

A Parable On Parables - Part 2

A middle-aged man was distraught over his wife's stubborn refusal to admit she had a hearing problem. One day he asked his family doctor for advice how to convince his wife that she has a hearing problem. The doctor promptly told him that when he got home he could confirm the hearing problem by opening the front door and from there asking his wife what's for dinner.

Then the doctor said, if she doesn't answer, move closer to the kitchen. Repeat the question again, and if she still doesn't answer, move right up to her ear and whisper in it, "What's for dinner, honey?" In this way, the doctor assured him, she'll have to admit she has the problem.

So the man raced home with joy in his heart and opened the front door. "What's for dinner, honey?" he asked. His wife made no reply, so he moved closer to the kitchen and asked again. "What's for dinner, honey?" Again, nothing was said. When he looked into the kitchen, sure enough, there she was at the kitchen counter. So, he tiptoed over to her and whispered in her ear, "What's for dinner, honey?" She turned and looked at him straight in the eye: "For the 3rd time, I said, we're having MEAT LOAF!"

We see in verse 9 Jesus saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." – this of course pertains to the hearing and understanding of spiritual matters. Those who cannot hear do not get it, and those who can hear, clearly understand.

Follow along in your Bible as I read **Mark 4:13-20**

- 13 And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"**
- 14 The sower sows the word.**
- 15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown.**
When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.
- 16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness;**
- 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time.**
Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.
- 18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word,**
- 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.**
- 20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."**

I think typically we read this parable and the explanation of the parable given by Jesus and we say to ourselves, "I'm so glad my heart is the good soil that Jesus holds up as an example of strong faith, I feel so sorry for all those poor people whose hearts are rocky, weedy or hard soil". It is very clear that the good soil are people who hear and understand the Word of God and the other soils are people who have trouble hearing the Word of God, so when we read a passage like this, I think we generally see ourselves in the best light possible, because we go to

church, we know about Jesus, and we believe, so we take heart in our belief and move on to the next passage. This is a very serious mistake. Do not assume your heart is the good soil because you believe.

If you have done even a little bit of gardening you know all dirt is not equal. There is dirt, there is good dirt, and then there is extraordinary dirt. Sometimes you are blessed with great dirt and sometimes your dirt won't even grow weeds.

I want to say at this point that we are NOT victims of fate, that our cards are dealt, and whatever is, is the way will always be. This is not what Jesus is indicating by this parable. Know that Jesus is not saying that you have a condition of heart and either you will receive the Word of God or you will not. See, we see that, as I mentioned earlier the disciples did not get it, they could not hear and understand, but later were all saved, except perhaps Judas, and the teachers of the law did not get it, but later even some of them were saved. There is a specific reason for this, this reason allows us to hear and understandwe will get to that in a little bit. But for now, know that whatever type of soil your heart is – that is not how it always has to be.

Did you notice that the twelve closest people to Jesus, the people who Jesus called, the people who were believers – the twelve disciples are so stumped by the parable that Jesus has to explain it to them in detail? The twelve disciples, at this point, cannot be good soil, for they do not understand. If the twelve disciples are not good soil, what makes you so quick to think that you are good soil? You in fact, might be a soil of lesser quality.

Let's take a quick look at this farmer. The farmer is God. He scatters the Word of God on the hearts of people. The condition of the hearts of people are represented by four types of soil: Hard soil, rocky soil, weedy soil, and good soil. The soil also determines the quality of spiritual fruit in their lives.

Now last Sunday morning, along with answering the question 'Why did Jesus use parables?', we sought to answer the question 'What is a parable?'. We defined a parable as 'something thrown alongside something else', in other words a comparison - someone has said a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Then we looked at the point of this particular parable of the seed, the soil and the sower. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that He was sowing the seed of the Kingdom, they would sow the seed of the Kingdom, and although part of that seed would never grow, some of it would. There would, one day, be a splendid harvest.

Today we're going to turn our attention to the four responses that the four different soils represent. Before we look first at the first soil, let me say that obviously this parable has commonly been interpreted and applied to the unconverted - and that is very true, as we'll see as we go through it. It shows how people will often respond to the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. But I believe that this parable can also clearly be applied to every believer in Christ, because every believer is called to bear fruit, to be productive, but of course all believers are not equal in fruit bearing. The point of the parable in general is that the condition of the soil of your heart determines your potential for growth and for producing fruit.

The Wayside Soil: The Hardened Heart (4:15).

So let's look at verse 15 first of all, the wayside soil: **"And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts."** The wayside was the pathway along by the side of the field, and men's feet walked upon it, and so the soil had been trampled and it had become hardened. Satan is pictured by the birds snatching away the word - It's very easy to interpret, isn't it? The Lord is speaking of the hard, unresponsive heart - a person who is stubborn and unbroken, who says a determined 'No!' to the words of the Lord in the Scriptures. This is an individual who is unmoved and untroubled by the message of God's word, someone who is indifferent, insensitive to the word of God at the moment he receives it and thereafter.

