



Four Soils-Four Hearts

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Matthew 13:1-23

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I used to drive our daughter, Emily, and her friends to preschool each morning. I couldn't get them to sit still, so I began to tell stories. Whenever I told them a story, they became really quiet. It got so that whenever they climbed into the car, they would ask, "Mr. James, tell us a story." My stories were hardly original. I shamelessly borrowed fairy tale characters from children's stories—Lilliputians, trolls, hobbits and all manner of talking animals.

Children aren't the only ones who love stories. Older people do also. Sit with older members of your family for any length of time and before long, they will launch into stories about their lives.

My father, now deceased, lived well into his nineties. He became something of a storyteller in his later years. He told stories about his childhood, his years with the Marine Corps in World War II, meeting Mom, raising us three kids, and growing his own business. Dad assembled a repertoire of 25 stories he recited on a regular basis. "Son, have I ever told you what it was like to grow up in the Depression?" "Yes, Dad, hundreds of times!"

Jesus was a master storyteller. Most of the people to whom Jesus spoke could not read or write. A primary means of teaching in those days was telling stories. Jesus perfected the art of telling short stories called "parables" to teach deep, spiritual truths.

Matthew arranges his gospel as a series of five major discourses or extended teaching sessions. His first discourse is the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7, the second is his missionary discourse in chapter 10, and his

third is a series of eight parables in chapter 13, one of which comprises today's reading.

Jesus begins his parabolic discourse with the words, "A farmer went out to sow seed" (Matthew 13:3). His listeners can picture a farmer sowing seed since it was a common sight in this agrarian society. Given that Jesus tells this parable out in the open air, perhaps he gestures in the direction of a nearby farmer sowing seed.

This farmer is not planting seeds in carefully cultivated rows. We call his method of planting "broadcast sowing." He sows seed in every direction.

Some seed falls on the path, worn hard by foot traffic. Since the seed cannot penetrate the tightly compacted soil, it is eaten by the birds.

Some seed falls on rocky ground. Since the seed cannot put down roots in rocky terrain, its tender shoots wither in the noonday sun.

Some seed falls among thorns. The tiny seed is no match for established weeds and thistles. Much like the seed in rocky soil, it fails to reach maturity and produce fruit.

Yet some seed falls on good soil. The result is a bumper crop: thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold. Jesus closes his parable with the poignant words, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (Matthew 13:9).

Later, Jesus' disciples ask why he talks so frequently in parables. His response in verse 13 is vintage Jesus, "This is why I speak to them in parables, though seeing, they do not

see; though hearing, they do not hear.” Then, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, “You will be hearing but never understanding; you will ever be seeing but never perceiving” (Matthew 13:13-14).

It sounds as though Jesus is being purposely vague about communicating his parables to outsiders. Isn't Jesus' mission to make God's Word plain? Why does he resort to parables that people do not understand?

There is more to this parable than meets the eye. The religious leaders have already written Jesus off. They have closed their ears and eyes to what he tells them.

The operative word in verses 13 through 17 is *hear*. I count nine references to “hear” in a span of four verses. People have ears but do not hear, and eyes, but do not see. Jesus' teaching goes in one ear and out the other. Jesus speaks in parables because he is not going to waste his breath on people who refuse his teaching.

Jesus' parables function much like a riddle. Riddles tease the mind into active thought. Typically, if you want to understand a riddle, you will. If you don't, you won't. If you want to understand Jesus' parables, you will. If you don't, you won't.

Jesus leaves most of his parables untranslated, yet this one he explains fully. The seed is God's Word, the farmer is God, and we are the soil.

First, *the seed is God's Word*. The Word of God equates to the Old Testament, coupled with Jesus' commentary, what we call the New Testament. We call Scripture “God's

Word” because it communicates what God wants us to know and do.

Second, *the farmer is God*. The seed is God’s Word and the farmer is God. Our farmer God is not circumspect in his method of seed-sowing. He doesn’t sow seeds only in fertile soil. He throws seeds of faith everywhere.

