

The Seed by the Wayside

Matthew 13:1-23

This is Martha's experience most Sundays. She follows the preacher for about a minute or two during his introduction. But then it gets hard to listen. She thinks to herself, "The preacher seems so dry compared to those evangelists on TV who have so many stories. Why can't he be like them? He goes on and on about what the Bible means, and what the Bible says, and how we should believe and feel and live, but it is so uninteresting. It's so irrelevant to my life. Why can't he preach on interesting topics like end-time prophecy and the mark of the beast, or teenage pregnancy or the death-penalty or maybe some controversies? It is actually tiresome to listen to him. It is as if he expects us to work to understand him. He doesn't understand a thing about entertainment. I don't know why I come, and why I sit through this. I don't get anything out of it."

After a while Martha simply begins thinking about other things while the pastor preaches, about things to do later, people to see, problems to solve. But as Martha sits in one place with her eyes down, thinking about anything that comes to mind, it feels remarkably like what one does when in bed waiting to fall asleep. And pretty soon, Martha is physically doing what her mind has been doing anyway. Martha is a fictional character who illustrates the first kind of soil in Jesus' parable - the soil that Jesus calls 'by the wayside', where the seed lands and it eaten up by the birds.

This parable of the soils is the parable to unlock all the parables. In fact, it is the parable to unlock the rest of the Word, because it explains what is going on when the Word is preached, and what is at stake.

In observing the parable we have noticed that Jesus did not say there were four kinds of seed and one kind of neutral soil. If Jesus had stated it that way, it would mean that if the Word did not change a person, it was the fault of the Word itself – something in its quality or make-up. But Jesus has made sure we understand that like a seed, the Word contains everything needed to transform us and change us. The Word is a hammer that breaks rock. The Word is a fire. The Word is a sword that penetrates. The Word is a retriever that goes out and comes back with what God intended. When the Word lands on a human heart, and the heart does not change, the problem is not with the Word.

We also observed that Jesus did not say there were four kinds of sower and one kind of neutral soil. That would mean the deciding factor when it comes to the Word changing a person is the preacher. We saw that while a preacher has a very heavy responsibility, if the Word is faithfully declared, and no change comes, the problem is not with the preacher.

The point of the parable is to tell us the state of the heart which hears the Word determines the outcome. The same Word preached by the same preacher on the same occasion is heard by different hearts – some hard, some shallow, some idolatrous, and some good. Hard hearts reject the Word; shallow hearts deceive themselves; idolatrous hearts have no room for the Word, and only the fourth kind of heart will give the Word the space and depth and quality for it to do its work.

By giving us four soils, Jesus seems to be saying that these attitudes characterise a particular person. I do not think He means to say that only one attitude is found in each heart. It is safe to say, from the testimony of Scripture regarding the human heart, verified by our own experience – that varying amounts of each of these attitudes can be found in each heart. You can have indifference and worldliness and shallowness at the same time. There can be a tussle between a good and honest heart, and the pull of the cares of this world.

But what happens to the Word when it comes shows what attitude is dominant. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Choked fruit equals thorns. No growth equals hardness and so forth.

By the way, we should note something else about this illustration. Soil is always soil, whether it is hard, soft, filled with weeds or rocks – it is still the same soil. The difference is in the condition of the soil, what has influenced it. So human hearts are really the same, we are truly of one blood – but what has influenced your heart can make all the difference.

Today I want us to examine the first kind of soil. Let's firstly understand the image.

Matthew 13:4 *"And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them.*
Matthew 13:19 *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside.*

As the sower reaches into his pouch, takes a handful and throws it out at random, some of those seeds land on the wayside. What is the wayside? In Israel of the time, the land was just criss-crossed with fields. Usually these fields were fairly narrow, and they were separated from other fields by narrow paths, about a metre wide. The path was not a tarred or paved road, it was simply soil which had been packed down and walked on again and again, until it had become hard. It was no longer even considered soil in which to sow, it was considered the pathway, the road, the gravel road next to the garden patch.

When seed lands on a hard-baked pathway, it simply lies on the surface. You may as well have thrown it onto a marble floor. It will not germinate; it will not start doing its work of germination. And if seed simply lies exposed on the pathway, then it becomes like scattering bread crumbs. The birds are going to come down and eat. They do not merely nibble – they devour, they utterly destroy all remains of those seeds, so within a few hours the way is picked clean, and you would not know that a sower had sown any seed there.

That's the image in the parable. Now Jesus explains this image to us. He tells us that this kind of heart is the kind of heart which does not understand the Word, and when it comes, it is quickly stolen away by Satan.

Now, without making too much of the symbols and images, let's see what Jesus means. It is no accident that the kind of ground which does not allow for any penetration is **hard ground**, and the kind of heart which does not understand God's Word is said to be a **hard heart**.

