

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 three)

Luke 8:4-8

We will return today to the parable of the sower in Luke 8. This time, we will approach it from a different angle. The parable of the sower, as you know, is a foundation parable. It sums up most effectively the Lord's whole teaching on salvation. This lesson will be divided into two parts. In the first section, we will insist on the fact that salvation is God's gift. In the second part, we will see how this gift becomes available to us through faith. In this respect, we will examine what faith means. We will define faith in terms of commitment and explain how commitment is related to faith.

A light

In the parable of the sower, the seed that is being sown symbolizes the word of God (Luke 8:11). The Lord Jesus explains also that the ground on which the seed falls is the heart of man (Luke 8:12). The sower represents Jesus and whoever else who proclaims the word of God.

We have seen all this in our previous lessons on this parable. What else can we learn? First, we notice that the seed is given freely. In that sense, it is a gift. It falls upon the soil as a gift to that soil. The ground does not earn the seed. And so, God's salvation is given to us as a free, unmerited gift. We do not work for it.

The seed is the word of God. The term 'word' in Greek means 'message'. It is the message of God to man about salvation and about the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes this message, this seed, comes to us in the form of parables. In the OT, we read that the word is a light by which men come to have some knowledge of God. Psalm 119:105 says, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* We saw in our previous lesson that the word of God, because it is light, is designed to reveal, not to hide. The parables are not meant to conceal anything. Their function is to reveal the truth of God.

This point is made very clear in Luke 8:16-18, a passage that comes immediately after the parable of the sower. The Lord Jesus uses the picture of a lamp to show that His teaching is like this lamp. The parables are like this lamp. He says that the purpose of lighting a lamp is not to conceal the light, but to illumine a room so that those who enter can see. Similarly, the function of parables is to reveal God's truth, not to hide it. If the light is hidden, it is because of the soil on which it falls, not because God has concealed the truth.

A mystery

On the other hand, the parables, the word, or the seed is spoken of as a mystery, as a secret. We see this in Luke 8:10 where Jesus says, *To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the*

kingdom of God. There are many things in the Bible that are described as ‘mysteries’. The word of God itself is defined as a mystery in Colossians 1:25-26 (*I became a minister ... to fulfill the word of God, the **mystery** which has been hidden from ages and from generations ...*). Ephesians 6:19 speaks of the ‘mystery of the gospel.’

A mystery is something that you don’t understand until its meaning is revealed to you. The gospel is called a mystery because it is not something we can understand by ourselves. It is something that God has to reveal to us. Understanding the Bible is not a matter of intelligence or education. Human wisdom cannot comprehend the word of God unless it is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. So spiritual understanding is strictly a matter of revelation.

Think back when you were not a Christian. The gospel was a mystery to you, wasn’t it? When you opened the Bible, you could see the words in English. You could read the sentences. But you could not grasp the meaning of the text. The sentences didn’t mean much to you. It was a mystery. As Jesus said in this parable, there is sight without seeing and hearing without understanding. But as you genuinely searched, as you opened your heart to the truth, the Spirit of God enabled you to discover the mysteries of the kingdom. It is only at that point that the gospel began to make sense to you.

God’s truth comes only by revelation, not by natural sight. Therefore it can only be understood as a gift of God to us by the Holy Spirit. No one can boast of having a good knowledge of the Bible. If a person understands anything about the word of God, it is because the Spirit of God has revealed it to him. The disciples were entitled to know the mysteries of the kingdom not because they were so good. None of us become good enough to be told the secrets of God. All our understanding of God rests on the work of God’s grace. And grace means that we did not earn it. We did not deserve it. It is a gift from God to us.

The life of God

The word of God has another characteristic. It brings life to us. Notice that Jesus speaks of the word of God as a seed. Why? Because a seed has life in it. Once the seed is planted into the ground, it brings life into that ground. The ground has nothing of that life. We have no life in our soul. Spiritually, we are dead. In the parable of the sower, the heart of man is compared to the ground because it is dirty. It is unrighteous. God plants His seed into our heart. And amazingly, this dirt is transformed into something productive.

