

# **A GOOD GROUND HEARER**

## **A SERMON**

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**“But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”**

**Luke 8:15**

THERE must be an object about which the heart is to be honest, and towards which the heart is to be good, and from which the heart is to bring forth with patience fruit unto God, so that such persons may, by their fruits, stand out distinguished as persons that the Lord has had mercy upon; as persons whom the Lord has chosen to salvation; for however much other persons may cavil at the truth of election, the one who is taught of God reasons with himself like this: Well, if God is not to choose salvation for me, he alone knew the kind of salvation that I needed; and if God does not choose me to salvation, who can choose me to salvation? and if God does not choose to save me, I cannot save myself, nor choose my own destiny. Here I am, a sinner and I read in the Bible that by one man's offence judgment came upon all men to condemnation. In vain, therefore, is it now to talk of our standing in a state of probation. We are not in a state of probation, we are in a state of condemnation, and such an one, therefore, feels that if he obtains mercy, it is because the Lord chooses to show mercy; and such an one is glad to find it written in the word that he that seeks, for we take the seeking him as an evidence that he has already begun to seek us, he that seeks, finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened; and he that asks shall receive. But then you must ask what the Lord has to give? If you ask what he has not to give, then you will not obtain. If you ask of him conditional salvation, then he has not that to give. If you ask of him universal redemption, then he has not that to give. If you ask of him yea and nay promises, then he has not that to give. But if you ask of him a yea and amen promise; if you ask of him pure mercy, as the publican did; if you seek for a free-grace salvation, and if you seek for his approbation entirely in his dear Son, God has these things to give, and these things he will give. He that seeks what God has to give finds; and he that knocks, desiring to enter in by the only door, Christ Jesus, Jesus having destroyed all impediments, and himself become the door of life and of hope, that man shall be admitted. He that thus, then, seeks, knocks, and asks, shall succeed. And the persons so favored are distinguished in this parable of the sower as belonging, not to the wayside, or thorny ground, or stony ground, but to the good ground hearers.

I shall this morning try and set three things before you, with all the clearness, humility, and sincerity, and simplicity, that I can. First, *The object about which the heart, if right with God, is honest*; and then, second, *the nature of those qualities, honest and good*; third, *the consequence of having the right object, and the right relation to that object*, they bring forth fruit with patience.

Now in the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, there the good ground hearer, I must avail myself of that, in order to get at, properly, the meaning of our text, it is there said of the good ground hearer that it is he that hears the word and *understands* it. Now, then, there is a word to be understood, and that word must be understood experimentally; and we cannot do better than light upon some essential of the gospel as an explanation of this. Let us, then, take the one subject of the substitution of the Lord Jesus Christ. He on the good ground is he that hears what Christ has done and understands it. He so understands the value of the word, the testimony of Christ, that he sees, such an one sees and feels that it is something he cannot part with; that this testimony of Christ is the pearl of great price, for which he may afford to part with everything; seeing in this testimony of Christ there are riches unsearchable, even durable riches and righteousness. Let us take, then, some things in the 32nd Psalm, to help us out with this object about which we are to be honest. "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven." To whom does this blessedness belong? I answer. To the man that, before God, feels that unless his transgression be forgiven, he must be damned; that he cannot, by his works, erase, blot out, mitigate, lessen, or get rid of his transgression. Such a one that says to himself, Unless there be forgiveness, I shall be lost. That is the man to whom the blessedness belongs. Only there is one more feeling, in the matter and that is this, if you're feeling be right in the matter, you will be led to see that your transgression can be forgiven only by what Jesus Christ has done. Here God is just as well as merciful in forgiving transgression. And if you can say, before God, that, unless in the name and by the atonement of Jesus Christ, my transgressions are forgiven, I shall be damned, I shall be lost to eternity, if this be your conviction and your feeling, then here is one symptom of your being a good ground hearer, and "whose sin is covered." We have transgressed every commandment of the law. Christ has walked the whole length and breadth of the law, and covered all the ground that sinners have transgressed, so that it cannot now be known that a sinner has been there. It is known now that a Surety has been there; it is seen now that a holy person has been there, but not that an unholy person has been there. It is seen now that a righteous Person has walked over that holy ground, but it cannot be seen now that an unrighteous person has walked over that ground. It is seen now that an incarnate God has walked, over that ground, the length and breadth of it; has magnified the law, and has thrown into it his own eternal worth; and there is a righteousness that covers all the ground of the law, so that not one footprint of sin, not one footprint of error, not one footprint of Satan can be seen. Your sins are covered, they are hidden, they are gone, and you stand before God by this righteousness of Jesus Christ, in an even place, even with all the demands of law and justice; and that there can no more sin be seen in you, as you thus stand, than there is in Christ Jesus, for you are complete in him. My hearer, what say you to this? Can you say that all other modes, and plans, and attempts to hide your sin are vain, and that nothing but this propitiation, Christ Jesus, can cover your sin? If you can say this, and you have this feeling, then here is another sign, though I will come more directly to experience presently, that you are a good ground hearer. "Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputes not iniquity." Now to impute is to blame, and to set to your account; and. In what way can you escape, being blamed?

