

It's All About Soil – Part 2

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like... Discovering the Mysteries of Kingdom Life

Matthew 13:1-23

April 10, 2016

It might be a little strange to preach this sermon today, especially with snow the last two Saturdays. Maybe in Ohio, I should have called this sermon, “It’s All About Snow”, not “Soil.”

Last week, we began our series on what the kingdom of heaven is like. During our series, we will explore the parables in Matthew 13 that all talk about the kingdom of heaven.

Last week, we began to look at one of the most famous parables Jesus ever told: the parable of the sower. Let’s look at the parable again.

READ MATTHEW 13:1-8

We learned several things last week:

First, In Palestine, the fields were in long narrow strips; and the ground between the strips was always a right of way. It was used as a common path; and therefore it was beaten as hard as a pavement by the feet of countless passers-by. That is how some of the sower’s seed fell on the path; it was right there. So any seed that fell there, and some was bound to fall there in whatever manner it was sown, there was no more chance of its penetrating into the earth than if it had fallen on an interstate highway.

The stony ground was not ground filled with stones; it was what was common in Palestine, a thin skin of earth on top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock. The earth might be only a very few inches deep before the rock was reached. On such ground the seed would certainly germinate; and it would germinate quickly, because the ground grew speedily warm with the heat of the sun. But there was no depth of earth and when it sent down its roots in search of nourishment and moisture, it would meet only the rock, and would be starved to death, and quite unable to withstand the heat of the sun.

The thorny ground was deceptive. When the sower was sowing, the ground would look clean enough. It is easy to make a garden look clean by simply turning it over; but in the ground still lay the beginnings of weeds, ready to spring to life again.

The good ground was everything the other soils were not. It was deep and clean and soft; the seed could gain an entry; it could find nourishment; it could grow unchecked; and in the good ground it brought forth an abundant harvest.

Finally, we learned that the Gospel is meant to go everywhere. The sower was not be wasteful or inefficient, casting seeds willy-nilly, here and there, without planting the seeds in just the right place.

So to, the Gospel is to go everywhere. The message of Jesus is meant for everyone. No one is not welcome in the kingdom of God, no one is not welcome in the church, despite what we think sometimes. Our attitudes and prejudices occasionally get in the way. We think this person or that person shouldn’t be here, but that was never Jesus’ intention. The Bible tells us that He ate with sinners, He touched lepers, He went to people possessed by demons. He went to where the people were.

And so should we: to comfort those in the depths of pain and suffering; to offer love and grace to those who have done so many things that they are even a

disappointment to themselves, let alone God and others; to share the message of salvation to everyone... even those who think they don't need it.

Now, let's continue to study the parable. Jesus tells the disciples the interpretation of the parable of the sower.

READ MATTHEW 13:18-23

When the disciples asked Jesus to explain the parable, Jesus showed them that there are different ways of accepting the word of God, and the fruit which it produces depends on the heart, or what I am calling today, the soil of the person who accepts it.

Look at verse 19:

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.¹

This is the hearer with the shut mind. There are people into whose minds the Word has no more chance of gaining entry than the seed has of settling into the ground that has been beaten hard by many feet.

There are many things which can shut a person's mind. Prejudice can make someone blind to everything they do not wish to see. The unteachable spirit can erect a barrier which cannot easily be broken down, and this unteachable spirit can result from one of two things. First, it can be the result of pride which does not know that it needs to know. And second, it can be the result of the fear of new truth and the refusal to adventure on the ways of thought.

Sometimes an immoral character and a person's way of life can shut their mind. Why? Because the truth condemns the things they love and accuses the things they do. Many are those who refuse to listen to or to recognize the truth which condemns them, for there are none so blind as those who deliberately will not see.

Then there is the hearer with the mind like the shallow ground. Verses 20-21:

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.²

There are two reasons why a person might be this.

The first is the kind of person who fails to think things out and think them through. Some people are at the mercy of every new craze. They take a thing up quickly and just as quickly drop it. They must always be in the fashion. They begin some new hobby or begin to acquire some new accomplishment with enthusiasm, but the thing becomes difficult and they abandon it, or the enthusiasm wanes and they lay it aside. Some people's lives are littered with things they began and never finished.

Likewise, a person can be like that with Christianity. When he or she hears it, they may be swept off their feet with an emotional reaction, but no one can live on an emotion. We have a mind and it is a moral obligation to have an intelligent faith. Christianity has its demands, and these demands must be faced before faith can grow. Sudden enthusiasm can always so quickly become a dying fire.

There is a second reason why people fall away. They never moved themselves from shallow soil into a place they could grow.

