

Russell Kelfer

He That Hath Ears to Hear

#1354-A

Series: The Parables of Scripture

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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It was a most unusual sight. You would imagine they were gathered for some kind of a boat race or a fishing competition. As far as the eye could see, there were people; people of all ages, from youngsters playing as their parents watched, to senior citizens who were seated on rocks, oblivious to the heat of the day and the press of the crowds. They represented all elements of society, from physicians to fishermen. They were standing along the edge of the shoreline, perhaps four or five deep, waiting for the event to begin.

Then, out of a house just a few yards from the shore, He came. They expected some kind of an aged professor, perhaps, someone who for years had accumulated the kind of knowledge men would stand on a sandy beach in the Israeli sunshine to listen to. Or maybe they were expecting some kind of radical preacher, like John the Baptist, who would call them to repentance, and whose very countenance would decry the norm of their society.

But it was not so. The look on His face was one of compassion and love. He walked, not as a government or religious superman with an entourage of secret service agents at His beck and call, but with a quiet confidence, His disciples at His side as students and friends, not as protectors and policemen.

He must have stopped momentarily to look at the crowds. Crowds were not important to Him. People were. How often He would turn from the multitudes that pressed upon Him and focus His eyes and His heart on the one, often on one the others had not even noticed. He did not cater to that which would attract them, in fact, He would soon lay down the boundaries of discipleship and many, no make that most of them, would scatter like leaves in the wind.

No, it wasn't the crowds that intrigued Him that day. He was as at home with hundreds as He was with one. But the crowds did present a problem. There were so many of them, and so scattered along the shoreline were they, that for Him to communicate truth to them, He must either move the crowd back from the waterfront, or He must somehow get out into the

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water far enough so that He could be seen and heard by as many as possible.

He had no expensive sound system. It wasn't a matter of boosting the master volume control a few more db's. The Master's volume control would be the sound of His voice, and He would be the only speaker on the shore; there would be no clusters of woofers and tweeters.

So He did a wonderful thing. He borrowed a little fishing boat, and moving out from the seashore just far enough to be seen and heard, but not far enough to be removed from His audience, He began to speak to them. It was not a theological masterpiece. No seminary would have used it as a model. No one needed a concordance or even a scroll to read to follow along with Him.

What He did was tell them stories; *children's stories would perhaps best describe it*. He talked to them the way you would address a 3rd grade Bible Class. But He did something special. He implanted within those childlike stories, deep, deep spiritual truths; and He did so in a manner that would allow only those who had His Father's ear to understand.

Let's turn the clock of eternity back to that day, and stand on that shoreline as the Master speaks, and let's run our VCR's back in slow motion so we can catch the very essence, as well as the message; the process as well as the performance. Let's rewind the Word of Truth back to Matthew, chapter thirteen, and enter into that seaside Bible conference for ourselves.

This is how the passage begins:

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.

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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.

Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.

(Matthew 13:1-18)

I imagine that the lenses of Channel 77, of "ITN", the "Israeli Television Network", were present and accounted for. News had spread from one end of the country to the other about this incredible carpenter whose very words were stirring the people to either deep remorse and spiritual awakening or cries of anger and deep rejection. The ones you might expect to be the most joyful at His coming, the religious leaders of the day, were not only skeptical, but downright vicious. They were determined to get rid of Him, even if it took a criminal act to do so. Many of the educated, the intellectual elite, if you will, looked upon Him

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with more scorn than anger. After all, He had no degrees, no credentials, no credibility. Without the seal of the Pharisees and Scribes and certainly without any recommendations from the government, He was hardly worth the time it took from the busy schedules of professors, authors, or rabbis.

No, it was the “common folk” who heard Him gladly. It was the average man on the street: the laborer, the housewife, the school teacher, the craftsman, who were the most interested in what this unschooled carpenter had to say. Interested they were,

For He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.
(Matthew 7:29)

I call your attention to verse 10. Jesus had finished telling His first story. Now, mind you, it was not the first time He had spoken to them this way. His Sermon on the Mountainside was filled with mini-stories and illustrations hewn out of the solid rock of human experience, but this was different. We’ll see why in a moment. In verse 10, we hear of the disciples’ first response to this style of teaching. You could almost hear them say to the Master, “We’ll never keep these crowds if you just sit around and tell stories. Hit ‘em with some heavy theology and impress them with your knowledge.” In actuality, it came out like this:

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?
(Matthew 13:10)

The disciples’ question was geared towards preaching style, not substance. They had, once again, missed the point of it all. Their question wasn’t “What is God saying to us?” It was, “Why speakest thou unto *them* in parables?” Lord, they can’t understand what you’re saying. They’re the ones who need help, Lord. Why not be more direct?

