

The Parable of the Soils, Part 2: Mark 4:1-20
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, May 16, 2010

We're going to look at the parable of the soils again this morning. Last week we focused on what Jesus said about the purpose of the parables. This morning we'll study the parable itself and the explanation that Jesus gives to His followers. We'll consider each of the four soils mentioned here: the hard path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil. And then we'll conclude by thinking about how God's glory is at stake in this.

In verse 3 Jesus says "Listen!" And then He begins the parable with the simple statement that a sower went out to sow. Notice that there is no adjective before sower. There is no description of the sower. There are not different kinds of sowers mentioned here. It is not a parable about different kinds of sowers. That's not the point. It would be a very different parable if Jesus described 4 types of sowers who all sowed on piece of ground. And three of the sowers produced nothing, while the fourth sower produced an abundant crop. It's certainly tempting to think about the ministry in that way, but that is not what Jesus taught. It's tempting to think about the fruitfulness of ministry in terms of the sower: the personality of the sower, the style of the sower, the cultural savvy of the sower, and on and on. The mentality can easily creep in that says, If we can just package this seed in the right way, it will produce the desired results. If we can just sow this seed with the right programs, in a trendy way, with the right music playing in the background, using the right lingo, then there will be a bumper crop. That marketing mentality that is so prevalent in churches today is telling a different parable than this one. They are telling the parable of the sowers. But Jesus tells the parable of the soils. There are not multiple sowers, with different descriptions and different results. There is one sower, who represents Jesus and all who follow Him in sowing the seed.

The seed, as we're told in verse 14, is the word. "The sower sows the word." This is what Jesus did in His preaching. He said in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." This is the Gospel. This is the seed that Jesus sowed. This is the word. And as followers of Jesus, we are to sow this word also. We proclaim the truth of Christ. We teach what the Scriptures say about God and sin and the cross and repentance and faith. We call people to turn away from their sins and make Christ the supreme treasure of their lives. And as we do this we are sowing the seed of the gospel. We are sowing the word.

We notice also that there is only one kind of seed in this story. There's one sower and one seed. So the point of the parable is not to compare the different techniques of various sowers, nor is it to compare the different results of various seeds. The sower is the one who proclaims the word, and the word is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And there's only one Gospel. The point of this story, then, is to compare different ways that people respond to the Gospel. The focus of the story is the soils, which represent human hearts. Jesus describes four soils. Three of them represent hearts that ultimately reject the Gospel and produce no fruit. The fourth represents the heart that is truly changed by the Gospel and therefore produces much fruit.

As we study these together let's each be considering the question: which soil describes the condition my heart? Maybe all of you here this morning consider yourselves Christians. But could it be that you are a Christian in name only? Could it be that your life gives some outward indications of bearing spiritual fruit, but in reality the seed has not gone down into good soil? This parable is a warning for us that we not be like the hard path or the rocky ground or the thorny ground. It is also an encouragement to us, though, when we see genuine fruit in our lives. That fruit is evidence that the word has taken root in our hearts and that God has truly changed us. And it's an encouragement to us as we sow the seed of God's Word, because we're assured that the seed will find good soil. Even if we're discouraged by the frequent rejection of the Gospel, there is the promise that in some hearts there will be fruit, and even much fruit!

The Hard Path

The first type of soil Jesus describes is the hard path. This is the dirt path that has been beaten down by the pounding of feet of hoofs and the weight of carts. It has become as hard as pavement. So when the seed falls on it there is no chance of it actually penetrating down into the ground. It just sits there on the surface, and verse 4 says the birds come and devour it. In the explanation, in verse 15, Jesus reveals that these birds represent Satan. "Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them."

