

The Ideal Soil

The very first time I flew on an international flight, the flight stewards began their safety demonstration. I listened intently, and followed them closely. I was quite disturbed by the fact that some of my fellow passengers weren't paying attention at all. Some were reading, some had headphones on, some were talking, and I was amazed that these passengers would be uninterested in the information that would save their lives. Now, what I didn't know was that many of my fellow passengers knew the safety drill very well, because they had flown so often. But it still horrified me that people could ignore a safety demonstration, one that might save them.

It is equally amazing to me, that when the Word of God comes, that which will save not only our bodies, but our souls, many people are like those passengers. Distracted, amusing themselves, wandering minds, only half aware that what is being said up there has to do with their own safety and well-being.

But that is what Jesus told us would happen in the parable of the sower. As we have seen, Jesus told us that three-fourths of his hearers would not hear. They would be indifferent, they would be impulsive but indifferent under the surface, or they would be infested with all kinds of distractions, which would ultimately render the Word unfruitful in their lives.

Having examined the hard heart, the shallow heart, the worldly heart, we come at last to the heart we should all strive for – the ideal heart. The good heart.

I. The Image of the Ideal Heart

Here is the image of the fourth soil:

Luke 8:8 *But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

From the seed which falls on hard pathways, to the seed which falls on disguised limestone, to the seed which falls on ground hiding the seeds of thorns which will destroy it, is seed which falls on good ground.

What is meant by *good*? Well, by implication, it does not have the problems of the other three. It is not hard. It is not shallow. It is not infested. Positively speaking, it has enough softness to receive seed, enough depth to allow roots to go down and enough space to allow it to grow without being crowded out.

The soil itself is really like all other soil. It is simply that it is not hardened down, or covering more hardness, or infested with other things. It is soft, deep enough and spacious enough.

The result is that it grows a crop of varying fruitfulness. In Christ's telling of this parable in Matthew and Mark, He adds the words "**Matthew 13:8** some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. " Even in the good ground, there are variations in fruitfulness.

Now we might make the mistake of imagining that this kind of ground just happened to be that way, by chance, by accident. Even if you have done a small amount of gardening, you will know that ground like this doesn't just happen. Leave ground in the hot sun after rain, and it bakes into a hard layer, which needs the fork and the plough to open it up again. Put your spade in the soil to the depth that a root might go, and you run into stones of various sizes, and old tree root running across

the bottom. If you want good plants, you have to get those out. And, ground left to itself sprouts weeds as surely as the sun rises and sets. You don't have to go to the nursery to buy weed seeds. They just come.

So when Jesus talks about ground that is soft, and without stones or roots hidden beneath the surface, or without thorns and weeds, you can be sure that his agriculturally-minded audience knew he was talking about ground that had been deliberately cultivated, ground that had been worked on by human hands to get it into that state.

You could say that this kind of ground is in fact the target of the seed. It only happens to fall on wayside ground, shallow ground or thorny ground. But it is wasted there. Seed only thrives on cultivated soil. Its real target is ground cultivated and prepared to receive it.

Now Jesus interprets this kind of ground for us.

Luke 8:15 *"But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, **keep it** and bear fruit with patience."*

In the telling of the parable in Matthew, Jesus says,

Matthew 13:23 *But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and **understands it**, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*

In the telling in Mark, we read,

Mark 4:20 *"But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, **accept it**, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."*

So this is a heart that accepts the Word, understands the Word, and keeps the Word with endurance, bringing forth fruit.

Jesus describes this kind of heart as noble and good. Those words can be translated honest and wholesome. The kind of heart that receives the Word has been made morally ready to receive it. The heart is filled with honesty and sincerity, instead of prejudice, lies, rationalisations. It is ready to receive the truth. The heart is filled with desires for righteousness, not filled with rejection, resistance and indifference. The heart is ready to obey in good or in bad, not only in the good. It is a heart that is single-minded and not distracted by the world.

Now we are coming to a paradox here. It is as if the soil needs to be good enough for the seed, even before the seed, which brings the fruits of righteousness even hits it. So, here is the Word, which changes a heart from good to bad, but for it to take root, it needs to be good already.

But that is exactly what Jesus says in verse 18:

Luke 8:18 *Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."*

Here is sovereignty and human responsibility operating in parallel fashion. If your heart has not been chosen by God and cultivated by God, then it will be like a Romans 1 heart – rejecting, defying, suppressing, exchanging, avoiding, idolising and justifying itself.

If you have not submitted to God in following up your heart and deepening it and weeding it, then it will regress into a state hostile to the Word, and even the fruit you seemed to have will seem to die.

So if you want a good heart which can receive the Word, you must acknowledge that God must do a work on your heart. You must admit that unless He comes and graciously gives you a new heart in

the first place, and keeps working on that heart, you will not go any further.

