

Seed over the fence!

In this article, I would like to share with you, from my recent Bible study, a topic that I have been thinking about for quite a long time – for a couple of years, at least.

Let us go first to chapter 25 of the book of Matthew – to the parable of the Talents. Now I'm sure that most of you all know the story very well. You have read it many times and heard the whole thing discussed in sermons and sermonettes for many years. So I will not go into all of its details here. That is not my purpose.

In this parable, Jesus tells of a landowner and businessman who is wisely preparing for a long trip into a far country. As he prepares for his trip, He entrusts his “goods” to three of his servants. Verse 15 tells us that he apportions his goods according to their previously proven aptitude as evidenced to him from his past experience with their abilities.

The land owner's “goods” might be likened to highly valued shares in his highly valued business. Each share was apparently, on average, worth one-eighth of the value of his business. He entrusted five shares to the first servant, two to the second, and one to the third. All this is very interesting, but I fear that it is diverting me from my main topic!

In this article, I would like to concentrate on just one tiny part of this extensive, multi-lesson parable. I would like to home in on just two verses: 24 and 26 which appear to constitute a kind of sub-parable off the main one.

I would like to focus on just one specific part of the lame excuse of the third servant – the wicked and slothful servant – and the things he accused his master – the land-owner of.

Let me mention before continuing that this study is a work in progress. I do not claim to have all the answers on what I am looking at here; and I would welcome your views on it.

The Accusation of the Wicked and Slothful Servant

Let us read verses 24-27 from the King James Version (KJV):

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, “Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not strawed: and I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the earth: lo, there you have that is yours.” His lord answered and said unto him, “You wicked and slothful servant, you knew that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed you ought therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming *{i.e. at my return from my journey}* I should have received my own with usury *{interest}*.”
(Matthew 25:24-27)

Here is Luke’s version of the same portion of this same parable:

And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is your pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin: for I feared you, because you are an austere man: you take up what you laid not down, and reap what you did not sow.” And he said unto him, “Out of your own mouth will I judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, taking up what I laid not down, and reaping what I did not sow: why then gave not you my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury?”
(Luke 19:20-23)

Notice that the landowner gave more talents to the first two servants because he knew that they would use them well. He gave only one talent to this last of the three servants because he apparently knew that he was least likely to obtain a good increase from it. But, being merciful, he took a chance on him and did at least give him a chance to improve on his poor past record.

The third servant, however, did not take good advantage of this wonderful, undeserved opportunity. Rather than making careful, profitable use of it, he merely buried the talent so that it would not get lost or improperly spent. The third servant’s opening words of his flimsy excuse for his actions were in the form of an accusation against his master:

“Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not strawed:”

Yes, this wretch repaid his master’s love and trust with accusations! What he did may seem amazing to us, but it is not uncommon for guilty people to try to turn the blame onto those to whom they have caused harm.

Hard and austere?

Notice first that the third servant – the slothful servant – accused the landowner of being a “hard” man. The English word “hard” here is translated from the Greek “skleros” which may also be translated as: *Fierce, harsh, rough, stiff, stern* or even *violent*.

Luke’s version uses the English word, “austere” translated from the Greek word, “austeros” which can also mean: *Of harsh, rough or rigid mind and manners*.

Notice also that the slothful servant, in his use of the words *reaping, sown, gathering* and *strawed* refers here – perhaps analogously – to the farming segment of his master’s business. He accused his master of being known to *reap* crops that he had not *sown* and to *gather* crops that he had not “*strawed*.”

Strawed?

Let us take a quick look at the word “strawed.” We all know what the other three agricultural terms mean – to reap, to sow and to gather. I do not know about you, but I was not so familiar with the term, “strawed.” So I looked it up. It was translated from the Greek verb “diaskorpizo” which generally means “to scatter” and so can have two main meanings – from both ends of the growing cycle of grain. It can mean both to sow seed at the *beginning* of the cycle, and to winnow grain at the *end* of the cycle – after the sheaves have been reaped and threshed.

How did Jesus mean it in this particular case? Sowing or winnowing? Different modern Bible versions translate the word both ways; but mostly the second – to winnow. And this is probably correct. Jesus probably meant it as winnowing. Why? Because if His meaning was the *sowing* of seed, He would have been repeating Himself unnecessarily.