In the same passage Jesus speaks of this.

Matthew 13:15 *For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'*

The word for 'dull' in the original means insensitive, thickened, calloused. This is how the hearts of the people who heard Christ's own words had become - hardened of heart.

In another passage, Jesus confirms that hardness of heart goes together with a lack of understanding.

Mark 8:17-18 *But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?" "Having eyes, do you not see?"*

And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?

Mark 6:52 *For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened.*

Hard hearts don't understand the Word, it does not penetrate and it is quickly stolen from them by Satan before anything else can happen with it. This heart is so hard, it is more like a road that people walk on, than a field in which people sow in. It is less like a place for God's Word, and more like a place for the world's feet to walk up and down. The person's heart is so hard that the Word does not even begin to go in. It does not even start to process. Meditation does not even begin. The Word is landing on the top of the mind, only landing in the ear, so to speak. And before anything more happens, Satan comes and steals the Word.

What exactly is a hard heart, how do you get one and is there any remedy?

Let me give you a definition, and then show you that such a definition comes out of Scripture.

A hard heart is one that does not feel what God wants it to feel, nor believe what God wants it to believe nor obey what God wants it to obey. It is hard in its affections, hard in its beliefs, and hard in its behaviour. Remember, to the Hebrew mind, the heart represented the whole person. A hard heart was a hard person – hardened in the core – loves, hardened in mind, hardened in actions. A hard heart does not feel what God feels, it does not believe what God knows, and it does not do what God wills.

a) A hard heart is one that does not feel what God wants it to feel

Mark 3:5 *And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.*

The Pharisees were guilty of hardness of heart for having no compassion on a deformed man. They did not feel what they should have felt - compassion and mercy. They did not love what God loves, they did not have His heart.

I think of Israel during their worst time of apostasy. God asked them through the prophet Jeremiah: *if they were ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; Nor did they know how to blush. (Jer 6:15).*

They did not feel shame. That feeling of shame would have pleased God, because it would have come out of a softer heart than the one they had

Think of the church at Corinth. They had a member who was in an immoral relationship with his father's wife. What was their reaction:

"1 Corinthians 5:2 *And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you."*

They did not feel what God felt.

Back in Deuteronomy, God told Israel how important it was that they felt what He wanted them to, by loving what He loved. He even threatened them with these words:

Deuteronomy 28:47-48 *Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, "therefore you shall serve your enemies"*

What happens to the seed when it hits a heart which does not love what God loves or feel what He

feels? It does not penetrate.

b) A hard heart does not believe what God wants it to believe

Mark 16:14 ¶ *Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.*

The disciples were guilty of hardness of heart for not believing He would rise from the dead. When they did not believe what He said, they were hard. When Pharaoh did not believe that Jehovah was the true God and that He would bring great destruction on Israel, the Bible says his heart was hard – it was unbelieving.

When Israel did not believe that God could spread a table in the wilderness, they were being hard. What happens to the seed of the Word when it lands on a heart which refuses to believe what God says? It does not penetrate.

c) A hard heart does not obey what God wants it to obey.

Hebrews 3:13-15 *But exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

When Israel refused to obey the promises of God regarding entering the land of Canaan, they were rebellious. God describes them as hard. In other places, the Bible says, ‘they hardened their necks’

A hard heart does not feel what God feels, it does not believe what God says, and it does not respond to God's will. Now why should this hard heart not understand the Word of God? Why should feeling differently, believing differently and doing differently have any impact on the way I understand the Word of God? Because understanding the Bible is not a matter of intellectual power, but of moral responsiveness. It is not about how much your brain can handle, it is about how much your heart responds positively to God.

Now we sometimes use the phrase, “their hearts beat as one.” We mean that to say that two people are so alike, so in agreement that it is as if their very hearts synchronise. A hard heart is a heart that does not beat as one with God's. If you do not feel what He feels, believe what He knows, and do what He wishes, your heart is far from His, and is hard in His sight.

And here's the thing. The Bible is not simply a collection of facts, it is an extension of God's Person, and it is the living extension of His will. If you resist His will, you will not understand His Word.

God's Word is not a technical manual to be deciphered; it is not a recipe to be followed; it is not a rule book to be learnt; it is not a story book to amuse us. It is the will of God, it is God saying, “This is who I am, this is what I love most, this is reality, this is who you are, and this is what I expect”. If you do not relate to God with a heart that wants to beat as one with His, this book will become indecipherable. It will become a puzzle, a contradiction, a mess.

Our Lord made it very plain that spiritual truth cannot be understood until the heart has made a full committal to it.

"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" ([John 7:17](#)).

The 'willing' and the 'doing' (or at least the willingness to do) come before the *knowing*.

