

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 3

How's Your Hearing?

The well-known parable of the Sower appears in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). It is one of only two parables that Jesus actually explains. At first the disciples did not understand it and asked him why he was speaking to the people in parables. The answer he gave them has sometimes been misunderstood, so I shall append a note on the subject.

This parable is an allegory. That does not mean all parables are allegories. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the inn does not have to mean anything but an inn, the donkey was a donkey and the two silver coins were literally two silver coins. Most parables make one major point. There are sometimes other subsidiary points (usually related to the major characters), but we should not attempt to see spiritual significance in all the details. When we read the parables in context, it is usually quite clear which details represent spiritual realities and which are included to create a context for the story and to provide colour.

WHAT?

1. The Setting

Jesus had been presenting the message concerning the kingdom of God in clear terms (as in the Sermon on the Mount). At a particular point in his ministry he switched to parables. This does not mean he had never used a parable before the switch, but the change was obviously both intentional and noticeable (Mat 13:34, 35).

A huge crowd gathered. It was so large that he got into a small boat while the people stood on the shore (Matthew and Mark). Living in that region, the people were familiar with the way seed was sown. Craig Blomberg explains:

The farmer's practice sounds strange to us. But in Jesus' world it seems to have reflected standard procedure for broadcast sowing. The farmer recognized that his seed would land in many different

kinds of soil. But sowing often preceded ploughing, and a farmer would simply walk up and down the rows of his field, tossing the seed out by hand; then using a wooden plough drawn by oxen or donkeys, he would create furrows in the soil so that as many of the seeds as possible could take root. Jesus is telling a story based on the life experience that many in his audience would have had. What seems unusual to us was realistic to them, except perhaps for the harvest. A thirty-fold yield for the seed was scarcely unprecedented, though certainly good. A sixty-fold yield was particularly welcome. A hundred-fold yield would have been better than anyone could expect. Here is the one surprising or unrealistic part of Jesus' story by first-century standards.¹

2. The Parable

- *The most important division*

A farmer broadcasts his seed. He does so, of course, with a harvest in mind. But inevitably not all of the seed germinates and some of the seed that germinates does not survive till the harvest. No percentages are given. According to Jesus, one of *four* things can happen to the seed. It is important to understand that the most basic distinction is between *two* outcomes, not four. The purpose of planting seed is that it might produce fruit. Some seed did and other seed didn't. In other words, these are not four levels of acceptability. The only acceptable outcome for a planted seed is that it yields a crop.

- *The four types of soil*

Obviously the farmer tried to place his seed in fertile soil. But the method employed meant that some blew onto the hard pathway. It was trampled on and the birds ate it up.

The region is very rocky. Besides the observable rocks on the surface there are many large rocks and ledges just beneath the surface concealed by a thin layer of soil. This may have hastened the appearance of the plant but the root system was totally inadequate. That and the lack of moisture would result in the withering of the young plant.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 106.

The fields contained thorny weeds. Seed that fell among the weeds would eventually be choked.

But other seed fell on good soil and yielded a great crop.

- *The Puzzlement of the Disciples*

The disciples did not understand what the parable meant. That's not surprising. What, after all, does a little story about farming have to do with important spiritual matters regarding the kingdom of God? Jesus explained that one of the purposes of the parable was to conceal "the secrets of the kingdom of God" from people other than the disciples. His quotation of Isaiah 6:9 is significant here (See Appendix).

3. The Interpretation

The interpretation itself is simple enough. The seed is the word of God. Just as seed is scattered, so the word is proclaimed. But it meets with different responses. In some cases it doesn't even get a hearing. Before it can have any effect at all, the devil comes and removes it. This is the seed that falls on the path. Before long, others, who at first seem to embrace the message enthusiastically, fall away. They are like the seed that falls on rocky soil. Still others hear the word and seem to embrace it. But other things seem more important to them. They are like the seed that fell among thorny weeds. Despite the initial growth, they never mature because they are choked by "life's worries, riches and pleasures." Some, however, receive the word and continue. In fact, they grow and produce fruit. They are represented by the seed that falls on good soil and grows to maturity, producing a plentiful crop.

4. Understanding the Issue(s)

- Remember, in the first place, that Jesus is speaking about the response to his own ministry. Many followed him excitedly who were not seriously interested in knowing or serving God. Their hope was for a new order (a better life) rather than personal repentance and godliness. John brings this out clearly (John 2:23-25; 6:14-15, 26, 41 - 47, 60-71).
- The problem in the first three cases is with the soil (or lack thereof), not the seed. It's a question of genuine receptivity.

- We must not impose on this parable subsequent debates about whether or not one can lose one's salvation. That's not what is in view here. People respond differently to the word of God. Neither a profession of faith, nor initial excitement means that a person has responded appropriately to God's word. Where there is a genuine response there will be lasting fruit. In fact, continuance in belief and the existence of fruit are the evidence that the response was genuine (Matthew 7:16 - 20; John 15:1-8; Gal 5:22; Eph 5:8; Phil 1:11).
- It is inappropriate for us to speculate regarding a person's salvation. On the one hand we prove nothing by saying, "I knew a person who was a true believer and he/she turned his/her back on God." We are not in a position to know what went on in his/her heart. On the other hand, it is not for us to say, "So and so has fallen away, therefore he/she could never have been a Christian in the first place." Yes, we can take the observation in 1 John 2:19 into account, but we should also heed Paul's word to Timothy in 2 Tim 2:19, "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'"

SO WHAT?

