

THE CASE OF THE LAVISH FARMER

by Ray C. Stedman

We shall turn again this morning to the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Here we are looking together at the *Sermon on the Sea* which our Lord preached from a boat on the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd was assembled on the beach listening to him as he delivered seven parables which he called the secrets, or mysteries, of the kingdom of heaven. These seven parables constitute a view of the age following our Lord's appearance on earth, the present age in which we live.

The parables, Jesus said, are hidden to those who do not pay attention, who do not listen, but open to those who do. His constant warning all the way through is, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." So we are invited to give close attention to these parables which unveil the great span of time between our Lord's first coming and his second. They are a look behind the scenes of history through the eyes of Jesus Christ, in which he points out to us the principles and powerful forces that are at work to produce the events which are recorded in history books and on the pages of our daily newspapers. If you want to understand the times in which you live it is essential that you know what these parables mean.

Each parable is like a mystery novel with certain clues given to guide us to the meaning. We are going to study the first one this morning. Like any good teacher, our Lord began by interpreting the first two parables for us so that we will understand them. By helping the disciples with the first two, Jesus gave them the pattern of interpretation, the process to follow in discovering what the other parables mean. Then he left them on their own, as he does us, with a little additional help on the last parable. Therefore each of these parables challenges us to think through what our Lord means by it, and each contains a great revelation which it is essential for us to understand. So as we go through them I hope you will feel like Perry Mason, with a desire to pick up all the clues that God has given, and to understand what he is saying in these unusual stories about the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

The first story is about a farmer who broadcasts his seed with a lavish hand, throwing it out without regard to where it falls. Matthew records it for us beginning with Verse 3:

And he told them many things in parables, saying, "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." {Matt 13:3-9 RSV}

It is very likely that when our Lord was telling this story the whole scene was being enacted right before the eyes of these people. This was springtime and probably from where they stood on the beach they could look out on the hillside and see a sower going forth to sow. This was the way Jesus taught. He often picked up that which was happening right around his hearers and used it as an illustration of the great truth he wanted to convey. They could see a path which had been beaten across the field and the birds picking up the seeds right behind the sower. They could see the rocky ground, and the thorns and thistles growing up, and the good soil of the field. It was what we would call a living flannel graph, depicting right before their eyes the truth our Lord was illustrating.

But when he finished there must have been many puzzled looks on the faces of people in this crowd. They were waiting, of course, for an explanation. He told a story; it was being enacted right in front of them -- but what did it mean? It was at this point, Matthew tells us, that the disciples came to him. Evidently everybody

waited and waited, and the pause became so embarrassing that the disciples finally came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

Our Lord's explanation, which we have already examined in our message last week, is that God is operating on a great, fundamental principle in human history: "To him who has will more be given" {Matt 13:12a RSV}, "but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away," {Matt 13:12c RSV}. That seems most unfair, doesn't it? But we must understand that when the Lord says, "To him who has," he is speaking about the possession of truth -- truth which is acted on. You never *have* truth when you merely have it in your head. You *have* truth only when you have acted on it, when it has affected you and changed you. It does no good just to learn something, and store it away as a fact you know about life. If you do not act upon it, it is not your truth; you do not have it. So what Jesus is really saying is, "He who acts on truth will be given more; but he who has it and doesn't act on it will lose it. And what is more, he will lose the very capacity to receive truth." This is his warning. And he said to the disciples, "To you it has been given to know" {Matt 13:11b RSV}, because they were the kind of people who acted on truth. So he starts to explain this parable to us, beginning with verse 18:

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path." {Matt 13:18-19 RSV}

Each of the elements of the story has an explanation, a corresponding truth connected with it. Our Lord begins to explain it section by section, which is the way he wants us to study all these parables.

He begins with the seed. You notice that he does not say anything specific about who the sower is, though in the next parable he does. But here it can be anyone who sows the seed. The important thing to notice is what the seed is. Jesus says it is "the word of the kingdom," i.e., the word about the existence of an invisible spiritual kingdom all around us which is very essential to us, and from which all our lives are governed, and to which they all must relate.

