

The Sower, the Seed, and the Soil

Luke 8:4-15

A sip of something sweet and savory is never enough. And the Savior's words were sweet to the simple country people in the towns and villages Jesus visited.

Some them were still hungry after our Lord's brief visit to their community. They wanted more. So they sought Him out.

...a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, Verse 4

They found Him beside the wrinkled blue mirror of the Sea of Galilee. And once again Jesus taught them.

Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. Mark 4:1-2

The fishing boat rocked with little waves that rolled in to slap at the sand on the shore. And Jews in homespun robes crowded close to hear, some of them standing ankle-deep in lake water.

The Master was telling a lesson story: a parable. Later when the crowds had all drifted away and they were alone, Jesus explained what it meant to His disciples.

The lesson concerned the message of the Gospel and its affects upon the hearts of those who hear it. The Savior said not everyone who hears that wonderful story experiences its power.

Some people hear the Good News that God loves them yet never know the sweetness of living in close communion with Christ. And one day they face death, alone and afraid without the powerful, eternal Savior and Friend they so desperately need.

Jesus' story tells about a farmer, striding through a field with a sack of wheat on his hip, scattering grain as he goes. The seed he sows is rich, powerful and alive. And it falls on different kinds of soil.

In the same way, the Gospel message reaches the ears of different people. The message they hear is the same, but their reactions to it are vastly different.

The difference dwells in the state of each hearer's heart. That is the core of the Master's message.

There are eye-opening lessons in the Lord's words here. He insisted it is quite possible to hear God's Word proclaimed clearly, concisely and completely yet fail to feel its full effect.

Indeed, at one extreme some people are never touched at all. Others respond all right, but somehow they never become strong believers. They live and die weak and wavering, unstable and unfruitful.

But that is not all the Savior had to say that day beside the sea. He also gave us a picture of the kind of spiritually alive and vibrant Christians He would have us to be.

But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. Verse 15

Tragically, not every one who hears the Gospel receives it so gladly or grows strong and mature. And fewer yet are ever able to reproduce their faith in others.

Jesus also mentioned three other kinds of hearts. And if we are not like the soil in which a seed grew into a mature plant, our hearts have to be like one of the other three.

The Calloused Heart

A foot path wound through the farmer's field: a shortcut people used on their way to a nearby village. And some of the wheat fell upon soil that had been pounded and packed hard by their feet.

The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. Verse 5

That is clear enough, but some questions remain. Why is it that the Gospel has no affect on some people? And how can Satan snatch God's Word away the moment it reaches their ears?

We do not have to guess at the answers to those questions. Matthew's account of this same parable records an explanation Luke omitted.

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. Matthew 13:19

They do not understand it. That is the problem. But why do some people hear the story of Jesus Christ, the cross, and the empty tomb and not understand it? The apostle Paul answered that question.

...a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. 1 Corinthians 2:14

Some people hear the message of salvation and do not understand it because their hearts are so cold and carnal the Holy Spirit is unable to reach them. So it sounds like foolishness to them.

But we must not be misled. Such spiritual hardening is not something over which we have no control. That is why the book of Hebrews warns us against it.

Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me. Hebrews 3:15

It is a gradual process that hardens a heart. It happens when we are convicted of our sinfulness and are drawn to Christ. Each time we turn away and refuse to submit to the Spirit's leading, we build up spiritual callouses. And our hearts are hardened a little more.

When that process has sufficiently hardened our hearts, there are two terrible results. First, we can no longer hear the pleading and enlightening counsel of the Holy Spirit.

So we neither understand nor appreciate the Gospel. Just as the seeds sown along the path were trodden down by travelers' feet, when the hard-hearted hear the life-changing message of Jesus' love, they scorn and disdain it.

At the same time, Satan is at work in the mind and memory. Silently, he steals the message away, and we do not long remember it. So we do not respond at the time because we do not understand. And we do not respond later because we do not remember.

People with hardened hearts have but one hope. And that is prayer. We who have tasted the rich joy of the Gospel must pray for the person whose heart is hard.

That is the only way to soften such a heart. If we fail to pray, we can be sure that person will die in sin and, despite having heard the Gospel many times, descend into the eternal darkness of Hell.

The Crusted Heart

There were stones in the farmer's field, too. Rain had washed a thin layer of topsoil on the surface of some of those large, flat stones. And some of the seed also landed there.

That image is very important. It is a picture of soil that is rich and fertile but very thin with a hard layer of rock beneath. Upon that thin layer of soil, a seed from the farmer's sack came to rest.

Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. Verse 6

Mark's account of this parable provides the reason why the green sprout withered and died for lack of moisture.

...immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Mark 4:5-6

Jesus described a person who not only hears the message of God's love and Christ's blood but also receives it eagerly. And for a while their faith seems stable and sound, but deep within that person there is a problem.

Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. Verse 13

...he has no firm root in himself, Matthew 13:21

They have no root in their own mind and motives. Theirs is a shallow faith. They trust in Christ, alright. Their faith just is not very deep. They confess their sins and ask for God's forgiveness.

But they never get past dealing with simple, shallow feelings of guilt. They never dare to look inside themselves to the resentments, the bitterness, and the pride that spawn the sin. Worse yet, they never look deep enough to discern just who is really running their lives.

So they end up with a fine profession and a splendid confession of Christ. But they never establish a living relationship with Him.

Such cursory Christians, Jesus explained, get along just fine as long as they do not run into any trouble and Christianity means no more than sitting on a church pew, singing hymns and attempting to adopting a new lifestyle.

But then quite unexpectedly one day, they are ambushed by suffering and hardship, by poverty and reproach simply because they belong to Jesus Christ.

When that happens, their shallow faith simply withers away. And they drift back to their old life of sin and self.

In the end, they are the most difficult people of all to bring to a real relationship with our Lord. Once they have fallen away, they are almost immune to the deep faith they did not find the first time. They have been inoculated against genuine faith.

If there is to be a solution for these shallow believers, it must come much sooner before the blistering sun of persecution withers their fragile faith. They must take the time to dig down deep into their own hearts and break up the fallow ground within them.

Only then can Christ's Spirit deepen their faith and strengthen their roots. And only then, can He plant a commitment within them that is deep and sound and strong.

The Crowded Heart

Only a single seed remains. This one fell upon rich soil that was free from stones. But it had a problem too: a problem that could be seen at planting time. That grain of wheat was not the only seed in that soil. It was already full of others: seeds of thorns and thistles, and taproots of briars and brambles.

Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. Verse 7

The kernel of wheat was good. And it sprouted and grew. But so did the other seeds. Then they all fought for moisture and sunlight. So the tender, new sprout of wheat could never get very big or very strong. There was just too much competition.

The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. Verse 14

Jesus said those seeds represent worldly worries, desires for riches and an appetite for sinful pleasures.

Here is a person whose faith does not fail. This response to the Gospel is real. The faith is real too. And so is the commitment. The person is saved, and the Holy Spirit settles down to live within a newly redeemed heart.

But it is a crowded heart. And there is great competition for their time, their money and their affections.

Jesus owns their heart alright, but not necessarily their bank account or their billfold. Neither does He control their work relationships or their leisure time.

Jesus Christ is important with this person. Make no mistake about that. He may even be first in their life. But there are other considerations, too. And God is but one of them.

Christ is not this person's one and only consideration in life. He is only a part of a ruling coalition. Their affections are divided and their loyalties are fragmented. And in such an atmosphere, it is impossible for faith to grow. So it remains weak and immature.

There is a tragedy to the lives of such believers. All too often, they never even realize what they are missing.

They never know what it is to belong utterly and unashamedly to Jesus Christ. They never know the thrill of serving Him and bringing others to Him, either.

They remain baby Christians who must be fed the basic truths of the Gospel again and again. And that is not all. They must also be constantly encouraged and babied along, or the slightest difficulty will shipwreck their faith.

The solution for cluttered Christians is simple, but far from easy. They have to do some weeding in the garden of their heart. Every desire, aim and affection that is not both surrounded by and soaked through with love for the Savior and commitment to Christ's will must be uprooted and thrown out.

That is precisely what Paul did. He searched out and destroyed everything in his heart and mind that was not completely Christ's.

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 2 Corinthians 10:5

For the rich young ruler, that meant giving up his estate and his vast fortune. I cannot say what it might cost you, but it does not really matter.

The rich reward of knowing Jesus Christ in all His fullness far outweighs any price we could pay. That is what Paul discovered.

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, Philippians 3:8

Our Savior would have our hearts to be like fertile soil. When God's Word falls upon a heart that is clean and uncluttered, salvation sprouts into an eternal, spiritual life.

And our relationship with Jesus does not remain weak and fragile. It grows deep roots and strong stems until we are spiritually mature.

For both plants and people, the proof of maturity is fruit. There is the spiritual fruit of a Christlike nature. And a man or woman who once was a sinner exhibits the very same attitudes and character traits people saw in Jesus when He walked the dusty roads and crowded market places of Palestine.

When we do mirror our Master's great heart, we become lighthouses, beaming out God's love to a dark world. Then lonely, troubled people are drawn to hear the same message of the cross we once heard.

And the circle is completed as once again the miracle of salvation takes root and sprouts in a life.

