Rev P Archbald

Sowing, Soil and Harvest

Zech 9:11-17

Mark 4: 3-9, 13-20

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, would you help us to listen carefully and to do so because we do love Your Holy will. Father help us also to see already the blessings that come from listening to that Word and receiving it. Blessings that come already in this life even if there are afflictions and grief’s in our life and help us to see the blessings that come from believing your Word – a growth in faith and in wisdom, the stability and peace amidst the storms of life and the sanctification, the gradual overcoming of sin in our lives as well, Father as helping us to trust in the blessings of eternal life to come. We pray this in Jesus name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, one of the helpful things about the parable of the sower is that it actually has an explanation. Not all the parables have such an explanation and because we do in this case it is very easy for us to say what each element in the story represents. Sometimes people argue about that in the parables, but in this one it is made crystal clear. And yet despite that, confusion remains if you look at commentaries on this parable you will find there is much disagreement about the main point of this parable. Some call it the parable of the sower and they believe that that is what it is primarily about. Others call it the parable of the soil, and emphasise the hearts on which the word falls and their reactions. And some call it the parable of the harvest and focus on what is to come. Opinions differ widely and it seems as if there is almost as much confusion about that as there was with the disciples at the time of Jesus when He first spoke these words. It’s good therefore for us to dig a little bit to see if we can find out what lies behind the simple surface details and we are going to do that under three headings. First of all, a key to understand the gospel, secondly the present reaction to the gospel and thirdly the future result of the gospel.

In the first place we note that the Lord Jesus himself encouraged the hearers and the readers to look below the surface details of this parable. The surface details themselves are quite simple. The sowing of the seed in different kinds of soil, the obstacles to growth of that seed, the prevention of fruit bearing from that seed, but nevertheless a good yield that comes at the end. These are relatively simple details and they are explained simply in verses 13 to 20 as to what the sowing means, as to what the obstacles mean, as to what the yield represents. It shouldn’t require much more investigation or effort, should it? And yet the Lord Jesus says ‘Listen to this’ and ‘behold’, terms that imply that the hearer needs to listen carefully to this – to pay very careful attention. And then in verse 9 He adds, ‘he who has an ear, let him hear’, which is a way of saying, there is more to this that meets the eye and you have got to work at this to figure out what that underlying meaning is. And then in verse 13 after saying that the parables are actually used by God to veil the truth in many cases, He then summarises the confusion of the disciples and He says, ‘do you not understand this parable’? How could they not understand the parable when the details on the surface appear to be so simple?

Well, the reason is because the parable is about the kingdom of God. It is about the gospel of the kingdom. Mark 4:14 says that the sower sows the word in explaining this parable, but Matt 13:19, the parallel adds that ‘this is the word of the kingdom’. It emphasises that this is the word of the kingdom, and in the parables and especially in Matt. 13 as you read the parables that follow, nearly all of them are introduced by this expression ‘the kingdom of heaven is like…’ They are kingdom parables. And the kingdom of heaven as we are told in Mark 4:11, ‘is a mystery’. A mystery in the Bible means something that you wouldn’t know if God didn’t explain it to you. The mystery is the kingdom of heaven itself and that is why the parables that speak about the kingdom also present us with a mystery that needs an explanation – that we need to figure out by God’s grace. And it is because of this also that these parables can be used to veil the mystery of the kingdom even further to those who are hard of heart. Because even though the details on the surface may appear simple, the underlying meaning of it – the main point of it – we need to be given that understanding.

So the disciples may understand easily what the sower represents and the seed represents and the soil represents, and the obstacles represent and the harvest represents, but how this applies to the kingdom, that is another question – a mystery – that they need to work at and so do we. What makes this especially important and especially worth doing, in this particular case, is that this parable is one that provides a key to understanding the other kingdom parables.

In verse 13 the Lord says to the disciples ‘if you don’t understand this one, how are you going to understand the other parables’. And that’s why this one also has such a detailed explanation. This very early parable where the Lord gives a very detailed explanation so that the disciples can understand and they can use that understanding to interpret the other parables.

This parable is more of an allegory. I don’t know if you know what an allegory is – but some of you may know what similes and metaphors are that are used in poetry and writing literature – a simile - you say something is like something else and a metaphor is when you actually say it is something else when you are making a comparison between two things. An allegory is like an extended metaphor when there is not just one comparison but a whole bunch of things- each detail having a special significance representing some other truth. And so this one is more like an allegory than the other parables.

Generally the parables just make one main point and then they have story details that provide the background and support that point. But this one, you get lots of details representing different aspects of spiritual truth – the sowing, the seed, the ground, the thorns, the birds, the harvest and so on. The reason for that is this parable introduces most of the main features of the kingdom and of the kingdom parables. It is kind of a summary, an overview parable. And the parables that follow are then going to pull one or other element out of this one and go into that in detail and focus on just that one aspect, but this one collects them all together. The sowing of the kingdom, the growth of the kingdom and the harvest of the kingdom. And the obstacles to that. All of that gathered in together in one overview. And so we don’t normally recommend an allegorical approach in the middle ages it was common for the medieval church to get all sorts of hidden meanings out of every passage where pretty well everything in the passage represented something else. And we don’t recommend that generally speaking as an approach either to the Bible or the parables. And the reformation was very strong in rejecting that approach. But this parable is a little bit unique in this way.