That is the great truth which God wants us to know -- that all of life is not contained in what you can see and touch and taste and hear and smell. Those senses open up a certain degree of life to you but there is more to it than that. There is an invisible kingdom beyond what you can apprehend with your five senses. It is very real, as real as anything you can see or touch. And it is very important because in that kingdom are hidden all the answers to the problems with which we wrestle. It is essential, therefore, that we understand that this kingdom exists. But more than that, the word of the kingdom is that in this kingdom, from this source, invisible and unseen, comes all that man desperately needs and is searching for in life. That is the good news of the gospel. The word of the kingdom, then, is the gospel.

You remember that when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans he told them that he was so eager to come to Rome because that city was the center of empire, with influence throughout the empire. He hungered to come and declare the gospel to them because, as he put it, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," {Rom 1:16a RSV}. And well he might not have been ashamed, for in it, as he says, are the two things men need most desperately: "the power of God" {Rom 1:16b RSV}, and "the righteousness of God," {Rom 1:17b RSV}.

Power is the ability to do, to accomplish. Every person in the world today is seeking that kind of power -- the secret of adequacy, the ability to be and do what you would like to be and do, the ability to cope with life, to handle whatever life throws at you. The most fundamental, urgent cry of any human heart, anywhere, is to find somehow the secret of the power to act correctly and effectively and to handle life adequately.

Righteousness is the freedom to do. It means that the individual has all his internal problems solved. He is released, no longer hung up with problems and inhibitions, limitations and barriers within. These are solved and removed. He is no longer under the burden of guilt, nor defeated by self loathing. He is free to be and to accomplish what God wants. That is what is in the gospel.

That is the seed being sown throughout the whole course of this age. This is the age of sowing the seed of the word of promise of the power and the righteousness of God. And that wonderful, attractive, powerful seed is

being dropped into human hearts everywhere. The sowing started with Jesus. He was the first great Sower who went out with this word. Millions have followed him since, sowing this seed wherever they go. It may be in the form of a simple Christian testimony. It may be in an elaborate sermon, or in a book that someone reads. It may be just a word, a single phrase dropped into a conversation, that is like a seed dropped into a human heart. It takes root and changes that whole life.

Some of you can testify that the thing which arrested you and turned you around and changed you was just a phrase which somebody uttered. This seed is powerful.

The crux of the parable is the condition of the soils into which this seed is dropped. This is what our Lord wants us to comprehend. There are various kinds of soils, he says, upon which the word can fall. The soil, of course, is the human heart. Wherever the word is sown, four kinds of soil are usually present, four conditions of the human heart to which this word speaks. They are all here this morning. In this congregation, I am sure, are representatives of each of these four kinds of soil. Our Lord wants us to see what they are.

What is the trouble with this first heart? Jesus says, "When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes (the birds are a symbol of the evil one) and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path."

This first kind of individual has a heart which is hard and narrow like a path beaten across a field. A path is trodden down and hardened and narrowed by the traffic of human feet as they cross the field. The problem with this heart is that it has grown hard and narrow.

Jesus focuses upon that which causes it. The word comes, he says, but they do not understand it. The idea is not that they could not understand, but that they do not try. They don't take the time to understand.

Now, what kind of a heart is this? You can see that this is what we might call the materialistic heart, the kind that does not want to be bothered with thinking about anything beyond what you can see and hear and smell and touch and taste. This is the humanistic heart, the liberal heart, or the atheistic.

Here is a man who has been rendered momentarily thoughtful by the word of the kingdom. Something has challenged him for the moment to think about God, and about life. And for a moment he wonders, "Maybe there is something to this." He has received a passing impression -- but it requires more thought, more self-evaluation -- and he does not want to be bothered. So he shrugs it off. And, immediately, our Lord says, the enemy comes, i.e. Satan, the evil one, and snatches away the thought out of his heart, and it never comes back again. So he goes on untroubled, thinking that the world remains the way he has conceived it to be.

There are many people like this, who live on these terms. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, describes a man who goes into the British Museum and sits down to read certain books that are there. Something he reads suggests to him a thought about God and he is inspired to think of him. For a moment it looks as though he is really going on to think this idea through. But then Screwtape manages to divert him with the thought that it is time for lunch and that he would be in much better shape to tackle this important subject after he has eaten. Screwtape goes on to say,

Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of 'real life' (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all 'that sort of thing' just couldn't be true.

