

PARABLES: THE FOUR SOILS pt 1

This parable has special meaning for me because it was the first real individual follow up input I had after becoming a Christian in late May 1974.

A grad student sat down with me and went over this parable with me.

The ONLY parable to appear in all three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is important.
Matt 13

1 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.

3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and *yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."

10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;

You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

15 For the heart of this people has become dull,

With their ears they scarcely hear,

And they have closed their eyes,

Otherwise they would see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart and return,

And I would heal them.'

16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 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. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 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. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

THE BIG QUESTION??

Why the cryptic introduction and passage from Isaiah?

HARD SAYINGS OF THE BIBLE – Kaiser et al

Should this commission be pressed to mean that Isaiah was ordered to go and tell the people to pay no heed to what they heard him say? Was it his prescribed duty to prevent them from hearing and understanding his message, and thus make it simple for them to repent and so escape the destruction that would otherwise overtake them?

No indeed; **if that impression is given, it is simply due to the Hebrew tendency to express a consequence as though it were a purpose. Isaiah volunteers to be God's messenger to his people, and God takes him at his word, but says to him in effect, Go and deliver my message, but don't expect them to pay any attention to it. The effect of your preaching will be their persistent refusal to accept what you say, to the point where they will have rendered themselves incapable of accepting it.**

The experience of Isaiah is repeated by Jesus. There was an initial excitement that gave way to unbelief. The same Isa 6 passage is repeated in Jn 12 and Acts 28 to reinforce the sense of the OT original text that despite all that God does, many will obstinate and hard-hearted.

According to Kaiser et al the Hebrew and Aramaic word for 'parable' might also mean 'riddle'.

Among those who heard Jesus teach there were those who were receptive and there were those who were hard of hearing. A parable or a riddle may have served to catch their attention so they might hear and believe. But for many, the words continued to fall on obstinate hearts.

We focus on the four soils and there is merit to that, but we see the context of v. 11 where Jesus is giving his disciples some insight into the mysteries of heaven.

John 1:9-11 shows us that Jesus knows he is coming to a people whose hearts are hardened.

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

His coming and dying underscores the level of unbelief that is rampant among the people and the religious leaders.

"Seeing they do not see and hearing they do not understand."

Jesus marvels at their unbelief especially when He, the Messiah, is right before them.

This parable seems so straight forward and clear TO US except for the side road to Isa 6. In some respects, it is easy to understand because we see these four responses in everyday life. If you've been around the church at all you've probably encountered all 4 soils.

Apparently, it wasn't so clear to the original audience because they asked for an interpretation.

REMEMBER that we benefit from 2000 years of sermons, teaching, and commentaries on this parable. For the audience of that day, it was puzzling. They came to hear this man who has already been doing miracles and upsetting the religious leaders by his teaching. They would be expecting a bold message and Jesus talks about sowing seed.

The illustration in the parable is SO plain and ordinary. And he compares it to the KINGDOM.

v. 16-17 Jesus says that they are blessed by what they've seen and heard i.e. HIM.

They have seen and heard what many prophets and righteous men desired to see and hear.

The people were not expecting stories of the kingdom to deal with sowing seed. They would be looking for

the parting of the Sea or the armies of Rome being washed away or killed by an angel of the Lord. Based on the scripture they knew, they were looking for God to go BIG, and what they got was a story about sowing seed.

While Jesus had done some miracles there was no immediate victory over Rome. There was no immediate Deliverance and establishment of a new King in Israel.

Instead, Jesus talks about the slow process of sowing seed and waiting for the results.

The parable is also troubling because of the way the process and the results are described.

The process is slow – step by step of the sower, and it is a bit disjointed – seed was falling where no one would expect the fruit to grow.

ONLY one of the four soils shows lasting fruit. If the sower were a baseball player, he'd be a .250 hitter. Not exactly Hall of Fame numbers. Yet, we note that the ROI is very significant – 30, 60, 100 fold.

A theme in the gospels is the growing hostility to Jesus among some as his ministry expands. There are those who were followers at first but who later turned away. The disciples were slow to grasp who Jesus really was. The religious leaders who should have received him were his most strident opponents. Even Jesus sowed among those who would reject him.

