

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### MATTHEW 13:3-9 AND 18-23

THIS first parable is one of two which the King explained. He evidently considered it to be fundamental, for He said that if men were not able to understand this one, they could not understand the others.

Let us, then:

- First look at the picture presented in the parable,
- Secondly attend to Christ's explanation thereof,
- Finally deduce from such examination the instruction which is of present value.

The picture is a perfectly natural one, but the naturalness is eastern rather than western. Let us, then, attempt so far as is possible to watch the eastern sower at his work.

Speaking of this particular parable, Dr. Thomson says, in *The Land and the Book*, describing what he actually saw:

“**Behold a sower went forth to sow**’ There is a nice and close adherence to actual life in this form of expression. These people have actually come forth all the way from Dahr-June to this place. The expression implies that the sower, in the days of our Saviour, lived in a hamlet or village, as all these farmers now do; that he did not sow near his own house, or in a garden fenced or walled, for such a field does not furnish all the basis of the parable. There are neither roads nor thorns nor stony places in such lots.

“He must go forth into the open country as these have done, where there are no fences; where the path passes through the cultivated land; where thorns grow in clumps all around; where the rocks peep out in places through the scanty soil; and where also, hard by, are patches extremely fertile. Now here we have the whole four within a dozen rods of us. Our horses are actually trampling down some seeds which have fallen by the wayside, and larks and sparrows are busy picking them up.

“That man, with his mattock, is digging about places where the rock is too near the surface for the plough, and much that is sown there will wither away, because it has no deepness of earth.

“And not a few seeds have fallen among this *bellan*, and will be effectually choked by this most tangled of thorn bushes. But a large portion, after all, falls into really good ground, and four months hence will exhibit every variety of crop.”

This brief paragraph describing what may be seen any day in Palestine shows us how simple, real, and direct was the picture to the men to whom Jesus talked. The points of interest in the parable are the sower, the seed, the soil, and the sequence. One man is sowing. He sows one kind of seed. That seed falls on different kinds of soil. A certain sequence or result follows, such as is dependent upon the nature of the soil. That is the simple and perfectly familiar picture presented by the parable to those who heard the King’s words.

Keeping this picture in view, we turn our attention to the King’s explanation. In doing so there are one or two preliminary matters specially to be noticed before attempting a close examination.

First, Jesus makes no reference to the sower. He gives no explanation of who the sower is. The chief value of the parable is seen in the fact that He speaks of the seed, and of the relation which the seed bears to the soil. Listening to the parable we should certainly be inclined to think that the chief lessons were to be learnt from the nature of the soil.

Indeed, already in epitomizing we have said that the sequence depends upon the soil.

When, however, we turn to Christ’s explanation, we find that such is not the case, *but rather that the chief lessons of the parable are those concerning the nature of the seed.*

Without His explanation we should inevitably say that the harvest depends upon whether the nature of the soil be the open highway or the rocky places of the fields, or the thorny ground, or the fruitful ground. Jesus, however, lays no emphasis upon the soil, but all emphasis upon the condition of the seed which is cast into the soil.

This is a most important distinction to be kept carefully in mind, or we shall continue to misinterpret all the parables.

I am aware that this statement may seem at first to obscure the vision of truth, contradicting, as it does, popular conceptions of the teaching of this parable. Yet it is only as this guiding principle is observed, that we shall be able to discover the profoundest and most remarkable teaching.

Let us, then, carefully examine His explanation, following Him as He takes each of the four sowings separately.

**“Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the Kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the evil one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.”**

**“He that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it.”**

**“He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word.”**

**“He that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth.”**

We have generally regarded the “**sower**” of this parable as a type first of our Lord Himself, and then of all those who preach the word, and the seed as the word sown in the hearts of men who respond to it in different ways according to their nature. This is a treatment of the parable which contradicts absolutely Christ’s own explanation of it.

In that explanation He declares, not that the sowing of the seed is the word cast into the heart of a man, but that it is the casting of a man into a certain age and generation. The sowing here referred to, then, to state the case broadly, is the sowing, not of truth, but of men, for in the next parable, where the Lord again takes up the figure of sowing, He distinctly says of the good seed, **“are the children of the kingdom.”**

Take a broad survey of this. Remember the two studies we have already taken, and that our Lord is describing in these parables the condition of the Kingdom. It is not a question of the creation of the Church by the gathering of individual men to Himself, but rather of the establishment of the Kingdom. Here, then, is the method of His work during this age the sowing of the sons of the Kingdom. Some of them are non-productive, some of them productive. Some of them bring forth fruit, fruit that is toward the Kingdom. They influence the age, creating in it the recognition of, and approximation to, the government of God. Others produce no such fruit. They are men who come into contact with the thought of the Kingdom and the ideals of the Kingdom, but who never produce the fruit of the Kingdom.

