

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 not be interested in the information that would save their lives. In fact, we recently saw an emergency landing on water occur in New York, meaning that these safety demonstrations have some value. 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.

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 which reproduces itself. 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 honest and sincerity, instead of prejudice, lies, rationalisations. 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."*

If your heart has not been chosen by God and cultivated by God, then it will be like a Roman's heart – rejecting, defying, suppressing, exchanging, avoiding, idolising and justifying itself.

If you have not cooperated with 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. We see in the Psalms, particularly, cries from the psalmist to God for a particular kind of heart. I think one easy way to remember a prayer we can pray to God for His work on our heart is the five vowels, A, E, I, O U.

A – admit that your heart needs God's grace.

E – Enlarge my heart, to be able to receive and believe and feel what I should when the Word comes.

I – Incline my heart to want your Word. Give the desires for your Word.

O – Open my heart; open the eyes of my heart to see the truth.

U – Unite my heart from the double-mindedness and unbelief.

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?

You can really boil it down to two simple actions that a good heart does with the Word.

A good heart receives the Word and a good heart responds 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.

I. 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 three kinds of reception that the Bible describes as a good reception.

a) You must Receive the Word with Readiness

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 if 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.”

It was the attitude of David, when he wrote,

***Psalms 119:103** How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

And it was the attitude of Jesus, when He told Satan,

***Matthew 4:4** 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'*

One of the reasons we fast is to say – more than food, Lord God, do we want Your will and the knowledge of Your glory in the Word.

This kind of eager reception is identical to the seeking heart which Solomon described in Proverbs 2:

***Proverbs 2:1-5** My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, ² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; ³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, ⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God.*

b) You Must Receive the Word with Reverence.

***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.*

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.

In fact, do you know where preaching really originated?

***Exodus 20:18-19** Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."*

God's people said, "Please, rather speak to us through Moses, not directly". That continues today. God speaks to us through Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, David, Solomon, the prophets, and the apostles.

For the ground of your heart to be right, you need to regard the Word of God with the utmost reverence. 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 hushed silence. 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. When God speaks, we listen with readiness and we listen with reverence.

c) You Must Receive the Word with Meekness

James 1:21 *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? Let's just turn on Dr. Phil and hear that we are great just as we are.

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 frighten me, and then clean me, transform me, change me."

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.

Let me illustrate meekness. 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 punch him in the mouth or spray mace in his eyes. 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.

A heart that receives the Word with readiness cannot be hard or indifferent. A heart that reverences the Word cannot be shallow or impulsive. A heart that is meek when the Word comes cannot be hard and resistant.

Mark says that the good heart accepts the Word. Matthew says that the good heart, because of this acceptance understands the Word. But here in Luke, Jesus emphasises something else. He says, the good heart keeps it and it bears fruit with patience.

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

II. 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. ²³ 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; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ 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.

Whether it is an attribute of God to be adored, or a promise to be believed, or a command to be obeyed, or a warning to be heeded, or an example to be followed, or a practice to be abandoned, it all comes under this one term – implement the Word, respond to it appropriately.

Do not become satisfied with the fact that you hear with readiness, reverence and meekness. It can quickly become another form of self-deception: “Because I welcome the Word, I have a good heart!” Listen to what God said to Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 33:31 *"So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. ³² "Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not 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 you are 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 in Obedience

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. Let me encourage you:

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 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, even if it costs you your life. 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 readiness, reverence and meekness. 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. Whom you hear it from, may make a difference, but they are still only the deliverer. 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.

So let me finish this series with seven practical exhortations to you regarding the Word.

- 1) Through your week, try to avoid the worldly distractions brought about by worldly television and music and other such things. Don't let the hustle and bustle of life keep you shallow and never reflective. Don't allow the weeds of worldliness and wealth-seeking and

idolatry take root in your thoughts and in your practice.

- 2) Get a good night's rest before the Lord's Day. Saturday night doesn't need to be the night that Christians are out till the late hours. Parents of older children still at home should encourage them to use Friday night if there is to be time spent with other Christians out. To be up into the late night of Saturday and to wake up exhausted, tired, bleary-eyed and yawning throughout Sunday, is not a wise stewardship of our bodies or our time.
- 3) Get a good start on Sunday. Be up early enough to avoid a rush which inevitably leads to conflict, grumbling, bitter spirits and a difficulty in hearing the Word. Husbands, help your wives. Wives, assist your husbands. Children, obey your parents. Remember that Satan is looking to snatch the seed, and if he can do so before you even get in the car, then he will be very glad to do so.
- 4) When it is time for the service to begin, try to quieten your thoughts for a few moments. Pray the AEIOU. If you know what passage will be preached, meditate on it for a few moments.
- 5) Engage yourself fully in every part of the service. If you allow any part, whether it is prayer, Scripture reading, or singing to be something others do and you just watch, then it is likely that you will listen to the Word in a detached and passive fashion. Be active from the start, and your mind will be active and focused when the Word comes.
- 6) Receive the Word with readiness, reverence and meekness. If you receive the Word with readiness and meekness you will not have a hard heart. If you receive the Word with reverence, you will not have a shallow heart.
- 7) Respond to the Word with practical, measurable obedience. Respond to the Word with persevering sustained obedience.

If we were all to do that, I do not know how we could stop revival in our midst. Each of us would become a yielded and powerful tool in the hands of the Lord to bring unbelievers to Christ, to disciple saints into the image of Christ, to be a family of worshipping saints who love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

So what does it depend on?

How you – as an individual - hear.