He said, “reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not strawed.” If, in His use of the word “strawed,” He was referring to the *sowing* activity, it would be like Him saying, “reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not sown.” Possible? Yes. Probable? No.

Rather, there appear to have been *two* activities that the land-owner performed here. Firstly, he reaped sheaves of grain, the seed of which he had not sown. Secondly, he gathered grain that he had not threshed or winnowed.

Stealing?

In saying this, the wicked, slothful servant here seemed to be implying that his master was in the common habit of doing something wrong. He seemed to be accusing his master of stealing.

Notice that the landowner did not deny that it was normal for him to reap where he had not sown, and to gather where he had not winnowed. In fact, by his words, the landowner actually seems almost *proud* of the fact:

You knew that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed.

But did this make him a thief? In doing these two things, did he do wrong? Was he, in effect, stealing from someone else? Not at all. Now I am no expert on First Century Jewish or Roman law; but I think that we can safely assume that, under normal, honest circumstances he had no legal right to go onto his neighbour's land to reap or gather crops that were not his.

But if his neighbours' sowers inadvertently cast some of their good seed over the fence onto his land, it was his legal right to harvest it. And if some of the wheat, barley, etc. from his neighbours' winnowers was caught by the wind and blew onto his property, it was his legal right to use it.

The landowner was a good businessman. He would, of course, caution his own sowers and winnowers against losing any of his seed and crop grain to his neighbours – or to any poor or common land as is shown possible in Mark 4:3-8. But he no doubt understood that if they *did* lose any seed or crop grain, his neighbours had the right to claim it.

The landowner, as we know, represents Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus owns everything that exists, He was not and is not a thief! Let us look at the spiritual symbolism of what is being described here.

Reaping Crops Sown by another Land-Owner

Let us try to visualize this in spiritual terms. Under what circumstances would this land-owner reap crops that were sown by another?

Again, we know that his reapers and gatherers had no legal right to trespass onto his neighbour's property to reap or gather crops that were not legally his.

In those days and in that place, as far as I know, the farmers did not have the benefit of the type of relatively accurate, waste-free, mechanical seeding machines that our farmers have today.

The land-owner's sowers went out into his fields in the sowing season and "broad-cast" the seed.

As already mentioned, at the edges of the land-owners' properties, there was some chance of a relatively small portion of the seed being accidentally cast or blown by the wind over into the neighbouring farmer's field.

What is the spiritual symbolism of this? If the land-owner symbolizes Jesus Christ, what do the seed and the field symbolize?

From the parable of the sower in Mark 4 and Luke 8 – if we may mix the symbolism of two different parables – we can learn what the seed symbolizes.

But before we look at those verses, let us ask the question: Is it valid for us to, in some cases, apply the symbolism of one parable to another? Yes, it is:

And He {Jesus} said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13)

Jesus is saying here that the understanding of the symbolism of this particular parable is somewhat crucial to the understanding of others. And then, in verse 14, He goes directly to the meaning of the symbol of the seed:

The sower sows the word.

More specifically in Luke's parallel account:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. (Luke 8:11)

Jesus used the symbol of farming practices in many of His parables; so it was critical that His people understand their symbolism.

Continuing back in our main parable in Matthew 25, if the seed represents God's Word, who do the sowers represent? Answer: Jesus' servants – the members of His true church. Perhaps in this function, more particularly, His ministers.

Another question: Where does Christ – through His sowers – scatter His seed? Answer: Into the minds of men.

Usually a farmer would plough, prepare and pre-cultivate the soil of his fields before sowing. I am not totally sure exactly how Christ prepares and pre-cultivates the minds of His called-out ones in advance of sowing His Word into their minds. But I am sure, from another parable in Luke 13:8, that He does so. Perhaps in various ways for various people. For some, perhaps through family tragedies. For others, perhaps through job loss. Perhaps for yet others – as in Herbert Armstrong's case – by bringing the person so low, that he feels like a "burnt out hunk of junk."

We know – from the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4 and Luke 8 – that some portion of the good seed – hopefully a very small portion, if His sowers are doing their jobs properly – will fall by the road side, on stony ground, and among thorns. But most of it should fall on the good, cultivated soil of the land-owner's field.

