THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (SOILS)

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By Pastor Stan
Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23

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INTRO.
-- We're going through the book of Matthew and are in chapter 13. Matthew organizes his Gospel around 5 of Jesus' discourses, what you might call teaching sermons, and this chapter is one of them. Jesus is speaking to a crowd gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus knows that some of those in the crowd believe that He is the Messiah but many, probably most, don't believe in Him. They're curious about Him and amazed at His miracles, but they haven't believed in Him as the Messiah.
-- The major theme of this sermon, and indeed of Jesus' ministry, is the Kingdom of God - Matthew uses the expression "Kingdom of Heaven" most of the time. The first century Jews had definite expectations about the Messiah and about the kingdom he would establish. They expected the Messiah to be an exalted version of David and Solomon, who would expel the Romans and would reign from His throne in Jerusalem and would establish a glorious kingdom of righteousness and justice, peace and prosperity.
-- But the kingdom that Jesus had come to establish was very different. Jesus is going to teach about that kingdom in this sermon, but He is going to that in an unusual manner. Look at verse 3.

13:3a, "And he told them many things in parables…"

This sermon is entirely parables without any interpretation or explanation of their meaning.

I. Introductory Information

-- In Matthew 13 Jesus tells 7 parables about the kingdom of God. A parable is a comparison that gives insight into spiritual truth. The word "parable" means literally to throw alongside; so, a parable takes something out of everyday life and puts it alongside a spiritual; truth to open a window of understanding into that truth.

II. the first: The Parable of the Sower/ Soils

-- Today, we're going to look at the first and best-known of the parables in this chapter. It's the parable commonly known as "The Parable of the Sower," but many think that it would be more accurate to call it "The Parable of the Soils."

vv. 3-9

A. The Parable (vv. 3-9)

-- It appears that when Jesus told this and the other parables in the chapter that He did so without any explanation, prompting Jesus' Disciples to come to Him with a question.

B. The Question (vv. 10-17)

1. The Disciples' question and Jesus' reply could have happened during the sermon or afterwards. Notice in verse 10 that the Disciples ask about Jesus' using "parables," plural; but at that point Jesus had given only one parable; this may indicate that the incident actually occurred later, after the sermon but that Matthew placed the question and reply here so we would know why Jesus was using these parables, that He was using the parables for two purposes - both to reveal and to conceal truth about the kingdom.

2. Jesus' 2 purposes.

(a) For those with hearts seeking God, those who were desiring to know the truth, those who were ready receive the truth, for them the parables reveal truth about God and His Kingdom.

(b) But those parables teach about the kingdom with analogies, comparisons that require some reflection and interpretation. Consequently, for those who weren't genuinely seeking to know and to understand God's truth, the parables would conceal the truth.

C. The Interpretation (vv. 18-23)

-- Jesus, of course, wants His Disciples to understand the truth in the parable; so, He now proceeds to interpret its meaning to them.

vv. 18-23

1. The Seed

-- The seed in the parable represents the Gospel, or as Jesus says in v. 19a

v. 19a, "the word of the kingdom"

-- The seed is the message about the arrival of God's Kingdom and of how to enter and become a member of it.

2. The Sower

-- The sower is the one who spreads or proclaims the message. In a sense, Jesus is always the sower. During His earthly ministry Jesus went about in His incarnate, physical body telling the message. When Jesus returned to Heaven, He left another body on earth through which He continues to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; that body, of course, is us, the Church.

3. The Soils

-- The primary emphasis of the parable, however, is on the soils where the seed lands. Jesus identifies 4 different kinds of soil, each one representing a category of the human heart. Whenever and wherever we proclaim the Gospel these 4 groups are generally present. They were present throughout Jesus' ministry; they were, undoubtedly, present in the crowd on the shore of Galilee; and they may all be here in this service today.

-- As we examine these 4 soils, ask yourself which one represents you. Or better than that, ask the Holy Spirit to show you which soil is a picture of your heart.

a. Soil #1

(1) The Hardened Soil (v. 4)

-- Between the fields were paths for workers and travelers. The feet of those walking on the path packed the soil, and then the hot Judean sun baked that soil until it was brick-hard. Any seed falling on those paths didn't have a chance to grow. Birds followed the sower and immediately ate any seed that fell on the paths.

