

## 1. The Sower

Jesus had already been ministering amongst the people for some time before He began revealing the secrets of the kingdom in specific parables. At the time that He spoke the parable of the Sower, the first of these 'secret' parables, the teachers of the law had shown their rejection of Him with the utmost blasphemy by claiming that the work of the Spirit of God through Him was the work of Satan and the kingdom of darkness (cf. Matthew 12:22-37).

They foolishly thought that the real power of God that they were witnessing through Jesus' miracles and exorcisms was that of the great Adversary, as though Jesus was some kind of shaman priest calling on the chief spirit of Bezebul (or Beelzebub)! But Jesus made it clear to them that He was the real Strong Man, the real plunderer/possessor who was able to tie up the lesser strong man, Beelzeboul (meaning plunderer-possessor) and loot his house; that is, the spirits and bodies of those whom the enemy occupied.

Jesus also made a huge statement to the people at this time by declaring that His blood relations, such as His mother and brothers, were not as important as those who were spiritual family members (Matthew 12:46-50). He was telling the people not to focus on flesh and blood, but to give place to the Spirit. Jesus was not only the King and Messiah of Israel, born as a Jew under the Law, but He was the Son of God.

The most important thing for the people was not their laying claim to being of the nation of Israel, according to the flesh, focusing on their endless genealogies as a token of their acceptance into the kingdom; but that of belonging to God through faith in His Son, and becoming a spiritual child of their heavenly Father. A spiritual Israelite or Jew was the true Israelite or Jew, first and foremost a true child of Abraham and of God (cf. Romans 2:28-29; 4:11-12). Faithful obedience in spirit is what counts, and not fleshly ties.

### The Secrets

It was at this juncture in His ministry, in this kind of atmosphere, that Jesus began to expand His teaching by revealing to His disciples the secrets of the kingdom. Israel as a nation was already showing signs of rejecting their rightful King, Who was in fact Yahweh Himself, the very Word and Image of God! This rejection was to have huge implications for the future that would inevitably involve some adjustments in God's plan for His people. These alterations were not a lack of foresight on God's part, as He is never taken by surprise. Even Israel's rejection of their Messiah and their subsequent hardening as a nation was all part of the grand design of God's awesome plan, but humanly speaking, this progression of the plan needed to be worked out in time, through history, in human experience.

Yet the inevitable fact remains, as spoken so clearly by the apostle Paul, that even though Israel as a nation failed to receive her King, this did not mean that they were forever rejected, or that God's word or plan had failed (Romans 9:1-6; 11:1-2, 11). On the contrary, it has given God the planned opportunity to shower His blessings of grace upon the nations of the world to make Israel envious and save some of them (Romans 11:11-12). Many Gentiles were called to become sons of God from amongst all the nations in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, so as to become a part of

the heavenly Israel of God, the Bride, who would co-rule with Christ in the coming ages of His spiritual kingdom. And the great harvest from amongst all nations still continues to this day.

So because of this rejection, Jesus begins to open the door of the spiritual kingdom being offered to Israel by revealing the secret, unknown elements to His disciples in parables. Peter was later given the 'keys of the kingdom' to open the door for Israel on the Day of Pentecost at the coming of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 16:16-20; Acts 2:14-41); but the inevitable and eventual rejection of the Spirit's testimony through the apostles by the leaders of the Jewish nation resulted in the kingdom being taken away from them as a nation and given to a people who would produce its fruit.

This was the meaning of that fateful prophecy of Isaiah that had been spoken by Jesus himself, and by the apostle Paul, when he met the leaders of the Jews in Rome (cf. Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:13-15; Acts 28:17-29). The nation of Israel had rejected the testimony of Christ both in the land of Palestine and outside of it, and their 40-year era of probation was then about to end.

