

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE VIII. 4-15.

4 And when much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable:	might not see, and hearing they might not understand.
5 A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.	11 Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.
6 And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture.	12 Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.
7 And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.	13 They on the rock <i>are</i> they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.
8 And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.	14 And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of <i>this</i> life, and bring no fruit to perfection.
9 And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be?	15 But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep <i>it</i> , and bring forth fruit with patience.
10 And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they	

THE parable of the sower, contained in these verses, is reported more frequently than any parable in the Bible. It is a parable of universal application. The things it relates are continually going on in every congregation to which the Gospel is preached. The four kinds of hearts it describes are to be found in every assembly which hears the word. These circumstances should make us always read the parable with a deep sense of its importance. We should say to ourselves, as we read it: "This concerns me. My heart is to be seen in this parable. I, too, am here."

The passage itself requires little explanation. In fact, the meaning of the whole picture is so fully explained by our Lord Jesus Christ, that no exposition of man can throw much additional light on it. The parable is pre-eminently a parable of caution, and caution about a most important subject,—the way of hearing the word of God. It was meant to be a warning to the apostles, not to expect too much from hearers. It was meant to be a warning to all ministers of the Gospel, not to look for too great results from sermons. It was meant, not least, to be a warning to hearers, to take heed how they hear. Preaching is an ordinance of which the value can never be overrated in the Church of Christ. But it should never be forgotten, that there must not only be good preaching, but good hearing.

The first caution that we learn from the parable of the sower, is *to beware of the devil when we hear the word*. Our Lord tells us that the hearts of some hearers are like "the wayside." The seed of the Gospel is plucked away from them by the devil almost as soon as it is sown. It does not sink down into their consciences. It does not make the least impression on their minds.

The devil, no doubt, is everywhere. That malicious spirit is unwearied in

his efforts to do us harm. He is ever watching for our halting, and seeking occasion to destroy our souls. But nowhere perhaps is the devil so active as in a congregation of Gospel-hearers. Nowhere does he labour so hard to stop the progress of that which is good, and to prevent men and women being saved. From him come wandering thoughts and roving imaginations,—listless minds and dull memories,—sleepy eyes and fidgety nerves,—weary ears and distracted attention. In all these things Satan has a great hand. People wonder where they come from, and marvel how it is that they find sermons so dull, and remember them so badly! They forget the parable of the sower. They forget the devil.

Let us take heed that we are not way-side hearers. Let us beware of the devil. We shall always find him at Church. He never stays away from public ordinances. Let us remember this, and be upon our guard. Heat, and cold, and draughts, and damp, and wet, and rain, and snow, are often dreaded by Church-goers, and alleged as reasons for not going to Church. But there is one enemy whom they ought to fear more than all these things together. That enemy is Satan.

The second caution that we learn from the parable of the sower, is to *beware of resting on mere temporary impressions when we have heard the word*. Our Lord tells us that the hearts of some hearers are like rocky ground. The seed of the word springs up immediately, as soon as they hear it, and bears a crop of joyful impressions, and pleasurable emotions. But these impressions, unhappily, are only on the surface. There is no deep and abiding work done in their souls. And hence, so soon as the scorching heat of temptation or persecution begins to be felt, the little bit of religion which they seemed to have attained, withers and vanishes away.

Feelings, no doubt, fill a most important office in our personal Christianity. Without them there can be no saving religion. Hope, and joy, and peace, and confidence, and resignation, and love, and fear, are things which must be felt, if they really exist. But it must never be forgotten that there are religious affections, which are spurious and false, and spring from nothing better than animal excitement. It is quite possible to feel great pleasure, or deep alarm, under the preaching of the Gospel, and yet to be utterly destitute of the grace of God. The tears of some hearers of sermons, and the extravagant delight of others, are no certain marks of conversion. We may be warm admirers of favourite preachers, and yet remain nothing better than stony-ground hearers. Nothing should content us but a deep, humbling, self-mortifying work of the Holy Ghost, and a heart-union with Christ.

The third caution contained in the parable of the sower is *to beware of the cares of this world*. Our Lord tells us that the hearts of many hearers of the word are like thorny ground. The seed of the word, when sown upon them, is choked by the multitude of other things, by which their affections

are occupied. They have no objection to the doctrines and requirements of the Gospel. They even wish to believe and obey them. But they allow the things of earth to get such hold upon their minds, that they leave no room for the word of God to do its work. And hence it follows that however many sermons they hear, they seem nothing bettered by them. A weekly process of truth-stifling goes on within. They bring no fruit to perfection.

The things of this life form one of the greatest dangers which beset a Christian's path. The money, the pleasures, the daily business of the world, are so many traps to catch souls. Thousands of things, which in themselves are innocent, become, when followed to excess, little better than soul-poisons, and helps to hell. Open sin is not the only thing that ruins souls. In the midst of our families, and in the pursuit of our lawful callings, we have need to be on our guard. Except we watch and pray, these temporal things may rob us of heaven, and smother every sermon we hear. We may live and die thorny-ground hearers.

