

The Shallow Heart

Let's look at the second soil.

Here's the scene:

Matthew 13:5-6 *Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. ⁶ "But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away.*

Jesus was describing a kind of soil which was fairly common in Israel. Often in Israel, you will have a limestone layer covered by a thin layer of soil. The limestone layer is essentially like the wayside, seeds cannot penetrate it. If seeds land on limestone that is on the surface, they will be devoured by the birds. But just covering the limestone would be a layer of soil, maybe a centimetre or a few centimetres deep. To the human eye, the soil looks as good as any. You can't see what is under the surface.

The result is this: Seed which falls on such shallow ground germinates in that little amount of soil. And because of its shallowness the suddenness and the speed of the growth is amazing. It can't get its roots down into the limestone, so it grows up and out. To the human eye, it looks like a very promising plant.

But the test comes when the sun comes out. The sun is good for plants with a root system. Plants with no root system, though, have no supply of moisture except what is on the surface or already contained in their leaves. As the sun rises to its most scorching, these plants have no serious roots, and all that lush foliage on the surface wilts, dies and completely dries up.

Now Jesus explains the meaning of this symbol in His parable:

Matthew 13:20-21 *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ "yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.*

This is the hearer we might call shallow or impulsive. He hears the Word, and accepts it. He even accepts it joyfully. He prays a prayer to accept Jesus as Saviour. He gets baptised. He tells others he is born again. There is excitement, there is gladness, and there is euphoria. There even seems to be explosive growth. For the time he has been saved, he is just blossoming, outgrowing others who have been saved for years, it seems.

But this is all to fade and die out completely. When is the decisive turn? When tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, **immediately he stumbles**. Stumble means he drops out of the race. He no longer professes Christ: he no longer obeys, loves or serves. He goes back to his old life and his old ways. When Jesus says, 'he endures only for a while' in the original language it is just one word which means 'he is temporary'.

Why does he do this? If he experiences direct persecution for the Word, he drops out. That is, if because of his profession of faith, he faces any kind of rejection, loss of support, financial loss, family rejection, cultural rejection, slander, physical harm, or threats of worse, he drops the whole thing. He has no root which goes deeper than his circumstances. If there is heat on the surface, he can't take it. He shrivels up. If he experiences tribulations for the Word, he drops out. That is, because of professing Christ, he experiences trouble, difficulty, pain, hardship, testing. It might even

be the pressures of increased commitment – the need to follow through with baptism or membership. And all of this are trials, tests to his profession of faith. He finds out that when someone names Christ, God starts to send them little doses of what His Son experienced on earth.

You see, the interesting thing is, the sun is good for plants with root systems. It makes them grow. And the biblical truth repeated over and over is that tribulation is good for true Christians; it makes them grow. It teaches us endurance, patience, longsuffering, love for enemies, admiration for Christ, greater dependence, more hope for heaven, greater faith, less worldliness, greater loyalty to each other, and more gratitude.

But do you know what trials produce in the person who has no real root in Christ? Unbelief. Denial. Doubt. Casting away of the confidence. Anger. Hatred. Despair.

What is going on in the shallow hearted person? Firstly, they are identical to the hard-hearted person at root. They might seem like they are not, but the reason nothing grows and bears fruit is the same hardness of heart under the surface, the same refusal to love what God loves, believe what God knows, and obey what God commands. They are hard.

But why wouldn't you think so? Why would the shallow-hearted person himself not think so? Because of the thin layer of soil on the surface. But they have a layer of openness to the Word, which makes them and other around them think that they really want the Word. They might congratulate the preacher, or talk about how convicting the sermon was, or how much it struck them, or moved them, or delighted them. And I don't mean to suggest that they are being dishonest. It is just that all that openness and enthusiasm for the Word is taking place in a very thin layer of their lives. It is the superficial layer of impulsive reactions, whims, gut feelings, sudden passions.

It is not the deep layer of what they love, what they believe and what they choose. It is the top layer of how I feel right now, what do I want right now, what experience can I have right now. And if the Word of God happens to fit in with what they want right now – then it is received with joy. But that layer is not deep enough to sustain anything except emotional decisions, impulsive actions, thoughtless commitments, momentary changes.

You will have seen this kind of person again and again. He is the sudden convert at the evangelism crusade, weeping, but a year later, he is living with his girlfriend. He is the one who tells everyone he has been changed, but then his colleagues are chuckling a month or two later because he is back to his old tricks.

You even see a form of this in professing Christians. This kind of person comes to church, and for a season they are at every service, and lapping up the Word, and just seem to be going in leaps and bounds, and then they suddenly seem down in the dumps, without any motivation, and you don't see them at all for a while. A few months later, they reappear, and the whole cycle begins again.

