

Parable of the Soils

Luke 8:1-21

A few years ago we started gardening. It started with just a couple of raised beds, and it has grown a little bit each year. One thing that's become very apparent over the last few years is that fruit doesn't just happen. It takes good dirt. Good soil. And good soil takes a lot of preparation, and a lot of work. We had to prepare our soil months before the seeds went into the ground.

We had to kill off what was already growing there. In our case, it was mostly weeds. We had to remove all sorts of debris from the soil. There were rocks and fibrous roots from long-dead trees and bushes. We had to breakup and till the soil. We had to add nutrients to the soil. I found that our plot for corn planting was short in nitrogen, and I was looking for a natural way to amend the soil.

I found the following helpful information on Gardenweb, "human urine is an excellent source of organic nitrogen...or as a free nitrogen activator for composting." That's where some of my empty diet Mountain Dew bottles came in to play. Teresa and the girls were thoroughly disgusted when I admitted to this particular gardening technique at the dinner table one night.

When we moved, the soil changed. Even though we were only three hours up I-44, the soil here is different. Things that we grew really well in Oklahoma, have struggled in our garden here, because the makeup of the soil is different.

Once the seeds are planted, the cultivation of the soil doesn't stop. You have to weed. You have to water. You have to mulch. You have to make further amendments. You do all of this because of one simple principle: the better your soil, the better your fruit, and Jesus' point with our parable this morning is this- As it is with the soil of your garden, so it is with the soil of your heart. The better the soil of your heart, the better the fruit of your life. In the parable of the soils, Jesus calls us to a life of fruitfulness. Specifically, he calls us to cultivate the soil of our hearts, so that our lives will bear fruit. He wants our hearts prepared to receive the truth of His Word in such a way that it bears fruit in our lives.

This is popularly known as the parable of the sower, although, as we dig into this text, we find that it really is the parable of the soils. It's a story about the quality of dirt. What is the difference between fruitful soil and bad soil? What dirt is good for growing stuff and what dirt isn't?

So, put on your gardening gloves, and let's dig into this passage.

⁴ While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ⁵ "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. ⁶ Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

⁹His disciples asked him what this parable meant. ¹⁰He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, "though seeing, they may not see;

though hearing, they may not understand.^[a]

¹¹"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. ¹²Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. ¹⁴The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. ¹⁵But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

The Sower and the Seed

The focus of this passage is on the soil, but we should take note of a couple things about the sower and the seed. Jesus never identifies the sower, even in his explanation. He's mentioned in the first verse of the story, and then he isn't brought up again. However, Jesus clearly tells us what the sower is sowing. The seed is the word of God, what Jesus in vs. 10 calls, "*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God.*" This is a knowledge that comes to us only from the revealed word of God.

The sower could be Jesus as he travels preaching and teaching. It could be the disciples as Jesus sends them out. It could be preachers and teachers today as they share the good news of Jesus. It could be your mom or dad, or your grandmother. It could be your friend. Whoever shared the good news of Jesus with you is the sower in your life. It could be you as you share a cup of coffee and the gospel with a friend, or as you talk shop and truth with a coworker. Anyone who plants the seed is the sower.

The sower might not be the focus of this story, but he is essential. Without the sower the seed never gets to the soil. Someone has to share the good news to get it into someone's heart. I'm thankful for all the sowers out there. Every word of truth you speak is seed sown. Everyone one of you who shares your faith is a sower. If you don't share it, no seed is sown.

The seed can be sown in all sorts of ways. Certainly, it is spread through preachers and Bible teachers and small group leaders, but it is also in the words you sow while you work out at the gym, or in the hallways between classes at school. You can plant seeds at the office, over a piece of pizza at Smokey J's, in the fishing boat, or walking through the woods on the way to your tree stand.

There is a popular saying, "Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." It's clever. It makes a point. It is absolutely false. You cannot preach the gospel without words. It is not a choice between speaking it or living it. It takes both our words and actions to share the good news of Jesus. If you never use words to connect your acts of love to the truth of Jesus, then you're nothing but a nice guy, a

generous girl. Too many Christians use the excuse, “I share Jesus by how I live, not by what I say.” That’s never enough.

Christian action can help break up the soil. It can pull weeds. It can fertilize and water. Every act of love furrows the soil to receive the good news of Jesus Christ. But without the word, there is no seed. It is the very nature of the seed to bear fruit, to grow, to spread, but if you never sow the seed, there is no fruitfulness. That saying would be much better if it said, “Live the gospel. Use words as necessary.”

The Soil

As important as the sower and the seed are, this really is a parable about the soils, and again Jesus identifies for us exactly what the soil represents. It is the heart of the person upon which the truth of God’s word falls. Vs. 12 says, *“Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”*

The soil of every heart is different. It is conditioned by different things. It has been either tilled or packed down by past experiences. It has been affected by our various hurts and loves. The quality of our soil is determined by the choices we have repeatedly made. What grows easily in one heart might not grow at all in another.

Unfruitful Soil isn’t the fault of the seed or the sower.

