

Towards a Fruit-Bearing Heart

Sermon

Based on Matthew 13:3-23

Introduction:

This parable is recorded in Matthew 13:3-23, and is also found in Luke 8:5-15. We know that this is one parable that has been quoted very often in sermons and studies. It is a classic in its own right, and its relevance to our times is indisputable. When we understand the import of this parable rightly, it challenges us to introspect and determine the present state of our hearts. Let us also accept the fact that even the hearts of those with deep-rooted commitment to Jesus Christ are likely to be impacted by the wear and tear of our life's compulsions. This act of introspection, therefore, cannot be a one-time exercise but should be made an ongoing process throughout our lives.

We know that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Master Teacher! He had the unique ability to take scenes from everyday life and use them to teach profound spiritual truths. Such is the case with this parable also. As Jesus sat by the seaside teaching, He began to talk about an image with which everyone present was familiar. He talked about a man taking seed into a field. He pictured that man casting the seed upon the earth. This seed fell upon the ground and landed upon differing types of soils.

Then we see that some of the seed brought forth fruit, while other seed did not.

Jesus used this imagery to teach about the condition of the human heart. We can easily identify the Sower as the Holy Spirit, the seed as the Word — the Gospel — and the soil as the human heart. From His words, we learn that the human heart is like soil. No soil is ever bad, as no human heart is ever bad. It is the given state of the soil, or the human heart, that makes it non-receptive to the voice of God. It can both receive the seed of the Gospel and produce a harvest of plentiful spiritual fruit, or it can be unprepared and produce nothing of value for the glory of the name of God.

But Why Parables?

One may find it a bit odd that Jesus knew well enough that the public did not really understand the meaning of His parables. Even His own disciples needed explanations from Him, though all His parables would seem very simple, commonplace stories. When Jesus was alone with His disciples, they asked Him to explain the parable. First, Jesus says that He told the parable so that the crowd would not understand its meaning! Then, before explaining the meaning of the parable, He scolded the disciples for not understanding it right away.

Today we are puzzled why the crowd would follow Jesus to hear puzzling teachings that they could not understand, or why only the disciples would ask for clarification, and that too in private. We talked about this last week, and a member of our group offered us a helpful perspective.

The first reason why Jesus taught in parables was because He was a rabbi, and, like many rabbis of that day, He taught in stories and parables. The rabbis who told the best stories had the largest followings. People followed Jesus because they were entertained by His stories, and since they were used to parables (some of which could be very profound in their interpretation), they did not expect to be able to understand them straight away. It is the same with an entertaining film: we spend a couple of hours watching it, and if it entertains us or affects us in some way, we remember the story; otherwise, we simply forget it and move on to the next. But our Lord made sure that His parables were compelling in nature, and those who heard them retained them in their memories.

But the most important reason why Jesus taught in parables was because, as He says in this passage, He wanted to disguise the truth. He was, in effect, planting a sort of time bomb in the hearts of those who heard Him. The people flocked around Him and listened to His stories. Like good jokes, His stories were repeated by word of mouth until they reached a wider audience than those who had originally heard them from His own lips. The meaning of the parables was concealed from the people, but the Pharisees often caught on to the implications of His message, and this made them fear the political consequences of His ministry.

This understanding of Jesus' purpose — that He deliberately concealed the parables' meaning from unbelieving hearers — reflects one longstanding interpretation of this passage, drawing on Matthew 13:10-15 and its quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10. Other readers understand Jesus instead to be describing a hardness of heart already present in some hearers, rather than an act of concealment on His own part. Both readings are represented among serious students of this

passage.

Later, after Jesus had been crucified and had risen from the grave, the apostles found fertile soil for their message in all who heard the parable, whether directly or indirectly. The time bomb went off. Since the people were already familiar with the parables, all that the apostles had to do was explain them, this time with the events of Easter as proof. This is what Jesus meant when He told the disciples that what they had heard in secret — that is, the meaning of the parables — would later be proclaimed from the housetops! At that time, the people understood and were saved. Just as, even after a lapse of over two thousand years, we still find these parables fascinating, we continue trying to understand their meaning in depth.

Tonight, let us investigate this parable. As we move through these verses, let us examine our own hearts to see what kind of soil we are. It may be that the Lord will have a word for our life in this passage.

The Plan of the Sower

A. The Sower in this parable is a man who goes into his field with the intention of raising a crop and reaping a bountiful harvest. He expects to reap a profit from the crop he is cultivating.

