

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (part two)

Luke 8:4-8

We will continue today our study of the parable of the sower. We mentioned in our previous lesson that the first soil represents people whose hearts are not open to the word of God. They are unbelievers who pay no attention to the message of the gospel. We come now to the second type of soil.

Seed on the rock

The second type of soil is the rocky soil. It is a rich soil but there is rock underneath. This is a person who, when he hears the word, becomes excited over it. He is so excited that he accepts it right away and with joy. He doesn't seem to struggle too much spiritually. And almost immediately, he makes a profession of faith before the world. He starts to grow really fast, faster than most people. But at some point, the growth stops. The problem is that in this kind of soil, the roots cannot go very deep. Matthew 13:5 says that 'they have no depth.' There is an impressive initial response, but the response is not very deep because underneath, there is a resistance, a hardness to the word of God. They are willing to go so far and no more. They commit themselves to Christ but up to a point. When the time has come to take a stand and to pay the price, they have second thoughts about their belief. They don't have the spiritual strength to withstand the pressure of persecution. Eventually they fall away.

Here Jesus tells us that not all who receive the word hold it. A dramatic conversion experience is no guarantee that the person will remain faithful to the end. In the spiritual life, it is not how we start our walk with the Lord that counts. It is how we continue it, and especially how we end it. Big conversions may become perilous if we put our trust in them rather than in God. It is unfortunate that some people, having experienced an extraordinary conversion, are prematurely pushed forward as a strong testimony, long before they have proven the steadfastness of their conversion.

Is this person a believer? The juxtaposition of two key terms, belief and falling away, has puzzled many. They *believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away* (Luke 8:13). Reception of the word and faith for a short time are followed by a falling away. Should we conclude that this person, who was once a genuine believer, abandoned his faith? Yes, I believe that this person was saved and then lost his salvation. The description of this second soil should not be explained away to say that this person did not really accept the word or that he had a 'false faith,' for it seems to me that Jesus' words say the opposite.

Short-lived faith

Let me explain what I mean. First, notice that in the case of soil two, there is germination and there is growth. We read in Mark 4:5, ... *and immediately it sprang up*. The seed took root and ‘sprang up.’ It grew. Now, how can there be growth and germination if there is no new life? Or, if we use theological terminology, how can the word germinate and grow in a person without regeneration? The fact that the seed took root and grew up implies that the Lord Jesus is talking about born again Christians. It would be very questionable to say that this experience of germination and growth was not really germination and growth but only an appearance of it.

Some might have noticed that the parable says ‘he has no root.’ This doesn’t mean that there was no root at all. It simply means that the root was not firm enough and deep enough to sustain a life of perseverance. That is why the NASB has the phrase, *These have no **firm** root* (Luke 8:13). Whenever there is germination and growth, there has to be some root in the plant. This is simply a fact of biology. The point then is that the presence of life in a plant, the evidence of regeneration, is indicated in this parable by germination and growth. Therefore the individual represented by the second soil has to be an authentic Christian.

Not only did he germinate and grow, but we read that he ‘received the word with joy’ (Luke 8:13). This can hardly be the description of a belief based on emotion. In fact, the word ‘joy’ (*chara*) is never used in the NT of a superficial and emotional excitement. In many places, it refers to saving faith, expressing the joy that comes from true belief in the gospel (Philippians 2:2, 29; 1Thessalonians 1:6; 3:9; 2Timothy 1:4; Philemon 1:7; James 4:9; 1Peter 1:8; 1John 1:4; 2John 1:12). In the gospel of Luke, it is used in connection with the joy the Father feels at finding one of His lost sheep (Luke 15:5ff), the joy of true Christians because their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20), and the joy of the disciples after the ascension (Luke 24:52).

Furthermore, when we look at the NT use of the expression ‘receive the word,’ we quickly notice that it is used to describe a response in faith to the word of God. It is basically a synonym for a salvation experience. This is particularly obvious in Luke-Acts and in the writings of Paul. Look at these examples.

- Acts 2:41: *So then, those who had **received his word** were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls*. Three thousand people were saved at Pentecost.
- Acts 8:14: *Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had **received the word of God**, they sent them Peter and John*. Many of the Samaritans began to embrace the gospel.
- Acts 11:1: *Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had **received the word of God***. The Gentiles also experienced the grace of God.
- Acts 17:11: *Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they **received the word with great eagerness***. As a result of their well-disposed and open-minded response to the gospel, many at Berea believed.
- 1Thessalonians 1:6: *You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having **received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit***. It was in the midst of trials that the Thessalonians welcomed the gospel and were converted.
- 1Thessalonians 2:13: *And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you **received from us the word of God's message**, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe*. ‘You, who believe, have received the word of God’s message.’

- James 1:21: *Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.* Reception of the word is here connected with the ‘salvation of your souls.’

