

With many evangelistic efforts sponsored by our church during the summer, we turn to the great challenge of the parables of the Sower and that of the Weeds in the Field as a way of encouraging ourselves in Christ's ability to scatter fruitfully the good seed of the Kingdom. Why is such Kingdom teaching important? Because our hope in the *present reality* of the Kingdom of God is one of the first casualties of the dark days in which we live. We simply find it hard to believe God's Kingdom has come in power when so many reject it. May the Lord revive our hope in "His Kingdom come," even into our dark world of unbelief.

Monday: Read Matthew 13:18 and Mark 4:33-34

Set Free

Turning to The Parable of The Sower, we begin by reminding ourselves that the first positive lesson of the parables is the *manner of teacher Jesus is* for His people. He is a Master Interpreter, able to "release" our minds from the bondage of sinful ignorance. He is, as Isaiah 9 says, "A Wonder of a Counselor."

For example, we see His great skill in teaching when Mark describes how He privately instructs His disciples on the meaning of the parables in Mark 4:34. Mark literally says that He "explains" or "gives further knowledge" of the parables to them. This verb means to "set free" by giving further illumination. It is a verb we find in the Old Testament, where Joseph reassures his fellow prisoners, who are so downcast at having no one to interpret their dreams, by telling them that "*Interpretations* belong to God."

Meditate and Pray: How generous Jesus is in His willingness to instruct and even open the minds of undeserving sinners like us! We should marvel at Joseph's kindness to representatives of the unjust Egyptian monarchy which imprisoned him in the first place, as we see him seek to encourage these men by interpreting their dreams. But Jesus' generosity to us in our guilty, blind and ignorant state is even more marvelous! All the light we need to understand and believe is only given because Jesus Himself was willing to "go into the darkness" at Calvary on our behalf!

Tuesday: Read Matthew 13:18-23 and Mark 4:33-34

Needy for Patient Instruction

There are many profound issues raised by the Parable of the Sower which challenge our ability to discern its deepest meanings. In fact, we are very much in the same potentially confused state as the disciples in Mark 4:13 and Matthew 13:18-23 – needing our Savior's patient instruction in the most basic of Kingdom truths, and needing the Spirit's illuminating light to show us how these things apply to our lives. How wonderful, therefore, that we have a Savior who is patient and careful to "explain all" to us.

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks that Jesus is able to condescend to our weakness and is determined to help us understand the realities of His Kingdom. He will not exhaust and discourage us with His teaching, but will speak according to our God-given capacity to understand (Mk. 4:33). Let us ask Jesus to tenderly lead and teach us in just this pastoral, understanding and patient way, using hymn # 599:

*Savior, like a shepherd lead us;
much we need thy tender care;
in thy pleasant pastures feed us;
for our use thy folds prepare.
Blessèd Jesus! Blessèd Jesus!
Thou hast bought us, thine we are.*

*Early let us seek thy favor,
early let us learn thy will;
blessèd Lord and only Savior,
with thy love our bosoms fill.
Blessèd Jesus! Blessèd Jesus!
Thou hast loved us: love us still.*

Wednesday: Read Matthew 13:18-23**Protective Presence**

The first kind of soil is the soil scattered on the hard path in Mt. 13:18-19. The key idea here appears to be that this soil is *outside the safety of God's covenant of grace*. Like Cain of old in Gen. 4:16, those who suffer the rapid loss of the Gospel seed to "the birds of the air," are those who "go out from" the protective presence of the Lord. Their lives are packed down and hardened against any Gospel penetration because of their frequent and ungodly interaction with the world. They are open to every wind of false doctrine *but not open to the true Gospel*.

Meditate and Pray: How different for us who are drawn into the protective presence of the Lord. Instead of fatal exposure to the full force of this world's temptations, God graciously fences us in, so that the devil in his frustration must complain to God that we are "hedged in" by Him (Job 1:10)! Sing about God's protection in hymn # 345:

*Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose Word cannot be broken,
Formed thee for His own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.*

*Round each habitation hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear!
For a glory and a covering
Showing that the Lord is near.
Thus deriving from our banner
Light by night and shade by day;
Safe they feed upon the manna
Which He gives them when they pray.*

*Savior, if of Zion's city,
I through grace a member am,
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in Thy name.
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

Thursday: Read Matthew 13:18-23**Trusty Refuge**

Openness to sin characterizes the first kind of soil which falls prey so easily to the evil one in Mt. 13:19. To paraphrase Benjamin Keach's description of such deadly openness, "This soil gives free passage to every kind of lust and sin. Every evil thought passes to and fro in this person's heart, like travellers on a highway. Sadly, it is not just godless company and worldly lusts which travel this road. The devil himself wanders to and fro on this road, looking for a heart in which he can stay."

Meditate and Pray: Let us thank the Lord Jesus that it is His job both to awaken our hearts to the tremendous danger of allowing the evil one an opening into our lives, and to remind us of the security from Satan's wiles which taking refuge in Him affords us! As Martin Luther's famous hymn says: "*The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him! His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him.*" The word of the Gospel is always a trusty refuge to cover us from Satan himself.

Fri/Sat/Sun: Read Matthew 13:18-23**Jesus the Plowman**

What then is the remedy for such hardened ground, trodden upon and hard-packed by “lust, the flesh and the devil”? Is there no hope? Must all hardened souls be consigned to Hell after the seed of the Gospel is snatched up by the evil one?

The answer is no. Jesus can give hope not just for the hardened nature of the first soil, but even for those with the rocky nature of the second (Mt 13:20-21). What is this hope? It is that Jesus the great Gospel broadcaster of the seed of the Word is also a skillful Plowman, who knows how to till up the rocks, and break through the hard ground. The Puritan John Owen wrote about such plowing, which Jesus so effectively accomplishes:

“If the fallow ground be not broken up, it is to no purpose to sow the seed of the Gospel. There is neither life, power, nor sweetness in the truth, unless a gash be opened in the ground into which the seed can be planted.”

Or, take another quote from another 17th century Puritan Benjamin Keach:

“Brethren, the plow must make deep gashes or pierce into the ground; so does the Spirit of God pierce the hearts of poor sinners. The hearts of men and women must be dug up by convictions of the Spirit, or the seed of grace cannot take root.”

We should see a common pattern here. It is conviction of sin, with real repentance, sincere faith and a sound conversion, that gives depth to our heart’s soil so that the seed of Gospel truth is not lost - either to the hardening effect of the world or to the heat of persecution.

Meditate and Pray: Ask the Lord to grant our church family an ever deepening experience of the grace of real repentance from our sins. Ask Him to save us from superficial conversion experiences which must themselves one day be repented of if we would be saved from “shallow-rooted” Christianity! “Lord, deepen your heart work in us and our church family! Amen.”