



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

Resourcing for Prayer Network Spiritual Guidelines on Kingdom (4)

Kingdom 'Sowing and Reaping'

January 2018

During the last few weeks we have been looking at Kingdom foundations and we now need to look at what God plants on these foundations. This week we will look especially at two different parables both with links to agricultural situations which would have been part of everyday life at that time. To us they may seem to be giving different messages about the Kingdom.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed appears in three of the Gospels (Matt 13.1-23; Mark 4.1-20; Luke 8.4-15) - and each is followed with the interpretation given just to the disciples. We may presume that this could be one of the easiest of the parables to understand. But even so they each have the words *'though seeing, they do not see; though hearing they may not understand'* (Isaiah 6.9) which should challenge us all to go deeper. Today believers should count their blessings and value this challenge. *'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it'* (Luke 10.23-24).

The Sower and the Seed

It is of interest that the newer versions of the Gospel translations no longer describe it as the Parable of the Sower and the Seed but as the Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil. Describing this parable in this way can make it very easy to overlook the role and purpose of the Sower as well as the importance of the Word of God as being the seed. It was the general practice in biblical times for the sower to sow the seed widely - and then plough it into the ground. Today farmers prepare the soil first - and then sow the seed more sparingly expecting this to produce a greater harvest - as it probably will.

When we make the Sower the subject we allow the parable to speak to us of the generosity of the Lord in sowing seed everywhere - even on the most unlikely of soils and in places where it will have difficulty in taking root - the opposite of worldly thinking. It should remind us that even the *'desert can bloom like a rose'* and beautiful plants can grow on building sites and in places where they are least expected. Perhaps too, we need to recognise that often what we regard as weeds are just God's plants in the wrong place.

The generosity of God to the most unlikely of recipients is also depicted when Jesus answered those who criticised him for eating with tax collectors by saying *'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance'* (Luke 5.31). It should help us to follow his example and become the Sower as well as develop our own right sense of stewardship of all the good things we have received.

In fact, we only have to read a favourite passage of mine (Mark 4.26-29) about a man becoming the sower to ensure that we keep our relationship right with God: *'a man scatters seed upon the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the seed produces corn - first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. As soon as the grain is ripe he puts the sickle to it because the harvest has come'*.

In our worldly economics we can think of seed as being a precious commodity which should not be wasted - but this is not Kingdom thinking. Thinking the worldly way causes us only to look for the harvest that comes from the **good** soil or where we have been involved in planting the seed. But God is already out in the wider world sowing seed and the missionary movement takes the Word of God out into the most difficult places where it often has to wait many generations before any real fruit grows out of it.

The Soil

The four kinds of soil translate well into an understanding of what happens to God's seed when it is planted in different types of soil and gives a heavenly interpretation of the kinds of situations that can prevent the Gospel from flourishing, or alternatively help it to take proper root. Each type of soil can give us valuable insights which can help us on our spiritual journey. Are there any other kinds of ground not mentioned on which the seed could fall and not bear fruit? And how does this agricultural simile relate to those situations?

But there is a danger that when we consider this parable purely from this view that we can perhaps liken ourselves to the good soil and presume that we have been saved from the failure experienced when the word falls onto other types of soil.

We need to remember that it is not the Father's fault if the good seed does not flourish and produce fruit when it is planted in good soil. More often it is our fault for not having been obedient, not having cared for it and nurtured it so that it can produce good fruit. So what kind of plants are we producing from the seed and what fruit are we, ourselves, bearing? What is good fruit? What is fruit that will last? Surely the fruit we bear should also be there to benefit others and help spread the Kingdom?

If we examine ourselves carefully, we may find that there may well be many times when good seed has been sown in our hearing which we have failed to hear or even recognise - or perhaps we forget the times when we have been enthusiastic after hearing God's word but then we have not followed it through, or developed it in our thinking; or maybe we do follow it through so far and then other things crop up in our lives so that it drops back in our thinking so we never allow it to bless us, build us up and help us to bear fruit. There may well have been times when we may have been so engrossed in other things (or slept through a sermon) that we never heard it in the first place, so God's 'now' word could never take root.

Thinking more deeply on these parables can also make us aware of how they can affect others. Our Father sows the seed but we can at least plough and fertilise the land so that the seed can flourish. Our role should be to help to nurture the seed wherever it is planted - even in the most unlikely situations. We are called to be co-workers with God and be able to say with Paul '*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it but God made it grow*' (! Cor 3.6).

The Parable of the Tares

We can learn even more about Kingdom growth when we look at another parable where weeds were sown by an enemy among good plants (Matt 13.24-30). The interpretation to this is an 'end times' word given in Matthew 13.36-44. This should be read alongside the Parable of the Net (Matt 13.47-50). While this is mainly about the separation of good from evil at the time of the Final Judgement: the owner encourages the servant to let the two grow together right through to the harvest. This reminds us of the co-existence of good and evil until that time and that the separation of the weeds from the good plants is God's responsibility, not ours.

Meditating on this can give us other insights too. Often we may think that we are protecting new believers by keeping them away from the world so that they can grow up in a pure environment, but in many ways letting them grow up in a secular or prejudiced community can strengthen their faith and enable them to be better witnesses and evangelists as they understand how others feel and can then minister to them more effectively.

This time we have stretched you to think more widely than the obvious - even when an interpretation is given.

It is often said that we should not try to stretch a parable too far - but sometimes we may not stretch it far enough!

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