

THE PARABLES.



PARABLE I.

THE SOWER.

MATT. xiii. 3-8, and 18-23; MARK iv. 3-8, and 14-20; LUKE viii. 5-8 and 11-15.

ON the relation in which the seven parables recorded in the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew, of which this of the Sower is the first, stand to one another, there will be need to say something. But this will best follow after they have all received their separate treatment; and till then, therefore, I shall defer it.

It is the evident intention of the Evangelist to present these parables as the first which the Lord spoke, this of the Sower introducing a manner of teaching which He had not hitherto employed. As much is indicated in the question of the disciples, 'Why speakest thou unto them in parables?' (ver. 10), and in our Lord's answer (ver. 11-17), in which He justifies his use of this method of teaching, and declares his purpose in adopting it; it is involved no less in his treatment of this parable as the fundamental one, on the right understanding of which will depend their comprehension of all which are to follow: '*Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?*' (Mark iv. 13). And as this was the first occasion on which He brought forth these new things out of his treasure (see ver. 22), so was it the occasion

on which He brought them forth with the largest hand. We have nowhere else in the Gospels so rich a group of parables assembled together, so many and so costly pearls strung upon a single thread.

It will not be lost labour to set before ourselves at the outset as vividly as we can, what the aspects of that outward nature were, with which our Lord and the multitudes were surrounded, as He uttered, and they listened to, these divine words. 'Jesus went out of the house,' probably at Capernaum, the city where He commonly dwelt after his open ministry began (Matt. iv. 13), 'his own city' (Matt. ix. 1), 'which is upon the sea-coast,'¹ and, going out, He 'sat by the sea side,' that is, by the lake of Genesaret, the scene of so many incidents in his ministry. This lake, called in the Old Testament 'the sea of Chinnereth' (Num. xxxiv. 11; Josh. xii. 3; xiii. 27), from a town so named which stood near its shore (Josh. xix. 35), 'the water of Gennesar' (1 Macc. xi. 67), now Bahr Tabaria, goes by many names in the Gospels. It is simply 'the sea' (Matt. iv. 15; Mark iv. 1), or 'the sea of Galilee' (Matt. xv. 29; John vi. 1); or, as invariably in St. Luke, either 'the lake' (viii. 22), or 'the lake of Genesaret' (v. 1); sometimes, but this only in St. John, 'the sea of Tiberias,' from the great heathen city of Tiberias on its shores (vi. 1; xxi. 1); being indeed no more than an inland sheet of water, of moderate extent, some sixteen of our miles in length, and not more than six in breadth. But it might well claim regard for its beauty, if not for its extent. The Jewish writers would have it that it was beloved of God above all the waters of Canaan; and indeed, almost all ancient authors who have mentioned it speak in glowing terms of the beauty and rich fertility of its banks. Hence, as some say, its name of Genesaret, or 'the garden of riches,'² but the derivation is insecure. And even now, when the land is crushed under the rod of Turkish misrule, many traces of its

¹ Τὴν παραθαλασσίαν (Matt. iv. 13), probably so called to distinguish it from another Capernaum on the brook Kishon.

² Jerome (*De Nomin. Heb.*) makes Gennesar = hortus principum.

former beauty remain, many evidences of the fertility which its shores will again assume in the day, which assuredly cannot be very far off, when that rod shall oppress no more. It is true that the olive-gardens and vineyards, which once crowned the high and romantic hills bounding it on the east and the west, have disappeared; but the citron, the orange, and the date-tree are still found there in rich abundance; and in the higher regions the products of a more temperate zone meet together with these; while, lower down, its banks are still covered with aromatic shrubs, and its waters, as of old, are still sweet and wholesome to drink, and always cool, clear, and transparent to the very bottom, and as gently breaking on the fine white sand with which its shores are strewn as they did when the feet of the Son of God trod those sands, or walked upon those waters.¹ On the edge of this beautiful lake the multitude were assembled; the place was convenient; for, 'whilst the lake is almost completely surrounded by mountains, those mountains never come down into the water; but always leave a beach of greater or lesser extent along the water's edge.' Their numbers were such, that probably, as on another day (Luke v. 1), they pressed upon the Lord, so that He found it convenient to enter into a ship;

¹ Josephus (*Bell. Jud.* iii. 10. 7) rises into high poetical animation in describing its attractions; and in Röhr's *Palästina* (termed by Goethe 'a glorious book'), p. 67, there is a very spirited description of this lake and the neighbouring country; see also Lightfoot, *Chorograph. Cent.* lxx. 79; and Meuschen, *Nov. Test. ex Talm. illust.* p. 151. Robinson (*Bibl. Researches*, vol. iii. p. 253) is less enthusiastic in his praise. He speaks, indeed, of the lake as a 'beautiful sheet of limpid water in a deeply depressed basin;' but the form of the hills, 'regular and almost unbroken heights' (p. 312), was to his eye 'rounded and tame,' and, as it was the middle summer when his visit was made, the verdure of the spring had already disappeared, and he complains of a nakedness in the general aspect of the scenery. But the account which transcends all others in the picturesque accuracy of its details, which leaves nothing to be desired by the reader, except that he might himself behold this, 'the most sacred sheet of water which this earth contains,' is to be found in Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, pp. 361-378. Compare also Keim, *Jesu von Nazara*, vol. i. p. 598 sqq., who on all the mere *externals* of the Gospel history is admirable.

and putting off a little from the shore, He taught them from it, speaking 'many things unto them in parables.'

