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

**MATTHEW-079**. **FOUR SOWINGS AND ONE RIPENING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. 2. And great multitudes were gathered together unto Him, so that He went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. 8. And He spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; 4. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: 6. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: 6. And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: 8. But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. 9. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."*

*Matthew 13:1-9*

The seven parables of the kingdom, in this chapter, are not to be regarded as grouped together by Matthew. They were spoken consecutively, as is obvious from the notes of time in verses 36 and 53. They are a great whole, setting forth the mystery of the kingdomin its method of establishment, its corruption, its outward and inward growth, the conditions of entrance into it, and its final purification. The sacred number seven, impressed upon them, is the token of completeness. They fall into two parts: four of them being spoken to the multitudes from the boat, and presenting the more obvious aspects of the development of the kingdom; three being addressed to the disciples in the house, and setting forth truths about it more fitted for them.

The first parable, which concerns us now, has been generally called the Parable of the Sower, but he is not the prominent figure. The subject is much rather the soils; and the intention is, not so much to declare anything about him, as to explain to the people, who were looking for the kingdom to be set up by outward means, irrespective of men's dispositions, that the way of establishing it was by teaching which needed receptive spirits. The parable is both history and prophecy. It tells Christ's own experience, and it foretells His servants'. He is the great Sower, who has come forthfrom the Father. His present errand is not to burn up thorns or to punish the husbandmen, but to scatter on all hearts the living seed, which is here interpreted, in accordance with the dominant idea of this Gospel, as being the word of the kingdom(ver. 19). All who follow Him, and make His truth known, are sowers in their turn, and have to look for the same issue of their work. The figure is common to all languages. Truth, whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual, is seminal, and, deposited in the heart, understanding, or conscience, grows. It has a mysterious vitality, and its issue is not a manufacture, but a fruit. If all teachers, especially religious teachers, would remember that, perhaps there would be fewer failures, and a good deal of their work would be modified. We have here four sowings and one ripening--a sad proportion! We are not told that the quantity of seed was in each case the same. Rather we may suppose that much less fell on the wayside, and on the rocky soil, and among the thorns, than on the good ground. So we cannot say that seventy-five per cent, of it was wasted; but, in any case, the proportion of failure is tragically large. This Sower was under no illusion as to the result of His work.

It is folly to sow on the hard footpath, or the rocky ground, or among thorns; but Christ and His servants have to do that, in endless hope that these unreceptive hearts may become good soil. One lesson of the parable is, Scatter the seed everywhere, on the most unlikely places.

**I. Our Lord begins with the case in which the seed remains quite outside the soil, or, without metaphor, in which the word finds absolutely no entrance into the heart or mind.**

A beaten path runs by the end, or perhaps through the middle, of the cornfield. It is of exactly the same soil as the rest, but many passengers have trodden it hard, and the very foot of the sower, as he comes and goes in his work, has helped. Some of the seed, sown broadcast, of course falls there, and lies where it falls, having no power to penetrate the hard surface. As in our own English cornfields, a flock of bold, hungry birds watch the sower; and, as soon as his back is turned, they are down with a swift-winged swoop, and away goes the exposed grain. So there is an end of it; and the path is as bare as ever, five minutes after it has been strewed with seeds.

The explanation is too plain to be mistaken, but we may briefly touch its main features. Notice, then, that our Lord begins with the case in which there is least contact between His word and the soul, and that, as the contact is least in degree, so it is shortest in duration. A minute or two finishes it. Notice especially that the path has been made hard by external pressure. It is not rock, but soil like the other parts of the field. It represents the case of men whose insensibility to the word is caused by outward things having made a thoroughfare of their natures, and trodden them into incapacity to receive the message of Christ's love. The heavy baggage-wagons of commerce, the light cars of pleasure, merry dancers, and sad funeral processions, have all used that way, and each footfall has beaten the once loose soil a little firmer. We are made insensitive to the gospel by the effect of innocent and necessary things, unless we take care to plough up the path along which they travel, and to keep our spirits susceptible by a distinct effort. How many hearers of every teacher are there, who never take in his words at all, simply because they are so completely preoccupied!

Notice what becomes of the seed that lies thus bare. Immediately, says Mark, Satan cometh. His agents are these light-winged thoughts that flutter round the hearer as soon as the sermon or the lesson is over. Talk of the weather, criticism of the congregation, or of the sower's attitude as he flung the seed, or politics, or business, drive away the remembrance of even the text, before many of our hearers are out of sight of the church. Then the whirl of traffic begins again, and the path is soon beaten a little harder. If the seed had got ever so little way into the ground, the sharp beaks of the thieves would not have carried it off so easily. Impressions so slight as Christ's word makes on busy men are quickly rubbed out. But if the seed sown vanishes thus swiftly, the fault is not in it, but in ourselves. Satan may seek to snatch it away, but we can hinder him.

