

Prayer

God, my Father and my delight, You are an unquestionable source of peace and security in a world that does not know You. By the riches of Your grace and the touch of Your kindness, touch each precious facet of my soul and make me a child of quietness and peace in a world of strife and war. God, my Father and my delight, stay close I pray, stay close. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

After you have prayed, think for a moment about whether your words demand that you take action on some of those things you have prayed for. Do what you need to do.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for disenfranchised people throughout the world:** *Pray for those who live in China and the far East, who do not enjoy the freedoms to which they aspire. Pray for Christians who are persecuted.*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of food and drink, and the privilege of sharing this with others*
- *Continue to pray about the on-going unrest in North Africa and Arabia, for disenfranchised people and for the whole world.*

Meditation

Lord Jesus;

Capture my mind and think through me;
 Grasp my hands and work through me;
 Seize my feet and walk through me;
 Conquer my eyes and see through me;
 Acquire my mouth and speak through me;
 Procure my feelings and empathise through me;
 Engage my heart and inspire through me;
 Select my life and live through me;

And above all, Lord Jesus;

Secure my spirit and pray through me;
 So that You may do Your work within this world ...
 Through me.

Bible passage - Luke 8:9-15

⁹ When His disciples asked Jesus what this parable meant, ¹⁰ He said,

‘You have been allowed to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God; but others have been given it in parables, so that,

“seeing they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.”

¹¹ ‘The parable means this: The seed is the Word of God.

¹² The seed on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes the Word away from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

¹³ The seed on the rock are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it with joy, but have no root. They believe only for a while and fall away at a time of testing.

¹⁴ The seed that fell among the thorns are those who hear; but as they go on their way they are choked by life's cares, riches and pleasures, and their fruit does not mature.

¹⁵ But as for the seed on the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the Word, keep hold of it in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with perseverance.'

Bible Study

Review

At first reading, most of this passage seems mundane. We have already read the parable of the Sower, and because it is so familiar, we feel we know what Jesus is going to say about each of the seeds and soils before He says it. However, there is much more here for those who are willing to dig deeper. As a whole, Jesus' explanation of the parable highlights one of the deepest mysteries of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Some hear the Word of God and yet it has no perceptible affect on their lives, for like the seed on the first three soils, they bear no fruit. Yet others hear God's Word and are transformed by it. Is this just a matter of soil or does Jesus' comment on His own parable tell us more?

Firstly, however, we must look carefully at how Jesus begins to explain the parable. He begins by pointing out the difference between the disciples and the crowds to whom He gave the parable. He contrasts their access to Him and the 'secrets of the Kingdom' with the relative ignorance of the crowds who first heard it. As if to explain the ignorance of the crowds, He quotes the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, and a passage where this famous prophet was told that Israel would prove obstinate and unwilling to hear God's voice. Jesus says:

'Seeing they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand' (Luke 8:10)

Of course, when we find a quote like this we should check it out against the original passage in the Old Testament, which actually says this:

'keep on listening but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive' (Isaiah 6:9)

The differences are subtle, but if you read these two carefully, you will find that Isaiah prophecies that God's people will fail to hear and perceive God's will. Jesus, however, changes this famous quote subtly to make it sound conditional; people 'may not' perceive and do God's will, but this leaves the possibility that some will! Jesus' point is this, through His teaching, and the Kingdom of God that He has announced, some will indeed be fruitful even though Isaiah's prophecy will still condemn many. This is precisely the overall message of the parable of the Sower.

In the explanation of the three failing soils Jesus therefore gives some reasons as to why the Word of God appears to fail (as it seems to have done with the Israelites). Of course, this is helpful information, and it can help us to understand why the people of Israel have failed in the past. But the analysis of why some seed fails in certain grounds was not Jesus' objective. His purpose was to reveal a secret from the heart of God, for something new was happening in His teaching and preaching. Soil was being established in which God's Word would grow, this was the kingdom of God, and in its soil a harvest would grow!