The secrets that Christ spoke of through the following parables primarily revealed one thing - that there would be an extended period of time, during Christ's absence from earth and session at the right hand of God, when the gospel of the kingdom would be proclaimed throughout the whole world (i.e. the Roman Empire) through His Ecclesia or Assembly (often rendered as 'Church'), right up to the conclusion of the old covenant age and the era of His return to that same generation. That is, a spiritual form of the kingdom of the heavens would be present on the earth through the coming of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of which had been promised in the New Covenant, and the Apostles and the Ecclesia (Gk. the called out ones) would represent Christ on the earth during His absence, making disciples from all nations (Acts 2:14-47; 3:11-26).

Let me just say a little word about 'the secrets'. The Greek word *musterion*, which is often translated as 'mystery', is more correctly termed *a secret*. It was often used of those who were initiated into some kind of esoteric teaching, particularly as it related to the ancient cult of the Babylonian mysteries and the doctrines of the Gnostics. In Scripture though, it refers to truth which had previously been kept hidden, but that has now been revealed to those of spiritual understanding. The apostle Paul uses this word *musterion* the most, and he also clarified the correct scriptural definition that Jesus Himself had previously revealed (cf. Colossians 1:26-27; Matthew 13:10-13).

### The Seed of the Word

So let us now take a look at this first parable known as The Sower that began to reveal the secrets of the kingdom. Jesus spoke this parable to the crowds that had gathered along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee while He sat in a boat. It can be found in Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:2-20 and Luke 8:4-15.

"A sower went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell beside the way, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil did not have much depth. But when the sun came up, they were scorched, and

because they had no root they withered. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. **He who has ears to hear, let him hear!**"

(Matthew 13:3-9 FT)

So here we have a simple narrative of a sower sowing his grain seed in his field and the various places where the seed falls. So what does this mean? Well, we are not left to guess at what Jesus was saying here because we are later told exactly what it means. The disciples didn't know what it all meant so they came to Jesus to ask Him why He spoke to the people in parables. Before He gave them the meaning of the parable, He told them this,

"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of the heavens has been given to you, but not to them. For anyone who has shall be given more, and he shall have an abundance, yet anyone who does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. This is why I am speaking to them in parables, though seeing, they are not seeing, and though hearing, they are not hearing, neither are they understanding. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, that is saying,

""You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.  
For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.""

(Matthew 13:11-15 NIV)

So Jesus then tells them plainly that they were the privileged ones who were to receive the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom, which would mean that as future teachers and administrators of the word, they would have the new treasures of the secrets, as well as the old treasures of the writings of the prophets to give to the believing community or ecclesia (Matthew 13:52). On the other hand, the mass of the people would not understand.

Amongst those of Israel who had been given positions of authority and those who had some knowledge of the Divine Oracles, if they had faith, they would receive more and have an abundance of truth. But those without faith would lose what they already had, and be left with nothing. This is the clear line that Jesus draws between those of Israel who were the spiritual ones (who would be blessed even more with what He had to give them) and those who were not of real faith, the mere religious unbelieving ones -- and even their part in the privileged nation, that which they had, would be taken away from them.

Then He states that the reason that He was speaking to the people in parables was to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah (6:9-10) concerning Israel's lack of spiritual perception. Jesus deliberately used his parables to hide the truth from the masses! Now that's quite a revelation, don't you think! Here we have one of many

examples throughout Scripture of God's absolute sovereignty in the realm of faith and spiritual enlightenment. One can only receive faith and spiritual perception by the Spirit of God in accordance with God's supreme choosing. Yet the great thing about God's way of teaching is that when you begin to see things in spirit, parables and allegories, and all manner of metaphors from the world around us, come alive in an exciting array of colour and depth of meaning. It's a whole new world!

### Spiritual Perception

"But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

(Matthew 13:16-17 NIV)

Jesus then tells His disciples that, on the contrary, they were truly happy or blessed because they had been given the spiritual perception to see and hear the truth of God being uttered from Jesus' lips. They may have been slow in their understanding of these things at times, but nevertheless, they had been given enlightenment and were among those chosen to learn directly from the Messiah Himself. He then tells them that many prophets and righteous men from the past yearned to see and hear the words of the Master as the disciples did, but they had not been given that privilege in the same way as the disciples.

