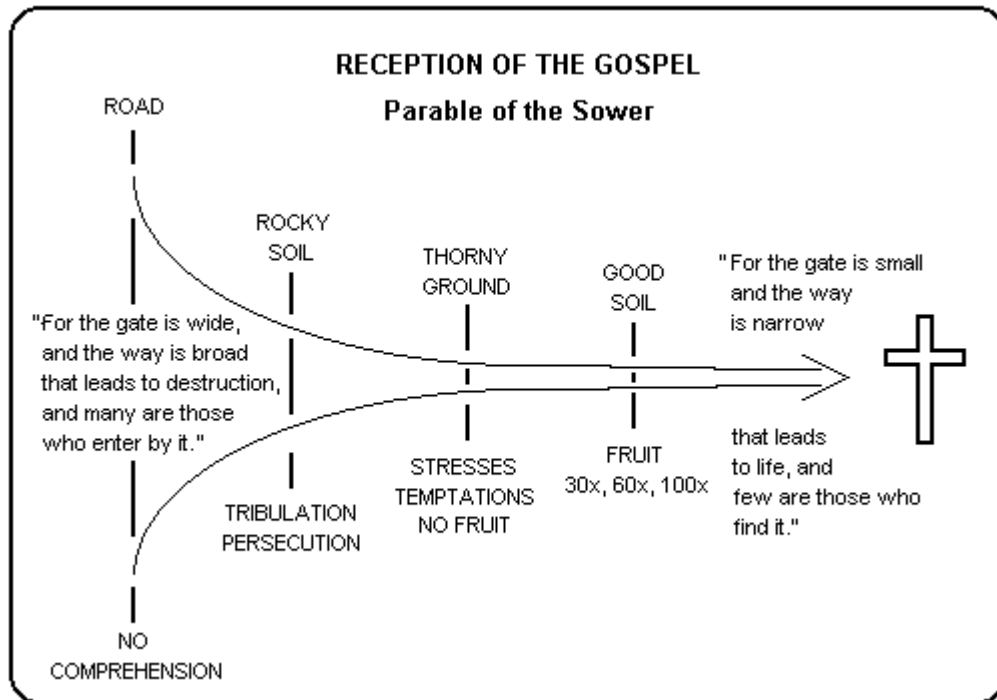


CHAPTER 25

The Parable of the Sower

The Parable of the Sower can be a tremendous encouragement to the evangelist. In this parable, Jesus spoke of some realities of evangelism and follow-up. These are timeless truths that transcend the limitations of worldview or culture. Whoever goes forth sowing the seed of the Gospel will encounter a number of reactions. They will also face some obstacles in the follow-up of new converts. Jesus shares this parable to prepare and encourage the evangelist for some of the realities of spiritual warfare.¹³⁸¹



Introduction:

- a. Sample antecedent Scripture:
 - 1) Regarding the Word of God as rain, Deut 32:1-2
 - 2) Regarding vineyards and fruit, Isa 5:1-7
 - 3) Regarding seed and sowing, Psa 126:5-6; Isa 55:10-11 (cf. 2 Cor 9:10)
- b. There will be different kinds of people:
 - 1) The wide and narrow roads, Matt 7:13-14
 - 2) You will be the smell of death to those who are dying and the aroma of life to those who are being saved, 2 Cor 2:15-16
- c. The Bible gives us hints about the different kinds of people we will encounter:
 - 1) Some will listen, some will not, "And go to the exiles, to the sons of your people, and speak to them and tell them, whether they listen or not, 'Thus says the Lord God.'" Ezek 3:11 (cf. Ezek 2:5, 7)
 - 2) Likewise, the Bereans were more noble-minded (εὐγενής) and spiritually eager than the Thessalonians, which appears unrelated to the message or the messenger (same message, same messenger), Acts 17:10

¹³⁸¹Also see a different rendition of this chart in my *Charts for a Theology of Evangelism*, Chart 8, "Lessons from the Parable of the Sower."

- 3) Similarly, the parable of the sower gives us four soils of the heart, Matt 13:4-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-9, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15

