

Dear Friends,

What has happened to our spiritual health during the last two years? Can we examine ourselves in light of New Testament teaching and honestly say we have grown stronger spiritually? Or have we grown weaker? Have the ravages of COVID isolation or the emotional heat of political chaos and conflict distracted us from peaceful and fruitful meditations on Jesus and our spiritual life?

Personally, I must confess that, depending on the day or season, I've had moments that tilted me in both directions. As the season wore on, I found myself digging deeper into Scripture and seeking out communication with wise godly friends who would check me if I started to drift in an unprofitable direction. The first time I spoke to a church I spoke from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount regarding trusting God for today and leaving tomorrow in His hands. Over the sixty-six, now almost sixty-seven years since that day, I've often preached and written on this passage and theme. With a lifetime of experience under my belt, I believe Jesus' words more today than ever. Ah, but I've often found myself struggling to live what I believe. I've wasted more time than I care to admit fretting about tomorrow. I honestly believe that this two years of COVID disruption has done more to imbed this Bible, this "Faith" principle into my mind than anything in my spiritual journey up to that time. I am not happy or thankful for COVID, but I am profoundly thankful to the Lord for gently leading me along this path of greater trust in Him for my tomorrows.

My hope with this writing is to spend some time examining and trying to learn from Jesus' teaching in His "Kingdom parables" in Matthew 13, and perhaps in other passages as well. We need those lessons to warn us and to nudge us to stronger and more consistent faith--and faithfulness.

Lord help us,  
Joe Holder

## **Parable of the Sower Explained by Jesus**

*Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. (Matthew 13:18 KJV 1900)*

Think of the parables as a story created and told by Jesus to teach a specific lesson to a specific audience. If He created the story, it includes all the information we need to understand His intended meaning. We need not add "Missing details" to His story. There are none. If we think we need more or missing details, we have the wrong meaning or ideas about the lesson.

When Jesus taught in parables, He always chose common, every-day situations as the background and basis of His lesson. He never used Greek mythology, for example, as the basis for a parable. Most of the people who heard His teaching were fishermen, farmers, or shepherds. He framed simple stories from the life and world where they lived their daily lives.

The literary genre of parable is a short simple story that teaches a moral or religious lesson by comparing the story line of the parable to the moral or religious idea. Like Old Testament proverbs, a parable teaches one dominant lesson. It is distinct from the literary genre of allegory. In an allegory, every detail named takes on a symbolic meaning. In a parable, the story dynamic frames a single logical lesson.

A wise man from my youth offered sound counsel, “Don’t try to put these lessons on their all-fours,” meaning to find the single lesson intended as much as possible, and to stay with it only, not try to make the lesson teach multiple principles. The name of the literary genre, “Parable,” itself makes this point. It “Compares” the natural lesson to a single spiritual or moral lesson.

In the verses following our study verse, Matthew 13:18, Jesus explained the parable. We need not chase our creative imagination for the meaning of the lesson. Jesus created the story, told the story, and explained His own story. Our task is not to find a different meaning for it, but rather to study and to believe what He taught us about it.

The most concise explanation I’ve found appears below.

The parable teaches that there would be four different responses to the Word: no response, emotional response, worldly response, and fruitful response. (Ryrie Study Bible Notes)

Sadly, most commentaries and sermons from this lesson obsess over whether each respondent in the parable was born again or not. This view ignores the primary lesson Jesus taught in this parable. Ryrie approaches the basic premise that is obvious to a simple reading of the lesson. When we preach to people, we do not always know every person’s spiritual state, saved or unsaved. Logically, I suggest that most people to whom we preach are saved, but the Lord doesn’t tattoo a crimson cross into the forehead of every born-again person, and we can’t know their heart. (Jeremiah 17:9) We could learn so much needful spiritual wisdom from this lesson if we approached it with this four-option perspective. It resonates with the reality we observe in preaching. Different people respond differently, and we may not always know why, though, with a little time and observation, we might learn from Jesus’ teaching here and sense more about why each person responds as they do to preaching.

### **No Response**

*When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. (Matthew 13:19 KJV 1900)*

According to Jesus, the catalyzing problem with this person is a lack of understanding what was heard, the message of the gospel. Any time someone hears the gospel and doesn’t understand it, we may rest assured of the “wicked one’s” tactics. He will do anything in his power to snatch away any thought of the word from that person’s mind. Literally, he will work to get it out of our mind before it has time to register in our mind, to germinate and take root.

