

## Chapter X

### The Flesh and the Spirit in the Church Age

#### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Early in this work we established the premise that the Bible is God's unfolding drama of redemption. In consideration of this, Lucifer (who was created as the highest of God's angels and was perfect in all of his ways, until iniquity was found in him) introduced sin into the universe. Ezekiel tell us, he was lifted up in pride because of his great beauty (28:15-17) In pride he lifted himself up against the throne of God. In pride he said, *I will be like the Most High* (Isaiah 14:14). In pride he extended his sin to one-third of the angels of God (Revelation 12:4) by convincing them he could, indeed, be the Most High. In pride he was changed from the glorious position of being the highest of God's angels to the devil, the archenemy of God. In his pride he was not content with the corruption of himself and of one-third of the angels, but extended his sin to the human family through the temptation of Eve, when, through the serpent, he contradicted God and said: *Ye shall not surely die: for God [Elohim] doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your*

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*eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods [Elohim], knowing good and evil* (Genesis 3:4-5).

We know Adam also ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This sin resulted in the fall of the human family (through the federal-headship of Adam), and it also resulted in the forfeiture of Adam's dominion over the earth: placing that dominion under the jurisdiction of the devil. This made the devil *the god of this world*, and it made the whole human family subject to *the world, the flesh and the devil*. Consequently the whole world lies in the power of darkness.

In our studies thus far we have traced the results of the sin of Adam and God's promise of a Savior through Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the age of Noah, Abraham and his two sons Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, the allegorical interpretation of the historical events in the book of Esther, and finally through Christ our Passover. We could have expanded our study to include many other persons in many of the books of the Old and New Testaments, but this was not necessary, nor very practical. What we have supplied is sufficient to have viewed the following principle:

Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. (I Corinthians 15:46-49)

We have come to the place in our studies where we shall endeavor to bring all that we have learned from the Old Testament into focus with the conditions which exist in the New Testament. In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew our Lord spoke seven parables which give us a view of the entire church age. These parables will take us from the first advent of our Lord until He returns to this earth as *King of kings and Lord of lords*. Consequently they will give us a view of the

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propagation of the gospel and the spiritual battles believers shall face until the Lord comes to receive us by *death* or by *life* at His coming in the air. In other words these parables will give us a view of *The Flesh and the Spirit in the Church Age*.

In order to accomplish our purpose in an orderly fashion, we shall consider each parable in the order in which it is given and the interpretation of each. As we consider all of the parables in this chapter, we shall discover that they are interrelated. The truths learned in one parable are applicable to the succeeding parables as well as to the preceding parables.

The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: but other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

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. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. (Matthew 13:1-15)

First, it is important to note that our Lord came out of the *house* and sat by the *sea side* and then entered into a *ship*, while the multitude and His disciples listened to Him speak the first

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four parables as they stood on the shore. Since Israel is spoken of in Scripture as the *whole house of Israel*, and the church is spoken of as a fellowship, and the seas represent the Gentile nations of the world, it appears the seven parables in this chapter relate to the time when the truth of the kingdom would be taken from the nation of Israel and would be given to the church (made up of Jews and Gentiles) to preach the gospel of the saving grace of Jesus Christ until the end of the age and the return of the Lord to this earth to establish His kingdom.

Second, it is important to note the people who were in the audience when our Lord spoke these seven parables. They consisted of a multitude of Jews and the disciples of our Lord. It was a homogenous audience of believers and unbelievers, which undoubtedly contained scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and representatives of the priesthood, as well as the common people. For the most part, despite the fact that this audience was made up of Jews who should have been aware of the truth of God, it was an audience who could not understand the parables of our Lord.

Third, it is important to understand what a parable is. Parables are stories about familiar things or persons which were used of the Lord to convey spiritual lessons and truths. Thus if one understands the natural circumstances associated with the things or persons and has *eyes* and *ears* to perceive spiritual truth, an understanding of the natural helps to convey the spiritual; but if one is without the spiritual ears and eyes to perceive, then there can be no understanding.

Fourth, our Lord spoke the parables for the specific reason of conveying spiritual truth to believers, while hiding the truth from unbelievers and counterfeit believers, for He said: *Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from*

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*him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have (Luke 8:18, emphasis mine).*

Our Lord began with the parable of the sower. It was concerned primarily with the different types of ground upon which the seed sown could fall. In that era it was common knowledge that a sower would carry a bag of seed, like a sling about his neck. It would have an opening into which the sower could reach the seed, which he would cast in an arc before him, allowing gravity and the wind to settle the seed to the ground. Our Lord's audience, being familiar with the process, would have understood that seed sown to the wind could fall in places other than the ground which had been specifically prepared for it. So He said:

Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. (Matthew 13:18-19)

Our Lord's interpretation of the seed that fell by the *way side* indicates to those of us who have been called to preach the gospel: we are in a spiritual battle against the devil and his angels. All of the seed which we sow, by the preaching of the gospel of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, is not going to produce. Some of it will fall on ground too hard to receive the seed that it might germinate (be quickened by the Spirit of God) and spring forth unto eternal life. Since the Spirit of God does not allow this ground to understand the Word preached, the seed will lay where it fell until the devil or his angels come and catch it away.

