

## **Barratt Ministries Challenge**

### **Issue 66**

#### **The Parable of the Sower**

#### **The Kingdom Series Part 5**

*by Alex Robertson*

The parable of the sower is very well known. But we are going to look at it in its context (as in fact we always should) as the first of seven parables of the kingdom in Matthew chapter 13. These seven parables are very significant for our understanding of the kingdom of heaven. I believe that they are in order (the first one is at the beginning and the last one is at the end for a particular reason), and I believe they are prophetic. Why do I say that?

Well, first of all I believe they are in perfect sequential order. The first parable is the sower, which talks of sowing seeds, of beginnings, and of the first signs of life that come from that beginning. Jesus says that he is the sower ("He that sows the good seed is the Son of Man", Matthew 13:37), so this is primarily talking about something happening in Jesus' day.

The last of the seven parables is the parable of the net, which talks about the end of the world, a gathering up and dividing for judgement. ("So shall it be at the end of the world", Matthew 13:49). So the first parable speaks of beginnings, the last parable speaks of the end. Is it not reasonable to guess that the other parables speak sequentially of the time in between? And in fact when we see this key to the parables we find that this is the case. This also begins to explain the reason why I believe these parables are more than just parables, they are also prophecy. The seven parables all speak of the kingdom of heaven, which we understand to mean the present time in between the first and his second coming of Christ.

#### **Prophetic parables**

Up until Christ's first coming, Israel was the kingdom of God; when he comes again, he will claim the whole earth as his kingdom for a thousand years. Now we are in the middle stage. We explored this in more detail in our first study, "What is the kingdom?" These parables are there to help us understand what is going on, what the kingdom of heaven is like, in this middle stage. So when Jesus spoke these parables, they were prophetic of the time to come. Seven is a number signifying completion or fulness in the bible, and this is a complete survey of the kingdom of heaven in the time between Jesus' first and second coming. Looking back now we can see how so much has been fulfilled, as we shall see in our future studies.

One of the things we notice about the kingdom of heaven in these parables is that everything is not well in the kingdom. It may be called the kingdom of heaven, but it's not heaven! On the contrary, the kingdom is a minefield rather than a safe and secure haven. For instance, the parable of the tares and the wheat (Matthew 13:24) tells us that the good soil where the good seed is growing and

bearing fruit is the very place where the enemy will plant bad seed, right in amongst the good seed. The kingdom of heaven is an open kingdom, unlike the kingdom of Israel which had strict laws and conditions for governing it. Anyone who cares to say they are a Christian, that they belong to the kingdom, is able to do so; and that means it is open to abuse. Jesus said "Every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16), and "the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12) - all sorts of people push their way in. Immediately in the first parable we see that not all is well in the kingdom. Only a fraction of the seed sown actually fulfills its intended purpose, to bear fruit.

### **The word of the kingdom**

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3) is about the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom into the lives of individuals. Jesus interpreted the parable to the disciples (verses 18-23) so we have a clear idea what he was talking about. Jesus said the seed means "the word of the kingdom" (verse 19). I know this parable is universally used to illustrate what happens when people hear the gospel, that is to say the word of grace, at the beginning of their Christian lives. But Jesus doesn't say that, he says it's about how people respond to the word of the kingdom. What is the word of the kingdom? It's in the Sermon on the Mount. It's the challenge to Christians, the challenge of discipleship, the challenge to deny yourself and take up your cross, the challenge of losing your life if you want to save it, the challenge of taking no thought for food or clothes but seeking God's kingdom first. That's the word that 4 different groups of people are responding to in this parable. This context puts a different angle on the parable. The word of the kingdom is a word of challenge to Christians, not a gospel message to the unsaved.