What were they saying? What did that word *parable* mean? That is where we must begin. The word in the Greek is: *parabole* {par-ab-ol-ay}. Strong’s concordance defines it this way for us:

- 1) a placing of one thing by the side of another, juxtaposition, as of ships in battle
- 2) metaphor
 - a) a comparing, comparison of one thing with another, likeness, similitude
 - b) an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated

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- c) a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God's kingdom are figuratively portrayed
- d) a parable: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning
- 3) a pithy and instructive saying, involving some likeness or comparison and having preceptive or admonitory force
 - a) an aphorism, a maxim
- 4) a proverb
- 5) an act by which one exposes himself or his possessions to danger, a venture, a risk.

The twelve understood what a parable was. That's why they specifically used that word. What they didn't understand was why God would send His Only Son into the world, gather together a great congregation, and then have Him talk in riddles.

A parable, as you can see from the concordance, is the laying of two things side by side; in this case a physical illustration of a spiritual principle. It is, as Strong's put it: "An earthly story with a heavenly meaning." It is a fictitious story which, by telling the story, teaches eternal truth. The word *parable* literally means to place alongside, as with a yardstick. As we will see in the weeks to come, parables were not new to Jewish teaching, nor to the disciples themselves. Nor were these the last parables they would hear from the lips of the Savior. But on this one occasion, perhaps more than any other, Jesus decided to spend a day teaching truth in story form. Verse 34 will end this day's sermons with an amazing statement:

All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables;
and without a parable spake he not unto them.

(Matthew 13:34)

All these things spake He in parables. Without a parable spake he not. In other words, *at least on this occasion*, Jesus' teaching was confined to stories laid alongside spiritual truths. Already He had done so much of it. In the Sermon on the Mount, as we mentioned, Jesus took simple physical illustrations and used them as a covering for intense kingdom issues.

He told them about salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), hardly subjects listed in the theological journals of His day; but beneath that covering of simplicity He painted with bold strokes on the

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canvas of men's hearts, a vivid portrait of their responsibility in the Kingdom. They were the lights. They were the salt.

He spoke of birds and lilies (Matthew 6:26-30) and in the process, of God's incredible provision to meet our needs. He talked of the splinter and the beam (Matthew 7:3-5), of the story of two gates (Matthew 7:13), of wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). He spoke of good and bad trees (Matthew 7:17-19), of the garment and the wineskins (Matthew 9:16), and of children in the market place (Matthew 11:16).

And this day would be a profound turning point in His ministry, for these parables were deep in nature, sometimes complex in their story line, and diverse in their subject matter. He spoke of farmers, of weeds, of mustard seed, of leaven, of hidden treasures, of precious pearls, and more. He spoke of truth after truth, using virtually every kind of illustration to make His point. The disciples were confused as to why He was using such simplistic stories to reach the multitudes. The truth is: He wasn't really aiming His message at the multitudes, but *at them*. He said, again and again, "He that ears to hear, let Him hear."

What did He mean? We surely cannot envision a crowd of people, some who had ears, and some who didn't. They all had ears. And He was not implying that some did not have *good hearing*. He was assuming that they all heard physically what He had to say, but only a certain group of those who heard *had the capacity to understand*. Jesus worded it this way:

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.
(Matthew 13:11)

The Master clearly answered their question. These messages were given in "code", so to speak, and *only those with the God-given capacity to understand had the de-coder ring*. Only they could receive the signal of the Word, and through the process of divine interpretation, *actually understand the spiritual truths hidden under the surface*. Everyone would hear the sermon, but to many, or perhaps most, it would be in another language. They would understand the story, but not the message in the story that could spiritually change their lives. Those *with ears to hear*, however, would hear, *not only the story, but the message*. Their responsibility would be whether or not to obey by applying the principles to their lives. Indeed, the very nature of these parables

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seemed to point to a truth that the disciples had not yet come to understand. That truth is this:

Many would hear, but few would respond. The size of the crowds would not be the key factor in determining what God was doing. The parables would talk about seed that did not take root, about fruit that never grew, about something that would become a kingdom within a kingdom; a world in which many would hear the gospel, but only some would respond; a world in which even those who understood might begin the pilgrimage, but when the fires of tribulation began to burn and the storms of testing began to fall, they would say, “*This is not for me.*”

So the principle was that those who heard would first of all fall into two categories, those who have ears to hear, and those who do not. Now the question is: “Who was the you who were given an understanding of the mysteries of the Kingdom, and were the them to whom it was not given?”

