

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

by

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A fundamental principle in interpreting parables is that they usually have only one central idea. Every part of the parable and its interpretation fit around this one central idea. In the parable of the sower this central idea is that the Word of God has its intended results in an individual only when it is received with a proper attitude, an attitude of total commitment to the Word. Without this attitude the Word may seem to have an effect but it is only temporary.

The context of the parable of the sower in the ministry of Christ in general and in the setting in Luke points to the fact that many of the people following Jesus had only a materialistic interest in His ministry. Jesus' purpose was to bring them into a deeper spiritual relationship. Anything less would eventually show itself to be a mere sham.

It is the fact that the seed was sown upon it that calls attention to the nature of the soil. Seed attracts birds. When it sprouts it needs room for roots and foliage, and can result in an abundant harvest. The Word of God, likewise, will accomplish great things in the life of the one who hears it, unless there are hindrances. The devil may initiate circumstances that hinder it from accomplishing its purpose. The pressures of this life may distract an individual from the total commitment he needs to exercise toward the Word of God.

The Word of God may touch an individual only superficially. If this is the case in an individual's relationship with the gospel he may seem to have saving faith and he may even think that he has faith, but when he finds that the Word of God makes greater demands than he is willing to accept, he rejects it and apostatizes. Then even that which he thought he had is taken from him. It is in this sense that his faith is temporary.

Jesus' concluding statement, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," indicates that the parable has to do with human responsibility. Every individual is to allow the Word of God to accomplish its intended purpose in his life. He should learn to hear the Word of God effectively.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, <u>Greek-English Lexicon of the NT</u> , second rev. ed.
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</u>
<u>BR</u>	<u>Biblical Research</u>
<u>BSac</u>	<u>Bibliotheca Sacra</u>
<u>JTS</u>	<u>Journal of Theological Studies</u>
NICNT	F. F. Bruce (gen. ed.), <u>The New International Commentary on the New Testament</u>
<u>NTS</u>	<u>New Testament Studies</u>
<u>TDNT</u>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u>

## INTRODUCTION

The Word of God has different effects on individuals. Some study it for many years but their lives are affected very little if any. Others, who have been acquainted with the Scriptures for only a short period of time, manifest a great change in their lives. What makes the difference? Surely every Bible student would like to receive the Word in such a way that it will have results. A study of the parable of the sower affords an opportunity to see Jesus' answer to the problem of effectively learning God's Word.

The parable of the sower has been explained in many different ways. It may be looked at from many different angles. The position of this thesis is that the parable does not answer theological issues. Though it fits in with the doctrines of security and perseverance it cannot be used to prove these doctrines. This parable, as well as many others, has to do with "the mystery of God's relations with ourselves."<sup>1</sup> God relates to individuals through His Word. The Word may or may not be effective in the heart of those who receive it. The parable of the sower teaches, to put it in a single statement, that the Word of God is effective in the lives of individuals only when it is received with a

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<sup>1</sup>John Dominic Crossan, "Paradox Gives Rise to Metaphor: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and the Parables of Jesus," BR, 24, 25 (1979-1980):31.

proper attitude, namely, with a faith that involves a total commitment and that is demonstrated by faithfulness and consistency.

The procedure in this study will be to examine, first, some background information. This will involve a study of the nature of parables, the purpose for parables, and the hermeneutical principles involved in correctly interpreting parables. It also involves a study of the context out of which the parable comes.

The purpose of the second chapter is to give an awareness of the problems involved in interpreting this parable. This is accomplished by examining the various views and interpretations that have been written concerning this parable.

The heart of this study is in Chapter Three. This chapter involves an exegetical study of the passage. Special attention is given to key words upon which the interpretation hinges.

The account of the parable and its interpretation as recorded by Luke has been chosen, more or less arbitrarily, as the object of this study. The variations which occur in the other Gospels are taken into consideration when they add something of significance. The quotations from the Bible are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise indicated.

It is the desire of this writer that all who read this thesis, as well as the writer himself, may be instructed by it to hear the Word of God more effectively.

## CHAPTER I

### AN EXAMINATION OF BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### Background Information on Parables

##### The Nature of Parables

##### Definition

##### The origin of the term

The word parable comes from the Greek word παραβάλλω which literally means to throw alongside and is used figuratively to mean to compare.<sup>1</sup> The noun form (παραβολή) refers to the act of holding beside for the sake of comparison.<sup>2</sup>

##### The broad use of the term

Since the word parable (παραβολή) basically means a holding beside or a comparison it can have a very broad, general meaning referring to many kinds of comparisons. It is used to translate the Hebrew word לְפָרֹשׁ which is used to refer to a proverbial saying (1 Sam 10:12); a byword (Deut 28:37); a prophetic figurative discourse (Isa 14:4); a similitude

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<sup>1</sup>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Parable, Allegory, Proverb," by C. H. Peisker, 2:743. See also Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on The Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, reprint 1974), p. 276.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

(Ez 17:2); a poem (Num 21:27); or a statement of moral wisdom (Prov 10:1).<sup>1</sup>

The word παραβολή is likewise used to refer to a variety of comparisons.<sup>2</sup> For example, it is used to refer to a proverb in Luke 4:23 ("No doubt you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself'"). It is used to refer to a type, as in Hebrews 11:19 ("He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type"). Or it can refer to a symbol as in Hebrews 9:8, 9 ("the outer tabernacle . . . which is a symbol . . .").

The technical use of the term

The English word "parable" has also taken on a technical meaning. It is a term used to designate a specific figure of speech.<sup>3</sup> From here on, in this thesis, the word will be so used. Like a simile, an allegory, or a fable it involves a formal comparison. But a parable has characteristics that distinguish it from other figures of speech and put it in a class by itself. These characteristics will be examined in the next section.

Various attempts have been made to summarize these characteristics into a definitive statement. An inadequate definition that is often given is this: "A parable is an

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<sup>1</sup>BDB, p. 605.

<sup>2</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 276.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

earthly story with a heavenly meaning."<sup>1</sup> A somewhat more adequate definition says that a parable is ". . . a comparison drawn from nature or daily life and designed to illuminate some spiritual truth, on the assumption that what is valid in one sphere is valid also in the other."<sup>2</sup> An even more complete definition is given by Doerksen. "A parable is a similitude or full-length story, true to nature and life, a picture of something which can be observed in the world of our experience, which was told by our Lord to illustrate a divine truth."<sup>3</sup> The following list of characteristics will explain in further detail the nature of parables.

### Characteristics

Parables are in story form

Unlike the shorter figures of speech, parables are always in story form.<sup>4</sup> They involved characters, setting, and a plot. Parables produce audience interest for this reason.

Parables are true to life

Unlike fables or myths, parables are always realistic.<sup>5</sup> Though one cannot be certain that the events related

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<sup>1</sup>Vernon Doerksen, "The Interpretation of Parables," Grace Journal 11 (Spring 1970 #2):4.

<sup>2</sup>Archibald M. Hunter, Interpreting the Parables (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 5.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 276.

in a parable actually happened as stated they very well could have for parables are always true "to facts and experiences of life."<sup>1</sup>

Parables involve a formal comparison

A parable is a figure of speech that involves a formal comparison. It is an extended metaphor or simile.<sup>2</sup> That is, something is said or implied to be like something else. In a parable something in the physical world is used to picture or represent a spiritual or moral truth.

Parables present a central truth

Every detail in an allegory is important in that it has a symbolic significance.<sup>3</sup> This is not true of parables. "In a parable there is usually but one central truth."<sup>4</sup> Some of the details help to develop this truth but a parable may include details just to keep the story realistic.<sup>5</sup>

Parables require interpretation

An allegory is so constructed as to interpret itself.<sup>6</sup> The skill of the author is demonstrated by this

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<sup>1</sup>A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 213.

<sup>2</sup>David H. Wallace, "Interpretation of Parables," in Hermeneutics, edited by Bernard Ramm (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 5.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Elbert Russell, The Parables of Jesus (New York: Young Women's Christian Associations, 1912), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), p. 4.

self-interpreting characteristic of allegories. The names of the characters, the names of the places, the insertion of strange events or surroundings may be employed to accomplish this.<sup>1</sup> A parable, since it is essentially a formal comparison of the spiritual with the earthly, "requires its interpreter to go beyond its own narrative to bring in its meaning."<sup>2</sup>

Parables set forth spiritual truth

Stories are often used to illustrate various kinds of ideas. However, a parable is unique in that it is always "constructed to set forth a spiritual truth."<sup>3</sup>

Parables reveal or conceal truth

A parable may illuminate the hearer or it may conceal truth. Its effectiveness depends on whether or not the parable is explained and on the spiritual condition of the hearer.<sup>4</sup>

### The Purpose for Parables

#### The general purpose

The parable is a valid and important figure of speech. It has several features that make it especially valuable.

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<sup>1</sup>Pilgrim's Progress is a good example of this.

<sup>2</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup>Trench, Notes on Parables, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, p. 215.

To embellish the truth

Many spiritual lessons are easily forgotten when presented only in a literal way. The narrative context of the parable makes the truth more attractive. It arouses interest and aids memory.<sup>1</sup>

To require the hearer to think

Thinking is essential for learning. Parables encourage the listener to think. The comparison is not always obvious. The extent to which the comparison can be drawn is not always clear. The parables of Jesus are often followed by a question (Matt 13:51, 18:23, 20:15; Mark 12:9; Luke 7:42, 8:9, 16:11-12). All these things encourage the hearer to think about what he is hearing.<sup>2</sup> Hunter writes, "The parable is not so much a crutch for limping intellects as a spur to spiritual perception."<sup>3</sup>

### Jesus' purpose

There are several other purposes for parables that must be discussed. These relate to the specific nature of Jesus' ministry.

