

The Parable of the Soils

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Preacher: Rev Dave Brown

[0:00] This weekend for the following two Sundays we're in this section of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus speaks almost entirely in parables. I say that because today we not only have a parable but an explanation of that parable and then those words in verses 10 to 17 as to why Jesus teaches in this way.

Those are key words I think they help us see the importance of what Jesus is teaching within this parable here. I think one of the difficulties with parables maybe particularly this one is that we often see it as referring to other people particularly those outside the church.

I think that could be helpful knowing that our seed scattering sharing the good news with others will bring all kinds of responses helps us deal with that disappointment when not everyone accepts that invitation to come to church or take something to read or come on a course.

We might think it's better to wait for better times but this parable tells us that even in the best of times the response will be mixed. The words of the teacher in Ecclesiastes 11.4 should warn us against prevarication and stir us to action.

The teacher says there whoever watches the wind will not plant whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. Now is the time to share the good news. The parable acts then as a reminder that scattering of God's seed of sharing the good news of Jesus is something we should all be doing.

[1:36] The constant activity of God's church in every age. God's Holy Spirit has the job of making those seeds grow but we are to be those who scatter the seeds and share the good news of Jesus.

But those middle verses make the point that if people refuse to listen God will not force the good news into their ears. It's the attitude of our hearts that makes a huge difference in this situation. And if we can consistently harden our hearts and turn away then what was true of God's people in the Old Testament will become true of us. We will get what we want.

Our ears will go deaf and our hearts will grow hard and our lives will remain unchallenged. Hearts that have no interest in the things of God grow harder so God's word has no effect.

That's why this parable is as much for us today as it is for all those who hear God's word wherever and whenever that might be. I think there's clearly an application for those who hear the good news of Jesus for the first time.

[2:43] What are their hearts going to be like? Are they going to receive that good news and follow or are they going to turn away? But actually this is a parable that challenges us about how we respond to God's word every day.

Whether we're here together in church, whether we're meeting with a small group of Christians, whether we're at home reading the Bible on our own. Will we be those who have ears to hear or those who refuse to take notes?

And will we be those who keep hold of what we've heard? Or will we let the glorious truths God has spoken to us slip through our fingers because of times of testing or temptation?

So as we think about this parable, don't be thinking about the people around you or people outside the church. Let's see if we can allow Jesus' words to challenge and change us this morning.

So that we might become fruitful disciples of the master gardener. Well, I'm sure you've heard this parable many times, but here's a one sentence recap. A farmer sows his seed and it falls of one in four different places, leading to four different results.

[3:49] Three of which are unfruitful. The seed is clearly the good news of the gospel, the message of God and how to enter his kingdom. That's the message that we need to have ears to hear.

The apostle Paul spoke of that message this way. It is the power of God for the salvation of the world. One person at a time, changing communities and nations.

If you've ever been in a churchyard and you've looked at an old memorial that now is cracked because there is a tree growing through the middle of it. You know the power of a seed as it grows. It's growing almost imperceptibly, but the strength of that stone can't resist it. That is the power of God's words. The one sowing the seed is Jesus in the first instance.

He is the farmer here. All the world, as we've just sung, is his own field. But it also includes his disciples, then and all Christians now, as we share our faith.

[4:52] The fact that there are four reactions isn't to say that there are no other possible reactions to the gospel. In his own ministry, Jesus found that there were those who mocked his message and plenty who I'm sure went out of their way not to hear anything he had to say.

But many came to hear him, and these four reactions should challenge us. So here's the first one. The seed that fell on the path is the hard-hearted hearer.

Notice that the seed does fall there, and it settles there. A hard-hearted hearer can't go on their way and say, well, no one told me. No, they heard it. The sound of the words went into their ears, and they were understood.

It wasn't in a foreign language, but the words were forgotten almost as soon as they were heard. It brings to mind a phrase that my dad used to say to me sometimes. I told you what to do, but the words just went in one ear and straight out the other.

Except that the reason Jesus gives here for this response is far more sinister, isn't it? You notice that verse 19? The evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in their hearts.

[6:00] It's as if the hearer hasn't realised how precious the gospel is, so they haven't paid it any attention. They've just left it there. And so it is snatched away. That's a terrible thing to let happen.

Reminds me of a sign that you see around Oxford Street, and sadly in other city centres these days as well. Maybe you've seen one. Thieves and pickpockets operate in this area.

You do not have to be one of their victims. Look after your possessions. Because if we wander along with our handbags open and our purses there, or our mobile phones just casually held in our hands, or a wallet sticking out of our back pocket, well, of course, someone's going to look at it and say, I'll have a bit of fat.

Thank you. When things are precious, we need to look after them. So here's the challenge. Are we careless with God's word to us? When we hear the word preached week by week, when we read the scriptures ourselves, do we let the words of God bounce away?

Or do we take them in? Maybe you're letting them bounce away now. Spent many days in churches in my early years, adding up the numbers of the hymns to see what numbers I could come up with, counting the tiles on the roof.

[7:16] Maybe you're planning your shopping lists at the moment. Anything but listening. But when we do that, we're doing the enemy's work. We're being careless with the gospel.

The hard-hearted hearer lets the word get snatched away, and they don't really care. It was of no value to them, they thought. The reaction to the word of God in the second situation is very different, isn't it?

There is joy and delight as the hearer hears about the mercy and goodness and greatness of God. And the word of God settles into their hearts, and it sprouts up quickly. But sadly, Jesus says, this growth and new life don't last.