That is the kind of soil Jesus is talking about. The devil takes care of him, brainwashes him. The thought is snatched away if it is not dealt with then -- and it never returns again.

There are many like that, They have settled for a world bounded on the north by their work, on the south by their family, on the east by taxes, and on the west by death. That is the whole of life to them. They have been described in the little jingle that goes,

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

And that's it. That's all. That's life. When the word of the kingdom falls upon that kind of heart it causes a momentary impression. But it is immediately shrugged off because it is different, it is challenging, it awakens the possibility of an entire world he has never thought of. So he divests himself of it and the enemy comes and takes it away and it is gone.

And yet do you know that, remarkably enough, this very verse was used to reach John Bunyan and lead him to Christ? That blasphemous old tinker of Bedford was known as the most godless man in his village and was regarded as so hardhearted and committed to godlessness that no Christian had any hope for him at all. But he heard this story of the sower and these very words seized upon his heart. And he said to himself, "Even the devil knows that if a man believes the word he'll be saved!" So he believed it, and he was saved. He became the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* and a tremendous testimony for God in this age.

Let's look now at the second soil. Our Lord goes on to describe it:

"As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."
{Matt 13:20-21 RSV}

What is the matter with this heart? It is rocky. But don't think of it as soil containing a lot of rocks. It doesn't mean that. The idea here is that there are a few inches of earth on top of a broad shelf of bedrock. In other words this is shallow, thin soil underlain by a ledge of bedrock. The key our Lord gives us here is that "he has no root in himself." This is what we would call a shallow life, one that is flitting from this to that, from one experience to another, never content with anything for very long. This heart is always on the prowl, restless, searching, groping. You have met people like that -- faddists, enthusiasts for the gospel this week ("Oh, what a wonderful thing this is!") and next week it is Geritol, or vitamin Z, or whatever. The word our Lord uses to describe this kind of person is, literally, "seasonal." When the season is on to believe the gospel they believe it.

Many people like that are being reached right now. For example, among the tens of thousands of young people who are turning to Christ in our day there are a lot who are doing so like this. But when the season changes they will drop right back. They will not continue; they are seasonal. They live on the surface, they are emotional. There is no depth in their life, nothing goes deep into their heart. When the gospel reaches this kind they receive it with joy. They think it is great! They are enthusiastic. But when the season changes, and tribulation and persecution come, when it is no longer a warm, glorious day for the word but it becomes cold and frosty, immediately they are gone. They wither and die.

Thus our Lord illustrates the terrible danger of a shallow heart, a heart that does not want to evaluate and go deeper but is always living on the surface, always relating to the event of the moment and concerned only with that. The devil took care of the first kind of man, but the flesh takes care of this one. The emotional seasons of life will make it very difficult for him to receive the word of God which changes his heart.

Then there is the third type of heart:

"As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." {Matt 13:22 RSV}

Here is the typical American businessman -- and his wife. What is the trouble? Busy-ness, that's all. It is not that he is uninterested; he is interested in the gospel. It is not that he is shallow; he isn't. He is very capable of

thinking in depth, of analysis of issues and long meditation. He does it in business; she does it in her social life. The trouble is that he wants it all. He wants the fruitfulness of life that comes from the gospel, but with it he also wants everything else. He wants the so-called "finer things" of life. We describe him as trying to keep up with the Joneses. (That means buying things you don't need with money you don't have to impress people you don't even like.) He wants a color TV set and a swimming pool and a fine home and two beautiful cars and a wide social life. The result is that he has no time to think about the word, no time to receive it and meditate. He is too wrapped up with the cares of this world and the pursuit of things.

When my daughters were younger one of them used to like to go riding with me in the car. I would invite her to go with me but she always wanted to take all her "friends." I don't mean the neighborhood children. Her friends were her teddy bear and her stuffed rabbit and her dolls and some other toys. When I'd ask her to go she would run and grab the bear and the rabbit and three dolls and several other kinds of toys and would come running with her arms filled and try to get into the car. But there wasn't room for them all and so she had to choose between me and her friends. I guess I won most of the time. But she was too intent upon taking everything with her.

That is what is happening with people today. They want it all. They want everything that the world can offer and everything God can offer. But the remarkable thing about the word is that God will never settle on those terms. He is always saying, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you," {Matt 6:33 KJV}. "What shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" {Matt 16:26, Mark 8:36}.