When we pray, we are saying, Lord, if you do not do this, then I will be one of those people who loses even that which he thinks he has. We are saying, Lord, please, be gracious, bless my ears and eyes with sight, favour me to be one of those who is not blinded or shallow or worldly. Lord, give me a noble and good heart.

The heart must be noble and good for the Word to have any effect.

How can we summarise this good and honest heart? How can we describe it so that we know what it does and does not do, so that we can know what we must do in cooperation with the Spirit of God to have this kind of heart?

II. The Attributes of the Good Heart

We've just seen that the good and honest heart is a heart that accepts the Word, understands the Word, and keeps the Word with endurance, bringing forth fruit. You can really boil it down to two simple actions that a good heart does with the Word. ***A good heart receives the Word (acceptance and understanding) and a good heart responds (keeping and bringing forth fruit) to the Word.*** A good heart receives the Word in a particular way, and a good heart responds to the Word in a particular way.

A. A Good Heart Receives the Word

Now what we have to be quick to notice is that Jesus pointed out that two of the other hearts also received the Word. The shallow soil received the Word and it grew, the thorny soil received the Word and it grew. In other words, what is needed is more than simply a reception, it is a particular kind of reception.

Let me show you two kinds of reception that the Bible describes as a good reception.

a) You must receive the Word with reverent relish

Acts 17:11 *These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.*

These Bereans were actually Jewish unbelievers, who were unlike their counterparts in Thessalonica who persecuted Paul. These Berean Jews had an attitude towards the Word that the Bible describes as noble, fair-minded. What made them noble and fair-minded?

It says they received the Word with readiness. The Word *readiness* in the original means eagerness. It is translated zeal when used in 2 Cor 9:2. It speaks of a strong desire, and hunger, a longing for the Word. These were people who loved God, and loved His will, so they loved His Word. So much so, that what did it motivate them to do? Once they had heard Paul, they went and searched the Scriptures daily to find out of these things were so.

Peter captures the image for us when he writes, “**1 Peter 2:2** *as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,*

An infant craves that milk, and cries when she can't have it. This was the attitude of Job, when he said, “**Job 23:12** *Neither have I gone back from the commandment of his lips; I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.* “

Here is another example of this attitude.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 *For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.*

These Thessalonian believers heard the preaching of God's Word, and they recognised something. They realised what a lot of people fail to realise. They were hearing human vessels, Paul and Silas, but they were able to see through and past Paul and Silas to recognise the divine character of what they were hearing. The speakers may have been crackly and a bit distorted, but the music was divine. The broadcast might have had static, but they knew its source was Heaven. The Thessalonians realised that God's Word preached by men, is not the word of men. God's Word preached by men is still, in truth the Word of God. So what the Thessalonians did is they welcomed the Word as the Word of God. They relished the opportunity to hear God's Words.

When we come to the Word, we have to realise, this is something different from hearing a lecture, listening to a seminar, a training conference, a political speech. This is the will of God. When God speaks, there is no error. When God speaks, there is nothing false. When God speaks, everything He says will be relevant, true, necessary, eternal and for your good.

Isaiah 66:2 *But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word.*

You see, there is only one appropriate posture to have when God speaks. It is a reverent relish. It is a worshipful welcome.

If your heart is filled with irreverence, unbelief, self-centredness, then your heart will not receive the Word. If you are outside at night, and you choose to look at your feet, it doesn't change the fact that the glory of the stars continues to shine. But you have to get into the right posture to see them. You must crane your neck and look up. The only appropriate attitude when God speaks is to look up with reverence, awe and recognition that He is still speaking, and when God speaks, we listen with readiness and we listen with reverence.

b) You must receive the Word with respectful restraint

¹⁹ *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

James tells us that the way to receive the Word is to repent and confess all known sin in your life and then receive that seed with a heart of meekness. What is meekness? Meekness is power under control, it is gentleness, and in the context it refers to a humbled response to hearing God convict us.

You see, what God starts with when he gets us at salvation looks very little like Jesus Christ. He has to do a lot of chipping and working with us to get us to look like Him. It is as if a sculptor receives a sculpture of a penguin, and is instructed, now make it into a fairy princess. Well, there will be a lot of chipping away.

As God does that with us, it tends to hurt. Who likes to hear they are not what they ought to be, week after week? Who likes to hear that huge changes are still needed, even after a week of trying hard? So what is needed is meekness. It is the attitude that says, "Yes, Lord, chip away. Search me,

bring out of my heart what will not be pleasant to look at, and then clean me, transform me, change me.”

Meekness is being in the dentist's chair. And as he begins picking and pulling, he hits something which sends a pain signal into the depths of your mouth. If he were not a dentist, and if you were not allowing him to do that for your good, you might physically defend yourself. He is causing you severe pain – but you take it! Why? Because he does it for your good, and meekness makes you lie in that chair until it is over.