First in order is the parable of the Sower; common to the three synoptic Gospels; being with those of the Wicked Husbandmen and the Mustard Seed the only ones contained in all three. It rests, as so many others, on one of the common familiar doings of daily life. Christ, lifting up his eyes, may have seen at no great distance a husbandman scattering his seed in the furrows, may have taken in, indeed, the whole scenery of the parable.¹ As it belongs to the essentially popular nature of the Gospels, that parables should be found in them rather than in the Epistles, where indeed they never appear, so it belongs to the popular character of the parable, that it should thus rest upon the familiar doings of common life, the matters which occupy

' the talk

Man holds with week-day man in the hourly walk
Of the world's business ;'

while the Lord, using these to set forth eternal and spiritual truths, does at the same time ennoble them, showing them continually to reveal and set forth the deepest mysteries of

¹ Dean Stanley, describing the shores of the lake, shows us how easily this may have been: 'A slight recess in the hillside, close upon the plain, disclosed at once, in detail, and with a conjunction which I remember nowhere else in Palestine, every feature of the great parable. There was the undulating corn-field descending to the water's edge. There was the trodden pathway running through the midst of it, with no fence or hedge to prevent the seed from falling here and there on either side of it, or upon it,—itself hard with the constant tramp of horse and mule and human feet. There was the "good" rich soil, which distinguishes the whole of that plain and its neighbourhood from the bare hills elsewhere, descending into the lake, and which, where there is no interruption, produces one vast mass of corn. There was the rocky ground of the hillside protruding here and there through the corn-fields, as elsewhere through the grassy slopes. There were the large bushes of thorn—the *nabk*, that kind of which tradition says that the crown of thorns was woven—springing up, like the fruit-trees of the more inland parts, in the very midst of the waving wheat.' Compare Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, vol. i. p. 115.

his kingdom. 'Behold, a sower went forth to sow'—what a dignity and significance have these few words, used as the Lord uses them here, given in all after-times to the toils of the husbandman in the furrow !

The comparison of the relations between the teacher and the taught to those between the sower and the soil, the truth communicated being the seed sown, rests on analogies between the worlds of nature and of spirit so true and so profound, that we must not wonder to find it of frequent recurrence; and this, not merely in Scripture (1 Pet. i. 23; 1 John iii. 9), but in the writings of all wiser heathens¹ who have realized at all what teaching means, and what manner of influence the spirit of one man may exercise on the spirits of his fellows. While all words, even of men, which are better than mere breath, are as seeds, able to take root in their minds and hearts who hear them, have germs in them which only unfold by degrees; ² how eminently must this be true of the words of God, and of these uttered by Him who was Himself the seminal Word which He communicated.³ Best right of all to the title of seed has that word, which exercising

¹ Grotius is rich in illustrative passages from Greek and Latin writers; he or others have adduced such from Aristotle, Cicero (*Tusc.* ii. 5), Plutarch, Quintilian, Philo, and many more; but it would not be worth while merely to repeat their quotations. I do not observe this one from Seneca (*Ep.* 73): God comes unto men, or rather, more closely still, comes into them. Seeds are scattered in men's bodies which, if received by a good husbandman, shoot up in likeness to their stock and resemble in their growth the things from which they sprang; but if the husbandman is bad, he is as deadly to them as a barren and marshy soil, and fosters refuse instead of fruits.

² Thus Shakspeare, of a man of thoughtful wisdom:

' his plausive words
He scattered not in ears, but grafted them
To grow there and to bear.'

³ Salmeron (*Serm. in Par. Evang.* p. 30): 'As Christ is the Physician and the physic, the Priest and the victim, the Redeemer and the redemption, the Lawgiver and the law, the Porter and the gate, so is he the Sower and the seed. For neither is the Gospel itself anything other than Christ incarnate, born, preaching, dying, rising, sending the Holy Ghost, gathering, sanctifying and ruling the Church.'

no partial operation on their hearts who receive it, wholly transforms and renews them—that word of living and expanding truth by which men are born anew into the kingdom of God, and which in its effects ‘endureth for ever’ (1 Pet. i. 23, 25). I cannot doubt that the Lord intended to set Himself forth as the chief sower of the seed (not, of course, to the exclusion of the Apostles¹ and their successors), that here, as in the next parable, ‘*he that soweth the good seed*’ is the Son of man; and this, even though He nowhere, in as many words, announces Himself as such.² His entrance into the world was a going forth to sow;³ the word of the kingdom, which word He first proclaimed, was his seed; the hearts of men his soil; while others were only able to sow, because He had sown first; they did but carry on the work which He had auspicated and begun.

‘*And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, [and it was trodden down (Luke viii. 5)], and the fowls came and devoured them up.*’ Some, that is, fell on the hard footpath or road, where the glebe was not broken, and so could not sink down in the earth, but lay exposed on the surface to the feet of passers-by, till at length it fell an easy prey to the birds, such as in the East are described as following in large flocks the husbandman, to gather up, if they can, the seed-corn which he has scattered. We may indeed see the same nearer home. This parable is one of the very few, whereof we possess an authentic interpretation from the Lord’s own lips; and these words He thus explains: ‘*When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that*

¹ Isidore of Pelusium (*Ep.* 176, p. 326) has a sublime comparison, in which he likens St. Paul to Triptolemus, the winged scatterer of seed through the earth.

² See, however, Greswell’s arguments to the contrary (*Exp. of the Par.* vol. v. part 2, p. 238).

