

The Soil of the Heart

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

To hear and truly understand the words of our Creator is no simple task. This is the One who knit us together in our mother's womb. Who recorded every moment of our lives before one of them came to be. Who holds together the seen and unseen, past, present, and future. How could finite, self-absorbed minds ever grasp the wonders of creation, the unseen battles of the spiritual realm, and the eternity God has set within our hearts? And so Jesus chose to speak in stories—parables—so that ordinary people could glimpse eternal truth.

Imagine standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The morning sun glistens on the water, a cool breeze drifts in, and the crowd is buzzing with anticipation. People have left their homes, their nets, and their fields to hear this teacher everyone is talking about. The crowd grows so large that Jesus steps into a boat, pushes off a little from the shore, and the water becomes His pulpit.

He begins—not with a lecture, not with lofty theological terms—but with a story. A story so simple that every man, woman, and child nods their heads in recognition.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed...”

In that moment, they could see it. They had all watched farmers plowing their rocky, sunbaked fields with oxen, cutting shallow furrows into stubborn soil. They had all seen the sower reach into his bag and scatter seed with a wide sweep of his arm, praying something would grow. Some seed fell on the hardened path, and before it could even take root, the birds swooped down and devoured it. Some fell on rocky soil. It sprang up quickly. But just as quickly, the sun withered it—because it had no root. Some fell among thorn bushes, and though it started to grow, the weeds choked the life right out of it. But some—some seed—fell on good, rich soil. And to everyone's amazement, it produced a harvest: thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown!

When He finished, Jesus simply said, “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

You can picture the farmers in the crowd nodding in agreement. They knew the struggle, the sweat, and the disappointment of planting in difficult soil. They lived the curse spoken to Adam: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground.” But Jesus wasn't just talking about farming. He was inviting them to lift their eyes from survival in the dust of this world to something eternal. Because the Sower in this story is the Son of Man.¹ The seed is the Word of God. And the soil... the soil is the human heart.² And here's the heart of the story: The harvest never depended on

¹ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 177.

² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 177.

the Sower. It never depended on the seed. Christ and His Gospel never change. The difference is the soil. So the question is not just for them on that shoreline two thousand years ago. The question is for us, right here, right now—what kind of soil is in your heart today?

The Hard Soil – A Closed Heart

And so Jesus begins His explanation with the first soil: the hard path — trampled underfoot, impenetrable, and quickly snatched away by the birds. This is the picture of a closed heart: a heart where the message of salvation cannot sink in or take root. And it reminds us that in evangelism we will meet some who hear the Gospel but will never respond in faith. Creation itself proclaims God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:28). And yet, many refuse to retain the knowledge of God. They suppress the truth written into their very souls. They ignore the eternity God has placed in their hearts. To them, the cross is nothing but foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18). Worse still, it is offensive, because the light of the Gospel exposes their sin and their love for darkness (John 3:19).

The sovereignty of God. His holiness. His wisdom. Even His love—offend the natural heart,³ because it insists on

wandering its own path and chasing its own pleasures. And even those who appear religious, like the Pharisees, prove that head knowledge without heart transformation is worthless, for their rituals were empty and their motives enslaved to the praise of men. Yet we do not lose hope. Since our Father is patient, “not willing that any should perish,” we bear witness even to hardened hearts. We do so wisely—not as those casting pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6)—but with the confidence that the blood of the Lamb is powerful enough to save anyone who will believe.

But before we think only of others, we must be honest with ourselves—the hard soil is not just “out there”; it can also be found in here, within our own hearts. There are places where we resist the Gospel, where God’s Word cannot take root because the ground has been trampled down and grown hard. And what makes a path hard? It is walked on, over and over again. In the same way, repeated sins, unchecked attitudes, and worldly habits can pack down our hearts until the truth of God cannot penetrate. It is one thing to agree in principle that we are to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37). But it is quite another to invite the Potter to put His hands on us, to soften and reshape our attitudes and behaviors so that they align with His righteousness rather than our own pleasures.

