**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MARK-017**. **FOUR SOILS FOR ONE SEED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. And when He was alone, they that were about Him with the twelve asked of Him the parable. 11. And He said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: 12. That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. 13. And He said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables? 14. The sower soweth the word. 15. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. 16. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17. And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. 18. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, 19. And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. 20. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred."*

*Mark 4:10-20*

Dean Stanley and others have pointed out how the natural features of the land round the lake of Gennesaret are reflected in the parable of the sower. But we must go deeper than that to find its occasion. It was not because Jesus may have seen a sower in a field which had these three varieties of soil that He spoke, but because He saw the frivolous crowd gathered to hear His words. The sad, grave description of the threefold kinds of vainly-sown ground is the transcript of His clear and sorrowful insight into the real worth of the enthusiasm of the eager listeners on the beach. He was under no illusions about it; and, in this parable, He seeks to warn His disciples against expecting much from it, and to bring its subjects to a soberer estimate of what His word required of them. The full force and pathos of the parable is felt only when it is regarded as the expression of our Lord's keen consciousness of His wasted words. This passage falls into two parts--Christ's explanation of the reasons for His use of parables, and His interpretation of the parable itself.

Christ was the centre of three circles: the outermost consisting of the fluctuating masses of merely curious hearers; the second, of true but somewhat loosely attached disciples, whom Mark here calls they that were about Him; and the innermost, the twelve. The two latter appear, in our first verse, as asking further instruction as to the parable, a phrase which includes both parts of Christ's answer. The statement of His reason for the use of parables is startling. It sounds as if those who needed light most were to get least of it, and as if the parabolic form was deliberately adopted for the express purpose of hiding the truth. No wonder that men have shrunk from such a thought, and tried to soften down the terrible words. Inasmuch as a parable is the presentation of some spiritual truth under the guise of an incident belonging to the material sphere, it follows, from its very nature, that it may either reveal or hide the truth, and that it will do the former to susceptible, and the latter to unsusceptible, souls. The eye may either dwell upon the coloured glass or on the light that streams through it; and, as is the case with all revelations of spiritual realities through sensuous mediums, gross and earthly hearts will not rise above the medium, which to them, by their own fault, becomes a medium of obscuration, not of revelation. This double aspect belongs to all revelation, which is both a savour of life unto life and of death unto death. It is most conspicuous in the parable, which careless listeners may take for a mere story, and which those who feel and see more deeply will apprehend in its depth. These twofold effects are certain, and must therefore be embraced in Christ's purpose; for we cannot suppose that issues of His teaching escaped His foresight; and all must be regarded as part of His design. But may we not draw a distinction between design and desire? The primary purpose of all revelation is to reveal. If the only intention were to hide, silence would secure that, and the parable were needless. But if the twofold operation is intended, we can understand how mercy and righteous retribution both preside over the use of parables; how the thin veil hides that it may reveal, and how the very obscurity may draw some grosser souls to a longer gaze, and so may lead to a perception of the truth, which, in its purer form, they are neither worthy nor capable of receiving. No doubt, our Lord here announces a very solemn law, which runs through all the divine dealings, To him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath.

We turn to the exposition of the parable of the sower, or rather of the fourfold soils in which he sows the seed. A sentence at the beginning disposes of the personality of the sower, which in Mark's version does not refer exclusively to Christ, but includes all who carry the word to men. The likening of the wordto seed needs no explanation. The tiny, living nucleus of force, which is thrown broadcast, and must sink underground in order to grow, which does grow, and comes to light again in a form which fills the whole field where it is sown, and nourishes life as well as supplies material for another sowing, is the truest symbol of the truth in its working on the spirit. The threefold causes of failure are arranged in progressive order. At every stage of growth there are enemies. The first sowing never gets into the ground at all; the second grows a little, but its greenness soon withers; the third has a longer life, and a yet sadder failure, because a nearer approach to fertility. The types of character represented are unreceptive carelessness, emotional facility of acceptance, and earthly-mindedness, scotched, but not killed, by the word. The dangers which assault, but too successfully, the seed are the personal activity of Satan, opposition from without, and conflicting desires within. On all the soils the seed has been sown by hand; for drills are modern inventions; and sowing broadcast is the only right husbandry in Christ's field with Christ's seed. He is a poor workman, and an unfaithful one, who wants to pick his ground. Sow everywhere; Thou canst not tell which shall prosper, whether this or that. The character of the soil is not irrevocably fixed; but the trodden path may be broken up to softness, and the stony heart changed, and the soul filled with cares and lusts be cleared, and any soil may become good ground. So the seed is to be flung out broadcast; and prayer for seed and soil will often turn the weeping sower into the joyous reaper.

