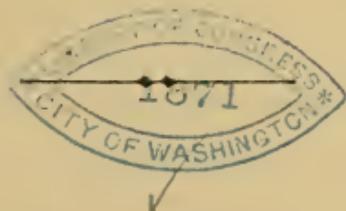


THE SOWER
AND THE SEED

BY

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JOHN HALL, D. D.

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HEAR

THE PARABLE

OF THE

SOWER AND THE SEED.

(3)

THE SOWER AND THE SEED.

CHAPTER I.

“HEAR YE, THEREFORE, THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER.”

WE *have* heard it: often heard it. The people to whom our blessed Lord first told the parable, had heard it when he said to them, “Hear ye the parable of the sower.” But his meaning was—hear the explanation of it: attend to its lessons: apply it to your respective conditions, that you may know what reproof, or warning, or direction it has for you. Hear and understand! hear

and perceive! hear and apply! Look at your hearts—at your conduct—and judge whether your case be described by the wayside, the stony-places, the thorns, or the good ground.

And so the Divine voice summons you now, whether it finds you in the house, or by the sea-side, or in the field, not for the first time to listen to the parable of the Sower, but, it may be, for the very first time in your life, to find its application to yourself.

And in hearing this parable, we must be struck with the fact, that our Lord regarded what he termed “the word of the kingdom,” to be the medium through which “the mysteries” of that kingdom are revealed to man. As seed

is the means of harvest, the source of the product—as there is no grain, nor flour, nor bread, unless the seed has been first planted, so, our Lord teaches us that “the word” is the first means of causing men to hear, understand, be converted, healed and saved. That is, there are truths which we must know and act upon, in order to be brought into the kingdom of heaven. We cannot enter it by forms and signs, by mechanism or motion, by wishing and consenting to enter it. We cannot enter it as we go on a journey, or come into a church, or do anything else, the performance of which requires no knowledge beyond that of external things and external means. The kingdom of

God, of Christ, of Heaven, is the dominion of the mind, the heart, the soul. The body is, indeed, included in the dominion, but its subjection follows as a necessary result: it is not the primary subject. Those spiritual parts require truth to influence them. They require knowledge to guide them. What they need is, not an army of the kingdom, nor a despotism of the kingdom, nor a treasure of the kingdom, but a "word of the kingdom."

To enter this kingdom, which is spiritual, one must first of all, and above all, know what is true; true of God and of himself; true as to what is required of him; true as to his character before God; true as to the extent, nature and

consequences of his offence ; true as to the means and way of forgiveness.

It was to this last department of the truth that the Lord was particularly alluding when he spoke of the word of the kingdom. His hearers had the written revelation of the truth, so far as the law of God was concerned. They had Moses and the Prophets ; but Christ came to seek and to save the lost ; to open the way of peace and grace. The word he brought was a message of mercy, a declaration of the way of redemption. It told the full truth as to what must be done by as many as wished to be saved. This word is the gospel preached and delivered to us. Without it we have no

adequate knowledge of God's righteousness in justifying the ungodly, no sufficient clew to the mercy-seat, no cross and expiating sacrifice.

Yet how little is felt the responsibility of possessing the New Testament!—Judge by your own observation, by your own experience, by your own habits, how much the history of Christ, the words of Christ, the inspired instructions of Apostles, are perused and studied, examined and re-examined, pondered and meditated, with persevering diligence, with earnest prayer, and honest sincerity, as the word of salvation, the guide to Heaven.

“Hear ye the parable of the Sower,” for it shows us that Christ perfectly

foresaw the reception which his word would meet with thenceforward. When he spoke the parable, it was so early in the career of the word of the kingdom, that a merely human mind could not have formed an opinion so comprehensive, as time has proved this prediction to be, of the varieties of causes that would prevent the acceptance of the word. Nor could such a mind have foreseen, so accurately, the disproportion of the hindrances to the facilities of belief. But standing as we do this day, eighteen hundred and more years from that day when it was uttered by the sea-shore,—contemplating Christianity as it then was, in a small boat, so to speak, one preacher, two or three

disciples, whilst the multitude of the hearers were practically strangers to the truth they were listening to; and looking along the history of the Church, with its myriads of ministers, and their millions of hearers, that whole history of preaching the word presents just the counterpart of this allegory of the Sower. It was true to the life then, in depicting the effects of the word in but a few hundreds of cases—it is just as true to the life this day in depicting the effects of the word on the persons who sit in the pews of our churches, and hear the parable read from the book. We might challenge the most ingenious or intelligent to add a fourth class of unfruitful hearers to the three

which Christ enumerated, as one not included in the sowing on the wayside, the stony places, or the thorns.

Then we ought to “hear the parable of the Sower” with great attention and solemnity, seeing we may do it under the conviction that we are hearing our individual character described by the Son of God, infallibly, within the compass of only three classes of the unprofitable, and one class of the profited hearers of the word of the kingdom.

It narrows the scope of the great inquiry to very manageable limits, when we say, our case—*mine*—as a hearer of the New Testament, is either like that of the seed sown by the wayside, or that which fell into stony places,

or that which was received among thorns, or that which was taken by good ground. In other words, each one may truly say,—

‘I have heard the gospel, but the wicked one hath caught it away from my heart;’ or, ‘I received it at first with joy, but taking no root, it endured but for a while;’ or, ‘I heard the word, but the care of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choked it;’ or else, ‘I heard and understood the word, and according to my measure, have shown some practical result.’

HEAR

THE PARABLE

OF THE

SEEDS BY THE WAY-SIDE.

(15)

CHAPTER II.

“THE FOWLS CAME AND DEVoured THEM UP.” “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.”

When *we* speak of not understanding the word, it is often done by way of excusing ourselves for want of faith, on the ground of the obscurity of the word. These hearers fancy

that if they cannot comprehend all that is said, they are under no obligation to receive it. As if the bare word of God, whether spoken as in times past by the prophets, or as unto us by his Son, and the whole embodied in one written record, was not sufficient to demand the belief and confidence of men, whether understood by them, or not!

But whatever may be the answer to this plea, this is not the place to insist upon it. However strong the plea might be in other circumstances, it could not avail the wayside recipient; for the "understanding" which the Parable speaks of has no reference to what are commonly called the difficult-

ies of gospel doctrine; or the things confessedly “hard to be understood.” The term which our Lord used* rather signifies that neglect of bringing together—or combining—in our minds the truth we hear and the regard that is due to it—the not bringing home to ourselves what we know to be true—which we call inattention, or overlooking. No one can be justly reproached for not comprehending matters that are beyond his capacity; but it is a proper and usual subject of reproach, if one fails to understand a matter in which he has great responsibility, from the mere neglect of putting his mind

* *Μὴ συνιέντος.* According to Beza’s translation, “*non attendit.*”

into contact with the facts of the case. It then becomes a reasonable reproof—and it is in our Lord's own words we find it—“*why* do ye not understand?” (John viii.) “Are ye also yet without understanding?” (Matt. xv.)

