

The Sower and the Soils

By Brad Allison on 2/29/2004

Scripture Reference *Matthew 13:1-23*

We're beginning today a series on the parables of Jesus, and we're planning on covering ten of the approximately thirty parables Jesus told. Much of Jesus' teaching and preaching was done in the form of these stories called parables. Everyone loves a good story, and Jesus wasn't reluctant to use them. As a matter of fact, if judged by the volume of story material in the gospels, stories were his primary method of teaching. Jesus tells us the reason he told so many stories. When asked by the disciples, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Jesus answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Matt. 13:11). In other words, a story will bring greater confusion to some and greater understanding to others. In the hearts of those in whose lives God is working, a good story will pave the way for greater understanding. Stories come in the back door of our lives instead of the front door. In a way, a good story is something like God in that it is gentle, non-coercive, yet very powerful. That's one of the reasons we need to tell our stories to one another. God is a storyteller. The Bible itself is written as a story, not a set of propositions.

Today's story is one that would have been easily understood by Jesus' original hearers. It's about a man who goes out to sow grain in his field. He carries his seed in a bag, or perhaps just in a fold of his garment, and spreads it by throwing it out by hand. As he does so, some of the seed will inevitably drop to the ground at his feet, hard ground that has been walked on often. Birds don't take long to see what's going on, and they come and eat this seed. Other seed gets sown in shallow soil—what our text calls "rocky ground." This wasn't soil with lots of small rocks in it, but rather soil that thinly covered giant rock formations. The stored heat in the rock would actually cause the seed to germinate more quickly here, and it would be the first to begin growing. But since the soil was shallow, it would also be more susceptible to draught, with the result that these would also be the first plants to die. Other seed would fall into good soil, but there would also be weeds in it. The vigorous weeds would crowd out the good seed and choke the life out of it. Finally, much of the seed would be sown in good soil and bear much fruit.

So what is this story all about? It's not hard to answer that question, because this is one of the few parables Jesus himself interprets. It's about how the kingdom of God comes to each one of us. In other words, it describes how we change in order to be fit subjects for the kingdom of God. We change as the word of God comes to our hearts like a seed, and then in time does its powerful work of producing much fruit. Jesus' word is powerful, though it may at first seem to be as ineffective as a little seed. But in time, as it works, great results stem from it.

So this is a story about the word of God at work in our hearts. But in order to talk about that, Jesus spends most of the parable talking about the obstacles to the word of God working powerfully in our lives. Why is it that we are often like the pilot of a crashed Avianca Airlines plane? At our Men's Fraternity, we heard about a 1974 accident in that airline in which the Spanish pilot was flying too low in foggy conditions. The onboard computer spotted an approaching mountain and repeatedly warned the pilot in its computer-generated voice, "Pull up, now." The pilot, who didn't speak English, finally got tired of hearing it and angrily responded, "Shut up, Gringo," as he reached over to turn off the voice. Two minutes later, the plane crashed into the side of a mountain and killed all onboard. Like that computer-generated warning, we often hear the voice of God as an unwanted intrusion into our lives, with the result that we don't listen.

How is that we can receive the word of God to the point that we are changed by it, so that the kingdom of God comes to our lives? Jesus answers that question by listing three obstacles to his word in our lives. The hard soil shows that a lack of understanding is the first obstacle. The shallow soil demonstrates the obstacle of failing to submit to the word, and the soil with weeds demonstrates the obstacle of failing to apply the word. Let's look now at these three.

I. The Hard Soil

Jesus explains that the hard soil is the person who "hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it" (v. 19). Just as the birds quickly consume such seed, so Satan steals it before it can take root and grow. So the first obstacle to hearing Jesus speak to us in his word so that our lives are changed is simply the failure to understand it. I can think of two reasons for such a failure: bad teachers and bad students. If a student is not learning a particular subject in school, it is usually due to one of these two causes. So, both good teachers and good students are needed if we are to understand God's word. The Bible is not intended to be some book of magic spells that work some good in us simply by reading their words. It must be internalized, and the first step of that is to understand it.

