

## *Faith Comes from Hearing*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 11, 2019.

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."*

*"Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)*

A parable, as one scholar describes, is "an expanded analogy" in which comparisons or contrasts are "used to explain or convince"; it is a story with a rhetorical point. The point, however, is not always easily understood, even for those with ears to hear. The Parable of the Sower is a case in point, remembered by many, understood by few.

Part of the difficulty of the parable is, in fact, its simplicity, a story of a sower, seed, and soil. Unlike many of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Sower, includes an interpretive explanation by the Lord Jesus. By virtue of His explanation we learn the sower is the preacher of the Word, the seed is the Word of God preached, and the soils are the varying ways in which the Word is rejected and received.

### **Seed as the Word**

Jesus describes the seed of His parable as "the word of the kingdom." Why? First, this phrase is consistent with Jesus' preaching from the beginning: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). Matthew describes Jesus' early earthly ministry as going "throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom..." (Matt. 4:23). Second, this phrase is consistent with Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, specifically as the King of Israel. It was Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist, who preached "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). It was the coming of the King in the Person of Jesus Christ that

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ushered in the kingdom of heaven-come-to-earth, inaugurating the reign of Christ in the hearts of His people. As Jesus preached “the word of the kingdom, it was like seed sown upon the soil.”

Therefore, the Parable of the Sower is not the Parable of the Harvester. The seed must first be sown, the word of the kingdom must first be preached, a word for the good soil of the elect of the kingdom. In the already/not yet aspect of the kingdom of heaven the seed of the Word is sown into the world, but not all have ears to hear. But, the seed of the Word will always accomplish its sovereign purpose, even in the rocky soil of a hard heart. As God said through the Prophet Isaiah, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10-11). This does not mean that everywhere the seed falls it produces fruit, but it will always accomplish its purpose.

Even as many in Israel heard the “word of the kingdom,” they received it not as life-giving good news but rejected it, securing their judgment. But, when the seed of the Word was sown beyond Jerusalem the Gentiles heard and “began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region” (Acts 13:48-49). Such is the effect of the sown seed of the Word; it shall accomplish that which God purposes and succeed in precisely for what it was sown. And, because the seed must be sown, there must be a sower to sow it, a sower of the Word.

### **Sower of the Word**

In the context of the parable and given the tie-in of “the word of the kingdom,” it is apparent that Jesus is the sower of the seed. Indeed, the incarnate Word of God personifies the perfect sower, but is He the only sower? In one sense, yes, but not only in the first-century Galilean context. Jesus promised His disciples that He would send the “Helper” (John 16:7), and it is through the Spirit of Christ that the Word is made effective. As the Shorter Catechism answers, “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation” (WSC 89).

But, if the Holy Spirit works through the seed of the Word as “an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners,” how is the seed sown? In the tenth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul explains in beautiful simplicity the gospel: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). This is glorious good news stated succinctly, but there is one problem: Unless a sower sows the seed, there is no seed upon the soil. Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? (Rom 10:14a). Do we expect fruit from a fallow field? Do we expect the convincing and converting of sinners apart from the ordinary means that God has ordained? Where no seed is sown there will be no fruit.

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Shortly before his death, Jerry Bridges preached at this church and enjoyed his meals in my home. At one of our meals together my parents and in-laws joined us. During one of our conversations, my mother-in-law asked, “Jerry, how do we grow this church? No one knows anything about Reformed theology in this area.” Jerry, in his slow, precise manner answered her question by turning and pointing to me, saying, “Preach the Word. In and out of season, preach the Word.” Jerry understood clearly what Paul asks rhetorically, “how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:14b). They cannot. Unless the sower sows the seed, there will be no seed upon the soil. Paul continues, “As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’ So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:15b-17). It is through the preaching of the Word that the seed is sown, and through it the Holy Spirit works in the soil of the heart.

Brothers and sisters, let us therefore not neglect assembling together in Lord’s Day worship (Heb. 10:25). Do you know one of the fastest ways to grow cold spiritually? Stay away from Lord’s Day worship. Let us be faithful to assemble and let us be under the preaching of the Word weekly, ready like good soil to receive what is preached. And, pray for the preacher that he may “preach sound doctrine diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation” (WLC 159). Amen.

So, the seed of the Word is to be sown by the sower of the Word, but what about the soil for the Word?

