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# The problem of leakage

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seen in the light of the parable of the sower

Leith Samuel



## 1. A word about our Lord's parables in general

They have been described as earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. In Matthew 13:10-15, 34-35 we may read our Lord's own explanation for His use of parables in His teaching. 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' His disciples asked Him. He replied: 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

This is why I speak to them in parables. Though seeing, they do not see. . . .'

The meaning of the first statement in the explanation He gives is self-evident. For some of us the second and third statements need amplifying for their meaning to be made crystal clear to us.

Whoever gets the message (= 'has') will receive the benefit of it in abundant measure. He will never forget it. And the truth encapsulated in it will never cease to benefit him. But whoever does not get the message or see the point (= 'has not'), even what he has, the memory of the story, like a ring-clasp designed to hold a precious jewel, will be taken from him. He will forget all about it.

Dr Leon Morris, in his Tyndale Commentary on Luke's Gospel, sees Jesus contrasting here the disciple with the casual listener. To the disciples the secrets of the kingdom of God are revealed. Secrets (*mysteria*) are truths which man could never discover for himself, but which God has revealed. (The word *mysteria* is common in Paul's writings, but is found only in this connection in the Gospels.) But for the casual listener there is sight without seeing, and hearing without understanding. For them the code is never cracked. They hear the parables, but do not penetrate into the meaning. The parables both reveal and conceal the truth. They reveal it to the genuine seeker who will take the trouble to dig beneath the surface and discover the meaning. But they conceal it from those who are content simply to listen to the story.

## 2. A word about this parable in particular

The parable of the sower is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 13:3-9; Mk. 4:3-9; Lk. 8:5-8).

*'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.'*

The only variation in the recording of the story is that Dr Luke doesn't mention the thirty or sixty times the amount sown in the good soil. He stops at 'a hundred times'.

Because of their confidence in the New Testament documents as the inspired Word of God, true in their historic introductions (who said what and when?) as well as in their didactic content (what exactly did He mean?) evangelicals accept this parable, along with all the other statements in the Gospels, as an authentic utterance of our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not view it as a story invented by His disciples to explain things that had happened or were happening in the developing churches, and placed on His lips to make it more authoritative and acceptable. Nor do we consider the

post-apostolic church invented the explanation recorded in Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:13-20 and Luke 8:11-15.

## 3. The Lord's own explanation of this parable

Both text and exposition come from the same divine lips.

'Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. What was sown on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. What was sown among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.' (As Dr Luke says, 'he brings forth no fruit to perfection' (AV) or 'they do not mature' (NIV).) 'But what was sown on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.'

We may ask, what is 'the message about the kingdom'?

In the light of our Lord's perfect life on earth, His clear teaching, His atoning death, His resurrection and ascension, it is *the good news* that God is on the throne of heaven and His kingdom rules over all; that the Son of God left the throne of heaven to come and die for poor sinners like us; that He conquered sin and death and the grave and returned triumphantly to the place of supreme influence and power on the Father's throne on high; that our sins may be forgiven through the death of the King's Son, and our daily needs may be met through the constant care of this 'young Prince of glory', as Isaac Watts called Him; that God's Holy Spirit is available for unholy men to make them holy. Christ died to save us; He lives to keep us; He will bring us safely one day, mature through suffering, into the great audience-room of the heavenly palace. But it is through much tribulation, trial and sorrow, pressure and pain, that we must enter into the kingdom; and unless a man is first born again, born from above, he can neither see nor enter into that kingdom (see, *e.g.*, Dn. 4:17, 25, 32; Acts 14:22 and Jn. 3:3-7). His kingdom cannot fail.

No wonder that we pray, 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. . . . For Thine is the kingdom (the right to reign) and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.'

## 4. The categories found in this parable

We have no difficulty in seeing that four quite different things happen to the seed, which is unvarying in its nature and quality. We can't blame the seed! Failure is due to the soil, as gardeners often prove!

**Our Lord sets before us four distinct categories:**

*a. The wayside, the hard-worn path.* The seed makes *no* impression on it. The seed is snatched away immediately. The enemy of souls sees to that. The devil is represented at all gospel-seed-sowing or gospel-preaching occasions, and he is prompt to snatch away the good seed, neutralizing the effect of the preaching, immediately and effectively negating the impression made by the message on many hearers.

*b. The stony ground.* The seed makes *some* impression on what soil there is. It springs up quickly, but shrivels and dies nearly as quickly. Shallow soil, no depth, short-lived growth.

*c. The thorny ground.* The seed makes a *deep but not a lasting* impression on the soil. Healthy growth is swamped and the fruit completely lost in the end, because the soil is preoccupied with other things which are hostile to the good seed of the Word.

