

GOOD WORKS PARABLE OF THE SOWER

**Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council
October 15, 2023
Revision D**

GOSPEL: Luke 8:5-15
EPISTLE: Titus 3:8-15

The Sunday commemorating the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council in 787 AD is celebrated on the Sunday falling between October 11 and 17. The Epistle reading for that day is Titus 3:8-15 and replaces the epistle reading normally falling on that Sunday. The Gospel lesson is the same as the 4th Sunday of Luke, which is normally what would fall on this Sunday.

Epistle: Titus 3:8-15

This Epistle lesson is also used for the Sunday in mid July commemorating the Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils. However, this reading is not used at all in the Western lectionary.

Background: Titus, Bishop of Crete

Paul wrote to Titus in about 64 AD shortly after his (Paul's) release from house-arrest in Rome. Acts 28 concludes with Paul under house-arrest in about 62 AD, so this letter post dates Acts. Following his release, Paul traveled a lot. One place he stopped was in Spain to visit the Churches started by James the son of Zebedee and others. Paul had wanted to visit Spain since 55 AD when he wrote Romans (Romans 15:28) and probably went there first after his release. After visiting Spain, Paul left Titus in Crete as Bishop (Titus 1:5-7) and Timothy in Ephesus as Bishop (1 Timothy 1:3) and was currently spending the winter in Nicopolis of Macedonia (Titus 3:12). Artemas, Tychicas, Zenas and Apollos (referred to in the Epistle lesson) are all members of the Seventy Lesser Apostles who had been sent out two by two by Jesus (Luke 10:1-24) and who had also worked with Paul. Titus and Timothy were also members of the Seventy.

As Bishop of Crete, Titus was one of the First Century Church Fathers and was encouraged by Paul to affirm constantly (v.8) that those who have believed should be careful to maintain good works (vv.8,14), to meet urgent needs. Titus ran into opposition, especially from Jews living on Crete (Titus 1:10-14). Thus, the good works Titus was overseeing would have the effect of "loving his enemies, blessing those who curse him and persecute him" (Matthew 5:44). But there is more involved than just this.

Good Works Benefit the Doer

John Chrysostom pointed out that Paul seemed more concerned for Titus and his fellow bishops on Crete that they maintain good works than for the poor who would be the recipient of their kindnesses. If the poor were maintained by others, this would be of no benefit to them because they would remain unfruitful (Homily VI on Titus). To illustrate this, Chrysostom used four examples, summarized as follows:

First: Christ, who fed 5,000 men with five loaves and 4,000 with seven loaves, could He not have supported Himself and His disciples? But it was the women who followed Him and ministered to Him (Mark 15:41) who supported Him out of their possessions (Luke 8:3). This was to teach us from the beginning that He is concerned for those who do good.

Second: Could not Paul, who supported others by his own hands, have maintained himself without assistance from others? Yet he received and requested aid during his house-arrest in Rome. His reason for it is stated: “Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account” (Philippians 4:10-17).

Third: At the beginning also, when men sold all their possessions and laid the money at the Apostles’ feet (Acts 4:37), the Apostles were more concerned for them than for those who received their alms. For if their concern had only been that the poor might by any means be relieved, they would not have judged so severely the sin of Ananias and Sapphira when they kept back (part of) their money (Acts 5:1-11).

Fourth: Paul charged the Corinthians not to give grudgingly or of necessity (2 Corinthians 9:7). Does this mean Paul is discouraging them from giving? No; he is addressing not the gift or the one who receives the gift but the benefit and the good it does to the giver. To be a cheerful giver takes faith. As John Chrysostom said, “...Many persons are afraid to give alms, saying, ‘Lest perchance I become poor; lest perchance I need aid from others’”. To give when one expects a return is an investment; even tax collectors do that! To give without expecting a return is being god-like. “If one is doing work of virtue, and yet all that is done is of necessity, it is shorn of its reward; with reason also Paul labors at this point.” (Homily XIX on 2 Corinthians 9).