The fourth soil is the good soil:

"As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it, he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." {Matt 13:23 RSV}

Notice the qualities of this soil. Here is a heart that is neither hard and narrow nor flippant. He understands the word, i.e., he thinks about it, ponders over it. He receives it gladly but his life is not shallow. He bears fruit. The seed remains long enough to sprout and grow and to come to fruition. Finally, his fruit is not lost in a jumble of things, the thorns and thistles of life, but he brings forth varying amounts -- thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

I think this three-fold division which our Lord gives is amplified in other parts of the Scriptures to illustrate the stages, the phases of the Christian life. John speaks of little children, young men, and fathers -- a three-fold progress through the Christian experience. And, in Romans, Paul speaks in this way about fulfilling the will of God: "... that you may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God," {cf, Rom 12:2}. There are other similar references to an obvious threefold progression of development in Christian growth. This is what our Lord means. The seed comes to fruition with varying degrees of harvest, but in any case the fruit is there.

The key point of this whole parable is that the only one of these four hearts which is genuinely Christian is the fourth one. The sowing is not salvation. Nor is the hearing of the word. Many hear, but they are not Christians. Even the sprouting of the seed is not salvation. That is important to note. The enthusiasm, the joy with which it is received, the immediate results in the life are not yet salvation. Isn't that startling? There are many who profess in this way, Jesus said, but they are not Christians. Salvation is seen when the fruit comes. Fruit appears when the will is genuinely yielded to the lordship of Christ, when the word is welcomed and nourished and acted on and allowed to grow to fruition.

But we need to note here that our Lord is describing hearts, not lives. He is not saying that once a man is like a certain kind of soil he is unchangeable, that his life is forever like this. He is saying that his heart may be like this. But hearts change. Hearts are altered by the circumstances of our life. And it is quite possible that a single individual can pass through all four of these conditions. Probably all of us do. What Jesus is asking us is, "What is your heart like when it hears the word? What are you like when the word of the kingdom, with its promise of power and of righteousness, falls on your heart? What is your heart like then?" That is his

question.

It is possible, if it is in any of these unsatisfactory conditions -- hard or shallow or distracted or resistant in any way -- for your heart to be brought to God because God is able to change it, whatever its condition. He is the Creator. He is able to break up the hard heart. I have seen him do it many times. That is what he did with John Bunyan. He is able to deepen the shallow life. He is able to slow up the over-busy life so that the wonderful, living, life-producing word may take root in your heart and change you and introduce you to the power and the righteousness of God.

What a picture this is of our age! The sowing has been going on constantly throughout the age. The enemies of the gospel have been at work as well -- the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The devil is the one who lies to us, who tells us that life consists only of what you can detect with your senses and that nothing lies beyond that. That is the devil at work to deceive and destroy us.

The flesh is that which allows us to relate only to the passing moment, to the changing scene, to the surface of life, which touches our emotions and centers our attention upon them so that all we are concerned about is how we are feeling at the moment and what our mood is. That is the destructive principle of the flesh at work. The world is that which engages us in busy-ness, in trying to amass riches, which involves us with the cares of this life, with the preservation of possessions, which centers our attention upon things instead of people, upon material wealth instead of personal fellowship and spiritual relationship. This is the world at work to destroy us.

But as the word of God falls upon us, the question each of us must ask is, "What is my heart like now?" And with that our Lord leaves this parable with us, for us to answer that question in the depths of our hearts.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we ask that you will take our hearts, whatever they are like right at this moment, and make them good soil, responsive, ready to listen, ready to think, ready to pay attention. Please don't let us get up from this meeting and go home and allow the effects of it merely to dissipate. But rather, let the word remain in our hearts. Let us ponder what we have heard, think more deeply than we ever have before, and ask ourselves, "What does this word mean? How does it affect me?" Perhaps there are some right here this morning who are ready -- the good soil upon which the word has fallen -- to receive you, Lord Jesus, ready to open their hearts to you, ready to say, "Lord Jesus, enter my life and change me." We pray they will do so right now. And we pray that others who are already Christians will ask themselves, "What is my heart like as I hear this word?" The word must be constantly received. It continually drops upon us, continually seeks to bear fruit. Lord, take our hearts and make them into good soil for the word. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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