B. Such is the case with the Lord God. He sent His Son into the world to die, and He sends His Spirit into the world to convict lost people of their sins, so that He might reap a spiritual harvest to the glory of His name: “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). Just as a bountiful harvest brings riches and honour to the farmer, so the salvation of souls brings glory to the name of God. After all, the only reason God does anything, including saving souls, is for the glory of His name!

C. Even though the plan of God to save the lost is all for His glory, let us praise God for the fact that He devised such a perfect plan to save those who believe. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins when we were still sinners. We sometimes think we are doing God a favour when we come to Him; that is a fallacy, and the very opposite is actually true!

The Potential of the Seed

A. Every seed sown by the Sower had the potential to produce much more seed. This is a botanical truth, and Matthew 13:8 and 23 bear this out. One little seed had the potential to multiply itself thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and even a hundredfold (Matthew 13:8, 23) — some three thousand per cent, six thousand per cent, and ten thousand per cent, by way of comparison. Those of us who do kitchen gardening have seen this principle in action. We plant one bean seed and from that seed reap many beans, with each pod containing several more seeds. And then we plant those seeds and produce more seeds still. The possibilities are boundless. This principle applies to all seeds.

The seed had the potential to reproduce itself many times over, without limit.

B. Such is the seed of the Gospel of grace. When it is sown in a ready heart, a prepared heart, it will germinate and reproduce itself over and over again. The seed has the potential to begin small and to produce much. Remember the parable of the mustard seed.

C. It is worth noting that the seed always changes the ground in which it is planted. What had been bare earth now yields a harvest to the joy of the Sower. When the seed of the Gospel finds a lodging place in a heart that has been ploughed by the Word of God and tilled by the grace of God, it will germinate and leave that heart forever changed, producing a harvest of spiritual fruit to the glory of God. This is what the Lord wants from your life and mine! He wants to produce His fruit in the hearts of His redeemed. All we need to do is be receptive to His calling.

Here is a brief description of the kind of fruit He will produce within us when we are the right kind of soil, sown with the right kind of seed:

1. *We become more like Him* — a. “But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life” (Romans 6:22). b. “Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11). c. “That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).
2. *We behave more like Him* — a. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).
3. *We are burdened like Him* — a. “Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you (but was let hitherto), that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles” (Romans 1:13).

The Problem of the Soils

A. As the Sower sowed his seed, it fell upon four distinct kinds of soil. We should understand that each of these soils was good soil, but the condition the soil was in when the seed landed upon it determined its potential for producing a suitable harvest. Remember that we are comparing the soils to types of human hearts. As I mentioned at the beginning, just as there are no bad soils, there are no bad hearts. In reality, there is no heart so bad that it should not receive the Gospel message. The Lord, in His grace, allows the seed of the Gospel to fall upon hearts of all descriptions (John 1:9; Psalm 19:1-6)! What makes the heart unable to receive the seed is its condition when the Gospel comes to it.

B. A look at the four types of soil mentioned here by Jesus is very revealing when it comes to understanding the human heart and why people respond to the Gospel as they do. One of these soils is going to paint a perfect picture of your heart.

See if you can identify what kind of soil you are as we look into these verses today.

I. The Hard Soil (Matthew 13:4, 19)

The “wayside” refers to the narrow footpaths that ran beside and through the fields. These were the roads of the day, and the soil on them had become as hard as concrete from the feet of the travellers who had walked upon them. When the seed fell on the footpath, it could not penetrate the soil, and it remained there in the open, only to be devoured by the birds of the air.

We are told that this speaks of the person who hears the Gospel but does not “understand” it. That is, they cannot make the connection between the claims of the Gospel and their own life. Maybe they are steeped in sin and refuse to believe. Maybe they are indifferent and cold toward the things of God and refuse to hear. Maybe they have hardened their hearts for years against the call of the Gospel, and, like a path trampled underfoot for centuries, they have become hard-hearted, and the seed of the Gospel cannot penetrate the soil of their hearts. And, more importantly, they are like all those who never had an opportunity to hear the Word — those to whom the people who heard the Gospel failed to reach out. When this happens, the devil and his minions will snatch away the Gospel by diverting the mind and causing the person to become even more hardened against God. This person has a heart that is not prepared for a work of grace leading to salvation.