The first thing we see here in Jesus’ explanation is that unfruitful soil isn’t the fault of the seed or the sower. The seed and the sower are the same each time. Each and every heart receives the same word. They are exposed to the same truth. This first soil didn’t get a lesser quality seed than the last soil. It wasn’t planted by a less qualified farmer. A seed doesn’t care who plants it; only where it’s planted. If there is no fruitfulness in your life, don’t blame the seed or the sower. We like to blame the preacher, we like to blame the teacher, we like to blame the church, when the real problem is in the condition of our own soil. The lack of fruitfulness here isn’t because of a bad sower or bad seed. It’s because the conditions of our heart aren’t right. For some of you, it is time you quit blaming imperfect churches and the imperfect Christians in your life for what’s going on in your own heart. This is between you and God, and what’s keeping you from having a relationship with your Creator who made you with a plan and your Savior who died to restore that purpose in your life. Will you let the seed take root in your life? Don’t let others be the weeds and rocks that choke God’s truth from your heart.

The first soil condition we see is the hard heart. Farms in 1st Century Israel weren’t vast acreages, but rather tiny plots with foot paths in between for the workers to walk on. These paths weren’t tilled and they would become packed down hard as a rock. Any seed that fell there didn’t stand a chance. It didn’t matter what kind of seed it was. It didn’t matter who planted it.

The hard heart is impervious to the word of God. It has become calloused by constantly rebelling against the things of God. This is a heart that has been hardened by sin's deceitfulness and calcified in its love of untruth. It's not that they can't hear the truth of the word, but they won't listen.

Jesus says they hear the word, but it can't penetrate their heart. They spiritually stick their fingers in their ears and say, "Blah, blah, blah, I can't hear you."

Fruitful Soil Can Be Found in Unlikely Places

Now, it's not up to us to judge ahead of time, which hearts are hard and which ones aren't. We can't see into the hearts of people. Only God can do that. Our job as Christians is to plant the seed. We plant the seed on good soil and bad. Because, as we will see, sometimes, what looks like fruitful soil isn't. Oh, he grew up in the church, he is fruitful soil. She went to Bible College. Her heart is in the right place. His dad is a respected leader in the church. He must have a lot of depth. And yet, such soil that often appears so rich and deep turns out to be some of the rockiest or weediest.

And what we think might be unfruitful soil, has finally been broken up by the Spirit's working in their lives, and they are ready to listen. Don't judge soils based on what you see above the ground. You can't see what beneath the surface.

Fruitful soil can be found in unlikely places. It may very well be that the good kid from the good home in the good part of town, may have the hardest heart, and the lesbian, atheist activist is finally ready to receive the word. So plant the seed, and leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. This brings up a very important point

In the previous chapter in Luke, we find the shocking news that tax collectors, who were believed to be under God's condemnation, actually had good soil. They were ready to hear and listen. It was the religious professionals, the Pharisees, who had unfallowed hearts.

As chapter 8 opens, Luke gives us the scandalous news that a large number of women were amongst Jesus' disciples. There was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the manager of Herod's household, Susanna and many others Luke writes. Even more surprising is this little tidbit in verse 3, "*These women were helping to support them out of their own means.*" No self-respecting Rabbi would ever do such a thing. This would have been a shame and scandal. But Jesus planted wherever he found good soil.

Don't let your own past, your own experience, your own mistakes and failures, convince you that you cannot cultivate good soil in your heart. Jesus had liars and thieves and terrorists and hookers amongst his followers. He could very well be calling you too. Good soil can be found in unlikely places.

Fruitful Soil Isn't Determined by Enthusiastic Response

The next lesson we learn from Jesus is that fruitful soil isn't determined by an enthusiastic response. It receives the seed and it sprouts quickly and grows swiftly. It must be good soil, right? It seems to make sense. If we can't tell good soil by what we see above ground, we can determine good soil by how excited it is when it receives the seed.

But listen to what Jesus says in verse 13, *"Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root."* They receive it with joy. There is gladness and rejoicing and enthusiasm. This is the person who responds at the end of the sermon, and they are just bubbling over with happiness. They want to do cartwheels down the aisle. They go to Men's encounter or Ashes to Beauty, and they respond initially with great gusto.

They begin their new life in Christ with so much passion and energy. They tell everyone at work. They Facebook all their friends. They come to church and they sing songs with more passion than anyone. They are just busting at the seams with their enthusiasm for Jesus.

But they are like spiritual bottle rockets. They sparkle and whistle for a short time, they burst in a great colorful array, and poof, they're gone. Next thing you know, they've dumped God, they've dumped church, they're off pursuing something else, and sometimes this change seems to happen almost overnight. And we wonder what happened. They seemed like such good soil.

Jesus tells us they have no depth. No room in their hearts for roots to grow. Vs. 13 continues, *"They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."* When Jesus talks about rocky soil, we might think of some of the soil around here where we have more rocks than dirt, but that's not exactly what Jesus was picturing. In Judea there are many places where the solid bedrock rises to the surface. You can't plow it, dig it, break it up. It is solid rock. Now this solid bedrock gets covered over with a thin layer of dirt and it looks just like the good soil next to it. You would never know the difference by looking. It receives the seed readily and it sprouts quickly.