*d. The good soil.* The seed makes a *deep and lasting* impression on the soil, producing varying degrees of fruitfulness, a sure and satisfying harvest.

## 5. The application of this parable to the problem of CU leakage

We must ask, how many of these four 'soils', indicating four kinds of hearers, are to be viewed as representing genuine Christians, the sort of people who should be found in CU membership? The answer is straightforward. All four types may be found attending CU meetings, but only the fourth should in fact be in CU membership. For the CU basis of membership is designed (a) positively, to bring together the born-again on campus, and (b) negatively, to restrict membership to the born-again, and (c) to ensure the continuity of Bible-based leadership.

*Category a.—'wayside'.* This is never found in CU membership. Such people may come to an occasional CU meeting and even to a Bible study, but no signs of spiritual life are to be seen. A smattering of religion, maybe, but no personal experience of Christ. We can hardly associate this person with CU leakage!

*Category b.—'no depth of earth'.* People sometimes

come into CU membership with great enthusiasm, and a president may be persuaded all too quickly that X has become a Christian. But a little scorn from cynics, a little frustration at the hands of examiners, no instant success story such as some had led him to expect, a caution from an anxious tutor or an adverse reaction from parents (or the vicar at home!), and the new member is presently a lapsed member. Even when the CU leaders are more discerning, trying to ensure that only the born-again become members, there can be casualties. In every generation of students there will be some who enjoy the company and the caring concern of Christians, who learn 'the language of Zion' and give the impression of earnestness and *personal* faith. But, alas, it is only a religious phase they are going through, and presently their keenness fizzles out. Never having experienced the miracle of new birth, they tend gradually to drop out of CU activities. Even if they maintain some measure of friendship with Christians on campus, they are likely to drop church attendance after graduation.

A medical student, who had been the heart and soul of his hospital CU, had prayed fervently and witnessed fearlessly, shattered his contemporaries by dropping everything the day he qualified. 'I needed the CU before I qualified. It gave me an identity. I was a somebody in it. But the need for it ceased the moment I heard I had qualified. I am a person in my own right now that I am a doctor,' he explained to me. Some thirty years later, *as far as I know*, he still shuns the company of Christians and lives for his medicine and his hobbies. True believers show the marks of their new birth by continuing in their walk with Christ. But if the root of the matter is missing, a religious spasm will fade and cease.

'It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow.' The quick-sow-quick-reap methods of evangelism have been practised by too many Christians. Is the life in the seed, or in the soil, or in the sower? What *is* the regenerating agency? Is the life in the technique for inserting the seed? Should there be instant proof that the seed has taken? If the answer, contrary to all we see in nature around us, is the latter, then the more pressure we apply for decision the better! Such pressure is made easier by methods which encourage people to 'make your decision *now*' (Bible studies, booklets, *etc.*).

But is pressure for decision the regenerating agent? Is not part of our problem as evangelicals that we have produced still-born infants by our impatience to see results? Have we not been victims of a commercial spirit that wants to see quick returns for time, effort and money invested? We all know it takes nine months' gestation for a human being to be born, whose

life-span on earth may be seventy to eighty years at most. But we seem to forget that spiritual birth is for a life-span that is eternal. We are too impatient in our hurry to see decisions. In our enthusiasm for evangelism we must have pushed many thousands, over the years, into a premature profession of conversion, the spiritual consequences of which have been so short-lived that we have had to explain what was happening in terms of a doctrine of backsliding. People blame the soil. But is the fault not more with any sower who tries to reap before the seed has had time to germinate? God preserve us from high-pressure salesmanship evangelism more loaded with emotional enthusiasm than with true concern for those to whom we speak.

When people were familiar with the Scriptures, and were doing nothing about the truths they knew, there may have been more reason for using a certain amount of pressure. But what can we say for it today, when people make too easy a profession of faith and in a short time many of them have fallen away? Should we not curb our desire to see something for our efforts ('get results') and give time for the seed to germinate, and for the Spirit of God to do a deep and lasting work of regeneration and conviction? He will bring signs of life to the surface in His own good time. In a very few instances that time may be immediately after the sowing of the seed. But why should untold spiritual harm be done to many every year by the assumption that the moment you hear you must decide or you have lost your chance for ever? Are there not far too many victims of well-meaning but ill-informed pressure? Let us preach and teach faithfully the Word of God, and be content to wait, leaving the Spirit of God to bring to spiritual life whom He will, when He will. To quote Gordon Harman: 'The greatest disservice we can do to a teenager is to get them to make a profession of conversion which is not a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.'

Let us not be guilty of applying a pressure that affects the weak-willed and unstable, and makes many discerning people amazed that we can be so naive; and, more serious, reduces evangelism to psychological machinery. People who have made a spurious profession of conversion are normally unreachable for the rest of their lives, and they usually try to shield their children from exposure to any evangelical activity. Who can blame them?