To conceal truth

According to Mark 4:11-12 Jesus spoke in parables not only to reveal truth but also to conceal it. There is

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<sup>1</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup>William Barclay, The Gospel of Mark (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 83, 84.

<sup>3</sup>Hunter, Interpreting the Parables, p. 74.

considerable debate over the meaning of verse 12. Did Jesus deliberately conceal truth from some so that they might be damned?

Part of the debate involves the meaning of ἵνα in this verse. There have been attempts to tone down its import from purposive (in order that)<sup>1</sup> to consecutive (so that) or to resultant (because).<sup>2</sup> However, it fits better with other Scripture to understand that Jesus deliberately withheld the truth from some, but only as a judgment upon those who had already clearly heard the truth and completely rejected it. For example, in Romans Paul writes of certain individuals that "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts" (Rom 1:24) and "their foolish heart was darkened" (1:21), and "God gave them over to a depraved mind" (1:28). However, these individuals suppressed the truth which they had (1:18). They knew God but did not honor Him as such (1:21). They refused to acknowledge God (1:28) and to keep His laws (1:32). From these God withheld further truth. Another example is seen in God's dealings with Pharaoh. God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exod 10:1), but only after he first hardened his own heart (Exod 8:15).

So then, it is safe to say that Jesus withheld the truth from some and revealed it to others. The nature of

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<sup>1</sup>Though this is not the only way the word is used, it is the normal usage. See James Hope Moulton, Prolegomena, vol. I of A Grammar of New Testament Greek (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), p. 206.

<sup>2</sup>Nigel Turner, Grammatical Insights into the New Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965), p. 48.

parables is such that they are suitable for this kind of use. However, the basic intent of the Lord was not to keep men from knowing the truth. It was hidden from those who would not receive it. Even this hiding of the truth had as one of its goals to open men's hearts to the truth.<sup>1</sup> The context of the Old Testament passage quoted in Mark 4:12 and Matthew 13:14-15 involves this very idea, for the command was to spread the word not hide it ("Go, and tell this people," Isa 6:8) and the promise was that a remnant would not be rejected (Isa 6:13). The purpose of this quote from Isaiah is not, therefore, to turn men away from the truth but to lure them to the truth.<sup>2</sup>

To reveal the truth

It is clear that Jesus' purpose was to reveal truth.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, Jesus used parables to teach spiritual truth,<sup>4</sup> or in the words of the Scripture to teach "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11).

The physical aspects of the kingdom had been revealed in many Old Testament passages and the Jews were well versed

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<sup>1</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1943), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Luke (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1931), p. 108.

<sup>3</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 279.

<sup>4</sup>Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, p. 215.

in them.<sup>1</sup> However, the spiritual aspects of the kingdom were not understood by most of them. Parables were an ideal way to teach these spiritual truths. Parables explain spiritual truth by comparing it to everyday physical, earthly situations. Parables allow those who are interested in spiritual truth to learn, but they hide the truth from those who are only interested in material things.

### The Interpretation of Parables

#### Basic assumptions

The proper interpretation of parables involves many of the same basic principles of interpretation that are involved in interpreting other passages of Scripture. These principles of interpretation fall into two broad categories.

#### Principles of logic and language

These principles indicate that, in many ways, interpreting the Bible is like interpreting any other literature. Since language exists for the purpose of communicating thought, the Bible is intended to be understood, it is God's message to man.<sup>2</sup> Since language is governed by usage and context the Scriptures must be understood on the basis of a grammatical and historical study.<sup>3</sup> Since every true statement denies that

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<sup>1</sup>The following passages give some indication of this: Matt 17:10, 11; Luke 14:15; John 6:14, 15; Acts 1:6; Rom 14:17; and 1 Cor 15:50.

<sup>2</sup>Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), pp. 107-28.

which is the opposite, every passage of Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with "the Analogy of Faith, or that system of truth which God has made known unto His people."<sup>1</sup>

### Principles of Scripture

Except for principles of interpretation which fall into the above category, all principles of interpretation must come from the Bible itself. The Bible is unique and is the final authority, therefore it cannot be controlled by external, man-made principles.<sup>2</sup>

### Specific principles

Look for one main point

Historical background of this position. Early in the history of interpretation it became popular to look for hidden meanings in the text of Scripture. This was also true when the parables were being interpreted.<sup>3</sup> Origen<sup>4</sup> and Augustine<sup>5</sup> are two who used this allegorical method of interpretation and made it popular. Chrysostom, on the other hand, opposed this method and taught that one should not look for a spiritual meaning in every word because "many

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Pink, Interpretation of the Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), pp. 31, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. xix, xx.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Doerksen, "Parables," p. 16.

absurdities will follow."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, allegorizing was the customary way of handling parables down through the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The reformers began to swing the pendulum in the other direction, because they avoided, to a certain extent, allegorical interpretations. They sought to establish a method of exegesis based on the historical setting and the grammatical structure of the parables.<sup>3</sup>

However, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the pendulum completed its swing away from allegorical interpretation. This change was primarily due to the work of A. Jülicher,<sup>4</sup> and C. H. Dodd.<sup>5</sup> Later J. Jeremias carried on the same emphasis.<sup>6</sup> These men strongly opposed the fanciful interpretation of the allegorizers and taught that the exegete must seek to grasp the

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<sup>1</sup>Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, vol. X in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 292.

<sup>2</sup>Kistemaker, Parables, p. xx.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>A. Jülicher's writings are in German. For further study the following volume is recommended: Adolf Jülicher, Die Gleichnisreden Jesu, Zwei Teile in Einem Band [Two volumes in one], Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963).

<sup>5</sup>C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1943), pp. 180, 181.

<sup>6</sup>Joachim Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, translated by S. H. Hooke with revisions (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 66-89.

basic meaning. They succeeded in destroying the popularity of the allegorical method of interpreting parables.<sup>1</sup>

However, these men swung the pendulum so far that there has since been a swing back in hopes of reaching a position that is not quite so cut and dried. Nourse states his summarization of Jülicher's position and then offers his own modified position:

Jülicher claims that a parable has properly but one idea--it must illustrate but one thought; its figures are part of one picture which represents but one truth.

While it is true that the main purpose of a parable is to convey one general idea, subordinate ideas may easily be suggested.<sup>2</sup>

Present views on this position. Many evangelical scholars today take the modified position. A parable is considered to have but one central, main point.<sup>3</sup> Doerksen gives an interesting picture of the importance of recognizing this central truth.

A parable might be likened to a wheel, the central point is the hub, and all the spokes point to the hub. If the hub is off center, the wheel will not perform and function properly.<sup>4</sup>

Though the parables have one central truth, various aspects of that truth may be presented in one parable.

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<sup>1</sup>Kistemaker, Parables, pp. xx, xxi.

<sup>2</sup>Edward E. Nourse, "Parable" in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, vol. 9, ed. by James Hastings (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 630.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, Doerksen, "Parables," p. 14; Mickelsen, Interpreting, p. 213; Ramm, Biblical Interpretation, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 15.

Furthermore, one must not ignore the various details of the parable. Most of them add some important detail to make the meaning complete. But some, on the other hand, evidently are included to make the story flow smoothly.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the case in the actions of the unjust steward of Luke 16:1-9.

#### Understand the details

Even though the teaching of each parable centers around one main theme, each detail of the parable must be carefully studied. This includes making "a study of the historical setting of the parable."<sup>2</sup> The goal is to know all the religious, social, political, and geographical circumstances involved so that the impression one gets from reading the parable is as near as possible to the impression the immediate hearers got.

This study of details should also include a study of the Biblical context.

Keys to the interpretation can be found in the context. Often our Lord supplied the interpretation (Matt 22:14, 25:13 [The parable of the sower is another example]). Sometimes it is supplied by the Gospel writer such as the parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1).<sup>3</sup>

#### Note the attitude of the audience

Jesus spoke the parables orally to real, live audiences. It is important to try to evaluate what was in their minds as the parable was given.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Kistemaker, Parables, p. xxiii.

<sup>3</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 12.      <sup>4</sup>Barclay, Mark, p. 94.

Relate the parable of Jesus' teachings as a whole

The entire body of doctrine which Jesus taught is the context in which the parables are found. The main theme of Jesus' teaching was concerning His person and work and how this was to affect those to whom He came. The parables fit into this context. They are "all illustrations of Christ and His mission."<sup>1</sup>

Avoid basing doctrine on parables alone

While some say that parables should be used as a source of doctrine,<sup>2</sup> it is safest to modify this statement. Doerksen succinctly states this modified position.

Parables should not be considered primary sources of doctrine. Doctrine may be illustrated and confirmed by parables, but one must be careful to check the interpretation with the whole body of inspired Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Parables are by definition comparisons or illustrations. The illustration must be considered in the context of the thing illustrated. The parables must be considered in the light of the direct statements of the doctrine which they illustrate.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Nourse, "Parable," p. 630 and Ramm, Biblical Interpretation, p. 263.

<sup>3</sup>Doerksen, "Parables," p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Trench, Notes on Parables, p. 17.

Background Information on the  
Historical Context

The Context of the Agricultural Procedure

The contemporaries of Jesus were part of an agricultural society. Sowing was a familiar procedure to Jesus' audiences. He referred to it several times in His teaching (e.g., Matt 6:26; 13:37).