And this also explains why people are still arguing over the main point. Is it the parable of the sower, is it the parable of the soils, is it the parable of the harvest? Well it is about all of the above because it is a summary, an overview, a big picture of the Kingdom’s coming from the sowing to the growth to the final harvest.

With that in mind we can break the parable down into two main aspects of the kingdom’s coming, the kingdom’s programme. First of all the present reaction and then the future results. And that follows the fact that the King of this kingdom has come, not just once but twice – a first coming and a second coming. So as our second point we look at the present reaction which has to do with the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you see the Jews were confused about this because they expected just one coming of the Messiah and they believed that when He came that coming of the Messiah would be a most glorious coming with all of the enemies of Israel defeated and Israel ruling the world and the milk and honey flowing in the streets like never before. Each man sitting under his vine and fig tree, and enjoying the grain from the harvest in the greatest abundance ever. And we had some insight into that from reading Zech. 9:11-17. That is what they expected, but the reality when Jesus came was quite different. When the Lord Jesus came there was opposition, there were obstacles, there was a veiled gospel and there was a cross that still lay ahead at this point.

Very different story at the second coming but that was what was found at the first coming and already the disciples were confused by that and the people were confused and already Jesus was beginning to explain these things the difference between the first and the second coming.

In the present then, in the time that we live in now and also at the time that Jesus was ministering, the gospel of the kingdom was to be widely sown – it was to be indiscriminately sown over all kinds of soil. This is in fact the way that sowing was done at that time in Palestine – they threw the seed all over the place, over the rocky ground, where the thorns were, over the path – it was sown all over the place and then they would plough it in and wherever the soil was good, the seed would grow up. That was the common practice. And that represents this current phase from Jesus’ first coming until the time when He comes again. Widespread, indiscriminate sowing, all over the place, but also widespread opposition. First opposition from Satan – that is mentioned first here, represented by the birds that pecked the seed that fell on the hard soil near the road, verses 4 and 15. Satan has many ways of doing this – they are not exhausted in this parable. He has many ways of trying to remove that seed from the lives and the hearts of people who hear it. Encouraging rank unbelief as he does through the state schools, through TV and the books that people read. Through pushing evolutionary doctrine and so on. Many ways that Satan encourages rank unbelief and tries to introduce doubts even into the minds of those who are God’s people. The way he brings in temptations of the world to encourage us and entice sinners, the way he sows discord and disillusionment and bitterness in the hearts of God’s people and in the life of the church. Satan is a prowling and a hungry lion and he is always ready to jump into action on this. Verse 15 – he does it **immediately**, always ready to try and destroy us and to counteract our hearing of the word and we need to be aware of this, we need to be alert to this and it is a very good question to ask yourself “how is Satan opposing my hearing of the Word at present?”. Ask yourself that question when you go home - think about that – how is Satan undermining my hearing of the word at this present time in my life – where are the danger areas – where are the weak defences where the attacks are being concentrated?

This question indicates that Satan is not the only obstacle that we are dealing with here. There is no ultimate obstacle to the Word of God but in the way things unfold in this life, we see people opposing it, it is not only Satan - it’s also the sinner himself. And so the parable actually deals more with the examples of obstacles in the sinner’s heart than it does going into Satan’s activities, but the reality is that really the two work together – Satan and the sinner cooperating in order to oppose the word of God. And that is why verse 16, as it begins to introduce the reactions in the hearts of sinners says ‘in a similar way’ in other words this is what Satan is doing but in a similar way this is what sinners are doing. They are working together.

And so we have the rocky ground where there is a shallow layer of soil with maybe a layer of limestone just below the surface, and that thin layer of soil heats up quickly when seed is put in it. The warming from the sun quickly heats up the soil, the seed germinates, it grows very fast – perhaps even faster than seed in other kinds of soil – but it also withers very quickly, it has no proper root development as the sun continues to heat it up. And as we have the explanation here, it is talking about those who temporarily receive the Word of God with joy, but they fall away as soon as pressure comes on them. The pressure of affliction, or persecution or other kinds of pressures in their lives – verses 5 and 6 and 16 to 18.

And then another kind of obstacle or opposition that comes from sinners – the thorns, in verses 7 and 18 to 19, that spring up and choke the crop, representing the one who hears the Word, but the Word is ultimately unfruitful in that person’s life because their life and their acceptance of the Word is choked out by the things of this world, the things of this present age. Whether the worries of this age, they get distracted by all of the problems of this life, or the deceitfulness of riches or other lusts or things of this world.