This is the seed that falls on the rocky soil. It's not so much among rocks, but on a piece of land where the bedrock is just a few centimetres below the top of the soil.

So the soil is easily warmed by the sun. The seeds germinate quickly, but then the sun comes out. And it gets hot. And the bright new plant shrivels and dies.

[8:21] We might say that the hearer has got a fickle heart. Quickly warmed, but just as quickly cooled. Jesus explains the hot sun as trouble and persecution because of the word.

Verse 21. Notice that Jesus says that those things are a when, not an if. Because if the evil one cannot snatch the word away quickly, he turns to other tactics, which include trouble and persecution.

Maybe you know you've reacted like this to God's word in the past. Maybe you've known a time of great blessing, renewed faith, when maybe some Bible readings or a talk has set your heart ablaze. But then when you talk to your friends or family about it, a good friend gave you the cold shoulder because now you've got religion. Or a sibling started to mock your faith at every opportunity for those things you now believed.

And maybe it was just easier to throw in the towel to go with the flow and just give up. After all, faith is supposed to make life easier, isn't it? Not more hard, not more difficult. I think sometimes churches haven't helped new disciples in this way by failing to explain Jesus' own words to count the cost, to take up your cross, to die to self.

[9 : 39] I've known so many excited new believers give up when life got tough. Maybe you've come across people like that too. So how do we not fall away? Well, elsewhere, Jesus says we should count the cost before we begin.

But also we're encouraged to keep the rewards of eternity in view and to fix our eyes on Jesus. Because he is the one who suffered far more for us than we ever will for him.

And he stayed true to the end. He becomes our example. We're tempted to give in. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus afresh. Let's measure the cost of our discipleship now with an eternal perspective. Let's see whether with God's help we can count it an honour to suffer for Christ. Let's not have a fickle heart. The third type of soil looks more promising.

Having settled in decent soil, put down deeper roots. The hearer endures being tested because of the word and looks to be doing well. But then there's another problem. Those of you that are gardeners know this one.

[10 : 45] Because the weeds start coming up. And the young plant gets choked. And it never matures nor bears any fruit. The hope is still there.

There is a faith there. But the plant bears no fruit at all. There is no noticeable impact of what is believed. The seed that falls amongst weeds is a hearer with a divided heart.

Jesus gives two possibilities for the cause of this. Verse 22, he describes those weeds as the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth. And both of those can be dangerous to our faith.

Troubles and worries of this life should send us to our knees in prayer. But so often they end up driving us away from God. Not very often because we're raging our fists at God in a peak of anger. But because those difficult times we can become so focused on them that we get too busy to pray. Too stressed to read and study.

[11 : 44] Too weary to get up and get to church. I've had times like that, if I'm honest. Maybe you have too. But stepping away from God doesn't help us cope with our trials.

Quite the opposite. Instead, we miss out on the power and peace of God. Our faith becomes a hollow habit. A weekly chore that bears little if no fruit.

The deceitfulness of wealth is at the other end of the spectrum. Here, life looks great. Your family is settled and healthy. Your career is flourishing. Our retirement has opened up so many opportunities.

And there's plenty of money in the bank to do whatever you feel. And to begin with, you thank God for these blessings. And they are great blessings. But then that good thing morphs into a God thing. And your focus becomes on that rather than on the giver. And all our daydreams and energies going to those things. Rather than the one who gave them to us.

[12 : 45] And so our love and commitment to God wanes. The weeds choke our faith. And they kill off any prospect of fruit. I think that's behind the test of Abraham in Genesis 22.

Would he love God and follow him no matter the cost? Well, Abraham passed that test. What about us? Well, what is the fruit we should be looking to see in our lives?

Well, the former Bishop of Liverpool, J.C. Ryle, put it like this. The fruit here spoken of is the fruit of the Spirit. Repentance towards God. Faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

Holiness of life and character. Prayerfulness, humility, charity, spiritual mindedness. Without such proofs our religion is in vain. However high our profession, it is no better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

Are the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of wealth, making us unfruitful? Do we have, if we're honest, divided hearts? We need to check.

[13 : 50] Or we'll never be fruitful disciples. It's only the fourth kind of soil that yields a good crop. 30, 60 or 100 fold. And here we find a hearer with a humble heart.

One who hears God's word and understands it and values it and seeks with God's help to put it into practice. This kind of hearer has a heart that sees greater value in the eternal than in the temporal. Someone who rejoices in God's kind gifts but who holds them lightly and does not make those gifts into little mini-gods. A person who, because of their trust in Christ, can bear all things and endure all

things.

Whose troubles drive them closer to God, not further away. And who, as a result, grows closer and more like the Lord Jesus as they wait patiently for the kingdom of God to come.

To what extent are our hearts like that? Are we humble before God? Eager for his word? Thankful, committed, obedient disciples? We'll only be fruitful if we are.

[14:59] So how is your heart this morning? How are your ears this morning? Is your heart hard towards God's word so that the truths of the scripture bounce away?

Is your heart fickle? Are you driven by emotions? And only trusting God when being a Christian is easy? Is your heart divided?

Are worldly worries robbing you of God's peace? Are there things that have a higher importance in your life than obedience to God? Or is your heart humble and receptive to God's word?

Are we growing more like Jesus? None of us are as fruitful as we might be. But wonderfully, our saviour is a master gardener. And if we're willing to let him, he will carefully prune us and tend us so that we will bear fruit.

It's 30, 60, 100 times what was sown. If we have ears to hear, may we listen to God's word to us this morning. Amen.

[16:05] Amen. so