You cannot help blaming yourself; you feel that your sins have been voluntary, and as they have been voluntary, they are your own, and you are responsible for them. You feel this; you blame yourself every day. Where is there a Christian man or Christian woman that does not give way more to evil thoughts and inclinations and passions, and a variety of things, than is good? Yet we have these evils within us, and we feel to blame ourselves for our carnal, earthly, and sinful tendency. And yet, such is that order of substitution, that God, if we are thus brought to Christ in the way I shall presently have to describe, will not blame us for any of these things for which we blame ourselves. He will not loathe us for any of these things for which we loathe ourselves. He will not reject us for any of these things for which we reject ourselves. He will not condemn us for any of these things for which we condemn ourselves. For, not he that commends himself is approved, but he that condemns himself in the sight of God as nothing, but a poor sinner shall not be condemned by the Lord. Blessed then is the man who is brought into the knowledge of this substitution and in whose spirit, there is no guile. It is, then, this putting away of sin in Christ Jesus, where forgiving mercy reigns, where justifying mercy reigns, and where imputed righteousness reigns; so that we are not to be blamed. Ah, my hearer, could you this moment believe the Holy Spirit enable you to believe that, at this very moment, while you are listening to my feeble voice, not a fault does the Lord blame you for; he beholds you in his dear Son; he has forgiven you with infinite freedom and eternal delight; he has covered your sins triumphantly and eternally, and they are never, never, never, never to appear against you and he will not blame you for anything you have done, but will fill your soul with all that joy and pleasure that shall constrain you with unutterable delight to praise him for what He has done. Here is the object about which we are to be honest. Then, he that hears the word on the good ground shall be saved; 13th of Matthew; that is, he that hears the word and understands the word. I will now say to you, I need not, perhaps, to many of you, but I do so for the sake of setting the matter forth plainly; I say to you now, as one said to another in olden time upon the same subject; he said, "Understand you what you read?" Are you a good ground hearer? Do you understand the word? Do you understand your need of mercy? Do you understand what Jesus came to do? And do you see there is no other way of acceptance with God but by Jesus Christ? And this man was a good ground hearer, though the seed was not, perhaps, very plentifully yet cast in; and he said, "How can I, except some man should guide me?" The Lord knew what the eunuch desired, and sent Philip to him; and he began at the same scripture, and preached unto him this very same theme; he preached unto him from the 53rd of Isaiah; the whole, as you are aware, of that chapter sets, before us, in a variety of forms and attractive beauties, the substitutional excellencies of Christ; he began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. "And the word took root very rapidly; not as in the stony-ground hearer, because there was fight attending it; he understood the word, and he went on his way rejoicing; became a practical Baptist, as you are aware, there and then. He, then, on the good ground is he that hears the word of substitution, the testimony of what Christ has done.

Now, friends, let us just hear what David says to this experience. And how came David to learn to know that all blessedness lay in the substitution of Christ; that there is no blessedness that man can ever possess but by the substitutional work of Christ? What was the feeling of David? What were the exercises of his soul? How came he into acquaintance with this? Was it by human learning? Was it by the dint of personal meditation? Was it by some intellectual or natural acquirement of his own? Let us hear his own account, as though he should say, Now I am come to let you know how all blessedness lies here, "My bones," he says, "waxed old through my roaring all the day long." Now I think we ought to understand that in this way. First, I, till I was convinced of my