The time of sowing

There were two times of the year in which sowing took place. Some sowing was done in the spring, but most of it was done in the fall, either just before or just after the start of the fall rains.<sup>1</sup>

The methods of sowing

Most farmers sowed broadcast, throwing out the seed with a sweep of the hand. Some took the time to carefully place the seeds in rows.<sup>2</sup>

The preparation for sowing

J. Jeremias and K. D. White lead the debate over whether fields were first plowed and then sowed or vice versa. Jeremias maintains that the parable of the sower depicts an unplowed field. After the sowing had been

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<sup>1</sup>Henri Daniel-Rops, Daily Life in the Times of Jesus, translated by Patrick O'Brian (New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1962), p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>A. C. Bouquet, Everyday Life in New Testament Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 84.

finished the farmer did the plowing. The paths which had been made across the field during the fallow time were then plowed up. The rocks near the surface were not exposed by the plowshare until after the seed had been sown. Weed control was not attempted until after the seed had been sown.<sup>1</sup> These primitive methods of plowing worked the seed into the soil in a very effective manner.<sup>2</sup>

But not all sowing was done before plowing. Many citations of sowing after plowing exist. All O.T. references to sowing and plowing mention plowing first (Job 4:8; Isa 28:24, 26; Jer 4:3; Ezek 36:9; Hos 10:11-13; Amos 9:13). This is the position that White takes.<sup>3</sup> While he acknowledges that in some locales plowing followed sowing, he thinks this was not the case in Palestine. He maintains that the field would have been plowed several times during a fallow time in the summer. If this is the case the sowing was followed by harrowing or by another plowing.<sup>4</sup>

The picture that Jesus presents in the parable is generalized. Neither Jeremias' position nor White's position can be proven from a study of the parable. Either agricultural procedure would fit into Jesus' description.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, pp. 11, 12.

<sup>2</sup>P. B. Payne, "The Order of Sowing and Ploughing in the Parable of the Sower," NTS 25 (October 1978):124.

<sup>3</sup>K. D. White, "The Parable of the Sower," JTS 15 (October 1964):304-07.

<sup>4</sup>Bouquet, Everyday Life in New Testament Times, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>P. B. Payne, "Sowing and Ploughing," p. 128.

### The Context of Luke's Narrative

Four scenes in the immediate context of the parable of the sower in Luke provide an atmosphere for the interpretation of the parable.

#### Jesus in Simon's house

Two contrasting individuals present themselves to Jesus in Simon's house (Luke 7:36-50). Simon made a show of righteousness inviting Jesus into his house. But Simon doubted Jesus' divine calling.<sup>1</sup> "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).

The woman was a known sinner but she had been forgiven (ἀφέωνται present tense of ἀφίημι). Not only had she been forgiven but she knew that she had been forgiven and that she had been forgiven much. Her love, as demonstrated by the way she treated Jesus, was the evidence, not the grounds, of her forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> The causal element of ὅτι must be taken in a secondary sense. The fact that she loved much might be said to be the cause for her assurance of forgiveness. Another possibility is to see it as the cause or grounds for Jesus' statement. In other words, "for she loved much," might be taken as going with "For

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<sup>1</sup>Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, The English Text with Introduction Exposition and Notes, in NICNT, F. F. Bruce, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 233.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

this reason I say to you" rather than with "her sins . . . have been forgiven."<sup>1</sup>

#### Jesus ministered to by faithful women

In Luke 8:1-3 some of Jesus' traveling companions are mentioned. The fact that they contributed financially for the support of Jesus' ministry is the key fact pointed out in this passage.

#### Jesus tells another parable

The parable of the lighted lamp is found in Luke 8:16. Its interpretation occurs in the following verse. "For nothing is hidden that shall not become evident, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light." In other words, the parable illustrates the fact that hidden things will eventually be brought to light and that which is unknown eventually will be manifested. Verse 18 goes on to apply this. "Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken from him." In other words, the effect that listening has had on a person's inner life will eventually be manifested. The result may be different from what even he himself may have expected.

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<sup>1</sup>Turner, Grammatical Insights, p. 39.

### Jesus explains His relationships

In Luke 8:19-21 Jesus explains that those who are most closely related to Him are those who not only hear the Word of God, but those who practice it as well.

### Conclusion

This context of mere profession in contrast to genuine faith that is demonstrated by outward acts; commitment that affects the purse; hidden things brought to light; and an emphasis on hearing and doing God's Word points to the fact that a person's spiritual state may not always be what it at first appears to be. However, that which is true and genuine will eventually be manifest by consistent outward fruit.

This is an appropriate context for the parable of the sower, if the teaching of the parable centers around the contrast between superficial hearing of the Word as compared to hearing that affects the innermost being of man in such a way that his outward actions also change.

### The Context of the Ministry of Christ

It is often suggested that Jesus saw a literal sower out in the field sowing. With this as a backdrop He began His parable. This is very possible since sowing was a regular occurrence in the rural areas of Galilee. It is also possible that Jesus saw the spiritual counterpart before

Him as He was relating the parable.<sup>1</sup> His ministry was a spiritual ministry. The crowd before Him was a spiritual field. The parable grew out of a deep spiritual concern for the people and a desire to minister to their needs. An examination of the spiritual conditions Jesus faced is therefore in order.

#### A context of popularity

The verse that introduces the parable (Luke 8:4) says that "a great multitude were coming together." The miracles that Jesus had done and His authoritative teaching had made Jesus very famous and large numbers came to see and hear Him. Some evidently came out of curiosity and out of a desire to follow the crowd, for many deserted Him at a later time. This is evident from John 6:66 where it says that "many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." The parable of the sower was addressed to this large multitude of people who were in various positions as far as their relationship with Jesus was concerned.

#### A context of hostility

In contrast to the popularity of Jesus one must also recognize the hostility which He faced. In spite of the fact that many were eager to hear Him, others strongly opposed Him. In fact some opposed Him for this very reason.

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Balmain Bruce, The Parabolic Teaching of Christ (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1886), p. 17.

The religious leaders were jealous of Jesus because the populace was so eager to hear Him.<sup>1</sup>

As Jesus' popularity was reaching its peak, hostility toward Him also increased. His authority was challenged when He claimed to forgive sins (Luke 7:49). He was criticized because He spent time with sinners (Luke 5:30). He was questioned because His disciples did not fast (Luke 5:33) and because they picked ears of grain on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1-3). The Pharisees, as a body, had rejected Him and were seeking an opportunity to kill Him (Matt 12:14). Jesus had warned them about the unpardonable sin implying that they had committed it or were in danger of committing it (Matt 12:31-33). This attitude of rejection and hostility had begun to affect the crowd. It produced a caloused kind of listening that was more ready to criticize than to obey.<sup>2</sup>

#### A context of rejection

Jesus knew that eventually the majority would reject Him. The enthusiasm of the crowd gave Him no great pleasure for it was not that which came from a lasting relationship with Him. The crowd was eager to see the miracles and to be benefited by them. But they were not willing to accept His message.

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<sup>1</sup>See Mark 12:37 and John 11:47, 48.

<sup>2</sup>Morgan, Parables and Metaphors, pp. 13, 14.

It was time for the wheat to be separated from the chaff. The parable put the responsibility on the individuals. Each one was invited to examine his relationship to the truth Jesus was proclaiming.<sup>1</sup>

Even the eleven needed a warning about their relationship to the things Jesus was teaching. Jesus would soon begin teaching them about His coming death and resurrection (Luke 9:22). These things were hard for them to comprehend and to accept. There was a great need for the apostles to listen with faith and understanding if they were to come through the experiences ahead of them with their faith intact. The parable of the sower prepared Jesus' followers to receive or reject these issues.<sup>2</sup>

#### A context of secularism

The teachings of Jesus centered on spiritual things. He spoke of being "born again" (John 3:3). He claimed to have the authority to forgive sin (Matt 9:6) and stated that His purpose was to call sinners to repentance (Matt 9:13). He promised eternal life to those who believe (John 6:47). In contrast to this, the spirit of the crowd was very secular. They were interested in miracles (John 6:2), and in

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, Parabolic, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Schuyler Brown, Apostasy and Perseverance in the Theology of Luke (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), p. 77; and Neil R. Lightfoot, Lessons from the Parables (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 22.

food (John 6:26), in possessions (Matt 19:22), and in position (John 11:48).

The woman of Samaria was interested in water and had to be skillfully introduced to the spiritual issues before her (John 4:7-29). The multitude was impressed with the feeding of the five thousand because it met a physical need (John 6:26). Jesus pointed out that the real issue was spiritual, not physical (John 6:27-58). The physical water and the multiplied bread provided an avenue whereby Jesus could bridge the gap between the secular mind and a spiritual message.

#### Summary

A parable is a figure of speech that comes in story form. It is simple and true to life and therefore is an appropriate way of illustrating spiritual truth. Jesus used parables often in His teaching. By means of parables He presented the spiritual aspects of the Kingdom in a figurative way. Therefore, those who were ready to receive the spiritual truths learned from the parables and those who were not could not understand their significance.

The student of parables needs to approach the study of a parable with some of the same general methods of hermeneutics he would use for other portions of Scripture. In addition to this he needs to keep in mind that each parable centers around one main truth. Each part of the parable and its interpretation should relate to this central truth.

This does not mean that the details are unimportant for each detail must be carefully studied to see how it fits and whether it just adds to the setting of the story or whether it relates to the interpretation as well. The interpretation of the parable must be compared with what the Bible says in other places about the same topic. No doctrine should stand only on the interpretation of a parable.

It is also important to examine the context of a parable. The parable of the sower arises out of a very common urban activity. Jesus presents the scenario of events just as His hearers had seen it happen year after year.

In Luke's gospel, the parable of the sower is found nestled in among several pericopes that indicate that the effect of the Word of God in a life is not always immediately obvious but that which is true and genuine will eventually be manifest outwardly. The other gospel accounts include some of the same material in the context of the parable of the sower and give additional parables that point to the contrast between that which is genuine and that which is not (Matt 12:43-45; 13:24-35; Mark 4:30-34).