That is the transforming power of grace. That is salvation for salvation is about life. When the word of God comes into our life, it brings God’s life into our soul. We then become a new person, a new creature. The unrighteousness of my heart is transformed into a fruitful ground. That’s what we read in 1Peter 1:23. *You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the **living and abiding word of God.*** God’s word is creative and powerful. God created heaven and earth by His word. It is also the living word of God that causes us to be born again. So the word of God is compared to a seed because it contains life, God’s life, which brings salvation into our soul when we accept it by faith. We will turn to this matter of faith in a moment.

We preach Christ

For now, let us summarize our first point. We mentioned that the seed is the word of God. The seed is a mystery. The seed is a gift. The seed contains life. When you put all those terms together, what comes to your mind? The word of God, mystery, gift, life. Well, all those terms are used in the Bible to describe the Lord Jesus Himself! Look at these passages.

- In Revelation 19:13, Jesus is called ‘the word of God.’ *He (Jesus) was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called **The Word of God.***

- In Colossians 2:2, Jesus is called ‘mystery’. ... *resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself.* The mystery of God, which is Christ Himself.
- In John 14:6, Jesus declares that He is the life. *I am the way, the truth, and the life.*
- In 2Corinthians 9:15, we read that Jesus is God’s gift to us. *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift* (i.e., Jesus)!

Jesus is the word of God. He is a mystery. He is a gift. He is the life. We suddenly realize that the seed is summed up in Jesus Himself. In fact, in Galatians 3:16, Jesus is explicitly called ‘the seed.’ *Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ.* This one seed that receives the promises made to Abraham is Christ Himself.

Now, how does a seed bring forth life? By dying in the soil where it undergoes dissolution. How does Jesus bring forth life? In the same way, by dying. By being crucified. Presented in this way, it is easy to understand why He is called ‘the seed.’ In John 12:24, Jesus compares Himself to a seed that falls on the ground. He says, *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* As the life that the seed carries can only be passed on to other seeds by departing from the original seed and leaving it dead, so the life which is in Christ can only be passed on to His disciples by His death.

All this tells us that the message of salvation is always summed up and centers in the person of Christ. He is the word of God. We do not preach the word of God at all if we do not preach Christ. And when we preach Christ, we preach Christ crucified, as Paul says in 1Corinthians 1:23.

Receiving God’s gift by faith

Seeing that God has freely given His seed to everyone because He so loved the world, the whole world, why then is the world not saved? Well, John 3 gives us some explanation. Because the world loves darkness rather than light. Though God’s gift is free, not every heart is ready to take it. Not everyone has the faith to accept that salvation in Christ.

You cannot be a Christian without hearing about faith, at least to some extent. We all know that ‘we are saved by faith,’ that ‘we are justified by faith.’ But what does faith actually mean? Sometimes we define faith by quoting Hebrews 11:1. *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* I don’t think that using this verse as a definition of faith is very helpful. It probably doesn’t mean anything to most people.

‘Faith is the assurance of what we do not see.’ But faith itself is not something seen either. So what is not seen is the assurance of what is not seen. What does that say? If we try to define faith in this way, we might end up saying that we believe what we happen to believe. You see, Hebrews 11:1 is not a definition of faith *per se*. That verse is simply telling us about the effect of faith upon our soul. When we have faith, the effect on us is that we have assurance of things hoped for. When we have faith, we have the conviction of things not seen. Because I have faith, I have confidence in the things that are of hope. So Hebrews 11 is a description of the effect of faith on us. It is not a definition of faith in its essence.

Faith has often been well illustrated by preachers and Bible teachers in this way. There is a child standing by a window in an upper floor. The building is on fire. The only way he can escape from the fire is to jump out of the window. Below this window, there is a strong man with his arms outstretched who says, ‘Jump, and I will catch you.’ And so the child, seeing the flames coming rapidly towards him, decides to jump. Just before he hits the ground, the strong man catches him.

Where is faith in this story? Faith is the attitude of this child who trusts the strong man. He jumps out of the window into the arms of the strong man because he trusts the ability of the man to catch him. The strong man here is meant to represent Jesus of course. This trust is driven somewhat by fear, the fear of the flames burning everything behind him, but it is trust nevertheless.

Faith: a total commitment

I personally find that the word 'trust' is a little too weak. This child is doing much more than trusting the man. If the strong man fails to catch the child, then the child will die or will seriously be injured. You see, the word 'trust' does not necessarily express the attitude of a total commitment, which is an essential aspect of true faith. When you have faith, you stake your life on the person in whom you trust, namely Jesus.

