

October 5, 2008

Isaiah 55:1-11 / I Corinthians 3:1-15 / Luke 8:4-15  
 Luke (#36) - Evangelism – Same Seed, Different Soils

When I was in my teens I used to travel my cousin's cottage on a beautiful little lake in Maine, surrounded by tall pine trees and small mountains. And my favorite thing to do was get up early in the MORNING when the sun was just rising, and mist was coming up off the water, or go down to the dock in the EVENING when the winds would start to die down, and the waves that lapped up against the shore during the day would quiet down (and even become somewhat soothing), and people would row out into the lake to fish, or just enjoy the last few hours of daylight as the sun went down.

And one of the things that made those particular times of the day fascinating to me — was the way sound would carry over the lake. So much so that I would go down and sit on the dock and actually listen to the conversations of people talking in their boats hundreds of yards away!

In the evening, and even moreso in the early morning, I could actually hear the minimal bump of an oar on an aluminum boat across the lake as if it was right next to me! It was amazing how well the sound carried over the water at those times of the day.

And why do I tell you that? Because I'm convinced that Jesus (wise as He was) took advantage of that phenomena when telling this parable. In relation to the setting where this teaching took place, both Matthew and Mark tell us something that Luke chose to leave out —

That this entire teaching on the SEEDS and the SOILS took place as Jesus sat in a boat, which He had pushed out from shore (on what we can assume was the Sea of Galilee) and spoke to the crowds that had gathered and were standing at the waters edge.

And knowing that most all people had no option but to work during the day (day laborers got paid at the end of each day — which meant no work, no pay), we can safely assume that this scenario took place either BEFORE they had to go to work (early in the morning), or AFTER they finished working (in the early evening) in the quiet part of the day.

And Jesus, wise and astute as He was, took advantage of the way sound carries over the water at those times of the day, got out in a boat, rowed a little way out from shore, sat down, and used the setting as a natural amphitheatre! It was really quite ingenious!

And that's not all. Barclay is right when he points out that the phrase, "*A sower went out to sow his seed,*" should be better translated from the Greek, "*THE sower,*" meaning, as he goes on to point out, "*The sower OVER THERE...*"

The context, he says, was not Jesus simply telling a generic story about some imaginary farmer, but rather, it was Jesus looking at a particular farmer working in a nearby field or spreading seed on a nearby hillside, and saying, "*Look at the sower OVER THERE sowing his seed in THAT FIELD.*"

Knowing Jesus, and His uncanny ability to use the most simple, familiar, everyday things of life to teach profound spiritual truths, he's probably right.

And what does Jesus share using the imagery of this farmer? Truths about evangelism and why the same exact seed produces such different results in different people's lives.

That's the **FIRST** thing we must see. Jesus assures us that it's NOT THE SEED that brings about differing harvests in different lives — it's the SOILS! The seed is the SAME in each case. It's "*the Word of God*" as He tells us in verse 11, or in the context, that part of the word dealing with "*the good news of the kingdom,*" or simply "*the Gospel*" (v. 1). To understand the parable it's imperative that we see that! Jesus is NOT talking about different Gospels being the reason for the different sized harvests or the differing results.

And if you've been around Christian circles long enough, you'll know different churches DO preach different Gospels, and thus they do produce varying results based on the varying content of the Gospel (or non-Gospel) that they preach. In those cases it's NOT the varying soils, but the varying seeds that do indeed account for the differences in the harvest or non-harvest produced.

*Diluted gospels / or watered down Gospels / or gospels that are works-based (and thus no gospel at all) / produce different results than the grace-based gospel of the Bible. And they produce different results because the MESSAGE, or the SEED PLANTED is different!*

Yet that's not what Jesus is talking about here! In this parable Jesus is assuming ALL THE SEEDS ARE THE SAME! All the seeds are good seeds! And I stress that because SO OFTEN I've heard people suggest (and you've probably heard it as well) that the reason some people defect from the faith is because the Gospel just didn't work for them.