³ Salmeron (*Serm. in Parab.* p. 29): ‘He is said to go forth through the act of Incarnation, invested with which He went forth even as a husbandman who dons a garment suitable for rain, heat and cold, and yet He was a King.’

which was sown in his heart.' In St. Luke, Satan appears yet more distinctly as the adversary and hinderer of the kingdom of God (of whom as such there will be fitter opportunity of speaking in the following parable), the reason why he snatches the word away being added—'*lest they should believe and be saved.*' How natural it would have been to interpret '*the fowls*' impersonally, as signifying, in a general way, worldly influences hostile to the truth. How almost inevitably, if left to ourselves, we should have so done. Not so, however, the Lord. He beholds the kingdom of evil as it counterworks the kingdom of God gathered up in a personal head, '*the wicked one.*'¹

The words which St. Matthew alone records, '*and understandeth it not,*' do much for helping us to comprehend what this first condition of mind and heart is, in which the word of God fails to produce even a passing effect. The man '*understandeth it not*;' he does not recognize himself as standing in any relation to the word which he hears, or to the kingdom of grace which that word proclaims. All that speaks of man's connexion with a higher invisible world, all that speaks of sin, of redemption, of holiness, is unintelligible to him, and without significance. But how has he arrived at this state? He has brought himself to it; he has exposed his heart as a common road to every evil influence of the world, till it has become hard as a pavement,² till he has laid waste the very soil in which the word of God should have taken root: he has not submitted it to the ploughshare of the law, which would have broken it up; which, if he had suffered it to do its appointed work, would have gone before, preparing that soil to receive the seed of the Gospel. But what renders his case the more hopeless, and takes away even a possibility of the word germinating there, is, that besides the evil condition of the

¹ Ὁ πονηρός in St. Matthew; ὁ Σατανᾶς in St. Mark; ὁ διάβολος in St. Luke.

² H. de Sto. Victore (*Annot. in Matt.*): 'The wayside is the heart which is trodden down and dried by the constant passage of evil thoughts.' Corn. a Lapide: 'The wayside is the hardened custom of a worldly and too wanton life.'

soil, there is also *one* watching to take advantage of that evil condition, to use every weapon that man puts into his hands, against man's salvation; and he, lest by possibility such a hearer '*should believe and be saved,*' sends his ministers in the shape of evil thoughts, worldly desires, carnal lusts; and so, as St. Mark records it, '*cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.*' '*This is he which received seed by the way side.*'

There was other seed, which promised at the first to have, but in the end had not truly any, better success. '*Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth; and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up,¹ they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.*' The '*stony places*' here are to be explained by the '*rock*' of St. Luke, and it is important that the words in St. Matthew, or rather in our Version (for '*rocky places,*'—as, indeed, the Rhemish Version has it,—would have made all clear), do not lead us astray. A soil mingled with stones is not meant; these, however numerous or large, would not certainly hinder the roots from striking deeply downward; for those roots, with an instinct of their own, would feel and find their way, penetrating between the interstices of the stones, till they reached the moisture below. But what is meant is ground such as to a great extent is that of Palestine, where a thin superficial coating of mould covers the surface of a rock; this stretching below it, would present

¹ Ἀνατέλλειν once occurs transitively in the N. T., Matt. v. 45; so Gen. iii. 18, Isai. xlv. 8 (LXX). It is especially used, as here, of the rising of the sun or stars (Num. xxiv. 17; Isai. lx. 1; Mal. iv. 2); but also of the springing up of plants from the earth (Gen. xix. 25; Isai. xlv. 4; Ezek. xvii. 6; Ps. xci. 7); and so ἐξανατέλλω in this present parable. In either sense the title Ἀνατολή belongs to Christ, and has been applied to Him in both; as He is The Branch (Ἀνατολή, Zech. vi. 12, LXX), and as He is The Day-spring (Luke i. 78; cf. Rev. ii. 28; xxii. 16). Ἐκαυματίσθη (Matt. xiii. 6; cf. Mark iv. 6) has been variously rendered; by the Vulgate 'æstuaverunt'; by Tyndale and Cranmer 'caught heat'; by Geneva 'were parched'; by A. V. 'were scorched'; which is retained in the Revised.

a barrier beyond which it would be wholly impossible that the roots could penetrate, to draw up supplies of nourishment from beneath.¹ While the seed had fallen on shallow earth, therefore the plant the sooner appeared above the surface; and while the rock below hindered it from striking deeply downward, it put forth its energies the more luxuriantly in the stalk. It sprang up without delay, but rooted in no deep soil; and because therefore '*it lacked moisture,*'² it was unable to resist the scorching heat of the sun, and being smitten by that, withered and died.³

We recur again to the Lord's interpretation of his own words: '*But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it.*' Though the issue proves the same in this case as in the last, the promise is very different. So far from the heart of this class of hearers appearing irreceptive of the truth, the good news of the kingdom is received at once, and with gladness.⁴ The joy itself is most appropriate. How should not he be glad, whom the glad tidings have reached (Acts viii. 8; xvi. 34; Gal. v. 22; 1 Pet. i. 6)? But alas! in this case the joy thus suddenly conceived is not, as the sequel too surely proves, a joy springing up from the contemplation of the

¹ Bengel: 'The reference is not to stones lying scattered about a field, but to an unbroken rock or stone under a thin coating of earth.'

² Ἰκμάς only here in the N. T.; twice in the Septuagint, Jer. xvii. 8, καὶ ἔσται ὡς ξύλον εὐθηνούν παρ' ὕδατα, καὶ ἐπὶ ἰκμάδα βαλεῖ ῥίζας αὐτοῦ· καὶ οὐ φοβηθήσεται ὅταν ἔλθῃ καύμα ('For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh'), and Job xxvi. 14.

