

July 26th message

You may have been taught at one time or another that ‘parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings.’ That teaching is a good start to beginning to understand all Jesus was trying to get across in His many parables. Jesus knew not everyone would get what He was teaching. He quoted a passage from Isaiah 6 foretelling how many would hear but not understand, see but not perceive, and how the hearts and eyes would be closed to what He had to teach. We see much of this in our world today, not only in what Jesus taught but in many common sense strategies for living today.

There is often money saving tips on many forms of media. Often we find them on the local news. When we watch channel 10’s evening news there is a segment called, “Watching Your Wallet.” I guessing many of you have seen it. Often this is common sense advice that I wouldn’t think needs to be shared, but it does. Many do not have the financial skills to make wise decisions. I remember one episode where the lesson was on money back credit cards. The host actually had to emphasize how people should not buy unneeded items just to get more money back on their cards! Unbelievable but true. Many don’t have a wise financial background and it sooner or later it catches up to them. You can advise them over and over but often it does no good.

The teachings of Jesus also falls on harden hearts, deaf ears, and times where it doesn’t change anything in one’s life. There are lots of common sayings we could apply to what Jesus is saying about parables here. One that comes to mind are “you can lead a horse to water but” Even those of us who had little experience with horses know what that means.

Jesus is telling how even though people may hear His teachings they may not have the spiritual understanding needed to apply it to their own lives. Spiritual listening means hearing and gaining a new perspective on how one should live their life.

I know I often talk about the influences our culture has on us but I'm going to keep doing that because sooner or later it begins to influence us. We are inundated with so much information and opinions from many different sources. We can easily be swayed to believe what might be the popular trends or beliefs right now. With that in mind let us look at this parable Jesus taught about the different kinds of soils.

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The first is the hardened heart. The word is snatched away in one way or another including by Satan. As I've told you before, one of my favorite passages in the Bible is the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew, chapters 5-7. Many a sermon has been preached on these verses throughout the centuries. We are seeing a trend in our society that basically waters down or dismisses these instructions from Christ. Some will tell how these teachings were told before the death and resurrection of Christ and how they don't apply anyone because Jesus became our perfection. "Our Christian walk is energized by the indwelling Christ living His life through us, NOT by keeping to the letter of the Law, a letter emphasized in various ways and in various parts of the Sermon on the Mount. We live, move, and walk under a new covenant. The Sermon on the Mount is NOT a Guide to Christian Living."

My learning through the years teaches me differently. While we can never live up to what Jesus is saying, these teachings are a guide to how we should approach many aspects of living. Yes, we are saved by the grace of God, through the death and resurrection of Christ, but this is not reason to downplay these instructions. Yet many do.

Many church leaders today struggle with getting the message of the gospel across to their congregations today. Russell Moore is the editor-in-chief of Christianity Today. He tells how he is alarmed at the number of self-professed Christians who believe the Bible and its teachings are “subversive” because they go against importance people are placing on nationalism and military strength these days.

Again my learning teaches these teachings of Christ are eternal. If one knows anything about history, one knows how different ideologies rise and fall, different leaders have their moments of power, and how different kingdoms have their day, but the words of the Lord are forever.

Next we learn of the rocky soil. The first listeners would have been quite familiar with what Jesus is getting at here. Often the ground was not filled with rocks like I tried to show in my children’s time, rather there was a thin layer of soil in the first few inches and then a layer of limestone underneath. The seed would quickly germinate and perhaps flourish if the conditions were just right. But there was no depth to the soil. The roots would try to go down in search of nourishment only to find the obstacles rock presented. When the gentle rains quit, the heat of the sun would be too much.

This example is pretty straight forward. Many have a shallow faith and when the going gets difficult, they are pretty much done. Others receive the good news with joy, yet their expectations are not what lies ahead for them. Such a faith withers and is soon gone.

I have always felt the thorny soil is what we encounter the most. Because the presence of competing seeds, the good seed produces little or no harvest. All of us know how weeds and other volunteer plants hurt the growth of what we may be trying to grow. Jesus describes these "other seeds" in terms of worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. We can put our priorities in the wrong places and the good seed simply gets choked out.

Last weekend I attended my 50th class reunion. It was enjoyable to visit and catch-up with many of my fellow classmates. In one conversation I an old friend mentioned how growing up he would leave the house in the morning and be gone all day with friends doing this or that in the summer. The only requirement was he is home when the streetlights came on. He mentioned how that cannot be that safe anymore and young people and their parents have to be so careful. He concluded we grew up at a good time. He also mentioned how big the confirmation class was when we were in class were in 8th grade. Now they are quite small. Yes, there are fewer kids but proportionally fewer go through confirmation.

Much has changed, some for the better, some for the worse. Yet we still can determine where we will place our priorities. And that is where the good soil comes into play. I suspect there are different times in our lives where we find ourselves as the four different soils. We can have harden hearts, little depth and follow through to the word, and the wrong priorities. But through prayer, diligence and the grace of God more of our lives can be the good soil Jesus describes in this parable.

This is the challenge then to examine our lives and throw out what may cause our hearts to be like the hard beaten path, rocky ground, and thorns Jesus describes. Maybe it's a belief we have or a something someone has done to us that we can't forgive. It is not easy to let go, but perhaps our hearts can be soften, the rocks and thorns removed and new growth can take place. May God help us as we try to enhance the good soil of our lives. Amen.