The seed sown on the trodden footpath running across the field never sinks below the surface. It lies there, and has no real contact, nor any chance of growth. It must be in, not on, the ground, if its mysterious power is to be put forth. A pebble is as likely to grow as a seed, if both lie side by side, on the surface. Is not this the description of a mournfully large proportion of hearers of God's truth? It never gets deeper than their ears, or, at the most, effects a shallow lodgment on the surface of their minds. So many feet pass along the path, and beat it into hardness, that the truth has no chance to take root. Habitual indifference to the gospel, masked by an utterly unmeaning and unreal acceptance of it, and by equally habitual decorous attendance on its preaching, is the condition of a dreadfully large proportion of church-goers. Their very familiarity with the truth robs it of all penetrating power. They know all about it, as they suppose; and so they listen to it as they would to the clank of a mill-wheel to which they were accustomed, missing its noise if it stops, and liking to be sent to sleep by its hum. Familiar truth often lies bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, beside exploded errors.

And what comes of this idle hearing, without acceptance or obedience? Truth which is common, and which a man supposes himself to believe, without having ever reflected on it, or let it influence conduct, is sure to die out. If we do not turn our beliefs into practice they will not long be our beliefs. Neglected impressions fade; the seed is only safe when it is buried. There are flocks of hungry, sharp-eyed, quick-flying thieves ready to pounce down on every exposed grain. So Mark uses here again his favourite straightwayto express the swift disappearance of the seed. As soon as the preacher's voice is silent, or the book closed, the words are forgotten. The impression of a gliding keel on a smooth lake is not more evanescent.

The distinct reference to Satan as the agent in removing the seed is not to be passed by lightly. Christ's words about demons have been emptied of meaning by the allegation that He was only accommodating Himself to the superstition of the times, but no explanation of that sort will do in this case. He surely commits Himself here to the assertion of the existence and agency of Satan; and surely those who profess to receive His words as the truth ought not to make light of them, in reference to so solemn and awe-inspiring a revelation.

The seed gets rather farther on the road to fruit in the second case. A thin surface of mould above a shelf of rock is like a forcing-house in hot countries. The stone keeps the heat and stimulates growth. The very thing that prevents deep rooting facilitates rapid shooting. The green spikelets will be above ground there long before they show in deeper soil. There would be many such hearers in the very great multitudeon the shore, who were attracted, they scarcely knew why, and were the more enthusiastic the less they understood the real scope of Christ's teaching. The disciple who pressed forward with his excited and unasked Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest! was one of such--well-meaning, perfectly sincere, warmly affected, and completely unreliable. Lightly come is lightly go. When such people forsake their fervent purposes, and turn their backs on what they have been so eagerly pursuing, they are quite consistent; for they are obeying the uppermost impulse in both cases, and, as they were easily drawn to follow without consideration, they are easily driven back with as little. The first taste of supposed good secured their giddy-pated adhesion; the first taste of trouble ensures their desertion. They are the same men acting in the same fashion at both times. Two things are marked by our Lord as suspicious in such easily won discipleship--its suddenness and its joyfulness. Feelings which are so easily stirred are superficial. A puff of wind sets a shallow pond in wavelets. Quick maturity means brief life and swift decay, as every revivalshows. The more earnestly we believe in the possibility of sudden conversions, the more we should remember this warning, and make sure that, if they are sudden, they shall be thorough, which they may be. The swiftness is not so suspicious if it be not accompanied with the other doubtful characteristic--namely, immediate joy. Joy is the result of true acceptance of the gospel; but not the first result. Without consciousness of sin and apprehension of judgment there is no conversion. We lay down no rules as to depth or duration of the godly sorrowwhich precedes all well-grounded joy in the Lord; but the Christianity which has taken a flying leap over the valley of humiliation will scarcely reach a firm standing on the rock. He who straightway with joyreceives the word, will straightway, with equal precipitation, cast it away when the difficulties and oppositions which meet all true discipleship begin to develop themselves. Fair-weather crews will desert when storms begin to blow.

