

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the sower** in Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-20 and Luke 8:4-15. Remember that this parable was told in the context of parables about God's kingdom. This is a parable concerning THE WORD OF GOD IN GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. Please read Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-20 and Luke 8:4-15 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Matthew 13:3-9 says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the 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. He who has ears, let him hear."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

What are the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable?

(S) It was customary for wheat and barley to be sown by hand. This made it unavoidable that a portion of the seed fell along the footpath on which the sower was walking through the field. The footpath had not been ploughed and too many feet had walked over it, so that the soil was too hard for anything to fall *into* it. Birds immediately ate the seed that lay on top of the path. Some of the seed fell on rocky places. It is typical of Palestine and the surrounding countries that a considerable portion of its arable soil is found on top of layers of rock. Thus plants cannot get firmly rooted. In the hot sun they get scorched quickly. Some of the seed fell among the thorns. Thorns and weeds generally grow faster than wheat and they take away the water and sun that the wheat needs. They choke healthy plant-life and finally the plant itself. However, some of the seed fell in good soil. Good soil is not hard as a path, nor shallow as the soil on a layer of rock, nor defiled by weeds and thorns. Good soil is fertile and produces fruit, a hundred, sixty and thirty times. Different kinds of good and fertile soil produce different amounts of fruit.

(T) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The context of the parable may consist of *the setting* and *the explanation or application* of the parable. The setting of the parable may state *the occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the parable. In the parable of the sower, the setting is contained in verses 1-2, 10-17, the story in verses 3-9 and the explanation or application in verses 18-23. Please describe the setting of the parable of the sower.

(S) Jesus told this parable while sitting in a boat. In Matthew chapter 13, he told *seven* parables! Among his followers by this time, there were those who believed him, understood him and were ready to accept more of his teachings. But there were also others, for example, Pharisees, who constantly opposed him, hardened their hearts against his teachings and were always ready to reject whatever he said.

(T) A parable is an *earthly* story with a *heavenly* meaning. In order to understand a parable, one must not only understand the earthly story, but also the heavenly meaning! People who were *responsive* to Jesus, understood the heavenly meaning, but people who were *unresponsive* to Jesus, did not understand the heavenly meaning. To them the parable remained a riddle.

(S) What is the kingdom of God and what is "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God"?

(T) First, The kingdom of God is God's kingship or sovereign rule in the hearts and lives of his people. It manifests itself in their initial salvation and their establishment as a Church on earth. It finally manifests itself in their complete salvation and the establishment of the perfect new heaven and the new earth.

Second. The secret of the kingdom of God. Usually we think of a *secret* as something people don't know and cannot know. But in the Bible the word secret means a *revealed truth*, a known secret. The secrets of the kingdom of God are the messages God revealed in Jesus Christ. The secrets reveal who God is and what God's plan is. It is the message that Jesus Christ died for the sins of people, so that whoever believes in Jesus Christ, will not perish, but have eternal life. In short, the secrets of the kingdom of God is the message of the whole New Testament!

(S) Why is the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God only given to the disciples and not to others? Is this not very unfair?

(T) Jesus Christ does not reveal these secrets of the kingdom, that is, the message of the New Testament, to just everybody. Although many people hear the message of the gospel and the New Testament, they will not all *really hear* and turn to God. The reason is that some people have hardened their hearts against God and his word! Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 1:2-4 is written that the children of Israel rebelled against God. They did not know their Master and they did not obey God's words. They were evildoers, corrupt and turned their backs on God. Then God's judgement followed. In Isaiah 6:9-10 God says, "Make the heart of this people callous; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turned and be healed."

These words of God are words of judgement! By their own choice the people of Israel had hardened their hearts against God. The Israelites *saw* so many miracles during their exodus from Egypt; they saw with their own eyes and yet did not believe in God! So *God allowed them to become what they wanted to be*. God made their eyes even more tightly shut! The Israelites *heard* God's words; they heard the Ten Commandments and all the words of the prophets; they heard with their own ears and yet did not obey God! So *God caused them to become what they chose to be*. God made their ears even more tightly shut! *God punished them by letting them have their own way*. What they sowed, they reaped (Gal 6:7-8)! They hardened their hearts against God and then God caused their hearts to be so hard that they could no more repent and turn to God! This was a terrible judgement! That is why so many times in the Bible God warns, "Today if you hear God's voice, don't harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." (Heb 3:15).

(S) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the main message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

(T) Jesus Christ interprets several details. "The seed" represents *the word of God, the message of the kingdom* (Lk 8:11; Mt 13:19). "The soil" represents *the heart of man* (Mt 13:19). "The different kinds of soil" represent *different conditions of the heart* of man, or *different attitudes of the heart* of man towards the word of God. The character of the hearer determines the effect that the word of God will have on his life. "The Sower" is not explained. In Matthew 13:37, the sower is Jesus Christ himself, but he may also be any Christian who proclaims or teaches the message of Jesus Christ to other people (Mt 10:40). In the explanation, not the person who sows, but the people who respond is an essential detail. All three Gospels describe a variety of responses by different people or a variety of responses by the same person at different times in his life.

