



NEW LIFE

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“For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:9)

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The Good Soil

*By Rev Michael Glodo, Part 4 of 4 of “The Parable of the Sower”
Adapted from TABLETALK from Ligonier Ministries – June 2009*

“Can this dirt grow corn?” One cold, blustery, wet Midwestern spring morning I found myself kneeling in a vast, empty field on the expansive central Illinois plain. With a dozen or so fellow geography classmates, I was picking up handfuls of wet soil, squeezing ribbons of it between my thumb and forefinger, dipping pH strips into diluted samples and timing how long small portions of water took to seep below the surface. In spite of the early hour and the unpleasant weather, we were all paying close attention and meticulously recording our results because there would be an exam in a few weeks – an exam in pedology, the study of soil.

There was another method, however, outside of the professor’s course syllabus that would have given me a clearer, more decisive answer to the question we were asking. Returning to that same spot six months later, I would have been shielded from the fierce August sun by emerald corn stalks towering a dozen feet or more on all sides as far as the eye could see. This land, once a vast sea of elephant grass so tall it could obscure a man on horseback, could indeed grow corn. It could grow corn like no place else on earth, enough to sustain a nation and still feed much of the world.

The parable of soils raises the same questions about our lives. Will we be fruitful, fertile followers of Jesus Christ? Not only does the parable raise the question, but it gives us a hope and a warning in answer. To rest on hope and heed the warning, we must understand the context of the parable.

When Jesus began to announce the arrival of the kingdom of God, he spoke amid high expectations. His hearers’ ancestors had been taken into exile and captivity because they had broken covenant with God. The prophets had made the case for God’s just punishment of their idolatry and injustice. But the prophets’ message was not exclusively woe, for they also had promised a day of restoration when God would set up His visible earthly reign through His anointed one (Messiah). Two things would happen: Israel’s oppressors would be defeated and pure worship would be re-established. The portraits of restoration painted by the prophets used the image of seed being sown, the metaphors that Jesus employed in this parable (see Isa 55:10-13; Jer 31:27-28; Ezek 36:8-15).

Yet the return from exile under Ezra and Nehemiah had come short of expectations. Ezra’s rebuilt temple paled in comparison to Solomon’s original (Ezra 3:12-13). Nehemiah’s rebuilt wall around Jerusalem couldn’t ensure the holiness of God’s people (Neh 1:3). Various occupiers continued to rule over Israel in spite of occasional rebellions that brought varied success (for example, the Maccabees).

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Some had moved to the wilderness where they could pursue holy living (Essenes). Some accommodated to Roman occupation (Sadducees). Some retreated into an individualistic yet stunted piety (Pharisees). Others harboured sometimes not-so-secret hopes of a successful revolution (Zealots). There were even some who located themselves under the illegitimate yet Rome-endorsed kingship of Herod (Herodians) who falsely bore the title “King of the Jews.” Thus, even though Jews from all twelve tribes were now living in Israel, it came nowhere close to the prophetic vision of the kingdom of God.

This is a stage onto which Jesus stepped when He stood in the synagogue and read from the Isaiah scroll (Luke 4:18-19) and announced that the true Jubilee had now arrived in Him. This is how Jesus commenced His public ministry of proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God had arrived (Luke 8:1). The time of release and restoration had come.

But rather than meeting with universal acceptance, Jesus encountered a host of reactions. Many opposed Him. The crowds were at times motivated more by novelty and curiosity (Luke 7:24). On the other hand, some of the most unlikely – and unseemly – were responding with joy and embracing Jesus and His announcement tenaciously. Throughout Luke’s gospel this mixed response would continue. A centurion, a widow from Nain, a promiscuous woman, a demoniac, a woman with lifelong uncleanness, a Samaritan leper, a blind beggar, a chief tax collector, and an impoverished widow were typical of those who were forcing their way into the kingdom in response to hearing the good news (Luke 16:16).

