

The Soil of the Heart

Matthew 13:1-23

INTRODUCTION

As we come to the Word of God in Matthew 13 this morning, the goal is simple: I want you to perceive the honest condition of your heart *today* before the Lord. How have you changed over time in your relationship with Him? Would you say you've grown closer to Him or further from Him? Are you still changing, being formed into the image of Christ...or has your growth been stunted?

Think with me for a second about when the greatest period of physical change in our lives happens: between the ages of birth and 18 years. This growth is accelerated *the most* in that very first year. But after year 18, physical change slows down drastically. It's convenient in many ways because we can keep the same shoes and clothes until we truly wear them out! But to sum up my point, after age 18 significant change in our appearance is finished. How we look is set in place.

Connected to this, for better or for worse, is *who we are*. Yes, it's true that who we are in our identity also settles into place as how we look in our appearance settles into place. As we get older, we can become "set in our ways." Our lifestyle, our habits, our relationships, even our personality become quite fixed, almost locked in position. By the time many of us reach 30, we have "settled down" and built roots. We essentially say, I'm done with change! We even become resistant to change.

Now there is nothing wrong at all about this approach to life, but can you see how it might negatively influence our walk with God, if we aren't careful? Traditionally, the older we get, the more stubborn we get, and the more opposed we are to deep change, change that can only come about from within the heart that ripples out into every place of our lives. I occasionally meet with people who have had recent, real encounters with Jesus in which they know they must change. Life has never been more black and white to them. Yet this excitement to change soon rubs against

their established lifestyle. The grooves of ongoing habits they've built are too hard to jump out of. It's more work than they thought to "go against the grain" with legitimate, deep-seated change. So instead, they remain the same.

And so as we begin this morning, I ask you again to consider the true state of your heart today. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "*Examine yourselves, to see if you are in the faith.*" I'm not trying to weigh you down with guilt, but if the Holy Spirit is bringing you conviction, then you should let Him do His work. None of us like to contemplatively consider the true condition of our being (often we avoid it altogether by all life's distractions). In fact, many of us go years without doing a deep-dive diagnosis of our souls. We are too afraid of what we might find.

To those burdened by the reality of your "spiritual stuckness," let me encourage you: ***With God all things are possible.*** If God could raise the dead, He can surely raise you from your deadened or stationary walk with Him and make you new again. You *can* change: the Gospel not only says it's possible but with the Spirit it's inevitable.

And to those who might already be saying you're content with where you're at spiritually, I want to challenge you: ***With God you can always go deeper.*** You are not yet where He wants you to be. He has more to do. He wants more of your heart.

No matter which of these two camps you fall into, this morning is about being honest with where you are right now. Before you can apply a treatment, you have to know your condition. My prayer is that you won't assume the best about yourself. May God give you eyes to see and a mind to know your true state.

SET UP

In order for us to consider our condition, we will use this parable of the soils in Matthew 13 to be our guide. This is one of the most well-known and important parables of the Bible. You might be asking what a parable is. The

Greek word for parable means “to throw alongside.” A parable takes one truth and applies it to another truth. It compares the visible (things of this world) to the invisible (things of the heavenly realm). Thus, parables have been labeled as “mirrors” or “windows.” Romans 1:20 carries a similar idea: *“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”* Creation itself reveals heavenly truths about the nature of God and His Kingdom. Parables do the same thing: They reveal heavenly truths about the nature of God and His Kingdom.

Thankfully, as we will see here, the Parable of the Soils has an explanation. Jesus first presents the parable in v.1-9, then he explains its meaning to His disciples in v.18-23. He doesn’t do this with all his parables! Jesus doesn’t explain the parable of the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and so on. Yet this one He does. This is very helpful because all the other parables build upon the concepts presented in this first parable. Understanding this parable is essentially the key to understanding all the other parables. Mark 4:13 records Jesus saying to the disciples about the Parable of the Sower, *“Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”*

With this in mind, let’s dive into the text. **We are going to see four different conditions of faith in the heart.** These will be presented in the parable as different soils. You will notice in v.3 it says, *“A sower went out to sow.”* Throughout the parable the sower stays the same and the seed with which he sows stays the same. ***They are the constants. But the one variable is the soil into which he sows his seed.***

For the sake of clarification up front, it’s good to know what these things each represent: the sower, the seed, and the soil. As we’ve already stated, Jesus tells us what they are in His explanation starting in v.18. Who the sower is is not explicitly given. Yet his identity can easily be inferred to be the Lord Jesus. It could also mean you or me. The sower could be anyone who is sowing the seed.