Commentators do not agree at this point. Some believe these messages were only meant for the disciples. Others teach that Jesus could not have meant to exclude some; therefore, Matthew misinterpreted what Jesus was saying. That certainly could not be the case.

What Jesus was doing, I believe, was beginning a process that would continue to the end of the age; the process of recognizing that spiritual truth would be broadcast to the masses, but deep instruction would be appropriated only by those who believe. The violation of this principle has been devastating to the church and to evangelism alike. He was teaching, among many other things, the principle of understanding *the purpose of your preaching*. To preach deep truth to unbelievers would be casting pearl before swine. They would not have ears to hear. To simply preach the simple gospel over and over to the converted would leave them happy, but stunted in their growth, with the challenges of discipleship and obedience never really communicated.

Jesus had a message to proclaim to the lost and dying world: It was one of salvation by grace through faith. Jesus had a mission to fulfill: It was an atoning death on a Roman Cross whereby One man would die for the sins of many. But, Jesus also had a Kingdom to teach about and preach about once man believed. It was about an inner transformation whereby God’s Spirit, living in man, would actually change the character of that

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man or woman until he or she would live differently, not by playing or self-will, but by surrendering to the plan of God until the Person of God actually lived through them from the inside out.

That would leave the world in two categories: 1) those who were born again and had the inner ear of the Holy Spirit within them to interpret truth, and 2) those who, as yet, did not. Those who did not could be preached at all day about how to live the Christian life, but it would fall on ears that could not hear, eyes that could not see. Those hearts had one need: conversion. Until and unless that happened, the truths of the Kingdom could neither be understood nor applied.

Believers, on the other hand, would have a deeper need. The reality of The Cross and the grace that redeemed them would now have to be understood and acted upon in such a way that their daily lives would be literally transformed by the renewing of their minds. Their relationships would be dynamically changed. Their marriages would be eternally committed. Their motivations would be dramatically transformed. Their priorities would be determined, not by what made them happy, *but rather by what would please the heart of God and give glory to the Name of God.* Nothing would be the same. But to preach that kind of total revolutionary truth to those who had neither the desire nor the capacity to receive it, would be only the more frustrating to them. Until they came to the Cross, they would have no ears to hear.

The Holy Spirit had not yet come to indwell the believers. Until Pentecost, that would not be reality. But those present in that audience who had, by faith, trusted in Jesus as Messiah, now had the eyes of their understanding enlightened. They were able to receive truth. To those on that sandy beach who only were curiosity seekers at this point, or even skeptics, the message must be received at a different level.

So Jesus preached in stereo. The masses heard channel one. It was a series of simple, interesting sounding stories about seed and sowing; about farmers and their enemies; about little seeds becoming great trees; even about baking bread. The most uneducated could understand every word. There were simple truths involved about cause and effect, and that made sense to them, and the authority with which This Man spoke held them enraptured, but unconverted.

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The disciples and those who had come to believe, however, heard not only channel one, but channel two, as well. These heard a subliminal message recorded by God's Spirit underneath the story line. Every character represented someone or some thing in the Kingdom of God. Every act or activity represented some form of spiritual reality or principle. And every message had a mission: to change the perspective and thus the hearts of the hearers; those who had ears to hear.

Therefore, before we begin the process of opening our hearts to hear again the parables of Scripture, and in particular, the parables of Jesus, we must come to grasp His answer to the disciples and make application to that in our lives. As we will see shortly in the parable of the sower, *even the believers would receive and act upon truth at different levels and with different degrees of spiritual fruit*. Ten thousand people could hear the same message and the amount of transformation, the degree of transformation, and the lasting effect of that transformation would depend upon several key factors, but they would not be the same. Three thousand might be unaffected. Five thousand might be touched, but not changed. One thousand might be moved and changed, but only to a degree, or only for a season. But there might be a thousand, maybe just ten percent, who would be so transformed by the message and so committed to surrendering to its overwhelming power that from that moment on, *nothing in their lives would ever be the same*.