The matter for us to think of is this. After hearing and reading the gospel-word so long, after having the seed sown so plentifully, why have we not believed and obeyed it? Why have we not yet learned the lesson, and performed the duty, and conformed to the whole truth as thus distinctly set before us? The explanation of the Divine Teacher will not permit us to say, it is all the fault of the wicked one who came and caught away that

which was sown ; for, according to our Lord's words, it is not until one has heard and failed to understand, that the evil agency from without is exercised. "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." When the hearers of the word disregard what they hear, so as not to make it the subject of investigation, they practically reject it; they leave it unappreciated; it is left exposed, like seed on the wayside, so that any bird may pick it up.

Is it any wonder that they whose eyes are shut, do not see? Is it any

wonder that they who do not listen, do not hear? And if this is the natural effect of what may be called unintentional inattention, mere carelessness and want of thought, is it not likely to take place still more seriously and permanently, when the inattention, the neglect of the means of understanding, is wilful and deliberate? It was this obstinacy of purpose in keeping the truth from the mind, that our Lord exposed in all its peril, when he said in the same discourse with the Parable of the Sower, "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.”

The moral condition of the disciples was different—“Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. . . Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.”

This is where this point of the parable comes home, or ought to come home to the conscience of many an habitual receiver of the word. When you receive it, you leave it as you find it. You read or hear it, and are done with it. You do not seize it as a treasure, and bury it in your heart, and protect it, and watch against losing it. You take no pains to “understand” it:

no such pains as when you receive a document in your profession, a letter in your trade, a book in your studies, the use and value of which consist in your mastering it, and turning its contents to your own personal account. It is “then”—“THEN”—upon this neglect—upon this slothful, unapplying, superficial use of the word, that the wicked one takes it clean away. The great pilferer steals only what you left exposed. You invited him. You tempted the tempter. Lay not the blame on him. Do not suppose that you can excuse yourself for the loss, when, knowing that he was all about, you threw open your doors, and let him see your treasures, and went

yourself to sleep. Or, to come nearer to the figure of the parable, do not abuse the fowls for the loss of your harvest, if instead of sowing the seed in the fit place, and with fit care, you throw it about the streets, or scatter it about the highway made to be trodden by man and beast.

That may well be called a mere wayside, or by-the-way receiving of the word, which consists in a passing, incidental, occasional catching of religious doctrine. Many persons go to church, or take up the Bible, in a manner that may be described as an intentional keeping of themselves aside from the reach of the truth. They are like the crowd which lines the

streets when a procession is in progress, or which fills the galleries at a public festival; spectators, but not partakers; they come to see, not to share. These expect the word to take effect on them. They see how it suits others. They may rejoice in the conversion of others. But if any thing fall near them; if a single stroke of truth seem to touch their own consciences for a moment, it is, as it were, sideways, unexpected, and soon shaken off, as if they had, by accident, got possession of what was intended for some other person. “*Then* cometh the wicked one.”

There must be a great deal in the intention which we have in putting

ourselves in the way of the word. If we go where we know we shall hear it, or take the sacred book into our hands to peruse it, and actually intend to be profited, positively give our minds to it, as when an industrious scholar goes to the lecture, or to the study at his own table, purposely to understand, remember and practice, then it will be strange and unaccountable if we receive no good impression. But if we have no intention no fixed purpose, no definite object, in the use of the divine word,—if there is no making up of the mind to attend to and lay to heart what shall be submitted to us in the name of the Most High and the Most Gracious, then it will be strange

and unaccountable, on any natural hypothesis, if we receive any more than such wayside fragments as may be caught away by the next volatile thought, or thrown away by the least resistance. In either case the seed is utterly gone. "The fowls came and devoured them up." "When they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts." "Then cometh the Devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved."

With these explanations it is easy to comprehend our Lord's meaning when he said, in applying a passage of prophecy, "they seeing see not,

and hearing they hear not; neither do they understand." Nor is it any more difficult to perceive why the reception of holy truth is ineffectual in these cases, than it is to account for the loss of any other kind of truth, when it is received only with the external senses, and is not brought into use. There is this greater difficulty, indeed, in the word of the kingdom, that it is a spiritual, as well as intellectual use of it that is required. It is directed to the state of the heart, the turning of the soul, a radical change, an eternal result. But yet all these results are, in the plan of divine grace, as closely connected with a sincere use of the means, as any other kind of

results with their established means.
“As a man soweth, so shall he reap.”

The great caution to be given to such as complain that good impressions are so soon effaced—that the word is so soon caught from their hearts—is this:—make no delay in improving what you receive; cover the good seed by prayer, and forsaking of temptation, and committing yourself to Christ, before the adversary can have the opportunity of your carelessness to snatch away the precious deposit. These impressions may be slight; they may seem superficial; but they may be cherished into strength and performance. The seed first falls on the surface; a puff of wind seems strong

enough to blow it away; but a little diligence and wisdom may secure it beyond the power of any tempest to disturb its rest, before it has fixed its root in the mould.

You sometimes are caught with a view of divine truth which fixes your attention for a moment; which excites some alarm, or awakens some good desire, and you think that nothing permanent will result because the impression is so light. You think that if the time for your awakening had, indeed, come, the impression would be stronger and continuous. But why is it not stronger and continuous? Because you are so slow in improving it, that it perishes of neglect. You per-

mit the birds to devour the seed before your eyes, and do nothing to "fray them away." You defer action till to-morrow, and by to-morrow there is nothing to act upon. You are not content with the amount or duration of the first impression, and so throw it all away. As if the mustard-seed could not become a tree! As if the drop of leaven could not swell the loaf! How many times has the process been gone through in your case? Perhaps the whole history of your attendance on the public and private means of grace may be summed up as a hearing and forgetting, a series of convictions of what you ought to do and of postponements of the doing of

it. In this case your whole religious character may be written in this line—oh! let it not be your epitaph—“*this is he which received seed by the way-side!*”

There are some few persons who appear to be so habitually inattentive, so recklessly trifling, that we may suspect whether they ever feel a word of the truth, or stop a moment, in their flight of folly, to remember that there is a God, or that they have souls. But the greater part, at least of church-attendants, do certainly receive from the word itself, or from the acts of Providence, or the suggestions of their own fears or thoughts, some intimations of danger to be escaped, duties

to be regarded, truth to be believed, changes to be prepared for. If not in the exact sense of the parable, yet these too are wayside impressions; they touch us as we pass through the experiences of life, and feel that we are making our way towards great changes before us.