The relationship and attitude of the hearer is also important in understanding a parable. The crowd that heard the parable of the sower was a mixed crowd. Some soon ceased following Jesus and rejected Him. Some would be true to Him. All needed to give careful attention to His words if they were to fully comprehend His purpose and His message.

## CHAPTER II

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED

In order to make the best use of the space allotted to the exegesis of the passage, the problems will be looked at first. These problems point to the hinges upon which the interpretation of the parable hangs. How one answers these questions determines the way he will interpret the parable. This chapter will, therefore, present the questions with the possible answers that have been stated by various expositors.

#### What Is the Central Idea of the Parable?

Chapter I has shown that the interpretation of a parable should be built around the one central idea of the parable. Several different ideas have been suggested by various writers as to what this key idea is. These will be discussed here briefly. The first two mentioned are quite widely held. In fact, it has been suggested that the parable has both of these meanings.<sup>1</sup> The last three views are not so widely held but will be presented nonetheless.

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<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 99, 100.

## The Preaching of the Word Will

### Have a Variety of Effects

Those who hold to this view understand the parable as being addressed to the disciples and the preachers who were to follow them. The parable is "the story of a farmer's fortunes."<sup>1</sup> Some of the seed is lost and wasted but this is to be expected and the ultimate harvest makes it all worthwhile. The disciples needed this reminder for they "were on the verge of overwhelming discouragement."<sup>2</sup> The lesson of the parable was that they should not be disheartened because, even though not all will respond to the message, there will be a great harvest.

## The Response of the Individual

### to the Word Will Vary

Many commentaries present the interpretation of this parable as centering around the idea of how seed relates to various soils as compared to the way individuals respond in various ways to the Word of God. "It is suggested that the parable means that the fate of the Word of God depends on the heart into which it is sown."<sup>3</sup> The different soils represent the various kinds of responses an individual may make when he hears God's message. The implication is that the

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<sup>1</sup>Dodd, Parables, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup>Lightfoot, Parables, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, Gospel of Luke, p. 99.

hearer should examine himself, note the hindrance in his own heart, and become a good hearer who truly hears.

There Will Be a Great But Not Universal  
Eschatological Harvest

Those who hold this view stress the harvest aspect of the parables. The matter of growth and the variety of soils are not given a prominent place.<sup>1</sup> Harrington points to the abundance of the harvest as indicating "the eschatological overflowing of divine grace surpassing all human measure."<sup>2</sup> Walvoord, on the other hand, emphasizes the opposite side of the picture. Based on the fact that only one of the four soils bears fruit, he makes the following statements:

There is no anticipation in the present age that there will be universal reception of the truth, as postmillenarians teach. Most of those who hear the message of the Kingdom will reject it. Some, however, will receive the message, cherish it in their heart, and believe in the truth of the kingdom. The first parable establishes the basic character of the present age, awaiting the return of the rejected King. The age will include some who believe, many who will not believe.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wilfrid J. Harrington, A Key to the Parables (New York: Paulist Press Deus Books, 1964), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfrid J. Harrington, Parables Told by Jesus: A Contemporary Approach to the Parable (New York: Alba-House Society of St. Paul, 1974), p. 100. Harrington presents several views on the parable but does not explicitly state what he accepts and what he rejects.

<sup>3</sup>John F. Walvoord, Matthew--Thy Kingdom Come (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 99.

People Placed on the Earth Will  
Vary in Effectiveness

Morgan holds to the view that in Matthew's account of the parable the seed represents various individuals whom the Lord sows in the world.

Jesus . . . lays no emphasis upon the soil, but all emphasis upon the condition of the seed which is cast into the soil. 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, "These are the sons of the Kingdom." This truth is emphasized, too, in the first parable by the fact that in every instance in His explanation, the King said, "he that was sown."<sup>1</sup>

As these individuals are "sown" in the world they vary in effectiveness. "Some of them are non-productive, some of them productive."<sup>2</sup> According to Morgan, "the soil is always the same."<sup>3</sup> Matthew says that "the field is the world" (Matt 13:38). The various soil conditions are related to the heart conditions of the individuals sown.<sup>4</sup>

This position seems inconsistent. There is no indication that Jesus related the parable twice and that Matthew records another version of the same parable. Harmonies of the Gospels present all the synoptic accounts as parallel within more or less the same context.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the

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<sup>1</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Matthew (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1929), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Morgan, The Parables, p. 48.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>A. T. Robertson, A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1950), pp. 64-67. John Franklin Carter, A Layman's Harmony of the Gospels (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), pp. 125-28.

three synoptic accounts say virtually the same thing. But the parable as recorded in Luke receives a different treatment by Morgan. Here the seed is the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> He reconciles the two positions by emphasizing the close relationship between the Word of God and the servant of God. "The implanted Word, in a man, in a woman, in an individual, becomes the seed of the Kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

### Jesus' Own Preaching Produced Various Results<sup>3</sup>

Jesus presents Himself as the sower. He summarizes the effectiveness of His preaching career with this parable. There had been success and there had been failures. Sometimes His words were received with enthusiasm, sometimes they were not. Sometimes they produced the fruit of changed lives, sometimes they did not.

### What Do the Various Soils Represent?

A prominent part of the parable of the sower is the description of the four kinds of soil. Therefore, an important question is, what do they represent? The views on this question divide into two categories.

#### The Soils Represent Believers or Unbelievers

Some students of the parable conclude that the main issue involved is salvation. The Word that is sown in the

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<sup>1</sup>Morgan, The Gospel According to Luke, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Harrington, Parables Told by Jesus, p. 99.

world has a variety of effects in that some people hear and are saved, but others, for some reason or another are not saved. The ones who are saved are fruitful in various degrees. There is a variety of opinions as to which of the soils represent the unbelievers and which represents the unbeliever.

Only the roadside represents unregenerate

Zane Hodges propounds the view that all the soils, except the first, represent individuals who receive the gift of eternal life.<sup>1</sup> Only along the wayside is the seed completely taken away. "Here, but here alone, Satan had triumph completely."<sup>2</sup> In the other soils the seed remained and represents those in whose heart "the living seed remained."<sup>3</sup> But Hodges goes on to say that though God's gift of life remains in the heart of those represented by the stony soil, "the faith that received it did not."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the roadside represents unregenerate. The rocky soil represents the regenerate individual in whom all faith is gone! The thorn-infested soil represents those in whom faith is barely evident.<sup>5</sup> The good soil represents fruitful Christians. Thus Hodges holds that regeneration exists where faith is gone! How this can be he does not explain.

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<sup>1</sup>Zane Clark Hodges, The Hungry Inherit: Refreshing Insight on Salvation, Discipleship, and Rewards (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 59-65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

Both the good and the thorn-infested soils  
represent believers

Alexander Bruce has presented the view that though the wayside represents an unbeliever and the rocky soil represents one who merely professed faith but eventually apostatized, the soil infested with thorns represents a Christian.<sup>1</sup> Bruce explains the nature of this Christian as described by the parable in the following manner:

His leaf will not wither,--it will continue growing till it reaches the ear; but the ear will be green when it should be ripe. Only in this sense is it said of him that "he becometh unfruitful" (Matt 13:22, KJV). He bringeth forth fruit, but he bringeth "no fruit to perfection" (Luke 8:14, KJV). He never attains to ripeness in his personal character. Anyone can see that he is a mistriven Christian, a man not victorious over the world, but defeated by the world in one form or another. . . . You may hope for his salvation notwithstanding; nevertheless you pronounce him a spiritual failure.<sup>2</sup>

Only the good soil represents true believers

Some commentators hold to the view that only the good soil represents true believers. The "imperfect fruit" of the thorn-infested soil does not represent unfruitful or immature Christians. It represents those who have heard the gospel, been convicted by it but do not come to the point of conversion because circumstances of this life are a hindrance to them.<sup>3</sup> Those who hold this view point out that even

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, Parabolic, pp. 29-31.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Guthrie, The Parables Read in the Light of Present Day (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, n.d.), pp. 227-31.

though the seed grew, the plants were ultimately completely killed off.<sup>1</sup> The fruit that was produced does not stand the test and is parallel to the one talent of Matthew 25:14-30.<sup>2</sup> "Even what he does have shall be taken away" (Matt 25:29b). Only when there is a right response to the Word of God is it effective in the heart of man. This is represented by the good soil. The other soil conditions illustrate individuals who, because of various heart conditions, do not respond aright to the Word of God.

The Soils Represent Heart Conditions That  
Affect the Way the Word of God is Heard

The central idea involved in the parable is not necessarily limited to salvation. A proper response to the Word of God results in regeneration. This is a key issue as far as the Word and faith are concerned. However, the Word can have additional results in the life of the one who responds properly to it.

The context of the parable does not point specifically to the issue of salvation but involves a broad spectrum of situations in which various individuals respond to Jesus in various ways. The parable, according to this view, therefore, relates not specifically to salvation but to the heart attitude of individuals who read or hear the Word of God. Whether the individual is already a believer or not,

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<sup>1</sup> Geldenhuys, Luke, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, The Parables of Jesus, p. 28.

he must be aware of wrong attitudes of the heart that would nullify its effectiveness in his life.

How Does This Parable Relate to the  
Doctrine of Perseverance?

If in the parable of the sower the productivity of the soil represents salvation, then one must, in the process of interpretation, explain how the parable relates to the doctrine of perseverance. Even if salvation is not the only thing represented by fruitfulness, it is included in the picture and this question needs to be answered. There are two possible positions one might take.