Our Lord uses a singular expression, This is he that was sown by the way side, which appears to identify the man with the seed rather than with the soil. It has been suggested by some commentators that this expression is to be regarded as conveying the truth that the seed sown in the heart and growing up there becomes the life-spring of the individual, and that therefore we may speak of him or of it as bearing the fruit. But this explanation will not avail for the case where there is no entrance of the word into the heart, and so no new birth by the word. More probably we are to regard the expression simply as a conversational shorthand form of speech, not strictly accurate, but quite intelligible.

**II. The next variety of soil differs from the preceding in having its hindrance deep seated.**

Many a hillside in Galilee--as in Scotland or New England--would show a thin surface of soil over rock, like skin stretched tightly on a bone. No roots could get through the rock nor find nourishment in it; while the very shallowness of earth and the heat of the underlying stone would accelerate growth. Such premature and feeble shoots perish as quickly as they spring up; the fierce Eastern sun makes a speedy end of them, and a few days sees their springing and withering. It is a case of lightly come, lightly go. Quick-sprouting herbs are soon-dying herbs. A shallow pond is up in waves under a breeze which raises no sea on the Atlantic, and it is calm again in a few minutes. Readily stirred emotion is transient. Brushwood catches fire easily, and burns itself out quickly. Coal takes longer to kindle, and is harder to put out.

The persons meant are those of excitable temperament, whose feelings lie on the surface, and can be got at without first passing through the understanding or the conscience. Such people are easily played on by the epidemic influence of any prevalent enthusiasm or emotion, as every revival of religion shows. Their very joyin hearing the word is suspicious; for a true reception of it seldom begins with joy, but rather with the sorrow which worketh repentance not to be repented of. Their immediate reception of it is suspicious, for it suggests that there has been no time to consult the understanding or to form a deliberate purpose; stable resolutions are slowly formed. It is the sunny side of religion which, has attracted them. They know nothing of its difficulties and depths. Hence, as soon as they find out the realities of the course which they have embraced so lightly, they desert, like John Mark running away as soon as home comforts at Cyprus were left behind. The Christian life means self-denial, toil, hard resistance to many fascinations. It means sweat and blood, or it means nothing. Whether there be persecutionor no, there will be affliction, because of the word, and all the joyful emotion will ooze out at the man's finger-ends. The same superficial excitability which determined his swift reception of the word will determine his hasty casting of it aside, and immediately he stumbles. All his acts will be done in a hurry, and none of his moods will last. Feeling is in its place down in the engine-room, but it makes a poor pilot. Very significant is that phrase, No root in himself. His roots are in the accidents of the moment. His religion has never really struck root in him, but only in the superficial layer of him. His conscience, will, understanding, are unpenetrated by its fibres. So it is easily pulled up, as well as soon withered.

There is another profound truth in this picture. The hard, impenetrable rock lies right under the thin skin of soil. The nature which is over-emotional on its surface is utterly hard at its core. The most heartless people are those whose feelings are always ready to gush; the most unimpressible are those who are most easily brought to a certain degree of emotion by the sound of the word. This class is an advance on the former, in that there has been a real contact with the word, which has lain longer in their hearts, and has had some growth. We may regard it as either better or worse than the former, according as we consider that it is better to accept and feel than not to accept at all, or that it is worse to have in some measure possessed and felt than not to have received the word of the kingdom.

**III. In one part of the field was a patch where the soil was neither rammed solid, as on the footpath, nor thin, as where the rock cropped out, but where there had been a tangle of thorns, which grow luxuriantly in Palestine.**

These had been cut down, but not stubbed up, as is plain from the very fact that the seed reached the ground, as also from the description of them as springing up. The two growths advance together. In this case, the seed has a longer life than in the former. It roots and grows, and even, according to the other evangelist's version, fruits, though it does not mature its fruit. There is no question of falling awayhere. Only the hardier growth, which had the advantage of previous possession, and which pushes up its shoots above ground all round the more tender plant, gets the start of it, and smothers its green blades, overtopping it, and keeping it from sun and air, as well as drawing to itself the nourishment from the soil. The main point here is simultaneousness of the two growths. This man is, as James calls him, a double-minded man. He is trying to grow both corn and thorn on the same soil. He has some religion, but not enough to make thorough work of it. He is endeavouring to ride on two horses at once. Religion says either--or; he is trying both--and. The human heart has only a limited amount of love and trust to give, and Christ must have it all. It has enough for one--that is, for Him; but not enough for two,--that is, for Him and the world. This man's religion has not been powerful enough to grub up the roots of the thorns. They were cut down when the seed was sown, for a little while, at the beginning of his course; the new life in him seemed to conquer, but the roots of the old lay hid, and, in due time, showed again above ground. Ill weeds grow apace; and these, as is their nature, grow faster than the good seed. So the only thing to do is to get them out of the ground to the last fibre.