The third sort of soil brings things still farther on before failure comes. The seed is not only covered and germinating, but has actually begun to be fruitful. The thorns are supposed to have been cut down, but their roots have been left, and they grow faster than the wheat. They take the goodnessout of the ground, and block out sun and air; and so the stalks, which promised well, begin to get pale and droop, and the half-formed ear comes to nothing, or, as the other version of the parable has it, brings forth no fruit to perfection. There are two crops fighting for the upper hand on the one ground, and the earlier possessor wins. The struggle for existenceends with the survival of the fittest; that is, of the worst, to which the natural bent of the desires and inclinations of the unrenewed man is more congenial. The cares of this worldand the deceitfulness of richesare but two sides of one thing. The poor man has cares; the rich man has the illusions of his wealth. Both men agree in thinking that this world's good is most desirable. The one is anxious because he has not enough of it, or fears to lose what he has; the other man is full of foolish confidence because he has much. Eager desires after creatural good are common to both; and, what with the anxiety lest they lose, and the self-satisfaction because they have, and the mouths watering for the world's good, there is no force of will, nor warmth of love, nor clearness of vision, left for better things. That is the history of the fall of many a professing Christian, who never apostatises, and keeps up a reputable appearance of godliness to the end; but the old worldliness, which was cut down for a while, has sprung again in his heart, and, by slow degrees, the word is choked--a most expressive picture of the silent, gradual dying-out of its power for want of sun and air--and heor itbecometh unfruitful, relapsing from a previous condition of fruit-bearing into sterility. No heart can mature two crops. We must choose between God and Mammon--between the word and the world.

There is nothing fixed or necessary in the faults of these three classes, and they are not so much the characteristics of separate types of men as evils common to all hearers, against which all have to guard. They depend upon the will and affections much more than on anything in temperament fixed and not to be got rid of. So there is no reason why any one of the three should not become good soil: and it is to be noted that the characteristic of that soil is simply that it receives and grows the seed. Any heart that will, can do that; and that is all that is needed. But to do it, there will have to be diligent care, lest we fall into any of the evils pointed at in the preceding parts of the parable, which are ever waiting to entrap us. The true acceptingof the word requires that we shall not let it lie on the surface of our minds, as in the case of the first; nor be satisfied with its penetrating a little deeper and striking root in our emotions, like the second, of whom it is said with such profound truth, that they have no root in themselves, their roots being only in the superficial part of their being, and never going down to the true central self; nor let competing desires grow up unchecked, like the third; but cherish the word of the truth of the gospelin our deepest hearts, guard it against foes, let it rule there, and mould all our conduct in conformity with its blessed principles. The true Christian is he who can truly say, Thy word have I hid in mine heart. If we do, we shall be fruitful, because it will bear fruit in us. No man is obliged, by temperament or circumstances, to be wayside, or stony, or thornyground. Wherever a heart opens to receive the gospel, and keeps it fast, there the increase will be realised--not in equal measure in all, but in each according to faithfulness and diligence. Mark arranges the various yields in ascending scale, as if to teach our hopes and aims a growing largeness, while Matthew orders them in the opposite fashion, as if to teach that, while the hundredfold, which is possible for all, is best, the smaller yield is accepted by the great Lord of the harvest, who Himself not only sows the seed, but gives it its vitality, blesses its springing, and rejoices to gather the wheat into His barn.