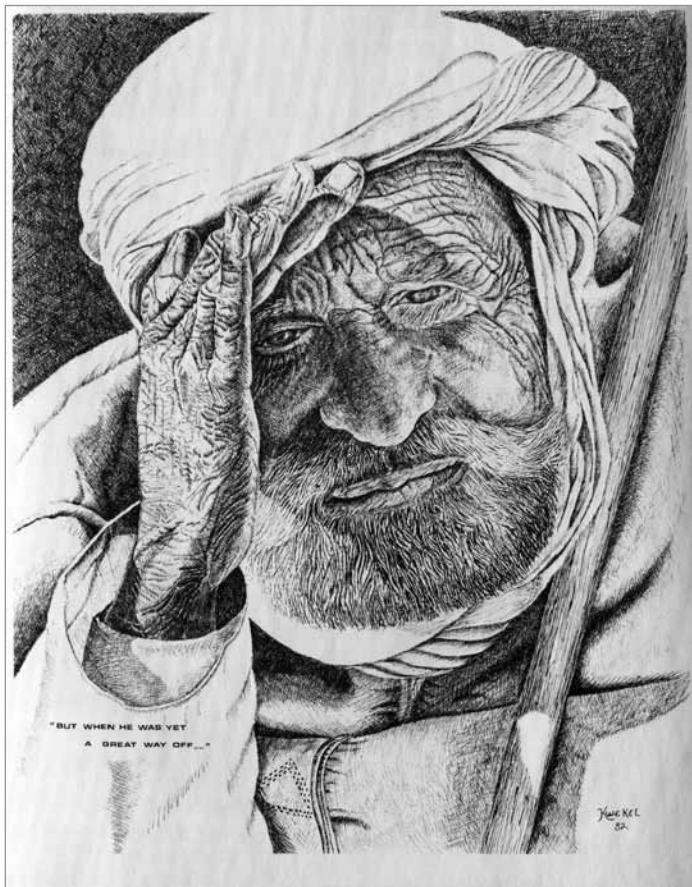


*Glory*  
**VEILED AND UNVEILED**



"BUT WHEN HE WAS YET  
A GREAT WAY OFF..."

Kane Kell  
SA

*Glory*  
**VEILED AND UNVEILED**

**A Heart-Searching Look  
at Christ's Parables**

Gerald M. Bilkes



Reformation Heritage Books  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Glory Veiled and Unveiled*  
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*To Michelle,*  
**with love**



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## *Introduction*

You have likely read the parables of Christ before, perhaps many times. But have *they* read *you*? This question will probably seem very strange at the outset. “How can passages read me?” you wonder. “Words on a page don’t have eyes or a mind so that they can read me. Besides, I am not a book full of pages with words to be read.”

Admittedly, we don’t typically think or talk like this. Yet we miss something important as a result. Think of what happened when the prophet Nathan came to David the king with the parable of the young lamb (2 Sam. 12:1–6). It ended up revealing the sin in David’s life that, until that point, he had been unable to see. Nathan’s parable acted as a searchlight on David’s heart and uncovered something that David had been concealing beneath layers of excuses and attempts to suppress his guilt. David grasped the parable that day. But, more importantly, the parable grasped him.

Without a doubt, it was the Holy Spirit who was working in David to produce accurate self-knowledge. But this parable was the means used to that end. It should be no surprise that the Spirit loves to use the Word. After all, He has inspired it (2 Peter 1:21). He is pleased to use it to bring sinners to a true and saving knowledge of God and themselves (John 16:8–14).

Yet many today are content to read the Bible in a way in which the Word of God is subject to them, rather than reading so *they* are subject to the Word. They study the Bible—so they think—but the Bible does not study them. They may even “search the Scriptures,” but the Scriptures fail to search them.

### **Experimental Reading of the Bible**

There are many books on the parables that are readily available. I did not simply wish to distill from their findings or duplicate their efforts. The concern of this book, rather, is to help students of Scripture read the parables in a way that takes into account that Scripture is searching us; we ought, then, to expect Scripture to transform us.

When we expect God to use His Word to search and change us, we take what theologians have called the “experimental” (or “experiential”) approach to the Scriptures. In fact, when you come to Scripture truly believing it to be what it claims to be—the Word of God—and submitting to its scrutiny of all of your life, then you are reading the Word experimentally. Psalm 119 is one glorious expression of experimental reading, and verse 130 states it succinctly: “The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple.”

