

Stories Jesus Told, Pt. 4
Changing Soils

Mark 4: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
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In Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge his own funeral where no one mourns him, not one person. He points Scrooge to a grave with his name on it. The terrified Scrooge then asks this poignant question, "Are these the shadows of the things that *will* be, or are they shadows of things that *may* be, only?" Scrooge wants to know "Is this

horrible future inevitable? Have I so sealed my fate that I can't change?" The question he raises is whether or not a person escape his past, his genetics, his upbringing, and his choices and live in a new way? That's the issue that underlies the parable Jesus told in today's passage.

A farmer went out to sow some seed. Wearing a seed bag around his neck, the farmer would reach into the bag, grab a handful of seed, and toss it out on the ground of the land he farmed. The seed, Jesus said, is the message of his Father's kingdom. Jesus himself is the farmer, making the message known through his words and his works. The seed fell onto four different types of soil.



1) Hard Soil. Now some seed fell on the path. The path was the hard ground that was walked on over and over until it became pressed down and hardened. The seed could not take root in such hard-packed ground before the birds came and ate it up. This is what happens, Jesus said, when people hear the message about the

kingdom but before it takes root the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts. Jesus acknowledges the presence of an adversary in the world. There is a power hostile to God's intent of redeeming us. He seizes upon the space between when the seed is sown and when it takes root, working hard to remove God's Word before it can make a difference in us.

This adversary works through a number of different means. The hard ground that resists the seed can be created from either a passive or active circumstance. For example, some people hear the Word, but a host of life situations have already made their soil hard and unreceptive. There's so much chaos at home that it is impossible to concentrate on the message. Or one might have been betrayed so deeply by a minister that it's impossible to open yourself to preaching again. Someone may have had no instruction about God as a child, so when the Word comes to them, there is no context. It makes no sense, so they do not understand. The adversary has done his work ahead of time, so that the Word gets plucked away from someone.

Another sense of the parable, however, is that Jesus is talking about *willful* hardness in the soil that does not receive the seed. There seems to be some urgency between hearing and acting on God's Word. We know well how easy it is to postpone responding. Yes, tomorrow I will start having a prayer time in the morning. Next week I'm going to get involved in that Bible study. I'll ask open my will to God's will right after I finish this project. We simply miss the moment when the Word comes by postponing our response.



2) Rocky Soil. The second type of soil that received seeds was the rocky soil. The seeds sprouted quickly because the rocks underneath warmed up in the spring sun. So these seeds began to grow quickly. But the same rocks that encouraged early growth also prevented any deep root from taking place. Growing fast in the spring, these plants are suddenly defenseless in the summer heat. They can't reach through the rocks to find moisture. They wither and die before any crop is yielded. This soil, says Jesus, represents "the ones who hear the word and at once receives it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away." They believe fast but fade soon. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, these plants don't have enough depth of root to survive.

Through the years, there are people who pass through these walls, get excited at worship, get highly active, and then flame out. Before you know it, they are gone. Some are nowhere to be found. They start with the best intentions, but sink no real root. Therefore, when the first love fades and the work of building a church, building a faith, building the body of Christ ensues, they wilt away.

Others just haven't sunk enough roots of knowledge and experience to know how to handle the pressure of the world. Within these walls, they hear that Jesus is Lord, and that the truth about God is Jesus Christ. They agree, they affirm. But outside these walls, they lose their confidence. They don't know how to counter the claims of atheists and pluralists. They wilt under the sophistication of cynics, and cringe from being labeled misfits and Puritans by the trendy pagans at work. No roots, no spine, no depth of knowledge. These Christians wilt fast.



3) Thorny Soil. The third type of soil on which the farmer throws seed is the ground that is already full of thorns. The good seeds sprout and grow, but the thorny weeds end up choking them out. These are the people, Jesus says, “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.” Oh, do we know about this! Who can cultivate a life of faith amidst the pace of life today?

Desperate for rest on Sunday, it's hard to get up for church. It's hard to commit to Sunday school. With all the things the kids are into, and the sheer volume of traffic in this town, getting to Bible study, or getting involved in a service project seems virtually impossible. Life demands a lot from us. That's the passive side—we feel helpless before this busyness.

On the other side, though, we know that we are pursuing madly all the distractions that keep us from consistent growth and service. We've got so many places to travel, so many experiences to savor. Our homes demand a lot of attention, and some of us have more than one house... Our kids are involved in travel sports, and those coaches aren't as kind as church people about their missing. Moreover, we have to make our way in this world, in today's business climate, and it's difficult to hold a Christian ethic and still get ahead. It's hard not to think about business even now during the sermon, isn't it? Plus, with everyone around us living out the deception that wealth will create security and fulfillment, it's hard not to believe it with them. In particular, our families with children feel a huge pressure to keep up. We get choked out.