Again you are asked—*you*, reader!—what has become of these impressions? What has been their end? How do you now treat them? How do you intend to dispose of such as may have been made upon you, as you have turned these leaves, and as your conscience has been compelled to cry truth! truth! to many a line? What a flock of mischievous agencies hover

this moment around you waiting to catch even this poor seed, before it rests long enough to produce any good effect! What *little* birds they are that do this! How trifling the causes which can prevent the word of the kingdom from being heard and understood? Not eagles, or vultures, or ravenous fowl pick up the seed. They would give the alarm by their very size and fierceness and clamor; they would despise the seed, and seek their prey in another shape. But it is the merest sparrows, the veriest humming-birds, that play around us, and while amusing us with their plumage, and motions, and chirping, catch away that which is sown, from the heart. It is your busi-

ness that does it; your love of the world; your sensibility to pleasure; your facility in changing the subjects of your thoughts; your neglect of mental discipline; it is this and that trifling temptation, or glittering scheme, or gay imagination; it is some foolish pride, or gaudy vanity; some paltry fear, or cowardly shame, or unmanly timidity. In some shape or other, probably in many shapes, such things are stealing away the most precious gifts, the most sacred deposits that your heart can receive. "Hear ye therefore the parable of the Sower," and remember that what seems so innocent, so insignificant, or so fascinating, is the agency of the most fear-

ful adversary of your soul: for the infallible interpreter of the allegory of the fowls that came and devoured the wayside seed has said, as he pointed to them, "then cometh *the Devil*, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved."

It may be that some of our readers have already lost the benefit of the Lord's admonition, by supposing that it has no reference to them. They may have thought with complacency that they have often both heard and understood the word, rejoiced in it, and obeyed it. They have heard the call of Christ and become his disciples.

All this may be so, and yet a little

reflection may convince them that the word—much of it at least—is snatched from them before it reaches the heart. This is the case with those who hear the word, but do not keep it; who receive the truth, but do not conform to it; who profess faith, but live without good works, saying, “Lord, Lord,” but not doing the commandments of the Lord.

Surely the word of the kingdom ought to be precious to the subjects of the kingdom. “Hear *ye*, therefore, the parable of the Sower.” It is well for Christians to ask themselves how much of the good seed falls by the wayside as to *them*; how often it is devoured before they have turned it to

account; in plain words, what effect of the New Testament precepts and doctrines is discernible in the lives of Christians compared with the amount of instruction they obtain from it. Every page of the Scripture is given to them, as well as to others, for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness, for it is given "that the *man of God* may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (1 Tim. iii.) No one's piety ever outgrows the necessity for the milk and meat of the word. Believers are exposed to the same interruptions and hindrances as others, in their use of the truth; but it is expected of them to show greater diligence in

avoiding and overcoming them. They are supposed to have more dread of the wicked one, and to be more watchful. Yet how successful is he in catching away the word that should be feeding, strengthening, comforting, directing them! They often feel convicted of delinquency in duty, negligence in their life, omission or unprofitable use of the means of grace, declining zeal, cooling devotion, religion degenerating into formalism. Then they have a sense of danger and of shame; they think they *will* do better; they will mend this fault and begin this duty, and give themselves with new vigor to the life of godliness and the minding of the things of the Spirit;

but the week, the month, the quarter, the year rolls round, and the improvement does not take place. Between the sowing of the seed and the time for the harvest something interposed and destroyed the good result as effectually as if it had devoured the seed.

Communion-seasons abound in these disappointments. As they approach, communicants cannot help remembering their peculiar obligations; they look back to their first profession, their early diligence, seriousness and conscientiousness; how they appreciated the opportunities of worship, when perhaps the ordinary services of their church were not frequent enough to satisfy them. It was the word—the

word of the kingdom, that was then so precious to them, and that impelled them to good works, and to seek the abundance of the fruits of the Spirit. They have the same word yet—they have been receiving it all the time, but it is all sowing and no reaping. In grace, as in husbandry, there is not one seed-time and one harvest for a field; or are seed-time and a perpetual succession of harvests, without a repetition of the sowing. In this field neither the planting nor fruitfulness is periodical. They should be concurrent and constant. But from the fault of regarding them as periodical, there is often a revival of diligence in devotion, and in the use of the public means, as

sacred seasons come round—serious impressions and pungent self-reproaches at the Lord's table—but when the special season has passed, the impressions pass with it. The seed was caught away as soon as it touched the soil. And why? Because it was forgotten; because the hearing and the feeling were taken for the fruit-time, instead of the seed—time; because they who received the word, did not hear and *understand*.

Let our little catechism give the practical lesson of these considerations:—“How is the word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?

“That the word may become effectual

to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love; lay it up in our hearts, and practise it in our lives.”

HEAR

THE PARABLE

OF THE

SEED ON STONY PLACES.

(45)

CHAPTER III.

“SOME FELL UPON STONY PLACES, [MARK HAS “STONY GROUND:” LUKE “A ROCK;”] 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.” “AS SOON AS IT WAS SPRUNG UP, IT WITHERED AWAY, BECAUSE IT LACKED MOISTURE.”

“HE THAT RECEIVED THE SEED INTO STONY PLACES THE SAME IS HE THAT HEARETH THE WORD, AND ANON [AT ONCE] 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.” “THESE HAVE NO ROOT, WHICH FOR A WHILE BELIEVE, AND IN TIME OF TEMPTATION FALL AWAY.”

SEED that drops where the soil is filled with stones, or where the soil is but the shallow covering of a solid rock, will spring up all the more quickly for the small quantity of earth. It has the shorter space through which to work its way; the lighter mass to oppose its puny struggles. It has a quick development. It has the start of what is sown in the deep furrow. But then it comes out feeble, slender, unable to bear the light and heat it encounters. It grows so easily upward, that it needs no root downward, to give it support, and when it appears above the surface, it has nothing to hold it in the wind, or to furnish nourishment to its stalk. Both from the

shallowness of the mould, and the absence of root, it gains no moisture, and soon withers away.

To this law of the nature of vegetation there is an analogous law in the nature of the mind. Superficial knowledge is weak and transitory. It is their shallowness that makes the multitude of the credulous, and the self-conceited. They look only at the outside of things: cultivate only the surface. They have little knowledge; they come quickly to their conclusions; they act upon first impressions. Their horizon is of the narrowest compass, yet they imagine that nothing is hid from them. They endure but for a while. When their wisdom is fairly put

to the test; when some emergency calls for their whole strength, they are soon scorched, and fall into insignificance.

So it may be with religious knowledge. We see one, perhaps a mere youth, taking up the Holy Scriptures, or the system of doctrines which the best and wisest of men have laboriously framed from the Scripture, and having himself the scantiest acquaintance with the holy volume, and the smallest capacity to apprehend the great outline of inspired theology, he is still self-confident and self-sufficient. He speaks of divine truth as if no one could teach him, and as if his own opinions could not be wrong and must

not be questioned. He demands that the Scripture itself shall be interpreted by his own standard of justice and truth, and will perhaps threaten to discard revelation, if it should teach otherwise.