The problem is that by nature everything is out of order in our lives. We don’t see things as they truly are. Sin has drawn a veil over our hearts, and we love this darkness rather than the light (John 3:19). By nature, we have lost the sense of being subject to God and accountable to Him. Actually, it is even worse than that. We actively rebel against His authority and transgress His laws (Rom. 8:7). We imagine we can make God submit to us. We make His Word the object of our scru-

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tiny, rather than submitting ourselves to its scrutiny. Many Bible students and teachers think they understand the Bible, and yet they do not subject their lives to it. They “understand” the Bible like a band of rebels might understand the laws of a government against which they fight every day.

But thankfully, through the equipping work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, people throughout the centuries have learned to read and explain Scripture in a truly experimental way. Anyone who has read Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Calvin, John Bunyan, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards—just to name a few—will have had a taste of this. And yet, in recent years, universities, churches, and people everywhere have avoided and derided experimental reading. Truly, “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14).<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes people will tell you that experimental interpretation of Scripture is something superimposed upon Scripture. They imagine it as an “extra” that comes from mystically inclined minds, those who are not content with the plain meaning of Scripture. Admittedly, there has been a stream of interpreters throughout the centuries who have done a lot to give credence to this charge. But the abuse of experimental interpretation doesn’t mean it is not necessary or useful when done properly.

## How This Book Is Organized

There are between thirty-five and sixty of Christ’s parables recorded in Scripture, depending on how they are counted. I

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1. For more on this, see my “Heart-Reading: Recovering a Spiritual Approach to Scripture,” *Puritan Reformed Theological Journal* 1, no. 2 (2009): 12–22.

have selected about twenty-five of them. Those who are interested in further study will be able to apply the method used in this book to other parables.

At times, when several of the parables deal with one topic, I have grouped them together into one chapter. I have not set out to give each parable an exhaustive treatment. Instead, I aim to point out overarching themes and pursue avenues of application for each parable covered. I have formatted the chapters in such a way as to assist in personal or group Bible study. There are questions at the end of each chapter that aim to help the reader further digest the parable.

In the interest of demonstrating how the parables should be read experimentally, I have arranged each chapter according to four categories:

1. *The Scenery*: How does Christ use the context, setting, background, and culture reflected in the parable to reach within human hearts?
2. *The Substance*: What is the main message that Christ gives in the parable about His kingdom or aspects of it?
3. *The Savior*: What does the parable unveil about the glorious Savior, His person and His work, to those who believe?
4. *The Searchlight*: In what ways does the parable search our hearts and lives and expose what is in them, as well as guide us into the knowledge of Christ as the gracious and glorious king of the kingdom?

## *Approaching the Parables*

## *Awakening to Glory*



### **THE RADIANCE OF THE SCRIPTURES**

(Isaiah 6:1–10)

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

—ISAIAH 6:1–4



Frequently, the Bible tells us of someone who, as it were, wakes up to the reality of the glory of the Lord. Isaiah certainly experienced this in the vision he records in Isaiah 6. The Lord allowed him to see within the throne room of heaven, and there he saw the majesty of the Lord (vv. 1–2). Christ later explained that what Isaiah saw on that occasion was His glory (John 12:41). On the one hand, this experience of the glory of the Lord left Isaiah feeling undone (v. 5). On the other hand, it mastered him to such an extent that he was willing to go and preach the coming kingdom of God (v. 8).

Earlier, Moses had a similar experience in the desert of Horeb (Ex. 3:1–2). While tending Jethro’s sheep, he saw a great sight that proved to be life-altering for him—an appearance of the glory of the Lord. Moses saw a bush burning, but not burning up. In the end, God explained from the bush that He had come down to deliver His people. When Moses awoke to the reality of God speaking to him in glory, like Isaiah, he responded in absolute fear and dread. We read that he “hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex. 3:6).

You could say that both of these experiences were awakening experiences. Until then, these men had not known or seen the radiance and splendor of the glory of God. But when God’s glory appeared to them, they were completely

transformed. They felt their insignificance and sinfulness. But ultimately they were mastered by the glory of God to serve Him.

Once, Peter literally awoke to the glory of the Lord. He was with two other disciples who had come to a mountain in Galilee to pray. It was the occasion that we know as the transfiguration of Christ. For some reason, Peter and the others were asleep during the first part of this transfiguration. Then we read, “And when they were awake, they saw his glory” (Luke 9:32). Christ was there in glory, and His face and clothes shone as the disciples had never seen before. Moreover, they heard a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son: hear him” (Luke 9:35). What an awakening that must have been!

