

HEAR AND BE FRUITFUL: AN EXAMINATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER IN LUKE 8:4-8

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ABSTRACT

The parable of the Sower has been traditionally interpreted, focusing mostly on evangelism only. However, in this paper, the researchers highlighted the four possible meanings of the parable, such as evangelism, warning, encouragement, and eschatological aspects of it. The researchers adopted a narrative critical approach in analyzing the parable and its broader meaning in Lukan parables. Thus, Ruben Zimmermann's integrative approach of interpretation of the gospel parables was employed to explore more possible meanings for contemporary Christians. The researchers found that all four possible meanings are appropriate. Therefore, they recommended that Christians in Nigeria and the world at large should live a holy life as they continue to preach and witness Christ, because they will meet with different kinds of people, some of whom will respond negatively and some positively, hence they should not be discouraged, and as they take heed to keep bearing fruit as they await the second coming of Jesus Christ.

KEYWORDS: Parable, Sower, Seed, Soil, and Fruitful.

INTRODUCTION: PARABLES IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Παράβολῃ (parable) is a story in which the characters are mostly not literal but metaphorical, and the meanings depend on the context. Thus, parable is "narrative, fictional, realistic, metaphoric, active in appeal and contextually related" (Zimmermann 137). F. Davidson defines it as "a story or illustration from the natural world and from everyday life which he (Jesus) used to set forth the spiritual world and the spiritual life" (847). In addition, Παράβολῃ (parable) is "a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parable>).

It is noted that the gospel of Luke is praised for how it recounts parables and the greatest number of Jesus' parables, which are about 57, and it uses related stories that are not found in any other literature of early Christianity (Zimmermann 293). Thus, Ruben Zimmermann went further to opine that Luke is "known as a storyteller par excellence among the evangelists" (293). More so, Luke "is particular in dating this parable as spoken at a time when crowds resorted to Jesus, and the cities of Galilee seemed emptied to hear Him" (<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/8-4.htm>).

That is why Dogara Ishaya Manomi writes that “Luke’s parables, unlike Matthew and Mark’s, are not arranged in a compositional order, but in a dispersed format” (199). He further notes that “Luke places the parables in smaller groupings of passages connected by specific themes such as prayer, meal, seeking the lost, etc.” (200). Arland J. Hultgren, in his categorizing of Gospels parables he puts the parable of the Sower under the ‘parables of life before God’ (viii). While Craig L. Blomberg puts it under the ‘complex three-point parables’ (ii). The parable of the Sower has been recorded in Mark 4:2-9; Matthew 13:3-9; Luke 8:4-8; and in the gospel of Thomas 9. Therefore, in this paper, the researchers adopted Ruben Zimmermann’s integrated approach to interpreting gospel parables, which focuses on the context of Text, Reality, Tradition, and Meaning of the parable of the Sower in Luke 8:4-8.

GREEK TEXT OF LUKE 8:4-8

V4. Συνιόντος δὲ ὄχλου πολλοῦ καὶ τῶν κατὰ πόλιν ἐπιπορευομένων πρὸς αὐτὸν εἶπεν διὰ παραβολῆς·

V5. Ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων τοῦ σπείραι τὸν σπόρον αὐτοῦ. καὶ ἐν τῷ σπείρειν αὐτὸν ὁ μὲν ἔπεσεν παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν καὶ κατεπατήθη, καὶ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατέφαγεν αὐτό.

V6. καὶ ἕτερον κατέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν, καὶ φυὲν ἐξηράνθη διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ἱκμάδα.

V7. καὶ ἕτερον ἔπεσεν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἀκανθῶν, καὶ συμφυεῖσαι αἱ ἄκανθαι ἀπέπνιξαν αὐτό.

V8. καὶ ἕτερον ἔπεσεν εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν ἀγαθὴν καὶ φυὲν ἐποίησεν καρπὸν ἑκατονταπλασίονα. ταῦτα λέγων ἐφώνει, Ὁ ἔχων ὦτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω (NA²⁷).