The way this relates to Titus and the Bishops of Crete, Chrysostom explains, is that riches are an impediment. Therefore he commands them to be given to the poor, instructing the soul to be pitiful and merciful, to despise wealth and to flee from covetousness. According to Chrysostom, nothing is so strong and powerful to extinguish the fire of our sins as almsgiving. This is why Daniel counseled King Nebuchadnezzar to “break away from his sins by doing righteousness and from his iniquities by showing mercy to the poor” (Daniel 4:27). This is also why Christ said to the rich young ruler “sell all that you have and distribute to the poor...and come follow Me” (Luke 18:22).

Chrysostom continues that almsgiving is the mother of love, where love is the characteristic of Christianity and is greater than all miracles (1 Corinthians 13). Almsgiving is the medicine of our sins, the cleansing of the filth of our souls, the ladder fixed to heaven; it binds together the Body of Christ (Homily vi on Titus 3). In the early church where everyone sold what they had and laid the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet, “they were one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32), “and grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33).

Titus had worked with Paul for about 25 years at this point. He'd seen this in action and it made sense - especially as applied to his fellow bishops on Crete. On the other hand, Paul encouraged Titus to avoid foolish questioning, genealogies, strife and Legal disputes (Titus 3:9). Paul is referring here to the Jewish opposition since genealogies (tracing their roots back to Abraham) were very important in determining who was a Jew and who wasn't. Only a Jew with the proper genealogy could be a priest (descendant of Aaron) and records were kept in the Temple in Jerusalem to document this. This documentation was tapped by the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke to show Jesus was the Son of David (Matthew 1:1ff; Luke 3:23ff). With the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, these records were lost.

For the Lord, who looks on the heart, genealogies were not that important. Speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees, John the Baptist declared that God could raise up children of Abraham from the stones along the river bank (Matthew 3:9). Speaking to the same group, the Lord said that they were neither children of Abraham nor children of God because they didn't do what Abraham did or what God said (John 8:37-42).

The legal disputes Paul referred to were probably interpretations of the Mosaic Law and amplified by Jewish tradition. For example, Jesus had a dispute with the scribes and Pharisees over the washing of hands before eating bread (Matthew 15:1-20). Jewish tradition specified washing one's hands before eating or one would be defiled. Jesus pointed out that it's what comes out of a man that defiles him, not what goes into his mouth (Matthew 15:11). The intent of the Mosaic Law was to direct the people toward holiness and to avoid contact with real uncleanness like idols and demons. (For more discussion on this, see Gospel and Epistle lessons for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost: (Matthew 15:21-28; 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1). By focusing on the minutiae of interpretation, the real intent of the Law could easily get overlooked and the Lord's Commandments would cease being rightly divided. Thus Paul's instructions for Titus were to avoid these things and concentrate on good works in order that the people might be really fruitful (Titus 3:14). Likewise, the Church Fathers encourage us the same way.

What are Good Works?

Salvation by Grace: In the verses preceding our Epistle lesson, Paul gives a brief summary of salvation by Grace. From Titus 3:4-7, Paul said that when the kindness and love of God appeared:

- He saved us according to His mercy
- Not by works of righteousness
- Through the washing of regeneration (i.e. *baptism*)
- And the renewing of the Holy Spirit (In the Orthodox church, this is known as *chrismation*)
- We are justified by His Grace
- And become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This reading from Titus 3:4-7 is also used in the Eastern lectionary for Epiphany (or Theophany, q.v.) and is covered there in more detail. Today's Epistle lesson can be understood as the other side of the coin, much the same as James, the Lord's brother (and bishop of Jerusalem for 30 years) wrote that faith is perfected by works and faith without works is dead (James 2:22-26).