The last caution contained in the parable of the sower, is to *beware of being content with any religion which does not bear fruit in our lives*. Our Lord tells us that the hearts of those who hear the word aright, are like good ground. The seed of the Gospel sinks down deeply into their wills, and produces practical results in their faith and practice. They not only hear with pleasure, but act with decision. They repent. They believe. They obey.

For ever let us bear in mind that this is the only religion that saves souls. Outward profession of Christianity, and the formal use of Church ordinances and sacraments, never yet gave man a good hope in life, or peace in death, or rest in the world beyond the grave. There must be fruits of the Spirit in our hearts and lives, or else the Gospel is preached to us in vain. Those only who bear such fruits, shall be found at Christ's right hand in the day of His appearing.

Let us leave the parable with a deep sense of the danger and responsibility of all hearers of the Gospel. There are four ways in which we may hear, and of these four only one is right.—There are three kinds of hearers whose souls are in imminent peril. How many of these three kinds are to be found in every congregation!—There is only one class of hearers which is right in the sight of God. And what are we? Do we belong to that one?

Finally, let us leave the parable with a solemn recollection of the duty of every faithful preacher to divide his congregation, and give to each class his portion. The clergyman who ascends his pulpit every Sunday, and addresses his congregation as if he thought everyone was going to heaven, is surely not doing his duty to God or man. His preaching is flatly contradictory to the parable of the sower.

4.—[*When much people were gathered, &c.*] Let us note, in this expression, a strong indirect evidence of our Lord's faithfulness and honesty as a public teacher. So far was He from flattering men, and speaking smooth things to procure popularity, that He speaks one of the most heart-searching and conscience-pricking of His parables, when the crowd of hearers was greatest.

Faithful ministers should always denounce sin most plainly, when their churches are most full, and their congregations most large. Then is the time to "cry aloud and spare not," and show people their sins. It is a snare to some ministers, to flatter full congregations and scold thin ones. Such dealing is very unlike that of our Lord.

5.—[*A sower went out to sow.*] It is highly probable that in this parable, our Lord describes something which was actually going on within sight. Many of His parables, we must remember, were spoken in the open air, and the images, in many cases, were borrowed from subjects before his eyes. Hence His lessons were seen as well as heard.

6.—[*Upon a rock.*] The rocky soil of many parts of Palestine makes the circumstances here mentioned far more likely than it appears to us, who live in a country like England.

7.—[*Among thorns.*] The precise nature of the plant or weed here called "thorns," we cannot exactly determine. It is the same word that is used in describing the "crown of thorns," plaited by the soldiers in the day of the crucifixion, and put in mockery on our Lord's head. Whether those thorns were the prickly thorns or briars, with which we are all familiar, has been much doubted, and remains an undecided question.

The description of the growth of the "thorns" here mentioned, would rather lead us to suppose that they were some plant or weed which grew up out of the soil together with the seed corn.

8.—[*He that hath ears to hear let him hear.*] Let it be noted, that this expression is specially recorded by all the three evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in their report of this parable. It seems to point out the special importance of the parable.

10.—[*Seeing they might not see.*] The expression used in this verse, is evidently quoted from the words in Isaiah vi. 9. It is worthy of observation that hardly any passage in the Old Testament is so frequently quoted in the New Testament as this. It is found six times, Matt. xiii. 14, 15; Mark iv. 2; John xii. 40; Acts xxviii. 26; Rom. xi. 8, and in this place. On each occasion it is applied to the same subject, the hardened and unbelieving state of mind, in which the Jews were.

11.—[*The seed is the word of God.*] Let us observe here, that the word "is" means, "signifies," or "represents," according to the Hebrew manner of speaking. It is important to remember this, because it throws light on the well-known words used by our Lord at the appointment of the Lord's supper, "This is my body. This is my blood."

12.—[*Then cometh the devil.*] This is one of those expressions which bring out strongly the existence, personality, and agency of the devil. There is an active, living agent, distinct from man, operating powerfully in man's heart, and to man's injury.

13.—[*Fall away.*] The word so translated, is, in the Greek language, the root of our well-known word "apostasy."

14.—[*Go forth.*] The meaning of this expression has been explained in various ways. Some think that it simply means "going away from the hearing of the word."—Others think it means, "as they pass through life,—in their progress through life," and compare it with Luke i. 8., where Zacharias and Elisabeth are said, "to walk in the ordinances of the Lord." The Greek word there is the same that is used here.

[*Bring...fruit to perfection.*] This expression is rendered in the Greek by a single word, which is found nowhere else in the New Testament.

15.—[*Honest and good heart.*] We must carefully remember that this expression does not imply that any one's heart is naturally "good," or ever can become so, without the grace of God. The fairest sense of the words is, "an unprejudiced heart, willing to be taught," such as was peculiarly lacking among the Jews in our Lord's time. The Bereans are an illustration of this expression. Acts xvii. 9.

[*Keep it.*] The word so translated. is not the word sometimes translated "observe." It rather signifies "hold fast," so as not to let go, and is used in this sense in 1 Thess. v. 21, Heb. iii. 6, and x. 23.

[*Patience.*] The word so translated is sometimes used in an active sense, and sometimes in a passive. Here it is probably active, like Rom. ii. 7, and 2 Cor. i. 6.