The first category of people are represented by the seed sown on the path (verses 3-4, 19). The type of ground represents our heart (see verse 19). The path means a hard stony heart. The word of the kingdom is preached, but it doesn't penetrate this heart at all, it just bounces off, and the devil comes and snatches it away. The message is heard but it's not accepted. How common this is in Christian circles! Everybody loves free grace, but nobody wants to know about the challenge of discipleship, and the devil is ready with all sorts of good reasons why we should not accept it. "All that fasting and self-denial - you're putting yourself under legalistic bondage!" "The Sermon on the Mount? That's works!" "Jesus came to give us abundant life, not hard commands!" I've heard all that before. Just a few weeks ago a man wrote to me telling me that the Sermon on the Mount was not for Christians at all. If he's right, we can ignore it and rip those pages out of our bible, they're no use to us. That is the seed bouncing off the rock.

### **Birds eat seeds**

It's interesting to note that birds generally don't eat plants, they eat seeds. Put a feeder tray of seeds out and the birds flock to it, put leaves and flowers in it and you won't get much response! What's the significance? The seed is the word. The devil snatches away the word, as the bird snatches the seed. The devil loves words, just like birds love seeds. He can play with words, twist them, do all sorts. He was so confident about his ability with words that he even quoted the bible to Jesus (who was the Word!). Satan happily twists and misapplies the word, but when that word roots down in a

person's heart and starts to become a plant, a living reality, he cannot any longer snatch it away. Plants are more difficult for him to deal with, seeds are easy.

The first category of people had no reaction to the word except indifference and hostility. The second category (verses 5-6, 20-21) have an immediate reaction. They love it. They accept it wholeheartedly. The challenge of discipleship appeals greatly to them. They want to be all out for God. In no time at all a plant has grown up. And we are amazed at such people. "What a testimony!", we say, "what growth!" But then some opposition turns up, some trial or test. And little by little the fire of enthusiasm dies down, until they end up withered and dead with regard to the kingdom. "I was into all that once", they'll tell you, "but I had a bad experience with it." And now they won't touch anything to do with discipleship.

### **A shallow heart**

What's the problem? The seed didn't take root. All the energy went into the upward growth of the plant - that's why it came up so suddenly. And it didn't take root because there was "no deepness of earth". The soil was shallow. A shallow heart, a shallow understanding of discipleship, won't last. Enthusiasm is great, but it won't pass through trials and persecution. When the sun comes up, the withering starts, because only a strong root can cope with the burning heat. The fiery trials test the fiery Christian! The fires of persecution test the fires of enthusiasm. The word must take root and grow deep. Underground work happens first. As the root must break up the soil, so the word must break the heart. "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17). We teach discipleship and we aren't disappointed if we find slow response at first. That's a good sign. People are thinking, pondering, getting broken up by the living word as it goes deep into the heart. Then when the plant grows up, when there is visible change, it's going to be a solid, lasting work.

The third category (verses 7, 22) do better. These are mature Christians. They have received the word thoroughly. The roots have gone deep into good soil, a good heart. They approve of discipleship, they have their eyes on the kingdom, they've passed the test of trials and persecution, and they're growing strong. They may have borne fruit - but Jesus says they "become unfruitful". What happens? The thorns. "The care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches" - or, in a word, materialism. It deceives the hearts of so many Christians. They want to live for God, but there are so many other cares to attend to, and they must give proper attention to their families, their jobs, and to do that they need to pay the mortgage, make sure they have a decent car, clothes and food and schooling for the kids, a holiday ... and before you know it they are trapped. The thorns are strangling their spiritual life. They no longer have time to think about the kingdom. They have forgotten Jesus' exhortation to "take no thought for your life ... for food ... for clothes ... for tomorrow" (Matthew 6:25,31); they have turned Jesus' words around to say "Seek first all these things and [hope that] the kingdom shall be added unto you"! Vain hope! The reality is unfruitfulness. The character of Christ no longer shines out. No longer are they lights in the world, radically different from the darkness all around. They've become conformed to the world, followed the pattern. In America a few years ago, a marketing survey examined the consumer lifestyle habits between Christians and non-Christians to see what the difference was. The result? They found no difference at all. In terms of materialism, of consumer goods, Christians live exactly the same as the

rest of the world. Shame on American Christians - not that England is any better. Of course we go to church, we've been born again, we have different doctrines to the world ... but if the way we live is no different, what difference does it make? There's no fruit and no light.