The faith-works issue became very clouded during the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church, following the teachings of Augustine on "original sin", sold indulgences to

remove the penalty of sin in Purgatory. In reaction to this emphasis on “works”, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, proclaimed justification by faith alone. Luther had problems with the Epistle of James and referred to it as “a right strawy epistle” (a reference to 1 Corinthians 3:12), since James seemed to him to emphasize works over faith. Luther retained Augustine’s concept of “original sin”, however.

In Orthodoxy, “original sin” is an heretical concept. Man inherited Adam’s mortality and corruption, and hence the passions and a propensity to sin. But Adam’s sin in the Garden was his, not ours. Men can refuse to sin and thus live a holy life. “Original sin” says that men are born guilty. Because of the doctrine of “original sin”, the Roman Catholic Church also had to add “the Immaculate Conception” of the Virgin Mary so that she could qualify in terms of personal holiness to give birth to the Son of God. Otherwise the Son of God would have been born with original sin. An Immaculate Conception is impossible to justify from historical documents (see Appendix B). The Orthodox view is that the Virgin Mary is a very good example of faith being perfected by works (James 2:22), that she received a great deal of grace (Luke 1:28), and that she achieved a considerable measure of holiness as a result.

Good Works in Perspective: Good works are mentioned throughout the Scriptures and have greater dimensions than many people think. For example, some statements regarding good works:

- Jesus’ good works came from His Father (John 10:30-32; John 5:17)
- We are His workmanship, created for good works which God prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10)
- The first step toward good works: believe that the Father sent Jesus (John 6:27-29), which is where our works come from.
- All Scripture is given that the man of God may be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- We must work the works of the Father while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work (John 9:4).

All Works Will be Rewarded: All men will be judged on their works, not on their faith per se (Matthew 25:31-45; compare Matthew 7:20-23). As Paul said: “Glory, honor and peace to everyone who works what is good” (Romans 2:10). For more discussion on this, see the Sunday of the Last Judgment (2 Sundays before Lent). For a related discussion on dead works, see the Epistle lesson for the 5th Sunday of Lent.

When the Lord returns, the dead will be judged according to the Book of Life (those saved by Grace) and according to the books that recorded their works (Revelation 20:12-13). By our deeds, we treasure up for ourselves either indignation, wrath, tribulation and anguish (Romans 2:8), or glory, honor, and immortality (Romans 2:7). In this regard, we are encouraged to bear one another’s burdens and to examine our own works (Galatians 6:2-4). The central feature of our works is that we are to be holy as our Father in heaven is holy. Since we will be judged by our works, we conduct ourselves in the fear of God (1 Peter 1:15-17). Judgment of one’s works was not limited to the New Testament. The Lord put man on notice way back that He searches the heart and rewards according to deeds (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Descriptions of Good Works: Descriptions of good works in the Scriptures focus on doing the will of God, since that’s what we were created for. Some good works mentioned specifically by Peter are abstaining from fleshly lusts (passions), having honorable conduct and submitting to every human ordinance. Doing good as such puts to silence the ignorance of foolish men (1 Peter 2:11-16).

Good works vary according to one's position in life where different people have different hurdles to overcome. For example, good works are mentioned as follows (Titus 2:1-10):

- older men:** be sober
be venerable or honorable
be self-controlled
be sound in: faith, love & patience
- older women:** be reverent (or conspicuously sacred)
not slanderers (Gk *diabolos*)
not heavy drinkers
make the young women self-controlled
- young men:** be self-controlled
in teaching: be incorruptible, venerable, having healthy faultless words
(i.e. cut out the trash talk)
- young women:** love their husbands and their children
be obedient to their husbands
be self-controlled
be chaste
be homeworkers
- slaves:** be obedient to masters
don't steal
be perfectly honest

It is the Grace of God behind all this teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly lust and to live self-controlled, righteously and godly. The purpose is that His own special people might be purified, zealous for good works (Titus 2:11-15). Finally he adds good works such as (Titus 3:1-2):

- speaking evil (Gk *blasphemes*) of no one
- being peaceable and gentle
- showing all humility to all men

For those who are wealthy, Paul exhorts them to avoid being stuck-up and setting their hope in their wealth, but instead to become rich in good works by being good at giving and by being generous (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

All the above examples of good works have to do more with a person's character than with his quotas. Much more emphasis is placed on righteous living than on save-the-world programs.

