

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

by R. Sutton, 1992

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POINT FOUR: BLESSING

R. Sutton

ceived only from the perspective of the New Testament witness to Christ. Christ, in other words, is the integrating center of biblical revelation. He is, in Luther's words, "King and Lord of Scripture." . . . As both law and gospel revealed Christ in Luther's thought, so, for Calvin, Christ is revealed in both the old and the new covenants. In fact they are one covenant, the covenant of grace, first administered to Israel by promise and newly administered to the church by Christ who fulfills the promise. Thus the concept of covenant (*berith*) became, for Calvin, a leit-motif of biblical revelation. Through it he sought to preserve the unity of that revelation while at the same time acknowledging its diversity.¹

I often fear that many of my brethren have forgotten what this statement so aptly summarizes: The unity of Scripture means the **Old Testament should always** be considered as the larger context when interpreting New Testament Scripture. Looking at it another way, if the New Testament, specifically the Gospel, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17ff.), then the New Testament cannot be comprehended without the Old Testament. When applied to parables, the same can be said. The Old Testament, and particularly the covenant, is the key to understanding these New Testament wise sayings.

And this is exactly what we find when Jesus tells us the purpose of parables. He uses covenant language when He says,

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. . . . But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:10-17).

The key covenantal word here is **blessed**. It is a sanction term found in Deuteronomy 28, the fourth aspect of the Biblical covenant. By this, Jesus gives us an important insight to see the covenantal, and in particular, the sanctioning characteristic of the parables. They have either a cursing or blessing effect. Hermeneutically, however, they can be interpreted with this important covenant-sanction background.

1. Paul K. Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 120.

Thus, I believe that the parables primarily have to do with the sanctions of the covenant. A careful overview of them reveals that they fall into three groups: those before the feeding of the five thousand, those between the feeding of the five thousand and the Triumphal Entry, and those after the Triumphal Entry and during Holy Week.

The Sanction Principle Parables

The parables before the feeding of the five thousand are mostly short, sometimes one-sentence parables (Matthew 13). They introduce the sanction principle with their genre. As I have already pointed out, they are for the covenantal sanction purpose of blessing. They imply cursing as well, for it has to do with death that leads to blessing and life. As Jesus tells us in all of the wisdom stories of the Gospels, the curse of the parables ultimately points to the Crucifixion and the blessing to the Resurrection. Mostly in Matthew 13, "however, they introduce us to all of the sanction themes of Deuteronomy 27-28. We saw this in our last study of the parable of the *Wheat and the Tares*. Let us continue to develop the introduction of the sanction principle parables in Matthew 13.

The Parable of the Sower

The lead parable launches the themes of Deuteronomy 27-28, or the motifs of blessing and cursing. Not surprisingly, the first parable is about seed, the parable of the sower.

Seed is perhaps the most dominant theme of the entire Old Testament and, especially the sanctions chapters of the covenant in Deuteronomy. Why? The salvation of the world as announced in Genesis 3 came through the seed of the woman. Granted, the seed appears to be of a different kind in the parables. But the language of Scripture directly parallels the imagery of the seed of humanity and seed of the ground.

Starting in Genesis, this is fairly obvious. Everywhere the Messianic Seed Deliverer steps onto the pages of history, lush productivity of plants and animals emerge. The seed person may begin in dire circumstances such as Abraham, Jacob and Joseph but eventually they are revealed to be the ones with the promise given to Eve. They bear the fruit in all forms to prove it. Barren wombs and soil are paralleled. They often start out with wives who cannot bear children. Through the promise, however, barrenness is thwarted. Children are born. Most importantly, the child of the seed-line is generated. As for other forms of productivity, men such as Jacob and Joseph again show where the promise lies; it is always with them. Jacob outwits Laban with productivity. Joseph receives dreams that all have to do with sheaves (symbolizing his brothers) bowing to his sheave, imagery of bread and wine in the prisoners dreams, and animals of the Pharaoh's nightmare. Each time barrenness of some sort is overcome to show that God's promise is being fulfilled through the covenant man.

If we move from Genesis to Deuteronomy, the seed theme is developed in terms of a range of sanctions of blessing and cursing. In fact, again I draw on the phrase, "It is not surprising," that so many of the sanctions concern seed of one sort or another. A casual read of the two amazing chapters of Deuteronomy 27-28 is quite – I hate to say it – fruitful. Children and produce are coalesced as seed. They are described as blessing and the lack thereof as cursing. Even the other curses and blessings are mostly in terms of the seed. For example, sickness and damage to the person are basically the destruction of the seed. Damage to the crops and other forms of produce are again the annihilation of the seed. At the very center of Deuteronomy 27-28, therefore, is the theme of seed.

