

THE ANSWER LIES IN THE SOIL

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and

yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23).

A crowd had gathered by the Sea of Galilee, eager to see and hear Jesus. Among them were many sick hoping to be healed. It was a joy for Jesus to exercise His right to restore them to vibrant health.⁴²

As the crowd grew larger and pressed closer, Jesus finally had no room on the beach. So He stepped into a fishing boat and asked the disciples to push out a little into the water. Unhindered, He then spoke to the crowd listening on the shore.

The plain of Gennesaret stretched out beside the lakeshore, and beyond it rose the hills. That day, on both the plain and the hillsides, workers were busy. Some were planting grain; others were reaping a harvest from an early crop. Jesus, seeing these activities, told the farmer/seed parable.

The Jews of that day were fixated on a Messiah who would reestablish their earthly kingdom. But Jesus explained that the kingdom would not be established by force, violence, or weapons of war. It would come only when a startling new principle found fertile soil in human minds.⁴³

To set the stage for understanding this truth, Jesus presented Himself in the story, not as a powerful king but as a humble farmer planting seeds. In this way He taught them that the same laws that control planting, growth, and harvesting on a farm also apply to the development of our spiritual lives.⁴⁴

The story left the crowd mystified. It awakened their interest, but it also dashed their dreams. Even the disciples failed to get the point of the parable. They privately came to Jesus later and asked for an explanation.⁴⁵

In the words of the promise made to Adam and Eve in Eden, Jesus planted the seed of the gospel. And in the words of this parable Jesus again planted the seed of the gospel. In

the story, the seed represents the word of God. Every seed contains life. And every word from God contains life. Jesus said, “Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). The life of God is in every requirement and promise of the Word of God. Through Him every requirement is accomplished and every promise becomes reality. So to receive God’s Word is to receive the life and character of God.

All seeds reproduce themselves—and only themselves. If you plant seeds under receptive conditions, then the specific life in that seed will grow. In the same way, if you plant the words of God in your life under receptive conditions, they will grow a life and character like the life and character of God.⁴⁶ Philosophy and secular literature, no matter how brilliant, can’t do this. But when God’s words are planted in your soul, they spring to life, everlasting life.⁴⁷

Note that in the story the farmer sowed his seed. Jesus taught truth because He is the truth. His own thoughts, character, and life–experience permeated His teaching. And the same principle applies whenever we share God’s Word with others. We can teach effectively only what we have experienced. So before we share the good news, we must make it our own by personal experience.

The story of the farmer describes four contrasting situations, four kinds of places on which the seed fell. When the farmer scattered the seed by hand, the breeze could take it in any direction, some intended and some not. Jesus told the story so His hearers would understand that the results are determined exclusively by the conditions into which the seed falls.

Some seed fell on packed pathways. Jesus explained it this way: “Some [seeds] fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up” (Matthew 13:4, NIV). The seed that falls on the beaten path is a symbol of God’s Word that comes to an

unresponsive heart. There is much traffic on this path—sinful types of pleasure, selfish career goals, worldly indulgences. Time and attention are completely absorbed, and no attention is given to the words that bring life.

And just as birds are quick to see and feed on scattered seed, so temptation comes to divert our attention and make us indifferent. And if this reaction continues, soon our heart becomes like that hard path where the seeds of the gospel were scattered. It is unreceptive and calloused.”

Jesus continued: “Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away” (Matthew 13:5, 6).⁴⁸

If you plant some seeds in your window box or a stone pot filled with a little soil and mostly stones, you’ll see them sprout. But in the heat of the day, if plants have no root system and can’t access the nutrients and moisture of the soil, they quickly wither. This is a symbol of the reaction of some to receiving God’s Word. There is a profession of interest, an external reaching out to God but, like the rich young ruler, they trust in their own good works instead of the strength and power of the Lord. Self-interest continues to remain the active principle of life. There can be intellectual conviction, superficiality of action, but no true heart conviction, which means it soon comes to nothing.