1. Understanding the differing soils:¹³⁸²

- a. The characteristics of the seed sown on *the road*:
- 1) No comprehension, Isa 1:2-3; 6:9-10; John 5:39-40; Acts 28:25-27; 2 Cor 3:15; 4:3
 - 2) Other characteristics of those not accepting Jesus Christ:
 - a) Foolishness, Psa 53:1-3; Prov 1:28-31
 - b) Wickedness, Prov 16:4; Rom 1:21-32; Eph 2:1-3
 - c) Ignorance, Rom 10:14; Eph 2:12
 - 3) Some thoughts:
 - a) Most seed inevitably will fall on the road, as most are headed for destruction (cf. Matt 7:13-14), the truth of the many and the few is taught multiple times in the New Testament, e.g. 1 Cor 9:22
 - b) Therefore, seeking “whole nation evangelism” or “people movements” may not be in accord with this teaching in the Bible
 - c) Likewise, seeking to evangelize, without the rejection of those on the road, may be like trying to be better than our Master (Luke 11:29; John 6:66-67; 15:20).
- b. The characteristics of the seed sown in *rocky soil*:¹³⁸³
- 1) Tribulation and persecution
 - 2) Lessons about this soil from Psalm 129:5-8 (just several Psalms away from the sower, reaper, and sheave bearer in Psa 126:5-6):

“May all who hate Zion,
Be put to shame and turned backward,
Let them be like grass upon the housetops,
Which withers before it grows up;
With which the reaper does not fill his hand,
Or the binder of sheaves his bosom;
Nor do those who pass by say,
‘The blessing of the LORD be upon you;
We bless you in the name of the LORD.’” Psa 129:5-8.

Consider:

Here the reaper is unsuccessful in filling his hand, as is the binder of sheaves in bringing anything home;
The growth of this sprouted seed dries up before it becomes a stalk;
Amazingly, these transient seedlings end up by hating Zion;
Nor are they eligible to receive the blessing of the Lord!

¹³⁸²Similarly, Jesus has three levels of persons mentioned in Luke 19:11-27—those who hated, those who used their talents, the one who buried his talent.

¹³⁸³Consider the parallel of the two “middle soils” with the “belief of unbelief” in John’s Gospel:

“The gospel of John presents the reader with something of an enigma. In the progress of belief there is a stage that falls short of consummated faith resulting in salvation. This is first in evidence in 2:23 where many at Passover ‘believed’ as a result of Christ’s signs, yet He did not ‘believe’ (trust) them (2:23-25). Christ discerned that their faith was superficial, based only on the miracles they had seen. Later in 7:31, during the Feast of the Tabernacles, many of the multitude ‘believed in him’ but apparently not as Messiah. In 8:31 Jesus spoke to the Jews ‘who had believed in Him’ and accused them of seeking to kill him (8:40). He later accused the same Jews of unbelief (8:45-46). Evidence of this enigma, the ‘believe of unbelief,’ is also seen in John 12:11, 37.

“Tenney refers to this belief that falls short of genuine faith as ‘superficial.’ Morris calls it ‘transitory belief,’ which is not saving faith. It seems to be based merely on outward profession, not coupled with regeneration. The problem with this ‘belief’ is its object. It appears to have been based primarily on the miracles and is not rooted in a clear understanding of the Person of Christ as Messiah and Son of God. Many were inclined to ‘believe’ something about Jesus, but were unwilling to yield their allegiance to Him, trusting Him as their person Sin-bearer” (J. Carl Laney, *John*, in *Moody Gospel Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 21-22).

- 3) Other biblical characteristics of those “falling away” – using the terminology of Jesus:
 - a) Unfaithfulness, Psa 73:27; John 15:6
 - b) Falling away from the faith, Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-29
 - c) Who do not persevere, Rom 11:22
 - d) Willful sin, Heb 10:26-31; 2 Pet 2:20-21
 - e) Practicing evil, Matt 7:21; 13:30; 25:11-12
 - f) Stumbling blocks, Matt 13:41-42; Luke 17:1-2
 - g) Sin against the Spirit, Gen 6:3; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10; cf. 1 John 5:16
- 4) Some thoughts:
 - a) According to this parable of Jesus, we can expect that a certain number of “converts” are seed in shallow soil or rocky soil;
 - b) It is not for us to make this call, insisting that someone has or will fall away; but the signs of a negative decision will become evident;
 - b) Seed in soil that does not last is part of God’s sovereign will of how some will respond positively to the Gospel at first, then falling away from it;
 - c) That some seed falls in the rocky soil is not the fault of the evangelist or the method (presupposing the good seed is sown), but rather rocky soil is part of God’s sovereign predisposition in His harvest.
- 5) Some examples of immediate persecution, with two different responses to the same:
 - a) Jews attacked invalid who Jesus had healed on the Sabbath (John 5:10-12), when Jesus revealed Himself to him, he went to tell the Jews who it was (John 5:13-15), so they were persecuting Jesus (John 5:16)
 - b) Man born blind was brought to Pharisees after he was healed (John 9:13-34), did not cave in, but stood his ground! Jesus waited until he was “put out” by the Pharisees before he sought him (John 9:34-35, note the repetition of the verb)
- c. The characteristics of the seed sown on *thorny ground*:
 - 1) Cares of the world:
 - a) “Dissipation [overeating] and drunkenness and the worries of life,” Luke 21:34
 - b) “Wood, hay, and straw,” 1 Cor 3:12-15
 - c) “Entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life,” 2 Tim 2:4
 - d) “Turn away their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths,” 2 Tim 4:4; “so that we may not drift,” Heb 2:1
 - e) “The sin which so easily entangles us,” Heb 12:1
 - f) “You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness,” 1 Pet 3:17
 - 2) Temptation, Matt 24:48-51; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:15-20; 10:1-6; Heb 6:4-6
 - 3) Fruitlessness, Matt 7:21-23; 25:24-30; John 15:2, 6; 2 Pet 1:8-9
 - 4) Some thoughts:
 - a) That some will receive the Gospel, will pass the test of persecution because of the Word, and yet will not bear fruit (i.e. do not reproduce themselves Christians) is inevitable in the local church
 - b) It is doubtful that these fruitless weed-entangled Christians merely need proper discipleship to be “made” fruitful
 - c) Theologically speaking, are these carnal Christians or were they never saved in the first place? It is hard to discern biblically. However, the reality of their existence is evident.¹³⁸⁴

