

Dear Friends,

Jesus always taught His parables with the simplest, and the most well-known comparisons to the people who heard Him. He used farmers, shepherds, and fishermen, and their work to teach His "Kingdom" truths. He never taught by the symbols of pagan mythology.

As we observed in the beginning, He also directed these parable teachings to the most religious people in Judaism. When we fail in our faith walk, becoming "Unfruitful," we more imitate those people than Jesus' followers. Do we truly want to model our life after the people who most rejected Jesus' teachings and despised Him? Surely not.

In this week's lesson, Jesus described the "Good soil" heart as "Good." However, in Luke's account of the parable, He also qualified the fruitful life as living by an "Honest" heart. God makes our heart good. We choose to live our lives either in honesty to Him and His teachings or dishonestly, claiming to be His followers, but making decisions and acting contrary to His teachings and ways. In this we choose, consciously and deliberately, to be that unfruitful field in this parable. We must live our daily life based on both the "Good" heart He gave us and the "Honest" heart He commanded us to cultivate. Are we prepared to do both? If so, we shall glorify Him and bear fruit to Him. If not, we knowingly become one of those unfruitful fields. Which path shall we choose today?

Lord help and guide our choices,
Joe Holder

Parable of the Sower Explained by Jesus—Fruitful Response

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
(Matthew 13:23 KJV 1900)

We must never forget the simple farming story that Jesus told to teach this lesson. For example, did you notice? The heart, the soil in Jesus' analogy, of this hearer was good prior to hearing the gospel—the sowing of the seed. His good heart is one of the reasons for the fruitful response. The idea that God uses the gospel as an agent or instrument to accomplish the new birth finds no support in this lesson. The field, the heart, was already good before the gospel "Seed" was sown in it.

Study Luke's conclusion along with Matthew's.

But 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 KJV)

Luke assigns two reasons the seed sown in this soil is fruitful seed.

1. The heart, the symbolic soil, is “honest.”
2. The heart, the symbolic soil, is “good.”

For seed to survive, much less bear a fruitful harvest, it must be planted in good soil, symbolic in Jesus’ explanation of the condition of the heart. The gospel preached to an unchanged, not born again, heart will no more produce God-honoring spiritual “Fruit” than natural seed sown in a toxic soil. However, Jesus also assigned another condition to the fruitful harvest. It must be an “honest” heart. A person may be born again, have a “Good” heart, but choose to hear and respond to the gospel in a “Dishonest” manner. That person will be as unfruitful as any of the three prior hearers. The Lord makes our hearts “Good” in the new birth. However, we deal with our spiritual understanding with honest and righteous integrity, or we deal with it dishonestly.

Let me give you an example. I had lunch with a friend many years ago who invited another friend to join us for lunch, the pastor of a conservative Baptist Church in the area. My friend had studied himself into a reasonably sound view of grace and salvation. He and I didn’t agree on every point, but he was truly an “Honest” man who responded to as much Biblical truth as he perceived. He understood my view of salvation, and we had many seasons of blessed fellowship over those occasional lunches. During this particular lunch, the question of salvation was raised. Immediately my friend spoke of his view that our eternal salvation is all of God without human (Including gospel) instrumentality. Of course, I agreed. The third man quite openly told us of his personal experience. He readily agreed with us regarding Scripture’s teaching on immediate (Not intermediate or indirect; rather without the involvement or “Instrumentality” of the gospel) regeneration by the work of the Holy Spirit alone. He then told about his efforts to teach these truths to the church he served. He preached a series of sermons on the topic, and they apparently received the teaching. As summer came, the church worked hard on its annual week-long camp for the church’s young people. He went with the youth leaders to the camp and preached to the young people daily. He thought it a good thing to ground these young people in the New Testament truths of salvation by grace alone, so that was his preaching theme during the week. Although the youngsters listened and tried to understand what he was preaching, the youth leaders started voicing their personal unhappiness with him because, by the end of Wednesday, the group had not witnessed a single young person coming forward and declaring his/her “Decision” for Jesus. More concerned for his “Job security” than Biblical soundness, on Thursday night, he reverted to his “Decisional salvation” past preaching, several young people came forward, and everyone went home happy on Friday. The man confided to us that, despite personally believing in salvation by grace alone, his “Job security” at this church required him to preach decisional salvation. His open confession said it all. He preached his messages on this topic with a “Dishonest” heart. He might well retain the church’s goodwill, but he could not grow spiritual fruit from that dishonest heart. Nor could he gain the Lord’s approval for his dishonest preaching.

In most instances in the New Testament, the “Kingdom” of God refers to our present life and the Lord’s interaction with us in our efforts to honor Him. Paul emphasized this cooperative work in his writings.