### **God’s Glorious Word**

Many imagine that hearing a voice from heaven would be a wonderful experience. “That would be glorious,” they think, “far surpassing anything we have in the Scriptures.” But the apostle Peter, who was there, writes, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy” than a voice from heaven (2 Peter 1:19). By this “more sure word” he means the Scriptures. In other words, if you had given Peter the choice between a voice from heaven or the written Word of God, he would have decidedly chosen the latter. To him the Scriptures were eminently glorious.

The matter is really quite simple. Since the Word of God is what it professes to be—the Word of God—it comes with a glory second to none. Let’s think for a moment together about what *glory* actually is. We sometimes speak of a glori-

ous day, and by that we typically mean a day with a lot of sunshine. Because of the luster of the sunshine, we see the magnificence of everything more easily and readily than on a cloudy and dreary day.

This helps illustrate how the Bible understands glory. According to the Bible, glory is the splendor that flows from a person's authority. In Hebrew, the word we translate as *glory* literally means "weight." It is what you would feel if a king or other important person were in your presence. You would feel small in comparison with that person's importance, similar to how you might feel when you see the splendor of creation in the brilliant light of the sun. If we sense this feeling with some great person here on earth or in creation around us, how much more should we feel this with regard to God Himself, who has made all of creation and is greater than all.

### **Glory Veiled**

One of the main reasons many who handle Scripture do not see its profound, sin-exposing, life-altering glory is they do not submit to it as God's Word. Somehow, in theory and practice, the Word of God has been reduced to merely human words. Thus the glory is gone, at least from the minds and experience of the readers. The Word of God seems common and ordinary, more human than divine. Our natural minds are blind to the weight of the glory of Scripture.

In order, then, to read the Scriptures experimentally, as they should be read, we need to recognize, register, and respond inwardly to the glory they possess as the Word of God. However, with the parables of Christ, we need to real-

ize that something more is going on. In the parables, Christ is intentionally veiling or concealing His glory and the glory of His kingdom.

Many miss this point. They imagine Jesus spoke in parables simply to make His teaching easy, simple, and alluring for anyone who heard them. But if this was the case, why, then, did so many fail to appreciate the parables? Especially those in authority rejected their teaching (e.g., Matt. 21:45–46). Christ Himself explained what He was doing when He answered the disciples' question about why He chose to speak in parables. He states it this way: "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them" (Mark 4:11–12). In other words, in the parables Christ is veiling His glory to conceal it from some, although He is ultimately revealing it to others.

The veiling of Christ's glory began already when He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary. Think of how He was conceived and born in relative obscurity. He grew up and reached adulthood, still hidden from the public eye. Not until He was thirty years old did He begin His public ministry. Truly, He was laying aside His glory in these things. Even as He began His work in public, He concealed His glory from the multitudes, though from time to time He would unveil something of it in His teaching and miracles.

In fact, even His disciples did not understand the full meaning of many things that Christ was teaching. It was as

if the truths about which He spoke were hidden, or veiled. Proverbs 25:2 makes an interesting observation regarding this: “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.” As the divine Son of God, it was Christ’s prerogative to *conceal*. As strange as it sounds, Christ ultimately would prove Himself more glorious by first hiding that glory.

Let me give a simple example to which we can all relate. Think of how much more intriguing it is to receive a gift that is wrapped, even with simple paper, than to receive a gift without wrapping. The wrapping begs to be taken away so the gift can be seen. So too the parables “wrap” the glory of Christ. Those who are spiritually blind—and thus are without humble, teachable faith—are blind to this glory. They see only the plain “wrapping,” and because there is no true faith, they never receive what is inside. They might find a certain measure of attraction in these simple stories, but the mysteries of the kingdom and the king of the kingdom are hid to them. Those who believe, on the other hand, are shown something of this king and kingdom.

### **The Ancient Tabernacle**

Another helpful comparison is the ancient tabernacle, a special symbol of God’s reign of grace among His people. His glory was certainly concealed there, as He sat enthroned between the cherubim. The tabernacle used many coverings and veils that hid items of glory and mystery. To many people it was only a little tent with a lot of curtains around it; it was not the hallmark of anything glorious or divine. Interestingly, the items in the tabernacle were quite ordinary and

everyday kinds of things. We would say, colloquially speaking, there was a fireplace, a washbasin, a candlestick, a table with bread, a footstool, and a few more such things. Without eyes of faith, the Israelites would never have been able to understand what all these things truly meant, and so they would have derived no spiritual benefit from them at all. The mystery of God's gracious kingship would have been hidden from their eyes. But when an Israelite looked with faith at what was happening in the temple, the things he saw would reveal something of God and His glorious kingdom.