In all these passages, there is no doubt that to ‘receive the word’ refers to a genuine conversion experience. And this applies also to soil two of the parable of the sower. Citing the same verses, the New International Dictionary of NT Theology comes to the conclusion that ‘In the early Christian communities the phrase *ton logon dechesthai*, to receive the word, became a technical term for the believing acceptance of the gospel’ (H. G. Link, ‘Take,’ in *NIDNTT*, 3:746).

Now, look at the use of the word ‘believe’ in the parable. The Lord Jesus tells us that in regard to the first soil, the devil came and took the word so that they could not believe and be saved (Luke 8:12). The word ‘believe’ (*pisteuo*) clearly refers to a saving faith. No one would dispute that. Satan prevents the person from coming to a saving faith. Right after that, we notice that the same word is used in connection with the second type of soil. Jesus says that soil two did believe (*pisteuo*), but only for a while.

*Luke 8.12. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.
13 But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.*

If *pisteuo* means ‘saving faith’ the first time, it must also mean ‘saving faith’ the second time it is used. Therefore soil two must logically represent the person who genuinely believed and was saved, but eventually fell away. His faith was authentic. Why should the word ‘believe’ suddenly refer to a ‘false faith’ in the following verse (Luke 8:13)? The fact that he only believed for a time in no way denies that he was once a true Christian.

He believes for a while, then falls away. The Greek word for ‘fall away’ means ‘to remove, either spatially or from fellowship with a person.’ In time of temptation, he falls away, i.e., he breaks off the relationship he had with God. It is a term that is quite final in the Scriptures. It is sometimes translated by the word ‘depart’. For example, Paul says in 1Timothy 4:1 that the day will come when *some will depart from the faith*. In Luke 13:27, Jesus expressed His utter rejection of those who called Him ‘Lord, Lord.’ He said, *Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity*. The same Greek word is used in Hebrew 3:12 where we find again the idea of falling away from faith. *Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*. An evil heart is a heart that refuses to let God rule. It is a rejection of God’s sovereignty. The result of this act of rebellion is to fall away from the living God.

For all these reasons, it is my belief that the person represented by the second soil is someone who had come to believe genuinely. But under the pressure of persecution and tribulation arising because of his faith, he then separated himself from a relationship with God which he previously had.

Seed among thorns

What about soil three? This type of soil looks good. It is deep and does not have rocks, which was the main problem with soil two. When the word of God is sown, it grows. No joyous reception of the word is describe here. In fact, the notion of conversion is left out of focus as if it were not the important factor. The reception of the word is simply assumed.

Luke 8.14. And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard...

So this is a person whose heart is open to God and honestly tries to live for Christ. But there is a problem. There are other things in his heart: the thorns of worldliness. Yes, there is commitment and devotion to the Lord, but it is not pure. Right under the surface of the soil, there is a chain of roots ready to spring up. Before long, the seed which was sown must compete with developing roots below the surface and verdant thorns and thistles above the surface. This person lives a double life, trying to live for Christ and yet still living out in the world. Fruitfulness is prevented by excessive concerns for the cares and riches and pleasures of this world. The danger of such distractions is that the message of the gospel is crowded out and choked off by the energy and priority given to these other concerns.

This kind of person fails to take into account the words of Jesus when He says, ‘You cannot serve God and mammon. You can only have one master. You have to make up your mind once and for all and decide who your master will be.’ That is why the Lord Jesus says in the same passage, ‘Let your eye be single. For if your eye is not single, you are going to suffer from double vision. And then the light in you will be darkness. If the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness (Matthew 6:22-24).’

Seed in the good soil

And of course, some of the seed falls on good soil. Otherwise the farmer would not have planted in that area in the first place. These are the true disciples – those who have accepted Jesus, believed His word, and allowed Him continually to make a difference in their lives. It is only in this soil that the seed has the response that yields fruit.

There are three aspects to that fruit-bearing response. *And the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an **honest and good heart**, and **hold it fast**, and bear fruit with **perseverance**.* (1) Firstly, it is crucial to have the right kind of heart. This person has an ‘honest and good heart,’ a heart that has the desire to take heed of the gospel and embrace it. (2) The second aspect is about holding fast to the word. He does not let the devil snatch it, nor temptation scorch it, nor the cares and riches of this life choke it. (3) Finally, the third aspect involves the term ‘patience’, a quality needed to bear up under the pressure of living faithfully.

Good fruits come from a person who has these characteristics. However not all believers are equally fruitful. Some produce a huge harvest; others produce a smaller crop. Matthew and Mark speak of a hundred, sixty and thirtyfold. We should notice that the soil which produces only a small crop is still called ‘good’. In the parable of the talents, the servant who made good use of only two talents was considered as a good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:14-30). We should nevertheless desire and strive to be of those who bring forth a hundredfold. There is nothing wrong with spiritual ambition when it subordinates everything to the glory of God.