Matters for Titus to Avoid

Paul encouraged Titus to avoid foolish questioning, genealogies, strife and legal disputes (Titus 3:9). Paul is referring here to the Jewish opposition since genealogies (tracing their roots back to Abraham) were very important in determining who was a Jew and who wasn't. Only a Jew with the proper genealogy could be a priest (descendant of Aaron) and records were kept in the Temple in Jerusalem to document this. This documentation was tapped by the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke to show Jesus was the Son of David (Matthew 1:1ff, Luke 3:23ff). With the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, these records were lost.

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Gospel: Luke 8:5-15

Today's Gospel lesson is also found in Mark 4:1-20 and Matthew 13:1-23. This Gospel lesson is also used in the Orthodox Church for the 4th Sunday of Luke. In the West, this lesson is commonly used either from Matthew 13 in July or from Luke 8 just before Lent.

Background: Why Speak in Parables?

Today's Gospel lesson took place late in the year 28 AD (where Jesus was crucified in 30 AD). Jesus had been teaching, preaching and performing many miracles for over a year at this time. And His audience was starting to change. As John Chrysostom (4th Century) pointed out, when He gave the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) earlier, He spoke plainly and directly. "He did not weave His discourse with so many parables. Because then there were multitudes only and a simple people; but here are also Scribes and Pharisees" (Homily XLIV on Matthew 13).

Prior to the Parable of the Sower, Luke records Jesus' visit to Simon the Pharisee's house for dinner (Luke 7:36-40). Matthew records, in addition, the Scribes and Pharisees asking for a sign just before the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 12:38). Therefore, Jesus began teaching in parables which was prophesied by David: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter dark sayings of old which we have heard and known and our Fathers have told us" (Psalms 77:2-3; see also Isaiah 6:9,10, quoted in Matthew 13:14-15). Concluding the Parable, Jesus said, therefore, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8).

Cyril of Alexandria (4th-5th Century) commented on this: "For being insolent, and setting up against Him, so to speak, their haughty neck, they gave not the slightest heed to the duty of receiving faith in Him; and even wickedly resisted His public teaching, and rebuked those who wished to be constantly with Him, and thirsted for His instruction, impiously saying, 'He has a devil and is mad: why do you listen to Him?' To them, therefore, it was not granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but rather unto us, who are more ready to embrace the faith. For He has given unto us, as being perfect wisdom, the ability to understand parables, and the dark saying, the words of the wise, and their riddles. For parables we may say are the images not of visible objects, but rather of those cognizable by the intellect and spiritual. For that which it is impossible to see with the eyes of the body, the parable points out unto the eyes of the mind, beautifully shaping out the subtlety of things intellectual, by means of the things of sense, and which are as it were palpable to the touch" (Commentary on Luke, chapter 8).

The Sower

In the Parable a sower planting his field would broadcast seed by hand onto the newly tilled ground. Going around the edges of the field, some seed was bound to fall on pathways off the tilled area; this is the wayside. Plows were not as efficient as today and did not turn the soil over, but just broke up the soil. A plow was often just a straight shaft of wood going into the ground that could be pulled by an ox and guided by the tiller. This kind of simple plow was not strong enough to be used on dry ground and farmers had to wait for the early rains to moisten the soil before plowing could begin. As a consequence of this simple plowing, rocks remained in the field, perhaps just below the surface where a seed fell. This seed, then, would have very shallow soil to grow in. Other seed may be blown farther off the field by the wind and may fall in untilled area where thorns and thistles had grown the previous year but had been cut down. Since the thorns hadn't been pulled out by the roots, the seed and the thorns grow up together.