The hard path represents the hard heart. This is the person who will absolutely not receive the word. This can take many forms. It may be the antagonistic atheist who passionately argues against the claims of Christianity. Or it may be the casual skeptic or agnostic who has given some thought to spiritual things but remains undecided. I talked to a man like this on my flight from Budapest to New York a few weeks ago. He was very cordial and friendly, and he listened attentively as I shared about Christ, but he

appeared to have no urgency, no desire, to really consider the weight of eternity. The person with the hard heart may simply be apathetic toward the Gospel. They may not argue with you, but they just don't really care. Maybe it's that they're too busy even to think about it. They have packed so many things into their lives that there isn't any room for thoughts about spiritual things. There's room for thoughts about a lot of other things. We all meditate on various thoughts. We may meditate on anxious thoughts as we worry about the future, we may meditate on sensual images, we may meditate on money-making schemes, or vacation plans, or purchases we would like to make. Our minds are occupied with a hundred different thoughts throughout the course of a day. And in many hearts those kinds of thoughts are consuming. The busyness of life and the preoccupation with other things makes the heart hard. And in a life like that the seed may be sown, but Satan quickly snatches it away.

This hard ground could also describe someone who actually attends church and is involved in different ways. But whenever the word goes forth there is a wall there that keeps the word from ever piercing the heart. Could that be you this morning? Could it be that you attend church because it makes you feel good about yourself or because you feel like certain people expect that of you, but you refuse to actually change the way you live? You're still holding onto the same old sins and walking in the ways of the world, unrepentant and unresponsive to the call of the Gospel?

If you have ears to hear this, please hear it. May this word go down into your heart and regenerate you. I pray that today the hard ground of your heart will break and crumble and soften so that you will be good soil.

Rocky Ground

The second kind of soil is the rocky ground. First look at how it's described in verse 5, "Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil." What is meant by rocky ground here is described by the next phrase, "it did not have much soil." It means there was shallow soil with rock underneath. And what happens in a situation like that is the plant springs up quickly. There isn't room for the roots to go down deep, so all the growth is directed upwards. And this can give the illusion of success. It may look like this is going to be a very fruitful plant. But then look at verse 6, "And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away." There is immediate growth, but the lack of a good root system keep it from surviving.

Verses 16-17 explain this. "And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word,

immediately 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."

I remember a vivid example of this. When I was in middle school, in 6th or 7th grade, there was a girl who sat at my lunch table, and she was in some of my classes. And she was a rebel. Pretty much everything about her communicated that attitude. She wore dark clothes, more often than not an AC/DC t-shirt, or something of the like. But I remember one day at the lunch table she shared with everyone that over the weekend she had been at some kind of Christian gathering and she had been saved. And for several days she seemed like a different person. Her language was different, her attitude was different, she was talking about the Lord and seemed to have a real desire to follow Christ. But it lasted such a short time, as I recall. It was only a matter of weeks before she was back to her former self.

That is the shallow, rocky ground. And a key question for us is how to interpret that kind of experience. What are we to conclude about that person's salvation? Are we to say that the person was saved and then lost their salvation? No. The idea that a person can lose their salvation does not square with Scripture. Just to give one text, Paul says in Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." This is the perseverance of the saints. For those who are truly saved, they will persevere to the end. God will preserve their faith and keep them believing and bring that good work to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. So it's not the case that the person described here was initially saved and was then unsaved. That doesn't happen.

Could it be then that the person was saved and then simply became unfruitful? They will still go to heaven. They are just unproductive in the Christian life. Many people would argue for this position, and many others just assume it. If a person makes a profession of faith then they must be saved. If they act excited about the Gospel, even if it's only for a short time, then they can have assurance of salvation. And we may be grieved by their wayward life and the lack of fruit in their life, but at least we know they'll go to heaven because they said that prayer at the revival meeting or the youth camp or whatever it was.