### **Thorns in your side**

God told Joshua not to leave any of the old inhabitants of Canaan alive, lest they become "thorns in your sides" (Numbers 33:55). The land we are conquering is ourselves, our thought patterns, our bodies and minds, and if we ignore Jesus' teaching about the cares of this life, they become thorns to us in the land. But - here is some good news! - if we can overcome the problem of cares and riches, there are no more obstacles to bearing fruit! Bearing fruit, as those in the last category do (verses 8, 23) is a natural process; it happens spontaneously to a seed planted in good soil. All we have to do is remove the hindrances and obstacles. Fruit is the manifested life of Christ. It's life spilling out of us. And it will happen, if we're eliminating the obstacles and being fed. If you're not bearing fruit - and we can all be more fruitful - the answers, in a nutshell, are clear: remove the obstacles, and feed the new nature. We have a whole series of studies on the Sermon on the Mount to help you, on video, audio cassette, and in "Challenge", back issues of which are available from our website at [www.barrattministries.org.uk](http://www.barrattministries.org.uk), or printed articles are available on request.

## **EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE**

*by Joanna Barratt*

### **Becoming Fruitful Again**

If we read Matthew 13 and think it refers to others, the scripture loses its value. When we don't take it personally, we tend to disregard it. When I first heard that the parable of the sower was talking to disciples, it was a complete eye-opener. We tend to think we have passed this stage long ago because the seed has taken root in our lives and we have become Christians. But we forget to search our hearts and ask ourselves, "So - where's the fruit!" We might have accepted mentally that Jesus Christ died for us so that we could have a relationship with God, but if there is no fruit to bear evidence of this in our lives, and our attitudes and dealings with others have not changed, then we have just changed our opinions, not our future. We are still slaves to this present world and not Christ.

I can remember vividly a particular time in my Christian walk when certain seed consistently fell on the stony path of my heart. Various godly people at different stages of my walk, over quite a period of time, offered me the same book to read - "Tortured For Christ" by Richard Wurmbrand. I knew the content of the book would be distasteful, that the author would talk about his horrific experiences after being arrested and tortured for the crime of being a Christian, but he was Romanian ... I was British. These things happened in other countries, but 'thank the Good Lord' I had

been delivered from having to face these problems because God had seen fit to allow me to be born and raised in freedom loving England. And if God had chosen this existence for me, then it would be ridiculous to read these horrific accounts and have troubled thoughts in my mind. No, naivety in this instance was far better than being informed. I refused to read the books.

### **A devastating effect**

I cannot remember what caused me to change my mind and read the book, but I do know that it had a devastating effect upon me. I had been right concerning the troubled thoughts and disturbed sleep that resulted, but this drove me to prayer on behalf of those paying such a heavy cost for their Christianity.

The other strange thing that resulted was that I began to question my own relationship with God. How could a God I knew to be so loving and considerate allow His beloved children to go through such fiery trials ... And even more disturbing, what sort of a relationship did these Christians have with their God that would cause them to give themselves in this way. They must have had some experience of God which I couldn't begin to understand if they allowed Him to treat them in such a fashion, and even grow in love towards Him and those who mistreated them. The books concerning the underground church challenged me and I found myself searching them out in book stores and churches as I craved to understand their depth of Christianity.

### **“Lord, make me perfect!”**

I read the story of a brother who, after his release from a long prison sentence, had gone into the woods to secretly pray. His prayer was, “Lord, make me perfect.” The reply from God came to him ... “If you want to be perfect, go back to prison.” The brother cried desperately, “Lord, anything but that.” He waited for a long time, struggling with what God had said to him, but eventually said through a blur of tears, “Lord, make me perfect!”