state, was somewhat flourishing in my own eyes; but when I became convinced of what I was by the fall, I found out that sin, by the fall, had mortalized my body, had mortalized my very bones; and when I was brought to feel thus, that I am altogether mortalized by the poisonous power of sin, by the diffusion of sin through my whole system, soul and body; for the figures there borrowed from the body must evidently be transferred to the soul, and must be understood spiritually; and as the bones give form to the body, if these give way, only see what a poor object you become; and so, when conviction enters the soul, and your fancied strength gives way, down you go; and what an object you become. "Through my roaring all day long;" that is an Oriental phrase, expressive of his fretting, and grieving to think he was in such a miserable condition. Well, David, how was this? Why, he says, "day and night your hand was heavy upon me;" as though he should say, God came by his holy law and said, Pay what you owe; and he put me down from my pride, from my personal righteousness, and supposed goodness, and strength, turned all my comeliness into corruption, and there he kept me; "day and night your hand was heavy upon me." Well, but can't you get up, David? No, my sin will not let me get up; the law will not let me get up; and God will not let me get up. What, have you no hope then? No; for "my moisture is turned into the drought of summer;" I am completely wasted, completely dried up. Oh, my hearer, Do you know what it is for your natural religion thus to be dried up; for your natural holiness and hope thus to be dried up; and for once in your lifetime to feel what it is to be without hope and without God in the world? I do believe, and I say it because I ought to say it, that a great many so-called conversions in our day are utterly unconnected with that vital experience that dries up their false hope, their free will, their supposed goodness. So, when the Lord put Saul of Tarsus down, could Sard get up again? There he lay; God's hand was upon him he could not get up; his sin would not let him get up; the law would not let him get up. "My moisture is turned into the drought of summer." Poor, perishing creature! Well, David, tell us the secret of this; what did it drive you to? Why, "I acknowledged my sin unto *you*;" not to the priest, not to a fellow-worm at all; but "I acknowledged my sin unto *you*." Not but I would go this afternoon, if I knew where there was a priest, and confess all my sins to him I could think of, if he could forgive them; but, poor wretch, he cannot forgive his own, much less forgive those of another; and I would just as soon go to the devil, and confess my sins to the devil, as to any man under heaven; he has just as much power to forgive. Poor arrogant moths! "I acknowledged my sin unto you and my iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord." Well, David, how did you get on then? Why "You forgave the iniquity of my sin." Ah, that's it; that's how you came into the secret. Now, my hearer, if we profess religion, how have we come by it? Do we know anything of what our state is by nature? Do we know anything of our natural religion being dried up? our false hope dried up? Now, mark the language; and I think it is a very important matter to acknowledge, that in that part David, as a sinner considered, had nothing to confess to the Lord but sin, nothing else; and so we, apart from his grace, if we are taught of God, we shall feel we have nothing to confess to him, apart from his grace considered, but sin. "You forgave the iniquity of my sin." That's how he came to know the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven in the Savior's name; that's how he came to know the blessedness of the man whose sin is covered, the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. And I venture to say that David, in this, had in his spirit no guile: "In whose spirit there is no guile." Now, says my text, "In an honest and good heart." Let me stop here for one moment, and bless the Lord for there being a revelation in which a sinner may be honest; because in this revelation of things, wherein there is an infinity and an eternity of mercy, you may honestly confess all your faults; you may tell them here, make yourself out as bad as you may, or be as bad as you may, you are but a creature, the author of the pardon is the Creator,

Christ Jesus; the author of the pardon is the Creator; the revealer of the pardon is the Creator, the eternal Spirit of the blessed God. Here is the good ground hearer then, whose heart is thus prepared, for all by nature are wayside hearers, all are stony ground or thorny ground hearers. "The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord." So that, if you are thus convinced of your state, if your false hope be thus dried up, if you have no hope but in the substitution of Christ, it is the Lord that has thus made you to differ. But now when David saw this blessedness felt his need of this blessedness, and realized a little of it, he could give a word to others. "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you in a time when you may be found." And when is that? While we live. It must be now or never; it must be on this side of the grave or never; it must be while in the body or never; it must be before we die or never. The soul once in hell, is in hell forever; the soul once in heaven, is in heaven forever. And therefore, "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you." Just see how encouraging.

