The parable of the sower and the four categories of those that hear the Word of God
The parable of the sower and the four categories of those that hear the Word of God

It is usual, when we want to emphasize something to repeat it more than one time. Similarly, though everything that is in the Word of God is important, when something is repeated more than one time, it obviously has special importance and special attention should be paid to it. One of these multi-repeated passages, is also the parable of the sower. Really, as a look in the four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ shows, this parable is repeated three times. It would be therefore interesting to examine it and see what is the specially important that God wants to teach us by it.

1. The parable

The parable of the sower is recorded in: Matthew 13:1-8, Mark 4:1-9, and Luke 8:4-8. Taking the Luke's record as our point of departure, we read.

Luke 8:4-8
"And a great crowd coming together, and those in each city coming to him, he spoke by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. And others fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit a hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, he who has ears to hear, let him hear!"
(NKJV-KJV)

Starting from the time that Jesus chose to say this parable, this was by no means accidental. Really, as verse 4 tells us: "And a great crowd coming together, and those in each city coming to him, he [when he saw this crowd coming to him] spoke by a
parable..." Jesus said this parable when many people were coming to him to hear the
Word of God. As we will see, the parable is about the hearing of the Word. Thus Jesus,
by saying this parable, wanted to make all those that were coming to him to hear the
Word, aware of the available choices.

2. "By the wayside"

A look at the above passage of Luke shows that the parable is about a seed that
fell in four different kinds of land, the first of which was "by the wayside". As Luke 8:5
tells us:

Luke 8:5
"A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it
was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it."

Some of the seed that the sower sowed fell "BY the wayside" and thus it neither
sprang up nor it gave any fruit but it was trampled down and eaten by the birds.

The explanation of this part of the parable is given some verses later. Thus, in
Luke 8:11-12 we read:

Luke 8:11-12
"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones
who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they
should believe and be saved."

Also, Matthew 13:19 explaining the same part, says:
"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside."

According to the above passages, the seed that is sowed is THE WORD OF GOD or "the word of the kingdom". However, this Word does not give everywhere the same results, since its fruitfulness depends on the ground where it falls. One of the possible kinds of ground is also the "by the wayside" ground, which, according to the interpretation of the parable, is composed of people that though hear the Word of God, "do not understand it". What is meant by "do not understand it" is something that we will see from the context. Really, the Greek word translated as "understand" in the above passage, is the verb "óöíéçìé" (suniemi) that is used 6 times in Matthew 13, 5 of which in regard to our parable. Thus Matthew 13:13-15 tells us:

Matthew 13:13
"....seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand (Greek: suniemi). And in them [in those that seeing do not see and hearing do not understand] the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: "Hearing you will hear and shall not understand [Greek: suniemi], and seeing you will see and not perceive; FOR [this is the reason that they don't understand though they hear] this people's heart has become calloused. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should UNDERSTAND [Greek suniemi] WITH THEIR HEARTS and turn, so that I should heal them"
(NKJV-NIV)

While with the ears one hears the Word, with the heart [the inner part of the mind] he "understands" it. It is not therefore a simple mental understanding of the Word that is meant in the parable of the sower. It is rather an understanding, an acceptance of the Word with the heart, the inner part of the mind. That's why the result of the seed is not dependent on the seed, the Word, but on the ground, the hearts of those that hear the
Word. The same seed falling in different kinds of ground, i.e. in hearts of different quality, gives different results. When the heart is calloused then the seed of the Word will be like falling by the way. It is not going neither to spring up nor of course to give any fruit. As II Corinthians 4:3-4 and Ephesians 4:17-19 tell us:

II Corinthians 4:3-4
"But even if our gospel is VEILED, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them"
(NKJV-KJV)

Also Ephesians 4:17-19
"This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having THEIR UNDERSTANDING DARKENED, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, BECAUSE OF THE BLINDNESS OF THEIR HEART; Who being past feeling have given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness."
(NKJV-KJV)

There are people to whom the Word of God is "veiled" and who cannot "understand" it, not because the Word is something difficult to understand, but because their hearts are calloused, hard, not permitting any growth of the seed of the Word.

Regarding now the Greek word translated as "blindness" in the above passage of Ephesians, this is the word "ðùñùóéò" (porosis) that means "callousness". It is the same word that it is used in Mark 3:5 to describe the heart of a characteristic group of people that so much persecuted Jesus: the Pharisees:

Mark 3:5
"And when he [Jesus Christ] had looked around at them [it means the Pharisees (see Mark 2:24)] with anger, being grieved by the hardness [porosis-callousness] of their hearts....."

The Pharisees had the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God before them!! They heard and saw the greatest teacher, the greatest man that ever passed from the face of the earth. And yet they didn't believe him. The reason? Their hearts were calloused, i.e. very hard and thus inappropriate for the receiving and growing of the seed of the Word. It was not the seed, the Word, that was not good but the LAND, their hearts, that was hard.

3. The second category.

Having examined the first kind of land to which the seed of the Word falls, we will now move ahead to the second one. Matthew 13:5-6 tells us about it:

Matthew 13:5-6
"Some [seeds] fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up, because they had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, they were scorched and because they had no root, they withered away."

A seed can spring up in various kinds of ground. However, it will not survive and give fruit in all of them. One of the grounds where the seed, though it will initially spring up, finally it will not survive is the stony ground. The reason that the seed cannot survive there, is because the stones do not permit it to put deep roots necessary to find moisture. Thus with the first it withers away.