I looked at my own prayers and knew that I had said exactly the same prayer as him, but with a completely different attitude. I wanted Gabriel to appear out of the blue and zap me with spiritual power to ‘make me perfect’, I didn't realise there was a cost involved. Now I understood what I was actually saying to God, I thanked Him with all my heart that He doesn't listen to our words, He hears our hearts. He couldn't make me perfect because He knew I didn't understand what I was asking Him to do, or the process He would have to put me through. But I wanted to know God the way these true believers did. The words (seeds) of the sermon on the mount and the books relating to the underground church had fallen on good soil and God had watered them well. They had produced fruit in me so that I too wanted to be perfect and follow Christ, whatever it took, and for a number of years I developed in God and flourished.

## **Thorns spring up**

It's only when you look back that you realise what has happened. I didn't notice the thorns springing up and growing alongside the good plants growing in my heart, nor did I notice when they began to wrap themselves around the plants. It was only when I felt the life draining from me, when I was gasping for spiritual breath, that I realised what must have happened. Indeed it was only when I had the revelation of this particular parable that I acknowledged what had taken place in my heart.

Nothing evil or sinister had happened, that's the problem, it's all so very plausible and reasonable. The cares of this world just took over. When I was single I had nobody but myself to consider. But when I became a mother everything changed. I now had responsibilities. Responsibility is one of the hardest things to cope with when you are a Christian. We all know that our first responsibility is to God, but we cannot see God and so we tend to attend to the responsibilities which are all too obvious.

My routines crashed around me, I could no longer have my personal devotions. Consequently when I was asked to minister I felt a fraud being well aware of my own spiritual lack. Because of my spiritual state I felt very resentful towards Maurice (my husband), as he could carry on his devotional life as normal. With the birth of my second son, Isaac, things went from bad to worse and my relationship with Maurice really suffered. Then one day I had the revelation that he was my 'head', I was his responsibility. Paul says that the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband, else would the children be defiled. So if the unbelieving wife can be sanctified, it seemed reasonable that the believing wife could be sanctified by her husband. I then allowed Maurice to spiritually 'carry' me and stopped feeling condemned, as that was the very thing that was robbing my peace and making me awful to live with.

## **The struggling stopped**

We both noticed a difference immediately. I stopped struggling and striving. I had been saved in the first place by grace, but somewhere along the line we begin to treat grace like the world treats 'charity' and want to do things in our own strength. Well, I couldn't, so I had to ask for grace all over again. And there is plenty of grace, more than enough grace for anyone who is humble enough to ask for it.

But then Maurice began to preach out more regularly as God opened house groups where people asked for his teaching. He took them through the Sermon on the Mount week by week which meant that he would be at each house group for a minimum of 18 months, sometimes even 2 years. I found this so hard as it meant that Maurice was out almost every night of the week on a permanent basis. I resented him his freedom, I resented the people he was teaching, I just resented being in this position especially as I had once been fully committed to the ministry with him at one time.

## **A better perspective**

It was when I had Tamar, my little girl, that God finally showed me the picture from a better perspective. When I was a young, rebellious girl, Maurice's father who had been the pastor of the church I attended gave me the job of being his church secretary. The times when I was supposed to be working for the church were ideal opportunities for him to talk with me. He taught me about God in such a way that my mind was reshaped. The mess in my mind was straightened out as biblical principles were poured in and I know I think as I do today because of the time this godly man put into me.

God reminded me of what I had received and then allowed me to see first hand the changes in the lives of the people Maurice had been ministering to in the house groups. God then challenged me to freely give. Seeing the picture from God's point of view helped me enormously and I realised what His plan was. I changed my attitude and He began to build me up as the thorns of resentment, anger and bitterness were pulled up one by one. I still have my responsibilities, but somehow God has managed to enable me to see the bigger picture. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness", and everything else will fall into place.