Just as the tabernacle and the items inside contained both veiled and revealed truth, so too the parables used very ordinary things to both conceal and reveal God's grace and glory. In using parables, Christ was, as it were, taking His disciples by the hand and leading them through the everyday things and situations of life into the message of the kingdom. What could seed in the earth say about the kingdom? Or a woman seeking a lost coin? An unjust steward? Virgins waiting for a wedding? In each of these cases, the ordinary first seems to veil the glorious, but then, to the humble inquirer, it also reveals it. Even Christ stoops to hide Himself in the ordinary stuff of the parables—in the sower, in the treasure in the field, in the pearl, and in the prodigal's father.

### **Glory Unveiled**

In order to see the glory that Christ has concealed in the parables and throughout the Scriptures, we need to have our spiritual eyes opened. By the work of His Holy Spirit, the Lord needs to make us humble and teachable. We need faith to believe what we cannot understand with our fallen minds.

We need to have the darkness of our minds driven back. We need the hindrances in our hearts and lives exposed and broken down. We need to become disciples who ask the Lord to “declare unto us the parable...” (Matt. 13:36).

What happens when the Lord unveils that glory? It is like what Paul pictured in 2 Corinthians 3:7–18. He refers to the time when God revealed His glory on Mount Horeb to instruct the people of Israel and to set up His kingdom among them. Many had some initial sense that something special was happening. However, they soon failed to see anything glorious about it and turned aside to wicked idolatry (Ex. 32:1). To them God’s glory was concealed. But God revealed His glory to Moses, and in Moses at least, this revelation effected a change. His face shone to such an extent that he had to cover it when he returned from the mountain. When God’s Word impacts us experimentally, it effects a change “from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18).

How we need this glory to change us by transcribing itself upon our hearts and lives! Ultimately, this change is the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13–15). May He work so that when we read the parables, they indeed read and take control of us. May He search our hearts as we search the Scriptures, and thus may they have thoroughgoing effect on our heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5).

## Questions

1. Why don’t most people see the true glory of the Scriptures?
2. Read 1 Samuel 4:19–22. The wife of Phinehas understood the significance of glory and what

it meant for it to be gone. What happens when churches and people treat the Bible in a way in which they don't see its glory? How does this sense of the glory of God return where it has been lost?

3. How did God veil and unveil His glory in the tabernacle? How does this compare to what He does in His Word?
4. Many people think of the parables as nice stories, illustrating lovely points of God's truth. Why is it a problem to study the parables like that?
5. Christ quoted Isaiah 6:9–10 on the great day of parables (Matt. 13:14–15). Compare what Isaiah saw in Isaiah 6 and what the people should have seen the day Christ spoke those words.
6. Is it realistic to think that every time we read the Scriptures, we ought to see the glory of Christ in them?





## *The King of Glory*



### **THE MYSTERY OF THE PARABLES**

(Matthew 13:10–17)

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

—MATTHEW 13:10–11

Imagine this scenario that has occurred many times throughout history: A conquering king has subdued a neighboring country and banished the original king. The original king, however, sends representatives, who spread reports among his people about his plans to retake the country. Often these reports would be *in code*, so that if the occupying king learned about it, he would not necessarily understand all the dynamics of the plans. The message was intentionally “locked,” or veiled. Nevertheless, those for whom the message was intended were able to “unlock,” or unveil, the code.

Now imagine that the king himself would come, moving among his people, but hiding his identity from them, to announce the imminent return of his kingdom and how it will be accomplished. Can you imagine the momentum building and loyalties being strengthened as the disguised king himself gave firsthand reports about the coming kingdom?

This is exactly how the parables functioned in Christ’s ministry. The prophets had come before, teaching the people many things about the coming king and His kingdom. But now Christ Himself was on the scene. So these familiar and appealing stories in Scripture are actually messages *in code* of the kingdom of heaven from the king Himself. In fact, the

king Himself came veiled in flesh, announcing and explaining His one-of-a-kind-kingdom.

Many did not understand what was happening. Some were repulsed by whatever they did understand about the message. Others found themselves strangely drawn to the message of these parables and to the One who was speaking them. These parables fostered a mysterious hope in them. It also exposed the emptiness of their hearts apart from this king and their rebellion, hardness, and unbelief with respect to Him. Above all, these parables drew them out of themselves and to the feet of the king, whose reign they deeply desired. Thus the parables gloriously and mysteriously were extending God's kingdom in people's hearts as they gave the message of the kingdom in code. Through them Christ was extending His kingdom and mastering many hearts.