When we look at the parable in this way, other parts of the passage come into a new light. The last verse about the good soil now appears far more important than the others, even though they can yield useful information to preachers and a useful set of points on which to hang a sermon. Here, Jesus seems to be speaking directly to the disciples, saying *'hear the word, keep hold of it in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with perseverance'* (8:15). This indeed is the secret for producing growth of a hundredfold (8:8), and this is teaching for all God's people!

The whole point of sowing seed is to gain a harvest, and the purpose of the Kingdom of God on earth is to establish the conditions under which the seed of God's Word can grow. Once we have heard a parable of Jesus saying that a crop of a hundredfold can be achieved, should we surely concentrate on the conditions of good soil that produce it, rather than those that do not? What is more important, to possess an analysis of failure, or to keep hold of the things of God with a good and honest heart, and persevere, so that seed may grow and be fruitful?

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- More about secrets and the Kingdom of God
- More about the pathway

- More about the rocky soil and weedy ground
- More about the good soil

Notes on the text and translation

V10 'You have been allowed to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but others have been given this in parables'

Other translations:

'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables' (NIV)

'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables' (NRSV)

This is not an easy verse to translate. The Greek reads strictly, 'It has been given to you to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables'. Many translators try to make this more meaningful by adding the words 'I speak' in the last phrase. However, the logic of the sentence seems to imply that if the disciples have been 'given' knowledge of the secrets, then this is 'given' to others in parables. There is no need to add 'I speak', because the sentence makes perfect sense as it stands.

V12 'the seed on the path ...'

Other translations:

'those along the path ...' (NIV)

'the ones on the path ...' (NRSV)

The other translations are correct in that the Greek does not refer to the seed at the beginning of each verse. However, the construction of the passage only makes grammatical sense if each sentence is about the seed, specifically. I have simply followed this logic. Not only is the translation right, it reads far better in English because there is a proper subject to each sentence.

Going Deeper

More about secrets and the Kingdom of God

Throughout the Gospels, the theme of secrecy may be found. It is at its clearest in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus seems reluctant for people to declare Him publicly, and He even tells people regularly not to let others know that He is the Messiah. In Luke, however, Jesus is not shy about who He is. He does not claim titles for Himself, but He clearly wants people around Him to recognise that He is the Messiah.

In this passage of Scripture, it can be argued that Jesus presents Himself as the Sower. Typically, Jesus does not say this, but it seems obvious. He is the One who preaches the Kingdom and delivers God's Word. To some extent, the whole parable is about how people respond to Jesus. Certainly, if you read through it with this in mind, then each part of the story makes a great deal of sense. Jesus' dealings with the Pharisees could reflect the seed that falls on the pathway, for there is little evidence that anything Jesus has said has penetrated the hearts or minds of these people. The rocky soil and the seed among thorns then represent some of the many reasons why people who hear Jesus speak fail to take what He says seriously; they either fall away because of 'testing' or because worldly matters are more pressing. Jesus' illustration is profoundly relevant even today!

In truth, the Gospels represent history in tension. Jesus had come into the world, but the Saviour was limited in time and space. He could only act as an individual, and the world changing message He brought of God's love for all would have to remain a secret until after His death and resurrection. Only when the Holy Spirit came would the Kingdom come in power together with the proclamation of the Gospel carried by the apostles. We must remember that although we read the life of Jesus as if it is common property, knowledge of what happened at the time was limited to only a few people, and this incredible secret destined for all the world had yet to burst out of its bounds.