As Jesus explained the Parable, the sower is Himself and the seed is the Word of God (Luke 8:11). In the Parable, He said, "A sower went out to sow" (Luke 8:5). John Chrysostom explains that this was "the Son of God clothing Himself with flesh. For because we could not enter, our sins fencing us out from the entrance, He comes forth to us. Not to destroy the ground containing thorns, nor to take vengeance on the tillers but to till and tend the ground and to sow the Word of godliness. For by seed here He means His teaching; and by land, the souls of men; and by the sower, Himself." (Ibid)

The Wayside: Hard Hearted Christians

"Some seed fell on the wayside or footpath and was trampled down and the birds of the air devoured it" (Luke 8:5). He didn't say that the sower tried to sow it on the wayside, but it "fell" there. The footpath is hard due to constant foot traffic; the seed never got a chance to get below the surface. Since the soil is men's souls, the footpath represents those with a hard heart who don't understand the Word and refuse to try. The birds of the air who devoured the seed represent the devil who snatches the word out of their hardened hearts before they can consider it and believe and be saved (Luke 8:12).

Cyril said it this way: "All those, therefore, whose mind is hard and unyielding, and so to speak, pressed together, do not receive the divine seed; for the divine and sacred admonition finds no entrance into them, nor do they accept the words that would produce in them the fear of God, and by means of which they could bring forth as fruits the glories of virtue. They have made themselves a beaten and trampled pathway for unclean demons, yea, and for Satan himself, such as never can bear holy fruit. Let those awake, therefore, whose heart is sterile and unfruitful; open your mind, receive the sacred seed, be like productive and well-tilled soil, bring forth unto God the fruits that will raise you to an incorruptible life; guard your mind, shut the entrance against the thief, drive away from your hearts the flocks of birds, in order that the seed may abide with you; that you may be ground luxuriant in corn, and very fertile, and rich abundantly in bringing forth fruit." (Ibid)

The Rocky Soil: Nominal Christians

“Other seed fell on a rock (or stony places - Matthew 13:5); and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture” (Luke 8:6). “When the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away” (Matthew 13:6). In the hot sun, soil begins to dry out first at the surface, then slowly deeper and deeper until rain or irrigation comes. Those plants with deeper roots can withstand a longer drought. The anise plant, for example, has a tap-root that goes straight down three to four feet; it can survive a drought quite well. Wheat doesn’t have a single tap-root like anise, but its root system will extend down to over 18 inches in good soil, thus allowing it to survive irregular irrigation.

The rocky ground represents those who hear and receive the Word with joy; but they have no root. They believe for a while; but in time of temptation (or tribulation and persecution because of the Word - Matthew 13:21), they fall away or stumble (Luke 8:13). This is the kind of person who is shallow or superficial toward the Kingdom of God. Nominally, they are Christians; but there is no depth of willingness to pursue it. Note that it is not the heat of the day that withers the seed on stony soil; it is the lack of root. The heat does not wither the seed on good ground because there is a good depth of root.

Cyril commented as follows: “For there are truly men whose faith has not been proved, depending on words simply, and not applying their mind to the examining of the mystery; of such the piety is sapless and without root. For when they enter the churches, they feel pleasure often in seeing so many assembled, and joyfully receive instruction in the mysteries from him whose business it is to teach, and laud him with praises. But this they do with no discretion or judgment, but with unpurified wills; and when they have gone out of the churches, at once they forget the sacred doctrines, and proceed in their customary course; not having stored up within them any thing for their future benefit. And if the affairs of Christians go on peacefully, and no trial disturb them, they even then scarcely maintain in them the faith, and that, so to speak, in a confused and tottering state. But if persecution trouble them, and the enemies of the truth attack the churches of the Savior, their heart loves not the battle, and their mind throws away the shield and flees, being devoid of zeal, and destitute of love towards God, and ready for desertion.” (Ibid)

The Apostle Paul stated: “No temptation has overtaken you except as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The Thorn Patch: Rich Christians

“And some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it” (Luke 8:7) “and it yielded no crop” (Mark 4:7). The seed started on ground that it could grow in. However, thorn roots (or seeds) were there also and grew up with it. Since the thorns grow taller and compete for the same nourishment of the ground, the seed that was sown slowly gets choked out.