³ How exactly this is taken from the life, a brief quotation from Pliny (*H. N.* xvii. 3) will show: 'In Syria men use a light ploughshare and shallow furrows, for underneath is a stone which withers the seeds with its heat. The same soil is by Theophrastus described as *ἀπόπετρος* (somewhat rocky). At Matt. vii. 24, 25 (cf. Luke vi. 48), it is implied that one who digs deep enough will everywhere come to rock.

⁴ Cocceius: 'Immediately to rejoice is a bad sign, for it is impossible that the word of God, if it be rightly received, should not work in a man dissatisfaction with himself, inward struggle, perplexity, a contrite heart, a broken spirit, hunger and thirst, and, in a word, distress, even as the Saviour taught, Matt. v. 4.'

greatness of the benefit, even after all the counterbalancing costs, and hazards, and sacrifices, have been taken into account, but a joy which springs from an overlooking and leaving out of calculation those costs and hazards. It is this which fatally differences the joy of this class of hearers from that of the finder of the treasure (Matt. xiii. 44), who 'for joy thereof' went and *sold all that he had*, that he might purchase the field which contained the treasure—that is, was willing to deny himself all things, and to suffer all things, that he might win Christ. We have rather here a state of mind not stubbornly repelling the truth, but wofully lacking in all deeper earnestness; such as that of the multitudes which went with Jesus, unconscious what his discipleship involved,—to whom He turned and told, in plainest and most startling words, what the conditions of that discipleship were (Luke xiv. 25–33; Josh. xxiv. 19). This is exactly what the hearer now described has not done; whatever was fair and beautiful in Christianity as it first presents itself, had attracted him—its sweet and comfortable promises,¹ the moral loveliness of its doctrines; but not its answer to the deepest needs of the human heart; as neither, when he received the word with gladness, had he contemplated the having to endure hardness in his warfare with sin and Satan and the world; and this will explain all which follows: '*Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.*'² It is not here as in the last case, that Satan

¹ Bede: 'These are the hearts which are delighted for a season with the mere sweetness of the word they hear, and with the heavenly promises.'

² Quintilian (*Inst.* i. 3. 3–5) supplies a good parallel; he, it is true, is speaking of the rapid progress and rapid decay in the region of the intellectual, our Lord in that of the moral, life: 'Minds of this kind ripen too early, and with difficulty ever arrive at bearing. . . . They yield quickly, but not much. No true strength underlies them, nor is there any support from deep-sunken roots. The seeds scattered on the surface of the soil burst out too quickly, and the blades, which mimic ears, yellow before harvest-time with empty husks.' Philo (*De Vit. Cont.* § 7) supplies another instructive parallel. He, too, demands for any seed

comes and takes the word out of the heart without further trouble. That word has found some place there, and it needs that he bring some hostile influences to bear against it. What he brings in the present case are outward or inward trials, these being compared to the burning heat of the sun.¹ It is true that the light and warmth of the sun are more often used to set forth the genial and comfortable workings of God's grace (Mal. iv. 2; Matt. v. 45; Isai. lx. 19, 20); but not always, for see Ps. cxxi. 6; Isai. xlix. 10; Rev. vii. 16. As that heat, had the plant been rooted deeply enough, would have furthered its growth, and hastened its ripening, fitting it for the sickle and the barn—so these tribulations would have furthered the growth in grace of the true Christian, and ripened him for heaven. But as the heat scorches the blade which has no deepness of earth, and has sprung up on a shallow ground, so the troubles and afflictions which would have strengthened a true faith, cause a faith which was merely temporary to fail.² When these afflictions for the truth's sake arrive, 'he is offended,' as though some strange thing had happened to him: for then are the times of sifting,³ and of

which shall indeed live the 'field with a heavy soil' and not the 'stony and trodden places.'

¹ It was with the rising of the sun that the *καύσων*, the hot desert wind, *άνεμος δ καύσων*, as often in the Septuagint (Jer. xviii. 17; Ezek. xvii. 10; xix. 12; Hos. xiii. 15; Jon. iv. 8), commonly began to blow, the deadly effects of which on all vegetation are often referred to (Jon. ix. 8; Jam. i. 11); in which last place *σὺν τῷ καύσωνι* should not be rendered, 'with a burning heat,' but 'with the burning wind.' Plants thus smitten with the heat are called *torrefacta*, *ἡλιούμενα*.

² Augustine is rich in striking sayings on the different effects which tribulations will have on those that are rooted and grounded in the faith, and those that are otherwise. Thus (*Enarr. in Ps. 21*), speaking of the furnace of affliction: 'There is gold, there is chaff, there the fire works in a narrow space. That fire is not different in itself, but it has different actions; it turns the chaff to ashes, and frees the gold from dirt.' See for the same image Chrysostom, *Ad Pop. Antioch. Hom. iv. 1*.

³ The very word 'tribulation,' with which we have rendered *θλῆψις*, rests on this image—from *tribulum*, the threshing roller, and signifying those afflictive processes by which in the moral discipline of men God separates their good from their evil, their wheat from their chaff. There

winnowing; and then, too, every one that has no root, or as St. Matthew describes it, '*no root in himself*,' no inward root,¹ falls away.