That interpretation does not square with Scripture either. The point of this parable is not to differentiate fruitful Christians and unfruitful Christians. The point is to differentiate Christians and non-Christians. True believers bear fruit in their lives. Unbelievers do not bear fruit, even if they call themselves Christians. The ultimate test is whether or not there is abiding fruit

in one's life. In Matthew 7 Jesus talks about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing. And He says, "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit." Now, listen to what He says next, because here He makes it clear that He's not saying that it's just a matter of fruitfulness and unfruitfulness. Rather, it's a matter of heaven and hell. He says, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15-20)

What do we have to conclude, then? The person who produces bad fruit, or no fruit, is someone who was never truly converted. This may challenge what we've always thought about salvation, but this is biblical Christianity. Becoming a Christian is not just saying a few words and going through a few rituals. A lot of people do that and their lives stay exactly the same. Or maybe they change for a little while and then go right back to normal. That kind of scenario shows us that the Gospel did not really take root.

For the person represented by the rocky soil, it is tribulation and persecution that causes them to fall away. There may be an excitement about the Gospel as long as things are going well, but as soon as the trials come they're done. This is why we need to talk often about the role of suffering in the Christian life. If we tell people that they are going to be healthy and wealthy and happy when they come to Jesus, that's a very effective way of producing false converts. People can get excited about health and wealth without being converted. Those are the very things our carnal hearts are drawn to. So it makes perfect sense when individuals receive the word with joy, because they think this Christianity thing is going to be the quick fix they've been looking for. But then they get sick, or they lose their job, or someone scoffs at them for being religious, and immediately they fall away. Do you see the fickleness of this individual? In verse 16 they *immediately* receive the word with joy, and in verse 17 they *immediately* fall away.

What we need to tell people up front is that the Bible does not promise health and wealth and prosperity. Instead the Bible promises tribulation and persecution. 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That's the verse we all wanted to hear, isn't it? It's the verse that our carnal, comfort-loving hearts do not want to hear. But for those who are truly converted we can see that Christ is better than earthly comforts. And we can even begin to see the wonder of how God uses trials and persecution in our lives to sanctify us and

give us a deeper joy in Him. Trials will test our faith and refine our faith and deepen our faith. And sadly, in many cases trials will show that a person's professed faith was no real faith. That is what we learn from the rocky soil.

Thorny Ground

The third type of soil that is described is the thorny ground. Verse 7, "Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain." We all know that weeds grow faster and more vigorously than the grass or the plants that we want to grow. That's what is happening here. The seed falls on ground where thorny weeds are also beginning to grow. And as the two grow up together, the thorns choke out the good seed so that it yields no grain. Again, this is a picture of someone who professed faith and appeared to be growing in the Lord, but falls away. Their lack of abiding fruit demonstrates this. It is not that they were saved and then lost their salvation. And it's not the case that they are saved but bear no fruit, for that is not a category that exists in the Bible. Like the rocky ground, the thorny ground is a person who professes faith but has no real faith. The difference is the means by which this person falls away. The person represented by the rocky soil fell away due to tribulation and persecution. The person represented by the thorny soil falls away due to worldly pleasures.

Look at verses 18-19. "And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." Pain and pleasure can both be a means of falling way. A person can be driven from the Gospel because of the tribulation and persecution that are associated with it. Or a person can be enticed away from the Gospel by worldly pleasures.

The description here is very enlightening. It says, "the deceitfulness of riches." And we should ask, how are riches deceitful? How is it that riches lie to us and deceive us? It happens when the commercial comes on and says that you need to have this kind of car or these kinds of clothes or this or that gadget or toy, and then you'll be happy. Then you'll be content. Or you look at your neighbor or friend, and you think that if you could just have the things they have, then you would be happy. If you could just keep up with the Joneses, then you would be living a successful and fulfilled life. And as they say, the reality of trying to keep up with the Joneses is that we buy things we don't need in order to impress people we don't even like with money we don't have. That pretty much sums up the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things. These are

the thorns that enter in and choke the word so that there is no spiritual fruit.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." Either your life is going to be devoted to one or the other. You can't have it both ways. It's an interesting statement that Jesus makes there, because it shows the nature of how one serves either God or money. How does a person serve money? By making money the supreme treasure of life. By orienting one's life around getting more and more money and seeking their ultimate happiness in the things that money can buy. That is the person who is a slave to money, a person who has made money their god.