English Translation

V4. When a large crowd was gathering and people from each city were coming to Jesus, he spoke (to them) in parable:

V5. The Sower went out to sow his seed. And as he was sowing, the seed fell by the wayside and trodden down, and the birds of the air devoured it.

V6. And other (seed) fell on the rocky (soil) and as it grows up, it withered because it had no moisture.

V7. And other (seed) fell in midst of the thorns, and as it was growing up, the thorns choked it up.

V8. And other (seed) fell in the good soil, grew up and produced fruit a hundredfold. As he said these things, he called with a loud voice, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

TEXT: ANALYZING THE NARRATIVE ELEMENTS AND CONTEXT

In the pericope to be analyzed, the characters need to be highlighted first to give more light to the parable. Which Manomi says character in parables “refers to human actors in the story, not only individuals, but unified groups as well” (200). In the parable of the Sower in Luke 8:4-8, characters are as follows: the Sower, the seed, the wayside, the trampers, the birds of the air, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil, though the three main characters are the Sower, the first three soils, and the good soil; that is why Blomberg calls it ‘complex three-point parable’ (ii).

Moreover, like the wayside, rocky ground, thorny ground, and good ground can also serve as the space in this parable. 'When the Sower went out' signifies space and cities where Jesus' audience (the great or large crowd) was coming, is also a space, and so also where they met Jesus to teach them. Jesus narrated this parable in Galilee (8:1). As the Sower went out to sow, it signifies the time as the time of sowing, which mostly comes at the beginning of the rainy season, though it depends on what kind of seed one wants to sow, while for each ground giving result signifies the harvest time. While the plot in this parable is verse 4, because it is the introduction/background to the parable, verses 5-8a are the parable itself, while verse 8b is the active appeal of the parable.

Thus, literal and construction analysis of the text has been considered by the researcher as follows:

Introducing the Parable

V.4. Συνιόντος δὲ ὄχλου πολλοῦ καὶ τῶν κατὰ πόλιν ἐπιπορευομένων. Alfred Plummer observes that "the construction is uncertain, and we have a choice of two ways as the καὶ is regarded as simply coordinating, or as epexegetic as (1) 'And when a great multitude was coming together, and they of every city were resorting to Him'. (2) 'And when a great multitude coming together, namely, of those who city by city were resorting to Him'" (217). He further notes that according to number 2 of his translation above, "the multitude consisted wholly of those who were following from different towns (8:1). As no town is named, there was perhaps no crowd from the place itself. Hence, it was the growing multitude that caused Jesus to enter a boat, Matthew 13:2 and Mark 4:1" (217).

εἶπεν διὰ παραβολῆς: The expression occurs nowhere else. Matthew and Mark write ἐν παραβολαῖς λέγων while Luke has εἶπεν διὰ παραβολῆς (Plummer, 218). Thus, verse 4 serves as the background of the parable, which was because of the gathering of the great multitude, causing Jesus to tell them this parable, as it is observed by Manomi that "Luke places the parables in smaller groupings of passages connected by specific themes" (200). This is the style of grouping parables and relating them to certain events or themes by Luke.

The Parable of the Sower

V.5. Ἐξῆλθεν ὁ σπείρων: It is so in all three synoptic gospels accounts: 'The Sower went forth.' Plummer says, "the force of the article is 'he whose business it is to sow': he is the representative of a class who habitually has these experiences" (218). Thus, Jesus here applies what was going on before their eyes. He always uses what was very familiar to his audience to give illustrations in his teachings and sermons. ἐν τῷ σπείρειν αὐτὸν: Plummer also notes that "during his sowing, while he sowed: αὐτὸν is subject not object and refers to ὁ σπείρων not τὸν σπόρον" (218).

