

Is the Parable of the Sower About Israel?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 February 2019

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today's question is, what credence is there to looking at the parable of the sower, Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8, as Jesus' comment on the nation of Israel, not as a parable about the condition of an individual's heart?

Does the agricultural imagery for the nation of Israel like field, vineyard, field of noble quality, garden and harvest found in passages like Jeremiah 26, Isaiah 5 and 37, Psalm 80 or Ezekiel 16 indicate that I've been misreading this passage or have been mistaught?

How should we think about this parable in light of this? Thanks for your thoughts. I think it is appropriate to read this as a story about Israel. Many of Jesus' parables are explicitly comments upon the history of Israel, the parable of the wicked vinedressers, for instance, and things like the wedding feast.

These various parables are not just parables about individual salvation and what happens in the individual's heart, but about what God is doing through Christ in bringing his kingdom at that moment in time.

The kingdom of heaven is not just about what happens in individual's hearts. It's about the destiny and the history of Israel. And so what we see in this parable, I think, is in keeping with those other parables.

[1 : 12] It's a parable about what God is doing in Christ at that moment in time in Israel. Now, Israel was described as a field. It was described as a vineyard. It was described with this other agricultural imagery, as the questioner suggests.

And here, I think, we see picking up language from the Old Testament concerning seed. Israel is planted within the land. And so as God returns his people from exile, he plants them in his land. We see the prophecy of Isaiah, which is in the background of Jesus' statements following this. Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive. In the original context in Isaiah 6, there's a reference to seed.

And the reference to seed is in the context of the remnant. So in Isaiah 6, verse 13. But yet a tenth will be in it, and will return and be for consuming, as a terebinth tree or as an oak, whose stump remains when it is cut down, so the holy seed shall be its stump.

Now, seed is language that has a lot of connotations in Scripture. It's associated with the promised descendants. It's God's promise to multiply Israel, to multiply Abraham's seed.

[2 : 28] And it's also a focus upon the Messiah, ultimately, the one who will be the seed, the seed of the woman. In this context, God is the one who is sowing the seed, or Christ, or the one who's giving the message of the kingdom, ultimately God himself.

He's spreading this seed, and as he spreads this seed, it lands on different sorts of ground. And this different sorts of ground, I think, relates to these different contexts in which Christ's word is received.

The word of the kingdom is received. God is restoring his people, or he's sowing the seed of the kingdom. That's restoring his people from exile. That's part of what's going on. It's also this word that's being delivered, this word that has this promise of the kingdom.

It's a secret thing. The seed goes into the ground, and you don't see it until it bears fruit. This sowing of the seed is something that's done in a way that the true outcome of it is where we see the power of the event.

It's not in the sowing of the seed itself that things are most visible. It's as it starts to bear fruit that we see it having its effect. And so this could be seen as a sequential reading of Israel's history.

[3 : 43] Maybe something like we have in Daniel with the dream of the statue with the different layers. But I think it's more likely to be a concurrent series of contexts in which the word of the

kingdom is being sown.

And so there are different responses to the word of the kingdom in this moment in time. But it is very much a parable about Israel. Like the other parables, it's about how Israel primarily is responding to the word of the kingdom.

The parables aren't just about Israel. There's parables of the dragnet. There's parables of the pearl of great price. Things like that that would suggest a more Gentile context. But here, I think, the emphasis is upon Israel.

How is Israel receiving the word of the kingdom? The word of restoration, of sowing again Israel in the land after exile from God's presence. Now, if you want to have a longer reading of this, I highly recommend reading N.T. Wright's treatment of this passage in *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

He gets into it in some depth and brings out some of these themes, arguing that it's connected with exilic themes, with Israel, with God sowing his people, that sort of thing.

[4 : 54] James Jordan has also discussed this in *Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration*, which is a monograph that you can get from *Biblical Horizons*. It may still be available there.

But I think that reading is fundamentally correct. It helps us to understand how this fits in with the broader tenor of the parables that we see in Jesus' ministry. The parables of the kingdom are not primarily about a timeless message of salvation for individuals, but about the event that is taking place in Christ, what God is doing in his kingdom ministry.

And I think that does help us to see how this fits on the ground of first century Israel, in the heat and the dust of Jesus' ministry.

And it is a message that provokes a response. It alludes to these messages of the Old Testament, to Isaiah, to the prophets and the way that they speak about Israel as a land receiving seed.

And Israel is called to respond. There are these different responses to the word of the kingdom.

And the word of the kingdom will yield its fruit as it is received appropriately. Now, Jesus' explanation for this has often been taken to refer to individuals receiving the word.

[6 : 11] And there is a sense in which it is that. It's the ones who receive the word well. And that includes individuals. But I don't think it's just individuals. We tend to individualize things that aren't necessarily individualistic.

We can recognize that there is a sense in which this has to be received by individuals. But it's individuals as part of a people. Individuals as those who are caught up in the destiny of Israel.

And in its moment of crisis, where it will either follow its destiny and receive the kingdom. Or it will deny it and it will fall away and be judged as this land that has often received rain and not yielded fruit.

Now, this sort of parable of the soul can also help us read things like Hebrews 6. To recognize that the land that often receives rain and does not give fruit is Israel.

That they are the ones who have crucified Christ again. As they've rejected not just Christ but also his disciples and his church. A lot more that could be said about this as usual.

[7 : 15] If you would like to think further about this, maybe leave a further question in my Curious Cat account. But for now, thank you very much for listening. If you'd like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

And, Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless and thank you for listening. God bless and thank you for listening.