¹³⁸⁴“The gospel of John also presents the reader with an enigma of ‘belief’ that is not belief. In the progress of belief there is a stage that falls short of genuine or consummated faith resulting in salvation (2:23-25; 7:31; 8:31, 40, 45-46, 12:11, 37). Tenney refers to the ‘belief’ that falls short of genuine faith as ‘superficial.’ Morris calls it ‘transitory belief’ that is not saving faith. Many were inclined to believe something about Jesus but were not willing to yield their allegiance to Him or trust Him as their personal sin-bearer.

- d. The characteristics of the seed sown in *good soil*:
- 1) Fruitful, Matt 25:46-47; Mark 1:17; John 4:36-38; 15:2, 4-5, 16; Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12-13; James 2:14-16
 - 2) Overcomer, Matt 24:13; 1 John 5:4-5; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7
 - 3) Awaiting Christ, Matt 24:46-48; 1 Thess 1:7-10
 - 4) Further characteristics of those living *fruitful lives*:
 - a) Direction of their life is Christ, John 20:21; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:12-14; Heb 12:1-4
 - b) It calls for a complete commitment, Matt 10:39; Rom 6:11; 2 Cor 5:15; Gal 2:20; 5:16
 - c) It calls for a heavenly perspective, Matt 4:4; 6:33; Col 3:1-3; Heb 11:6-16
 - 5) Some thoughts:
 - a) Only a certain percentage of those who respond to the Gospel will ever bear fruit
 - b) In the context it is most logical that the fruit in question is the Word of the Gospel sown in the lives of others, in other words, multiplying believers; to see fruit in this context as anything else, such as merely the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), the fruit of one's words (James 3:12), or the fruit of one's teaching (Matt 7:15-20), seems quite shallow and/or avoiding the obvious¹³⁸⁵

2. Applying the principles:¹³⁸⁶

Question: Is it possible to avoid sowing in the “shallow soil”?

- 1) T. J. Bach, former General Secretary of the Scandinavian Alliance Mission, said: “In all Christians Christ is present; in some Christians Christ is prominent; but in few Christians Christ is preeminent” (e.g. 1 Cor 10:5).
- 2) Ray Comfort, however, seemed to struggle with the shallow soil, as expressed in this quote:

“As I began to look at church growth records from around the country, I found to my horror that 80 to 90 percent of those making a decision for Christ were falling away from the faith. That is, modern evangelism was creating 80 to 90 of what we commonly call backsliders for every hundred decisions for Christ. ... The tragedy of modern evangelism is that, around the turn of the

“The major objection against interpreting the fruitless branches as unbelievers is the presence of the phrase ‘in me’ (en emoi). How could a fruitless, unbelieving branch be ‘in Christ?’ Godet has suggested that the words ‘in me’ may modify either the ‘branch’ (adjectival) or the participle ‘bearing’ (adverbial). If interpreted adverbially, the verse would read, ‘He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit in me.’ The bearing of fruit takes place ‘in the sphere of’ (en) Christ—by His influence and enablement. The emphasis of ‘in me’ is apparently not the place of the branch but the process of fruit-bearing” (Laney, *John*, 272-73); I am very grateful for International Mission Board missionary Kevin Greeson for bringing this very helpful resource to my attention.