Like Paul, do we not all struggle with sin? Do we not all have areas of life that are resistant to God’s Word? James

³ James Montgomery Boice, [*The Gospel of Matthew*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 232.

reminds us that when we “*draw near to God, He will draw near to us*” (James 4:8). That is not a casual invitation—it is a humbling call to ask our Creator to soften what is hard within us, so that His truth might take root and transform us. And here is the good news: no heart is beyond His reach. Praise be to God that the hardness of sin, pride, or distraction can be broken up by the Spirit of God. When the soil of our heart becomes humble and submissive, the Word of Christ takes root and begins to bear fruit. So the question is this: will we let the Spirit soften our hearts, or will we remain hard soil where the Word cannot take root?

The seed is the same. The Sower is the same. The difference is the soil.

The Rocky Soil – A Shallow Heart

If the hard soil warns us of a closed heart, the rocky soil warns us of a shallow one—alive for a moment, but withering in the heat of trials. It’s like a plant that looks healthy in a shallow pot, but when the summer sun scorches it, it withers—because it has no root. In ancient Palestine, farmers often dealt with thin layers of soil covering thick limestone. When seed landed there, it would sprout quickly—almost too quickly—but because the roots could not sink deep, the moment the scorching sun rose,

the young plant withered and died.⁴ Jesus explained that some people respond to God’s Word in the same way. They hear the Gospel, they rejoice, and for a time it looks like life is springing up. But because there is no root—no depth of faith—when hardship, persecution, or trials come, they quickly fall away.

This warns us to be careful, especially in evangelism. David Platt and others caution against what they call “easy believism”—a mindset that focuses more on securing a quick response, a sinner’s prayer, or even baptism, rather than seeking whether God’s Word has truly taken root in the heart. George Whitefield once said, when asked if a certain person was saved through his preaching he responded, *We will see in a few years.*” He wasn’t questioning salvation by grace—he was reminding us that genuine faith proves itself over time. Our calling, then, is not only to sow the seed, but to nurture it. We must walk alongside proclaimed believers, encouraging them when trials come, and pointing them again to Jesus. For without deep roots in Christ, joy will wither in the heat of testing. And here is our hope: Christ can take what is shallow and give it depth. He can break the rock, deepen the roots, and make a faith that endures.

Sometimes our lives are like a mountain stream—rushing swiftly over the stones, sparkling and beautiful at first glance, yet shallow beneath the surface. How many times have we been stirred by a sermon, when God’s Word felt so alive that our hearts leapt for joy and we resolved to obey every command?

⁴ Leon Morris, [*The Gospel according to Matthew*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 336.

In those moments, it seems as if strongholds are falling, as if by God's power we are finally breaking free from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (2 Corinthians 10:4; 1 John 2:16). Inspiration floods in, and for a time we feel clothed in His grace, walking with unspeakable joy in the footsteps of our Master.

Inspiration is good. But inspiration is not endurance. Joy is real. But joy without roots will not last. Too often, when the comforts of this world are threatened or trials press in, our reliance on the One who sustains us begins to falter. To live lives worthy of the Gospel, our obedience must sink deeper than fleeting emotion. Our roots must reach down into the very soul. And this depth does not come by willpower alone. It comes when we invite the Potter to place His hands on the rocky places of our hearts, reshaping them into fertile ground. It comes when we seek first His kingdom (Matthew 6:33), trusting that His ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8–9), and believing that the blessings of His Spirit are of infinite worth compared to the fading treasures of this world.

The seed is the same. The Sower is the same. The difference is the soil.

The Thorny Soil – A Crowded Heart

And yet not every heart fails from shallowness. Some fail because they are too full—crowded with the thorns of worry and wealth. It's like our phones buzzing with endless notifications. The noise never stops, and in the chaos, God's whisper is drowned out. A young tree planted in shallow ground that blows over in the first storm because its roots never went deep. In farming, when seed fell among thorns, both would grow together, but the thorns always won—stealing sunlight, nutrients, and water until the good plant withered.⁵ You can almost see the farmers in the crowd nodding as Jesus spoke, remembering their own crops lost to thistles and weeds.