Well what is the seed? The seed in v.19 would be *“the word of the kingdom.”* When Jesus began His ministry, He said *“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* ***This seed would be the truth regarding Christ’s Kingdom and the way one gains entry into it.*** In the same parable given in Mark 4:14, it expressly says, *“The sower sows the Word.”* Luke 8:11 says it most explicitly: *“The seed is the Word of God.”* 1 Peter 1:23 says, *“You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”* This seed is the Word of God, the unchanging truth of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Seeds are an amazing creation of God and a wonderful reflection on the Word of God. If you think about it, there are many ways this comparison fits. When planted both produce life. Both also have the ability to lie dormant for decades, and still produce life at a later time. Both are powerful. As a plant grows from a seed, it moves dirt, rock, and even concrete! Similarly, the Word of God can move mountains in the hearts of people. Going further, both can multiply: From one seed, many more seeds are produced. In a similar fashion, God’s Word multiplies from our life into the lives of others, creating reproducible expansion and momentum! Lastly, both require maintenance and care. You must nourish a seed with water, sunlight, and warm weather if it is to grow. And of course the human heart needs spiritual nourishment from God’s Word, the preaching of the Word, and prayer if it is ever to grow. And in time, both will produce a harvest of rich fruit.

The last, and most important element to consider is the soil. What is the soil meant to represent? Surely this is the most veiled piece of the story. Surprisingly Jesus was content with his stories being veiled. This is why He spoke in parables. He concluded this parable in v.9 with *“He who has ears, let him hear.”* In other words, those who didn’t have ears to hear would *not* discern the meaning of this parable.

This is the nature of spiritual truth, isn’t it? You cannot understand it unless you first have come alive spiritually. It’s the same as trying to explain something to a dead person. That corpse doesn’t have the mind to even

hear what you are saying. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

Only a regenerated, spiritually alive person can understand what Jesus is getting at in this parable. Thankfully, for the sake of the disciples, Jesus showed them its meaning. And He showed them the meaning of the soil as well.

Look again at v.19. It says, *“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.”* There is the key! The seed is sown in the heart. Jesus isn’t talking ultimately about farming. He’s talking about how God’s Word settles into the heart. Is it accepted, tolerated, or rejected?

BODY

He continues with an explanation of the four soils so the disciples, and us today, can examine our hearts and see how receptive we are to His Word.

SEED ALONG THE PATH

The first of the soils is hardly soil at all in the sense we’d imagine. In v.4 it is the seed that fell along the path. This path is a road; it’s a well-traveled way. The soil here is compacted down. It would be too hard for the seed to penetrate. It acted like concrete, hard and impossible to break through. The seed would just lie there, verse 4 says, until the birds came and ate it.

Now birds are the unwelcome accompaniment to farmers, as we all know, don’t we? That’s why farmers put in their fields what is called a scarecrow, right? To scare the crows away because their mission is to consume the seed and the crop. And so, it was very typical as the sower was sowing that the birds would be waiting for him to turn his back and they would descend and take advantage of the easiest seed to pick up and that seed was on the beaten path.