Now, I suppose I am speaking this morning to one that is saying, Well, I am afraid I have not gone quite so deep into downward experience as David, and yet, I see this is the only way of escape, and I do pray to have mercy in that way. Well, come then, I should hope you are a good ground hearer, for there is godliness at the bottom; there is godliness at the root. "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto you in a time when you may be found." Ah, but, say you, perhaps the time is gone by. No, my hearer, your life is not gone. Well, then, the time is not gone by; you are not in hell yet. "Well, but I shall be, though" No, you shall not, if you have this praying heart, "In a time when you may be found," and he can be found, and will be found, in this way. "But in the floods of great waters, they shall not come near unto him." There is evidently here a reference to the Flood. There was so long given for the world to repent with the repentance of reformation. The repentance of regeneration, the repentance unto life and salvation, is God's free grace and discriminating and especial gift; but the repentance of reformation is the duty of all men. God gave the world a certain time to repent; and they repented not. Presently the moment came when it was too late. It was now hidden from their eyes; the ark was closed, the rains descended, the fountains of the great deep were broken up. See the ark in the distance; see the people on those high houses; see the people on those castles; see the people on those towers; see the people on those mountains, they see the waters rising, they see the ark in the distance, but they cannot get near the ark, and it does not come to them, and they cannot now get to the ark, it is now too late. "In the floods of great waters, they shall not come near unto him." So, my hearer, at the judgment day, when the great Redeemer shall descend, and floods of fury roll before him, millions upon millions shall see him in the distance; but no prayer now, no access now, no repentance now, no mercy now; no, the solemn words are realized now, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; he that is filthy, let him be filthy still; he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; he that is holy, let him be holy still." Down they sink, to rise no more; while saints innumerable take possession of that kingdom that cannot be moved and are glorified in the presence of and with the Lord their God, and that forever. Happy the man, then, whose eyes are opened in time, that is, before he dies. You read of one who, it appears, never, lifted up his eyes to God on earth; but you read that he lifted up his eyes in hell to Abraham, with the desire that Lazarus might be sent, that he might dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue; but even that was not granted, an impassable gulf there remained. I think, therefore, you must think with me, those of you that have the fear of God before your eyes, that that part of the 32nd Psalm is very solemn; and if we are brought to know our lost condition, if we have only a little of the downward experience there described, so as to understand the value of the testimony of Christ, to understand the value of his mercy, and to hold fast his testimony, and to

feel that it is something not to be parted with, then we belong to the good ground hearers. And when David realized pardoning mercy, and saw how salvation may be found, "Seek you the Lord while he may be found; call you upon him while he is near." When God speaks these words to a sinner, down will go every idle excuse, every supposed excellency, and seek God he must and will. Let whatever may be left, neglected, or passed by, my soul, my precious soul, my immortal soul, eternity, all things are toys in comparison of its salvation and welfare; and therefore such an one, at all hazards, let those around him oppose him as they may, he is determined to seek God, to stand out for God; the man is thoroughly in earnest in the matter; it is a matter of life and death, time and eternity, with him. Now David, when looking at the revelation the Lord had made to him of his situation, Looking at the downward experience he had had, and then realizing this mercy somewhat in his own soul, and then looking at discriminating grace, he then comes back to personal experience, and says, "You are my hiding place; you shall preserve me from trouble." There is no trouble there. I may have trouble in my person, and trouble in my family, and trouble in the church, and in the pulpit, and in the pew, and in the world, and among friends, and among foes, trouble in life and trouble in death; but there is no trouble in Christ, no trouble there. The moment we leave all other localities, we entirely leave every region where trouble is, and enter upon a scene where there is no pain, no sorrow, no hunger, no thirst. No death can enter there: "You shall preserve me from trouble: you shall compass me about." To show it should not be a mere dull matter, to show he was not to be shut up in some stronghold where everything was gloomy and dull, and was merely preserved from a calamity, without having anything to make him happy where he was, "you shall compass me about with songs of deliverance." And now, upon this matter, see how kindly the Lord speaks, as though the Lord should say, Well, David, I have made known to you this substitution; I have given you this knowledge of yourself; I have shown to you that if you had not been called by grace now, while you live, it would have been too late after you die, for you cannot come near me when those great floods of almighty and eternal wrath shall begin to rise. Now, David, let us go on comfortably together; as you are a good ground hearer, you understand the word. "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you shall go; I will guide you with my eye." Let us go comfortably together. "Be you not as the horse," kicking and tearing about, "or as the mule," but walk along quietly; I have nothing against you, and don't you have anything against me; I love you, and you love me; I have chosen you, and you choose me; I abide by you, and you abide by me; I will stand out for you, and you stand out for me. "Be you not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto you." See the value, then, of this experimental understanding. Why, some of us have gone on with the Lord like this for many years. The Lord and I have never had one quarrel for thirty years upon these matters. And upon nothing else, say you? Oh, don't name it; I have had ten thousand quarrels with him on other things, but never quarreled with him about his dear Son; I am always satisfied there; he has nothing against me, nothing laid to my charge; he has loved me with an immutable love, and he will no more part with me than with his dear Son. "Many sorrows shall be to the wicked and the only way to be righteous is by faith in Christ; and, let us be what we may, if we are not believers in Christ, we are reckoned in the category of the wicked, and many and eternal sorrows must be unto such; "but he that trusts in the Lord," by this substitution, "mercy shall compass him about." So, then, "be glad in the Lord, and rejoice you righteous and shout for joy, all you that, are upright in heart." This shall be the ultimate destiny of the good ground hearer.