What is it you need to do if you are to be a good student of God's word? One of the most common reasons we fail to understand the word is indicated in the parable itself. What makes the soil hard is the fact that it is the path the man has walked on repeatedly. Ironically, one of the reasons we fail to understand God's word is that we become so familiar with it that we suspend our minds when reading it. We are too quick to think, "I know how this passage ends," and then we stop thinking about it. One of the things that helps in Bible study is to try to read it as if you are reading it for the first time.

There are other things I have found helpful as I try to understand God's word. For example, just slow down a little and notice the details. It is helpful at times to think about each word of a particular text and ask yourself, "What does this word contribute to the whole?" Also, I find it helpful to review the context of each passage. Third, I will often study with pen and paper in hand and write down both observations and questions about the text. In short, don't check your mind at the door when reading God's word. While it's possible to over-intellectualize God's word and focus only on the understanding, it is impossible for the word of God to change us without understanding it.

II. The Rocky Soil

As I indicated earlier, the rocky soil is the thin layer of soil covering large rock formations. In other words, it is shallow soil. Jesus says this is the person in whose life the word does begin to take root. He's not like the one who fails to understand it. He immediately receives it with joy and seems to be growing rapidly. But then something happens that exposes the shallowness of his roots. A major trial comes and the shallowness is exposed as he immediately falls away.

What is Jesus talking about with this soil? One hint is in the phrase where it says he "immediately receives it with joy" (v. 20). If God's word penetrates deeply into our lives, does it come only with joy? Both experience and the Scriptures teach that it comes with both joy and sorrow. When the word penetrates our hearts, it brings a sorrowful conviction of sin, where we see those areas in which we have misspent our lives. Such conviction brings both sorrow and joy.

Let me say this a little differently. It is possible to receive the word only as a set of principles that will help your life work better. If you conform your life to the Bible's teachings about money, your hope is that then you will prosper. If you conform your marriage to God's word, you do so in order to have a happy marriage. Is there anything wrong with that? Absolutely, because who's at the center of that? You are, and not God. The purpose of God's word isn't just to give you a better way to achieve your own agenda. Rather, it's to change your agenda. Such a self-serving approach to God's word is exposed in our response to trials, because the presence of such trials leads us to conclude that this is not working for me.

C. S. Lewis has a well-known and helpful illustration about this in his book *Mere Christianity*. Using the analogy of a house, he says inviting Jesus into our lives is like inviting a contractor into your old house. You think that he will help you by painting a few walls and cleaning up some nasty things that you have long recognized as needing attention. But then he starts removing walls and making changes far bigger than you had anticipated. It soon becomes evident that he has in mind a much grander vision for your house than you had imagined. That's the case with Jesus. We often want him to come in with the modest goal of making the existing purposes of our lives work better. He comes in with a different idea, wanting to change our purposes to his grand purpose. Unless we are ready to submit to him in this, we are going to bolt when he gets out his sledgehammer instead of the paintbrush we expected. In other words, if we are going to receive Jesus' word and let it bear fruit in us, we are going to have to submit to him fully. That's what the shallow seed teaches us.

III. The Weedy Soil

The seed sown in weedy soil gets choked out by the more vigorous weeds growing there. Jesus says this soil refers to the person who hears the word, "but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (v. 22). What is this talking about? It's talking about our failure to apply the word because of competing demands in our lives. Here's how that often works. We read the word or hear a sermon and determine that a certain change is needed in our lives. We are convicted by our need to make this change and determine to do so. But then the urgencies of life press in upon us and we end up putting this on the back burner of life and never getting around to it.

This has such relevance to our worlds. Listen to the way Randy Frazee begins his book, *Making Room for Life*.

Consider the average day of a typical middle-class family in America. The family rises at 6:00 a.m. Everyone fends for himself or herself for breakfast. Dad heads out at 6:45 to beat the 7:00 traffic. His normal commute without excessive traffic is forty-five minutes. Mom and the two children are out the door by 7:15 (usually someone is a little cranky). Mom drops her elementary-age sons off at school by 7:40. Twenty minutes later she arrives at her workplace.