(2) Hardened, Unresponsive Heart (v. 19)

-- The soil on the path represents hearts that are hardened and unresponsive to the Gospel.

v. 19

-- Some people are rock-hard to the Gospel. They are skeptical, bitter, cynical, rebellious. Talking to them is like talking to a wall - or to your husband during a Vikings game. People like this soil won't allow the Gospel any entrance into their hearts or minds. For Satan, these people are easy picking. Just like the birds eating the seed off the pavement-like path, Satan easily robs the person with a hardened heart of the good news of salvation.

b. Soil #2

(1) The Rocky Soil (vv. 5-6)

-- There are areas of Galilee where limestone is near the surface, covered with just 2 or 3 inches of soil. That soil warms easily, and a heavy dew can cause seeds to germinate and grow quickly. But there's not enough moisture in the dry soil to sustain the tender plants during the heat of the day

(2) The Superficial, Shallow Heart (vv. 20-21)

-- Jesus says that this soil represents the superficial, shallow heart.

vv. 20-21

-- People like this live shallow lives - always hopping from one thing to another. Every time you see them they're into something new. People like this can embrace the Gospel readily and with great excitement. But, as with most other things in their lives, their response to the Gospel is superficial and shallow. They're unwilling to pay the cost of real discipleship. They may want to volunteer for everything at first, but in a few weeks or a couple of months they lose interest and drop out of ministries and before long they leave church and move on to something else.

c. Soil #3

(1) The Crowded Soil (v. 7)

-- This soil has so many weeds and wild plants competing for space and nourishment that the good seed can't survive.

(2) The Preoccupied, Materialistic Heart (v. 22)

-- People with preoccupied, cluttered and materialistic hearts can hear the call of the Gospel. But they hear other calls just as strongly - the call of money, the call of possessions, of power and of pleasures. Their hearts are so preoccupied and distracted that they get pulled away from the Gospel towards a hundred other pursuits.

d. Soil #4

(1) The Good Soil (v. 8)

-- Finally, thankfully, there's the good soil.

v. 8

(2) The Receptive, Fruitful Heart (v. 23)

-- This soil represents the receptive, fruitful heart. This is the only soil that is the real thing. Only those in this group are genuine believers and true disciples. The only heart that's genuinely Christian is the one where the message takes root in the heart and the Spirit of God transforms the person and gives them new life, and the person perseveres and grows and bears the fruit of a Christ-like character and life.

It's not enough to hear the Gospel - even to hear it every Sunday. It's not enough to get excited about the Gospel. It's not even to recognize the value of the Gospel and say that it is good and true. Kingdom hearts are hearts where the Gospel takes root and transforms the person and changes the life.

CONCLUSION

T.S. Eliot was a British poet and writer who lived about 100 years ago. He was one of the most brilliant poets of the 20th Century. In the 1920s he lived in a section of central London that attracted a number of talented artists and intellectuals, and he shocked them all when in 1927 he became a confessing Christian and got baptized. Virginia Wolf, the famous writer who had been a friend of Eliot, expressed her surprise and disgust in a letter to a friend:

I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become a [believer] in God and immortality, and he goes to church. I was shocked. A corpse would seem more credible than he is.

In other words, Virginia Wolf thought Eliot would have been netter dead than being a Christian. Now that's a hardened heart. And it's the same kind of a heart that T.S. Eliot had possessed. So how did Eliot go from hardened soil to good soil, from a hardened heart to a receptive heart? The grace of God. God can change the hardest of hearts into hearts where the Gospel takes root and grows and produces new life.

He did that in my father's heart. He did that in my heart. There was a time when my heart was hard to the Gospel, when my heart was like the hard path where the seed had no chance to grow. But God did a work of sovereign grace and mercy and changed that hard heart into one in which the seed took root and grew and burst forth into wonderful new life. And God can do the same in your heart - today.