### **The Scenery**

We might define parables as *comparisons, with scenarios and stories drawn from everyday life in order to conceal and reveal spiritual truth relating to the kingdom of heaven*. Christ used the stuff of creation and life as it was lived every day as code for His message about the kingdom.

Think of the rich and varied scenery He used in parables. There are agricultural scenes—a sower going out to sow, or a fig tree being examined by the husbandman to see whether it is bearing fruit. There is a threshing floor. There are vines and vineyards. There is a shepherd with his sheep. There is a woman in her house. There is a wedding scene with bridesmaids waiting to attend a bride. There is a marriage banquet, where guests come dressed in wedding clothes. There is an

estate on which a father lives with his two sons and hired servants. There are two men building houses in different locations—one on rock, one on the sand. There is a traveling scene where a man is attacked by robbers as he makes his way from one place to another. What common, everyday scenes! Think of Christ's use of common elements—of pearls, leaven, oil, coins, and sheep. Jesus did so much with the ordinary things of life!

As the Son of God, Christ had created all these things, seen and unseen. But in His human nature, He studied this glory that His own eternal hands had made. In fact, in the parables Christ harnessed the glory of His own creation and used it as the code to convey most splendidly the glory of His kingdom.

### **The Substance**

What did Christ convey in code? The parables are not intended to teach general lessons and morals without any coherent, consistent focus. Instead, when Jesus began to teach in parables, He specifically did so in order to reveal the kingdom of God. So many of the parables begin that way. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like..." (e.g., Matt. 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47). Moreover, when the disciples ask Christ, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" He answered, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matt. 13:10–11).

What is meant by "the kingdom of heaven"? This kingdom can be defined as *the gracious reign of God in the hearts of His people by faith in His Son, the king of the kingdom*. This kingdom is invisible to the human eye, but it operates in

hearts throughout the world and is moving to a final culmination at the second coming of Christ.

Christ did not unveil this substance all at once. When we study the parables in order, as accurately as we can reconstruct that order, we see a pattern develop. At first, Christ dealt largely with the idea of the *coming of the kingdom* in parables about such things as the sower sowing, the strong man bound, and the seed growing secretly in the earth. The gospel writer Matthew has recorded most of these parables for us. Next, Christ spoke more in depth of the *grace of the kingdom*. Think of the parables of the good Samaritan, the great supper, and the prodigal son. The gospel writer Luke has recorded most of these parables for us. Finally, as Christ approached Jerusalem, the focus of the parables shifted again—this time toward *Christ's return*, an event that would mark a radical division in the kingdom. Think of the parable of the man without the wedding garment (Matt. 22:1–14), the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13), and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46).

It is also interesting to notice that the only two parables recorded in the book of John focus on Christ's revealing Himself: the parable of the sheepfold (10:1–18), and the parable of the vine and the branches (15:1–17). Certainly, all of these topics relate to the kingdom of heaven and aim to subdue our hearts and minds to its reign of grace.

### **The Savior**

The parables are about more, however, than just the kingdom in code. Ultimately, Christ is the subject of the parables. The glory of the parables is derived from His glory as the king

of the kingdom. Ultimately, He is the one who has come to sow the Word of God (Matt. 13:37). He is the one digging around the fig tree (Luke 13:8). He is the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44, 46). He is the one who, through His messengers, is graciously inviting people to a great supper of God (Luke 14:23). He is the bridegroom, who is soon to come for His church (Matt. 25:13). He is the shepherd who goes out to find the lost sheep (Luke 15:5). Who is the father in the parable of the prodigal son, other than God through Christ looking while prodigals are still a long way off (Luke 15:20)? All the parables that speak of grace enfold Christ, at whose expense that grace will be dispensed. When by faith you look in the rearview mirror at all the parables, you realize it is the *king* of the kingdom whose portrait is like a watermark throughout. What rich insights there are in the parables into the person and work of the Redeemer, for those who believe!

### **The Searchlight**

When His disciples asked Him why He taught in parables, Christ quoted Isaiah 6:9–10: “Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed” (see, e.g., Matt. 13:10–17). It was when people, especially the leaders, began to reject Him and His teaching that Christ began using parables. They unveil the truth of the kingdom to believers but veil and therefore hide it from unbelievers. How do they do that?