(S) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-9 teaches about *the word of God in God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is that *the condition and attitude of the heart determines the response given to the word of God. And the response given to the word of God, determines the result in one's life.*

(T) *Responding to the word of God* is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. The people of God's kingdom continually respond in the right way to the word of God as it is contained in the Bible. They hear the word of God, understand it, receive it in a clean heart, hold on to it under all circumstances, and with perseverance bear fruit.

(S) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. The truth in all the parables also has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct and clear teaching of the Bible.

In the parable of the sower, the emphasis is on *the response* a person gives to the word of God. But in Luke 6:47-49 the emphasis is on putting the teachings of Jesus Christ *into practice*. In the parable of the sower, the devil *snatches away* the word of God. But in Matthew 13:24-30, the devil *sows weeds* among the wheat. The parable of the sower stresses *the human responsibility* to respond to the word of God. But Mark 4:26-29 stresses *God's responsibility and action* to make the kingdom of God grow.

(T) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

(S) The main message of the parable is that *the result in one's life depends on the response one gives to the word of God, and the response one gives to the word of God depends on the condition and attitude of one's heart*. Every person is responsible for what response he gives to God's Word. When he hears God's Word, he must choose how he will respond!

(T) The seed sown along the path represents *the unresponsive, insensible and hardened heart*. This part of the parable deals with *the response and attitude factor*. By constantly thinking that the word of God contains nothing of importance for him, this person's heart becomes hardened (Heb 3:7-8). By continually putting off to act upon the word of God, because he finds it inconvenient to take the message to his heart, this person's heart becomes hardened. He says, "Not now, perhaps later." (Acts 24:25). Because he does not like what he hears, his heart becomes hostile and he rejects the messenger or the message. The main lesson of this parable is to make every effort to accept and understand the word of God whenever you hear, read or study it! You must immediately deal with your attitudes of indifference, procrastination or hostility!

(S) The seed that fell on rocky places represents *the impulsive heart*. This part of the parable deals with *the depth and duration factor*. This is a person, who acts on the spur of the moment, immediately and without considering the consequences or counting the cost. When he hears the word of God, he is thrilled or enthusiastic. Although he initially follows Christ outwardly, he is never a genuine follower of Christ. His confessions concerning the Christian faith do not spring from his inner conviction. He fails to consider the consequences of accepting the word of God. He does not consider the fact that true discipleship implies self-surrender, self-denial, sacrifice, service and suffering. When trouble or persecution comes, he quickly falls away. He has *no root*, that is, he lacks perseverance, the ability to stick to the word of God under all circumstances. The main lesson is to retain God's word and to persevere to believe and obey it under all circumstances! You must immediately deal with your tendency only to be emotionally touched when you hear God's word!

(T) The seed that fell among the thorns represents *the pre-occupied heart*. This part of the parable deals with *the preparation and priority factor*. This is a person, who is unthinkingly careless or deliberately chooses the wrong priorities. As a consequence, his heart has no room or time for the calm and serious meditation and application of God's word. He not only opens his heart for the word of God, but also opens his heart for the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things than God and God's will. Pleasures that are wrong in themselves are drunkenness, drug addiction, gambling, sexual immorality, etc. Pleasures that become wrong when a person over-indulges in them are eating, sleeping, sports, entertainment, watching television, or even work like being a workaholic. A person, whose heart is pre-occupied with other things, so that he has no time or place for the word of God, can never grow to spiritual maturity and can therefore never bear fruit for eternal life or lasting fruit in his life (Jn 4:36; 15:16). The main lesson is to keep your heart clean, honest and good. Keep it free from the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the other pleasures of the world. You must immediately deal with your worries, your tendency to be materialistic and with your wrong pleasures and wrong priorities.

(S) The seed that fell on the good soil represents *the responsive, retaining, well-prepared and fruitful heart*. This part of the parable deals with *the motivation and quality factor*. This is the person, who wants to hear the word of God and who meditates on what he hears, because he wants to understand it. He clings to the word of God, no matter the difficult circumstances and he keeps his heart free from whatever can choke the word of God. With effort and perseverance he bears fruit. The fruit may be conversion or spiritual growth. The fruit may be growth in character, that is, in the fruit of the Spirit. Or the fruit may be a fruitful ministry in other people's lives. The difference in the degree of fruitfulness is due to the fact that not all believers are equally penitent, trustful, loyal, courageous, meek, or obedient.

(T) The key to understand all other parables. Mark 4:13 says, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” Jesus teaches that the parable of the sower is the key to understand all the other parables. Why? Because the condition and attitude of the heart determines the response given to all the parables and all of God’s Word. And because the response given to the word of God, determines the result in one’s life! That is why Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life.” How can a person guard his heart? Proverbs 23:26 says, “My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways.” Only when you have given your heart and life to Jesus Christ, will you be able to guard your heart and make the best responses to God’s Word!

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the wicked tenants. As preparation, please read Matthew 21:33-41.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and preach God’s Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.