True Believers Stand in Danger  
of Losing Salvation

Luke 8:13 states that "those on rocky soil are those who . . . believe for awhile and in time of temptation fall away." The faith of these is not qualified except that it is temporary. Shank's view, therefore, is that these are individuals who were truly and sincerely believers, but who later apostatized and thereby lost their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

True Believers Must Be Distinguished  
From Apostates

The parable of the sower describes soil that initially appears to be good and productive. However, hidden hindrances, that later become evident, prevent the soil from being

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Shank, Life in the Son (Springfield: Westcott Publishers, 1960), pp. 155-83, 242.

productive. This pictures individuals who appear to be what they are not. In their initial attitudes to the Word of God they cannot be distinguished from those who sincerely believe, but later their relationship with the Word is seen to be unproductive. Their apostasy (departure from the truth) takes place because they never fully accepted it.

#### Summary

There are several positions as to what the key idea of the parable is. Most of them fall into one of two categories. Either the purpose for presenting the various results of sowing is merely to inform and encourage, or it is intended to also serve as a warning to the hearers, showing that a proper response to the Word is necessary if it is to result in fruit in their lives.

Furthermore, one might view the fruit produced as having to do with regeneration or one might broaden it to include other positive effects the Word of God may have in a person's life. In either case one must determine how each of the soils relates to the way people respond to the gospel and whether the person making such a response experiences regeneration. The exegetical considerations of the following chapter need to be brought to bear upon these issues.

## CHAPTER III

### AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF THE PASSAGE

#### Introduction

Parables readily lend themselves to allegorical interpretation because they involve the process of comparing an earthly activity with spiritual truth. This temptation to allegorize must be resisted. Furthermore, definite effort should be made to exegete the parable by examining the words and grammar of the parable. The purpose of this chapter is to do just that.

#### The Parable Related

Only a few of the parables related in the New Testament are followed by an interpretation by Jesus. These parables have special significance in that they provide an example of how parables are to be interpreted.<sup>1</sup> Even though Jesus' interpretation of the parable is the main part of this exegetical study, it is also important to study the parable itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Both the fact that in Matthew the parable of the sower comes first in a long series of parables and the words of Jesus in Mark 4:13 ("Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables?") suggest that the parable may in some way be a key to the interpretation of all the parables. See C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to Saint Mark, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, C. F. D. Moule, gen. ed. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1972), p. 161.

### The Seed

This parable is called "The Parable of the Sower." Jesus Himself gave it this name. "Hear then the parable of the sower" (Matt 13:18). Though this title is very appropriate for use in identifying the parable, it does not point to that which is most significant in understanding it. Some have renamed it "The Parable of the Soil."<sup>1</sup> This title points to that which is prominent in the parable. Though the soils have a prominent place, their significance is in the variety that is exhibited among them. However, this variety comes to attention and has significance because of the characteristics of the seed. The variations in soil would not be particularly important were it not for the nature of the seed. If the soils were to be used for purposes other than planting a crop the four variations in soil may not be of any particular significance. For example, if gravel stones, bread crumbs, or refuse were to be scattered on the ground, the variations in soil would be inconsequential.

Jesus presented this parable in such a way that the emphasis is placed on the seed, the various kinds of soil, and the relationship between them. The sower is mentioned but he does not have a central part in the parable. The harvester is not mentioned at all. Other essential details are also omitted. For example, there is no mention of rain or of

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<sup>1</sup>Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, p. 216, and George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1928), p. 41.

plowing. Since the seed is one of the central elements in the parable, careful attention will be given to an exegesis of Jesus' interpretation of the seed.

### The Four Soils

Four kinds of soil are mentioned in this parable. Each of these four soils had seed scattered upon it with a different result in each case. These results occur because of a cause and effect relationship.

#### The pathway soil

The first soil Jesus mentions is the pathway. Here the cause is so obvious as to not need an explicit statement by Jesus. The soil is hard. The road referred to here may be the footpath used by the farmer to transport his tools and seed to the field.<sup>1</sup> This soil would be packed by recent use and the farmer's intention would be to plow it up and not to use the path during the growing season.

More likely this is referring to a public footpath. Since all travel was done on foot or by the use of a donkey or camel, broad thoroughfares were not needed and the roads were not laid out by a surveyor.<sup>2</sup> The farmer who tilled the land beside one of these footpaths would grow his crop right

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<sup>1</sup>Herman C. Hanko, The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of the Parables (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>George A. Barton, Archaeology and the Bible in Green Fund Book, No. 17 (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1916), p. 132.

up to the very edge of the narrow path.<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:1 alludes to such a footpath. "Now it came about on a certain Sabbath He was passing through some grain fields; and His disciples were picking and eating the heads of wheat, rubbing them in their hands." Jesus and His disciples were not trespassing in the fields treading down their standing grain. They were merely following the public footpaths which had grain growing beside them so near that the heads of grain could be reached from the path.

Since the path ran right alongside the field it was inevitable that, in the process of sowing the seed broadcast, some of the seed should fall upon the path.<sup>2</sup> The results of this particular procedure was twofold. The first result is that it was walked upon (κατεπατήθη). This was not due to any maliciousness on the part of the traveler nor due to any unwarranted poor agricultural procedure on the part of the farmer.

Secondly, the birds ate the seed. The counter-productive activity of the birds was not limited to the roadway. The birds tended to follow the sower and get what they could of the precious seed before it was encased in the soil.<sup>3</sup> However, the seed which fell on the path would be more

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, Commentary on Mark (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup>The Book of Jubilees, translated from the Ethiopic by George H. Schodde (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1888), 11:10, p. 39.

thoroughly ravished by the birds since it would be much easier to see than that which was hidden by either the stubble of the previous crop or by the loose granules of the prepared soil.

### The rocky soil

The second kind of soil Jesus mentioned is rocky soil. This does not refer to soil that contains a large number of stones. Rather the soil is spread thinly over a large layer of rock.<sup>1</sup> The Greek word πέτραν is used here. Unlike πέτρος, it does not refer to stones<sup>2</sup> but to solid rock such as the rock which would form a cliff or a mountain.<sup>3</sup> The word πέτρα is used to refer to the rock in which a tomb is hewn or the rock which forms a foundation of a house.<sup>4</sup>

The lack of depth which characterizes the soil referred to here produces two results. Being shallow it warms quickly and therefore the seeds sprout quickly.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the lack of depth does "not permit the plant to develop its roots."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, after the plants come up (φύεν) they lack moisture (μὴ ἔχειν ἰκμάδα) and are dried up by the heat of the sun (ἐξηράνθη).

<sup>1</sup> Swete, Mark, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 507.

<sup>3</sup> TDNT, s.v. "πέτρα," by Oscar Cullman, 6:95.

<sup>4</sup> BAGD, p. 660. <sup>5</sup> Swete, Mark, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

### The thorn-infested soil

The third soil Jesus mentioned is that which was infested with thorns. The thorns (ἀκανθῶν) are bramble-bushes or briars.<sup>1</sup> The sower may not have cast his seed literally among the thorn plants but among the seed<sup>2</sup> or the roots<sup>3</sup> of the thorns. As soon as the fall rains came these unwanted plants would quickly come up along with (συμφοεῖσα) the grain crop. The effect of thorns on the crop is quite drastic. The word ἀποπνίγω means to choke,<sup>4</sup> to drown,<sup>5</sup> or to suffocate.<sup>6</sup> This same root word occurs in Luke 8:33 where it describes the fate of the swine when they ended up in the lake. "And the demons came out from the man and entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned."

### The good soil

The last soil Jesus mentioned is called the good soil (τὴν γῆν τὴν ἀγαθὴν). It is good in that it does not have

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<sup>1</sup>C. F. D. Moule, An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1953), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>John Peter Lange, "Mark" in Commentary on the Holy Scriptures (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, in the New International Greek Testament Commentary, I. H. Marshall and W. W. Gasque, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1978), p. 320.

<sup>6</sup>Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon, p. 66.

any of the defects of the previously mentioned soils. It is good in that it produces a harvest. The success of the harvest is stated in terms of the amount of increase, which is one hundred fold. Matthew and Mark state that in the good ground there was a variation in the amount harvested. In some places the harvest was thirty times as much as the amount of seed planted, some was sixty, and some was one hundred. Luke mentions only the largest increase.

Scholars differ as to whether this describes an unusually abundant harvest. Jeremias describes this as "a harvest of reward beyond all asking or conceiving."<sup>1</sup> However, Swete states that "even the highest rate of increase named here is not extravagant. . . ."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to describe the extremely fertile and productive soil of the grain-growing regions of Galilee.<sup>3</sup> According to Selah Merrill, the fields of Galilee usually produced an abundant harvest and some of the regions of Galilee were well known for their excellent wheat.<sup>4</sup> Genesis 26:12 speaks of the harvest that Isaac reaped. "Now Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him." It seems safe to conclude that the rate of

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, Mark, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Selah Merrill, Galilee in the Time of Christ in By-Bath of Bible Knowledge V (Oxford: The Religious Tract Society, 1898), pp. 25, 39.

increase presented in the parable, though it was very abundant, was not unusual in parts of Palestine.

### The Parable Applied

There is a short section in Luke's gospel between the section where the parable is related and the section where the parable is explained (Luke 8:8b-11). Three significant ideas need to be noted here. These ideas do not help one to understand the parable, but they do show that the parable is to be both understood and applied.