*First, the parables read our hearts.* The glory of Christ in the parables acts like an X-ray, unmasking and exposing the evil in our hearts. When, for instance, Christ speaks in the parable of the sower of the stony ground, He is exposing the hardheartedness that is so common among hearers of the word. Think of how the parable of the rich fool exposes our greediness and selfish spirit, as we think we have our lives all in order, with many goods stored up for years. Think of how the parable of the good Samaritan indicts us for our coldness in the name of religion and our mercilessness to those in need of mercy. In these and many other instances, Christ is pointing out the need for our hearts to be changed.

*Second, the parables transcribe Christ's rule upon our hearts.* Paul writes similarly in 2 Corinthians 3:3: "Ye are... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." Often, the parables challenge us in a way that requires a response. They give directions, encouragements, or warnings. Think of the parable of the friend at midnight, which ends with these words: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Luke 11:9). Or think of the ending to the parable of the unmerciful servant. There Christ gives us this warning: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matt. 18:35).

This is also how Christ's parables become gloriously effective in the lives of believers. Our hearts need to become places where the glory of Christ and His cross reside—like glory in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7): veiled in a certain sense, and yet also reflecting the beauty and kingly glory of Christ.



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## Questions

1. If you had to choose a favorite parable, which would it be? Why?
2. Define the kingdom of heaven. How and why do the parables speak about the kingdom in code, or in a veiled way? Are we used to talking about the kingdom as much as Christ did?
3. Many people think of the parables almost as sermon illustrations, which simplify a spiritual point for hearers. According to Matthew 13:10–13, is this accurate?
4. A simple believer will understand a parable like an unbelieving scholar never will. Do you agree? How would that work with, for example, the parable of the two builders (Matt. 7:24–27)?
5. Nathan told David a parable in order to search his heart (2 Sam. 12:1–6). Give an example of how one of Christ's parables might function as a searchlight.



*The Glory of the Kingdom:*  
**Some Parables in Matthew and Mark**

## *The Glory of Kingdom Reception*



### **THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

(Mark 4:1–20)

The sower soweth the word.... And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

—MARK 4:14, 20

The gospels give the parable of the sower a prominent place in the record of Christ's ministry. Three of the gospels record it, along with the interpretation that Christ gives of it (Matt. 13:1-8; Mark 4:1-8; Luke 8:5-8). Basically, Christ uses the process of agricultural production, from sowing to harvesting, to signify the spiritual restoration that God works in grace, otherwise known as the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 13:19, "the word of the kingdom").

Christ did not derive this agricultural theme as a symbol for the kingdom of God simply from nature. The Old Testament contains many promises of spiritual restoration, and a number of them use the imagery of seed being sown (see, e.g., Ps. 126:5-6; Jer. 31:27-28; Hos. 2:23). The prophets also used the picture of agricultural devastation to symbolize judgment (see, e.g., Isa. 34:9-15).

It is not surprising, then, that Christ uses the picture of a sower and his seed. But what *is* surprising is that the sower in this parable sows on *four* soils, with only *one* of them producing fruit. Christ clearly was intending to highlight the fact that the word of God does not have the same effect everywhere it is sown. Not all gospel preaching yields gospel fruit, and it is the glory of divine omniscience to uncover that.

## The Scenery

The parable introduces us to a sower, seed, and various kinds of soils. It is easy to picture the scene. You don't need to be a farmer to know about the possibility that a planted seed won't sprout and the disappointment that failure would cause. There is nothing that suggests the sower of the parable is ill-equipped or unskillful at what he does. Neither is there a problem with the seed; it is not inferior or corrupt. The problem is with the various kinds of soil.

The first ground Christ portrays is the well-packed earth alongside the field, where perhaps generations of people have walked, hardening the soil until it is impervious to the seed (Mark 4:4). Christ describes hungry fowl, which devour the seed. Just a minute or two after the sower had the seed in his bag and then ran it through his hand, it disappears from the ground into the birds' beaks. The wayside is no better off, and the seed is gone forever.

Next is the stony ground (v. 5). The picture here is of a thin layer of soil under which there is dense rock. The seeds that fall here do germinate, spring up, and take root. But the roots cannot find depth of earth, and when the hot sun beats down on the little seedlings, they shrivel up and lie withered on top of the soil. This is evidence of the rocks just below the surface.

Third is the ground with thorns and thistles (v. 7). Here, the problem is that though there is soil and presumably depth, there are also thorns and thistles. Christ does not state whether these weeds are in seed form or already beginning to sprout, but eventually they choke the sprouting seed.