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament, the

same relationship between produce and human seed continues. Perhaps the clearest example from Jesus' teaching ministry is the analogy of the seed falling into the ground and dying. Jesus said,

The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me; and where I am there My servant will be also. If anyone serves me, him My Father will honor (John 12:24-26).

Jesus no doubt is the Seed that fell into the ground and die. Yet, everyone knows that seed does not die when it falls to the ground. Jesus uses this language to teach the truth of the true Seed. He said the time came to be glorified. He followed by describing the plight of a seed that goes under the ground but rises in a new form, the message of the Death and the Resurrection of Himself. What is striking about this analogy is that Jesus includes the disciples in this lesson on the plight of the seed in the ground. Apparently, the same will happen to them, as seed (little "s"). Where Jesus is, the same will occur to them. They will undergo death in many forms, set back in ministry, persecution, and even physical death. But just as Jesus was raised so will His disciples be.

Thus, in one sense or another, everything having to do with seed touches the important promise of Genesis 3. In sanctions language, it is the ultimate blessing. As always, however, the blessing does not come without cursing. Life cannot take place apart from death after the fall of mankind. Now we are prepared to understand the first of the parables in light of this covenantal sanctions background. As long as the Old Testament and the covenant are not disassociated from the Gospel, the parables are not meant to be too difficult. Only extreme hardness of heart caused the hermeneutical dullness of the Jews of Jesus' day.

The parable of the sower introduces the basic concept of the seed as the Word. It is planted in four different types of soil, all with differing responses. We should remember that the sanctions are also in terms of the land of Israel, called the Promised Land because it is all part of the fulfillment of the covenant.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus is telling us something first and foremost about Israel. In the land, there are four different soils. Only one of those soils is called "good," an important creation designation for God's assessment of what He made; true Biblically oriented Jews would have made this connection. Only the good soil bears fruit and is sustained. The point seems to be that only the part of Israel that responds to Christ has any real future. This is a sanction, blessing and cursing in terms of Christ.

Furthermore, the parable makes a transition from land to Christ. The sanctions of Deuteronomy 27-28 are played out with reference to Christ and not simply the land. Yet, the land is not excluded. Rather, Christ is included as the fulfillment of the land and the promise. In other words, a cryptic message is made with reference to the land, to wit, only the good soil will survive. The real message is that Christ fulfills the roll of the land. Faithfulness to Him saves the land, whereas in the Old Testament, obedience to the law regarding land saved the seed. Now that the Seed has come, the land is dependent exclusively on Him. In a sense, this was true even in the Old Covenant. But, the behavior of the Seed determined the disposition of the land. For example, when the Davidic kings were disobedient, the land came under the curse. Accordingly, the parable of the sower implies that the covenantally faithful dis-

tinguish themselves as good soil because they receive the Word and persevere with it.

Does this interpretation mean that the parable only concerns Israel? No, it also serves as a lesson to any disciple and/or would-be-disciple. It is precisely because Christ becomes everything that seed and land (person and environment) implied that man's response to Christ is analogous to Israel's relationship to seed and land. Just as Israel saw fruitfulness in proportion to covenant loyalty to the Seed, so humanity becomes fruitful in the fullest sense by its response to Christ.

In addition, once the soils are associated with the land of Israel and all that involves, a number of insights can be turned out regarding the various soils. The quality of soil is measured by response to the Word. Beginning with the first soil, it is completely hardened. Satan steals immediately what is sown. He can do so because there is no reception of the Word. The second and third soils appear to be more responsive but they too choke out the seed by their unresponsiveness. Only the fourth soil is truly responsive because it perseveres and does not allow anything to damage the rooting effect of the Word. Here is the place for much application in teaching this parable.

Finally, we should not overlook the cryptic message about the Death and Resurrection of Christ. The Seed has to be planted and permanently come forth out of the ground. The planting is the Crucifixion and the fruitful springing forth is the Resurrection. Jesus projects what will happen to Him. Since He is ultimately the land as well as the Seed, He is the good soil out from which the Death and Resurrection will spring. He begins to anticipate through this imagery not only His own Death and Resurrection, but the purpose of the other parables to follow, especially in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. We saw this in our last study of the Wheat and the Tares. Let us consider the other parables of this chapter.

The parable of the Mustard Seed

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches (13:31-32).

The seed theme continues in this parable. More is added in this case, namely growth. The Deuteronomic sanctions are informative for a correct interpretation. The blessings promised by Moses involve, "And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you" (Deuteronomy 28:11). The blessing is specifically, "increase," or growth.

The Gospel, however, adds that the Seed will increase (to use Moses' language) to the extent of covering the entire earth. According to the sanction language of Moses, this is a specific blessing that overcomes the curse. Moses says of the curses, "And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron. The Lord will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed" (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). What does this have to do with the parable of the mustard seed?