Christ specifies what He deems thorns. We can all understand care being so called; but riches? Yes, they too have sharp prickles, as anybody will find who stuffs a pillow with them. But our Lord chooses His words to point the lesson that not outward things, but our attitude to them, make the barrenness of this soil. It is not this world, but the care of this world, not riches, but the deceitfulness of riches, that choke the word. These two seem opposites, but they are really the same thing on two opposite sides. The man who is burdened with the cares of poverty, and the man who is deceived by the false promises of wealth, are really the same man. The one is the other turned inside out. We make the world our god, whether we worship it by saying, I am desolate without thee, or by fancying that we are secure with it. Note that the issue in this case is--unfruitfulness. The man may, and I suppose usually does, keep up a profession of Christianity all his life. He very likely does not know that the seed is choked, and that he has become unfruitful. But he is a stunted, useless Christian, with all the sap and nourishment of his soul given to his worldly position, and his religion is a poor pining growth, with blanched leaves and abortive fruit. How much of Christ's field is filled with plants of that sort!

**IV. The parable tells us nothing about the comparative acreage of the path and the rocky and thorny soils on the one hand, and of the fertile soil on the other.**

It is not meant to teach the proportion of success to failure, but to exhibit the fact that the reception of the word depends on men's dispositions. The good soil has none of the faults of the rest of the field. It is loose, and thus unlike the path; deep, and thus unlike the rocky bit; clean, and thus unlike the thorn brake. The interpretation given of it by our Lord seems at first sight incomplete. It is all summed up in one word, understandeth. Then, did not the second and third classes, at all events, understand? They received the word, and it had some growth in them. The distinction between them and the good-soil hearer is surely of a moral nature, rather than of so purely intellectual a kind as understandingsuggests. Hence, Luke's keep fast in an honest and good heartmay seem a more adequate statement. But Biblical usage does not regard understandingas a purely intellectual process, but rather as the action of the whole moral and spiritual nature. It knows nothing of dividing a man up into water-tight compartments, one of which may be full of evil, and the other clean and receptive of good. According to it, we understandreligious truth by our hearts and moral nature in conjunction with the dry light of intellect. So the word here is used in a pregnant sense, and includes the grasp of the truth with the whole being, the complete reception of the word of the kingdom not merely into the intellect, but into the central self which is the undivided fountain from which flow the issues of life, whether these be called intellect, or affection, or conscience, or will. Only he who has thus become one with the word, and housed it deep in his inmost soul, understandsit, in the sense in which our Lord here uses that expression. Thy word have I hid in mine heartexactly corresponds to the understandingwhich is here given as the distinctive mark of the good soil.

The result of that reception into the depths of the spirit is that he verily beareth fruit. The man who receives the word is identified with the plant that springs from the seed which he receives. The life of a Christian is the result of the growth in him of a supernatural seed. He bears fruit, yet the fruit comes not from him, but from the seed sown. I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. Fruitfulness is the aim of the sower, and the test of the reception of the seed. If there is not fruit, manifestly there has been no real understanding of the word. A touchstone, that, which will produce surprising results in detecting spurious Christianity, if it be honestly applied!

There is variety in the degree of fruitfulness, according to the goodness of the soil; that is to say, according to the thoroughness and depth of the reception of the word. The great Husbandman does not demand uniform fertility. He is glad when He gets an hundredfold, but He accepts sixty, and does not refuse thirty, only He arranges them in descending order, as if He would fain have the highest rate from all the plants, and, not without disappointment, gradually stretches His merciful allowance to take in even the lowest. He will accept the scantiest fruitage, and will lovingly purgethe branch that it may bring forth more fruit.

No parable teaches everything. Paths, rocks, and thorns cannot change. But men can plough up the trodden ways, and blast away the rock, and root out the thorns, and, with God's help, can open the door of their hearts, that the Sower and His seed may enter in. We are responsible for the nature of the soil, else His warning were vain, Take heed, therefore, how ye hear.