The problem, they suggest, is that the SEED was bad. I hear it all the time! The message is too old and antiquated. / It's too simplistic and shallow. / It's not relevant to the felt needs of the contemporary person and what they want out of life.

But to such remarks, or such suggestions, or to those people who would point to the MESSAGE or the SEEDS as being the problem, Jesus turns it around 180 degrees! Because He says just the opposite is true! If the seed (the word of God in this case) doesn't produce the intended harvest, it's not the fault of the SEED, it's the fault of the SOIL fell on!

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Which brings us to our **SECOND** point — The four basic types of soil which Jesus says explain the differing degrees of harvest or non-harvest in people's lives, and the **FIRST** soil Jesus refers to is the *"soil along the path."*

And if we read it correctly, the seed didn't "fall along the side of the path." Some of it, if not all of it, fell on the path itself — the hard, dry, compacted soil that's so packed down by people always walking on it, that the seed cannot penetrate. As Jesus tells us, they get trampled on, or eaten by the birds of the air who swoop down to get it because it simply lays there on the top of the ground.

*"Trampled underfoot"* probably means (as it does elsewhere) not taken seriously or disrespected or abused by people. And the *"birds of the air"* as Jesus says in verse 11, represent Satan.

*"They are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."*

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Interestingly, it's almost the same exact thing the Author of Hebrews says when speaking of people who fail to enter *"the Sabbath rest of God"* (or obtain salvation) even though they, just like many others, had heard the Gospel message that everyone else heard.

*"We also," he says, "have had the Gospel preached to us just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them because it did not join with faith in the hearer."*

You see, unlike those who heard and believed, in these others it remained mere head knowledge and never really penetrated the soil of their heart. They never received the message by faith to make it part of who they were so it could bring forth a harvest of righteousness.

*So like Jesus, the author of Hebrews also tells us the fault or the problem is not with the message. The problem lies within the hearer. It's a problem of the soil not the seed.*

Who then does the "soil by the pathway" refer to? It's refers to people who earnestly resist the Gospel and do not allow the word penetrate by believing it or embracing it by faith. It refers to closed-minded people. / Indecisive, non-committal type people. / People who procrastinate or delay or refuse to respond to the Gospel message.

Interestingly they're often church going people or occasional church goers who have heard the Gospel, but their heart — in relation to surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus, or casting themselves unreservedly upon Him alone for salvation and living a life of holiness — is like that hard, dry, compacted soil.

They will not let the seed penetrate it. They keep it sitting on the surface of the soil thereby inviting people to trample it underfoot, or the devil to come and snatch it away! They hear it, and sometimes hear it often, but delay in responding to it.

Yet you know what happens each time one puts off responding to the Gospel? The soil of their heart becomes harder and harder. Each proclamation of the Gospel that the person refuses to respond to in faith, is like a metal compactor that hits the soil of the heart, but instead of breaking it, it only compacts it further.

Each excuse one uses, or each rationalization, or each delay or procrastination, causes the heart to become harder and the seed to remain on the surface of the soil longer, giving people time to trample it, or the devil time to time to snatch it up.

You see, one of the most deadly things any person can do when it comes to the promptings and urgings of the Spirit of God, is DELAY! / IS WAIT TILL THEY'VE GOT IT ALL FIGURED OUT or WAIT UNTIL IT ALL MAKES SENSE (which is never)!

IT'S TO PUT IT OFF TILL TOMORROW (which usually turns into NEXT WEEK and NEXT MONTH and NEXT YEAR or the NEXT DECADE — the seed sitting there the whole time EXPOSED TO THE TRAMPLING FEET OF OTHERS and the THEIVING ACTIVITIES OF THE DEVIL).

That's surely one of the reasons the call of the Gospel is always presented as an urgent call! *"The Spirit and the Bride say "Come!"* And it means right now! It's in the imperative! *"COME! Whoever is thirsty let him come!"* (Rev. 22:17) Do it and don't delay! Why not? Because each time you do your heart becomes more and more hardened to His call to believe and be saved!