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.
(2 Corinthians 6:1 KJV)

Based on Jesus' words to Nicodemus (John 3:8), it is impossible for a person to receive God's new birth saving grace in vain. However, Paul taught in this verse that we may receive that grace which enables us to serve the Lord and His people in a manner that glorifies the Lord, or we may receive it in vain, though this passage urges us not to do so. If we regard this verse in light of Jesus' teaching in the sower-seed parable, to receive grace in vain is to content ourselves to be—and to remain—an unfruitful field. We can only rise above ourselves, be fruitful, and honor the Lord by receiving His grace conscientiously and Biblically, using it and its revelation of New Testament truth to transform the "Soil" of our hearts and lives from indifferent (No response), emotional (Stony ground), or worldly (Thorns) to a well plowed and prepared soil, intent only on following the Lord's directions in Scripture alone.

Jesus taught this lesson to the eleven immediately prior to His arrest and crucifixion.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. (John 15:4-5 KJV 1900)

Jesus spoke these words to the eleven in the context of His final teaching before His arrest. He would no longer be present with them day in and day out in physical form. They needed to grow immensely in inner faith and strength to be ever fruitful for His glory. The objective of this lesson is obviously fruitfulness, not salvation. He spoke the words to disciples who were already born again. It applies to us no less than it applied to them. If we ponder abiding in Jesus on Sunday, but chase our personal ideologies through the week, we shall be that unfruitful field of the parable. Jesus made the point emphatically. We can bear godly fruit only as we "**abide**" in Him, not occasionally drift past Him.

Apply Jesus' teaching regarding godly fruit to your conduct, thought, word, and deed, over the last two to five years. How do you normally deal with problems on the job? In the family? If Jesus were standing beside you when you followed your normal strategy to deal with those problems, would He approve of your strategy?

Shortly before I retired and sold my business, I was having lunch with a Christian associate from a company that had worked closely with me in my business. He asked what I intended to do with my time. In addition to ministry, I told him that I'd always thought I'd enjoy teaching, but that dream was likely not realistic. He mentioned a small denominational college in the area that was sponsored by the church he attended. This church held to a strongly Arminian (Salvation by works) doctrine. I told him a bit about my understanding of Scripture's teaching on salvation all of grace. I could not "Honestly" teach in that college without compromising my own faith. This lead to a lunch-long discussion of "Honest" Christian living. During that discussion, we chatted about some of the problems that we'd both encountered in our careers. I had grown a reputation of honesty in the industry, despite many in my position who freely

compromised their honesty for financial gain. Why didn't I follow that habit, he asked. I gave him two responses. First, it was immoral when weighed against Biblical moral teachings. Secondly, when I sold my services to a client, I gave them my word that I would serve them in their best interest, not mine. In that point, I quoted Psalm 15:4. David opened the Psalm with a question.

LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? (Psalm 15:1 KJV)

Dwelling, present lifestyle dwelling in the Lord's tabernacle, requires a specific God-honoring lifestyle. We can't ignore the Lord's ethical teachings—commandments—and honor Him in our conduct. What does Verse 4 say about this question.

He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. (Psalm 15:4b KJV)

When I assured my clients that I would work in their interest, not mine, I didn't take a formal oath, but I gave them my personal promise. For me, my obligation was no less than if I had given them an oath. In one instance, that promise gave me considerable difficulty, but the difficulty in no way diminished my moral obligation. Even if the outcome—at the moment at least—of my "Oath" was to my "Hurt," I had no moral basis to change my word and violate my "Oath." My friend smiled and agreed. He had faced those challenges and had dealt with them similarly. Seated with us was another person, also a Christian by profession. Within less than three years from this conversation, he wholly contradicted this moral principle and for ever—in the eyes of people who knew him—compromised his Christian testimony.

This question of living a life that is fruitful to the Lord holds the potential of being life transforming. In fact, it is transforming if we truly live by it. You frequently hear—or read—my emphasis on our living life and making decisions for the glory of the Lord and for the service of His people, never calculated for personal interest or gain. Consider Jesus' method of teaching His truth in both lessons, the parable and his closing teaching to the eleven. When a wheat plant or fruit tree produces fruit, **how much fruit does the plant or tree consume for itself?** Nothing at all! Every seed, every piece of fruit grown, is produced for the benefit of another. Our "Fruitful" Christian life should imitate this lesson from Jesus. Nothing for self—all for Him, for His people, and for His glory. Now that is transforming.

I used two personal experiences in this lesson of professing Christians who made major life decisions with a less-than-honest heart. In both cases, the outcome was not good. Not at all God-honoring. What legacy shall you and I leave? The witness of a good and an honest heart? Or the legacy of an unfruitful field?

Elder Joe Holder