But later, after His resurrection, Jesus also said to 'doubting' Thomas, one of the Twelve,

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

(John 20:29 NIV)

So it is also a great blessing for those of us who have not literally seen Christ as yet to believe the testimony about Him as it is revealed in the Scriptures, and to receive illumination by the Holy Spirit of God and to partake of the Spirit of Christ – even though we have never seen His face or heard His words as the disciples did. Nevertheless, one day we will!

Then Jesus says to them, "*Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?*" (Mark 4:13).

He is saying here that this parable of the Sower is a very basic parable that the disciples should've understood. If they could understand this one then they should be able to understand the others that He was about to share with them. So Jesus gently has to give them a helping hand to understand it. Yet even this was all part of God's plan, so that Jesus would have to explain it for the benefit of all who would read it.

### The Hard Heart

He then gives them the meaning of the parable. So let's break it down and take a look at the four environments where the seed is sown and their meaning:

“When anyone hears **the word of the kingdom** and is not understanding it, the wicked one comes and snatches what was sown in his heart. This is the seed being sown on the pathway.”

(Matthew 13:19 FT)

The spiritual Word of God (as it states in Luke’s account), also referred to here as the Word of the Kingdom, is the Seed that is being sown into people’s hearts, particularly as applied to Israel, who were the original ‘saints’ (meaning ‘holy ones’) and sons of the kingdom. So the seed represents the gospel (i.e. good news) of the kingdom first proclaimed through Christ and then by His disciples; and the four places where the seed is sown represents the four kinds of responses to the message, particularly as it related to the 1<sup>st</sup> century audience who heard these things from Christ and the apostles directly. Nevertheless, the number 4 represents that which is universal, or the whole world, so it also applies to all people throughout this age of the world.

The seed that is being sown on the unploughed dirt road or pathway represents those who hear the message of the Messiah and His kingdom, but they don’t understand it because their hearts are hard and unbroken. Consequently, Satan, the wicked one, like the birds of the air, comes and snatches the word from their heart so that they cannot believe.

This is a reminder of the words of the prophet Jeremiah that were spoken to Judah and Jerusalem,

“**Break up your unploughed ground and do not sow among thorns.** Circumcise yourselves to Yahweh, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem...”

(Jeremiah 4:3-4 NIV)

God’s people are commanded to stop hardening their hearts in unbelief, in the hypocrisy of their religious fervour, but to bring forth the fruits of repentance that prepares a heart for the words of God. Only then can they be saved from sin and condemnation, and receive the promised kingdom. But Jesus reveals here that many will *not* believe in the days ahead during the proclamation of the Gospel.

### The Temporary One

“The seed being sown on the rocky places is the man who hears the word and receives it immediately with joy, **yet because he has no root within himself, it is temporary**. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he is offended.”

(Matthew 13:20-21 FT)

The seed that is sown on the rocky, stony soil represents those who hear the message and receive it straight away with much joy because it sounds good and is full of blessing. But just as the seed cannot take root in such soil even though it may have shown signs of life initially, likewise the faith of such a one is very temporary because they have no root within. Like the sun that rises and scorches the seed, when a time of testing comes in relation to the kingdom, bringing

affliction or persecution, offended they fall away and are trapped, killing the life that was there. For true disciples, the sun is usually a figure for the blessings of the Son of God, but for the rest, the sun becomes a fire in a parched land that resembles a curse rather than a blessing.

Jesus reveals that, as a result of His ministry and those of the apostles, some will accept the message with gladness to begin with, but they would eventually fall away because they do not have true lasting faith to endure the necessary trials that often comes with living a life of faith. There is a cost to entering the kingdom.