But, as we see in our Talents parable of Matthew 25, some of his seed may be inadvertently cast or blown over into the neighbour's field – which brings us to a big question: What would the neighbour's field represent?

The only thing that I can believe the neighbour's field to represent is the spiritual soil, fields belonging to the great deceiver and counterfeiter. Yes, the minds, churches and other false religions of the unconverted under *their* landowner, Satan the Devil.

There is only one true Christ and one true church – as symbolized by the Talents Parable landowner and his sowers. This is *not* to say that God's true church is *not* made up of various organizations – perhaps in the same way as the landowner's property may consist of multiple fields.

But let us not beat around the bush – either a person or a church is of God, or else is a counterfeit of Satan the Devil.

Satan's Bad Seed in Christ's Good Field

Is all the seed good - including the neighbour's seed? And is all the soil good? Generally, the answer to both questions is "No."

Christ's seed (His Word) and the pre-cultivated soil of His fields which represents truly called human minds is A-1 top quality. Satan's counterfeit seed and soil are second rate, or even worse. Satan's counterfeit seed is deadly poisonous and therefore cannot be used for God's holy purpose and must be rejected.

But it appears that Satan's soil – even though second rate – *may* be used to grow any small amounts of Christ's seed that might get blown in there.

Of course, it is best for Christ's good seed to be grown in His own fields of A-1 quality soil.

But it seems that He – the One who has power over all things – *may* allow some small portion of His seed to grow in Satan's fields. But will He allow some of Satan's poisonous seed to grow in His – Jesus' – fields?

Yes. That is where the parable of the tares comes in. Even if recognized as tares at an early stage in the growing cycle, Christ will permit them to grow side-by-side with His own good crops until reaping time when the tares will be torn up and burnt:

Another parable put He forth unto them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, 'Sir, did not you sow good seed in your field? From whence then has it tares?' He said unto them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said unto him, 'Will you then that we go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; lest while you gather up the tares, you root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "Gather you together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

Notice that the tares will be gathered and burnt first, before the good grain is gathered into Christ's barn. These tares are crops – bad, counterfeit, poisonous crops – that Christ permits to grow alongside His good crops in His field for now.

Mixing this Matthew 13 parable with our Matthew 25 one, these tares are crops that Christ will reap, but did not sow. His neighbour sowed them. His enemy sowed them. The counterfeit farmer sowed them. Satan sowed them.

What are these tares? If the good seed is the true, pure Word of God, then this bad, counterfeit tare seed is the counterfeit – but oh-so-convincing – word of Satan.

And where is it growing? In some of the good soil of Christ's fields! In the minds of some of His called out ones!

Thankfully, Christ will reap it at harvest time and will burn it in the fire.

Christ's Good Seed in His Neighbour's Field

But what about the vice-versa situation? What if some of the land-owner's good seed strays onto his neighbour's field and grows there?

The spiritual counterpart of this – i.e. a small portion of the land-owner's seed growing in the neighbour's field – is a scary thought! Can some of Christ's good seed – His Word – really be cast over into Satan's field – into Satan's soil? If so, can it grow there?

We are not talking about tares now. We are talking about Christ's good seed – God's true Word. Can God's seed effectively grow in a person and/or a church that is not truly Christian?

Would God really allow any of His Word to be sown and grown in the world or in a church that is not truly Christian? Can this happen? Does this happen? Evidently, yes! If it does happen, what happens to that seed?

Now, please do not read me wrong here. I am certainly not telling you that the world's churches are God's churches, or pseudo-churches of God, or any of those kinds of ideas. Not at all!

From the correspondence that I have received over the past years in the church, it certainly does appear that many non-Church-of-God people are frequently picking up Church of God material.

The idea here seems to be that the human servants of God and sowers of His seed will normally sow His seed in His various "Church of God fields" with the acceptance and even the hope that some of that seed will stray over into neighbouring fields; that some of our effort in one Church of God group will bear spiritual fruit amongst members of other "sister" Church of God branches – perhaps even members of non-Church-of-God organizations, and perhaps even to some who are openly and admittedly non-Christian. Also that, through this method, if it is His will, God might call some people.