Choosing Mark's record for the explanation of this part of the parable, we read:

Mark 4:16-17
"These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, IMMEDIATELY RECEIVE IT with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, IMMEDIATELY THEY FALL AWAY"
(NKJV-NIV)

As it can be seen, the stony ground is composed of people that hearing the Word, receive it immediately and in fact with gladness. However, this does not last for long, for when persecution and affliction arises, these people, again immediately, fall away. As it is obvious, the problem that finally causes their fall is that they are very weak in persecution and affliction. Thus, when the devil brings such things against them, they immediately fall. Their falling is not caused because the affliction is too heavy for them to bear, for II Corinthians 4:17, I Corinthians 10:12-13 and I Peter 5:10 tells us that the affliction will be light and certainly no more than what we can bear (I Corinthians 10:12-13). Instead, it is caused because they are not willing to show even the smallest resistance to the devil [they fall IMMEDIATELY as the text says]. As James 4:7 tells us:

James 4:7
"Therefore submit to God. RESIST the devil and [as a result of your resistance] he will flee from you.

Also I Peter 5:8-9 says:
"be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Whom resist steadfast in faith, knowing that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of sufferings."
(NKJV-KJV)

If we will not resist the devil, he is not going to flee from us. In contrast, he devours those that do not resist him. To this category of potential food of the devil belong also the people of this second category. When the devil comes bringing
afflictions, they immediately fall and thus becoming an easy food for him. They have a
good beginning but unfortunately a bad end.

4. The third category

Having considered the first two categories of people that hear the Word, we will
now move ahead to the third one. Mark 4:7, tells us:

Mark 4:7
"And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded
no fruit"
(NKJV-KJV)

The third kind of ground to which the seed falls is the thorny ground. The seed
falling in this ground is choked, thus giving no fruit. To understand what is meant by
this part of the parable, we will go to Mark 4:18-19 where we read:

Mark 4:18-19
"And these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones that hear the word, and the
cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires of other things entering in,
choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

Unfortunately, this third category of people is also problematic. The problem with
this category is that the Word of God is kept in their hearts together with other things
such as "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things". These things finally act as thorns to the Word's growth, choking it and making it
unfruitful. In contrast to what the people of this category do, Jesus Christ said:
Matthew 6:25-34

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: for they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin: And yet I say to you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, What shall we wear? For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things."

(NKJV-KJV)

FIRST are the things of the kingdom of God AND THEN all the other things. If we apply this principle, then all the other things will be added to us. If however, we don't apply it but in the top position we put cares and other things, then these other things will choke the Word, making it unfruitful.

**5. The fourth category**

By now we have examined three kinds of ground to whom the seed of the word fell. Unfortunately, none of them was able to make the seed fruitful. Thus the first kind of ground, that was "by the way", was so hard that the seed not even sprang up. Also the other one was stony not permitting the seed to put deep roots. Finally the third one was
thorny choking the seed and making it unfruitful. Having seen three unfruitful categories, it is now time to see what is the GOOD land, the land on which the seed of the Word falling, gives fruit. Matthew 13:8 tells us about it:

Matthew 13:8
"But others fell on good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty"
(NKJV-KJV)

The explanation is given in Matthew 13:23:

"But he that received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word, and understands [Greek: suniemi] it; who indeed bears fruit, and produces: some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

This time the seed didn't fall by the way, or on a stony ground, or among thorns, but ON A GOOD GROUND, composed of people that hear the Word AND UNDERSTAND [Greek: suniemi] it. As Luke 8:15 explains this "understand it":

Luke 8:15
"But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, in AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART, having heard the word, KEEP it, and bring forth fruit WITH PATIENCE."
(NKJV-KJV)

As we may remember, the first category of people couldn't "understand", receive, the Word for their hearts were calloused, hard. In contrast, the people of this only fruitful category UNDERSTAND the Word putting it in their GOOD and HONEST heart. This fruitful category has all that the other three unfruitful categories missed. Thus though in the first category the people had calloused hearts, here the hearts are GOOD AND HONEST. Also though in the second category the people had no endurance but fell
immediately with the first affliction, here the people are patient (they "bring forth fruit WITH PATIENCE" as the text says) and do not give up. Finally, though in the third category the Word of God was choked by the various cares and desires which got the top position, here it is KEPT in the hearts of those people, not losing its position for the sake of any other thing. This is the fruitful category. The only category that brings forth fruit. And as Christ said in John 15:

John 15:1-2, 4-5, 8, 16

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away: and every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit....Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing.........By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples......You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give you."

(NKJV-KJV)

God cleans every branch that bears fruit so that it may bring forth more. The more fruit that one brings, the more God is glorified.

6. Conclusion

To conclude therefore. The Word of God may be spoken to various kinds of people. However, the results will be different as different is the quality of the heart of the people that hear the Word. Thus others will reject it, others will accept it till the first affliction, others will receive it but eventually will put it in the last position putting other things (cares, riches, other desires) over it, and finally others will keep it in a good and
honest heart bringing forth fruit. That's why Jesus, finishing the interpretation of the parable said "take heed HOW you hear" (Luke 8:18). It is not only that one hears the Word, but it is also HOW he hears it, for many may hear the Word but only those that hear it and keep it in a good and honest heart will be fruitful. May we all be and continue to be in this category.

Tassos Kioulachoglou