παρὰ τὴν ὁδόν: Plummer argues that the seed that fell along the way was "not 'along the way' but 'by the side of the way'" (218). Hence, for him, "it fell on the field, but so close to the road that it was trampled on" (218). I. Howard Marshall posits that trodden the seed underfoot, "the detail may be meant to reflect the contempt which the word of God suffers in the world (Hebrews 10:29)" (319). It is noted that those "who generally flock about places where seed is sowing; and here intend the devil and his

angels, that have their dwelling in the air; and frequent places of public worship to hinder the usefulness of the ministry of the word, as much as in them lies” (Luke 8:5 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/luke-8-5.html>).

V.6. ἐπὶ τὴν πέτρην: Plummer argued here that the rock had a slight covering of soil; and hence is called τὸ πετρῶδες in Mark and τὰ πετρώδη in Matthew, which does not mean “stony ground”, that is full of stones, but “rocky soil”, that is with rock appearing at intervals and with “no depth of earth”. The thinness of the soil would cause rapid germination and rapid withering, but Luke omits the rapid growth. For ἰκμάδα “moisture”, Matthew and Mark have ῥίζαν. The word occurs in Jeremiah 17:8 and Job 26:14, but nowhere else in the New Testament (218). That shows vividly that the soil was not stony ground but rocky with soil in between, but it is not deep enough, which is why the seed on this soil withers very fast in times of drought. The depthlessness of the ground makes the seed vulnerable to dying fruitless. It is worth noting that here the sun represents “trouble and persecution. It’s a picture of trials and suffering. So, by implication, we can say that it’s this trouble and persecution that ripens or matures us too” (Parable of Sower: <https://dontwasteyourpain.org/how-is-the-parable-of-the-sower-relevant-today/>).

V.7 ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἀκανθῶν: Here Plummer observes that “the result of the following was in the midst of the thorns: preposition of rest after a verb of motion compares with 7:17. Luke is fond of ἐν μέσῳ (2:46; 10:3; 21:21; 22:27, 55; 24:36; Acts 1:15 etc.). Elsewhere, it is rare, except in Revelation. Neither Matthew nor Mark has it here” (218-219). συμφύεσθαι: He argues that this word appears “here only in the NT. In LXX only Wisdom 13:13. In Plato and Aristotle, it is transitive: “cause to grow together” (Plummer 219). Hence, it is to be understood that “the good seed fell into ground where young thorns were growing; otherwise, the growing together would hardly be possible” (219).

Furthermore, it has been noted that “indeed the ἀνέβησαν αἱ ἄκανθαι of Matthew and Mark almost implies that the thorns were not yet visible, when the good seed was sown in the midst of them” (Plummer 219). This is the reason that the thorns and the seed grow together. The ἀπέπνιξαν ἀποκτείνῳ means “choked it off”, to exterminate it: compare to the ἀπὸ in ἀποκτείνῳ (Plummer 219). Thus, later as they grew together, the thorns choked the good seed off and were unable to bear fruit.

V.8a. εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν ἀγαθὴν: This means “not merely upon, but into the soil” (Plummer 219). The double article in all three synoptic gospels presents the soil and its goodness as two separate ideas: “the ground (that was intended for it), the good (ground)” (219). Matthew and Mark have καλὴν while Luke has ἀγαθὴν. This repetition of the article - τὴν is especially frequent in John (219). It is worth noting that Luke omits the sixtyfold and thirtyfold of Matthew or the thirtyfold and sixtyfold of Mark, and just directly records the hundredfold. It is said in Genesis 26:12 that “... Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold...” (ESV).

Active in Appeal

V.8b. Ὁ ἔχων ὅτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω: This formula occurs in all three synoptic gospels accounts compared to Luke 14:35; Matthew 11:15; 13:43. In Revelation, the

singular was used; ὁ ἔχων οὐκ ἀκουσάτω (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Thus, Plummer notes that “the introductory ἐφώνει ‘He cried aloud’, indicates a rising of the voice, and gives a solemnity to this concluding charge” (219). This, perhaps, means that the charge was repeated compared with Ezekiel 3:27, which says, “But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and shall say to them, this is what the Sovereign LORD says. Whoever will listen, let him listen and whoever will refuse, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house” (NIV).