4) Good Soil. The fourth type of soil, of course, is the good soil. It yields a huge crop of grain, multiplying into thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. This is the person who hears the word and receives it deeply. They root into a community of Christ. They learn to see life and the world through Jesus' eyes. Everything else shakes out from the priority of meeting Jesus, learning his word and being shaped by it. Isn't it fascinating how Jesus connects knowing with the fruit of one's life? Service without knowledge is empty. We know God by hearing the Word and opening our hearts to it. We let our minds be shaped and conformed by God's way, not the world's way. This quite naturally shapes our actions and makes us fruitful.

Of course we all want to be the fruitful soil. We're each and all convicted by all three of the bad soil types. I harden my heart in areas I don't want to change. I chicken out when the pressure gets too great. God gets choked out of my life by movies, bills, football, worries and general busyness. Jesus nails me all three places.

So the crucial question is, "Can we change soils? If so, how?"

Scripture gives us some very practical actions that create spiritual change. That have to do with our hearts, our time, our money and our actions. They are ridiculously simple to grasp. And devastatingly hard to do.

1) Pray. Ask the farmer to till your soil. To plow up the rocks and soften my hard heart. To clear out the rocks and the weeds. To fertilize my heart with a sense of his love and goodness. I ask him, often, to send his Holy Spirit to tend me. I do it in an attitude of availability and submission.

2) Keep the Sabbath. Set aside one day a week for God, for rest and works of compassion. Time is the most precious commodity in these fast-paced lives we lead. Ceasing work for a day a week is revolutionary. Seems impossible. But it will change your life. And the world will get on just fine without you. Sports team will not collapse when you say, "We can't do that game on Sunday morning." Your children will still grow up to be successful if you say, "This semester we are not travelling for sports." Or, "This year, we're doing one activity per child not three." You will be amazed what happens in your relationships, your business and your soul if you start to keep a Sabbath day rest.

3) Tithe. Ship out the ten per cent and watch what happens to your spiritual life. Many of you do that and I know you can testify to the power of giving back to God in a significant way. Giving frees us from idolatry. And it frees us from worry. One immediate way to jumpstart your spiritual life is to move some treasure. Just start towards the goal. Go online and join the Magruder's support team. Or invest in a college ministry. Or go pay for an ultrasound for a pregnant teenager. See if that begins to change your soil.

4) Fasting is another ancient discipline endorsed by Jesus. Abstain from food for a defined period and whenever you feel hunger, turn your attention to God, who alone is your source and sustainer. This is one I'm not very good at. But even skipping one meal a week to pray and rely on God will shift the quality of your soil. Fasting can come in a lot of different forms. You can take a media fast: go a day without the internet or television. Go a day without looking at a screen. You will not be the same!

What would be funny, if it weren't so tragic, is that most of you don't believe me. When it comes down to it, I don't believe me! We figure it has to be more spiritual than involving my time, my money and my belly. We figure only fanatics from years ago believed any of that. We figure that's too hard. So we stay locked in our soil types and wonder why God doesn't do more with us. If you want to change, if you want to grow, start simple and start strong: pray, keep the Sabbath, tithe, and fast. Just do it. Use the change in focus to worship, to study, to fellowship, to give and to serve. Try it this summer. Keep eight Sabbaths; tithe on two months gross income. Fast four meals over 8 weeks. Turn off social media for a week. In the process, seek God in his Word. Seek God in his people. Seek God through service. Don't be a victim of the world's game. Don't be a victim of your past. Don't be a victim of raving sports and entertainment culture. Don't be a victim of your job. Make a change. Test God and see what happens. Tell me what happens!

We close with the missional aspect of this text. It's not just about me personally. It's about the call to be a soil cultivator. To carry the water of love and mercy that softens hard, stony hearts. To risk getting pricked as you help others untangle from the thorns. To help people dig up the rocks and sink deeper roots. Changing soils is about our each becoming more devoted disciples. Fruitfulness is about helping others become devoted disciples. We cultivate the soil of our lives in the field of our community, this fellowship of believers. One of our elders noted this week that changing soils is really all about spiritual yielding.

Jesus told us this parable to motivate us to soil cultivation. To remind us we are not stuck. Jesus wants us to know that he is our life. He is our fulfillment. He is our connection to his Father. Only by his word do we do anything that has eternal significance. Apart from him we have no good. In his presence, though, is fullness of joy. A fruitful life. In each life, the bad soil mixes with the good. The hope, though, is that change is possible. We've just got to make a move, to do the obvious, to start down the road of daily spiritual yielding.