Now here is the seed; here is the word; it is revelation that is the subject of knowledge; but here is "not much earth," "no deepness of earth," "no root," "it lacks moisture." There is hard rock under the shallow soil; there is but a handful of earth among the stones where the seed fell. The result is often as apparent as the scorching of the precocious blade of grain. The first faith withers away. The mind, not being established in the

truth, suffering its opinions to push themselves forth without any proper substratum of truth to hold them and nourish them, is drawn in every direction from that which is right, and at every turn becomes more crooked and more weak. Every new theory diverts it; every dream of folly or superstition perplexes it; it goes from error to error; becomes wiser and wiser in its own conceit; soars higher and higher above what is written; by and by becomes offended at all established and tried doctrine, and its faith withers away into some miserable delusion, or into vacant unbelief.

It is in the stony places that most heresies start up; it is from those who

once received the word with joy, and whose religion, such as it was, "forthwith" sprang up into imaginary maturity and independence, that the great accessions are drawn to error, fanaticism, and infidelity.

Religious impressions are often received as suddenly, and the mind converted as unexpectedly as in the instance of Saul of Tarsus. The seed may be received into a shallow soil, and the soil may afterwards accumulate so as to furnish nutriment and protection to the grain till it shall have attained some growth. But often, too, there are received sudden and transient impressions of a religious kind, which really have no connection with

the word of the kingdom, and which perish in the same night in which they show themselves.

One sees a company of worshippers in a state of strong excitement. Their looks, gestures, outcries, create a scene of animation, which has a contagious effect, especially with weak and unreflecting minds. A spectator may become strongly affected through the mere susceptibility of his nervous temperament, and without hearing or thinking of any fact or doctrine of a religious nature, to which he could point as producing the excitement in himself.

Or, on the other hand, there may be a scriptural statement uttered,—some

word of the kingdom—which gives the start to the sudden alarm, or the luxurious ecstasy, or the excited imagination. The “joy” and “gladness” with which these impressions are so “immediately” received, seem to promise great results. They are sometimes taken as the supernatural, and therefore, most certain evidences of conversion, rendering superfluous any further trial of its reality. But what is frequently the result? Is it not like the rush without mire, the flag without water, which whilst in its greenness withereth before any other herb? (Job viii.) And what is the evident cause? What but this—that there was only the feeling, the excitement,

the sympathy? “Anon with joy” the word was received, but the cause of joy was not known; there was in fact no cause for it. It was a transport without reason. How could it last? Anon with indifference it expired. If it had proceeded from a view of the divine attributes as shown in the word; or from a view of the divine righteousness in the method of justification; or from the consciousness of a new principle of spiritual life, exercising an actual power over the heart and its issues, there would have been a cause for intelligent joy,—though, perhaps, not of a description that would exhibit itself in the form of bodily excitement. But if the ex-

perience were only superficial, and without the groundwork of an intelligent and sincere reception of the word itself, there was no root; not much earth; it lacked moisture; it withered and disappeared.

Or, again, the most tranquil regard may be given to the word. It may be so emotionless as to be stoical. The most unimpassioned assent may be given to the truth, and yet the holy seed may be said to lie among the stones, or on the rock, because the *heart* is not opened to it. It falls only on the mind—is received only by the understanding. As in the case just supposed, there was all feeling and no knowledge, so here all is knowledge

and no feeling. There is an admission of guilt, but no such shame as will not lift up its eyes to heaven, and only cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" There is no such abasement as exclaims, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes:" "mine iniquities are gone over mine head; as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me:" "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up into the heavens."

There are many suns to scorch and wither such soil as this. "Tribulation or persecution because of the word" will do it. When men find they must

suffer on account of their religion, they often show how rootless their faith was. The stake has made many martyrs, but also many apostates. And not only the stake. The dread of any loss as a consequence of faith, is sometimes enough to blast the sprouting of the good seed. Persons are persuaded of the truth; there is soil enough among the stones for that; but when they begin to reflect that a life conformed to the truth will cut them off, here and there, from what they love more than the truth; that sacrifices must be submitted to; self-denials endured; reproach, or ridicule, or suspicion encountered; the very apprehension of such incidents prevents

their committing themselves to what they know to be true; or having committed themselves, the fire is too hot for them, and while they are shifting hither and thither to escape it, their religion withers away. "Demas hath forsaken me; having loved this present world." The hot sun of covetousness withered the religion of Ananias, Sapphira, Judas. Prosperity is sometimes a more searching fire than persecution, in the trial of faith. A religion that started up suddenly, in a season of affliction, in a moment of alarm, and which was not cultivated afterwards, will show its want of depth and root by gradually dwind-

ling into negligence and indifference, till it finally vanishes from sight.

What one of the Evangelists calls the "time of temptation," when many "fall away," comprehends a large class of the occasions that witness the perishing of good impressions:—the temptations of pleasure and the weakness of the principle of self-restraint; the temptations of a formal religion, and the weakness of the understanding of what is spiritual; the temptations of self-righteousness, leading to the forgetfulness of the necessity of being "rooted and grounded in Christ;" the temptations of false doctrines, causing a false hope that the grace of God will dispense with good works, if

there be an outward show of religion, or causing the delusion that, there being no danger of falling from grace, there is no necessity for watchfulness;—or either side of this error, viz: that if one act well, it is not important what he believes, or if he believe correctly, he may act as he pleases.

It must be observed that these temptations may implicate the standing of professed Christians as well as of others. Indeed the stony places where the seed was sown, do not originally represent unbelievers at all. It is they who receive the word, and even joyfully at first, who alone are described. They are advanced a stage beyond those from whom Satan caught

the word, before it germinated at all—the wayside seed. Let new confessors of Christ take notice of this. There is seldom much deepness of earth when the word first takes effect. The little that there is, is apt to pass for a great deal. Too much confidence is placed in the mere profession, as an evidence of grace, or as the accomplishment of the work of faith. It would be better to consider attendance on the ordinances as means of cultivation rather than the harvest; as more like planting than gathering. It would be better for all of us to be looking to ourselves that our shallow knowledge, superficial experience, and feeble beginnings of every kind may be growing

more full and complete. We should be extremely watchful to hold fast what we have, that it may not barely be preserved from extinction before it produces anything, but that it may be secured and established so that it shall bring forth much fruit and constantly. Our principles must be made stronger; our practical acquaintance with the truth more thorough and active. We must know why we believe and what we believe, and feel that we do believe, and that this believing works itself into our actions day by day and all day, and is strengthening, directing and marking our character. This is the only means of becoming so rooted in faith, that

the winds of error shall not prostrate it, the billows of doubt make it waver, nor the fire of temptation scorch and wither it. (Ephes. iv. James i. Matt. xiii.)