More about the pathway

At the beginning of Jesus explanation of the parable, He said openly that the seed was the Word of God. By this He meant both God's words and deeds spoken and done in the world, through Him, the Messiah. God's

Word had been delivered in the past by prophets, but now it was being delivered through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

The first impediment to the growing of the seed was the pathway. People often pass over the significance of this in their rush to explain the work of the devil in taking away the seed, a picture that reminds us of birds picking up seed on a pathway. Was the pathway just a convenient place for the devil to do His work? Perhaps it was. A pathway is functional, enabling people to get from 'A' to 'B', so is it possible that Jesus thought of the pathway as representing the religious life of Judaism in His day? It had become functional, a matter of doing 'right religion' according to rules and regulations, and if the common people resisted these things, the Pharisees were keen to point them out, indeed, to make even more burdens of religion. The religious life of God's people had become a wearisome journey, not unlike the 'wandering through the wilderness' of the forefathers, centuries before.

There may be other ways of interpreting the meaning of the pathway, but this has a number of merits. It enables us to focus on the one specific way in which the devil was able to work to oppose the Kingdom of God in Jesus' day. The opposition of the Pharisees was Jesus' constant companion and ultimately, it led to His death on the Cross, the greatest work of the devil. We should always be careful lest the pathway of religiosity becomes the devil's way to snatch the Word of God from the heart of a Christian.

More about the rocky soil and weedy ground

The second 'soil' refers not so much to 'rock', but 'rocky ground'. It is only with this proviso that the parable makes sense. If a seed fell on a rock, then its fate would be no different to falling on a path. In Jesus' day, a farmer's greatest responsibility was to clear the rocks and stones from his land. Throughout most of Israel, the soil could be good, but was rocky to varying degrees, and unless cleared, a field would not yield its potential.

The picture of rocky ground is a helpful backdrop for Jesus' description of those who '*have no root*' and who '*only believe for a while and fall away at a time of testing*' (8:13). But what is the soil, and why do people succumb to this problem? It is easy enough to understand the problem, but why do people to this day turn away from God when the going gets tough? To a certain extent, the connection between rocky soil and lack of root is obvious, but if we think of the Israelite farmer's problem, then it is easier to explore the matter further.

The rocky ground may not be the fault of the seed, or as we might say, not the fault of the people in whom the seed grows. It may have arisen because those who had the responsibility of caring for the soil had not done their job. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were having a heyday because the High Priestly family in Jerusalem had such a grip on the state religion that the rituals of faith were hardly practiced in the countryside where people lived. Religion was practised in Jerusalem, but the countryside was exposed to pressure groups within Judaism such as the Pharisees with disastrous results. Perhaps Jesus saw this when others did not, and knew that He was spreading seed on rocky ground.

Something similar can be said for the ground that was full of weeds (8:14). Weeds are the result of the sowing of many seeds, and it is easy to see that such soil readily describes the general multicultural nature of first century Palestine. Around the region of Galilee lived large numbers of people from that region generally, including many people from other parts of the Roman Empire. Excavations show that people of many different beliefs lived around the Sea in Jesus' day, and Jewish communities occupied only parts of its shores. In addition, while religious practices were variable, the economic pressures placed upon people were considerable, chief amongst these being the Roman taxation system.

It seems that Jesus was speaking accurately of the economic and social pressures of His own day when describing soil full of weeds, and this speaks to people today as well as it ever did to those who first heard Jesus speak.

More about the good soil

Most of the study has emphasised the importance of the good soil, and the fact that the structure of the parable as well as Jesus' explanation of it focuses on this. Of course, this is what produces the fruit of the Kingdom of God. God's intention in sending Jesus was to establish His rule and authority on earth, and this could only exist where people willingly accepted Jesus and believed what he said and did. The good soil of God's Kingdom was where God's people were to be found, and where Jesus was honoured and listened to, and His words received and obeyed.

In the early days of the church, it was easy for God's people to identify the Kingdom rule of God with the fellowship of the church. After all, this was where God was obeyed. This was where people should be able to put down roots in the things of faith, and find the necessary support to sustain faith. The logic of the argument is compelling. No one could sustain faith outside of the fellowship of the church, and roughly the same is true to this day.