The next type of ground upon which the Sower's seed fell was *stony places*. This ground was shallow, with a minimum of arable soil on top of a stony base. Our Lord said: *[H]e that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or*

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*persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended* (Matthew 13:20-21).

It is important to note that of the four types of ground upon which the seed fell, only the first, or *way side ground*, failed to produce. Since the seed is the Word of God and the field is the world of unregenerate men, the various types of ground represent the different types of men in a lost world who hear the Word of God. In each case where the seed germinated and produced a plant, it must be concluded that the plant represents one who has life in Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, *And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand* (John 10:28).

Since the various types of ground affected the status of the plants, this characterizes different types of believers. Some believers in Jesus Christ are not fully dedicated to the production of fruit in the kingdom of God. This is the point of the parable -- to reveal some of the pitfalls which interfere with the believer and cause him to be unproductive in his life as a believer. Remember, our subject is the flesh and the Spirit in the church age.

The *stony places* believer was one who did not have much of a root system in the things of God. He quickly received the Word of God *with joy*, but having only surface ground in which to grow, he soon languished for lack of nutrients. The plant in *stony places* can be likened to one who joyfully receives the Lord as Savior, but rarely avails himself of the preaching of the Word of God that he might grow. Thus he is like those believers at Corinth of whom the apostle Paul wrote: *And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ* (I Corinthians 3:1).

Carnality is the antithesis of spirituality. And, as we have seen in previous lessons,

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spirituality is predicated of the Word of God. As suggested in the parable, the *stony places* plant was prevented from having all of the moisture and nutrients it needed for growth because of the stones in the ground. Thus it did not do well in extreme heat.

It appears, then, the *stony places* believer has many activities (which may be likened to the stones in the ground) which give him an excuse for not availing himself of those things which could aid his growth. To his way of thinking, all of these stones are important to his life. Even though he started out well in his Christian life (*with joy*), he is not capable of withstanding adversity. He is saved, but he cannot take the heat because of a lack of resources. Peter wrote to encourage believers like him:

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you. Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (I Peter 1:23-2:3)

The *stony places* believer remains a babe and carnal because he does not receive the unadulterated milk of the Word of God, that he may grow. This may not be altogether his fault. For throughout the world today, there are many churches where their attendance and wealth is soaring because of fleshly programs, concerts and the like, which bring in many people, but they give them little, or nothing of the Word of God to sustain them. In addition to the Word not being preached, Peter suggested envy, malice, evil speaking, and hypocrisy could also hinder the believer from receiving the pure milk of the Word. Thus the seed sown on this kind of ground does not produce because of a lack of spiritual food, whatever the specific cause.

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The next type of ground, described by our Lord in the parable of the Sower, was the seed which fell *among thorns*. He said: *He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful* (Matthew 13:22). The believers represented as being *among thorns* can be doctrinally sound. They can be knowledgeable and attend a church where the truth is proclaimed faithfully. Their problem is not a lack of sound teaching, but *the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches*. And one of the company said unto him, *Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me. And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you? And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth* (Luke 12:13-15).

The flesh is manifested in this believer too, but in a different way than with the *stony places* believer. The *stony places* believer does not grow because of a neglect of the Word of God, but the seed *among thorns* believer can show all kinds of signs of outward growth. His problem is that he is motivated by money. His decisions are based upon furthering his ability to produce money, rather than producing spiritual seed. This believer is afraid he might have to do without. He has many anxieties which interfere with his spiritual production and occupy his mind with the state of the world and his ability to make and keep his money.

A believer from the seed *among thorns* could even be an uncalled man in the ministry. He would have to be uncalled of God because one of the qualifications of a pastor is not to be greedy of filthy lucre. Despite this qualification there are many in the ministry who are in fact *greedy of filthy lucre*. Some of these are not believers at all. Even so the apostle Paul wrote:

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Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort. If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain.

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. (I Timothy 6:1-12, emphasis mine)

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with money. The problem with money is the insatiable desire for it. Many of God's servants, especially in the Old Testament, had a degree of wealth. It is not money, but the love of money which is the root of all evil. The love of money in the preacher, who is charged with the responsibility of good stewardship of the truth: results in a conflict of interest. Thus our Lord said:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?

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(Matthew 6:19-25)

Too much emphasis upon the needs of life can cause the man of God to be diverted from the purpose for which God called him: to faithfully proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. With too strong an interest in temporal things, the man of God, just like the believer, might find himself *among thorns*, where *the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful*.