### The Parable Ends With a Command

The parable has been Jesus' sermon. As He concludes the sermon He stresses the need for the message to be applied by the hearers. "As He said these things, He would call out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'" "Call out" translates the imperfect verb ἐφώνει. This is best taken as an inceptive imperfect. This force of the imperfect is represented by the translation, "Having said these things He went on to cry. . . ."<sup>1</sup> The verb ἀκουέτω (let him hear) is in the present imperative form. The sense of these verbs is well expressed in Lenski's translation: "He went on to cry, He that has ears, let him be hearing!"<sup>2</sup> There are several ideas portrayed by these verb forms. 1) The statement should

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<sup>1</sup>See H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 444.

be taken as directly related to that which had been said just previously (namely, the parable of the sower). 2) Jesus is giving a command to hear. 3) This hearing should be done not just at the moment but in a continuous manner. The implication is quite clear. His audience has responsibility to hear properly and can and should change (so to speak) from poor soil to good soil.

#### The Parable Evokes a Question

"And His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable might be" (Luke 8:9). This verse introduces the fact that the parable has an interpretation. Its meaning was not obvious to them but they perceived that it had a specific meaning. One might note here also that the parable was spoken to "a great multitude" (Luke 8:4), but it was the disciples who asked about the meaning of the parable. The latter were obviously more desirous of knowing its meaning than the former.

#### The Parable Has a Purpose

Before Jesus proceeded to explain the parable He stated His reason for speaking in parables. This question has already been dealt with in the first chapter of this thesis and will not be further discussed here except to restate the conclusion. Jesus' purpose was to provide an avenue of teaching truth and He withheld truth only from those who had already previously heard the truth and rejected it.

### The Parable Explained

The parable of the sower is one of the few parables recorded in the Gospels that also includes an interpretation by Jesus Himself. This interpretation is therefore the central element in one's study of this parable. Key words in Jesus' explanation will be dealt with and then a tentative conclusion will be stated.

#### The Seed

In this parable the seed represents the Word of God. Seed is a very appropriate illustration of the Word of God. Several parallels can be drawn between the seed and the Word.

#### Both have life

Though a seed looks parched and dry it contains living cells and under the right circumstances these cells begin to grow and multiply. Likewise there is life in the Word of God. "For the word of God is living and active . . ." (Heb 4:12). "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63b). Kittel amplifies this idea thus: "This Word does not simply point to grace, salvation, and life. It affects grace, salvation, and life, for it is grace, salvation and life. James 1:21: τὸν . . . λόγον τὸν δυνάμενον σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>TDNT, "λέγω," by G. Kittel, 4:118.

Both have power

The preceding paragraph has already described the power of the Word to work salvation in a person's life. The Word of God also has power to do other things in a person's life. For example, sanctification. "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth" (John 17:17).

Seeds also have power. They are able to push through hard soil, push aside hard clods and certain seeds, if they should sprout in the crevice of a rock, might even break a rock in pieces.<sup>1</sup>

Both have a capacity for propagation

A single kernel of grain is able to reproduce itself and eventually in the course of a few years produce a large amount of grain.<sup>2</sup> Peter likens the Word of God to seed but sees the Word as having much greater importance because of its incorruptible fruit. "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).

## The Soils

The significance of the four soils

Before examining the four kinds of soil individually, the significance of the fact that there are four soils needs to be evaluated. Some understand the four soils to be

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, The Parables, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

representative of clearly distinct individuals or groups of individuals. For example, Gerhardsson says that the parable's "intention is to present not 'four kinds of listener' [sic] but 'the four kinds of listener [sic]."<sup>1</sup> By this he means that everyone who heard Jesus' message either accepted or rejected it. Those who rejected it did so for one of three reasons as depicted by the three unfruitful soils.<sup>2</sup>

Another view is that the parable relates not just to the ultimate acceptance or rejection of Jesus' message but also to the heart attitude of the hearer every time God's Word is heard. There are several arguments in favor of this view. The first is from practical experience. Everyone who hears the Word must be on his guard because any one of the first three soil conditions may at some time be present in his heart. He may find his heart hard against the Word and the devil snatches it away. He may receive it with enthusiasm but find that his interest wanes when problems arise. Or he may find that his mind is preoccupied with the concerns of this life and the Word cannot have its desired effect.

Secondly, the poor soils seem to parallel the three enemies of the soul--the world, the flesh, and the devil.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Birger Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," NTS (January 1968), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 176-88.

<sup>3</sup>Ada R. Habershon, The Study of the Parables (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1957), p. 281.

The birds represent the devil as is clear from Jesus' explanation, "Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart" (Luke 8:12). The thorns parallel the world for they are called "worries and riches and pleasures of this life" [emphasis mine] (Luke 8:14). Unlike the pathway which is made hard from without, the stony soil is hard from within.<sup>1</sup> If the parallel is continued, then this inner hardness relates to the enemy within--the flesh. Since each individual is opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil, each individual who hears the Word will at various times relate to it like each one of the four soils relates to the seed.

Furthermore, the parable includes an exhortation. Those to whom the parable is addressed are asked to change from being like the poor soil to being like the good soil.

These arguments are not entirely valid in that they go beyond interpretation to application. However, they do serve as a reminder concerning a danger in the first view. If this parable puts every individual into one of four categories, this must not be construed to mean that the individual cannot and is not responsible to change from being an ineffective hearer to being an effective hearer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

### The pathway soil

#### The cause of the problem

Each one of the four soils represents a condition of the mind that may be present in an individual when he hears the Word of God. The individual's response to the Word of God varies, depending on his mindset. As the seed upon the soil produces a cause and effect relationship so the Word in the ears of listeners produces a cause and effect relationship. The hearers who are like the pathway have the Word of God taken away or removed (ἀρῶ) from their hearts.<sup>1</sup> The one who causes this removal is Satan. The nature of the Word of God is such that Satan opposes it in every way he can.

#### The result of the problem

The result is that Satan accomplishes his purpose (ἵνα μή) of preventing both faith (πιστεύσαντες) and salvation (σωθῶσιν).

#### The example of the problem

This soil represents those who hear the Word of God but its message does not even begin to penetrate their minds. Bruce describes the individual in this category as follows: "Their mind is like a footpath beaten hard by the constant passage through it of 'the wishes of the flesh and the

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 24.

current thoughts' concerning common earthly things."<sup>1</sup> Jesus had such individuals in His audience at times, for example, the man who interrupted Jesus while He was preaching and said, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13).<sup>2</sup> This man was not hearing what Jesus said. Jesus was preaching about man's relationship with eternal things. This man's mind was on earthly things. He completely changed the subject to ask Jesus for help in getting earthly possessions. Jesus' words were having no impact upon his thinking.

### The rocky soil

The cause of the problem

The rocky soil represents those who, when (ὄραν with the aorist) they hear, receive the Word of God with joy. This sounds very positive but "it is not always good when people seem to receive the Word with joy."<sup>3</sup> This joyous response may indicate that it is merely an emotional response and can quickly and easily change, for that is the nature of emotions. This kind of response lacks root. Matthew 13:21 says that they do not have root in themselves (οὐκ ἔχει δὲ ῥίζαν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς). That is, the seed has not really taken

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Parabolic, p. 25. His quote is from M. Arnold's translation of Ephesians 2:3 in Vide, "Literature and Dogma," p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> H. A. Ironside, Addresses on the Gospel of Luke (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1971), p. 244.

root. Thayer says that this is "spoken of one who has but a superficial experience of divine truth, has not permitted it to make its way into the inmost recesses of his soul."<sup>1</sup>

The result of the problem

The effect of the heart condition is that his faith is defective. Jesus said this person believes "πρὸς καιρὸν" (Luke 8:13). This means that his faith was temporary, short-lived, or transitory.<sup>2</sup> This description of faith signifies either that one can believe and then stop believing and thus lose his salvation, or it signifies a superficial kind of faith that does not result in salvation. The latter would be similar to the kind of faith James speaks of: "The demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19).

When this temporary faith ceases they are said to "fall away" (Luke 8:13). The word translated "fall away" is ἀφίστανται, present indicative of ἀφίσταμαι. It refers in its broadest meaning to a departure in the spacial sense but usually carries the idea of departing in the sense of rebelling, opposing, or refusing to have anything to do with someone or something.<sup>3</sup> The noun form of this word

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<sup>1</sup>Thayer, Lexicon, p. 563.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, p. 722; and Gerhardsson, "The Parable of the Sower," p. 184.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, p. 126; Thayer, Lexicon, p. 89; and James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), p. 68.

(ἀποστασία) has been brought into the English language (apostasy) and means rebellion or abandonment.<sup>1</sup>

It is not within the scope of this thesis to prove whether or not one can lose his salvation. However, this writer believes that the temporary faith referred to here is not saving faith. Apostasy results when an individual, who has heard a considerable amount of God's Word, suddenly realizes that he must either do an about face, completely change his way of thinking and his life style, or he must reject the Word of God. The apostate eventually decides to reject the Word of God. This change in attitude makes it appear as if he has ceased being a Christian, but in reality he never allowed the Word of God to penetrate into his life in the first place. These individuals may think that they have faith but not really have it. This superficial faith is temporary. Jesus described this kind of person in Luke 8:18b. "Whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him." Calvin held this view and described as follows the individuals who think they have faith.

In Matthew and Mark these are called 'temporary,' not only because they fall away in temptation after being professed disciples of Christ for a time, but also because they themselves think that they have true faith. This is why in Luke Christ says that they believe for a time, since the honour they give to the Gospel is like faith.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>BAGD, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke in volumes 1, 2, 3 of Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), vol. 2, p. 72.