God only knows what seeds of faith planted today will yield tomorrow. My Sunday school teacher, Miss Buckholtz, could never have imagined that the seed she was planting in my resistant heart would one day take root and grow. Some of the people who planted seeds of faith in your life might have wondered the same.

Third, *we are the soil*. The seed is God’s Word, the farmer is God and we are the soil. Jesus likens our hearts to the soils enumerated in this parable. These four soils represent four kinds of hearts: hard hearts, shallow hearts, crowded hearts, or receptive hearts. Jesus’ implied question hangs in the air. What kind of heart have you?

We come to the *so-what* moment in this sermon. Let me illustrate today’s sermon application by applying this parable to my own life. I wish I could say that my heart is always responsive. Sometimes, my heart is hard. Sometimes, my heart is shallow and crowded. Sometimes, my heart is receptive. I vacillate between these four types of hearts. Don’t you?

Some days, my heart is hard. I am troubled by prayers that seem to lie on the floor, unanswered. I pray for people who do not improve. I beg God to change my circumstances, to no avail. There are times when I tire of

doing the right thing, especially when it is not reciprocated by other people. There are days when I do not feel like praying or reading the Bible.

Perhaps it's disconcerting for you to hear a pastor talk this way, especially one who has been at it for 40+ years. Yet how could it be otherwise? Even preachers get the blues and close our hearts to God.

Hard-heartedness is a universal human problem. God's Word cannot penetrate our calloused, cynical hearts. Sometimes, our hearts are as hard as I-66. Mark relays in his gospel that Jesus' disciples did not understand his miracle of feeding the 5000 because "their hearts are hard" (Mark 6:52). Hard heartedness can be a malady of unbelievers and believers alike. Our hearts can become hard to the things of God.

Some days, my heart is shallow. There are impediments that lie just below the surface that choke my growth in faith. The author of Hebrews directs us to throw off "everything that hinders and the sin that so easily besets us" (Hebrews 12:1). *Besetting* is an old-fashioned word meaning persistent or principal. Each of us struggles with besetting, chief sins, based on our personality and temperament. We are all tempted to sin, each in our own way. Your sin may not be my sin, but its deleterious effect is the same.

We sometimes convey the misimpression in the church that following Jesus is an easier way to live. Let me set the record straight. Following Jesus is hard. Things bother me now that didn't concern me before I was a believer. If we are serious about inviting Jesus into our lives, he's going to mess with things that aren't right.

I have met countless people through the years who come to church with the expectation that God will make their lives easier. At the first whiff of trouble, they become disenchanted and drop out. I said in a sermon recently that following Jesus isn't easier, but it is better. Way better.

Some days, my heart is crowded. So many concerns and worries compete for my attention: What about my future? My investments? The welfare of my children and grandchildren? My health? My mortality? God's Word hardly stands a chance, given the condition of my crowded heart.

A crowded heart is a particular malady in a place like Northern Virginia. Listen to the way we talk with each other. We drone on about how busy we are, as though busyness adds importance to our lives. Most of our busyness is self-imposed. We fill our lives with every sort of amusement and diversion. Don't play the card that you don't have time for God. We always have time for things that are important to us.

Some days, I am happy to report my heart is open and receptive. God's Word takes root and grows. The key to opening my life to God is arranging my life in ways that are receptive to God's Word.

Jesus' invitation today is to open your heart to God. Let God's Word fall in.

How do I do that? I pray every day, whether or not I feel like it. I read the Bible and ponder its meaning for my life. I spend time with Jesus' followers. I seek out people trying to live a Christian life, just as I am trying to do. I make

worship a priority. I practice generosity with my money and time.

COVID-19 requires us to become intentional about incorporating spiritual practices into our lives. Our emotional and physical health is at stake. Mental health experts tell us this pandemic threatens our emotional well-being. Fear of getting the virus, losing income, and the lingering effects of cabin fever weigh heavily on us. This is no time to coast and let faith slide. It's time to open our hearts to Jesus.

The words of Psalm 95 come to mind, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:7-8). The key word in this parable is *hear*. Jesus said, "Whoever who has ears to hear, let them hear."