Serving God, on the other hand, is to see that God is the supreme treasure of life. It's to orient one's life around experiencing more and more of God and seeking our ultimate happiness in the enjoyment of Him. And this is why we cannot serve two masters. A person cannot be a slave to money and simultaneously be a slave to God. Our ultimate allegiance is going to be to one or the other.

So the question is, what do you ultimately desire? What is your treasure? Which is also to say, what are you trusting in? Are you being enticed by the deceitfulness of riches and believing those lies? Or are you fighting to believe the truth of Scripture?

Both pain and pleasure can be ways that individuals fall away from the truth. Maybe there was a profession of faith at one point, but then pain and persecution drive one away from Christ, or the pleasures of riches entice one away from Christ. In either case, we have to conclude that the profession of faith was an empty one. It was not a true conversion.

Good Soil

Finally, the good soil. Verse 8 says, "And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And then the explanation is in verse 20, "But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." This is the encouraging part of the parable. The encouragement comes in the fact that there is good soil. As we proclaim the Gospel we will be disappointed when we see people reject the Gospel outright, or when they seem to accept it but then fall away. But we must know that there is also good soil out there. There are hearts that will not only hear the word, but will accept it and bear fruit. In all 4 cases the person hears the word. But only in this last case does the person hear the word, accept it and bear fruit. And it's the fruit-

bearing that shows that this is the true believer. This is the person who is truly converted. And, indeed, there will much fruit: thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Lest we be discouraged by the three soils that do not produce fruit, we're told here of three increasingly great yields that come from the good soil.

God's Glory

I want to conclude by talking about how God's glory is at stake in all of this. I want us to think briefly about how God's glory is seen in the way He has chosen to save sinners. Why does God choose to save in this way? Why is it that the true converts are those who bear fruit? Why doesn't God save people who merely make a profession of faith? Wouldn't it be more gracious of God to save those represented by all the soils, rather than just the last one? Why doesn't God have mercy on every person who prays the sinner's prayer, even those who continue to live in sin afterwards?

The reason is that God does everything for His own glory, and He would get no glory by granting salvation to those who will not praise Him throughout the course of their lives. Think about it. If a person merely says a prayer at a revival because the music and the rhetoric got their emotions going, and then they go back to their worldly lifestyle, what does that say about God? It says that we may be willing to use God to get eternal life, but we don't actually think much of God, Himself. We may be willing to jump through a few hoops in order to get into heaven, but we won't submit to God's commands for us now. We may trust Him for the afterlife, but not this life. That kind of attitude is terribly demeaning to God. And it is not God's character to act in ways that bring eternal scorn on His Name. Therefore He does not grant salvation to those who do not bear fruit by submitting to Him and honoring Him and following Him. He will not be Savior without also being Lord.

If God were to save individuals who do not bear fruit, it would cheapen the Gospel by making it merely a get out of hell coupon rather than a powerful inner transformation that makes us love the things we ought to love. This is the beauty of the Gospel, and this is how it redounds to God's glory. As God changes our lives by changing our desires, He shows that His glory is more precious than worldly pleasures and possessions. God saves us and changes us, and in this way shows the supreme value of who He is.

Sadly, there are many who think they are saved but are not. They have reduced the Gospel to a cheap ticket, and they do not value God. They do not value the cross. They do not hate their sin. They have not truly repented or believed. For these

individuals the judgment will be a very rude awakening. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

This morning let's examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). Let's be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). Let's do everything we do to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). And let's be instructed and encouraged by this parable, that the proclamation of the Gospel will oftentimes be met with hardness of heart, but it will also find good soil and bear much fruit.