I feel the need to stress this point because the message of salvation, unfortunately, is sometimes presented in a way that cheapens grace. There is a thinking that runs like this: If you believe that Jesus died for you, and you are wrong, you lose nothing. But if you are right, you gain eternal life. Either way, you lose absolutely nothing. In this kind of teaching, salvation can be compared to a lottery ticket that is given to you for free. If the draw comes out and you don't have the right number, you win nothing but you lose nothing either. If you happen to have the lucky number, then the jackpot is yours. So with this free ticket, you have nothing to lose but you have the possibility to gain everything.

If you receive Jesus in the same way that you accept this lottery ticket, that is not faith in the biblical sense. Where is this illustration of a child jumping out of a window from a high building into the arms of anyone? That child, remember, runs the risk of being injured severely if the man fails to catch him. A true Christian does not just believe that Jesus died for his sins. He believes, yes. And because he believes, he is willing to jump out of the window into the arms of Jesus. Faith is about receiving Jesus and committing yourself totally to Him, even if it means that you might lose everything.

When you read Hebrews 11, you see that every example of faith is an example of total commitment. Abraham trusted God's promises completely. When God called him, he went out even though he did not know where God wanted him to go. He believed God and obeyed. That's faith. That's total commitment.

By faith, Moses counted the riches of Egypt as nothing. He lost everything that the world could have given him. He turned his back upon Egypt and went out to be identified with the people of God. That's what we mean by 'jumping out of the window.'

Hebrews 11 ends up with those words. That through faith, they conquered kingdoms, they shut the mouths of lions, they overthrew foreign armies. But some of them were chained and put in prison. Others were stoned or killed by the sword. It is not for men of faith to dictate God's purposes. Those who have faith trust God and know that, whether in life or in death, all will ultimately be well. That's what we mean by 'jumping out of the window.' You believe what God says and you act on your faith. The Bible understands faith as a total commitment.

Faith in the parable of the sower

Let us examine this commitment on the basis of the parable of the sower. There are three things we can say. The first thing is that commitment implies openness. The soil has to be open in order to receive the seed. That's the reason why a farmer plows up his land. This activity opens up the soil so that the seed can start to grow when it falls in it. It will not grow if it falls on a hard ground. So

the most basic point we must say about commitment or faith is that it is an openness to the word of God. It is an openness to Christ.

The second point is this. The seed, having entered into the soil, must have full possession of the soil. The word of God must have total possession of your heart. This is not going to happen if the seed falls in a stony ground or in a place where there are thistles growing. The commitment to God must be total. We should be able to say, 'Lord, here are the keys to every room in my house. I want you to have access to every part of my heart. In fact, if that is Your will, take down the doors so that You don't have to use those keys anymore, so that You have all of my life.'

Thirdly, so essential to the seed is the sun. In the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus compares the sun to tribulations, persecutions and temptations, using three different Greek words to talk about the suffering that the Christians have to endure. In contrast, the sun is also that which promotes the growth of the seed. Without sunshine, nothing can grow.

We just mentioned that our commitment to God must be total. How do I know how much Christ is Lord in my life? The answer is this. It depends on your reaction to the sun. That will be the test. You see, the sun can either destroy the plant or cause it to increase in its growth. In the case of this parable, the sun destroyed the seed that had no root. But the seed that fell into the rich ground grew so well under the sun that it produced a big crop. So the same sunshine that brings life to one brings death to the other. When difficulties arise, that's when you can see whether a person is a true believer or not, whether he is genuinely committed to Christ or not.

Jesus already taught this point in the well-known parable of the two builders (Matthew 7:24-27). There the pressures of life are represented by the storm. And we read that it is the storm that will differentiate between the person who built his house upon the rock (genuine believer) and the one who built it on the sand (professing Christian). Again, the Bible tells us that the true nature of one's commitment to Christ is revealed in moments of crisis.

We are justified by faith. God's gift of justification is given to us freely. But we have to understand that do not receive that gift in the same way that we would accept a free lottery ticket. Receiving that seed into our heart involves a commitment on our part. We accept to have Jesus as Lord of our lives, living faithfully in obedience to the word of God. May our faith radiates in such a way that others can see the glory of Christ in us.