### **Soil for the Word**

The Parable of the Sower describes four types of soil: a footpath, rocky ground, thorny ground, and good (or fertile) soil. The purpose of a footpath of course is not to grow a crop but for travel. It is well-worn and not conducive to receiving a seed, let alone producing fruit. The rocky ground is neither a footpath nor fertile soil but has enough soil for the seed to temporarily germinate. The thorny ground is fertile ground but not cultivated exclusively for the crop. The seed germinates and grows but cannot sustain its life due to the infestation of thorns. The fertile soil is perfectly suited and ready for its purpose, to receive the seed and to produce fruit. Fertile soil may vary from field to field, producing fruit in various quantities, but it always produces. Each kind of soil is a type representing those to whom the Word is preached.

Theologically speaking, we distinguish the preaching of the Word and what the Holy Spirit does with it by the terms “general” and “effectual.” The Word is preached indiscriminately to all people, serving as a general calling. For example, Jesus preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). This was a general call to repentance and to believe the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. Despite the fact that the sermon was preached by the Son of God, Second Person of the Godhead, the incarnate Word, not everyone who heard Him preach repented and believed. Of course, the same is true today for the preacher who faithfully preaches

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the Word. Some may receive the Word being convinced and converted. Others may reject it, and others may not even listen. But, the preacher preaches the Word as a general calling to all people.

Effectual calling is different; it is specific and *always* effective: “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel” (WSC 31). The reason we should understand the distinction between general calling and effectual calling is because we see it clearly in this parable. The sowing of the seed is indiscriminate, whether it be thorny ground, a footpath, good soil, or rocky ground. The Word, indeed, is to be preached to all people in season and out of season.

It should not surprise us then that when the Word is preached, the evil one, the devil, “comes and snatches away what has been sown.” Satan hates the Word preached and mobilizes his minions to save the lost and dying for an eternity in hell. One of the most effective ways to do this is to make sure the Word is not preached in the first place, and if preached, then relegated to triviality. In our own day preaching is increasingly out of vogue, not relevant enough, not entertaining enough. Of course, it can be entertaining to the point of nonsense, in which the devil delights. But, even where the Word is preached, the devil works quickly to snatch it away, to do anything to keep ears from hearing.

Some do hear, however, and internalize it gladly. Maybe they join the church, serve on a committee, attend a bible study. They may look like the most passionate Christian you have ever seen. Until...someone or something challenges them. Maybe it is a traumatic experience or a series of difficult events. Maybe it is an attack against them personally or Christianity in general. Whatever the case, their rootless-faith is revealed to be a superficial allegiance rather than a supernatural conversion; no roots, no life.

Perhaps the most striking are those who hear the Word but never produce any fruit. They profess the faith, identify themselves as a Christian, perhaps living and dying a church member, but there is no evidence of conversion. Perhaps they prayed the sinners prayer as a child or walked forward at a crusade. Perhaps going to church sounds good for the family, but they care far more for their family than for Christ and His Church. Perhaps the Christian faith meshes well with their politics. Christianity is a helpful allegiance as long as it doesn’t conflict with their candidate or the party platform. Subtly yet successfully the cares of this world concern them more than a love for Christ.

Or, perhaps it’s wealth. The luxury of ease can so subtly, quietly, and effortlessly erode even the strongest entrenchment of the Word. Less like surgery and more like an open bar, wealth can make all the cares of the kingdom pass away, like eternal life. What need is there for the gospel of the kingdom of heaven when we can make heaven on earth? The cares of the world and its wealth crowd out the seed of the word choking to death true life. Thankfully, Jesus’ parable does not end here and neither does His explanation.

There is good soil, fertile soil, soil where the roots run deep and the fruit grows tall. Unlike all the other soil types, it is only the good soil that bears fruit. Fruit is the distinguishing result of the

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one who hears the Word of the kingdom, repents, and believes. Fruit is the distinguishing result between those who profess the faith but do not hold it. However, fruit is evidence of good soil not a description of independent effort. Good soil begins through the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit by God's grace through faith in Christ. Fruit grows in this good soil through union with Christ. Jesus explained it this way: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing...By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:5, 8). Through our union with Christ we bear fruit. There may be varying yields according to God's grace, but a true disciple is identified by bearing it.

So, if the seed as the Word is sown by the preaching of the Word, what have you heard? Are you deaf to the Word of God? Have the cares of this world calloused your hearing? Have the pleasures of this world plugged your ears? Or, has the Word filled your ears and so your soul resulting in the fruit of obedience and praise?

Do you have ears to hear this? "For God so loved the world; that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Did you hear that "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom. 10:9-10).

If so, then let us be faithful hearers of the Word, good soil for the sown seed. May we attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine the Scriptures, receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind; meditate on it; hide it in our hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in our lives (WLC 160).

Amen.