These were the ones who proved to be fertile soil for the word of the kingdom, not the ones who chose the places of honor (14:7), or the privileged who saw Jesus as one of many important priorities to be managed (14:15-24). This is Luke’s great theme or reversal, beginning in the birth narratives of Jesus and continuing through the very end of Luke’s gospel account. In His final parable, Jesus forced the confrontation with His opponents by declaring that God would give the kingdom to those who would produce a harvest for God and honor His son (20:9-18).

He was more than simply the messenger announcing the arrival of God’s reign. He was the one who brought the kingdom. In fact, Jesus embodied the kingdom because He was the king, not only of Israel but the royal Son of God who would rule the nations (Ps 2). As such, He represented threat and overthrow to some just as much as He meant salvation and blessing to others. What was decisive throughout Luke’s gospel is how people responded to the person of Jesus.

Therefore, this parable and its explanation to His inner circle would be understood as an accounting for the surprising range of responses. Even more than an explanation, it would be preparation – preparation for the hard road that lay ahead for those who would remain true to Jesus. These would be the ones who would serve the ultimate purpose of God’s great act of sowing in His Son – to produce a great harvest.

Herein lies hope. Jesus’ followers gathered around Him were a representative sample of those who had received the good news “in an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). They had been given “ears to hear” (vs 8). The seed of God’s Word had accomplished what God intended (Isa 55:11). In Jesus’ word of proclamation – announcing the good news of the kingdom of God – we see vividly the point that God’s Word is His deed. It isn’t simply that God says what He will do but that His very act of speaking is the means by which He does it. When we hear God speak to us, it is proof that we are alive. Not only do “dead men tell no tales” but they hear no tales as well. “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God,” Peter wrote in Peter 1:23.

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This is why the Westminster Confession describes the Word of God, and particularly the preaching of the Word, as a means of grace (Westminster Shorter Catechism, questions 88 and 89). That Word is powerful in itself by the Spirit of God (Heb 4:12).

Conversely, the description of the good soil preserves our hope when we see others reject the good news or fall away after initially receiving it. Those early Christians to whom Luke wrote may have been deeply troubled by seeing how many had once followed Jesus but then turned back for one reason or another. Yet Jesus in this parable led them and use to expect this at times and provided a God's-eye view of the difference found in the good soil – “they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15). We are not to be surprised, nor is our faith to be shaken, when the most genuine-seeming Christian falls away.

The hope is palpable in this parable. Yet there is a word of exhortation, a word of warning. The good soil will hold fast to God's Word and “bear fruit with patience” (vs 15). The word for *patience* here does not mean passive waiting. It is a word that connotes steadfastness and endurance, holding firm even in the face of trial. It is a word used several times by Paul in Romans (2:7; 5:3-4; 8:25; 15:4-5). It can reflect episodes of overt persecution (2 Thess 1:4) or simply the normal struggle of enduring life in a fallen world (Rom 8:25). The point in the parable is that only those who endure with steadfastness have a share in the kingdom that Jesus announced.

How can salvation be a gift of God's grace and yet there be some condition put on it? This is an enormous subject and relates to the very heart of the gospel. For our purposes here let us merely note what is plain. There are those who give the appearance of true faith who do not possess it. Those who do possess true faith cling to the object of their faith. To appeal to our opening analogy, the “proof is in the corn.” We know the difference when we see the fruit.

This is one of the chief pastoral concerns of the letter to the Hebrews, though it is clear in the Gospels and Paul as well. Saving faith is persevering faith. It is not the merit of perseverance that brings us into the kingdom of God, but it is only persevering faith that is the kind of faith called for by God.

Many have been greatly misled on this point. Evangelical Christianity is populated with multitudes who through one nominal act or another believe they settled their business with God. But Jesus doesn't offer false comfort in this parable. The good soil perseveres and is fertile. It is fertile because, by God's grace, it has laid hold of Jesus. The warning then leads back to hope, because seeing the fruit of the gospel in our own lives testifies to us of the power of God at work within us. “As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me” (John 15:4). Fruit is the distinguishing mark of the good soil. “By your endurance you will gain your lives” (Luke 21:19). Hold fast to Jesus Christ, put confidence in nothing else, and you will be fruitful.