Our great God is not seeking hastily-arranged accommodation in the hearts of sinners who will take pity on Him and 'let Him in'. He is holding out terms of pardon and reconciliation to sinners who will repent and believe the gospel. And He has chosen to work through the preaching of that gospel, centred in Christ's ghastly experience on the cross, not in our wonderful

experience, to produce new life, repentance and faith in untold multitudes in every generation.

Let us 'preach to reach each', as Bishop Taylor Smith used to say. But don't let *us* try to do the Holy Spirit's work for Him. Ours to preach and witness, His to regenerate.

*Category c.—'choked seed'.* 'Others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.' How many have lost out spiritually through business pressures, family pressures, family pride? One person fears losing his/her share in the family inheritance. Another fears losing his promotion. Another fears losing friends, or getting a reputation for being narrow-minded.

Perhaps the most insidious influence that destroys capacity for spiritual things comes from the wife or husband who has little time for the things of God. One partner may insist on going to the nearest parish church or a nearby nonconformist church and will go nowhere near a Bible-teaching church. So first the regular exposition of the Word of God (if I am not misinformed, less than 2,000 out of 16,000 parish churches are known to be Bible-loving) is lost to the parent and presently to the children. Eventually all appetite for private Bible-reading may disappear too.

Why are we so blind when we contemplate marriage? Why do some professing Christians choose looks, which fade in time, instead of beauty of character and keenness for things eternal, which will grow with the years? How many professing Christians have lost out spiritually through choosing to live in a beautiful environment that was so far from a Bible-teaching church that they eventually gave up the traffic struggle to get there regularly, especially in the summer. Watered-down teaching may meet with some mental resistance to start with. But hearing enough of it, coupled with the fear of offending pleasant neighbours who listen to it, wears down the resistance, and the desire to hear and spread the gospel may evaporate altogether. Too much reading of liberal commentators like the late Professor William Barclay can have the same effect. Their background information may be helpful, but their doctrine is insidious, their fundamental unbelief infectious. The more helpful people find their background information, the more easily they may be influenced by their heresies. Plenty of sound help is available through the Tyndale and other commentaries. Let us make use of them.

Charming people like Professor James Barr, who say they have been through the evangelical syndrome and outgrown it, encourage others to give up their 'preju-

dices' about the Bible's inerrancy and to 'find freedom'. 'Forget you were in the SCM or the IVF (UCCF); you are Anglicans now,' was the advice of a theological college principal, once regarded as a strong evangelical, to the ordinands under his care. Is it any wonder that ecumenical pressures have swamped the distinctive evangelical witness of some who once 'ran well', but have been effectively shunted into non-evangelical sidings?

Organized games and sport on Sunday ('What an honour to be picked for the University or County!') have been the downfall of many who promised well. The family boat or caravan or country cottage may be a status-symbol. But how many professing Christian families have had their worship and teaching pattern gradually undermined by the love of the country or the sea, and the feeling that 'we must get away from it all and have a day of rest'? Church involvement becomes of less and less significance and eventually becomes one of those things that don't matter so much as in our younger days.

Thank God, plenty of Christian families who own a boat or a country cottage make sure of keeping their Christian priorities right, and don't allow worship and

teaching to be crowded out or cut down on the Lord's day.

*Category d.—'fruitful harvest'.* The steady sowing of the Word of God brings a steady harvest in every generation. Let us do all we can in our generation to continue the spreading of the seed of God's Word, by preaching and teaching, personal living and personal witnessing and passing on the printed word as God gives opportunity.

Some lives are more fruitful than others. The regenerate may degenerate and grow cold at times, but can never become unregenerate again. There *will* be a harvest from *every* believer's life (Jn. 10:27-29; 15:16; Phil. 1:6). Let us pray that our lives may be as fruitful as they can possibly be. And let us remember that the leakage from Christian Union circles has not been nearly as great as some have suggested. Thank God for the vast numbers of ex-CU members who are now stalwarts in their churches all over the world, spreading the Word of life.



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# Causes, nature and marks of a decline in grace

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John Newton

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My Lord, when I once had the pleasure of waiting on you, you were pleased to begin an interesting conversation, which, to my concern, was interrupted. The subject was concerning the causes, nature and marks of a decline in grace; how it happened that we lose that warm impression of divine things, which in some favoured moments we think it impossible to forget; how far this change of frame is consistent with a spiritual growth in other respects;

how to form a comparative judgment of our proficiency upon the whole; and by what steps the losses we sustain from our necessary connection with a sinful nature and a sinful world may be retrieved from time to time. I beg your Lordship's permission to fill up the paper with a view to these inquiries. I do not mean to offer a laboured essay on them, but such thoughts as shall occur while the pen is in my hand.