There is, besides this, another sowing, that of the word in the heart.

In Luke’s account of our Lord’s explanation (Luke 8:11-15) he shows that side of the truth. There is no contradiction between the two things. The sowing of the word in the heart of a man is the introduction of the principle which makes him a fruitful seed in the age.

Let us examine our Lord’s description of these seeds, **“by the way side.”** Who is he that was sown by the way side? **“Any one heareth the word of the Kingdom, and understandeth it not;”** that is, one who listens to the word of the Kingdom, but to whom that word is but a jingle of empty sounds. Such are seeds planted by the way side. **“The evil one . . . catcheth away that which was sown in his heart.”**

There is the recognition of the sowing of the word in the heart. If the word be snatched away out of a man’s heart, he becomes a seed of the hard highway, and no issue results from his planting, no fruitfulness, no influence in his age, nothing that brings the Kingdom nearer. This is the first kind of seed.

Again, that which was sown upon the **“stony places,”** who is he? The man who hears the word, and rejoices in the word, **“with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself.”**

This is a man who goes farther than the first man; one who not only knows the sound of the word of the Kingdom, and is familiar with its letter, but who consents to its claim, and rejoices in it; and yet he never allows it to take grasp of his own life, to take root therein.

**“When tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended (stumbles);”** because the word has not taken root in himself, he cannot influence the age for the Kingdom. That man becomes a nonproductive seed in the soil.

Again, that which was sown **“among the thorns,”** who is he? He is the man who hears the word, but the **“care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.”**

This is a man who has within him the life-giving principle, but who becomes so occupied with the things of the world, with its methods and maxims, its cares and its pleasures, that they operate in his life as thorns, choking the vital principle, and preventing his having any effect upon the age in which he lives. But finally, we have that which was sown upon **“the good ground.”** Who is he? He is the man who hears the word, and **“understandeth it, which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth.”**

This is the man who hears the word of the Kingdom, who understands it, who obeys it, and therefore in his age produces fruit.

Let us re-state these truths.

The seed which the King plants **“are the children of the kingdom”** (vs. 38) who have heard the word. One has heard and never understood. To him the word is a form, a jingle of empty sounds. Plant that man in the age and what is the result? With persecution and testing his witness fails.

Yet another receives the same word of the Kingdom, but he is enamoured of his age, desires to catch its spirit, and to adopt its method. What effect has he on the age? None. The age chokes him under the press and crush of the material interests to which he has given himself, his influence dies.

Here is another who hears, understands, obeys. The word produces fruit in his life. Plant that man, and what is the result? He produces fruit toward the Kingdom of God. His life is the life that prepares for the return of the King.

Now, let us take the parable and explanation, and deduce their simple and natural instruction.

*Here again, I ask you to notice the apparent difference between the incidence of the teaching in the parable, and the explanation.*

***In the former, the whole issue seems to depend on the nature of the soil. In the latter, it is seen to depend on the seed. This distinction, however, is only apparent. It cannot be real, because when Jesus explained His own parable, He distinctly said that the nature of the seed was the important thing.***

So that the harvest depends, not upon the soil, but upon the seed sown. The soil responds or refuses to respond according to what that seed is in itself. We all feel how much more nearly this interpretation of the parable harmonizes with experience than any other.

If it be interpreted in the usual way, then there is no responsibility whatever upon the seed, neither can the soil be blamed for the lack of result due to its own natural hardness, for it cannot help being what it is. But when we come to our Lord's explanation we find how serious our responsibility is, for He teaches that the age will respond or fail to respond according to what we are in ourselves.

The age will be hard, rocky, thorny, or fruitful according to the nature of the seed.

What a man's influence in the age is going to be depends entirely upon whether the word of the Kingdom is in his heart or not, and further upon his response to the word which is in his heart. Take a man who has never received the word, and put him down in his age, and he cannot produce the influences of the Kingdom. We shall meet such a man in our next study, in the parable of the tares.

*Let us now fix our attention upon the men who have heard the word.*

There has been the primary sowing, the mysterious impartation of the principle of life which makes of them seeds equal to producing harvest. At this point our parable begins, and we have one sower, the Lord Himself; one soil, the age; one seed, men who have acquaintance with the word of the Kingdom. Now, however, we see four results, all depending upon the nature of the seed.

- To the seed understanding not, the beaten way of the age is hard, and there is no harvest.
- The seed with no root in itself, the persecuting age destroys.
- The seed which is careful for the things of the age, the age absorbs and chokes. None of these three bring any harvest.
- To the seed that understands and obeys and responds in personal life, the age responds, and an abundant harvest is the result.