The parable speaks of a Seed that grows into a Tree that provides shade and prevents the effects of the curse described by Moses. Everything about the parable assumes the blessings of Deuteronomy such as rain and increase. The Seed and the Tree are Jesus Christ. Thus, He is the one who deflects the curse and brings the blessing of this parable.

The Parable of the Leaven

Another parable He spoke to them: "The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened" (13:33).

The blessing of Deuteronomy suggests the blessing of the parable. Moses says, "Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl" (Deuteronomy 28:5). And, of the opposite, the curse, he says, "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl" (Deuteronomy 28:17). What does this have to do with a parable in the New Testament about leaven?

A kneading bowl and basket imply leaven. Bread is kneaded and normally it is expected to rise. The only time the leaven was removed was at Passover. At all other times, the leaven was left. Significantly, leaven was usually a negative Old Testament concept. It was the primary metaphor for evil, harkening back to the Egyptians who had the leaven from which Israel was to be delivered. It was to be removed at Passover to constantly remind the Israelites of pagan leaven. The Deuteronomic blessing introduces a change, positive leaven.

The parable of the leaven recalls the positive leaven of Deuteronomy. It does more. It speaks of a leaven "hid in three measures of meal until it is leavened," which refers to the work of Christ. The language of hiding the leaven to make something rise can hardly be missed. It describes a kind of burial that issues into a rising. This is none other than the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. He is the positive leaven that causes the basket to be full. He is the leaven that makes the dough to rise in abundance.

The powerful point of the parable is an important New Covenant development. In the Old Covenant, blessing and cursing were equally ultimate. This is apparent from the identical language of kneading bowl and basket in the blessing and cursing section. In the New Covenant, the evil leaven is overcome by the leaven herein described. Christ's leavening effect is more powerful than the evil of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Thus, no longer are the two leavens equal. The leaven of blessing is greater than cursing.

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (13:44).

This parable uses the very language of the Deuteronomic sanctions. Moses says of the blessings, "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Deuteronomy 28:8). Two points about this blessing should be underscored. The land of Israel was apportioned according to the tribes and families. So, God promises to bless this inheritance of land and bless it to the point of having full storehouses, which could be translated, "treasure house."

The parable of the hidden treasure draws on the Mosaic imagery. A man finds a treasure in the field. What is significant is that the field does not belong to the man. Every piece of land was divided up as Israel's inheritance. It was passed from generation to generation. The man of the parable decides to buy someone else's inheritance, which means an individual is being disinherited for the treasure. The treasure is not cheap, however, for one has to give up everything, which means his own inheritance. Thus, the one who finds the prize gives up everything he has to secure another's inheritance all for the purpose of the treasure.

Yet, the treasure is not native to the soil. The treasure

is from somewhere else because the treasure is not purchased. The field has to be bought. The law forbid taking what was on another's property. But the treasure was hidden in the field, which on the basis of the hiding in the leaven parable probably meant the treasure was buried.

The Gospel significance is powerful. The man in whose field the treasure is buried is disinherited. The burying of the treasure again points to the Death of Christ and implies the Resurrection, because the man presumably raises his treasure out of the ground after buying the field. In addition, the parable also refers to the disinheritance of Israel. After all, the one in whose field the treasure is buried, the land where Christ was Crucified, loses the field to another who is willing to give up everything, the Gentiles.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it (13:45-46).

This parable is essentially the same as the previous one. A man finds a prize and is willing to give up everything for it. Much has and can be said about the natural parallel of the pearl to Christ. But the emphasis seems to be on the willingness to give up personal inheritance for something worth more, the pearl of great price. Israel is still in view. They were worried about inheritance issues when the Messiah came. They were willing to hold on to their land at the expense of the seed. They had forgotten that the land inheritance was in terms of the seed and not the other way around. Christ attempts to refocus on what is of real value, the pearl.

The Parable of the Dragnet

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that we cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into the vessels, but

threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old" (13:47-52).

The parable of the dragnet extends the language of Deuteronomy in an interesting way. The end of the sanctions section of Deuteronomy concludes on a note of final judgment. Moses says,

And the Lord will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, "You shall never see it again." And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

Israel is told that they will be judged from the sea, when ships carry them away. And, the judgment will be final. They will never again return from Egypt.

This background heightens the meaning of the parable of the dragnet. A dragnet images sanctions on the sea, analogous to the Egyptian judgment. The net draws out a large group of fish. Some are kept and others are thrown away, which Jesus compares to the final judgment. He closes these parables in a similar way to the end of Moses' sanctions. He turns Israel's attention to the finality of judgment that will come on them should they continue to resist His kingdom. They had been part but they could be thrown back, just as could the Gentiles.

On this note, Christ ends the short parables that precede the feeding of the five thousand. He has introduced the principle of sanction with these parables. In our next newsletter we will consider the second group of parables that follow the feeding. They are the parables of blessing.