Note that in each of these cases, the seed was sown and the Word was heard and even in many cases it initially gets a favourable response – verses 15, 16 and 18. The Lord Jesus is addressing the fact that people hearing the gospel, and this also includes covenant people, people who are in the church, as well as those who hear and perhaps some of those later join the church by profession of faith – they can do and still sometimes fall away as sadly and grievously we have seen. And this is a warning to us that simply being a member of the church and growing up in a Christian family and even professing your faith, those things in themselves are no guarantee that you are permanently rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ. There needs to be good soil for that – verses 8 and 20. And good soil means you not only hear the Word, but you also accept it, and you accept it in a continual, in a ongoing, and a lasting way. And as a result of that there is good fruit in your lives and you keep bearing that good fruit. Not just an appearance of it for a short time but for the whole of your life. In other words you and I are going to demonstrate our soil type by our perseverance by God’s grace and by perseverance not only believing in Jesus Christ but also by obeying Him, showing that we really do believe by bearing fruit in our whole lives, not just by being members of the church - important as that is.

The point in saying this in the parable is that God sows the Word widely at the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, but as He ploughs it into the ground, there are some who reject it either immediately or later, and there are other who truly receive it into their hearts – in both cases the Word of God not being empty or made void or failing in its purpose, but accomplishing the purposes that God has set for it. Isaiah 55:11. That is the nature of the case between the first and second coming of the Lord Jesus and therefore it should not dismay us to see opposition to the gospel and to see persecution coming upon God’s people and to see also at times apostasy even from those who have been in the church.

We also need to keep before us what awaits us in the future. The future result of the gospel – our third and final point.

For all the glorious promises of the Old Testament about Zion’s future – about the kingdom of God – about the people of God, all of that will be fulfilled. The disciples simply needed to understand and this is part of the mystery of the kingdom – they needed to understand that these promises from the Old Testament will be fulfilled in principle with the first coming and they will be fulfilled in completeness or consummation at the second coming of the Lord Jesus. That is part of the mystery that the disciples struggled so much to understand. Why were there so many in Israel rejecting the Messiah. This is the covenant people of God. Why were so many turning away? Why do so many reject the gospel when you tell them today? Well the time is coming when every knee will bow and there will be a great harvest. That will be when the Lord Jesus returns.

In ancient Palestine a yield of ten, a tenfold yield, from sowing seed was considered to be a pretty good result for a farmer. The yield that is spoken of here is not tenfold. It’s thirtyfold, sixtyfold and even a hundredfold. The idea is that if you take one grain, one seed and you put it in the ground, and it grows the way that the sower wants it to, that seed will grow up to produce a stalk that has a number of ears of grain on it so that the number of seeds and the amount of grain actually multiplies, maybe ten ears of grain on the stalk, that’s good – but if you had a stalk that had thirty, well that’s incredible. If you had one that had sixty – that’s even amazingly better and if you have one that has a hundred ears of grain on it, that’s just about unheard of. So the point being made is that when the seed truly takes root even in one heart, the fruit that comes from that by God’s grace is not just good, it’s great, in fact its staggeringly great up to a hundredfold, and you put all of that together with all of those in whom the seed has found that lodging place and you are going to have a fantastic harvest that is beyond all human expectation. If you are a pessimist you can focus on the opposition and you can say – three quarters of it goes bad, what a waste. Three quarters of the scenarios in the parable end up with a bad result – no fruit from the hearing of the Word because all of this opposition around us is so fierce, it’s too strong.

But we are meant to see that in the light of the final result. Where despite that opposition, the number of the souls harvested and the fruit that comes from their lives to the glory of God is gloriously and staggeringly great. The number of obstacles to the Word in this present age is not a true picture of the ultimate size of the harvest and this a cause for hope and for joy and for optimism to the Christian already in this life. And that is the main point and the main application here is one of hope. It is not a parable that deals so much with us being a good soil, and us making sure we listen to the Word, or even us bearing fruit – though all of that is true and absolutely crucial to the Christian life – but this parable is above all a parable about the overview of the kingdom’s programme explaining to us the range of reactions that come to Jesus now as well as the way things will end when He returns – for our encouragement so that we don’t lose our enthusiasm for promoting the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so that we don’t lose our joy in having the Lord Jesus as our King that we really can see Him as King, despite the fact that there is opposition. Even when we tell others about Him and they don’t listen or when some who have heard and known the truth later turn from it. Because when the Lord Jesus returns the number of those who have heard and believed and even the number of those who have heard and have then turned away but have later been restored - been rescued, brought back like the prodigal son or daughter – the number of those people will be so great and the shout of their praises to God so loud that there will be no more talk of wasted seed or of a triumphant opposition, because the triumph of Jesus Christ will be all in all. AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father would you help us to understand the present situation that we live in and the responses that we see to the gospel we proclaim, and even the baffling situation that we cannot even begin to understand when someone who has been brought up in and knows the truth rejects it. Father that is beyond us, but at the same time help us to keep before us the fact of the harvest to come, and not to doubt what is coming. Would you cause this knowledge to encourage us to promote the gospel, to promote the name of the Lord Jesus all the more and especially as we see the importance of our fruit-bearing as a means that you have chosen to spread your fame. We pray it in Jesus name, AMEN.