What hinders a person from understanding the gospel? Understanding relates to the mental process of assimilating new information and putting it together into a logical and meaningful way that fits into our life and conduct. One dictionary used the simple task of looking at the pieces of a puzzle on a table and methodically putting those pieces together to make the completed puzzle and seeing the image it contains. Rather than looking for one reason for people not understanding the gospel, we need to realize the multitude of hindrances that might interfere with a person truly putting the pieces of the gospel together to see and believe the true story it tells of “**Jesus and the resurrection.**” (Acts 17:18)

Instead of thinking only one thing can remove the message of the gospel from a person’s mind, we need to thoughtfully ponder the breadth of reasons a person who recently heard a sound and thought-provoking sermon might forget about it before having time to ponder its significance and truth. Career demands, family demands, illness, personal or of a loved-one, are a few such issues. In the last two years, I have observed people whom I would have formerly regarded as established believers investing so much emotion, time, and energy on either COVID or toxic political issues and personalities, that they had no emotional or spiritual energy left to invest in Jesus and the kingdom of God. In many cases, these people slowly drifted from faithful and fruitful to me-centered and fruitless. Our adversary is not selective. He will gladly—and adroitly—use anything in our lives to distract us away from the fruitful reality of Jesus and the gospel.

Other than a brief observation, I will not engage the fruitless pursuit of whether this person was saved or not. Jesus described the person in the parable, in His story to teach His lesson, as hearing “...**the word of the kingdom.**” When Jesus responded to obviously wicked people who despised and rejected Him, He gave them—and us—His description of them.

**Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.** (John 8:43 KJV; emphasis added)

According to Jesus, such wicked people lack the basic ability of spiritual hearing. He spoke audible words to them, and they responded to those words. Obviously they heard what He said. His intent in this verse relates to their spiritual hearing and understanding, something, according to Jesus Himself, these people did not have and could not do. If we accept Jesus’ own teaching in this verse, there is more than a casual implication that the person in question in the parable was, in fact, a saved person who truly experienced hearing of the message of the gospel. “**When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom.**” I suggest that the word of the gospel never enters the heart of an unregenerate person, per Jesus’ words in John 8:43, but the word does enter the person’s heart and mind in the parable.

Observation over the last two years has prompted me to grieve that many formerly fruitful believers allowed either COVID or a disruptive political climate to so consume their thinking that they dropped their guard, and the adversary quietly snatched away the word these folks heard before it could remind them of Biblical and godly priorities. A fruitful, spiritual lifestyle became anemic, and their devotion to the “Word” and its fruitful abiding residence in their minds faded. The Lord doesn’t cause every calamity in life, but, if we as believers keep our faith anchored in Him, and fresh and foremost in our minds, we can learn profitable spiritual lessons from those calamities.

Some of these dear people might protest, “Even though I became actively engaged in COVID issues and/or political issues, I also kept my faith.” I would offer a simple question. During this time, where have you invested most of your emotional energy and, for that matter, your time? COVID wrangling, political heat, or your faith? They have forgotten Jesus’ warning.

*No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. (Luke 16:13; study the context of this verse. Jesus spoke the same words in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:24)*

If you have resumed physically gathering in your church, perhaps after the service you go to lunch at a local restaurant with some of your church family. What has been your most frequent topic of conversation during those lunch visits? During visitation before or after your church services? What topic most fires your mental zeal? If your zeal fires most often over your personal opinions of COVID or politics, this lesson from Jesus cries out for your prayerful attention. Has the evil one quietly snatched away the word of Scripture and the word of the gospel you heard while you were burning zealously over these—or any other mundane issues?

Jesus linked our fruitfulness in His kingdom with the “Seed” of the word being planted in our heart and mind, and slowly growing to maturity and fruitfulness over time, not to a two-hour flash on Sunday morning in church. You cannot grow healthy spiritual fruit by paying attention to your faith only while you are in church on Sunday. It must abide and germinate by steady meditation and Bible study on its teachings throughout the week. Fired zeal for any other issue becomes, in the analogy of Jesus’ sower and seed parable, the ideal setting for the wicked one to steal the word away from your active attention before you truly give it serious thought. We need to believe Jesus’s words, you **cannot** do both, serve God **and** mammon—or anything else.

Did you ever go out into your yard and pull up a weed plant? You felt resistance, didn’t you? The longer that plant had grown the greater resistance you felt trying to pull it up. The same idea applies to the “Seed” of the gospel that you hear in church or in your focused and prayerful study of Scripture. The faster the wicked one can snatch the seed away from your heart and mind the less resistance you will exercise to its removal. Excuses abound. But they all rationalize the mirror opposite to the good outcome Jesus taught in the last option of the parable.

You hear an edifying sermon on Sunday morning. How much time do you devote to meditation and Bible follow-up to its teaching next week? By Wednesday, how much of that sermon do you honestly recall? Is the “Seed” still present in your mind? Or has “Someone” quietly snatched it away?

Elder Joe Holder