The having of such an inward root here would answer to having a foundation on the rock, to having oil in the vessels, elsewhere (Matt. vii. 25; xxv. 4). It is no unfrequent image in Scripture (Ephes. iii. 17; Col. ii. 7; Jer. xvii. 8; Hos. ix. 16; Job xix. 28); and has a peculiar fitness and beauty, for as the roots of a tree are out of sight, while yet from them it derives its firmness and stability, so upon the hidden life of the Christian, that life which is out of sight of other men, his firmness and stability depend; and as it is through the hidden roots that the nourishment is drawn up to the stem and branches, and the leaf continues green, and the tree does not cease from bearing fruit, even so in that life which 'is hid with Christ in God' lie the sources of the Christian's strength and of his spiritual prosperity. Such a '*root in himself*' had Peter, who, when many were offended and drew back, exclaimed, 'To whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life' (John vi. 68). So, again, when the Hebrew Christians took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing in themselves that they had 'in heaven a better and an enduring substance' (Heb. x. 34), this knowledge, this faith concerning their unseen inheritance, was the root which enabled them joyfully to take that loss, and not to draw back unto perdition, as so many had done. Compare 2 Cor. iv. 17, 18, where faith in the unseen eternal things is the root, which, as St. Paul declares, enables him to count the present affliction light, and to endure to the end (cf. Heb. xi. 26). Demas, on the other hand, lacked that root. It might at first sight seem as if he would be more correctly ranged under the third class of hearers; since he forsook Paul, 'having

are some good lines by George Wither expounding this, quoted in my *Study of Words*, 17th edit. p. 49.

¹ With allusion to this passage, men of faith are called in the Greek Fathers *βαθύρριζοι, πολύρριζοι*. Compare with this division of the parable the *Shepherd* of Hermas, iii. sim. 9. 21.

loved this present world' (2 Tim. iv. 10). But when we examine more closely Paul's condition at Rome at the moment when Demas forsook him, we find it one of extreme outward trial and danger. It would seem then more probable that the immediate cause of his going back, was the tribulation which came for the word's sake.¹

But there is other seed, of which the fortunes are still to be told. '*And some fell among thorns;*' as fields were often divided by hedges of thorn (Exod. xxii. 6; Mic. vii. 4), this might easily come to pass (Jer. iv. 3; Job v. 5); '*and the thorns sprung up, and choked them,*' or as Wiclif has, '*strangled it,*'² so that, as St. Mark adds, '*it yielded no fruit.*' This seed fell not so much among thorns that were full grown, as in ground where the roots of these had not been diligently extirpated, in ground which had not been thoroughly purged and cleansed; otherwise it could not be said that '*the thorns sprang up with it*' (Luke viii. 7). They grew together; only the thorns overtopped the good seed, shut them out from the air and light, drew away from their roots the moisture and richness of earth by which they should have been nourished. No wonder that they pined and dwindled in the shade, grew dwarfed and stunted, for the best of the soil did not feed them—forming, indeed, a blade, but unable to form a full corn in the ear, or to bring any fruit to perfection. It is not here, as in the first case, that there was no soil, or none deserving the name; nor yet, as in the second case, that there was a poor or shallow soil. Here there was no lack of soil—it might be good soil; but what lacked was a careful husbandry, a diligent eradication of the mischievous growths, which, unless rooted up, would oppress and strangle whatever sprang up in their midst.

This section of the parable the Lord thus explains: '*He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth*

¹ See Bernard (*De Offic. Episc.* iv. 14, 15) for an interesting discussion, whether the faith of those comprehended under this second head was, as long as it lasted, real or not,—in fact, on the question whether it be possible to fall from grace given.

² Columella: 'the choking grass.'

the word; and the care¹ of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches [and the lusts of other things entering in (Mark iv. 19)] choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful,' or as St. Luke gives it, 'they bring no fruit to perfection.'² It is not here, as in the first case, that the word of God is totally ineffectual; nor yet, as in the second case, that after a temporary obedience to the truth, there is an evident falling away from it, such as the withering of the stalk indicates: the profession of a spiritual life is retained, the 'name to live' still remains; but the power of godliness is by degrees eaten out and has departed. And to what disastrous influences are these mournful effects attributed? To two things, the care of this world and its pleasures; these are the thorns and briars that strangle the life of the soul.³ It may sound strange at first hearing that two causes apparently so diverse should yet be linked together, and have the same hurtful operation ascribed to them. But the Lord, in fact, here presents to us this earthly life on its two sides, under its two aspects. There is, first, its oppressive crushing side, the poor man's toil how to live at all, to keep the wolf from the door, the struggle for a daily subsistence, 'the care⁴ of this life,' which, if not met in faith,

¹ Catullus: '*Spinosa Erycina serens in pectore curas*' (Erycina sowing in the breast thorny cares).

² Οὐ τελεσφοροῦσι. The word occurs only here in the N. T. It is especially used of a woman bringing a child to the birth, or a tree its fruit to maturity (Josephus, *Antt.* i. 6. 3; cf. Plutarch, *De Lib. Ed.* 4: δένδρα ἔγκαρπα καὶ τελεσφόρα).

³ See the *Shepherd* of Hermas, iii. sim. 9. 20. In the great symbolic language of the outward world, these have a peculiar fitness for the expression of influences hostile to the truth; they are themselves the consequences and evidences of sin, of a curse which has passed on from man to the earth which he inhabits (Gen. iii. 17), till that earth had nothing but a thorn-crown to yield to its Lord. It is a sign of the deep fitness of this image that others have been led to select it for the setting forth of the same truth. Thus the Pythagorean Lysis (Baur, *Apollonius*, p. 192): 'Close and thick bushes grow around the mind and heart of those who are not purely initiated into the sciences, overshadowing all the mild, gentle and reasoning element of the soul, and hindering the intellectual from open increase and progress.'