### The Choked One

“What was sown among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worry of this age and the deceitfulness of riches **are choking the word**, and it becomes **unfruitful.**”

(Matthew 13:22 FT)

The seed that is sown among thorns represents the one who hears the message and receives it, but in the same way as the thorns grow up and choke the growing grain, so this one's faith is hindered by the worry that comes with this present wicked age of man's rule, and the deceitfulness of riches and material gain, and the gratifications of life. This results in them becoming unfruitful, or put another way, they do not become mature or perfect. As we shall see, according to the rest of Jesus' teaching, if these do not bear fruit, they are cast into the fire of judgment – in other words, they would not enter the kingdom at its establishment at His return.

Jesus was revealing here that some would have a form of belief as a consequence of receiving the message, but they would not grow spiritually and bear real fruit from the heart due to the pressure of the world and the weaknesses of their own flesh.

Paul reveals that in the last days there would be many who, as religious leaders, would be ever learning yet they would not be able to come into a realisation of the truth. They would have a form of godliness yet they would deny the true power of God, especially His power to save and reconcile (cf. 2 Timothy 3:1-9, 13).

The story of the rich young ruler will serve as an appropriate example of Christ's meaning here, which can be found in Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27.

### The Rich Young Ruler

This young rich guy, who was probably the ruler of a synagogue, came up to Jesus making a bit of a show in front of the people. He calls Jesus 'Good Rabbi,' but Jesus saw through his pretence and unbelief, and questions his use of the word 'good,' saying that God alone is Good. Then the rich ruler asks Jesus how he can be assured of entering the kingdom to receive eternal life (lit. 'the life of the age').

Jesus intentionally points him to the Ten Commandments of the Law, knowing full well how he would reply. The ruler then boasts that he has kept the commandments since he was a boy. He was boasting in his law-righteousness, especially as he was

a greatly respected citizen amongst the people. Jesus' reply to him is very illuminating. In Mark's account it reads,

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me, taking up the cross."

(Mark 10:21 FT; some mss don't have 'taking up the cross')

Jesus knew that this guy was lost and full of sorrow, boasting in his own righteousness, yet as He looks at him, He loves him. This is the heart of God right here, revealed in and through His Son. His heart goes out to those lost in sin. Then Jesus tells him that he still lacks one thing, if he wishes to become perfect and enter the kingdom. He needs to sell all he has, give the money to the poor, and then actually follow Jesus in the way of humility and suffering, picking up his own cross.

This was especially relevant at that time in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, for Jesus knew that destruction was going to come upon the land in that generation – therefore, all material possessions, and Jewish land inheritance, would become worthless! At hearing Jesus' words, though, the young ruler turns away sombrely, full of unhappiness because of his great wealth.

Jesus went on to say that those who are wealthy and who put their trust in money would find it extremely difficult to enter the kingdom of God. In fact, the Greek word that is used in all of the accounts should be translated '*squeamish*.' That is to say, the process of entering into the kingdom for a wealthy person is one that would make them distressingly sick! Now as most of the religious Jews were rich, and they thought that this was a sign of God's blessing upon them (modern 'prosperity' teachers, take heed), you can understand the shocked reaction of the disciples when Jesus spoke these words – they said, "*Who then can be saved?*" Humanly speaking, it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom, but with God, all things are possible!

This wealthy young ruler had failed the test of Christ. He had to choose between serving God or his Money, but he chose his money and his possessions and his own law-righteousness, yet this never brought him happiness. In this state he could not receive entrance into the coming kingdom. This test revealed his heart of unbelief, a life that was unfruitful; a life that was not perfected or mature so as to be called a true son of God. The seed was being choked. (I'd like to think, though, that at some later time, he repented, sold everything and followed Jesus. Whether he did or not, we are not told).

He had chosen to save his own soul but would inevitably lose it, while if he had made the decision to follow Jesus by taking up his cross and dying to his self, living a life of true love and humility and sacrifice, trusting in his Master for his daily provision, he would have been among those who were losing their souls (their earthly comforts and sinful lifestyles) for the sake of Christ, only to find their souls again in the kingdom; he would've been listed among those who were fit for service, who put their hand to the plough and did not look back; he would've been a wise man building his tower on a solid foundation or the king who asks for peace from the opposing stronger King by giving up everything he has (cf. Matthew 16:24-27; Luke 9:59-62; 12:32-34; 14:25-33).