Gathering Grain Winnowed by another Land-owner

Now what about Part 2? What happens at harvest time? Under what circumstances would our land-owner gather grain that was threshed and winnowed by another?

As with the sowing process, in those days and in that place, as far as I know, the farmers did not have the benefit of the type of waste-free mechanical winnowing machines our farmers have today. Their winnowers went to the threshing floor after the sheaves had been reaped and gathered there. The threshers would thresh or beat the ripe grain stalks. This would separate the grain heads from the stalks – which would then become straw – hence the English term “strawed.” Then the winnowing process would begin. The winnowers used winnowing fans to throw the grain up into the air. The wind would separate the edible grain from the inedible, useless chaff. The heavier grain would fall to the earth. The lighter chaff would blow away in the wind and form a pile off to the side.

Speaking of Jesus Christ, John the Baptist said this:

Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor *{threshing floor}*, and gather His wheat into the garner *{storage barn}*; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12)

Luke 3:17 says essentially the same thing. If the threshing floor was located close to the edge of the land-owner’s property and the wind was strong, there was some chance of a relatively small portion of the grain being accidentally blown over into the neighbouring farmer’s field. Then, two things might happen. First, the neighbour might gather that blown grain with his own. Secondly, the blown grain might go into the neighbour’s soil as seed and might grow along with his crops.

And vice-versa! Some of the grain that has been reaped, threshed and winnowed from the neighbour’s field might get blown over onto “our” landowner’s field.

But again, would Christ really be interested in grain from the neighbour’s field? In our specific example, would He be interested in poisonous tare grain produced from tare seed? Would He really be interested in potentially poisonous words from Satan’s world and churches?

No. But what if some of this grain that blows from Satan's field over into Christ's field at winnowing-time is not tare grain, but rather is good grain that was produced from the very same seed that blew over from Christ's field into Satan's field – either at this season's sowing time or from last season's winnowing time? Impossible? Way too much of a coincidence? Not with God:

But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)

And Jesus looking upon them saith, “With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.” (Mark 10:27)

For with God nothing shall be impossible. (Luke 1:37)

And He said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.” (Luke 18:27)

In the anti-type of real spiritual life, how can this happen?

Possibly with people who have theoretically but not completely left God's true church, and come back in at the end-time?

The symbolism is not perfect here, I know; but I can think of four people right off the top of my head who parted company with God's church many years ago – in some cases as much as thirty years ago – and who have recently come back with great zeal. You might know of others.

Where had they been all those years? They have been over the fence. They have been in the neighbour's field. In the counterfeit farmer's field – yes, in Satan's world.

Of the four I can think of right now, I do not think any of them actually joined up with other churches – what we might refer to as “the world's churches” or “false churches.”

But the main thing is that the wind blew them back over to the right side of the fence – to Christ's side of the fence – to His field – to His church.

It seems that, although their spiritual nourishment out there in the second-rate soil of Satan's field was certainly not as good as it would have been had they stayed in the good soil of Christ's church.

Still, they did not die spiritually. They did not totally give up on God's Word and, more importantly, He did not give up on them. He performed a huge miracle for them to be blown back over into His field.

The wind that blows the seed and grain may symbolize God's Holy Spirit:

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. (John 3:8)

I thought for a while that they might be some of the ones referred to in the parable of Matthew 19, in which the labourers hired at the eleventh hour were paid the same wage as those who started work early in the morning.

But these Matthew 19 workers were all "new hires" whereas those represented by the seed blown back over the fence were "old hands" who – although wrong to do so – took a leave-of-absence from God's Work.

Not a Second Chance Doctrine!

Before concluding, please let me assure you that I am not preaching a Second Chance doctrine! The Bible is very clear on this:

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27)

So how do we reconcile these two ideas? The answer is that there is a sin unto death and there is a sin not unto death:

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death. (I John 5:16-17)

This concept is discussed further in an article which can be found at: <http://www.tcog.ca/sinuntodeath.htm>

Please think about these things. Please turn them over in your mind. They are pretty deep spiritual concepts, it is true; the meat of the Word rather than the Milk (I Corinthians 3:2; Hebrew 5:12). Perhaps we do not yet have all the answers on these matters; but such things can still tend to give our “little grey cells” a good and beneficial spiritual work-out.

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