REALITY: MAPPING THE SOCIO – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Here, the researchers looked at farming procedures and planting by sowing in the first Century AD Palestinians either illustration was real or not. The farming procedures described in the parable of the Sower, Neal F. Fisher says, “are faithful to the manner in which a Palestinian farmer would have gone about the work. In Palestine, the grain was harvested in June, and the field was left until the sowing time of November or December” (Fisher 94). It is worth noting that:

The ancient method of sowing seed was generally by “broadcasting.” The Sower carried grain seed in a fold of his garment or in a container. He dispersed the seed before him with his hand in a long sweeping motion that extended from the seed supply to the opposite side. In Palestine, the sowing season extended from about October until the first part of March, depending on the kind of grain sown (Sower, Sowing: <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1200014101>).

Fisher further notes that “the field might be plowed after the harvest, but it was not plowed again before the new crop was sowed and thus the Sower who went out to sow was walking across stubble and various thistles which had grown in the shield after the last harvest” (94). For him “the seed in this broadcast method; it was plowed quickly so that the birds will not consume the bulk of the seed” (94). This kind of broadcasting sowing is also being practiced in some parts of Nigeria today as well.

No doubt, as Fisher posits, “it is understandable and logical, therefore, that some of the seed would fall upon the footpath which had been formed by those who had walked through the field” (94). The seed was cast upon the path so that it could be plowed later. Other seeds were consumed by the birds. Yet other seeds fell upon soil that concealed limestone, which lay shallowly under the surface. That seed germinated quickly since the sun warmed the shallow soil, and the germinating plant grew only upward. But lacking an adequate root system, it withered quickly under the blistering heat of the sun (Fisher 94). Another seed fell among thistles, or rather among the seeds of thistle, which would grow quickly but were naturally robbed of light and moisture and yielded nothing, if indeed they could grow at all (Fisher 94).

Despite the fact of all these discouragements, about three types of soil, “there was that seed which fell upon good soil, and the harvest to be reaped from that seed was astounding” (94). Fisher added that a tenfold harvest was good. However, “this seed would yield thirty, sixty, or even hundred-fold” (94) as in Mark and Matthew, but in Luke is only hundredfold. The parable closes with a familiar command, which is Ὁ ἔχων ὅρα ἀκούειν ἀκούτω, and it could be translated as ‘he who has ears to hear, let him hear.’

TRADITION: EXPLORING STOCK METAPHOR AND SYMBOLS

The stock metaphor and symbols are to be considered in relation to the characters in the pericope. That is why Craig L. Blomberg notes that “the imagery of God as Sower and the people of the world as various kinds of soil were standard in Jewish circles” (226). He further says “the imagery of bearing fruit, falling on stony ground, having no root or being choked by thorns was so obviously applicable to people as well as to plants that the interpretation ascribed to Jesus in verses 11-15 is entirely natural” (Blomberg 227). He mentions that “even the birds as Satan fit in with their role as harbingers of evil in Old Testament and intertestamental literature (e.g., 1 Kings 16:4; Jub 11:5-24; Apoc Abr 13)” (Blomberg 227).

In biblical literature, “birds often symbolize various spiritual truths, both positive and negative. Among these, certain birds are associated with evil, desolation, and the presence of demonic forces. This entry explores the concept of “Birds of the Devil and His Spirits” as depicted in the Bible, focusing on their symbolic representation of chaos, judgment, and spiritual desolation (Birds: https://biblehub.com/topical/ttt/b/birds_of_the_devil_and_his_spirits.htm).

Additionally, the imagery of birds “associated with the devil and his spirits serves as a powerful reminder of the reality of spiritual warfare and the presence of evil in the world. These birds symbolize the chaos and desolation that result from turning away from God and embracing sin” (Birds: https://biblehub.com/topical/ttt/b/birds_of_the_devil_and_his_spirits.htm). That is why “the biblical portrayal of birds as symbols of the devil and his spirits is a vivid reminder of the spiritual realities that underlie the physical world” (Birds: https://biblehub.com/topical/ttt/b/birds_of_the_devil_and_his_spirits.htm).