Now this doesn't mean that every disciple of Jesus has to sell everything and have no earthly possessions, but the willingness to do so, if necessary, needs to be there, and the principle of total abandonment to God has to be accepted. Anything less is not true discipleship. Ultimately, we don't own anything - it's all His! I do think though that this kind of instruction was particularly relevant to that unique era in many respects.

He who is greatest in the kingdom of the heavens and who will be given real authority and great wealth, is the one who truly serves God by loving and serving others in a true child-like spirit of humility and meekness – in the footsteps of the Lord and Master Whom they follow; the King Who washes His servants feet (Matthew 18:1-5; Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; John 13:1-17).

Focusing again on the parable, notice here that the main 'thorns' mentioned above are worry and deceit, especially the deceitfulness of riches. There is certainly a message here for the Church today. Worry is a form of unbelief because it is a result of not trusting God. This path will inevitably cause us to be unfruitful, as worry and unbelief are chokers of faith and peace. But if we want to become fruitful followers of God then we need to learn to believe God's Word and talk to Him in prayer, leaving all things, including the worry, with the One Who truly is the Almighty Creator and Father of us all.

As Paul said to the Philippians,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:6-7 NIV)

And as Peter also said,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.**

(1 Peter 5:6-7 NIV)

### Which Master: God or Money?

The seductions of the flesh and the world are numerous, but the seduction of riches and greed is one of the big ones. Most people today (at least in the western nations) are living for these things – and even the Church has a new 'prosperity gospel' that encourages Christians to seek material gain by 'sowing your seed-faith' of money to reap greater money and riches! But is this teaching really new?

Apparently not, for Paul spoke the following to Timothy concerning those who thought that godliness (that is, to be devoted to God and reflect His character) was a means to financial gain, which many should take heed to in these extremely seductive days.



But **godliness with contentment** is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. **For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.** Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

(1 Timothy 6:6-11 NIV)

What Paul is basically saying here, if I may paraphrase it, is “Don’t get too fond of money and don’t aim at getting rich. If you do, you’ll surround yourself with painful trials that will destroy you and lead you away from the truth. Run away from these things as a true follower of God. Be content with the basic things of life (which he refers to here as ‘food and clothing’), and chase after true righteousness and godliness and faith and love, at the same time being willing to endure and suffer in a spirit of gentle submission, going without in this world if necessary for the sake of the gospel.”

Now this is radically different from the message of the world today, and sadly, from what many in the Church are preaching and teaching as well! This is not to say that money or material things are wrong in themselves. If we are blessed with such things, as most of us are today, especially in the West, then we thank God for such comforts. But the bottom line is this: we cannot serve two masters; it is either God or money (Matthew 6:24). It's a matter of Heart-Priority.

There is nothing wrong with seeking to walk in health and blessing. After all, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and should be cared for as such, and the Spirit of God and of Christ within us should have an effect on our mortal bodies as we walk in the Spirit. Nevertheless, the focus of our prosperity should be on truth and love. This is the real prospering of the soul.

Dear friend, **I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.** It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

(3 John 2-4 NIV)

## Sowing and Reaping

There is one passage of Scripture in the New Testament that talks about sowing and reaping in the context of money and that is 2 Corinthians 9:5-15, but the focus of this passage is not on the money or financial gain. Paul was talking to the Corinthians about the monetary gift that they promised to contribute on behalf of the fellow saints back in Judea and Jerusalem. The believing Jews there were in great need due to a famine in that area. So Paul was collecting a gift from the assemblies of the nations where he was ministering to take back to the needy in Judea. Paul saw this giving as an important part of the gospel message and he mentions it in a number of his letters.