Much like the path is hard, so the person represented here would have a heart that is hard. Jesus gives this explanation in v.19. This is

someone who hears but does not understand God's Word. They do not have spiritual receptivity. **In essence, they have no faith.** They honestly have no interest in the Gospel. To them the Gospel is foolish primarily because their heart is focused on other things. Such a heart is never broken up, never softened by conviction, never softened by repentance, never softened by self-searching; the heart grows callous, the terrors of the Lord aren't frightening and the love of the Lord isn't even winsome. **In summary, they have no conviction of sin.** They seek no remedy because they sense no real problem. ***The seed is good. The sower's good, but the problem is the heart - It's unplowed and impenetrable.***

This reminds me of the people to whom Jesus came. And He threw the seed all over Palestine, didn't He? And He invited them to come into His kingdom and they were so hard that they executed Him! Speaking of these people in [Isaiah 65:2](#) it says, *"I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices."*

And Satan, like a bird, finally comes and snatches away the seed. It doesn't just stay there. It's taken away by Satan. Satan wants to make sure it never has a chance to penetrate. He snatches it away through the influence of false teachers. He snatches it away through the fear of man. He snatches it away through pride. He snatches it away through doubt. He snatches it away through bitterness. He snatches it away through stubbornness. He snatches it away through procrastination. He snatches it away mostly through the love of sin. But whatever the reason for the sinner, Satan snatches it away. That's a sad situation. This certainly describes an unbeliever. And you have to look at your own heart this morning.

Are you that hard dry road at the end of the field? Maybe you even come occasionally here and you hear the Word as seed thrown upon your heart, but it bounces and disappears. Has your life been hardened by sins that you've constantly given your heart to so that the powerful, productive seed of God's Word never can penetrate? That's sad, but it's real. I deal with people like that occasionally. So do you. You can be so exuberant about

the gospel and excited about what Christ has done in your life! You think the next guy you meet is going to love the message, too. You give it to him and you find you're running into a brick wall. Been there? Don't question the seed, don't even question the sower, the issue is the soil. The issue is the heart. The heart is hard. It cannot receive God's Word.

SEED IN ROCKY GROUND

But moving to the next type of heart, we come to v.5 of Matthew 13. **This soil represents shallow faith.** Here it says, *“Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.”*

You see, what happens is the seed goes down into the soil, it decomposes and that releases its life and in the warmth of the soil and with the moisture that is there, it begins to generate. It sends its roots down, it sends its stump up or its branches up, but all of a sudden, the roots hit rock and can't go anywhere. This then forces the plant upward only and it springs up at a more rapid rate than normal, making the farmer assume maybe this is the greatest crop he'd ever had! However, this is happening because the roots desperately need the water that is down beneath, but they can't penetrate the rock to get it. Then when the sun rises high in the sky, the moisture that was initially in the plant evaporates in the heat. The roots tried to get more moisture, but there wasn't any way to go down to get it. So the plant burns and dies and is unproductive.

Jesus describes this person's heart in v.20-21. It refers to the person who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary. And when affliction or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he falls away. This picture is so clear. ***Here's the person who has shallow faith.*** On the surface, “Whoa, this is great, I'm in, count me in, where do I sign? I like this, this is wonderful.” Joy seems to burst out of them! Let me pause and say that joy is not the distinguishing factor of true salvation; people get happy about a lot of stuff.

Joy *is* a reality to a true Christian, but just exuberant, emotional excitement or enthusiasm doesn't necessarily indicate true faith. Newly stirred up affection brought on by coming out of a problem and into the hope of Christianity isn't the purest sign of legitimate faith. Same with someone looking for community, someone trying on the religion of Christianity for a short stint, or someone reaching up to the next immediate "fix" for their life. And when they're told Christianity is the answer, there's an exuberance! It looks good! And we might even say, "Wow, look at that joy, that person's real."

But you can have joy without commitment to the King: the roots are real short. It's not necessarily the deep, thoughtful, profound joy of a devoted heart; it's just a superficial, short-sighted, temporary fling with Jesus.

Remember the people in the parable of Matthew 22? Jesus talked about having a wedding feast for the king's son. Into the wedding feast come all these people and some guy crashes the party without the proper garment. He didn't wear the wedding garment. And Jesus said, "We pitched him out."
The garment represented righteousness, and there are lots of people who want the party without the righteousness.

But the issue here is more than pursuing righteousness. ***It's the persecution and tribulation that arises on account of pursuing righteousness.*** This sudden trouble is symbolized in the sun that scorches the plant and causes it to wither, or in the case of the person, to fall away from the faith.

