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The Sower, His Seed, and the Soil

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CHRIST'S popularity had reached such proportions that it was difficult for Him to teach the large crowds of people that thronged Him. On one occasion by the Sea of Galilee He stepped into a boat and pushed off a few yards from land. Here He spoke to the multitude upon the shore. The setting was especially apt for the parable Christ was to tell. On the hillside and on the plain of Genesaret sowers were scattering their seed. Looking upon the scene, Jesus said, "Behold, the sower went forth to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root they withered away. And others fell upon the thorns; and thorns grew up and choked them: and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matt. 13:3-8, A.R.V.).

The main emphasis in this parable falls not so much upon the sower or the seeds as upon the kind of soil that receives the seed. The central idea is that the seed being uniformly good, the difference of crop depends upon the character of the soil that receives the seed. In its practical application this parable is about the soil of human understanding and response into which the gospel seed falls.

We have no problem with the identity of the sower. "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man" (Matt. 13:37). The seed is the "word of God" (Luke 8:11) or the "word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19).

But what is the soil? "And great multitudes were gathered together unto him"—there is the soil. Some of these people had come from idle curiosity; they had followed the general movement of the crowd. Others came from self-seeking motives; they wished to be fed or to have some miracle worked in their behalf. Some came with political and revolutionary dreams in their heads; they would make Christ king and throw off the

Roman yoke. To this class Christ's parable was especially pertinent. "Not by force of arms, not by violent interpositions, was the kingdom of God to prevail, but by the implanting of a new principle in the hearts of men."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 35. Some came with a deep sense of longing for divine truth; others brought only a shallow enthusiasm. How would these various kinds of people receive the words of Christ?

Seed by the Wayside

In interpreting this parable to His disciples Christ explained first the meaning of the seed that had fallen by the wayside and which was then eaten by birds. He said that this represents those who hear the word of the kingdom and understand it not. When this happens the evil one comes and snatches away the truth that has been sown.

The seed sown by the wayside represents the word of God as it falls upon the heart of an inattentive hearer. This is the man who has rejected God's appeals so long that he has become completely indifferent and calloused. He might once have felt the warmth of the truth, but he has failed to act upon it. Each rejection has made his heart harder, until he has become the subject of a disease much more fatal than hardening of the arteries. His *soul* has become "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). In this state he no longer hears or understands the overtures that God makes at his heart's door. Instead of his heart being a highway for righteousness, as God intended, it becomes a highway for the world's traffic, its pleasures and sins.

The people of Christ's home town, Nazareth, illustrate the hardened soil of the pathway. At first they were captivated by Christ's words. But their attitude changed completely when He implied that they were captives who needed to be freed from sin, the blind who needed spiritual eyesight, et cetera. "As they opened the door to doubt, their hearts became so much the harder for having been momentarily softened."—*The Desire of Ages*,

p. 238. This unbelief became so intense that Christ's miracles could have accomplished nothing for them, so "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief" (Matt. 13:58).

It is said of those represented by the wayside soil that they could not "understand" the word of the kingdom. All that speaks of man's connection with a higher invisible world, all that speaks of sin, redemption, holiness, is unintelligible to them and without significance. What brings a man to such a state as this? The man himself. He has so hardened himself to the influences of the Holy Spirit that God's seed has no soil in which to take root. The situation is aggravated and made more hopeless by the presence of the "wicked one," who, unsatisfied with the evil condition of the soil itself, comes and snatches away that which has been sown so he may be absolutely sure that they may not "believe and be saved" (Luke 8:12). Having resisted God, a man is unable to resist the devil, and thus he endangers all hope of salvation.

The seed sown in rocky places appeared at first to have better success. But the true nature of the soil made success ultimately impossible. Palestine is a limestone country, and one will find places where a broad, flat, limestone rock lies just below the surface, with a thin layer of earth upon it. In such places the seed cannot sink deep. The warmth of the rock below makes the seed sprout quickly. But since the roots cannot penetrate the rock to find nutriment and moisture, it soon is scorched under the hot sun, and it perishes. Jesus says that this represents the man who "heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; and when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth" (Matt. 13:20, 21, A.R.V.).

Total Commitment Necessary

There are many who do not understand the real nature of Christianity. They do not realize that Christianity calls for self-sacrifice and total dedication to Christ. Their Christian experience is a shallow profession. "Like the rock underlying the layer of earth, the selfishness of the natural heart underlies the soil of their good desires and aspirations. The love of self is not subdued. They have not seen the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the heart has not been humbled under a sense of its guilt."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 46.

To people of this kind Christianity is charming but not transforming. They have a sudden thin enthusi-

asm and immediately accept without counting the cost. What is the cost? Total commitment to Christ, unreserved consecration, undivided service. We do not belong to Christ unless we are His wholly, body and soul. We can have root in ourselves only when we are "rooted and built up in him" (Col. 2:7).