At 3:30 p.m. the children are done with school and enter an after-school program. Mom skips lunch so she can rush out of the office to pick the kids up by 5:00. She arrives home at 5:30. Fifteen minutes later one son has baseball practice. She gets both kids in the car and rushes to make it to the practice field on time. The other son has a game at 8:00. She calls her husband on the cell phone while taking her son to baseball practice to make sure he can grab the second child at the field and get him to his game by 7:30.

Dad leaves the office at 6:00 p.m., unsuccessful in his efforts to make it through his to-do list. Traffic is now an issue. The forty-five minute commute stretches now into an hour and fifteen minutes. He arrives at the practice field at 7:15 with all the signs of road stress. He kisses his wife, waves to his son in center field, whooshes the second son into his SUV (a mere \$700 a month), and heads to the game field about fifteen minutes away. Son #1 finishes practice at 7:30, and he and Mom head for home. On the way they stop at Taco Bell for dinner.

They arrive home at 8:00. The boy turns to the video games while Mom checks the e-mail.

Meantime, the baseball game gets started a little late and doesn't end until 9:45 p.m. Dad is still in his business casual clothes, but he does appreciate the forced break to watch his son play ball. On their way home they make a quick stop at the McDonald's drive-in window. They arrive home at 10:30. Once in the house, son #2 reveals that he hasn't finished studying for the history test he's supposed to take tomorrow.

After forty-five minutes of shoving facts into her son's short-term memory while he inhales a McDonald's "happy" Meal, Mom sends him to bed. It is now 11:15 p.m. Time for bed. Mom and Dad flop into bed dead tired. They watch a little television; exchange a few words—mostly action items for the next day—and then lights go out. Mom falls asleep as soon as the lights are out. Dad, on the other hand, doesn't. He lies there thinking about all the things that must be done. He knows he needs to sleep, so he gets up and swallows a sleeping pill. It seems to be the only way he can get a good night's sleep lately. It bothers him a little, but he doesn't see any alternative. Tomorrow promises more of the same (pp. 15-16).

Jesus is saying that such a life is toxic to spiritual vitality. It has the effect of choking out his word. Are you familiar with this experience of failing to apply God's word because of the crowded nature of your life? You know God is calling you to change, but you just don't do so. Has it ever been your experience, as it has been mine, that you hear God's word, agree with it, but then reveal that you really don't understand it because you don't apply it? Let me give you an example.

Illustration: I remember reading a sermon years ago that was preached by a man named Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers of the early church. His name means "golden-mouthed" and he pastored in the city of Antioch in Syria. He later became the archbishop of Constantinople. In the sermon I read, he was addressing what he considered to be a huge problem in the worship services of the church where he served as pastor. The problem was the practice the congregation had of breaking out in applause during his sermons because of the brilliance of Chrysostom's oratorical abilities. So eloquent was he in making his point against this practice that the congregation was moved to break out in applause. That seemed to stir Chrysostom even more, so that he continued with even greater passion and eloquence to rebuke such applause, with the result that the congregation applauded even louder. This cycle was repeated a couple more times until Chrysostom finally just gave up. The congregation was quick to agree with his words, but slow to apply them.

CONCLUSION:

The kingdom of God has come, and God wants to bring it to each of our hearts. His plan for doing so is for his word to work powerfully in our lives and to bring forth fruit. If that's going to happen, we need to understand it, submit to it and apply it. When we do so, it becomes living and powerful in our lives.

Illustration: A small factory had to cease operations when a vital piece of machinery broke down. The firm's own mechanics couldn't repair it, so an outside expert was called in. He looked the situation over for a couple of minutes and then took a hammer and tapped the machine in a certain spot and it started running beautifully. When he submitted a bill for \$100 the plant owner figuratively hit the ceiling and demanded an itemized bill, which subsequently was forthcoming as follows: \$1.00 for hitting machine; \$99.00 for knowing where to hit. God uses His word to "hit" us where we need fixing. (Hebrews 4:12)

God's word is living and powerful, and I want to invite you to let it work in your life. I want to do so with two applications. First, ask God for the help to repent of any of the bad soil that may be in your life: not understanding, not submitting or not applying his word. Second, listen for the voice of Jesus as he speaks to you through his word. Let him speak to you there.