In verses 6-7, he lays down the principle that *'he who sows (or gives) sparingly, shall also be reaping sparingly, and he who sows generously, shall also be reaping generously.'* As Jesus taught, *'it is more blessed to give than to receive'*, so the more one gives, whether it be money or something else, especially to those in need, then the more they will be blessed in return. But this blessing or reaping is primarily spiritual, although God may choose to bless that person with material things as well. Then the more we are blessed with, the more we can give, and so on.

Paul goes on to say that God loves a cheerful giver, one who gives because they really want to, but he does not say that we *have* to give or that we *have* to tithe when we are unhappily forced to do so. We should give because we know that this is the way of love, and we should give what we have decided to give, and not what someone says we should give – and that includes 'forced' tithing!

Tithing is not something that should be forced on the Body of Christ as though we are still under Law. Many Pastors and leaders today misuse scriptures on tithing to rob the people so as to feed their own desires and plans, and to keep their ministries going. In God's sight this is an abomination, where they are preaching law and not grace. Paul says that those who do not proclaim true grace in accordance with the true message of the gospel, and distort it instead, "Let him be anathema," that is, treated as cursed (Galatians 1:6-9).

Yet in relation to giving, we should also be wise as to where we place our gifts, that is, we must be careful as to whom we are giving the gift, and the purpose of the gift. For example, it is a common thing these days to come across many drug addicts that will often scrounge and use elaborate lies to get money, and giving it to them will only feed their habit. In my naïveté, I have succumbed to these kinds of tricks a number of times in the past - and some of them were very convincing! But it is better to offer them some food and drink or clothes rather than money if they are in genuine need – and then pray for their deliverance. Only those believers who are especially called to this kind of ministry are usually in a position to offer any further help and on-going support to the homeless and the addicts. Most of these needy ones need professional help and care.

There are also numerous charities and Christian organisations around today, but some of them can even be deceptive or unwise as to how they actually use their money. If each of us gave to every charity and good cause, we'd have to start a charity for ourselves! We need to learn how to be wise and good stewards of all that God has given us as His Spirit leads us. And we must always remember: God is ultimately the Master Who owns everything anyway!

Paul continues,

**'And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.**

As it is written:

"They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;  
their righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God...'

(2 Corinthians 9:8-12 NIV)

The sole purpose of God blessing us and multiplying our 'seed' is so that we may bless others with the blessings we have received. The growth and the enrichment based on our generosity (the sowing and the reaping) that Paul is referring to here is primarily spiritual, but it can also include material blessing as well – but not for getting rich so that we can have a comfortable, easy life, and become complacent and greedy. Yet the principle stands that whatever measure we use in giving to others, the same will be measured to us (Luke 6:38). But this isn't some kind of 'pyramid scheme' (though it is often presented as such), because the true principles of God are always the opposite of man's ways.

### Be Content

The key word in both passages above is contentment. Whatever our circumstances and position in life, we need to learn to be content. Paul learned to be content whether he was in need (and that included going hungry and suffering all sorts of trials) or whether he was abounding in all things and doing rather well. His strength came from the invigorating Spirit of Christ within him, and he was aware that God would take care of him and give him everything he needed, whatever he was called to do (Philippians 4:11-13,19). And Paul followed the greatest example of all – Jesus, Who said,

"You seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

(Matthew 6:33 FT)

In all of these examples of sowing and reaping, the most important thing is our spiritual walk with God. It is a spiritual principle that if we sow for our own flesh, from the flesh we shall reap dark and corrupt things that can only end in death; whereas if we sow for the Spirit, from the Spirit we shall reap good things that leads to real life that shall last for the ages to come (that is, eternal life).

For this reason, believers shouldn't be despondent about doing good things for others, for in due season we shall be reaping the benefits and rewards *if we do not become weary and give up*. Therefore, as we have occasion to do so, under the Lordship of Christ in obedience to the gospel, we should be working for the good of all, yet *especially* for our brothers and sisters in the faith (Galatians 6:7-10).

Paul also gave some good advice to Timothy concerning believers who were already materially rich.