Members of the Church are here, they are the sons of the Kingdom. Jesus in effect says in this first parable, as in the second, that the harvest of the Kingdom will be produced by implanting in the age such souls as have received the word of the Kingdom.

- If they receive the word and do not respond to it, they bear no fruit, and do not lift the age toward the Kingdom.
- If they respond and obey, they will bring forth harvest, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

Then the philosophy of the parable is that Jesus Christ works toward the realization of the heavenly Kingdom on earth, by planting in the midst of its life such souls as have heard His word, have received it, and obeyed it. He influences the age through their presence, through their living, through all that they are in themselves.

This is one aspect of Church responsibility. Our inclusive responsibility is that of the evangelization of the world, but that evangelization has in it two values:

- First, the calling out of individual souls,
- Second, that these may for the time become as seeds planted in order to a greater harvest.

In this purpose we see the larger issue of the Church's responsibility. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says: "**The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,**" waiting "**for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.**" It may quite correctly be affirmed that the apostle is there speaking of the fact that presently, when the hidden sons of God are manifest with Christ in His advent glory, then will begin the final work of healing creation's pain. That will be the historic fulfillment of the principle, but the principle itself is at work to-day.

Wherever creation groans, the only method of healing its wounds and assuaging its grief is that of planting the sons of God in the midst. Wherever such men and women have come to live, there is found, in a measure, the healing of creation's wounds, and the soothing of its pain.

That is the great story of missionary enterprise. The sob of the women and children of the dark places of the earth is healed by the preaching of the word, but there would be no healing but for the living presence of those who practice the word they preach. Plant the son of the Kingdom in the midst of an age that is against the King, and he will exert an influence that tells for the Kingdom.

Wherever sorrow is assuaged, wherever wounds are healed, wherever love becomes the law of life, wherever men are loosed from the power of sin, there the Kingdom of God is come.

And such a harvest is the result of the living seeds flung from the hand of the living Sower upon the soil, which of itself produces no Kingdom result, but which laughs into the harvest of the Kingdom in sure response to the fruitful seed.

Finally, one word by way of application to our own hearts.

The harvest the King is seeking is the harvest of the Kingdom. He sows the age with the sons of the Kingdom, and yet many of them are non-productive.

*We know His word. The question is, What effect are we producing upon our age? The answer depends upon the extent to which the word we know has affected our lives. How many there are who hear the words of the Kingdom, who have never yet understood them. They repeat them, they sing them, they love them perhaps, but there is no resulting harvest in the age in which they live. The harvest of the Kingdom is not found even in their own homes. There is no Kingdom influence exerted in their social circle. There is no compulsion toward the Kingdom produced by their lives in city or nation. Why not? Because they heard the words, but did not understand them. It is possible to recite all the words of the Kingdom by heart, and yet in home life, in social life, in civic life, in national life, to realize nothing.*

Or, again, some have gone beyond that. *They have not only heard the words, but they rejoice in them. They consent to the glory of the ideal. Yet as the word of the Kingdom sets up its imperial demand within, seeking to change the life, they hinder it. They do not allow it to take root, with the result that the age remains hard and cruel.*

Some have gone yet farther. *They have heard and obeyed the word up to a certain point, but have never in their deepest heart been delivered from the age itself. No man can exert an influence for God until that deliverance is absolutely his. You were a worker, such a worker that men felt your power; but in the matters of this life you have been "getting on." Oh, this devil of "getting on," when it kills a man's power for God in his age! The care of the age, the deceitfulness of riches, the successes of material life have destroyed the testimony of many for the Kingdom. When a man gives himself wholly to the age, to be great with its greatness, to be wise in its wisdom, he cuts the nerve of his testimony for God. The thorns of worldliness choke him, and the voice that was powerful is silenced, and the life that was productive is barren, and nothing is done for the Kingdom.*

**But, thank God, there are those who have heard the word, who understand the word, who obey the word, and through whose lives the Kingdom is influential. What is the issue? There is a harvest coming wherever they go, some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. There are men and women whose names never appear in the newspapers, who never found any report of their work even in the manual of their Church, but who have lived in obedience to the word of the King. If angels wrote the epitaph of such at their passing, they would write, These are they who helped the coming of the Kingdom. No finer testimony to successful life could possibly be written.**

As we pass out to individual work, teaching in the Sabbath School, speaking amid the needy men and women of the age, whatever it may be, never forget that whenever we win man, woman, or little child to the word of the Kingdom, we are planting another seed in the age, and preparing for the harvest which is yet to be. Every one of us who has heard the word, and who understands it, and obeys it, is part of the King's influence, and every soul we win is another seed planted for the final harvest of His Kingdom.

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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