You see, the temptation of our hearts is to get angry with the Word, and by implication with the one who preached the Word. But what does James say about the wrath of man in verse 20? It does not produce God's righteousness.

Now, God certainly fills His Word with promises, with comforts, with encouragements, with blessings – more than enough to make the bitter seem hardly bitter at all. But when it comes, it can seem hard to take.

Reverent relish and respectful restraint are signs of honesty and goodness. Hard hearts, indifferent hearts, infested hearts are not eager for the Word, reverent before the Word, patient with the Word.

That leads us to the second side of the good heart.

B. A Good Heart Responds to the Word

Receiving the seed is only the potential for change. It is the growth and the fruit bearing that is the result we want. And that corresponds to obedience – keeping the Word.

Why did you listen in the first place? Because you were listening with a view to obeying. You had the heart of Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”. Lord, you speak, because I am your servant and will do what you say. It is the heart of Paul, on the road to Damascus who, after Jesus revealed Himself, asked, “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

There are two responses here that please God.

a) A responsive heart practises the Word

James 1:22-25 *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*

The responsive heart is not merely interested in the diagnosis, it is interested in the cure. Don't just tell me what is wrong, tell me how to put it right. The responsive heart is not merely interested in receiving an exercise routine, it is interested in exercising.

The responsive heart is not satisfied to just look at pictures of destinations, it sets out to go there. A responsive heart has not fallen in love with knowledge alone. It has not fallen in love with the process of instruction. James tells us to do so is self-deception. It is feeling fit because you bought a book on health, it is feeling presentable because you have bought more mirrors, it is feeling humorous because you have a joke-book on your shelf. To accept the theory as being equivalent to the practise is to deceive yourself.

The pattern of the Bible is hear and obey.

John 13:17 *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."*

In other words, when you walk away from the Word, God wants you to do something. He wants you to believe something, love something, obey in some way that you didn't before. Can you write it down in a sentence? If not, perhaps it was not communicated well enough, or perhaps you did not listen well enough. Perhaps you need to do that – write. Have a journal. Be able to say in a sentence what God wants you to love, believe, know or do. And then how are you going to do it? What will it look like at 2:20 pm on Tuesday? What difference does it make to your family life, work life, school life, personal habits? What difference does it make to your thinking, your priorities, your desires, your ambitions, your hopes, your goals, your plans? A responsive heart does homework! What must I do with this? How must this change me?

Notice something that James says, "he continues therein" That leads us to the second thing about a responsive heart which Jesus mentions in the parable:

b) A responsive heart perseveres with the Word.

Luke 8:15 "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, **keep it** and bear fruit with patience.

The good heart keeps the Word with patience – the Word is endurance. The only way that obedience turns into character is if it is repeated.

It is good to have a heart which receives the Word with readiness, reverence and meekness. That is a prerequisite. It is good and essential to have a heart which submissively responds and seeks to implement what it knows. But all of that will be like the shallow heart or the infested heart if the obedience does not persist. If you obey once and disobey 99 times, you have not yet changed. If you do God's will occasionally, but mostly live for yourself, then your heart is not yet good ground.

A good heart labours to bring forth that good fruit. A good heart keeps obeying in the face of failure. Like Micah. It falls forward. A good heart confesses the same sin a thousand times, with tears of repentance, because it is persevering in the fight against that sin. A good heart keeps learning about how to defeat the sin, how to grow in righteousness, because it is committed to getting there. A good heart keeps obeying in the face of persecution and trouble. A good heart keeps obeying even when obedience seems to bring more difficulty than disobedience. A good heart is patient with the growth process, and does not give up when it fails.

Proverbs 24:16 *For a righteous man may fall seven times And rise again,*

You see, for you to have a good heart is to labour and struggle and fight with your own sin and beat it to death. It is to die daily, and do it again and again and deny yourself daily. It is an ongoing fight which ends at death or the return of our Lord. But this is a good heart.

The Christian life is not a sprint; it is a marathon. To finish is to win. The only way obedience turns into Christlike character is through persevering obedience.

Receive it with reverent relish, and respectful restraint. Respond with practical obedience and persevering obedience.

You see, it all comes down to Jesus' statement in verse 18: take heed **how** you hear. What you hear is the Word, with all the power to change you – that's the seed, and there's only one kind. Whom you hear it from, may make a difference, but if he preaches Christ, then it is still just one sower. It all comes down to how you hear. How you hear is the quality of the soil of your heart. How you hear is if your heart is hard, shallow, worldly or good.

We began this series by reminding ourselves that we will hear something like 52 sermons this year. That's a lot of seed. What will be growing in your life a year from now? The answer is entirely what quality of heart the Word finds every Sunday it lands.