⁴ Μέριμνα, by some derived from μερίς (curæ animum diuorse trahunt,

hinders the thriving of the spiritual word in the heart. But life has a flattering as well as a threatening side, its pleasures no less than its pains; and as those who have heard and received with gladness the word of the kingdom are still in danger of being crushed by the cares of life, so, no less, of being deceived by its flatteries and its allurements. The old man is not dead in them; it may seem dead for a while, so long as the first joy on account of the treasure found endures; but, unless mortified in earnest, will presently revive in all its strength anew. Unless the soil of the heart be diligently watched, the thorns and briers, of which it seemed a thorough clearance had been made, will again grow up apace, and choke the good seed.¹ While that which God promises is felt to be good, but also what the world promises is felt to be good also, and a good of the same kind, instead of a good merely and altogether subordinate to the other, an attempt will be made to combine the service of the two, to serve God and mammon. But the attempt will be in vain: they who make it will bring no fruit to perfection, will fail to bring forth those perfect Terence), that which draws the heart different ways (see Hos. x. 2: 'Their heart is divided,' i.e. between God and the world; such a heart constitutes the ἀνήρ διψυχος, Jam. i. 8); but this etymology is brought into serious question now.

¹ Thus with a deep heart-knowledge Thauler (*Dom. xxii. post Trin. Serm. 2*): 'Ye know yourselves that, when a field or garden is being cleaned from weeds and tares, generally some roots of the tares abide in the depths of the earth, but so as scarcely to be detected. Meanwhile the soil is diligently planted and weeded; but, when the good seeds should spring up, immediately the tares from their deep-seated roots grow with them, and will hurt and destroy the corn and other plants and the good seeds. So, therefore, in the present place also, I mean by these roots all the evil failings and vices hidden away beneath the surface and not yet mortified, which by confession and penitence are indeed, if I may use the term, weeded, and by good exercises ploughed up; but yet the evil bent or tendencies of their vicious roots, such as of pride or luxury, anger or envy, hatred and the like, have been left hidden beneath the surface, and these subsequently spring up, and when the season comes for the divine, the happy, the virtuous and laudable life to bud forth from a man and grow and spring forth, then these most evil offshoots from the hurtful roots also come forth, and scatter, crush and overwhelm the man's fruits and his religious and faithful life.'

fruits of the Spirit which it was the purpose of the word of God to produce in them.¹

But it is not all the seed which thus sooner or later perishes. The spiritual husbandman is to sow in hope, knowing that with the blessing of the Lord he will not always sow in vain, that a part will prosper.² ‘*But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.*’ St. Luke says simply, ‘*and bare fruit an hundredfold,*’ leaving out the two lesser proportions of return; which St. Mark gives, but reverses the order of the three, beginning from the lowest return, and ascending to the highest. The return of a hundred for one is not unheard of in the East, though always mentioned as something extraordinary; thus it is said of Isaac, that he sowed, ‘and received in the same year an hundredfold, and the Lord blessed him’ (Gen. xxvi. 12); and other examples of the same kind are not wanting.³

¹ Ovid’s enumeration (*Met.* v. 483–486) of all which may disappoint and defeat the sower’s toil exactly corresponds with that of our parable; though with some additions, and in an order a little different:

Et modo *sol nimius*, nimius modo corripit imber;
Sideraque ventique nocent; *avidæque volucres*
Semina jacta legunt; lolium *tribulique* fatigant
Triticeas messes, et inexpugnabile gramen.

‘Now is there too much sun, now too much rain,
Now wind and weather harm, and birds again
Eat greedily your seeds, while tares o’erspread
Your wheaten crops, and the still-conquering weed.’

² Thus the author of a sermon in the *Appendix* to Augustine (*Opp.* vol. vi. p. 597, Bened. ed.): ‘Beloved, let not either the fear of thorns, or the stony rocks, or the hardness of the road, terrify us, so long as in our sowing of the word of God we may arrive at last at the good land. Let the word of God be received by every field, by every man, whether barren or fertile. I must sow, look thou how thou receivest; I must bestow, look thou what fruit thou renderest.’

³ According to Herodotus two-hundredfold was a common return in the plain of Babylon, and sometimes three; and Niebuhr (*Beschreib. v. Arab.* p. 153) mentions a species of maize that returns four-hundredfold. Wetstein (in loc.) has collected examples from antiquity of returns far greater than that of the text. See, too, V. Raumer, *Palästina*, p. 92.

We learn that '*he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty,*' or, with the important variation of St. Luke, '*That on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience*'—important, because in these words comes distinctly forward a difficulty, which equally existed in every record of the parable, but might in the others have been overlooked and evaded; while yet on its right solution a successful interpretation must altogether depend. What is this '*honest and good heart*'? How can any heart be called '*good*' before the Word and the Spirit have made it so?—and yet here the seed *finds* a good soil, does not *make* it. The same question elsewhere recurs, as when Christ declares, '*He that is of God heareth God's words*' (John viii. 47); and again, '*Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice*' (John xviii. 37). For who in this sinful world can be called '*of the truth*'? Is it not the universal doctrine of Scripture that men *become* '*of the truth*' through hearing Christ's words, not that they hear his words because they are '*of the truth*;' that the heart is good, through receiving the word; not that it receives the word, because it is good?¹ This is certainly the scriptural doctrine, and he teaches *preposterously*, to use the word in its most proper sense, who teaches otherwise. At the same time those passages in St. John, and the words before us, with much else in Scripture, bear witness to the fact that there are conditions of heart which yield readier entrance to the truth than others;—'*being of the truth,*'—'*being of God,*'—'*doing the truth,*'—'*having the soil of an honest and good heart,*'—all pointing in this