That difference would not be because God only wanted to reach ten or twenty or fifty percent. It would be because some had, in varying degrees and at different times, *hardened their hearts and allowed a veil to cover their eyes, lest they be changed and that change disrupt the status quo in their lives*. Verse 15 explains:

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. (Matthew 13:15)

Jesus takes three medical conditions to describe those who could not hear because they would not hear. Little by little, they have allowed these physical ailments to go untreated, and by not treating them, were reaping the consequences.

The first had to do with a sick heart. The Greek word used

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here is one that describes a fatty, degeneration of the heart. There has been a buildup of spiritual plaque that has kept the flow of truth from pouring into the heart. There has been no conversion. Salvation gives man a new heart, and thus the arteries are free to receive the pulsating love of God by faith. The shedding of God's blood has allowed the ultimate transplant to take place. A new heart. A new creature. A new life.

The second illustration had to do with earwax. A gradual buildup of wax in the ears dulls the sense of hearing, and it happens so slowly that you don't realize it's happened. You may find yourself nodding and grinning as though you understand, but in reality, you can't quite make out the words.

The third picture is one of eyes that have gradually developed cataracts. You can't read the road signs of life anymore, but it's been so long and so gradual you forget you were supposed to, so when Jesus puts up a poster that says Only One Way you can't quite read the *only* and think He means He is *one way* to heaven, rather than the *only way*. Reading two out of three of the words is not so bad, you surmise. Not so. It is really bad.

So Jesus has begun the process of trying to demonstrate for these somewhat spiritually obtuse disciples that the message would be constant, continual, and life-changing, *but the response would be variable, diverse, and distinctively unique from heart to heart.*

Even when it would be received with gladness, the level of fruit borne would vary as much as 300%. The gospel would go out to the ends of the earth, and many, in fact most, would hear it, but not really hear it; or they would hear it and not receive it and surrender to it. In like manner, the word of Truth would go out to believers for the rest of the age and as it did, some would respond immediately, some eventually; some excitedly, some reflectively; some transformingly, others less productively. The choice belonged to the human heart, but the message belonged to the Living God.

This whole scenario, then, is a backdrop for Jesus' explanation of the lead parable, the parable of the sower, as we have come to know it. Perhaps a better title would be the parable of the soil, for the sower would remain constant, the seed would remain constant, but the *results would vary based on the condition of the soil.* And the condition of the soil, remember, represents the

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condition of the heart of the hearer, along with his or her behavior *just after hearing and/or responding to the Word of God.*

Perhaps God has spoken to you in days just past; maybe He has reached down into the cavern of your heart and placed seed there, seed that is starting to bud, conviction that is starting to take root. Don't for one minute surmise that long-term fruit-bearing is a given. You must nurture the seed as any good farmer would. You must water it, pull up the weeds that seek to infest it, fertilize it with further truth, memorize and meditate, lest it get away from you. Only then are you likely to look back a month from now, a year from now, a lifetime from now, *and see that moment of truth as an eternal turning point.*

The disciples needed to understand that truth. They did not yet have the Holy Spirit to interpret it, so they asked Jesus to strip away the allegoric veneer and just give them the application. So He did. His purpose was several fold:

- 1- To help them understand *this* parable.
- 2- To help them understand *all* parables.
- 3- To help them understand *why He taught* in parables.

Listen to what 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.

But he 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 persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.

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.

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 13:18-23)

Listen carefully to what the Master said. He said that there are four categories of hearers. At any given time, each of us

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probably fits into one of these four groups. They are:

- 1- The wayside soil
- 2- The stony soil
- 3- The thorny soil
- 4- The good soil

The good soil, incidentally, is divided by Jesus into variables, described by example into three additional categories. How you receive future truth, *and how you respond to truth God has recently laid on your heart*, may well depend upon decisions you make concerning the care and keeping of the soil of your heart from this day forth. In our next lesson, we will devote our time to taking this parable apart one piece at a time, and seeking to search beneath its surface to find the jewels of truth that lie hidden there.