So Christ details a farmer's familiar nightmare. We can all imagine the farmer's pain at having expended sweat and

toil, and then losing his precious seed to such unproductive ends. When we look at these three soils, we cannot help but think about how this symbolizes the misery of the fall of our first parents. There was no fruitless labor before the fall. But now, thorns, thistles, and wilted plants all attest to the fact that the heart of man itself has become an unproductive field with respect to the Lord, who is the great husbandman (literally, “farmer” [John 15:1]).

Even though the majority of the soils are ultimately unproductive, Christ finally mentions that there is also a good ground. The seed that falls into this good soil bears forth fruit to different degrees: “some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred” (v. 8).

### **The Substance**

The following two points are central to the message of the parable. First, *Christ is showing how the restoration He brings does not have saving effect wherever it comes, yet in the end it will most certainly produce fruit.* Christ’s parable builds upon and fits with the prophecy in Isaiah 55:10–11: “For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” Christ is not comparing His word to the rain, which is mentioned first in this text, but rather to the seed. Nevertheless, in both the prophecy and the parable God’s word is compared to the agent effecting transformation.

Essentially, what Christ is saying is this: “As I have been preaching to you, I have been scattering the seed of the word upon the fields of Israel. Because of your sin, you became a desolate land spiritually, as your prophets abundantly made clear (Isa. 35:1). But now, in my ministry, the seed of the word is coming down on you, and this will continue in the ministry of the apostles. Even then I will be the Sower from heaven through my servants and people. That is how the spiritual restoration will unfold—by the power of My word.”

We can infer from Christ’s teaching here that the word of God should be proclaimed far and wide, even if the seed of the word thereby falls beyond a perfectly prepared or obviously fertile ground. As the Canons of Dort put it, the word should be “declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction” (II, 5). That is what Christ Himself did, and He commanded His apostles no differently (Matt. 28:19–20). It will often seem that much of the seed is wasted when the gospel is preached widely. Isaiah lamented, “Who hath believed our report?” (Isa. 53:1; cf. John 12:38; Rom. 10:16) But it is better for a farmer to labor, sweat, and cast the seed in places where it may not yield fruit than it is for him to assume that he knows exactly which soil is good ground (see Eccl.11:6). So too Christ sends His word into many places and to many people where it will not ultimately yield true, saving restoration.

Second, *Christ is asserting that this ministry of the word will prove which hearts are receptive to the word, and which are not.* In light of the fact that Christ’s parable hooks into Old Testament promises of a coming spiritual restoration, many of His hearers may have thought this parable would bring



good news. If they could have written a different ending to the parable, it might have been like this: "A sower went out to sow, and everywhere he sowed, life and fruitfulness ensued, bringing prosperity and beauty and all manner of success." Many people today want to hear the same kind of news: "Christ will certainly and quickly bring good things into your life. Believe this morning, and you'll see success by evening." This parable proves differently. Only one-quarter of the ground into which the seed falls is fruitful ground. Three out of the four soils prove ultimately unreceptive to the word.

Let's trace more closely what Christ is doing by treating the different soils. As He describes the first three kinds of ground, His all-seeing eye scrutinizes more deeply into human hearts than anyone else ever could. No one knows the heart of man like He.

First, He exposes the wayside hearers. The seed stays on the surface rather than penetrating, and the devil simply takes the word away, "out of their hearts" (Luke 8:12). Can't many, if not all of us relate to this? How many times, after hearing a sermon or reading the Bible, has this happened in our hearts? The word seems to have evaporated as quickly we heard it. Perhaps many of us will take comfort from remembering the times when the word *has* had some effect in our lives. Perhaps we can point out little "shoots" of new life that have sprouted up after we heard the word. But we should heed what Christ says next in this parable.

Next, Christ deals with the rocky soil. In this case, hardness of heart might not be visible on the surface, but it is only an inch or two below the surface. Although there are evidences of new life after the word is preached, Christ fast-

forwards to show us how the young shoots wither under the sun of “affliction or persecution” (Mark 4:17). The cause is this: there was “no root in themselves” (Mark 4:17). Notice it is “themselves” who are to blame, for there is no root in them. Listen to how the Canons of Dort similarly incriminate some hearers of the word: “Others, though they receive it, *suffer it not* to make a lasting impression on their heart” (III–IV, 9). The fault clearly lies in the hearers.