Now certainly, right away, you see the obvious application. This is a picture of an unconverted sinner, and of course Paul helps us in 2 Corinthians 4:4 where he says that Satan, who is **"the god of this age has blinded, (the minds of those) who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them"** so that they would be saved. So, if you're here this morning and you're someone who frequents gatherings where the word of God, the seed of the Kingdom, is sown, you need to beware - because every time you open your heart and do not allow the seed of the word of God to find root in it, you're allowing your heart to become harder and more unresponsive, consequently, to the next message you hear from God's word.

Many of us have friends or family who have hard hearts. Whenever we bring up the subject of Jesus they get angry, they mock, they turn away....and our hearts become heavy. Luke 8:12, where Luke recites this parable, Jesus applies this directly to the lost saying, **"Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved."**

So certainly it applies to the unconverted, but can it also apply to believers? Soil becomes hard when too many feet trample on it. It's not just unbelievers who recklessly open their hearts to all kinds of people and influences that will harden them. Even the apostles sometimes were affected like this - in John 2:22 they failed to remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He was to rise again. In Luke 18:34 after Jesus spoke plainly the obvious truth about His death and resurrection, Luke says, **"But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken."**

I'm asking you this morning: is your heart hard to God's word? Primarily it does refer to those that are unsaved, but it may also apply to you: what are you exposing your heart to that has made you become unreceptive to the word of the living God?

The Stony Ground: The Shallow Heart (4:16-17).

Let's move on to verses 16 and 17, the stony ground: **"These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble."** Now this stony ground indicates to us that there was a shallow skin of earth that covered a shelf of limestone rock which is very common in Galilee. This is speaking of a person who seems to go

on brightly for the Lord for a while, but then tribulation and persecution rises because of their profession, and they decide that the cost is too great - and perhaps they even abandon the whole thing. In other words, suffering exposes their shallowness.

Now a question that many ask when they look at this stony ground is: is this person saved? Is this person born again, or is this person someone with imitation faith that makes a profession but their life doesn't back it up?

Let me say first of all what is clear in this parable. As we have already seen, the person with the hardened heart, like the wayside soil, never receives the word and is certainly still lost, without Christ. And when we get to the fourth soil, the good soil where the seed grows and produces an abundant crop, that person is clearly saved--their fruit proves it. But the two middle soils are not as clear.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 8 for a moment, where Luke gives us this parable. When Luke records how the Lord Jesus explained and interpreted this parable, he indicated that the seed falling on the rocky soil represented those who, Luke 8:13, look at it, **"who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away."** I know we could snap to judgment and say: *"Well, this can't be true faith, or the person would never have fallen away."* And certainly I have known some who seemed to believe for a while, but then when things got tough, they fell away and never seemed to return to faith. Maybe their faith was not true saving faith. But if you look at how Luke records it, it doesn't say it was imitation faith, it says he believed for a while. Now in verse 12 when Satan snatches the seed from the hardened heart, Jesus says, **"lest they should believe and be saved."** Do we have any grounds to say that **'believe'** in verse 12 means something different than **'believe'** in verse 13?

Is it possible to believe for a while, and then hardships come into your life and you fall away because of those hardships? What would you answer? You would say "yes," wouldn't you? But is this person saved? I don't know. What I do know is that God intends for all saved people to bear spiritual fruit in their lives. And good fruit is a sure indication of saving faith. Do you want to be sure of your salvation? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, let His Holy Spirit produce His spiritual fruit in your life.

So is there an application to believers here? Yes, I think so. Some of us at times can have superficial acceptance of God's word. We joyfully embrace it with our emotions, and yet it doesn't affect our lives, it doesn't bear forth fruit. We drink 'Christianity-Lite', we don't want hardships, we certainly don't want persecution.

The Thorny Ground: The Worldly Heart (4:18-19).

Then verses 18 and 19: **"Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."**

Again, as in the stony ground, the seed in the thorny soil has a promising start, and then something happens, it gets choked out by the weeds. There are people who believe, or seem to believe, but then they become preoccupied with business, or with worldly worries, as Jesus says **"the deceitfulness of riches."** Essentially they lose interest in the spiritual life, their heart becomes crowded. **"The desires for other things entering in choke the word, and (he) becomes unfruitful."**

Certainly again these truths could apply to those who are not converted. But could they also apply to believers? Isn't there a real danger of us packing our lives with so many other things that it leaves us with no time in our hearts for Christ? The more complicated our lives become in this age, the more necessity there is that we make sure our priorities are right, we allow our hearts to receive the word of God and not be crowded with other things that prevent our productivity for the Master. So I'm asking us today: is your heart so crowded by other things that the word of God is choked?