The thorns represent “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19); because of this and “the pleasures of life, no fruit is brought to maturity”

(Luke 8:14). It is not because of the thorns, Chrysostom said, that the Word gets choked, but because of the ground that allows the thorns to spring up. “Let us not blame the things, but the corrupt mind. For it is possible to be rich and not to be deceived; and to be in this world, and not to be choked with its cares. For indeed riches have two contrary disadvantages: (1) care, wearing us out, and bringing a darkness over us; (2) luxury, making us effeminate.” (Ibid)

Cyril put it this way, “In order, therefore, that the divine seed may blossom well in us, let us first cast out of the mind worldly cares, and the unprofitable anxiety which makes us seek to be rich, for we brought nothing into the world, nor can we take anything out (1 Timothy 6:7). For what profit is there in possessing superfluities? Treasures profit not the wicked, as Scripture says, but righteousness delivers from death (Proverbs 10:2). For immediately upon the possession of affluence, there run up, and, so to speak, hem us in, the basest wickednesses; profligate banquets, the delights of gluttony, and carefully prepared foods; music, and drunkenness, and the pitfalls of wantonness; pleasures and sensuality, and pride hateful to God. But as the disciple of the Savior has said, everything that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of the world, and the world passes away, and its lust. But he that does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:16, 17).

The Good Soil

The seed that fell on good ground sprang up and yielded a crop a hundred fold (Luke 8:8), and some sixty fold and some thirty fold (Matthew 13:8). Not every stalk of wheat contains the same number of grains; neither does every tree produce the same number of fruits. In U.S. agriculture today, a stalk of wheat in good soil will produce an average of 50 kernels; that is fifty kernels are produced by one seed, or fifty fold.

The good soil represents those “who having heard the Word with a noble and good heart (who understand it - Matthew 13:23) hold fast to it and bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15). But everyone doesn’t produce the same amount of fruit. Paul stated that “each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that” (1 Corinthians 7:7). And “each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor” (1 Corinthians 3:8). How much is produced depends greatly on the soil (cultivation, fertilizer, etc.) where using this analogy, the gift is part of the soil, not part of the seed.

Cyril’s comment on this was: “For when the Divine Word falls upon a mind pure and skillful in cleansing itself from things hurtful, it then fixes its root deeply, and shoots up like an ear of corn, and, so to speak, being strong in blade and well flowered, brings its fruit to perfection.” (Ibid) Chrysostom’s comment was: “Great is His mercy to man, that He does not require one measure of virtue (i.e. the hundred fold); but while He receives the first, and casts not out the second (the sixty fold), He gives also a place to the third.” (Ibid)’’

Receiving the Parable in Humility

The sower does not sow His seed just once, but continually. Receiving it once with a good heart is good, but if this hardens our heart into thinking the task is over, we may miss it the next

time. Most people have times when they need to deal with the wayside, stony soil and thorn patch at various stages in their lives depending on when the Word comes to them.

Chrysostom wrote: “It is not enough to be freed from (the deceit) of riches only, but we must cultivate also the other parts of virtue. For what if you are free indeed from riches, yet are soft and weak? And what if you are not indeed weak but are careless about the hearing of the Word? No one part is sufficient for our salvation, but there is required first a careful hearing and a continued recollection; then fortitude; then contempt of riches and deliverance from all worldly things.” (Ibid)

We need to continually break up the fallow (unplowed) ground of our hearts to be ready to receive the seed when it comes. As Hosea said: “Sow with a view to righteousness, reap in accordance with kindness; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until He comes to rain righteousness on you” (Hosea 10:12).