The believer that is represented by the seed that fell *among thorns* has forgotten some things. He has forgotten that the Lord promised to meet all of our temporal needs. The believer's responsibility is simply to seek the kingdom of heaven first. The seed *among thorns* believer has forgotten that the Lord provides for the birds of the air and the beast of the field, who perform no labor. He has forgotten that Solomon in all of his glory was not arrayed like the lilies of the field. He has forgotten that God always keeps His promises. Our Lord said:

... take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (Matthew 6:31-34)

The last type of ground that our Lord spoke of in the parable of the Sower was the seed that fell into *good ground*. He said: *[H]e 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).

The *good ground* seed produced a crop the same as the seed in *stony ground* and the seed *among thorns*; but the *good ground* seed produced a bountiful harvest, while the other two grounds

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produced scant little. The *good ground* believer can have his problems with the flesh, like the other two; but the believer represented by this ground is committed to the purpose for which he was saved -- to labor in His Father's field in the truth of the gospel, so that with the increase of the Lord, the yield is *some an hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty*.

It is important for us to determine what is meant by this threefold type of yield. The patriarch Noah can supply us with important information about what a yield of an hundredfold might mean. First of all Noah is named with the so-called heroes of faith in the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews. We have the testimony of the Holy Spirit of God to his life of faith:

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith. (Hebrews 11:7)

We know that *without faith, it is impossible to please God*, and Noah is listed with those who lived their lives by faith. Consequently he must be included as a type of the good ground that brings forth an hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty. Now the implication from the book of Genesis is that Noah labored for one hundred and twenty years in the preparation of the ark, which is a type of Jesus Christ, and in doing so (according to the above text) condemned the world that then was. It is evident then, despite Noah's intense labors for all of those years, the Lord gave him but seven souls, besides his own, to enter the refuge of the ark. There can be no doubt about Noah's faithful labor, nor can there be any doubt about the number of souls saved; so despite what man might think, Noah's good ground brought forth an hundredfold.

God is an immutable God. He does not change. We know God is the only One Who can save souls. Noah's increase, like our own was (is) predicated of God. Further according to our

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Lord's statement to His disciples in the fourth chapter of the gospel of John -- not all who sow, reap and not all who reap, necessarily, sow: *Herein is that saying true, one soweth, and another reapeth, that they may rejoice together.* It should be evident, the responsibility of the believer is faithfulness to that which is committed to his trust, while it is the Lord's responsibility to give the increase, and the increase He gives will be every soul He gave to the Son before the foundation of the world.

Today there is a great emphasis placed upon the reaping of souls by mass evangelism. It is wonderful to see souls saved. In fact, the salvation of souls is and should be the desire of all believers. Nevertheless it is not possible to reap a crop that has not been sown. In this respect, Jesus said:

... Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours. (John 4:35-38)

Therefore the salvation of souls is a joint effort of believers in Jesus Christ, with no greater glory accorded to the one who reaps than to the one who sows. In fact, Jesus stated that His disciples would reap what they had not sown. Jesus told His disciples they would enter into other men's labors. Therefore the disciples reaped a harvest of souls as a result of the work of men like John the Baptist and other Old Testament saints. Nevertheless, at the resurrection, the disciples will rejoice with those who preceded them when they view the results of their combined labors.

How different the teaching of the Word of God is from the ridiculous statements of some preachers. When I was in Bible College, we were told, *If you have not won a soul to Christ this*

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*week, you are backslidden.* That is quite a statement! Where does that kind of thinking fit into a proper understanding of the Word of God? It certainly does not allow the increase of souls to be of God, neither does it allow for the joint efforts of the sowers and the reapers. It is simply an overzealous statement from a spiritual ignoramus.

Genuine spirituality and fruit bearing does not always fit the preconceived ideas of some professed authorities. Often, as in the case of the statement about soul winning, we find that these authorities judge by the flesh and not by the Word of God. Their judgment is not spiritual. It is carnal. This is true because the work of the Spirit of God always agrees with the written Word of God.

The *good ground* believer believes the Word of God for salvation and for life. For him, salvation is not just preservation from judgment and hell, it is a message to be taken to the lost so that they can also taste of the grace of God. The *good ground* believer reflects the interest of the One Who saved him. Therefore he seeks a local church which is sound in the faith, with a solid teaching ministry, so that he can grow in grace and in the knowledge of his wonderful Lord. This is the basic difference between the *good ground* seed and the *stony places* and *thorny ground* seed.

The apostle Paul wrote:

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge [Greek: *epiginosis*: full knowledge] of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge [Greek: *epiginosis*: full knowledge] of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)

These parables are spiritual lessons to those who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear *what the Spirit sayeth unto the churches.* In these parables there are truths which have the capacity

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to add to the believer's full understanding of the Word of God. A proper understanding of these parables provides the believer with the capacity to avoid much of the error that will come upon the church before the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. This is true because these parables give the believer in Jesus Christ a fore view of the problems and conditions that shall confront believers throughout the church age.