II. The Stony Soil (Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21)

These stony places are common in Palestine. Often there is an outcropping of limestone rock covered by a thin layer of topsoil. This soil looks as though it is ready to be sown; the ground looks good and productive, and seed cast here will germinate and quickly spring up into a promising plant. But, because there is no depth of soil, as soon as the sun beats down on the tender plant, it withers and dies without producing any fruit.

This kind of soil speaks of the heart that makes an emotional response to the presentation of the Gospel. Perhaps this person heard the Gospel and said, “That’s what I need!” Or perhaps they came because a friend came. Whatever their motive, they make a profession, but it is a shallow one at best. They may even show signs of life in the Lord, but when Christianity does not turn out as they thought it would, they quickly fade away and disappear! They shrink away from the radical claims of Christ and the Cross: “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). These are the people who make a profession, go great guns for a short time, and then wind up right back in the world. Their hearts are not conditioned to carry the Cross. Were they saved? No! How do we know for sure? Because they produced no fruit.

III. The Thorny Soil (Matthew 13:7, 22)

This soil looks as though it is ready to be sown also, but underneath the surface are the living roots and seeds of thorns and weeds. When the seed falls here, it also quickly springs to life and gives every indication that a good harvest will follow. However, the same ground begins to produce the thorns and weeds that were already there, and they soon choke out the tender plant. This plant withers and dies without producing any fruit at all.

This is a picture of a heart that tries to have the benefit of the Gospel while still clinging to the thorns of sin. Without a conscious break from the old life of sin, this person does not have a chance of being saved. The seed of the Gospel cannot survive to produce fruit in a heart filled with other things. The seed must have the ground, or sin must have the ground, but it cannot be shared! Jesus said it was the cares of the world and the quest for earthly riches that spelled disaster for this kind of soil. This kind of person begins well, but soon fades away, having their profession choked out by sin and the world. Were they saved? No! How do we know for sure? Because they produced no fruit.

IV. The Good Soil (Matthew 13:8, 23)

Finally, some seed fell onto good ground. This ground had been worked and prepared; it had been ploughed and tilled, and it was ready to receive the seed when it came. The seed germinated within the heart of the soil, and the plant began to grow. When the plant reached maturity, it began to produce fruit that brought joy and gain to the farmer.

This is a picture of the heart that has been ploughed deeply by the Word of God. It is a picture of a heart that has been tilled and prepared by the grace of God — a heart fully receptive to hear the voice of our Lord through constant meditation. When the seed of the Gospel meets this kind of heart, it germinates, grows up, and bears fruit to the glory of God. This heart alone pictures the kind of life that can truly call itself saved!

We notice that the only difference between these soils was fruit. On the hard soil, the seed did not penetrate, but it disappeared, being removed by the fowls. In the other three, the seed disappeared within the ground. In the last three soils, a plant resulted, but only the good soil brought forth a harvest! What kind of soil are you and I this evening? Has the Gospel message found a lodging place within our hearts and our lives? Are we bearing fruit to the glory of God as we should? Let us not get hung up on fruit bearing! Some of these plants brought forth more fruit than others, but the point is that they all bore some fruit! If you are saved, your duty is to abide in Jesus, and He will produce His fruit in your life, as it pleases Him:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:1-11).

If you will abide in Him, you will find that “fruit happens”!

D. While these kinds of soil are used to speak about the matter of salvation, there is another application that we can draw from them as well. If we are not careful, we who are saved can allow ourselves to develop the wrong kind of heart. We can become hard-hearted toward the things of God, toward His house, and toward His Word. When this happens, we will find ourselves fruitless and defeated as believers! Or we can grow shallow in our commitment to the Lord and His work; this, too, can hinder our fruit production. Or we might allow our lives to become filled with the wrong kinds of things, thorns of sin and worldliness that will hinder us and keep us from being fruitful for the glory of the Lord. So, if we are saved tonight, what kind of soil is our heart made of?

The Challenge Before Us

Can we be honest with ourselves for just a few minutes? Let each one of us try to answer these questions truthfully:

- What kind of soil is my heart?
- Have I become hardened to the things of God?
- Am I shallow in my commitment to Him and His work?
- Am I constantly distracted, burdened, and defeated by sin and the cares of the world?
- Am I bearing the kind of fruit I should be bearing?

Everyone here tonight knows where they stand with the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be honest with ourselves, and with Him, about what we need to do this evening. If we need Him in salvation, in repentance, in rededication — in anything — His abundant grace is freely available to us.

Amen.