1. As you look around you and observe people reacting to the proclamation of God's word, are you able to identify 'pathway', 'rocky places', 'thorny ground' and 'fertile soil' hearers?
2. Describe, in contemporary terms, the kind of behavior represented by each kind of soil. (Remember, the soils represent types of response, not personality profiles).
3. Fortunately judgment is not committed to us, but what might we expect if one is genuinely receptive towards the Word?
4. What do you understand by Jesus' statement in Luke 8:18? (cf. Luke 19:24 - 26)?

NOW WHAT?

1. How receptive are you to the word of God?
2. What can you do to ensure that you remain receptive?

3. If it is true that "whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him" (Luke 8:18), what ought we to do with the opportunities God gives us? Are we?

NOTE

Did Jesus tell parables to conceal truth or to reveal it?

Teachers generally use illustrations to make difficult or unfamiliar concepts clear. But parables are more than illustrations. Günther Bornkamm explains:

The rabbis also relate parables in abundance, to clarify a point in their teaching and explain the sense of a written passage, but always as an aid to the teaching and an instrument in the exegesis of an authoritatively prescribed text. But that is just what they are not in the mouth of Jesus. Here the parables are the preaching itself and are not merely serving the purpose of a lesson which is quite independent of them. Jesus' parables . . . aim, as all parables do, at making things clear. (To do so) they make use of the familiar world, a comprehensible world with all that goes on in the life of nature and of man . . .

By preference and with great art, Jesus' parables tell just such stories, which are not by any means a regular feature of daily life. Yet they always remain within the realm of what every man understands, what is a daily or at least a possible experience.²

So, according to Bornkamm, Jesus' parables aim at making things clear. But this seems to contradict what Jesus himself said. When asked by the disciples why he was speaking to the people in parables, he said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is given to you but not to them" (Mt 13:11). It may seem from what he said that he told parables to keep people from understanding the truth. This would be strange to say the least--a teacher with an important message who adopts a deliberate strategy to ensure that the message is not understood.

Actually, there isn't a problem here if we take things one step at a time.

² Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 69-70.

1. Remember Jesus' switch to parables surprised his own disciples. (By the way, this does not mean that he only taught in parables from this point on. The statement contained in Matthew 13:34, refers to the occasion of which it speaks).
2. Enough time had elapsed for Jesus to see that some were increasingly moving toward genuine discipleship and others were increasingly rejecting and even opposing his message.
3. In a sense, he places the truth beyond the immediate grasp of those who are rejecting it while at the same time making it accessible to those who wanted to hear it and act upon it. The quotation from Isaiah 6 is significant. The people to whom Isaiah was sent had, of their own volition, rejected God's word. Isaiah's ministry to them would not result in a change of attitude on their part. It would hasten judgment and this would in turn lead to salvation (Is 6:1-13).
4. Grant Osborne places the matter in perspective for us. He acknowledges that Jesus spoke in parables to conceal the truth from unresponsive hearers. But he asks a further question, "Was this *the* purpose of the parables or *a* purpose?" He then explains:

It seems clear that Jesus did indeed have a larger purpose in using the parable form. Parables are an "encounter mechanism" and function differently depending on the audience. . . Each group (leaders, crowds, disciples) is encountered differently by the parables, which demonstrate the leaders' rejection, challenge the crowds to decision and force the disciples to think more deeply about kingdom reality. . . For those who reject the presence of God in Jesus (the leaders of the Jews) the parable becomes a sign of sovereign judgment, further hardening their hearts. For those who are open (the crowds) the parable encounters and draws them to decision. For those who believe (the disciples) the parable teaches them further kingdom truth.³

Craig Blomberg concurs: "In part, at least, parables are spoken to clarify a division that had already occurred among those who have heard Jesus throughout his ministry."⁴

³ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 295-6.

⁴ Blomberg, *Parables*, 110.

5. Roy Clements captures the genius of this method of teaching.

Jesus is not merely seeking to tantalize or educate his hearers; he is wanting to challenge them at a fundamental level. On the surface, such stories seem innocuous; charming little narratives full of familiar images that easily capture your attention. In reality they're a kind of Stealth bomber, specially designed to evade our psychological defenses, insinuating themselves inside our mind in spite of every barricade we may seek to erect, and then dropping a highly explosive charge targeted at the most vulnerable point in our spiritual complacency.

One feature that is often characteristic of these story parables is that they have a sting in the tail (tale); a punch-line that creeps up on you and then kicks you in the stomach when you're not expecting it.⁵

6. The bottom line is that **parables convey truth in a way that precepts cannot**. Think of the "parable" that Nathan told King David (2 Sam 12:1-13). The story got to him before the message did. The simple but powerful teaching contained in the parables is available to us. Their message is as relevant today as it ever was. They explain, they illustrate and, above all, they challenge us to response and commitment.

⁵ Roy Clements, *Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 7, 8.