The rocky-ground hearers are just as quick in their rejection of true Christianity as they are in its acceptance. When persecution comes "straightway he stumbleth." It is "straightway" both in the vow to serve the Lord and in apostasy from Him. Persecution ends the "joy" that did not calculate the costs, the hazards, and the sacrifices of being a Christian.

In the third instance some seed falls among thorns. The evil here is not that the soil is hard or shallow. Instead, there is in the soil that which robs the good seed of its necessary

moisture and richness. In the soil are numberless weed seeds that will spring up and eventually choke the good plants.

The thorns that make salvation impossible for the thorny-ground hearers are enumerated as the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts (desires) for other things. These are the noxious weeds of the human heart. If they are not destroyed they will eventually destroy the spiritual life of the soul. We must gain the victory over sin lest sin gain the victory over us.

For the three classes represented by the hard ground, the shallow ground, and the thorny ground, hope is not completely gone. Remaining in this state is what makes salvation impossible, for in each case the word of God cannot enter it effectively. However, this unfruitful condition need not be maintained. We cannot change ourselves, but we can give ourselves

to Him who can change us. When this commitment takes place, poor soil will be made into good soil. "The Spirit of God is ever seeking to break the spell of infatuation that holds men absorbed in worldly things, and to awaken a desire for the imperishable treasure."—*Ibid.*, p. 56.

Though there is much disappointment in the labors of the sower, there is also ample reward. Of the seed that fell into good ground the Saviour says, "These are such as in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, hold it fast, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15, A.R.V.).

One may wonder how it can be said of anyone before the gospel has taken root in his life that he has an "honest" and "good heart." Is not the gospel addressed to sinners? The answer, of course, is Yes. But these terms are not to be taken in the absolute sense. Here the honest heart is that heart which is sincere in the desire for truth and which will yield to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The good heart is the believing heart, the heart that has faith in the word of God. Taken in this sense, the expressions "honest" and "good" are used appropriately. They merely indicate that in the person who possesses these qualities there is a preparedness to receive the truth.

Furthermore, the good-ground hearer receives the word "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). This "word of God often comes in collision with man's hereditary and cultivated traits of character and his habits of life. But the good-ground hearer, in receiving the word, accepts all its conditions and requirements. His habits, customs, and practices are brought into submission to God's word. In his view the commands of finite, erring man sink into insignificance beside the word of the infinite God. With the whole heart, with undivided purpose, he is seeking the life eternal, and at the cost of loss, persecution, or death itself, he will obey the truth."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 60.

The Scripture says that the good-ground hearer brings forth fruit "with patience." The words "with patience" indicate that persecution and trial do not spell loss for the good-ground hearer as they do for the thorny-ground hearer. No! Persecution only strengthens his faith and develops within him steadfastness of character. Thus there is for the good-ground hearer an abundant and fruitful yield. May the same be true of us by the grace of God.

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Where Is the Power?

By LUCILE JOY SMALL

Dear God:

The battle and the task we face in this,
earth's closing day,
Is totally beyond our strength, so rough
and steep the way.
The gospel Thou hast bid us take to every
land and tongue
Goes forward slowly; so few are being
found and won.
And many, Lord, born in our homes and
taught in our own schools,
Now turn their back upon Thy truth—
see in it only rules.
Why is this, Lord? Why does it seem
that truth has lost its power?
How has fine gold become so dim in this,
earth's crisis hour?

We have the message, Lord, to give in
all its purity,
But oh, where is the power to accomplish
things for Thee?
Can it be, Lord, that we have failed to
let the truth apply
To personal experience? to self we will
not die?
Can it be that we are fearful of launching
out for Thee,
And fear our anchor will be lost if we
put out to sea?
How will we know its strength, dear
Lord, if fear keeps us near shore,
A fear that tossing angry waves will turn
our small craft o'er?

And, dear Lord, from so near the shore,
when comes the tidal wave,
We'll find our untried anchor chain in-
adequate to save;
But if we tested day by day Thy precious
promises
We would grow skillful in our work and
and know their usefulness.
Thy word is as powerful now as it was
in Jesus' time,
When with consecrated human effort it
did combine.
O may we trust Thy promises, and work
in Thy great power
By giving Thee our will today, just now,
and hour by hour.

O Lord, may I today so work as holding
Thy dear hand
I fix my eyes upon Thy face instead of on
the land.
I know this works, dear Lord, for I have
tried this way before
And found Thy word so wonderful that
I would trust it more.
So, Lord, today the courage comes to
face the task that waits,
The task that must be done before we see
Jerusalem's gates;
The task is never greater than Thy al-
mighty power—
I take Thy hand and trust Thee now for
help this very hour.