Let church members, whether their connection be recent or old, beware of the stony places, the stony ground, the rock. Do not be diverted from admitting the necessity of scrutinizing your condition by the occasional—or even habitual joy, with which you receive the word. You may find your emotions affected by the incidents of public worship. The hymn, or the prayer, or the sacrament, or the word may excite, now your feelings of happiness, now of tenderness. You

may weep, you may feel yourselves elated above the flesh and the earth. You may think within yourselves, "this is heaven," or, "now I am indeed sensible that I am a Christian." But how is it "by and by?" How is it when the moving cause, so far as the outward cause is concerned, ceases to act?—when the service is over, when the sympathetic chords lose their tension, when you breathe the fresh air, and tread again the common walks of life? How is it "by and by," when you are at home, when you are the father, the merchant, the landlord, the politician? How is it when the temptation to an old sin recurs; when an opportunity of benevolence offers itself; when the

poor ask your assistance, or the embarrassed your forbearance; when you may perpetrate a secret meanness, or perform a secret charity? Is it heaven *then*? Is it tears of joy and celestial emotion, in view of your divine relationship, and of the practical strength you find imparted in the hour of temptation to evil, or opportunity for good, that fill your eyes *then*? Do you under these common-place circumstances feel and act as you did in the worship or at the communion-table, or as you then thought you would feel and act under such circumstances? "By and by he is offended," said our Lord, in his interpretation of this part of the parable. Something takes place which

causes him who received the word with gladness to stumble at that very word; to wish it were not what it is; to wish he could avoid its requirements, modify its strictness, or evade its authority. "He hath not root in himself, but dureth for a while." Oh! the stones, the stones! that cover the ground, and shut out the proper influence of the sunshine, and the moisture, and only allow the seed to attain such a puny existence that it hardly begins to put forth the blade, before the very power which should have given it growth and strength and maturity, burns it up.

"*For a while* they believe." How strange and unreasonable! What is

true in the objects of faith is always true, and always to be believed. The truth of God and the duty of man do not vary with the seasons, they are not affected by the changing moods of the human mind. Religion is not one thing in church, and at the sacrament, and on the Lord's day, and another thing everywhere else. The soul's value, and the soul's danger, and the soul's hope do not rise and fall with the feelings. Your interests, your jeopardy, your accountability, are just the same this moment when you are at ease on these points so that no words move you, as they were the other day when you were so anxious, so full of seriousness, so absorbed in

the sense of danger, that whichever way you turned you could behold nothing else. You need the means of grace, the Bible, private prayer and public prayer, just as much this week when you are letting every thing hinder your use of them, or are using them as cold formalities, as in that week when you had resolved to make a public profession, or the week after you had made it, when you felt that you would be acting inconsistently if you were not employing all these opportunities, nay, when you could not be comfortable or feel safe, without using them.

“For a while they believe, and in time of temptation, fall away;”—there

is the secret of it. They ceased to believe as they did at first, not because there was less reason to believe, but because, through temptation, they fell away from their belief: they ceased to act according to what they believed.

“Hear ye, therefore, the parable of the Sower:” understand it: apply it. Does it reveal the canker of your short-lived piety? Does it remind you of what you once felt, and show how you lost the impressions? Does it disclose the cause of your present deficiency, of the stunting of what once promised a vigorous growth, the decaying of what once indicated strong vitality? If you find it to be so with

you, or fear that it is so, and all religious sentiment and conviction be not quite withered, make immediate exertion to obtain the radical amendment which you see to be necessary. In the kingdom of grace the worst disadvantages may be overcome; what seemed to be the most hopeless condition for any wholesome result, may be reclaimed. There is nothing—not even the conversion of a faithless and deceived heart—too hard for the Lord. Is yours that heart? Does the rock appear to underlie the thin surface of your religious dispositions, and the stones to crowd it above, while the fierce heat of temptation burns around, as if awaiting the first appearance of

the tender shoot to scorch it up? Then it was for you this part of the parable was given; to warn you; to put you on your guard; to set you to using the means of preventing the fatal result. What you have to do is to go to Christ with your hard heart, your inattentive, unsettled mind, your variable feelings, your shallow religion, your easily-offended prejudices, and with tears of confession, with unqualified submission, with infant-like docility, with a decided, and if necessary *violent* correcting of all your known inconsistencies, trust in omnipotent grace to effect the great conversion which you need.

HEAR

THE PARABLE

OF THE

SEED AMONG THORNS.

(75)

CHAPTER IV.

“SOME FELL AMONG THORNS AND THE THORNS SPRANG UP WITH IT AND CHOKED IT, AND IT YIELDED NO FRUIT.”

“HE THAT RECEIVED SEED AMONG THE THORNS IS HE THAT HEARETH THE WORD, AND THE CARE OF THIS WORLD, AND THE DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES, AND THE LUSTS OF OTHER THINGS ENTERING IN, CHOKE THE WORD, AND HE BECOMETH UNFRUITFUL.” “THAT WHICH FELL AMONG THORNS ARE THEY WHICH WHEN THEY HAVE HEARD GO FORTH, AND ARE CHOKED WITH CARES, AND RICHES, AND PLEASURES OF THIS LIFE, AND BRING NO FRUIT TO PERFECTION.”

THE different terms used in this explanation of the parable may be represented in that single one "THIS LIFE." It is the antagonism of this life to the other life, of this world to that world, the unfriendliness of the trifling things now about us to the great interests of an eternal destiny, it is this which every one knows to be one of the chief hindrances to the rise and progress of religion in the soul.

The manner in which the things of "this life" accomplish their unfriendly end, is most graphically portrayed in the expression used by the heavenly Teacher. They do not "tread down" or "devour" the seed, as in the way-

side sowing; nor “scorch” and “wither” it, as it begins to appear in the stony places which had not much earth; but the thorns of the world grow up with the good seed and *choke* it, so that there is no fruit.

How exactly this comparison represents the process, may be better seen by a few examples, made the more personal by taking the form of a direct address.

For instance:—You heard the word of the kingdom in the nursery, in the school, from the Bible, from one catechism after another, from parents and teachers, from your pastor and his assistants, from the juvenile books of a religious kind which were the chief

reading of your youth. Thus the early seed was scattered and received. Religion was to a certain extent, incorporated with your daily habits. You talked of the Bible, of sin, of heaven, of the righteous and the wicked, of God and the Saviour, as realities, and as if you thought that every one else was as familiar with them, and had the same childlike faith in them as yourself.

Then you "went forth"—forth from the childish age and its associations, its simplicities and comparative harmlessness. You took your place in an older rank. You passed to a school, perhaps a boarding-school, or college. You found older associates, new phases

of life, customs different from, and some of them in strong contrast with those of your own training. With each step of this going forth and growing-up, your religious character was changing. In putting away other childish things, your Christian childhood began to pass into what was considered a more advanced condition. You heard the same word as before, but your faith was not so direct and unquestioning as it used to be. You did not treat the Scripture and its subjects with the simplicity and openness you formerly did. Prayer became a more formal act. It was sometimes suspended. You found yourself ashamed or afraid to pray. Your new company, and higher grade of

reading, and new subjects of imagination, and engrossing studies insensibly weakened the effect of former impressions, and now, God, heaven, sin, the Saviour, the distinction of righteous and wicked, and the solemnity of religious observances, though far from being obliterated, had become more dim, less prominent, actual and abiding objects.

Surely it may be said of such a course that the seed was choked; choked by the first growth of those new cares of THIS LIFE, which, though comparatively slight, are still the beginning of its THORNS.

But you came to another stage. Manhood succeeded the youthful period.