An example of the problem

A careful examination of the individuals in Jesus' audience shows that the above description of apostasy fits some of them well. Bruce describes them as follows:

If a type of this class is sought for in the Gospel records, it may be found in the man who said unto Jesus, "Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever Thou goest," and to whom Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have roosts, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head, Luke 9:57." The reply clearly implies that this would-be disciple was under some sudden impulse proposing to follow Christ, without considering what the step involved. He had received the word of the kingdom with joy, and came to offer himself as a disciple in a spirit of romantic enthusiasm, without the smallest idea what he was undertaking, utterly unaware of the hardships of disciple life. But what need to point to the scribe as if he were a solitary instance of inconsiderate profession! Was not the crowd by the lake to which the Parable of the Sower was spoken full of such professors? There was a great religious enthusiasm--what in these days might be called a 'great revival'--in Galilee, and there were many in that crowd who had come under its influence. Infected by the spirit of the time, they followed Jesus, by whose preaching of the kingdom the movement had been created, whithersoever He went: delighted to hear Him speak, feeling as if they could never hear enough of the precious words which fell from His lips. But, alas! their religion consisted largely in sympathy with their fellows, and in vague romantic dreams concerning the kingdom that was coming; and so when the time of disenchantment came, and they learnt that their dreams were not likely to be realised [sic], they "went back and walked no more with Him, John 6:66."<sup>1</sup>

#### The thorn-infested soil

The cause of the problem

The thorn-infested soil is unproductive because the grain must compete with weeds for space, soil, sun, and

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, Parabolic, pp. 27, 28.

moisture. The Word of God also faces competition in the minds of the hearers. This is not a problem that is immediately noticed. The individual hearers whom Jesus describes here are said to "go on their way" (πορευόμενοι). This indicates that they are going about the normal routine of life and in the course of time something happens.<sup>1</sup>

Three things that they experience in the course of events affect their relationship to the Word of God like weeds affect a farmer's crop.

Anxieties. The first experience that acts like a weed is cares or anxieties. The Greek word μεριμνῶν is from the root word μερίζομαι which means "to be drawn in different directions."<sup>2</sup> These are, therefore, experiences that draw one's mind away from his original purpose and distracts him from the ideals he has set before himself.

Wealth. Secondly, the desire for riches or the possession of riches will distract an individual from his relationship with God. Jesus spoke, in another setting, of the hindrance that wealth could be in distracting a person from this relationship. "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he

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<sup>1</sup>J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Luke (Leiden: Published for the United Bible Societies by E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 335.

<sup>2</sup>Thayer, Lexicon, p. 400.

will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13).

Pleasures. The third problem pictured by the thorns is pleasure. The pleasure is described as that pertaining to human or earthly life (τοῦ βίου).<sup>1</sup> It is probable that this word goes with all three of the nouns (anxieties, wealth and pleasures),<sup>2</sup> but definitely relates to pleasure.<sup>3</sup> The person referred to has not come to a proper understanding of the relationship between the pleasures of this life and the rewards of the after life. Moses is an example of an individual who was potentially a victim of this thorn but gained mastery over it.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward (Heb 11:24, 25).

The result of the problem

The individual who allows other things to compete for his attention finds them to cause two things in his life.

The Word of God is strangled. The result of these thorns is that the seed is choked (συμπνίγονται). The

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<sup>1</sup> Reiling and Swellengrebel, A Translator's Handbook, p. 335.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, Luke, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> Reiling and Swellengrebel, A Translator's Handbook, p. 335.

present tense indicates that it is progressive or persistent.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the word, as was indicated earlier, indicates that the process will end in total strangulation.

The Word of God does not produce fruit. The individuals who allow anxieties, riches, or pleasure to take a predominate place in their lives "bring no fruit to perfection" (Luke 8:14). The word in view here is *τελεσφοροῦσιν*. This word was used to designate the fact that fruit was born, not just in the immature stages, but clear through to maturity.<sup>2</sup> It was also used of females to designate that they bore perfect offspring.<sup>3</sup> The negative of this, therefore, implies fruit that fell from the tree before it was ripe or an abortive pregnancy.

Tenney thinks that in a grain field this might imply a "scanty and stunted" harvest.<sup>4</sup> However, since the word *τελεσφορέω* basically means to "bring to maturity"<sup>5</sup> the implication here must be that if there is any fruit it is not ready when the field is harvested and therefore is lost and of no benefit to the farmer.

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<sup>1</sup> Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> BAGD, p. 818.

<sup>3</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 443.

<sup>4</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel According to Luke" in The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, edited by Charles Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 1962), p. 1042.

<sup>5</sup> Moulton and Milligan, Vocabulary, p. 629.

An illustration of the problem

In the audience of Jesus there were those who had a divided interest. They wanted to follow Jesus but were not totally willing to give up other things--things lawful in themselves but things that stood in the way of a total commitment to Christ. One such individual was the man who said, "I will follow you Lord: but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home" (Luke 9:61). "Apparently a most reasonable request; but Jesus discerned in it the sign of a divided heart."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, He replied, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

#### The good soil

Only one group of hearers is compared to the good soil. These individuals are said to have "an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15). "It is well known that 'beautiful and good' (kalos k̄agathos) is the traditional Greek phrase for a gentleman. . . ."<sup>2</sup> These individuals, like the soil which represents them have no outstanding blemish in them. This verse does not provide proof against the doctrine of depravity.<sup>3</sup> Just like the soil "which, through the care of the husbandman in preparation, has become good"<sup>4</sup> so also the heart of man is good, not of its own merit, but only because God has made it so.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bruce, Parabolic, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>Turner, Grammatical Insights, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>Lange, Mark, p. 130.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

The cause of the situation

Even though it is ultimately God who makes men's hearts good, the individuals described in this section do some good things that qualify them to be compared to good soil.

They hold fast the Word of God. The first thing these individuals are said to do is "hold fast" the Word (Luke 8:15). The Greek word here is κατέχουσιν, present, active, indicative of κατέχω. This word can be used to express either one of two similar ideas. It can mean to hold back, that is, to keep from going away, to hinder, or to keep secure.<sup>1</sup> Or, it can mean to get or keep possession of something.<sup>2</sup> Both of these ideas would fit into the context here. The implied object of this verb is the Word of God which they have heard. These hearers possess the Word, that is, they have it in their minds, but they also guard it and keep it secure lest it slip from their memory. This same word is used in 1 Corinthians 15:2, "By which also you are saved, if you hold fast [κατέχετε] the Word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain." The idea here is that the Word is to be held in one's memory.<sup>3</sup> This verse shows how important it is not only to receive the Word, but also to retain it lest it be ignored or slip from one's memory.

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<sup>1</sup>Thayer, Lexicon, pp. 339-40.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, p. 424.

They bear fruit. The second thing these individuals do is that they bear fruit. The whole idea of the parable is aimed toward this end result. The sowing takes place for only one reason--so there might be a harvest. The birds, the lack of moisture, and the thorns are a problem for only one reason--they prevent a harvest. The good soil is good in that it produces a harvest.

The Greek word in view here (καρποφοροῦσιν) is used to refer to land producing a crop (Mark 4:28, "The earth produces crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head"). Here the meaning is obviously figurative, referring to the fruit which the Word of God produces in a person's life.

This passage does not tell us precisely what that fruit is nor limit the fruit to any particular one. Other passages of Scripture speak of various kinds of results the Word of God produces in the lives of individuals. First Peter 2:2 speaks of spiritual growth being produced by the Word (long for the pure milk of the word that by it you may grow in respect to salvation). Romans 10:17 says faith comes through the Word. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." Galatians 5:22-23 speak of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.). John 20:31 indicates that saving faith comes through the Word of God. "But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

There are various views as to the significance of the fruit. Hendriksen considers the fruit referred to here as both "conversion" and the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> Arndt and Gingrich refer to "practical conduct as the fruit of the inner life. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Many writers view the fruit as referring to salvation.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, this must be included since it is one of the main reasons the Word of God was given (John 5:39; 20:31). However, there is no reason to limit the fruit to just salvation since the Word of God produces other things in the life of the person who submits to it. The context of the parable is not entirely limited to teaching about salvation but also includes teaching about the Kingdom (Matt 13), teaching about the deity of Christ (Luke 9:18-20), teaching about the coming death of Christ (Luke 9:22).

Another indication of the fact that the fruit is not limited to salvation is that there are degrees of fruitfulness. Though this is not included in Luke's account, both Matthew and Mark mention it. These degrees of fruitfulness indicate that more than regeneration is in view here since regeneration does not come in degrees.

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<sup>1</sup>Hendriksen, Matthew, p. 562.

<sup>2</sup>BAGD, p. 407.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, Guthrie, Parables, p. 220; Archibald M. Hunter, The Parables Then and Now (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 38; and Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 191.

The four kinds of soil relate to the human responsibility involved in hearing God's Word. Not the main emphasis of the parable, but true nonetheless, is the fact that even among those who are fully in right relationship with God and His Word there will be variations in fruitfulness because of God's sovereignty in bestowing gifts and opportunities upon them.

On the basis of these considerations it seems safe to conclude that the parable refers to regeneration and the various areas and degrees of fruitfulness that come with it.

Another important phrase in verse fifteen that must be considered is "with perseverance" (έν ὑπομονῇ). This phrase can be understood as going with "bear fruit" or with both "bear fruit" and "hold fast." The preposition here could have either an instrumental meaning<sup>1</sup> or a locative meaning.<sup>2</sup> Thus it indicates that mature fruit is produced by means of, or in the sphere of, patient endurance. But to keep or retain something also requires patient endurance. So "with perseverance" can well be taken as amplifying both the idea of holding fast and the idea of fruit bearing.

#### Summary

The interpretation of the parable of the sower can be summarized by the following statements: 1) The Word of

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<sup>1</sup>Reiling and Swellengrebel, A Translator's Handbook, p. 336.