¹ Matthew 13:19 (NRSV)

² Matthew 13:20-21 (NRSV)

As John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, began outdoor preaching in various sites around England, he soon noticed a troubling pattern. Without intentional support and encouragement, people who had moving, even ecstatic experiences of God while he was preaching, would soon fall away from their newly awakened state. They would come to an event, find God, but never to what it took to go deeper. Therefore, to provide responsible spiritual care, Wesley would only preach in venues where spiritually awakened people could be placed in small groups or what he called "classes." His goal was not to see people have a single encounter with God, but to have them experience real, lasting life change through faith in Christ. Such transformation of heart and life happens best when people do life together with a handful of others who become a spiritual family.

My friends, I'm going to be frank with you. Not Gary, but frank. If you are not in a Sunday School or Bible Study or small group, you are not growing. You are settling for rocky soil that will never help you grow, and someday, when something happens, something very difficult happen, it will be as if the sun started beating down on your little plant, and without purposefully being in a growth group, your shallow faith will shrivel away and die. You will look back years later and remember that you used to go to church. You will rationalize to yourself, "I never got anything out of it," when in fact, you never put yourself into a place where you could grow.

Next, Jesus explains the seed among the thorns in verse 22.

*As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.*³

This is the hearer who has so many interests in life that often the most important thing, one's spiritual life, get crowded out. It is characteristic of modern life that it becomes increasingly crowded and increasingly fast. We become too busy to pray. We become so preoccupied with many things that we forget to study the word of God. We become so involved in committees and good works and charitable services that we have no time for the God from whom all love and service come. A man or woman's business can take such a grip of them that they are too tired to think of anything else. A child's sports become so demanding that it can become an idol, taking a person away from spiritual thing and focusing them on a game, just a game, that in a month will mean little if anything.

You see, it is not the things which are obviously bad which are dangerous. It is the things which are good, for the "second best is always the worst enemy of the best." It is not even that a person deliberately banishes prayer and the Bible and the Church from their life. It can be that he or she often thinks of them and intends to make time for them, but somehow in their crowded life never gets round to it. We must be careful to see that Christ is not shouldered out of the topmost niche in life.

Finally, Jesus talks about the seed in the good soil. Verse 23:

*But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*⁴

Jesus tells us about the believer who is like the good ground. He says that we receive the Word in four stages. Like the good ground, the growing believer's mind

³ Matthew 13:22 (NRSV)

⁴ Matthew 13:23 (NRSV)

hears the Word and is open to it, willing to learn, never too proud or too busy to listen. Many of us would have been saved all kinds of heartbreak, if we had simply stopped to listen to the voice of to the voice of God.

The growing believer not only hears the Word, but understands it. He or she has studied and been open to the leading of the Spirit.

Then the growing believer translates that hearing and understanding into action. The Word is not meant to sit in the mind; it must go forth through the arms and legs.

Finally, the growing believer produces the good fruit of the good seed.

The question then is “Which ‘soil’ are you?” With this many people here, all 4 types would be represented.

There are those here who have hardened their hearts. You don’t really want to be here. You have closed yourself to the message of God. You may even be mad about it.

IF THIS IS YOU, YOU CAN BE DIFFERENT. YOU CAN ALLOW GOD TO SOFTEN YOUR SOIL, YOUR HEART.

There are those here who have heard the Word and have begun to grow, but you’ve done nothing to add depth to your spiritual growth. You probably can look back in your life to a time when you were excited for the Lord, but that is not your reality today. You have grown cold to the love of God.

IF THIS IS YOU, YOU CAN BE DIFFERENT. YOU CAN FALL IN LOVE WITH GOD AGAIN AND WORK TO DEEPEN YOUR SOIL, YOUR SPIRIT.

There are those here who have heard the Word, have begun to grow, and have grown large, but you are being choked out by worldly things – things that take center stage instead of Jesus. And while you have the appearance of a crop, you are like that lone stalk of corn all by itself in a grassy or weedy area – you are not producing fruit.

Ask yourself: what spiritual fruit have I produced, in myself, in others? Who is in the kingdom because of me?

IF THIS IS YOU, YOU CAN BE DIFFERENT. YOU CAN BE THE SOIL THAT PRODUCES 30 FOLD, 60 FOLD, 100 FOLD.

APRIL 10 OSWALD CHAMBERS:

Have you made the following decision about sin—that it must be completely killed in you? It takes a long time to come to the point of making this complete and effective decision about sin. It is, however, the greatest moment in your life once you decide that sin must die in you— not simply be restrained, suppressed, or counteracted, but crucified— just as Jesus Christ died for the sin of the world. No one can bring anyone else to this decision. We may be mentally and spiritually convinced, but what we need to do is actually make the decision that Paul urged us to do in this passage.

Pull yourself up, take some time alone with God, and make this important decision, saying, “Lord, identify me with Your death until I know that sin is dead in me.” Make the moral decision that sin in you must be put to death.