We will seek to hear Jesus explain again just what this parable means. We must, however, look in closing at His explanation of the first kind of soil. It is wayside or roadside soil. Roadside soil is soil that has been hardened by being trodden under foot. It is that pathway along the edge of a planted field where footprints over and over have pressed down on the ground and made it difficult to receive the seed. It is caked over with indifference. It is hardened through years of unconfessed sin.

Nonetheless, some of the seed falls there. The sower knows some of it will fall there, but He would rather lose some seed than miss any opportunity for even that hardened clay to open up and bear some fruit. So He allows it. Because of the hardened heart, the soil of that one by the roadside seems relatively void of understanding. He or she has heard it all so many times they can quote it from memory. Repent. Commit. Surrender. Lordship. Discipline. Confession. Restitution. They are not new principles, nor are they new commandments.

Mr. or Mrs. Roadside, however, has heard them before, and has rejected responding so many times, he or she is devoid of understanding. Understanding, remember, is the personalization of truth. They will agree with the principles, even say Amen, but not apply it to their own lives. Because they have intellectualized truth rather than applying it, the seed just lies there on the ground, not having been drawn into the soil at all.

Then cometh the wicked one, says Jesus. Don't blame it

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on the devil; he's just looking for raw seed to snatch up, and the roadside hearer is perfect soil. He constantly swoops from overhead and snatches the seed up *before it can take root and bear fruit*. The enemy doesn't mind the word going forth, *so long as the seed does not take root*. Remember: the sower is Jesus. The seed is the Scripture. The enemy is Satan. The soil is your heart. No complicated surprises. No twists in the plot. Just simple truth made plain through an ordinary illustration about a farmer, planting time, and different kinds of ground.

God's goal, remember, is not sowing, it's fruit bearing. Sowing is a means to an end, not the end itself. If the seed isn't sown, no fruit will come. But for fruit to be multiplied and remain, wayside or roadside soil has to be ground up, turned up, turned over, and softened, or it will only become a silver platter for Satan's next big meal.

Have you recently received truth designed to change your life? And have you made serious, or at least casual commitments to God for Him to change you? Are you convinced you want to finish well, but you've had enough seed sent your way in your life to feed a nation, and seldom seen so much as a stalk of grain come forth from your heart? Don't give up now. Tend to the soil, beloved. Tend to the soil. Don't just pour more seed on top of it; that will bury the seed that's trying to grow. Don't just stand and look at the seed; that'll only break your heart as that crafty serpent with wings swoops down while you stand in a fog and devours the very seed God sent to change your life and make it His.

Tend to the soil, beloved. That means concentrate on the commitments you have made. Turn everything else off and focus. Forget the television set. Forget your favorite sport or hobby for awhile, *and tend the soil*. Double the time you spend in the presence of God. Triple it, if need be, *until you are so saturated with His presence, and so aware of the sin He has convicted you of, that the very tears that fall from your eyes will moisten the soil by the roadside, and when Satan dives down to snatch the seed, he will land head first into ground softened and made precious by God's flow of love through you*. He will limp away wounded, *and you will have won the victory*. Tend to the soil, beloved. Tend to the soil. Can't you just hear Jesus whisper it?

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- Read the Sermon on the Mount and see what parables emerge there. How did these parables seem to differ from those in Matthew 13? In what ways were they the same?

2- Can you find any parables in the Old Testament? How did the parables of Jesus differ from them?

3- Write out Matthew 13:1-18 in story form the way you would tell it to children. Then take verses 18-23 and use them to explain what the story meant. How can you use parables to teach others the way Jesus did?

4- Find one other Scriptural principle you would like to teach or share. Write out a parable or story that explains that truth in the context of life today *without violating in any way the essence of that truth.*

A Challenge to Application

1- What is the most important thing God has said to you in the last month? What do you think He is asking you to do about it? Ask God for the grace to focus on that seed before the enemy can swoop down and snatch it from your heart.

2- Make a list of three things you can do to become focused and accountable so that the soil of your heart will be pliable and able to bear fruit from that seed. Purpose before God that you will not do anything to interrupt the process until you have given His instructions time to take root.

3- Pray continuously and specifically for the soil of your heart to be softened by the Spirit of God. Pray with expectancy. It is according to His will. Ask Him to do it.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Matthew 18:19

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