John 8:43 *"Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. Why can't you understand what Jesus says verbally? Because your heart is not ready to take in His will!"*

"Theological facts are like the altar of Elijah on Carmel before the fire came, correct, properly laid out, but altogether cold. When the heart makes the ultimate surrender, the fire falls and true facts are transmuted into spiritual truth that transforms, enlightens, sanctifies." A.W. Tozer —That Incredible Christian

Ancient church father Basil:

"He who seeks to understand commandments without fulfilling commandments, and to acquire such understanding through learning and reading, is like a man who takes shadows for truth. For the understanding of truth is given to those who have become participants in truth"

There is a moral relationship with the Word that determines whether or not you will hear it.

That explains how you get a hard heart.

You get a hard heart by resisting God. The more we resist loving what He loves, believing what He says, doing what He commands, the harder we make our own hearts. The hardening of the heart happens every time we resist something of God's heart. If we refuse, show indifference, rebel, scoff, disbelieve, stiffen the neck, reject, resist, hold out, excuse, and defend.

God says you should love this, and we say, I don't want to. I don't find it lovely right now.

God says you should hate this, and we say, No, I love it.

God says, believe me – this is true, and we say, no it isn't, that's not how it is.

God says – that this a lie, and we say, no it isn't that's how life is.

God says – you must do this, and we say, no, I won't.

God says – you must not do that, and we say, I will.

Here is the thing: there is no such thing as a neutral response to God's Word. It is resistance of one form or another, or acceptance. Resistance hardens the heart. Acceptance softens the heart. The same heat softens wax and hardens clay. That's why hearing the Word preached will either make you more ready for the next time, or less so.

Understanding the Word of God has everything to do with how you are relating to the will of God. If you are genuinely interested in what God wants, in what God desires, in what God is pleased with, you will have a heart ready to hear the Word.

Now, Jesus added a tragic extra to the story of the hard heart. The hard-hearted person is his own worst enemy, but he is not his only enemy. Because waiting in the wings, Jesus said, is the devil. Satan is pictured like bird. Now what do birds typically do when they see someone coming with a big bag of seed or bread? They gather, which might give you some indication of what demons do every time the Word is preached. Imagine a host of demons at every church service, hovering like birds, watching to see if you are going to leave the Word on the surface with a distracted mind.

You have to ask, why would Satan want to snatch away the Word so quickly? Because every now and then, even the hardest ground can have a crack in it, and the seed might be blown into it, and a bit of rainwater might set things going. He makes sure that the Word which hits a hard heart very

quickly disappears from conscious thought.

How would he do this?

Distraction during the sermon. Were the demons ever known to do things to people like throw them into the fire or the water? Do you think it would be unlikely of them to send a strong wind to slam the door, or to give an infant a sudden tummy ache or itch or nightmare, or to send some unbelievers down the street in their Harleys or in cars with stereos blaring? Distractions don't distract hearts that are taking in the Word, but they serve as the moment when he snatches the Word away from the hard of heart.

He could do it through diverted thoughts while listening or while reading. Reminding you of the lunch at home, the schedule tomorrow, the bills to pay, the people to see. He could do it with temptations to various sins while listening.

The fear of man which makes you fear to believe this or do it? What will my family think? What will my colleagues think? What will my friends say if I acted on this?

Pride which says, I already know this, I don't need to listen to this. Or this isn't a problem in my life, but boy I wish so-and-so was here to hear this today. Or, I can't accept this; this is childish fairytales. I am better educated and better taught than to believe everything the Bible says.

Maybe procrastination which says, yes this is true, but not now. I will get to it, when I am ready, or when I am older, or when the children are older, or when I pay off the house, or when I get that promotion, or when I emigrate

Maybe doubt which says, what if I can't trust the Bible? What if I spend my life on believing this and it all turns out to be wrong? And as the heart gives in to the fear of man or pride or doubt or procrastination, Satan is there in the blink of an eye to take that Word away before you give it any more thought. You go home, have a Sunday lunch, read the newspaper, and everything seems fine. It was just a bit of emotions that were getting worked up, you tell yourself.

Sometimes, he sends false teachers along your way, who deny and overturn everything you have learned in the Word. And if you believe them, then in that act, Satan steals from your heart the Word you heard.

But I want you to notice something. The birds only eat what is lying on the surface and exposed.

Satan can only steal what is not taken and hidden. If it is exposed by our resistance, it is vulnerable to be snatched. If you are receiving the Word, Satan can send distractions, diversions, temptation or false teachers, and it will not penetrate.

A hard heart is a frightening concept. The only thing which could change you is the Word, but every time the Word comes, it meets the impenetrable barrier of your own heart. And while it lies there, before you can do any more thinking, Satan is there to quickly steal it away.