

How do

YOU

hear

God's Word?

***Some thoughts on
the Parable of the Sower***

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How Do You Hear God's Word?

In order to illustrate the various ways in which the gospel was being received, our Lord told the parable of the four different types of soil, commonly called the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18). The parable of the soils upon which the seed fell can be read in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and in Luke 8 where our Lord's explanation is also recorded.

This is the first parable which Jesus used and so it is important to understand it. Jesus said (Mark 4:13) to his disciples, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

At the time when Jesus spoke this first parable he was at the height or had just passed the very peak of his popularity. The crowds were flocking to hear him but Jesus knew that they had started or were about to start turning against him. Our Lord's heart was heavy and it is suggested that all of his parables were the utterances of a sorrowful heart. Jesus saw the crisis ahead knowing that the majority of the crowd were not true followers and would soon be openly against him.

Our Lord's sense of truth was satisfied by his parable. Jesus was sowing his words among the people but as far as most of them were concerned Christ's gospel was being received in ways similar to farmer's seed sown on a path going through a field or on a place where there was a thin layer of earth covering solid rock, or in soil where a crop of thorns lay hidden. The people were told the truth by means of this parable and if they were in earnest they would examine themselves in its light and if we are in earnest we should do the same.

The parable was also intended for the disciples. It was a warning to the disciples about the disappointment which they would face when they would be engaged in the work of sowing the seed of the gospel. It was also an encouragement to them, for the parable contains the message that no matter how much seed might seem to be wasted the end result would be a great harvest. "In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand" (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

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The Path Illustrating Hardness

The seed which fell on the path was crushed under the feet of men as well as being picked up by the watchful birds. "The ones along the path are those who have heard: then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved." The path was simply soil hardened by people walking on it and because it was hard and smooth the seed was easily picked up by the birds. The path did not take in the seed. People can be like paths as far as God's word is concerned. They don't take it in or are spiritually stupid or as we say today "you might as well be talking to the wall". The word reaches the ear of the spiritually insensible but not his heart and so it is as if he had never heard it. It is like a man in a room with the radio on when the weather forecast is being read and when asked about it cannot tell anything about the weather expected. Satan, the enemy of the word of God, has an easy victory with those who are not "tuned in" to spiritual things. The word cannot sink into minds that have been beaten hard to insensibility by thoughts of unspiritual things.

Rocky Soil Illustrating Shallowness

The soil mentioned is not that which contains a lot of stones but rather a thin layer of soil over a shelf of rock. The seed which fell on this soil took root but due to a lack of moisture and deep roots it withered in the sun for the soil was too shallow. "The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away." The shallow soil represents the spiritually shallow: those who receive the word with joy but without thought. The man who has joy without thought, the man without a thoughtful personality, with no root in himself, is doomed to be a temporary Christian. If a man with no root in himself is put in touch with a shallow popular enthusiasm he will profess to be religious at once. But left to himself and away from enthusiasm he will lose heart and wither away.

In the New Testament (Luke 9:57) we read of a thoughtless enthusiast who said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus

replied saying that following him could be tough for he had nowhere to lay his head, which answer implied that the man's words had not much thought behind them. It is a sad fact of history that in every religious revival a fair percentage of converts are like seed sown in shallow soil over rock. Such seed grows quickly, for due to lack of depth it spends no time in rooting itself. But rapid growth is the forerunner of rapid decay. The oak tree that is going to last for a hundred years does not shoot up like a runner bean. The shallow hearer accepts a thing straight away and receives it with joy. The deeper man has to think about it and take many things into account and is unable to show a light-minded joy. The thoughtful man hesitates because he will be a totally committed member or not a member at all; and while the thoughtful man is thinking about these things the superficial man has settled the whole affair. The shallow-hearted man is a step further on the way to bearing spiritual fruit than the hard-hearted. But a shallow nature that is easily stirred is just as easily discouraged.

Thorny Soil Illustrating Double-Mindedness

The seed on the path did not sink in and so the path represents those who do not take in the good news. The thin layer of soil over the rock represents the shallow person who receives the word with lack of thought. The thorny soil is both soft and deep but being full of weeds the farmer might call it dirty. The thorns take the goodness out of the soil and overshadow what grows from the good seed. Just like the soil the productive powers of the human heart and mind are limited: no one can serve two masters. The thorny soil represents a life which is crowded out with other things: it represents a double-minded man.

The double-minded man is not a hypocrite pretending to be what he is not: he has two minds. This man is not spiritually stupid for he takes in the word, unlike the first type and he is not superficial like the second. James in his New Testament letter speaks of a double-minded man unstable in all his ways and he says "purify your hearts you men of double mind". The thorny soil is good as far as softness and depths are concerned but it is impure and so the result will be two crops. The double-minded man is religious but he has other interests which are equally or more important. He

is not the shallow type to begin with enthusiasm and then fade away, for he will continue what he starts but like the corn among the thorns which did not die, he maintains his spiritual interests but bears no fruit. Christianity for this man is not his chief interest and it produces little result because it is so mixed up with other things; and just as the farmer keeps his eye out for special weeds, Jesus mentions the cares of the world, the deceit of riches and the pleasures of this life. In this illustration of the thorny soil our Lord warns that if his word is to do its work it must have the field to itself. No one is free from evil desires but the double-minded man allows the root of evil to grow and he never sets his face resolutely against evil. The man described as "perfect" in scripture is the single-minded man who fights evil and "seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" knowing that secondary things will follow in their proper place.

We have an example of a thorny ground hearer in the man who said to Jesus "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at home". Jesus replied "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God". This is an instructive example, for the man's affection was for things lawful and proper in their place. It is not always bad that crowds out the best: the second best is often the worst enemy of the best. Thorny ground represents those who receive the truth but not as the one supremely important thing in life.

Good Soil Representing An Honest And Good Heart

We have thought of hard, shallow and dirty soils. The fourth is loose, deep and pure, which is the picture according to our Lord (Luke 8:15) of an honest and good heart. Honesty in matters religious is not common. Honesty is common among people who assemble to listen to a lecture on scientific facts but there is not the same honesty when the subject is politics or religion. In matters political or religious most minds are already made up and will not change no matter what arguments are used. The man with an honest and good heart not only receives God's word, he understands it and holds it fast and obeys it under all circumstances. We could call Nathaniel a good soil hearer for our Lord said of him that he was a man in whom there was no guile, a man incapable of falseness or deceit. And when we

read (Acts 16:14) of Lydia that the Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by the apostle Paul, we learn that it is the Lord who turns us into good soil hearers.

The great distinction of the true-hearted is fruitfulness which is the formation of godly character. "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). The good-soil hearer not only hears the word but takes it in and keeps it with an undivided mind and cultivates righteousness with singleness of purpose. Such hearers attain to a fruitful life because they are the kind of people they are. They bear fruit by persevering at it or as the parable says "with patience". They are like the "more noble" Thessalonians who received the word from Paul and Silas with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if what they were being told was the truth (Acts 17:11).

What kind of soil am I? How do I hear God's word? Our Lord in his parable did not deal with the question of change from one type of soil to another. We do however know that a hard heart may become receptive; the shallow man can become more thoughtful; and purification can come to the double-minded. Also we must note that no honest and good heart is good by nature but only through the work of God. So let us ask God to turn us into good soil hearers so that his word in us may bring forth fruit with patience.

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