

The Lord's Parables (4) - The Parable of the Sower

If you were asked to name the three or four parables you remember best of all from the Gospels chances are the parable of the sower would be among them. Not only is it one of the best remembered parables, it is also one of the few which the Lord, after telling it, went on to explain at least something of the meaning it contains.

The parable appears in each of what are called the 'Synoptic' Gospels, that is, in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Here is the version as it appears in Matthew's Gospel, the beginning of the thirteenth chapter.

"He told them many things in parables, saying, A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering his seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns; which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop, a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

What was the Lord getting at here? He Himself, only a few verses later on, made it abundantly clear. He, that is, the Lord, is the Sower, and the seeds He scatters are the truths He teaches us. However, His truth, is received differently by different people. With some, it is like when seed falls on the wayside and the birds come and eat it up. With others it is like when seed falls on stony places and springs up quickly, but only has superficial roots and when the sun is up it withers away. There are those, too, whose reception of His truth is like seed sown amongst thorns which choke it and prevent it bearing fruit. But there are also those who are like the good ground of the parable and with whom the Lord's truth and teaching, sown in their minds, bears fruit, "a hundred, sixty or thirty times."

Whilst that explanation is clear enough, and important to us, it would, however, be wrong to think that it exhausts all that is involved. At that time, and having in mind even the disciples' limited capacity to understand, it could only be a general explanation of the meaning of the parable. And this is why I would like to look at it again with you.

It is one of the best known parables, and at first we think we fully understand it. Yet there is so much more that the Lord intended we should know and learn from it. And it is with the aid of the explanations given in the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg that we are now able to do so.

Where the implantation of truth is concerned there is some which will, as the Lord warns, fall by the wayside, some upon stony places, and some among thorns. The mind of man is of course the ground in which the seed is sown. The questions we are looking at are these: what sort of mind, or what kind of reception given to Divine truth, is depicted by the seed falling by the wayside? What kind of reception is depicted by the seed falling upon stony places? And then that among thorns?

Concerning the seed which fell by the wayside, first of all, it is important that we are quite clear in our minds as to what is being spoken of here. The Lord was not talking about seed falling by the side of the road. Such seed could easily take root. He was speaking of seed which fell upon the road, or upon the tracks or pathways which crisscrossed open fields in ancient times. Hard, beaten down, constantly trodden upon, frequently travelled over, tracks and pathways, upon which, invariably, seed would fall, though it could never take root.

These are those, the Lord said, who hear the word of the kingdom and, as the Bible says, "understands" it not. The word is better translated as "attends", it not those who hear but who do not attend to what they hear. They are not interested in it. Truth makes no impression on them. They have already got quite fixed ideas about things; and the truth has no appeal for them. It lays there in their minds but is unable to put down any roots. Their thinking is too set; their opinions altogether too hardened for it to be able to do so. And whilst we may, somewhat self-righteously, believe that this applies to people other than ourselves, in reality, and with certain things and at certain times, we are all involved.

Is it not so, for example, that when we have been hurt or offended, attitudes take over, at least for a time, on which the Lord's truth can make no impression? Is it not so also that we reason out certain attitudes and ways of going about things which have an inherent resistance to any influence that the Lord's teaching might have on them? I am talking about when "I" and "me" and "my idea about things" ,"what I say" and "what I think" is very much at the forefront. My idea about how to treat criminals. My ideas about strikes and strikers. My idea about equality for women. My ideas about divorce. And so on.

It is such self derived thinking, basically false as it is, which is depicted by the birds which came down and devoured the seed. Known as the truth may be, yet it is quickly lost to us when our own ideas, and false reasonings, take over.

And then there are those whose reception of truth is represented by the seed which fell upon stony places; where there was very little earth. And though it sprung up quickly, when the sun was up it withered away. These are those with whom truth seems to catch on quickly. There is overnight enthusiasm for it. To all intents and purposes it seems to have made a real impression. But in fact there is no real depth of good ground for it to become established. It has been all on the surface. There are people who have a love for truth in only a superficial way. They hear things which please and excite them, but they won't let the truth put down deep roots. Indeed, it is unable to do so. Once they see that the truths they have embraced so eagerly carry certain responsibilities for them; once they recognise that those truths demand of them a change of ways, and a shunning of their evils, their enthusiasm wanes. And the truth with them withers. It never had any depth anyway.

With many people, and from time to time in our own experience, thinking and receiving the Lord's truth can be an "emotional", superficial, thing. And by an "emotional" reception I do not mean, simply, an emotional situation such as a revival crusade, though that can be involved and carries its particular dangers. But the reception and acceptance of a truth or teaching because one's parents always believed it, is an "emotional" reception and acceptance, and at the same time it can be no more than superficial as well.

Or, if the Lord's truth is accepted into our lives for reasons other than it should lead to the amendment of our lives, this too is "emotional", and the truth can have surface roots only. If I profess acceptance of the Ten Commandments, for example, for the sake of my reputation and good name, then I am accepting the Lord's truth for a reason other than that it should lead to the amendment of my life, and it will make no more than a surface impression.

In all of these cases, when the sun comes up, or as is meant, when self love is aroused; when anger and resentment and pride and self importance begin to 'glow' within us; the truth is scorched, and, because it has no roots, it withers away. The fact is that it never had a proper grip on us. And though it seems to find acceptance with us so long as life is calm and things are going our way, when it comes to the test, its shallow roots and insecure hold becomes all too evident.

In speaking of the thorns amongst which seeds also fell, the Lord explained these as being, "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it and make it unfruitful". And there is a great deal that has been said about man's preoccupation with the world and with everyday concerns to the extent that these crowd out what is of the Lord from his life. And this, without question, is a real thing to which everyone ought to pay attention.

But there are deeper things as well, not so obvious to the outside world, not so clearly seen, to which our attention is directed here; and these are the feelings and thoughts, the disorderly loves and desires which, like thorns, are forever springing up within us and amongst which the seeds of Divine truth fall.

Elsewhere in the Gospels the Lord taught the necessity of losing one's life in order to save it. All the things which were dear to us before regeneration. The things we treasured. Our image of ourselves. Self satisfying pleasures. Getting our own way. Being considered important and at the centre of things. These are what we are to surrender. And these are what are represented by the thorns in the parable which, if not removed, must choke and stifle the growth of truth with us and prevent it bearing fruit in our lives.

And so we come to the good ground, to a mind which is receptive in every way, open, willing to be instructed, of real depth, and free from obstructions. There the Lord's truth will bear fruit, some a hundred times, some sixty, and some thirty.

It is very easy for us to identify with the good ground of the parable, but few, if any of us, are. We are almost certainly one of the other three, probably a mixture of them all. At one time our reception of the Lord's truth is as seed which falls by the wayside. At another time it is as seed which falls on stony places. At another, it is as seed which falls among thorns. And the great point of the parable is that it challenges us to look at ourselves in order that, recognising our shortcomings, we might at last become that good ground in which truth can bear fruit so prolifically.

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