They never counted the cost. They never realized that to be a Christian could cost you something. To be a Christian could cost you a relationship. It could cause your own family to turn against you. It could cause some friends to turn against you. It could be a real price to pay. There will be a real price to pay. It's the most joyous life there is but it is a cross bearing lifestyle. And when there was some pressure put on the individual, they

couldn't handle it. There was just no real root there to sustain them in the storms of life.

But you see, trouble and persecution are very helpful. They do two things.

One, they strengthen believers and they manifest non-believers.

Trouble and persecution will show you who's real and it will strengthen God's own. After you've suffered a while, Peter said in 1 Peter 5:10, "***The God of all grace will Himself confirm, strengthen, and establish you.***" So we are going to have those kinds of people. And if that happens to be you this morning, I challenge you to consider the real reason you are here. Take a hard look at your heart and define your motivation. ***Are you willing to follow Christ not just to the mountain top but also into the valley?***

The important matter here is whether you have a root. A root proves your faith is more than merely shallow faith. To grow your root, you need to clear out the rocks in your heart. ***The rocks here are likely theological roadblocks that prevent the expansion of faith.*** Working through these will help you better withstand the heat of tribulation. One rock could be a failure to believe that God is good all the time. Another rock could be a belief in the prosperity Gospel: "Things should only get better for me after becoming a Christian." Or still another rock could be a lack of God's promises amid pain stored up in your heart. ***Purifying your soil from all rocks is the work of getting to know your God for who He truly is in the Scriptures.*** What will result is a personal walk with Jesus as your friend. Proverbs 17:17 says, "***A brother is born for adversity, but a friend loves at all times.***" Jesus is that friend that stays close through any adversity. When you know Him as this, it will be a healing balm for your rocky heart.

SEED AMONG THORNS

The third type of heart is represented by the seed that fell among thorns.

This person has a distracted faith. This person Jesus says in v.22 is, "***The one who hears the Word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word.***" Who's that? Well that's the man who hears the Word, with a receptive attitude, but the worries of the world

choke the Word from becoming fruitful. Such a person is distracted and allured by all the world has to offer. They are deceived into thinking there's greater value found in a novel career, obtaining a lot of money, being catered to by all life's comforts, and so on.

Or as Kent Hughes illustrates the point:

This is the divided heart – like the heart of the girl to which a young man once proposed. He said, “Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I’m not rich. I don’t have a yacht or Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.” She thought for a minute and then replied, “I love you with all my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown.”

There are many people whose hearts, like this girl, are caught in the thorns of life, especially here in America. Why be a Christian when you can pursue and obtain your own heaven on earth now? Why be poor in Spirit when you're treated like a King in the office? Why be involved in the church at all when you have so many weekend activities to pursue? Why choose a road of likely loss when you can gain so much right now? **Such a person has never committed to Christ alone.**

Most of us have moments in our lives, even as Christians, when the allurements of the world prevent God's Word from being fruitful in our lives. During the season of Lent we are in right now is a great time for us to repent of unedifying tendencies and return to God with all our heart. But there are others who aren't Christians who are consistently overcome by the world's toys and trinkets.

I'm sure we can all think of someone who says they made a profession of faith yet the cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches drew them away from any active pursuit of Christ. The soil of their heart appears good at first, but there's other stuff in there that's never really been cleaned out.

They've never truly repented from harmful, worldly practices. This is the double-minded man who's not going to receive anything from God, James said. He's trying to serve God and money, the deceitfulness of riches.

Maybe this describes you this morning. Maybe you're that person who's come to Christ, but you're really into your lifestyle. You've got it just the way you want it and you've got the path in which you can make the things you want to make. The world is important to you; you want to gain the things the world has to offer. This morning you have to force yourself to reckon with what James said in chapter 4:4, that *"if you're the friend of the world, you're the enemy of God."* And if you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.