¹³⁸⁵Some admit uncertainty toward this interpretation: “The following examples demonstrate commentators’ admission of uncertainty as to the original meaning of ‘fruit bearing.’ ‘The fruit is probably to be understood . . .’ (Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13: Word Bible Commentary*, Vol 33A, 2015, 380); ‘Thus, the word yields a variety of responses from a variety of people’ (Darrell Bock, *Luke* in BECNT, 726). ‘But this is uncertain’ (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1978, 327).” (Kevin Greeson, D.Min. Student, SEBTS; from a personal email received 12 July 2017).

Others concur, such as D. A. Carson, “Carson states the ‘crop’ (‘fruit’) in John 4:36 ‘refers to the people who become followers of Jesus’ and that “‘eternal life’ is that for which the crop is harvested’ (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub., 1991], 230). Jesus compels the sower in John 4:35 to open their eyes and look at the fields, for the fields ‘are ready for harvest.’ As Jesus relates the parable of the sower to the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, Carson relates the John 4:35–38 passage to Isaiah’s prophecy for Galilee which “allows for other sowers than Jesus” (ibid.) to participate in the same harvesting of souls that Jesus experienced in his ministry.” (Kevin Greeson). See also Frédéric Godet on John 4.

¹³⁸⁶Thomas P. Johnston, *Charts for a Theology of Evangelism*, Chart 8, “Lessons from the Parable of the Sower.”

twentieth century, the church forsook the Law in its capacity to convert the soul and drive sinners to Christ.”¹³⁸⁷

Note that Comfort gave an arbitrary date when the Gospel no longer was preached with the Law as a precedent. He was perhaps unfamiliar with the preaching of the Southern Baptist Mordecai Ham, who preached sin for two weeks without an invitation in the 1930s before spending two weeks on the Gospel, and then two weeks of separation from the world.

It seems that Comfort’s real problem was the fact that some seed will fall in shallow soil. No matter how good the Gospel is, this fact remains true—some seed will fall in shallow soil. There is no way around it.

However, Comfort’s point was good, the Christian is under obligation to preach “the whole counsel of God” without omitting a word.

- 3) Often “human elements” are promoted as providing the panacea for avoiding the “shallow soil”—when in actuality these human additions often produce even more shallow decisions!
 - a) Depth of relationship
 - b) Love of the service rendered
 - c) Positive Christian lifestyle
 - d) Cogent apologetic arguments
- 4) Discipleship or multiplication can also be brought up as the answer to the problem of the “shallow soil.”
 - a. Applications to theology:
 - 1) While coming from the framework of eternal security, this parable shows the reality of evangelism and follow-up as hard work.
 - 2) Real-life evangelism and follow-up cause one to wrestle with an experiential understanding of foundational principles. This parable matches with experience.
 - b. Applications to evangelism:
 - 1) There is no indication in the text that the sower:
 - a) Was wrong to sow on the road or in the shallow soil; or
 - b) Knew what kind of soil upon which he was sowing the seed.
 - 2) Someone falling by the spiritual wayside does not necessarily show that:
 - a) The Gospel presentation, or
 - b) The style of evangelism was wrong.

In the parable of Jesus the same seed was sown (the same way) in all four places; someone falling away likely points to the wrong type of soil.
 - 3) Often the method of proclamational evangelists is sullied because all of their converts do not continue on with the Lord:
 - a) This same difficulty is true of all types of true evangelism (including relational)
 - b) This difficulty comes because some seed will necessarily fall on shallow ground.
 - c) Perhaps shallow soil (and counterfeits) should be understood as a sign of true evangelism (cf. Matt 13:24-30)
 - 4) Prayer for the Lord to direct to open hearts that the seed may fall on good ground should precede evangelism.
 - c. Applications to follow-up:
 - 1) As a priority, the Christian should seek to nurture those who are characterized as the good soil (cf. 2 Tim 2:2).
 - 2) The evangelist, however, should make a concerted effort to nurture all of those whom he has led to the Lord, as he cannot be sure of their true spiritual state (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). It takes time for the evidence of shallow soil and weed-infested soil to become manifest.

¹³⁸⁷Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort, *The School of Biblical Evangelism: 101 Lessons* (Gainesville: Bridge-Logos, 2004), 26.

4. Further considerations:

a. From Deut 11:10-12:

Just as there are physical differences between lands—Egypt needing to be irrigated, Israel receiving rain—so there appears to be spiritual differences between places

If the illustration is applied even farther, as in the case of irrigation, the difference is mostly in follow-up, the watering, cf. 1 Cor 3:6-8

b. From Isa 5:1-7:

In the case of the vineyard of the people of Israel, fences were built around it, as well as a winepress.

But because of its bad fruit, God promised to destroy its fences and allow it to be trampled underfoot and filled with weeds, and that it would receive no more rain.