Enduring to the end

In the gospel of Luke, the parable of the sower ends with the word ‘patience’. This is not the ability to wait without complaining when something takes a long time. A better translation is the word ‘endurance’. The Greek word in its verb form is made up of two parts, *hupo* (under), and *meno* (to remain, to abide). It is to ‘remain under.’ The noun *hupomone* describes a quality of character that one needs to remain strong under stress, under difficulties. It is the opposite of falling away. In fact, it is the opposite of the responses in the first three soils.

In the Lord’s teaching, this word appears four other times. Interestingly, it is always in the context of salvation. In each incident, Jesus says that endurance or perseverance is a characteristic of the one who is saved. Look at these verses.

- Luke 21:19: *By your **endurance** you will gain your lives.* By persevering in bearing these trials, you will save your souls.
- Mark 13:13: *And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but the one who **endures to the end, he shall be saved** (parallel passages, Matthew 10:22; 24:13).* It is the believer who stands firm right to the end who will be saved.

Why do some Christians believe for a while and then fall away? Because they did not endure to the end. They could not bear the pressure of the Christian life. What pressure? The Lord Jesus uses three different words in the parable: (1) tribulation (Matthew 13:21); (2) persecution (Matthew 13:21); (3) temptation (Luke 8:13). These are the things that will put a lot of pressure on the believer. Soon after the seed is sown, tribulation, persecution and temptation will arise.

Suffering for the believer is inevitable. It is like the sunshine. You just cannot avoid it. The sun shines upon everyone. It shines upon the Christians and it shines upon the non-believers. But notice this: Suffering is going to destroy some, and bring life to others. In the parable, suffering is symbolized by the sun. Jesus says in Matthew 13:6, ‘When the sun came up, the plants that were on rocky ground withered because they had no root.’ He explains later (Matthew 13:21) that when affliction arises for the word’s sake, i.e., when the sun rose, these people do not last. They quickly fall away. Think about it. The sun can either cause growth or it can destroy. The sun makes plants with roots to grow and compels plants without roots to wither. Tribulation then is like the sun. It makes the true believer to flourish as a tree planted by a stream of water (Psalms 1:3). On the other hand, the shallow person, who lacks perseverance, collapses when troubles come because he is unable to stand the pressure.

In Jesus’ own ministry, these people might be the disciples described in John 6. They were following Jesus until the Lord began to talk about the need for His own suffering and death. At that point, they decided to leave Him. Seeing this, Jesus turned to the twelve and asked them if they wanted to leave as well (John 6:66-67). It is a sobering thought to consider that behavioral changes following a profession of conversion or even appearance of growth and fruitfulness are not necessarily adequate to determine if a Christian has spiritual depth. In many places, the word of God tells us that what ultimately determines the presence or absence of true faith are persecutions, oppressions and perhaps even the threat of martyrdom. As Paul said in Acts 14:22, it is through much tribulations that Christians must enter the kingdom of God.

You know, there is one kind of Christians with whom you can have a deep fellowship. These people know Christ. They met Him in the school of suffering. A Christian who has learned to cope with suffering with a positive attitude has a depth that makes him very different. He knows Jesus not only in his head. He has a personal acquaintance with Him. He knows Jesus in the school of suffering, in the fellowship of His sufferings. That is why in Philippians 3:10, the apostle Paul says, *That I may know Him ... and the fellowship of His sufferings.* He puts all that in one sentence. You will know Jesus especially in the fellowship of His sufferings. Jesus gives a very special sense of His presence, love and care when you are suffering for His cause. That is when He comes closest to you, provided that you put your roots down. Otherwise suffering will have the opposite effect. It will drive you away from the Lord.

Summary

Let us sum up.

The Parable of the Sower			
Soil	Seed	Spiritual condition	Obstacles to fruitfulness
one	by the road	was never saved	forces of evil
two	on the rock	saved, then fell away	pressure of persecution
three	among the thorns	saved, then fell away	worldly interests
four	on good ground	saved	*****

In Jesus' interpretation of the parable of the sower, the whole emphasis was to explain the variety of responses to the word of God. Some never even consider God's message. The devil takes away the message, making it almost impossible for this kind of person to ever believe. Others respond initially, but hardship crushes their response. Still others allow the word to take root in their hearts but worldly cares and materialistic pursuits choke their faith. And finally, those who allow the word to take permanent root will overcome the obstacles that prevent a response and will bring forth fruit.

I should mention that this story is not a moment-by-moment picture of how a person receives the word at various times. The point of the parable is not to describe a person moving from soil to soil or being in different soils at different times. Rather it pictures what the word does throughout the totality of one's life. Therefore the soil represents the different kinds of individuals from the point of view of their whole life, not the different responses of the same person.

This parable looks for a response. When Jesus taught it, He was challenging the crowd to consider their position individually. In the same way, when a person reads the parable of the sower today, he is invited to consider where he fits into the picture. The exhortation is to be the receptive, faithful, persistent, and patient soil.