Jesus warned that many will hear the grace-filled offer of salvation, yet reject it—not because they openly oppose it, but because the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it out. As ambassadors of Christ, we must never forget how easily people are ensnared by what they can see and touch, while neglecting what is unseen and eternal. It is far easier to trust in money in hand than to live by *“confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”* (Hebrews 11:1).

So how do we reach the crowded heart? Not by dazzling the world with a more polished program or a slicker event, but by offering what Isaiah promised—*“food without cost”* (Isaiah

⁵ D. A. Carson, [“Matthew,”](#) in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 305.

55:1). We show them, not with marketing but with our lives, the surpassing worth of the Treasure hidden in the field and the Pearl of great price. For when people see Jesus alive in us—our joy, our contentment, our sacrificial love—they see a testimony far more powerful than words alone.

But before we point to the world outside, we must admit that the thorny soil often grows in us too—for how easily the busyness of life, the demands of work, and the pursuit of comfort crowd God out of the very center of our hearts. What is it that competes for your love, your time, your trust? For some, it is the drive for financial security or the endless race to keep up with the “Joneses,” working ourselves to exhaustion. For others, it is fear—anxiously consumed with protecting an unknown future. Still others are enslaved by the desire to belong, spending every waking moment trying to impress people rather than please God.

The motivations may differ, but the result is the same: noise that drowns out the still, small voice of God. Think of a crowded restaurant. The clamor is so loud, you can’t hear the person across from you. That’s what happens when the noise of life drowns out the voice of God. And just as thorns choke a plant, so busyness and misplaced priorities suffocate our hunger and thirst for God, leaving us barren and fruitless.

But Jesus gives us a better way. *“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33). When we take time to be still before Him, to let His Word and Spirit speak, our lives are no longer

choked by thorns but filled with fruit, and the joy of His presence satisfies our deepest needs.

The seed is the same. The Sower is the same. The difference is the soil.

The Good Soil – A Fruitful Heart

And yet, even though much seed falls on hard paths, rocky ground, and thorny places, Jesus reminds us that not all is lost—for some seed falls on good soil. And when it does, the harvest is far greater than we could ever imagine. For the farmers in the crowd, who knew all too well the heartbreak of failed crops, these words must have sounded like music to their ears. In Palestine, a normal yield was five to ten times what was sown.⁶ But Jesus spoke of thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold. That was more than good farming—that was the unmistakable blessing of God!

And the same is true for us. As we sow the Good News in this fallen world—where “self” has become the god of choice—it can feel discouraging. We look around and see soil that is hard, rocky, and thorny, and we are tempted to give up. Satan whispers, *“It’s all pointless. Your efforts are in vain.”* But God’s Word answers differently: *“Always give yourself fully to*

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, [Matthew](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 475.

the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Our calling is not to make the seed grow. That is God’s work. Our calling is to plant and to water faithfully. As Paul said, *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth”* (1 Corinthians 3:6). And so we press on, encouraged by this promise: *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”* (Galatians 6:9).

But the question Jesus leaves us with is not only about the harvest out there—it is about the soil in here. If the seed is the Word and the Sower is Christ, then the real question is this: is my heart good soil where God’s Word can take root and bear fruit? Are there corners of your heart so entangled with worldly habits that you no longer hear His call to repent? Have the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, or the pursuit of comfort choked out God’s presence in you? Do you find yourself stirred for a moment, only to have the enemy snatch away your passion?

Do not give up. You are not alone in the struggle. Even Paul cried out, *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* (Romans 7:24). And yet he answered his own question with hope: *“Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* (v. 25). The same Paul would later urge us, *“Do not conform to the pattern of this*

world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Our Father, the Master Potter, can break the hard ground, uproot the rocks, and remove the thorns.⁷ He alone can make our hearts soft, deep, and fruitful for His kingdom. So ask—and you will receive. Seek—and you will find. Open your heart to Him, and He will make your life into good soil that bears much fruit for His glory.

Four soils. One seed. One Sower. The Word never changes. Christ never changes. The difference is the soil. The question is not ancient. It is here. It is now. What kind of soil is in your heart?

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of Matthew](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 235.