Despite this second revelation from the all-seeing Savior, many professing Christians will again heave a sigh of relief, reminding themselves quickly that they have not “withered away” like others have. After all, they are still under the preaching of the gospel, and they don’t consider themselves withered or rootless. So Christ’s skillful eye probes deeper still, as He treats the third soil.

Christ fast-forwards again and pictures the young shoots in the soil, this time surrounded by thorns and briars. These toxic plants have grown up with such a vengeance that the young plants are defenseless against them. Christ, as it were, points to the thorns and identifies them for us: “cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things” (Mark 4:19). Again the Canons of Dort stress that the hearers themselves are at fault: “Others choke the seed of the word by perplexing cares, and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit” (III–IV, 9). No one can rest comfortably under this diagnosis. Who never feels the sting of cares, the lure of riches, and the quills of harmful desires? Who has not been guilty of choking the word by allowing other things to take priority? When you sense the truth of that, Christ’s

parable has had an experimental effect. You might as well ask with the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" (Mark 10:26).

Thankfully, Christ explains that there is also good ground into which the word falls. He explains what that is: "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" (Luke 8:15). This is the ground on which God has so worked that there is an internal honesty, or as Psalm 51 says, "truth in the inward parts" (v. 6). There is a reception of the word to the point that, through the blessing of the Lord, it is kept, and fruit grows (Mark 4:20). Nothing like this happened in the first three kinds of soil. This is the only ground that yields a harvest. Those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God hear the Word of God, embrace it, and bring forth fruit. It's no wonder that the Lord ended this parable with a cry. "And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8).

### **The Savior**

As Christ speaks this parable, He reveals himself in three ways. First, see Him as the *sovereign*, or king of the kingdom of heaven, whose secrets He is revealing in parables (Mark 4:11). As He speaks parables like this, and through the rest of His teaching as well, He is bringing in the kingdom of grace that the prophets had prophesied.

Second, see Him as the *sower*, who brings this restoration by His word and Spirit. Christ loved the emblem of seed and used it frequently, not in the least because it pictured naturally what happens spiritually, namely, fruitfulness in

the way of humiliation and death. He—the sower—would ultimately become a seed, as He explains later (John 12:24). Moreover, He—the sower—would ultimately be the “good and honest” heart, as He says: “I do always those things that please him” (John 8:29). We can have a good and honest heart only because of His perfectly receptive heart to His Father. We need His payment on the cross for all our hardness of heart with respect to the Lord and His word.

Third, see Him as the omniscient *surgeon*, who diagnoses our spiritual heart condition through this parable and others. Not only does He diagnose our condition, but He also addresses our hearts by His work on the cross. There He obtained the quickening Spirit whereby He renders our hearts pliable and receptive, and so effectually works upon the soil of our hearts, that we hear, receive, and bring forth fruit to His praise and glory.

### **The Searchlight**

This parable searches our hearts regarding how we receive the word of God. Which of the soils most corresponds to our hearts? Even true believers cannot simply comfort themselves that they are “the good soil.” For even after grace, believers struggle with sin and unbelief as it is pictured for us in the first three soils. The ultimate question is this: What do we do after Christ’s glorious omniscience exposes our unreceptive hearts, or unreceptive tendencies in our heart, for what they are?

The disciples here point the way. While other hearers presumably left—thereby revealing that they were not receiving the seed that Christ had just sown—the disciples went

to the Lord, heeding His cry: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 8:8–9). They were not offended by His words, but wanted to hear more of them.

It is important to remember, however, that Judas would have been among the disciples that day. He would prove to be a thorny-ground hearer. He allowed the powerful thorn of the deceitfulness of riches to ultimately choke the word in his life. He betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver. But thankfully the others, despite all the remaining sin in their lives, evidenced ultimately an “honesty before God” and received a continued work of the Sower-Savior in their hearts.

## Questions

1. Christ tells us that the seed is the word (Mark 4:14). We can safely say that He is speaking of the pure, undiluted, and uncontaminated word of God. If this is true, where then are these different grounds Christ is speaking of to be found?
2. Read 2 Timothy 4:10, in which Paul makes reference to Demas. Based on what Paul writes about him, what kind of hearer was Demas, and what powerful thorn choked the word of God in his life?
3. Why didn't the sower just sow on the good ground? What can we learn from this?
4. Think about how hardships can choke the word of God. Describe how you might find that happening in your life now, or how it may have happened to you in the past.
5. Why should we not be content with a shallow Christianity? What can make the “roots” go down deep?