Remember Matthew’s reaction to hearing the words of Jesus? He considered the invitation, counted the cost, and, without delay, got up, left everything, and followed Him. But the seed that falls in “rocky places” represents those who act rashly. They don’t count the cost; they act impulsively. They don’t make a full commitment to the Lord Jesus or to living the life He offers. They are content to live with exter-

nal appearances without making changes in their destructive habit patterns.⁴⁹

And the hot summer sun that strengthens and ripens healthy plants destroys plants that have no root system. Some people accept the gospel as a way out of personal difficulties rather than as a deliverance from sin. They're happy for a time thinking that religion will solve their problems. And as long as life moves along smoothly, they appear to be consistent Christians. But they faint when confronted by the first fiery temptation.⁵⁰

Love is the principle of God's government, and it must be the foundation of a Christian's character. Nothing else can give us the strength to overcome trial and temptation.⁵¹ And that love is revealed in sacrifice. The plan of redemption was born in sacrifice, and God's loving sacrifice is immeasurable. Jesus gave all for us, and those who receive Him will be ready to sacrifice all for Him.

Jesus says, "Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them" (Matthew 13:7). You can't grow a crop of wheat among weeds and thorns. And the seeds of God's love can thrive only when what otherwise "grows naturally" is rooted out, allowing God's grace to be the active principle in your life. As long as the Holy Spirit is allowed to work, our characters will be refined, and we will find the strength to weed out the habits that are in opposition to God's will. Accepting Jesus must be followed by modeling Him. It's a process the Bible calls sanctification. The two must always go together.

Jesus was quite specific in naming the factors that can keep us from growing in Him. One factor He identified as "the cares of the world." This applies to all people, no matter what their social situation. The poor fear they will not be able to obtain their basic necessities. The rich fear they will lose what they have accumulated. The fears of us all about

security should lead us to the One who has promised to supply all our needs, for He cares for us. No matter where we work or spend our time, we can become so absorbed in secular pursuits that we squeeze out of our lives those essentials for the growth of the seed of God's Word—time to meditate about God and heaven, time to pray, time to study Scripture, time to seek and serve God. The noise of the world overpowers the voice of the Spirit of God.

Next, Jesus talked about the deceitfulness of wealth. Instead of regarding wealth as a gift to be used for God's glory and for helping others, it can be used as a means of promoting self. In this case, instead of developing the selflessness of God, we develop the selfishness of Satan.⁵²

Then Jesus talked about "the pleasures of life." He didn't mean we were not to have a good time. (After all, He began His ministry in Palestine at a wedding celebration and didn't hesitate to attend social gatherings such as Matthew's and Simon's.) Rather, here Jesus discusses the danger of those kinds of amusements that draw our affections away from Him. He's condemning indulgences that diminish our physical strength, dull our minds, and numb our spiritual perceptions—all of which stifle spiritual growth.

The farmer, Jesus continued, does not always meet with disappointment. Sometimes the seed falls into good ground, and he reaps a wonderful harvest. "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it" (Matthew 13:23). This doesn't refer to a heart without sin, because the Gospel is to be preached to the lost. Rather, the honest heart refers to one who yields to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, confessing guilt, feeling the need of the mercy and love of God. The person who receives the Scriptures as the voice of God is the true learner. Angels of God come close to those who humbly seek for divine guidance.⁵³

If our hearts become the "good ground," we will choose

to fill our minds with great thoughts, pure thoughts. Jesus will live in us, producing the good fruit of obedience and good works. Our troubles and difficulties will help us become more Christ like until we seek eternal life with our whole heart, even at the cost of loss, persecution, or death itself.⁵⁴

Throughout the story of the farmer, Jesus showed that the differing planting results are based on the receptivity of the soil. In each case the farmer is the same, and the seed is the same. So if the Word of God fails to prosper in our lives, the problem lies in ourselves. The results are in our control. It's true that we can't change ourselves; but we do have the power of choice, so we determine what we will become. If your experience has been that of a beaten pathway or stony ground, thorns, and weeds, it doesn't have to continue that way.⁵⁵

God's Spirit is ready to break the old patterns and to give you a new life if you will allow your heart to be "good soil," a hearer and a doer of His Word.

As the seed of His Word grows roots deep into the fertile soil of your heart, it will sprout! By the invisible union of your life with Jesus, through faith your spiritual life can flourish. When Jesus plants the seeds of the good news in the receptive soil of your heart, the harvest is joy—joy for you, joy for all of heaven!⁵⁶