G. Campbell Morgan, that great Bible expositor once said these words: *'Persecution is only Satan's second-best weapon, his first is materialism'*. Because by stealth the love of other things chokes the seed of the word of God, and we become double-minded. Oh yes, we want Christ, but our hearts are a bit like the girl to which the young man once proposed, and said: *'Darling, I want you to know that I really, really love you, more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I know I'm not rich like Johnny Brown, I don't have a yacht or a Rolls-Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart'*. She thought for a moment, and then she answered: *'I love you with all my heart too...but tell me more about Johnny Brown!'*.

That's what we're like sometimes, isn't it? We say we love the Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might, with all our strength, and we sing the hymns, we listen to the preaching - but in reality the things of this world, particularly materialism, is choking us!

This world is constantly coercing us into spending our money, our time, and our energies on those things that are not of Christ.

Lee Tian, a persecuted pastor in China says: *'Consumerism makes you think you don't have to suffer to follow Jesus. It makes you think you can have lots of things and Christ as well. In reality you end up with lots of things, and most of the time you don't even realize Christ has gone'*.

I'm asking you: have you a crowded heart by other things that are choking God's influence in your life?

The Good Ground: The Productive Heart (4:20).

Then finally, verse 20, there is the good ground: **"But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred"** - Here there is definite acceptance of the word of God, and it bears fruit. Even among the good hearers there are varying degrees of fruitfulness - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred. So even among those people there is a variety of productiveness. What determines that productiveness is simply our hearts! Do you see it? The life is most productive in the one that is most responsive to the seed, the one who receives it, the one who takes it into their minds and into their hearts and then puts it into action, the one who, as Matthew says, has an honest and a good heart that is fertile for productiveness for Christ.

Generally speaking, if I could sum up in conclusion what this parable says, it is simply this - now listen, I know this doesn't apply across the board, but generally speaking: God goes where He is wanted. Is that too simple for you? God goes where He is wanted. Is He wanted in your heart? Do you want other things better? Would you want comfort rather than persecution? Do you want to open

your heart to all the things of the world that are hardening your responsiveness to His word?

Let me finish with this story: in Vietnam a former soldier by the name of Bao (sp?) was conscripted by the Khmer Rouge in 1966 when he was only 17. He became totally de-humanised by the war. He saw his best friend shot dead, his girlfriend raped then strangled. To deal with those traumatic memories Bao chewed a jungle leaf that was prized for its narcotic qualities, and he would eventually lapse into dreams of a perfect world, and then he would again waken up into the hell of war.

One day his troop was ambushed by a South Vietnamese patrol, and after a fierce skirmish only one of the enemy survived. They got him and stood him up to be shot, and they gave him a last request. The prisoner didn't request a cigarette, as was per usual, but he asked to have a portion of a little book read to him that was sitting in his top pocket. Bao was the man who took it out and began to read the words out loud: 'And Jesus said...', but he got no further because suddenly the air was filled with what sounded like thunder, and the trees around were shredded with bullets. Bao dived for cover, and just managed to escape the destruction, because there was a helicopter gunship that came overhead. In the melee that prisoner escaped. The next day the soldier asked his troop leader, this is Bao, 'What did Jesus say?'. The troop leader looked shocked, and Bao said: 'Look, it must have been something important for that guy to want to hear it just before the moment of his death'. Now his leader was furious with him, and told him he was reporting him to the political commissar, and Bao knew that he was in serious trouble. On the march back he was struck with painful diarrhoea, and the troop waited by a tree for him, and he went a little distance to relieve himself - there was a huge explosion, and Bao returned to the trees to find his companions hanging in bits from the foliage, they were all dead.

He continued to be a soldier for four more years, and every day he wondered what Jesus said. Finally, when he reached Saigon, and his own side was victorious, he found a Bible on a dead person. He re-covered it in brown paper, and he read it all the way back to Hanoi. He said these words: 'I finally got to read what Jesus said, and I decided I wanted to die to those words to'. But he answered, 'I was spared by God even when I was in my sins, the diarrhoea was what saved me, and that was God - otherwise I would have been in bits like the rest of my troop, but God wanted to save me. He spared me to hear what Jesus had said'.

Now that's a testimony of the power of God and the power of God's Word to intrigue that young man Bao for four long years with the phrase 'Jesus said'.

Oh Lord, forgive me for hypocrisy, forgive us all when we sing these words and yet our lives declare the opposite. If there is no greater thing than knowing Christ, then I should be getting to know Him more. Yet we would rather have our things. Lord, help us, deliver us, have mercy upon us. Lord, give us grace to prepare our hearts, for out of our hearts spring the issues of our lives. Let us guard them, let us keep them good soil, tended, weeded. Let this seed of this word bear fruit, to the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.