You end up with a shallow heart for at least two reasons:

- 1) You never deal with the underlying hardness of heart. Because you look at the growth that goes on in the little soil covering, you never deal with the hard, unbroken, stubborn heart underneath all that talk. Underneath the positiveness, the friendliness to other Christians, the openness to the Word, there is a hard, unresponsive heart. It does not respond to God. It refuses to feel what God feels, believe what He knows, or do what He says. And because of the superficial positive reactions that it has towards God's Word, it becomes like a substitute for real obedience. If you feel good about the Word, if you have a strong sense of agreement with it, if you don't actively oppose it, you feel like

you are really open. But all those reactions don't go very deep – they are happening in the soil covering of some of your emotions, while underneath that, you remain unchanged, unmoved, unyielding.

And it's a strange thing, because the shallow-hearted person can go on for years, saying 'Yes' to God in the thin soil of his heart, but saying 'No' to God in the depth of his heart. And he notices his shallow “Yes” more than he notices his quiet and stubborn “no”

The second way that a person becomes or remains shallow-hearted is by being content with the shallowness of the soil. If we're to press the illustration a little, it's as if this person at least has some part of them mentally, intellectually, emotionally which can hear and respond to the Bible, unlike the hard-hearted person. The problem is not with that part of them which is open; the problem is that the part of them which is open isn't very deep. And sadly, they are content to stay that way.

When you hear people say something like, “She is a pretty shallow lady”, what do they mean? Usually they mean, she is only interested in things which themselves are pretty meaningless. She loves only what is temporary, amusing, external and related to her. When you meet someone who can only speak about eyelashes and clothes and nails and parties and pretty faces, you are going to silently conclude, “There isn't much depth there,” meaning – she chooses to live for and think about and make herself about what is shallow.

You can develop and maintain a shallow heart by exposing your heart to what is shallow and meaningless and trivial, and giving your heart a steady diet of that all the time. Fill your days with reading fashion or men's health magazines, go on the Internet and flit from one ignoramus to another, drinking in their shallowness with every stop. Let the world train you to read no more than two paragraphs in a newspaper before jumping off to something else. Join in the office conversations that centre on what is trivial – the weather, sports, TV shows, weekend activities, gadgets and cars and clothes brands and girlfriends and boyfriends and other vanities. Come home and switch on the TV and drink in hours and hours of shallowness - advertisements which teach a shallow view of what life is about. Comedies which trivialise life itself and make it seem shallow and lightweight. Soap operas that shallow out the meaning of love and replace it with a very shallow substitute. Sports which teach men the paradox of only being serious when they're watching a game. Spend hours listening to music which is shallow in its composition, without beauty, art or thoughtfulness. Listen to musical clichés when you drive to work and when you drive home. Listen to musical clichés at home. Put musical clichés on your mp3 player.

Do you realise, that which trivialises God is far more dangerous to your soul than open blasphemy? At least blasphemy takes God seriously enough to use His name in vain. But trivialisation simply makes everything, including God; seem smaller, less serious, more playful, more fun, and shallower.

Proverbs 4:20-27 *My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your eyes; Keep them in the midst of your heart; For they are life to those who find them, And health to all their flesh. Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth, And put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, And your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, And let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; Remove your foot from evil.*

Then, on top of all this, if you want a shallow heart, make sure you are too busy to stop and do some thinking. Make sure you never have time to digest the meaning of things around you. Make sure you fill every empty spot in your life with noise or activity. Never have simple quiet, where

you can think, with perhaps just a pen and paper to write down important thoughts and meditations.

“Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom (for a while I retreated to the furnace room for want of a better place). Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelops you. Deliberately tune out the unpleasant sounds and come out of your closet determined not to hear them. Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. Stop trying to compete with others. Give yourself to God and then be what and who you are without regard to what others think. Reduce your interests to a few. Don't try to know what will be of no service to you. Avoid the digest type of mind—short bits of unrelated facts, cute stories and bright sayings. Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work. Practice candour, childlike honesty, humility. Pray for a single eye. Read less, but read more of what is important to your inner life. Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration.—Best of A. W. Tozer,

This is the real value of a quiet time. It should not be one more pit-stop of information in an already information-cluttered day. It is a time to think, think about the Word, think about your God, think about His will, and to talk to Him about your thoughts. People who do that start to deepen. They begin to think about God, self, the word. They ask and answer the big questions. They revisit them. They consider the Word of God deeply. They begin to deal with their hearts. And that means the root is penetrating deeper.

It should have been enough for us to simply understand the command “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world”. I am not saying that all the devices or media I've mentioned are evil in themselves, but to the degree that they shallow out your soul – they have an evil effect. To the degree that the world robs you of quietness, of time to think, and send the roots down, it is nudging God out of your life.

Now in both the shallow and the hard-hearted person, the bottom line is going to be repentance. Repentance for having resisted God; calls upon Him to soften our hearts, and then submitting to whatever he sends to do just that.

And then, we have to be resist what the world does to us so often, which is to pressure us to live in a one-centimetre soil life.