This doesn't mean that we should be totally isolated from the society around us, it's more the question of what we are – what we long for. What's our true identity? It's a question of what our passion is, what our priority is. I mean, I want to drive a car that runs. I don't need to have a hole in my shirt or my shoe. I like to sit in a comfortable chair if I have an option. And I think God has given us all things richly to enjoy. But it's one thing to understand those things as gifts from God and embrace them as evidence of His blessing; it's something else to pursue them as the god of your life. Their hearts are distracted. They've never committed to Jesus alone.

SEED IN GOOD SOIL

But the last condition of soil is the hopeful part of all of this. **This is the seed that fell in good soil, which represents fruitful faith.** V.8 says, *"Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."* Jesus provides the spiritual meaning of this in v.23: *"As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the Word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."* This is the fruitful hearer who understands the Word, accepts the Word, and finally obeys the Word. ***There's genuine repentance: There's a genuine plowing of the Spirit of God in his heart – plowing out the rocks that prevent faith and plowing out those overwhelming thorns that distract faith.*** As a result

he produces a harvest of fruit. And this isn't an ordinary harvest. It's an unusually productive harvest – 30, 60, and even 100 times the usual yield! It seems hyperbolic, but it shows the dividend of devoted faith; your life spiritually can be that much more fruitful, that much more of a blessing than the average person without God's seed activated in His life.

Now not every Christian produces the same amount of fruit. There were different conditions in the soil that caused different levels of fruitfulness in the crop. And the same thing is true of our spiritual lives. We all bear some fruit. Some bear just some fruit, some bear more fruit, some bear much fruit, but we all bear fruit. That's the distinguishing mark of believers.

What is fruit? Fruit is the evidence of faith. Fruit is the outward evidence of what God has done in you. Paul gives us the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: *“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* This fruit is attitudinal fruit, but there is also action fruit. These are the things God does to bless the world and others through the good faith of your heart. And it differs from person to person by the fact that there's a different level of devotion and in some cases perhaps different capacity by God's design. But all the same, there's fruit.

This final soil of the heart is the only one that produced fruit. The case can be made quite easily that this person with this kind of faith is the only authentic believer. Jesus said in just the previous chapter, 12:33, and also earlier in chapter 7:16 that *“You will recognize them by their fruits.”* “Them” in this verse must be authentic believers! Anyone that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!

What's the difference here between the good soil and the other three soils? **We can say that this person is convicted by sin, has counted the cost, and has committed to Jesus alone. But boiling it down any further, this person is simply obedient.** When they hear the Word of God, they understand, which produces conviction. True conviction leads to godly repentance, which results in obedience. When this person hears the Word of God, they understand, which produces endurance by way of God's

promises to press on amidst pain. They count the cost and continue, which is the very definition of obedience. And lastly, when they hear the Word of God, they understand, which produces undistracted devotion. They understand they can't serve God and something else. So they commit to God alone above all else: This is obedience.

I'm hoping you can see how all this fits together: ***The good soil that produces good fruit is the person who hears, understands, and obeys.***

CONCLUSION

Now let me draw this to its conclusion. Friend, there's no discussion here of the sower, anybody will do. There's no discussion here of the seed—the seed is the Word of God, the gospel: it alone will do. ***The only variable here, really the only issue here, is the soil.*** So I invite you again to consider the condition of your heart. Are you like the soil of the path that's never convicted of sin? Are you hard-hearted, calloused and numb, with a heart that won't allow the seed of God's Word to penetrate. Or are you like the rocky ground, having a shallow faith that falls away when trials come? Or lastly are you like the thorny soil that's caught up in the cares of the world, making little room for King Jesus to have His way? Even for the true believer in the room, that does produce fruit, yet maybe hasn't produced much during this season, which of these soils would characterize your heart this morning?

I want to close with simple Gospel encouragement: No matter the condition of your heart, Jesus invites you just the way you are to simply come to His cross and receive His full forgiveness. All He asks is that you repent for your wrongdoing. This means you choose to turn away from your wrongdoing. It's through your decision to repent that God's restorative healing comes into your life. Acts 3:19 is your confirmation. It says, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

At the cross, anyone can be changed. To step into this change, we come this morning to the communion table.

COMMUNION

CLOSING PRAYER

BENEDICTION

John 15:4-5 – *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”*