The trouble we face today is that we have become so used to defaming the church that we have forgotten the fact that it is the earthly form of God's Kingdom. It is the place on earth, both in people's hearts and in physical buildings, where God is honoured and the teachings of Christ are shared and learned. Too often, we denigrate the church without understanding its role or seeking to make sure that the fellowship of God's people has any consistent or recognisable form. Jesus did not come just to make a difference in people hearts, He came to save the world through people and to change it for the better.

So if we value what Jesus says about holding on to the 'Word', and keeping it in an *'honest and good heart'* (8:15), then the church matters. It is the visible aspect of God's Kingdom rule on earth, in its many forms, and it is the place where we find the fellowship and friendship in which we can persevere in faith and do what God requires. Satan has done a good job in trying to stop His people believing that the Church is essential to God's plans, but it is the good soil in which we are all planted.

Application

After Jesus' analysis of the parable of the Sower, we are left with two clear themes for application. The first of these relates easily to the usual way preachers discuss the parable of the Sower. This is to go through each soil identifying its pitfalls, before highlighting the good soil in which a harvest may be obtained for the Kingdom. Although this ignores the key contrast we have discovered in verse 10, it may still serve a useful purpose.

Firstly, people do indeed need to be warned that the world is not all 'good soil' for the preaching of the Kingdom. The first enemy of God's people is clearly the devil, and although people today like to treat the devil as a philosophical problem, no one should doubt his ability to *'take the word away from their hearts'* (8:12). The second and third soils sound more like a warning to God's people that appearances may be deceiving. Growth commences in each of these two soils, but eventually, growth comes to a halt and the plant dies, either because of lack of substance or through being choked. Our imaginations can run wild as to the potential causes of such perils, but we have at least been warned that starting the Christian journey is no guarantee of finishing it.

The clear theme of today's Bible study has been different from those however. I have argued that Jesus' purpose throughout was to highlight the seed sown on good soil, and the harvest that comes from it. The parable suggests that those who hear Jesus must take hold of what He says and value it, for without care, God's Word, the seed, will be compromised. It is only through positive engagement with what God is doing and perseverance in the teachings of Jesus, that fruit will be produced from the seed of faith planted in the heart of a believer. This is how the kingdom of God works.

It may sound very simple to say this, but for some it will be extremely difficult to put this into practice. Some who go to church are happy to do so providing real commitment is kept at a distance. For such people, religion is a matter of choice and something that must fit life as they experience it. Unfortunately for them, the devil has already snatched the word of God from their hearts. True Christian faith is different. It is a deep relationship with God, full of love, honesty and perseverance, and it constantly seeks the growth of the Kingdom.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you think Jesus meant by saying *'seeing they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand'* (8:10)?
2. What do you believe the soils represent today? Is there any way in which we can ensure that a seed falls upon good soil?
3. What does Jesus say that a disciple must do, so that good seed will grow in good soil and produce a harvest of a hundredfold?

Personal comments by author

Today's study is one of those in which I have dared to put forward a rather different analysis of the text than is common. It is not easy for me to do this, and whenever I do so, I feel very conscious of the weight of evidence that seems to suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, from time to time I feel compelled to proceed with an interpretation that is new or original. Perhaps doing this is rather like allowing good seed to grow in good soil! Only time will tell.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *To what extent do you feel that your own life mirrors any particular part of Jesus' parable of the Sower? It can be hard to try and make such comparisons, but it is important to try and do this. If necessary, discuss this with a friend, for whoever feels bad about not having grown in God's kingdom will need encouragement from others to ensure that the word implanted within their hearts is truly grown in good soil.*
 - *Read verse 15 carefully, has asked the Lord to show you how this applies to you and your life.*
-

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, we thank you that the seed of the Word of God has grown within us, and You will have promised that fruit will grow from us. The stainless we pray, and give us the courage to persevere through every trial of life, so that the precious word within will yield its full harvest. We praise you, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. AMEN