The rocky heart is all for Jesus as long as things are going good. For them Jesus is all about making their life better. As long as they are healthy and happy and the bills are paid, and the relationships are going good, then they are all in love with Jesus. However, when the hard times hit; when they face difficulties; when their devotion to Jesus is tested, they bail.

They want a Jesus who is going to give them their best life now, not a Savior who is going to cultivate them for eternity. Jesus is more concerned about your character than he is your comfort. Jesus is calling you to be fruitful. He didn't die on the cross to pay your bills, help you find your prince charming, or get you the perfect job. He died to make you holy and be the Lord of your life. His will for your life is that you will be fruitful, not that you have a nice house and a nice car, and a cushy life. And

once people figure out that Jesus isn't going to be their cosmic vending machine, they won't last. They have no depth of heart.

There is an unfortunate error we often make in North American evangelical Christianity. We have confused enthusiasm with spirituality. We equate emotional response with the Holy Spirit. If something is really exciting and emotional in the church, we say, "Wow, the Spirit was really moving." But I've seen far too many times where the people with the most excitement and most enthusiasm, turn out to have the least depth. Their faith is very shallow.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we shouldn't get excited and enthusiastic. There is no one worth getting excited about more than Jesus. I'm not saying that the Spirit doesn't work through our emotions and feelings, but let's not equate Him with that, and let's not limit Him to that. He also works through our minds and intellect and reason. He wants to work through all that we are. We can't tell good soil merely by a joyful response.

Fruitful Soil Can't Grow Everything

The next thing we see about fruitful soil is that it can't grow everything. The second year of our gardening I tried something called three sisters gardening. It is an old Native American technique where you grow three things in conjunction with each other. They are supposed to grow in different ways and support each other. Typically, it is corn, pole beans, and some kind of squash. The corn grows up in large stalks, the beans grow up using the corn stalks for support, and the squash grows along the ground filling the space between.

This may be a great idea for a back yard garden, but some people think it works spiritually as well. They think they have enough room in their hearts to grow all sorts of things. This is the person Jesus talks about in verse 14, *"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."*

We might think our lives can be all about Jesus, and all about our careers, and all about our families and all about our interests, but Jesus says that our hearts only have enough room for one thing to be number one. If our relationship with Jesus isn't the number one thing we're growing in our hearts, then all of these other things will choke it out.

These are the people who are perfectly alright with Jesus. They believe in him. They think church is great. They believe the Bible is true, and they will give it all the attention it deserves as soon as they're done with school, as soon as they get that promotion, as soon as they get the kids raised, as soon as we retire, as soon as... There is always something else on the list. Jesus keeps getting put behind one thing

and then another. After a while, his word is choked out entirely. Is Jesus competing with anything in your heart?

Fruitful Soil Both Hears and Does

So, what is fruitful soil? It's simply this- it is the heart that both hears the word and does it. The focus of this whole passage is on listening- hearing the word and then doing what it says. When Mark records this parable in his gospel, Jesus opens with this one command, "*Listen!*" Pay attention. Hear what I'm saying. This is important.

After Jesus tells the parable, what does Jesus say? "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" Later, when the disciples ask about the parable's meaning, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6. As Jews, they would have understood the significance of this passage. It was a warning to a rebellious Israel. They had hardened their hearts and minds to the Word of the Lord. They had ignored his prophets. They had ignored his discipline. Isaiah was being sent to announce Israel's impending judgment. God was about to condemn them for their lack of hearing and obedience. They had received the seed countless times, but there was no fruitfulness. Still, even though the nation was too far gone, Isaiah urges the people to stop rebelling and start listening and return to God.

The message for the 1st Century is clear- do not be like your forefathers who refused to listen and so faced God's judgment. Rather, you should listen and respond to the word. This is why Jesus says of the fruitful soil, "*But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*"

Jesus then compares our lives to lamps put on a stand to give light for all to see, and he says in vs. 18, "*consider carefully how you listen.*" Doctor Luke punctuates the point with a little story about Jesus and his earthly family. His mom and earthly brothers were trying to get through the crowd to get to Jesus, and Jesus makes this statement, "*My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.*" That's the bottom line. Fruitful soil hears God's word and puts it into practice.

So, why does Jesus tell us this parable? Is it so that we will look at our hearts and determine if we have fruitful soil, and if not, just give up? We take a look inside and say, "Well, my heart's too rocky, or it's too thorny. I guess I'm not good soil." No, not at all.

The message for the 21st Century is also clear. Fruitful soil doesn't just happen. The soil must be prepared. It must be worked. It has to be tilled. It has to be weeded. You need to bring in mulch. You might need to amend its nutrients. If you are just going to go into your backyard and put a seed in the ground, and then say, "Well, I just don't have good soil. It's too hard. It's too rocky. It's too acidic. It just won't work. You've missed the point.

Am I fruitful? Where is there hardness in my heart? Are there weeds or thorns that need to be pulled?