Now came business, filling the day with its occupations, and the night with dreams. Now came professional and political ambition. Now you were men; and you must be busy men, full of work and of schemes. You had your own affairs, the concerns of others, perhaps some public cares to divide your thoughts and fill your time. And how was it with the Bible, and catechism, and the Sabbath, and the bedside prayer now? They were not discarded; they are not doubted; but was their influence growing with your growth? If it had been but seed, little seed, once, was the fruit advancing? If the days of the childlike bud and youthful flower had gone by, was the

mature tree taking their place? Ah no! The further you advanced from that earlier period, the wider became the separation between your thoughts and your habits, and the truth—the word of the kingdom, at first so identified with both. You became too busy, too full of other things. Those other things were close at hand. They were visible and tangible; they were demanding or alluring your constant attention. They were powerful, and conspicuous and progressive, compared with the simple religious things of childhood, which began to appear to you in the light of faded, obsolete things. Are not the causes of such a result well named *thorns*, choking the word, and

if not absolutely killing it, making it unfruitful?

Or the cares of this life came in another shape. You had become the head of a family. A world of new "cares" opened upon you as a husband, wife, father, mother. You had to run a daily career of employments, and perplexities. The duties arising from your children's education, training, subsistence, preparation for future life, pressed upon you. The cares arising from sickness, restricted means, reverses of fortune, brought a new variety of distractions to your mind. The common burdens of the head of a household necessarily require much time and thought. Even to the mother

of a family how often may the words of the Lord Jesus be applied, as expressing an unavoidable burden, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things!" But, after all, they are things of "this life," and what is their effect on the things of the other life? Do you not say that your domestic cares give you no time to pursue the bent of the religious training which you enjoyed at a more favorable season? Do you not complain that the troubles of your lot so perplex and weigh upon your mind, that you can think of nothing else? Do you not make excuses, out of your circumstances—your being cumbered with much serving—for the neglect of

the "one thing needful?" (Luke x.) And has not the consequence been that you have grown, both into disuse of, and indifference to religious duties once held to be indispensable? Is it not easy now to make, and yield to slight reasons for omitting what, in other times, you would not have dared to omit, or for doing what you once would have shrunk from? Oh then see how plainly you are written among those who, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.

Connect this thought with those that are thus suggested:—you were trained by a kind Providence in the time of

freedom from care for the time when you would have fewer and less favourable opportunities. You were trained in childhood, in the nursery and school, for the headship of your own family, with all its trials and responsibilities. That was the seed-time. Now is the time for showing the good results. Now the good seed of the word should be flourishing in its thirty-fold, sixty-fold, hundred-fold blessings; guiding, supporting, comforting you with its teachings, and ripening your piety under all its trials, and so overcoming—outgrowing—the thorns which cannot be eradicated. “I would have you without carefulness,” says the inspired writer, when dwelling on the

exposure of domestic life to those occupations and motives which are so likely to make the heart selfish, and the mind forgetful of higher ties. (1 Cor. vii. 32.) "Hear the parable of the Sower;" and judge whether there is any mystery in the gradual disappearance of religious impressions, when, instead of being encouraged and confirmed in early life, those who have received them "go forth" into the exposures and the conflicts of even the common cares of this life, and encounter every successive obstacle with diminished strength. "The thorns sprang up with it, and choked it."

And some are "choked with *riches*." You were once poor, or in moderate

circumstance as to worldly wealth. In your humble home, or retired pew, you first received the word. Your temporal condition was favourable to its effect. You had not luxury to pamper you, no room for vanity, no social position to make you a mark for the snares of the worldly. But with time came riches. Now you possess it; or whatever you may term it now, it is what in those humbler days you regarded as riches. The change may seem to have strewn your path with flowers, to have surrounded you with the means of enjoyment, to have made your advancing years the harvest of your life. But what has been the effect of the change on the growth of

the *word*? Has it nurtured, strengthened and ripened your religious knowledge and religious character, so that all the world is as ready to bear witness to your piety as to your wealth? Have all your gains been made conscientiously, so that "fraud" or "oppression" or "extortion" or "uncharitableness" cannot be justly written over the smallest heap of your coin? Are you humble and devout in reference to the very fact of your having this stewardship, lest the rust should be witness against you? Have your riches so ministered to your worldliness as to be cankers to your piety? Has your zeal to be rich caused you "to fall into temptation and a snare,

and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition?" (1 Tim. vi.) Has your use of riches clearly indicated that you had labelled all your resources "holiness unto the Lord?" Or do you grudge the gift to God, to his kingdom, to Christ in his poorest disciple? Or is the gift so paltry, that you would be considered mean if you bestowed no more in the mere superfluities of living? Look candidly at your possessions and your religion, and see whether they have been antagonists; whether they divide your heart; whether God or Mammon has the ascendancy; whether the good seed or the thorns have prevailed.

It is not only the possession of wealth that chokes the word. The pursuit of it, whether successful or futile; the desire of it, whether gratified or disappointed; the thought of its desirableness and of what it would procure, constantly occupying the mind; the envy and jealousy excited towards the more prosperous; all that is comprehended in "the love of money," has a tendency to prevent the influence of divine knowledge on the heart. Examine yourself whether, if not the actual obtaining of property, yet your thoughts, hopes and cares about property, have not prevented the growth of holy affections, and made you "carnally-minded." This scrutiny is the

more important for the intimation thrown out in our Lord's phrase in the parable—"the *deceitfulness* of riches." They deceive in a thousand ways—by tempting under false appearances, by concealing sin under specious names, by licensing indulgences once condemned—but they are deceitful in no way more injurious to the soul, than in the promises men make to themselves, and the vows they make to God, before they are rich. You thought how well you would spend your money if ever gained; what a good influence would flow from your higher position; what a faithful steward you would be. Has the result been what you intended? Or has the increase of the blessing

stifled your good intentions and led you into new classes of offences? Have not your temporal pursuits been constantly thwarting your religious pursuits?

There is one more antitype of the word-choking thorns. The divine Teacher named it "the pleasures of this life," or "the lusts of other things."

It should not escape our notice that none of these particulars refer to things absolutely wrong. "The care of this world" comprises the common and unavoidable subjects of every person's duty. "Riches" are a peril, they are "deceitful," but so is poverty, and neither is in itself a sin. And so "the pleasures of this life" are not all

sinful; nor are the "lusts of other things" always unjust or unholy desires. They are but other phrases for the common influence of "this life," "this world." This life has its pleasures. God has provided them. This world has its "other things" than the word which rightly claim our regard. But the "pleasures" and the "other things" have their proper place. It is their intrusion, out of that place, that produces the mischief. It is their crowding upon the better things, and displacing them, that makes them evil. It is the disproportionate consequence they assume that makes them dangerous. It is when the weeds become so rank as to choke the good seed, that

they require extermination, if no other means can correct them, and keep them in their place.