In the next place, now the honest heart has to do with right and wrong. How nicely it answers. Here is the Christian; I know, well it would be wrong for me to give up one iota of the testimony of Christ; I know it would be wrong for me to admit one false doctrine or mixed seed into my land; we will not sow with mixed seed; we will leave free-willers and duty-faith people to sow with mixed seed; we are to sow only with free-grace seed, not with mixed seed. Such a one says, I feel it would be wrong of me to part with one iota of the glorious testimony that “by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” There it is you are honest; there the man is honest. I will be honest; I will stick to it. Well, but they will call you a hyper. I don’t care what they call me; they may call me what they like; I will be honest. I am daily in my nature that sinner; that if grace does not, in spite of it all, and over it all, and through it all, and after it all, reign, there is no hope for me. That is the honest man that abides honestly by the truth of the gospel.

My conscience does bear me sweet testimony in private as in public in the sight of God that in all honesty I have had my conversation in these things, and unto such the Lord will say, “Well done you good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over few things, I will make you ruler over many things; enter you into the joy of your Lord.” Honesty, then, regards right and wrong as to the truth. The honest heart is a man, made honest with his own soul, made honest with the gospel. But then we may have this one quality without the other, and that would prove our honesty is not of the right kind. I believe there are persons professing the Roman Catholic religion that are honest, that are sincere, but have not a good heart; honest in their delusions, but it is not good. So, duty-faith people, no doubt many of them are honest, but their hearts are not good in the sense here intended. So, of others, Wesleyans, thousands of them thoroughly honest, amiable people, but their hearts are not good in the sense here intended. I like to see a man sincere in his religion, even if he is wrong; I like to see him sincere, because there is something good about the man; you say, “Well, the man is wrong, but still he is not a hypocrite, he is sincere; he is deluded, but still he is sincere. Let us give him credit for his sincerity; if we can’t give him credit for the other quality, let us give him credit for what we can; and I say, never say any more against other men than you are obliged to say; if you know any good at all about them, appreciate that good.

Well, then, what does the next word mean, “a good heart”? Well, the good heart, as the original word shows, is something in addition to honesty. Perhaps I cannot better illustrate it than by reminding you of that scripture in Romans 5, where the apostle says, and conveying to us this very distinction; and with that I must close, for I have no time to speak of the patience this morning: “Scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.” Now, the ancients drew a line of distinction between a righteous man and a good man. A righteous man was a man that abode by the laws of right and wrong; he took care that he would not wrong anyone, and he took equal care no one should wrong him; he would hang them first. That was the righteous man; all very cold and miserable. Father right and wrong; father right and wrong; poor, miserable gospel that; all very well as a basis and foundation. But the good man is the man, not only honest, and would not wrong another, but the good man is the man that would help anybody, the man that does all the good he can, benevolent, openhearted, and kind. Now, that man is not only an honest man, so as to wrong no one, but in addition to that he does all the good he possibly can. That was the way in which the ancients drew a line of distinction between the righteous man and the good man. So, you have these same qualities here, an honest and a good heart. Now, a good heart is a heart that has a good feeling towards God the Father in his love to us

and eternal choice of us. Ah, says one, that's not me. Then you are not a good ground hearer. But I am honest. But you are not good. The good heart is the man that has such a good feeling towards Jesus, that he loves the Lord Jesus Christ, and could not be offended with him; the good heart is the heart that has a good feeling towards the good Spirit of God, a good feeling towards the truth of God, and towards the people of God. "We know we are passed from death to life, because we love the brethren." If we have the honesty without the goodness, then we are mere dry father right and wrong professors; if we have the goodness; without the honesty, then we are still at fault. I have met with some ministers, they seem to have the bump of benevolence so extremely large, that it leaves them hardly a grain of honesty. Ah, here is a dear Wesleyan brother, here is a dear duty-faith brother, here is a dear hyper brother; all dear. But that love that sprawls all over the place is not much account; I think it is a kind of love that has no basis, no compass, no decision; it loves anything and everything; all goodness, but no honesty, no fixed principle. That is the idea; the honesty is the principle, and the goodness is that love that is regulated by the principle; and love without being regulated by principle is no love at all. That is what I understand by the qualities here; and if we are brought into the knowledge of this substitution of Jesus Christ, we shall be honest in that matter, and our goodness, our kindly feeling towards the people and cause of God, will be governed by the truth of God.