At the same time, the call to careful listening, which frames the parable, suggests that not every detail was entirely self-evident in the parable. Thus, it is best to see the narrative, then, “as one which demanded some kind of interpretation of the primary ‘characters’, but which permitted the rest of the details to fall into place quite naturally” (Blomberg 227). The Sower, perhaps this suggests that “whereas its primary reference is to God, derivative applications to Jesus or his disciples as Sowers of the word (cf. LK 8:11) are entirely appropriate” (227). And “sowing in rabbinical literature is a frequent metaphor for teaching and the conceiving of the teaching of the truth under the analogy of the sowing of seed was common in that period” (Buttrick 147).

Blomberg records that there is “a somewhat fruitless debate has raged over whether sowing preceded plowing in Palestine, which would make the Sower’s wastage of so much seed on bad ground more intelligible” (228). In response to this debate, Blomberg quoted Philip Payne by saying “that both sequences were probably employed and that some inadvertent waste would occur in either case, so the imagery would have been intelligible to a Palestinian audience” (228). However, for Blomberg, “the purpose of the parable is not to provide a realistic depiction of Palestinian agricultural practices but to teach a lesson about spiritual fruit bearing. The same is true for amazing harvest – the quantities are not inconceivable, but they point to overflowing, abundant blessings of God” (228).

MEANING: OPENING UP HORIZONS OF INTERPRETATION

Four horizons of interpretation that have been considered here are: Evangelism/Discipleship; Warning; Encouragement; and Eschatological.

Evangelism or Discipleship

The Sower in this parable can be identified as God/Jesus and can also apply to the disciples of Jesus and Christians today, as Jesus commissioned all believers to go and preach the gospel (Mt.28:18-20). Which Blomberg rightly says, “like the Sower, God spreads his word widely among all kinds of people” (228). Leland Ryken agrees with Blomberg by saying “sometimes God is pictured as metaphorically supplying the seed and therefore always capable of increasing or sowing it” (809). He further notes that God is “supplying and multiplying people’s capacities to act righteously (2 Cor. 9:9-10)” (Ryken 809). On the parable of the Sower, Ryken says, “Jesus is the Sower, the seed represents the message that he preaches, and his hearers are represented by the different soils on which it lands” (809).

Jesus commissioned his disciples (and Christians) to be the Sowers of the word. Thus, “sowing is spoken figuratively for setting various things in motion and in the OT and NT, it is used for engaging in a righteous or loving activity (Prov. 11:18; Eccl. 11:1; Hosea 10:12; James 3:18)” (Ryken 809). In this regard, George Arthur Buttrick says, “it is the preacher’s or teacher’s task to sow the word of God: let him do this faithfully and generously, not allowing himself to be discouraged because much of his seed seems to be wasted” (148). Therefore, even though things are not working well in Nigeria, and it seems people are not responding to the gospel of Christ positively, yet the Christians’ duty is to keep witnessing Christ to them by preaching, teaching, and lifestyle. Hence, evangelism is the task of all Christians, regardless of their professions; all are to witness Christ in their daily life.

Warning

The parable serves as a warning to the listeners and readers to be careful not to be like the first three soils that were unable to bear fruit. It is a warning, or rather a caution. Blomberg says, “Sowers sow seed only for it to bear fruit; without this result, the plants are good for nothing” (226). Listening to the word of God is important; however, to respond positively to it is very important, as James 1:22-25 says that one should not be the hearer of the word of God only, but also be the doer of it. Which Blomberg concurred that like the three kinds of unfruitful soil, many will respond to the word of God with less saving faith, be it “(a) complete lack of positive response due to the enticement of evil, (b) temporary superficiality masquerading as true commitment, or (c) genuine interest and conviction about the truth that simply falls short due to the rigorous demands a discipleship” (228).