Command those who are rich in this present world (*or age*) not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, **who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment**. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm

foundation for the coming age, **so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.**

(1 Timothy 6:17-19 NIV)

As most of us would be considered rich by 1<sup>st</sup> century standards, we should assume that Paul is addressing us, reminding us here that the reality of eternal life and the kingdom of God is *spiritual*, for it is not a matter of food and drink and material things, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). The real treasure that gives us a sure foundation for the future kingdom is our righteous acts of faith, which is the *fruit* of the gracious work of God's Holy Spirit within us. This gives us a glimpse of what life really is, and shall be, in the heavenly kingdom. And whatever we truly treasure, whether it be earthly or heavenly, that is where our hearts will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

### The Good Soil

Returning to the parable of the sower, Jesus continued,

"But that which was sown on **the good soil** is the man who hears the word and understands it, **who by all means is fruitful and produces a crop – some a hundred, some sixty or some thirty times what was sown.**"

(Matthew 13:23 FT)

The seed that was sown on the good soil represents the one who hears the word and understands it, and who perseveres to produce a crop, that is, to bear fruit. Jesus was revealing here that there would also be those amongst the people who possessed a good and noble heart, who would receive the truth of God and understand it; *and they would also endure to the end, producing fruit fit for the kingdom*. The individual harvest may vary amongst those who persevere in the truth, but they all will, nevertheless, multiply their seed.

These are the ones who become fruitful, who mature and become perfect. Yet take note that the harvest yield that they produce may be varied – 100, 60 or 30 times what was sown – yet, nevertheless, *they all bear fruit*.

There are a number of passages spoken by Jesus and Paul that reveal the graded rewards or chastening given to God's servants at the Judgment. This is in accord with the measure of fruit (or service) that each believer bears in his or her lifetime as a disciple.

Jesus spoke of 'many lashes' or 'few lashes' being given to disobedient servants (Luke 12:41-49); as well as those who would be *least* in the kingdom of heaven due to their disobedience, while the faithful obedient ones would be called *great* in the kingdom (Matthew 5:19-20); and Paul spoke of believers receiving rewards (or wages) for their 'building materials' in their service of the kingdom, with some forfeiting their reward, though they themselves would be saved – as through fire! (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

When Paul spoke of 'running for the prize' in the race of faith (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27), I think that he was referring to the goal of gaining the reward of '100-fold' crops, building with the right materials that will stand the test of God's fire, and

avoiding the lashes of chastening! Therefore, it does really matter how we live, and how we teach; what we believe, and whether we endure – all in God's grace.

As we shall see from the figures used in some of the other parables, the faithful obedient remnant are equivalent to the good and faithful servants who serve wisely and double their talents or minas; or the wise virgins who are prepared to meet their Bridegroom; or the little flock who hear their Shepherd's voice; or the pruned, yet fruitful branches of the Vine; or those who are accepted into the wedding feast, etc.

These are the true Israel of God, the believing Firstfruit-remnant of the nation that would form the new nation of the kingdom, the Bride. And as Jesus began to reveal during His ministry, this spiritual Bride-nation or flock was also to include sheep from another fold, those from the nations, to form what Paul calls the Joint-Body of Christ (John 10:16; Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:6-7).

Throughout Jesus' teaching, we see that things were very black and white, cut and dry, straight down the line. There's no sitting on the fence here. Depending on the context, a person was either fruitful or unfruitful; a good tree that produced good fruit or a bad tree that produced bad fruit; a lamb or a wolf; wheat or darnel; good fish or rotten fish; a wise servant or a foolish servant; a faithful steward or an unfaithful steward; for Jesus or against Him; gatherers of the fruit or scatterers; sheep of His flock or not sheep of His flock; chosen or not chosen.

We either belong to the called-out Assembly (Gk. *ekklesia*) of God or we belong to the world under the jurisdiction of Satan. Those who claim to belong to the congregation of God will be tested to show their true allegiance to their King, for judgment begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). It did then, and it still does today.