Now look around, look within, and see if there be any mystery in this. You have heard the word: you have been convinced by it: you have found on its side every conclusion of reason, every remonstrance of conscience, every persuasion of what was best for you, in all possible respects, for the present and the future: you thought you would go forth, perhaps you positively resolved that you would, and obey that word. But when you went forth from the hearing of this heavenly message, ambassadors of another description met you. They were the representatives

of "this life" only, the devotees of "this world" exclusively. They said, "come with us and we will lead you into the pleasantest path; it is broad, fair and full of life: no sombre shades fall upon it; no spectres from the world beyond the grave haunt it: it is all innocent, too: it is only to live as the rest of the world do: there is no harm in pleasure." And so you went to their occupations and amusements, still reserving a little space, a corner here and there, in your daily, or at least weekly routine, for better things—for a chapter, a prayer, a public service—but the predominant feature of your life was pleasure—the enjoyments and pursuits which begin and end with the

present world. And how fared the good seed? Ah! it was dwindling all this time. Prayer was crowded out by this engagement, or postponed for that, or abridged by a third. The pleasant book superseded the useful. Inclination controlled duty. What was agreeable, what made the variety—the “other things”—of life, these decided every choice; with now and then a reluctant sacrifice of preference through a superstitious, rather than religious fear, lest you should go too far, or too rapidly, with the world.

When you think over this course and its effect, what figure in the whole range of nature, would better set it forth than the thorns strangling the

seed as it begins to grow, so that it is made unfruitful, or brings no fruit to perfection? There was always a promise, a sign, a beginning of good, but always, too, another kind of influence going on at the same time, and as must be the case in such close connections of the good and the evil, the evil becoming the stronger.

This illustration of the Teacher sent from God, gives one of the best standards for judging the true quality of the world's customs and amusements, about which curious questions are often propounded as to their lawfulness, or the contrary. The point is generally to be determined, not so much by the name and description of the thing itself, or by

any settled uniformity of its influences, as by the effect it actually produces in a given instance. Does it hinder good impressions? Does it promote holy dispositions? Does it interfere with devotion? Does it divert and bewilder the mind? Does it make sacred things less attractive, less effective? Does it help, or does it hinder the struggles of the soul for communion with God, and for the holiness without which no one can see God? Does religious principle maintain its vitality and activity in spite of the worldly compliance? Do the spiritual affections and appetites enlarge even whilst the lusts of other things are entering in? Do the tares hurt the wheat?

I am making no accusation. I am only repeating what the Lord Jesus Christ has declared will be found in the history of his kingdom, and among his own disciples as well as others, as causes of hindering his own word, and ask you to judge whether in your own experience there is any counterpart to these various representations. It may be that you do not easily perceive to which of the three classes of hindrances your own case may be most properly referred. You may see something in each one of these mirrors that reflects your spiritual image; in each of these portraits you may detect the likeness of particular features. Turn not away from the discovery. Your

salvation may be identified with your turning it, through the divine blessing, to this practical use. The possession of the means of grace involves a result corresponding with the use that is made of them. "For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God; but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned." (Hebrews vi.)

HEAR

THE PARABLE

OF THE

SEED ON GOOD GROUND.

(103)

CHAPTER V.

“HE THAT RECEIVED THE SEED INTO THE GOOD GROUND IS HE THAT HEARETH THE WORD, AND UNDERSTANDETH IT; WHICH ALSO BEARETH FRUIT.” (*Matthew.*) “SUCH AS HEAR THE WORD, AND RECEIVE IT, AND BRING FORTH FRUIT.” (*Mark.*) “THEY WHICH IN AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART, HAVING HEARD THE WORD, KEEP IT, AND BRING FORTH FRUIT WITH PATIENCE.” (*Luke.*)

WHEN those who profit by the word of the gospel are compared to good ground, as contrasted with the bad soils previously described, and are characterized as having “an honest and good heart,” it is not signified

that there is such a difference as that in the original, natural, condition of the respective classes, so that it is only the good who are profited by the word. In this sense, "there is none good; no not one." The three unfavourable soils represented, not so many natures, but certain varieties of obstacles lying in the persons themselves, produced by their own fault. The good ground, being presented as the reverse of the other kinds, is therefore, to be understood as exhibiting, not a nature predisposed to goodness, but a state of mind which, conscious of its need of radical improvement, is willing to receive and employ the means established by divine authority

for that end. According to the terms of the contrast, the good ground stands for the person who gives a sincere and faithful attention to the holy truth; guards against what is known to be prejudicial to it; watches against the temptations that would counteract a good impression; is not moved by the opposition, or other causes of offence, that would make one ashamed or afraid to follow his convictions; allows not the cares, or pleasures, or riches of the world to divert and fill his mind with other incongruous things; but, on the contrary, does everything to encourage the good effect of the heavenly instruction. The phrase, therefore, does not describe the better heart, the heart

to which everything in religion is easy and attractive; the heart enjoying some high and special privileges arbitrarily bestowed upon it and setting it above ordinary circumstances and trials; but the "honest" heart, that desires to know and do what is right, that is open to conviction, that is willing to be taught, that is not afraid to encounter the consequence of a faithful conformity to known duty. Such an one heareth the word and understandeth it. He receives it in an honest and good heart. Having heard the word, he keeps it. He brings forth fruit with patience.

Do you really wish to know how you may use profitably the advantages

you possess in having the word of the kingdom?

Begin by laying to heart the three-fold admonitions which the Lord of the kingdom has already given in apprising you of the chief hindrances that are in your way. If you have found that there is that one thing, or those several things, on which you can lay your finger and say, It is this which, in spite of all my convictions, keeps me from being a Christian, or from being a more consistent Christian, than I am, then it is in vain you continue to receive more and more of the word, while the very obstacle remains which has kept the word unprofitable to this time. The question must come to this

point—which will you give up? You cannot retain both. The parable of the wheat and the tares being suffered to grow together, does not refer to the existence of the good seed and the weeds in the same heart at the same time, but to the living together of the good and the evil in the word, or the church, till the time for eternal separation. The one is possible; the other is not. Two persons may be in the same place at once who serve different masters, but no man can at the same time, serve two such masters as God and Mammon. Our Lord's own language has shown us what are the principal resistants to the power of grace;—"this world," "this life," the

objects, the delights of the present existence. It is the flesh against the spirit. It is the carnal mind against the spiritual mind. It is not merely the present life against the future life, time against eternity, earth against heaven,—but it is the divine realities *now* existing, *now real*, now claiming our supreme and constant regard, that are put aside for ignoble rivals. This world—this life—are now thrusting themselves into the place of God. The results reach indeed to eternity, they affect the question of heaven and hell, but it is a present sin and loss that is meant when it is said that the love of the world is incompatible with the love of God; and that friendship with

the world, in this sense, is enmity with God, "for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world." Some shake off the application of such statements by thinking they mean worldliness in the sense of gay pleasure, or the indulgences which it requires wealth to obtain. But whilst these are included, they are far from exhausting the catalogue. Forgetting others, ask yourself what is your own position as to "this life." What place has "this world" in your plans, works, hopes? What power have the things of last week and next week, the things you suspend on the Lord's day to run

to church and to be resumed on Monday—what amount of power have they over your heart? How much room do they occupy? You may be poor as Lazarus, yet “this life” may be your idol. Every idol must be put out of the way, if the doctrines of God’s word are to take effect. Is the sacrifice too great? Then make up your mind to take the consequence.