WELCOME TO NEW LIFE B-P CHURCH LONDON

Our worship services begin promptly at **11.00 am** and **4.00 pm**.

Please stay back for Bible Study and fellowship lunch after the morning worship and for tea after the evening service. Do invite your friends to come to Church.

Worship Services			WELCOME
Morning	Today: 26/07/2009	Next Week: 02/08/2009	We extend a warm welcome to all worshippers this Lord's Day. We like to welcome Mr H K Lim (Grace's father) to our worship services last Lord's Day.
<i>Chairman:</i>	John Poh	Joey Seow	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Rev Timothy Ki	Rev Timothy Ki	
<i>Message:</i>	Why do I have to be a Christian? – Part 1	Why do I have to be a Christian? – Part 3	
<i>Text:</i>	Psalm 8	Genesis 2:4-8	
<i>Organist:</i>	Anthony	Anthony	
Evening			NEWS/ANNOUNCEMENTS
<i>Chairman:</i>	Jonathan Kim	Joey Seow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling of Resident Minister: Continue to pray for the Lord's calling for Rev Timothy Ki to serve as our resident minister. Rev Ki will be here for the months of July and August. Pray for his visa application. • No DHW Bible Study today: Please spend the upcoming week preparing for Lesson 13 (Genesis 18-19). • Pray for those who are sick: - Yetta's mum (upcoming chemotherapy sessions), Constance (ankle), Douglas (knee pain), Barbara (Alzheimer's), Prema (thyroid and skin condition), Eld Jack Ford (old age and knees), Margaret (Asthma, Hay fever, lost her voice), Yanning (back pain after fall), Brian (awaiting appointment for wisdom tooth extraction). • Pray for those who are on travel: Sophia, Lee-Wei, Rachel & Grace (S'pore), Nicolas (Belgium), Joey & Family (Lake Districts) • Pray for those who are still progressing with their studies: Yetta, Hubert, Joshua • Pray for those seeking employment: Joy • Pray for visa applications: Grace (China and UK), Joshua (Student visa), Joy (Post studies visa)
<i>Preacher:</i>	Rev Timothy Ki	Rev Timothy Ki	
<i>Message:</i>	Why do I have to be a Christian? – Part 2	Why do I have to be a Christian? – Part 4	
<i>Text:</i>	Isaiah 43:10	Genesis 2:4-8, Hebrews 9:27	
<i>Pianist:</i>	Hubert	Anthony	
Other Duties			
	Today: 26/07/2009	Next Week: 02/08/2009	
<i>Ushers</i>	Daniel / Jonathan	John / Yetta	
<i>Sunday Sch:</i>	No Sunday School	No Sunday School	
<i>Lunch:</i>	Constance	Maureen	
<i>Washing-up:</i>	Volunteers	Volunteers	
<i>PA Crew:</i>	Joshua	Joshua	
Appointments of the Week			
Fri 31 July	7:30pm	Young Adults Fellowship: No YAF	
Sat 01 Aug	4:00pm	Prayer Meeting & Bible Study: Led by John Poh	
<u>Worship Service Collections</u>			
Offering: £491.72		Lunch: £44.00	
 <u>Our Weak Hours</u> 			
<i>Adapted from "In Green Pastures" by J.R. Miller, D.D.</i>			
<p>We are not at all times equally strong. There are days with all of us when we throw off temptation with almost no effort. But none of us are so every day. There are hours with the strongest of us when we are weak. These are the times of peril for us, and our adversary is watching for them. In your weak hours keep a double guard, therefore, against temptation. Keep out of its way. Throw yourself with mighty faith on Him who was tempted in all points as we are, and knows therefore how to deliver us when we are tempted. In time of special weakness run to Christ for shelter.</p>			