<sup>2</sup>See Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar, p. 87.

God has characteristics that parallel the characteristics of seed, because it contains life, power, and the capacity for propagation. 2) The parable has to do with how these qualities of the Word of God can be hindered in various ways in the heart of each hearer. 3) The Word of God has no effect on some people because the devil does not allow it to remain in their hearts. 4) Some who gladly receive the Word of God have only "temporary faith." This "temporary faith" ends in apostasy or a rebellious departure from the truth because their faith was a sham. 5) The effect of the Word of God can be completely suppressed by the anxieties, possessions, or pleasures of ordinary living. 6) A proper response to the Word of God allows the Word to do in one's life that which it was designed to do and thus bring forth the fruit it was intended to produce. 7) Jesus' statement, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" implies that the hearer is responsible to be like the good soil--to hear effectively.

## CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

### The Meaning of the Parable

#### The Meaning Summarized

In light of the material which has been presented, the following conclusions can be stated concerning the problems involved in understanding the parable of the sower.

1) The issue involved in the parable of the sower is the relationship between God's Word and those who receive it. It does not have the same effect on all. The mind-set or attitude of the hearer makes the difference.

2) The Word of God in the heart of an individual can result in a variety of fruits in his life. Jesus, in interpreting the parable did not say specifically what the harvest represented. All the effects that the Word of God can have on one's life might be included. The most obvious and pronounced effect it can have is to bring the individual to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

3) Those who "believe for awhile" (Luke 8:13) do not have genuine faith. It may appear to be faith. They may think that they have faith. It does not involve the total commitment that the Word of God requires.

4) "Fall away" means that those who have merely a superficial relationship to the Word of God, in a time of testing allowed by God to separate the genuine from the false,

forsake the truth which they have because they never fully accepted the truth which was available to them.

5) Genuine faith, which results in an inward change, is demonstrated by a consistent and obvious outward change in one's life.

6) Jesus' purpose in relating this parable was to instruct His hearers to hear effectively. They were to cease allowing their relationship to the Word of God to be affected by Satan, to be mere superficiality, or to be hindered by too much attention to the things of this life.

#### The Meaning Compared with Related Doctrines

An important principle in interpreting parables is that the exegetical results must be checked with the plain teaching of other passages and with the teaching of the Bible as a whole.<sup>1</sup> So, to complete this study of the meaning of the parable of the sower, summaries of some related doctrines need to be examined. In this section, three doctrines will be examined briefly in regard to how they relate to the parable of the sower.

#### Perseverance

In this parable three kinds of individuals are presented. Each one started out fine but the desired goal is not reached in all of them. Those pictured by the wayside soil receive the Word, and that is as far as their relationship with the Word goes. Those pictured by the stony soil

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<sup>1</sup>Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 263.

and thorn-infested soil have a more significant relationship with the Word of God but in neither case are the desired results achieved. The fourth kind of individual, on the other hand, retains the Word of God and demonstrates perseverance. The Word of God has its desired results in his life. Therefore, his life is fruitful.

This relationship of a hearer with the Word involves the relationship between an individual and the gospel message. Therefore, the interpreter must decide how the parable relates to the doctrine of perseverance. As has been demonstrated in chapter two, this parable has been interpreted by different individuals so as to fit either view. However, the interpretation presented in this thesis fits in with the doctrine of perseverance as held by Calvinists and moderate Calvinists. According to this position, all those who are truly regenerate will voluntarily continue in faith and will certainly have everlasting life, and those who are not genuinely regenerate will eventually fall by the way.<sup>1</sup>

### Apostasy

Related to the doctrine of perseverance is the doctrine of apostasy. The interpretation presented in this thesis views the first three soils as totally unproductive. Those who hear the gospel in this way seem to respond

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<sup>1</sup>Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. in one (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1907), pp. 881, 884.

appropriately but later demonstrate that their faith was not genuine.

This view of apostasy is presented by Ryrie who gives this definition: "Apostasy is a departure from truth previously accepted and it involves the breaking of a professed relationship with God."<sup>1</sup> C. I. Scofield has presented this doctrine of apostasy as it is widely accepted today.

Apostasy, "falling away," is the act of professed Christians who deliberately reject revealed truth as to the (1) Deity of Jesus Christ, and (2) redemption through His atoning and redeeming sacrifice (1 Jn 4:1-3; Phil 3:18; 2 Pet 2:1).<sup>2</sup>

Scofield goes on to point out that though the apostate rejects the faith he does not necessarily depart from "Christianity."<sup>3</sup> This strange situation, of individuals being ostensibly in right relationship with God, His people, and His Word, but in reality having no vital relationship at all, is that which is pictured in the parable. The fact that such individuals have actually existed is clear for John writes about them in 1 John 2:19.

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, "Apostasy in the Church," BSac 121 (Jan-March 1964):46.

<sup>2</sup>C. I. Scofield, editor, The New Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 1304.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

### Illumination

Is it possible for an individual to hear and receive the Word of God and not be changed by it? Can one study and "believe" the Word without experiencing regeneration? The answer is "yes." Many unbelievers know a great deal about the Bible. Roman Catholics and cultists study the Bible and believe at least parts of it. The doctrine of illumination explains what is lacking in these individuals.<sup>1</sup>

According to 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, spiritual truth can only be understood through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Though a man study the Word of God diligently he will receive no spiritual benefit unless the Spirit does a work in his life. It is the Spirit who enlightens the understanding so one can do the truth.<sup>2</sup>

Since this is the case, the parable of the sower can well refer to individuals who hear the Word, receive it in the sense that they give diligence to study it, yes, even believe much of it, and yet spiritually they may be totally unaffected by it.

### The Application of the Parable

#### How It Applied to the Original Hearers

Large crowds of people were acquainted with the earthly ministry of Jesus. They considered Him a great

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Introductory and Concluding Parables of Matthew Thirteen," BSac 121 (October-December, 1964):353, 354.

<sup>2</sup>William G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), p. 563.

miracle worker (John 3:2; 6:2; 7:31) and a great teacher (John 3:2; 7:40, 41). Some even considered Him to be the Messiah. However, their thinking was on a physical, earthly level. They were looking for a Messiah who would bring political deliverance and physical prosperity. Jesus' teaching during the last part of His ministry was aimed toward producing an understanding of the spiritual aspect of His ministry, and toward helping His hearers understand that He came not just to change outward circumstances, but to change men on the inside, thus changing their whole life.<sup>1</sup> He taught with an emphasis toward heavenly and eternal things rather than earthly and temporal things (John 3:12).

Out of the large crowds who considered Jesus to be a great miracle worker and teacher, some would continue to listen with open ears and hearts as Jesus taught about heavenly and eternal things, and some would not. And then there was the matter of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Would they believe? Could they accept the fact that His death was the sacrificial atonement for their sins?

The parable of the sower set the stage for the presentation of these things. In Matthew it comes just before the parables of the Kingdom where the spiritual aspects of the Kingdom are presented.

To the disciples, it was a warning that they would yet have to do some careful listening. Jesus still had some

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<sup>1</sup>Note the Sermon on the Mount, especially Matt 5:20.

important things to say to them. Many of the things they were about to hear would require hearing with open ears and a discerning mind. To the multitude it was an invitation to participate in these things, if they were willing to resist the devil, if they were willing to let the Word of God penetrate their lives and affect every part of their life and being, if they were willing to let it be predominate in their lives to the exclusion of all competitive influence.

#### How it Applies Today

To readers today the parable, likewise, is both a warning and an invitation. Many have received the Word of God, but to them it is only superficial knowledge. This is often called "head knowledge." The truth of the Word has not been allowed to penetrate their whole being and affect every aspect of life. It has, therefore, done them no spiritual or eternal good. Everyone who has heard the Word needs to examine himself lest this be his case.

Whoever finds that his relationship with the Word of God is on a superficial level without a life changing commitment is invited, not first of all to do, to become, or to confess; but to hear.

The condition of the soils represent different ways the people might hear, three ineffective ways and one effective way. The implication is that each hearer is responsible to become the latter. Jesus does not explicitly speak of changing from one kind of soil to the other, for it

does not fit the picture of the parable. Soil does not change itself. However, His exhortation to hear (Luke 8:8) implies this responsibility on the part of the hearer. Therefore, the whole message of the parable points to the human responsibility involved in hearing God's Word. Why does the devil snatch the Word out of the minds of some and not others? Some resist the devil and others do not (James 4:7). Why do some listen to the Word of God with stony hearts? Because they are not willing to let the hardness be broken up. Why is the Word often crowded out of men's minds? Because they are not willing to give it first place. It makes great demands in their lives. If they really believe what it says they would have to make a lot of changes in their lives. A lot of things would have to be eradicated from their lives. If they are not willing to do this then the Word of God must be rejected by some excuse or another.

Just as Jesus taught His hearers to hear properly, there needs to be clear teaching today about how to hear the Word of God.

A leader in Christian education writes about the integration of truth, saying that "all truth is God's truth."<sup>1</sup> By this he is renouncing "the false separation between sacred and secular truth."<sup>2</sup> Though this is a valid concept the other side of the issue must be stressed as well. The Word

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<sup>1</sup>Frank E. Gaebelien, "Toward a Christian Philosophy of Education," Grace Journal 3 (Fall 1962):12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

of God is unique. It has characteristics that set it apart from all other truth. It is not enough to hear and learn it like other truth. It must permeate completely or it is of no lasting benefit. The one who hears the Word needs to be aware of this difference. He needs to be taught this difference. The practical import of the parable of the sower is this: hearing the Word of God effectively involves not just any kind of hearing. Therefore, learn how to hear it aright.

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