Another point is implied in the language of “keeping” the word, when it has once been heard. Having got the possession which comes by receiving the knowledge of the word, it is essential to the end of receiving it, that it be retained. As the seed must maintain its hold in the soil after it has

been deposited there, so knowledge must keep the place it has gained in order to produce its permanent result. The student will be disappointed who only reads and hears, and does not establish his acquirements in his memory. The christian will have no reason to expect progress in piety who only skims the pages of the Bible. To keep the word, does not, in this connection, mean obeying it; though that is a consequence of such keeping. It means, here, what we call the safe keeping, the treasuring, of what is valuable. It is the remembering, pondering, revolving that which inspires our faith and regulates our conduct. Even to his dearly beloved son in the faith did the

Apostle say, "hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me." (2 Timothy i.) If you would be effectually benefited by what you receive, you must take some pains to hold it. You must cease trifling with the messages of God. You must no longer dishonour them by putting them on a level with your every-day reading and hearing of common things. You must look that what has been imparted to you is safe; safe when you go where you know it is most exposed; safe when scepticism would steal it, or the pursuits of the world crowd it out; or the persecutions of the world torture it from you; or your own indifference cause you to forget that you

ever possessed it. The keeping of the good and honest heart is the custody which a good and honest trustee takes of what is put into his hands for a profitable use. This is your stewardship. The Lord, the divine proprietor, will reckon with you; and whether your talents have been one, or five, or ten, he will inquire not simply whether you have kept what was committed to you, but whether you kept it for the use contemplated. No course is honest that does not hold this responsibility in view. The proof of the honesty lies in the result. "Having heard the word, they keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." The practical evidence of the power of the word is

the patient production of its proper fruit. It must "increase" as well as "spring up," and this increase, though not the same in all individuals, is yet always certain in the view of him who is emphatically "the Lord of the harvest"—"some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred."

What is the *fruit* of the word—the fruit of the truth—the fruit of the Bible? It is an expression for the proper effects of the knowledge of this divine doctrine when faithfully received. The fruit of education in school, of training in a profession, of apprenticeship to a trade—the fruit of reading, of study, of application is understood to be that result which

answers to the nature and object of what was received in the several instances. It is never thought in these cases that the end is gained because the process is over. In each case it is the sowing of seed—sowing in order to fruit. But the idea of religion held by some seems not to extend beyond the receiving of the truth. They appear to regard Christianity as consisting wholly in believing the Bible. Their religion consists in reading the Bible, and in attendance upon religious services—following the routine of *receiving* the word. But this is all sowing—all seed-time. The fruit of the word is what the Scriptures so expressively call the *doing* of the word.

“Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them.” “Every one that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not.” (Matt. vii.) “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” (James i.) If the word says “love your enemies: do good to all men; pray without ceasing; if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me”—it is not the reading, receiving and believing of this that is the fruit; but the fruit is seen, and only then, when the reader, receiver and believer loves his enemy; when he does the actual good; when he cherishes the spirit and often performs the acts of

prayer and praise; when he refrains from this thing that he knows to be injurious to his piety, and does that which is contrary to his natural disposition, and so mortifies the fleshly mind. This is fruit: this is the springing and increasing of Bible-seed: this is more than the reading and the church-going; this is the rendering of the heart according to what it has received.

The fruitfulness of nature is steady in its progress. "First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." And the fruitfulness of the word is not an occasional outbreak of goodness, soon subsiding; a flaming forth of zeal, soon to die out; one fruitful season

and then coldness and sterility. Our Lord characterizes Christian fruitfulness by patience: "they bring forth fruit with patience." This must mean an unwearied perseverance in the works of religion. The practical believer is not worn out by a little labour, or discouraged by a few disappointments. Godliness is his life. The good works of faith and holiness are his habit. The glory of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is his chief end. It is enough for the earth to be annual in its harvests. They are the results of annual labour. But the truth of God, and the rational soul of the creature, are in perpetual life, and in perpetual capacity of imparting and

receiving influence, and working it out. The human character is not a temporary, or periodical matter. The inquisition for its moral standing is always going on. It cannot meet its responsibilities by occasional parades of good appearances. Those who seek in the right way for glory and honour and immortality, do it "by patient continuance in well doing." (Rom. ii.) Even "the husbandman" who "waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain," (James v.) does not intermit all labour and watchfulness, because the seed is in its place. How much more necessary is such continuance when the growth

is dependent on no natural means! They were Jews who believed on him, to whom Christ said, "if ye *continue* in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed." (John viii.) They were proselytes to Christianity whom Paul and Barnabas persuaded to *continue* in the grace of God. (Acts xiii.) This continuance is often made the condition of a promised blessing: "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled" (Col. i.) "If they continue in faith, and charity, and holiness, with sobriety." (1 Tim. ii.) It was because Israel continued not in the covenant, that the Lord forsook them. (Heb. viii.) It is against the unsteady, unpersevering Christian, that the expostula-

tion is aimed, "ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. v.) Many may trace their want of improvement under the means of grace, to this simple cause. They had not patience under the divine methods of preparing and cultivating their hearts. They would not "hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord," (Lam. iii.) in the humble, penitent course of duty. They would not try that test, "if any man will *do* his will he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." (John vii.) They wait and hope for some other mode of assurance, than just the simple, reasonable way of doing what is directed and continuing to do it. In all

applications the exhortation is suitable, "be not weary in well doing."

The last mark of the good ground is the abundance of the fruit. It is not scanty—it is many-fold. The least in the parable is thirty-fold. An hundred-fold is implied as not too much to be expected. All do not attain the maximum: but all make advance upon their first condition. All have something to show for what they have received. No allowance was made for the character, in another parable, who laid up his master's money and buried it and restored it undiminished. He was denounced as an unprofitable servant. (Matt. xxv. 30.) The condemnation is not—You have not produced

an hundred-fold and are therefore accounted as having done nothing; but the test is, Are your progress and your work according to your opportunities? Is it only thirty, when it might have been sixty, or only sixty when it might have been an hundred? Have you the maturity of piety, the fullness of graces, the completeness of character, which may be justly expected of you, considering what, and how long continued, have been your advantages? Have you done—are you doing—according to your “several ability?” The fruit of the seed is the effect of the blessing of the Holy Ghost on the proper use of the word. Take those fruits according to the enumeration of

them in the Scripture itself, and judge of your "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance;" (Gal. v.) or as elsewhere comprehended under the three heads of goodness, righteousness, and truth; (Eph. v.) or as described in another place, "filled with the knowledge of" the divine "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 of God; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering, with joyfulness." (Col. i.)