Thus, to people who are intent on coming to join the group of Jesus’ disciples, Jesus “speaks a word of invitation that is simultaneously a warning, thus ‘be careful how you hear, and do not become merely nominal or superficial followers of mine’” (Marshall 319). The hearers here are summoned to hear at a deeper level than mere sense perception, to take hold of the meaning of the parable, to apply it to themselves,

and thus ultimately to hear the word of God which can save them. So, “hearing the word of God must lead to the production of the fruit, or else the hearing is in vain” (Marshall 323).

Therefore, “like the fruitful soil, the only legitimate response to God’s word is the obedience and perseverance which demonstrate true regeneration” (Blomberg 228). It is a warning or caution to Nigerian Christians not to be unfruitful but to be fruitful, which comes by hearing and doing the will of God. Hence, Christians should not allow any situation in life to separate them from the love of Christ (Romans 8:31-39). Consequently, the hearers and readers of the word of God are to take heed.

Encouragement

As three-quarters of the soil is fruitless, it can be very discouraging to the Sower; however, the fourth soil serves as encouragement to the Sower to continue sowing. Jesus told this parable “To encourage his disciples in the faith that his proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom of God would prove fruitful” (Buttrick 147). Preachers of the gospel here on earth should know that the kingdom of darkness and its agents are going to oppose them as in the days of Jesus. When Jesus knows that:

opposition has developed, and it is clear that only a limited number in Israel are going to hear and respond to the gospel of the Kingdom. He finds comfort in the observation that only a part of seed broadcast by any Sower eventually bears fruit. Much of it falls on hard, barren, or preoccupied soil and yields nothing. This is to be expected; and the preacher, no more than the Sower, must be discouraged; let him remember that some seed does fall into good soil, where it yields a hundredfold (Buttrick 147).

Therefore, Christians today should know that “preaching is sometimes a failure and sometimes a success” (Marshall 324). Thus, preachers of the word should bear in mind that some hearers resemble the hard ground, some the shallow ground, some the crowded or preoccupied ground, and others the good ground. That is why the task of a preacher is to preach and leave the rest to God. As such, Christians in Nigeria, as the first disciples of Jesus in the 1st Century AD, are encouraged to live holy lives in order to be fruitful in God’s Kingdom, and they should not relent in doing so because the day of reckoning is coming.

Eschatological or Judgmental Interpretation

Harvest has been understood as a result of either reward or punishment. And sometimes refers to the harvest of the end time, which is eschatological. As for the first three soils yielded nothing, and the last one yielded a hundredfold, which signifies harvest time and at the same time judgment time. Fisher says, “The parable of the Sower illustrates the confidence which should be placed in the coming of the new age. As the seed miraculously thrusts forth a bountiful harvest despite all the restraining and inhibiting forces, so the new age will come suddenly despite all that holds it back. Even now, the mysterious work of God is going on. It will result in the harvest of the kingdom” (Fisher, 93).

The seed represents the word of God, which “men are required to believe this word to be saved, and those who fail to believe or do not persist in belief are lost”

(Marshall 324). Thus, Nigerian Christians should know that John 3:18-21 confirms this: those who believe in Jesus are saved, and those who do not believe are already condemned and judged. And bear in mind that “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that he will also reap. For the one who sows to his flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8 ESV). Therefore, the Day of Judgment is coming, and one’s salvation will depend on how he/she responded to the word of God (gospel) while here on earth.

CONCLUSION

The parable of the Sower applies to our contemporary society, and the lessons derived from it are timeless truths. Thus, as Christians, our core mission is evangelism as we continue to take heed of the caution by not letting anything or anybody to separate us from the love of Christ because only those who endured to the end will be saved (Matt. 24:13), which calls on us to be fruitful in our daily life because the Day of reckoning is coming that one’s salvation will be on how one responded to the gospel of Christ. The researchers recommend the following:

1. All four possible meanings of the parable of the Sower are beneficial; hence, they are to be taught and learned.
2. Scholars and teachers of the Bible should look for possible meanings in biblical texts without compromising the central messages.
3. Preachers of the Word can also learn to pinpoint different meanings of Bible passages without doing eisegesis.
4. Preachers of the Gospel should know that not everyone will listen to or respond to them positively, but they should not be discouraged.

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