¹ Augustine (*In Ev. Joh. Tract.* 12) puts the difficulty, and solves it thus: '*What is this? For of whom were there good works? Didst Thou not come to justify the wicked?*' He replies: '*The beginning of good works is the confession of evil ones. Thou workest truth, and comest to the light. In what does this working truth consist? Thou dost not caress, nor soothe nor flatter thyself; thou dost not say, I am just, when thou art unjust; this is to begin to work truth.*'

direction. Inasmuch as these all express a condition *anterior* to hearing God's word—to coming to the light—to bringing forth fruit—they cannot indicate a state of mind and heart in which the truth, in the highest sense of that word, is positive and realized, but only one in which there is a preparedness to receive and to retain it. There is none good but One (Matt. xix. 17); and yet the Scripture speaks often of *good* men: even so no heart is absolutely a good soil; yet relatively it may be affirmed of some, that their hearts are a soil fitter for receiving the seed of everlasting life than those of others. Thus the 'son of peace' will alone receive the message of peace (Luke x. 6; Matt. x. 13; cf. Acts xiii. 48), while yet only the reception of that message will make him truly and in the highest sense a 'son of peace.' He was before, indeed, a *latent* son of peace, but it is the Gospel which first makes actual that which hitherto was only potential. And thus the preaching of the word may be likened to the scattering of sparks, which, where they find tinder, fasten there, and kindle into a flame; where they do not find it, expire; or that word of the truth may be regarded as a loadstone thrust in among the world's rubbish, attracting to itself all particles of true metal, which but for it *would* never, as they *could* never, have extricated themselves from the surrounding mass, however they testify their affinity to the loadstone, now that it is brought in contact with them.

Exactly thus among those to whom the word of the Gospel came, there were two divisions of men, and the same will always subsist in the world. There were, first, the false-hearted, who called evil good and good evil, who loved their darkness, and hated the light that would make that darkness manifest (John iii. 20; Ephes. v. 13), who, when that light of the Lord shone round about them, only drew further back into their own darkness; self-excusers and self-justifiers; such as were for the most part the Scribes and the Pharisees with whom He came in contact. But there were also others, sinners as well, often, as regards actual transgression of positive law, much greater sinners than those first, but who

yet acknowledged their evil—had no wish to alter the everlasting relations between right and wrong—who, when the light appeared, did not refuse to be drawn to it, even though they knew that it would condemn their darkness, that it would require an entire renewing of their hearts and remodelling of their lives: such were the Matthews and the Zacchæuses, and sinful women not a few, with all who confessed their deeds, justifying not themselves but God. Not that I would prefer to instance these as examples of the ‘*good and honest heart*,’ except in so far as it is needful to guard against a Pelagian abuse of the phrase, and to show how the Lord’s language here does not condemn even great and grievous sinners to an incapacity for receiving the word of life. Nathanael would be a yet more perfect specimen of the class referred to—the ‘Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile’¹ (John i. 47), in other words, the man with the soil of ‘*an honest and good heart*,’ fitted for receiving and nourishing the word of everlasting life, and for bringing forth fruit with patience; one of a simple, truthful, earnest nature; who had been faithful to the light which he had, diligent in the performance of the duties which he knew, who had not been resisting God’s preparation in him for imparting to him at the last his best gift, even the knowledge of his Son; who with all this, knowing himself a sinner, did not affirm that he was righteous. For we must keep ever in mind that the good soil as much comes from God as the seed which is to find there its home. The law and the preaching of repentance, God’s secret and preventing grace, run before the preaching of the word of the kingdom; and thus when that word comes, it finds men with a less or a greater readiness to receive it for what indeed it is, a word of eternal life.²

¹ Augustine: ‘If guile was not in him, the Physician pronounced that he was healable, not that he was whole. In what way was guile not in him? If he is a sinner, he confesses himself to be one. For if he is a sinner, and says that he is just, there is guile in his mouth. Therefore in Nathanael He praised the confession of sin, He did not pronounce him not to be a sinner.’

² On this subject of the ‘*honest and good heart*’ there is an admirable

When the different measures of prosperity are given, the seed bringing forth 'some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold,' it seems difficult to determine whether these indicate different degrees of fidelity in those that receive the truth, according to which they bring forth fruit unto God more or less abundantly; or rather different spheres of action, more or less wide, which they are appointed to occupy;—as in another parable to one servant were given five talents, to another two; in which instance the diligence and fidelity appear to have been equal, and the meed of praise the same, since each gained in proportion to the talents committed to him, though these talents were many more in one case than in the other (Luke xix. 16–19): probably the former is meant.¹ The words which St. Luke records (ver. 18), 'Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have' (cf. Mark iv. 33), are very important for the averting of a misunderstanding, which else might easily have arisen here. The disciples might have been in danger of supposing that these four conditions of heart, in which the word found its hearers, were permanent, immutable, fixed for evermore; and therefore that in one heart the word must flourish, in another that it could never germinate at all, in others that it could only prosper for a little while. There is no such immoral fatalism in Scripture. It left to the Gnostics to distribute men into two classes, one capable of a higher life, and the other incapable. It declares

discussion by Jackson, the great Arminian divine of the 17th century, *The Eternal Truth of Scripture*, iv. 8.