After the death of Christ, the disciples' discouragement was changed into triumph when they saw the risen Christ. The hope of the returning and ruling King was nourished by the advance of the gospel and the writings of the NT AUTHORS.

Yet, the experience of the early church reflected the parable of the Sower and the four soils. Those who were Christ followers, "Christians", became the Sowers. The Books of Acts gives accounts of those who were typical of the four soils.

Phil 1; Col 4 refer to Demas who was a co-laborer, but in 2 Tim 4:10- Demas, who loved this present world, has deserted Paul and gone back to Thessalonica.

1 Tim 1:20 mentions that Hymenaeus and Alexander suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.

1 Tim 4 warns against those in the later times who will fall away from the faith.

Hebrews and Revelation have strong warnings about falling away as they commend those who stand firm and persevere.

The story of the kingdom of God in this world is one of FOUR SOILS and the different responses to the Word that is sown.

Every period of church history and every location where the Word has spread has seen examples of the four soils. Every local church and even families within the same church know the reality of this parable.

We can be thankful that Jesus gave this instruction and warning ahead of time lest we become too discouraged when we see those who made a good beginning veer off course because of hardship, affliction or persecution, cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke out the word.

Dr. Rayburn – "And now, the Lord be thanked, not only do such betrayals not undermine our faith, in a strange kind of way they actually confirm and support it, as once again proving true what the Lord has said."

HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE in light of this Parable?

- 1) **Sow widely. We don't know which seed falls beside the road, in rocky soil, among thorns or in good soil.** It's not tattooed on anyone's forehead.

Beware of making that determination on your own!!

EX: ME as a college freshman. From the outside I would have looked like I was beside the road where the evil one would have quickly come and snatched away the seed. I didn't even know what God was doing in my heart and no one else could have known either.

EX: MANY OF YOU too, most likely

- 2) Be warned that not all who show an initial response will remain faithful. Jesus wanted us to know this from early on so we would not grow discouraged and feel like our labor is in vain.
- 3) Examine our own hearts regarding our response to the Seed of the Word. While Jesus gave the parable to explain a mystery of the kingdom, it is an appropriate response to examine our own situation, even though we aren't always discerning enough with our own lives.

EX: when the graduate student who took me to this passage finished walking through it with me, he asked a simple question: "Which soil do you want to represent your life?" DUH??? What would anyone say? "The FOURTH soil", of course.

The parable doesn't tell us how to be 'good soil', but it is certainly commended, and the fourth soil is described...

In Matthew 13 the fourth soil is the one who "hears and understands and bears fruit"

In Mark 4: the fourth soil is the who "hears and accepts the word"

In Luke 8 it is those who have heard the word with "honest and good hearts who hold it fast who bear fruit"

Your LIFE IS PERFECTLY STRUCTURED TO GET THE QUALITY OF SOIL THAT YOU ALREADY HAVE.

Change is inevitable. Growth is intentional – Glenda Cloud

- 4) We can expect to see fruit in our lives as we hear, understand, accept, and hold fast to the seed of the Word.

We don't need to compare ourselves with others since Jesus said some will bear fruit 30, 60 or hundredfold. It is God who causes the growth, so we are not in competition with other believers or even with ourselves or with other churches.

We can, however, be thankful to God for growth and fruit that we see in our lives, individually and corporately.

We can live fruitful lives now while we have our hope fixed on that which is eternal.

Friends, the growth of the fruit is like compound interest. It may be small but over time you'll be surprised how much it grows. We may not see the fruit until the last day, but it will be revealed.

It is easy to get discouraged in this life, but we are called to keep our eyes on that which is eternal.

This parable reminds us that even as we face temptations, hardship, persecution, and the cares of this world, if we hold fast to and by the grace of Christ, we will see the fruit of faith.

Galatians 6: 'Do not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest *if we do not give up.*'

While we don't get fixated on ourselves, we can make use of the means of grace that God has given to fertilize the soil of our hearts. It does not happen automatically.

THE TABLE is a way to cultivate a life of faith.

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