¹ So Irenæus (*Con. Hæc.* v. 39, 2) must have understood it, and Cyprian (*Ep.* 69): 'The spiritual grace which in baptism is received by the faithful equally, in our subsequent behaviour and actions is either diminished or increased, as in the Gospel the seed of the Lord is sown equally, but, according to the different nature of the soil, in some cases is wasted, in others is augmented by the luxuriant crop to the varying abundance of thirty, sixty, or an hundred fold.' So too Theodoret (*in Cant.* vi. 8), who finds here, as he does at John xiv. 2, an evidence of the 'many different degrees of the pious.'

all to be capable ; even as it summons all to be partakers of the same ; and the warning, ‘ *Take heed how ye hear,* ’ testifies as much, for it tells us that in each case, according as the word is heard and received, will its success be—that a man’s whole anterior life will greatly influence the manner of his reception of that word, seeing that all which he has gone through will have wrought either to the improving or the deteriorating of the soil of his heart, and will thus render more probable or less probable that the seeds of God’s word will prosper there, and bring forth in him that hears fruit that shall remain (Jam. i. 21).

For while it is true, and the thought is a very awful one, that there is such a thing as laying waste the very soil in which the seed of eternal life should have taken root—that every act of sin, of unfaithfulness to the light within us, is, as it were, a treading of the ground into more hardness, so that the seed shall not sink in it,—or a wasting of the soil, so that the seed shall find no nutriment there,—or a fitting of it to a kindlier nourishing of thorns and briars than of good seed ;—yet on the other hand, even for those who have brought themselves into these evil conditions, a recovery is still, through the grace of God, possible : the hard soil may again become soft,—the shallow soil may become rich and deep,—and the soil beset with thorns open and clear.¹ For the heavenly seed in this differs from the earthly, that the latter, as it finds, so it must use its soil, for it cannot alter its nature. But the

¹ So Augustine (*Serm.* lxxiii. 3) : ‘ Change ye when ye are able : turn the hard ground with the plough, cast forth the stones from the field, and uproot from it the thorns. Refuse to have a hard heart, whence the word of God quickly perishes. Refuse to have a thin soil, where the root of love takes no firm hold. Refuse to choke with worldly cares and desires the good seed which is sown in you by our labours. For it is the Lord who sows : we are his workmen. But be ye the good soil.’ Cf. *Serm.* ci. 3 ; and the author of a sermon, Augustine, *Opp.* vol. vi. p. 597, Bened. ed. : ‘ If thou feelest that thou art a barren, a thorny, or a parched soil, betake thee to thy Creator. For what is now to be done is that thou be renewed, that thou be fructified and watered by Him who turneth the wilderness into a standing water, and dry ground into water-springs (Ps. cvii. 35–37).’

heavenly seed, if acted upon by the soil where it is cast, also reacts more mightily upon it, softening it where it was hard (Jer. xxiii. 29), deepening it where it was shallow, cutting up and extirpating the roots of evil where it was encumbered with these; and, wherever it is allowed free course, transforming and ennobling each of these inferior soils, till it has become that which man's heart was at the beginning and before the Fall; good ground, fit to afford nourishment to that divine word, the seed of everlasting life¹ (1 Pet. i. 23-25).

¹ As our Saviour here, so the Jewish doctors divide the hearers of the words of wisdom into four classes. The best they liken to a sponge which, drinking in all that it receives, again expresses it for others; the worst to a strainer which, letting all the good wine pass through, retains only the worthless dregs; or to a sieve that, passing the fine flour, keeps back only the bran.—Prudentius (*Con. Symm.* ii. v. 1022) has put this parable well into verse. Here are a few lines in an English dress:

Christ gave these precepts to direct our toil:
 When seeds ye cast in furrows shun the soil
 Made hard by wasting stones; there let nought fall,
 For there the tender seedling first of all
 In hasty bounteousness itself arrays,
 Then fails of sap, and summer's burning days
 Wither and waste away its thirsting life.

Nor let your seed fall where sharp briars are rife,
 For there, soon as your crop springs from the ground,
 Harsh bonds entangle it, and all around
 With pointed thorns hem in each tender stalk.
 Nor strow your grain on roads where men most walk,
 There birds make it their prey, and eat their fill,
 And carrion crows work on it their foul will.

Such care as this upon our fields outlaid
 With fruit an hundredfold will be repaid.

Nor would I willingly leave unquoted here some admirable words of Godet in his *Commentary on St. Luke*, vol. i. p. 465: 'Jesus discerned in the crowd four kinds of faces; some which were dull and inattentive, some enthusiastic and full of rapture, some with a serious but pre-occupied expression, and lastly countenances serenely joyful which proclaimed a complete surrender to the truth He was teaching. . . . The first class includes those who are thoroughly insensible to religion: they have no spiritual needs, no terror of judgment, no desire of salvation, and consequently no leaning towards the gospel of Christ. . . . The

second are weak-hearted but easily influenced, and their imagination and sensibility make up for a time for the absence of moral sense. The novelty of the Gospel and the opposition it offers to received ideas charm them. In almost every revival such men form a considerable portion of the new converts. The third class consists of those who are earnest but undecided; they seek salvation and recognize the value of the Gospel; but they wish also for worldly success and have not resolved to renounce all for truth. . . . The spiritual needs of the fourth class govern their lives. Moral sense is not dormant in them as in those of the first class; it is this consciousness, and not imagination and feeling, which guides their will; it dominates the earthly preoccupations which prevail with those of the third class.'