*"Seek the Lord while He may be found,"* says Isaiah 55:6, *"call upon Him while He is near!"* / *"Repent,"* said Jesus, *"for the kingdom of God is at hand!"* / Paul says the same thing: *"Now is the time of God's favor, today is the day of salvation"* (II Cor. 6:2). / And the author of Hebrews says it too: *"Today if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts."* (Hebrews 3:7-8)

You see, to delay IS to harden your heart! It's to give doubts or people time to trample the seeds underfoot, or Satan time to steal it away, forgetting that their non-decision is a decision!

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You see, people often ask me: "Does God harden our hearts or do we?" And my response is this: It's probably a little of both — we hear and procrastinate and cling to our sin and reject Jesus in preferring our sin to Him, and God seeing our habitual resistance and preference for our sin eventually "gives us over to the very thing our hearts desire."

That's what Paul says three times in Romans 1:24, 26 and 28: "*God gave them over, God gave them over, God gave them over...*" Over to what? Over to the very thing they wanted.

When we resist and resist and resist God in favor of other things, He eventually lets us have the very things we want. That's what He did with me. In my teens I was repeatedly confronted with the Gospel, and at first my heart was soft to it. I often felt the promptings of the Spirit moving me to respond in faith. In fact, in the eighth grade I actually remember bringing my Bible to school on at least two occasions.

But I never fully committed my life to Jesus. So as I heard the Gospel preached, and repeatedly resisted surrendering to the promptings of the Spirit to come to Christ, they soon went away, and I could hear the most stirring sermon without even a twinge of conviction or desire, so that by the time I was 18-19, I even came to repudiate the Gospel.

I was given the choice of having Jesus or my sin. And I chose SIN over JESUS so many times that God finally said: "*Because that's what you want, I give you over to it.*"

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And you know what happened? With each day that passed I became more and more disillusioned and depressed (even contemplating suicide) — though by the "world's standards" I was having "lots of fun." God, in an act of wrath and divine judgment (that actually turned out to be a grace in disguise), gave me over to what I wanted in order to show me it's NOT what I wanted!

Which brings me to the **SECOND** type of soil. The rock or rock ledge. "*Some fell on rock,*" says Jesus. Not just on rocky soil, but on rock itself. Possibly, as Barclay points out, some out-cropping of limestone ledge (so common to the area) where holes or dips or little crevices in the ledge were filled with a thin layer of soil, and the seed fell onto that soil, and took root, but because the soil was so thin or shallow the plants withered away because they had no moisture.

I discovered that in my side yard. There was this one patch of ground where the grass always died and turned brown. And expert gardener that I am, I assumed it was beetles or grubs or chinch

bugs. So I bought fertilizer with grub killer in it and put it on the spot. But it still did the same thing! So I dug down to see if I could find the problem, only to hit a flat piece of that purple color rock about one inch under the surface!

It wasn't grubs. The soil was too thin, and thus lacked moisture, and because of it the grass "withered away"— until I dug up the rock, filled it in with dirt, and resolved the problem!

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So, who does the rock stand for? Interestingly it's not the hardest or most calloused of people! They were the soil by the pathway! This is Jesus speaking in descending order of hardness!

The **PATHWAY** is actually the hardest, and the **ROCK** (in this case) is a little softer (due to the thin little patches of soil on the top of it that the seed could actually penetrate. The seed on the rock (unlike the pathway) did actually germinate and sprouts did come up. They simply died because the soil was so thin or shallow.

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You see, if we had to describe these people, we would have to say they are people who are all emotion! Totally impulsive. People who run on their feelings (receive the message with joy as Jesus says in verse 13) but they are somewhat "shallow" people. They're all excitable, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in time they fall away."

Maybe we could say they interpret their FEELINGS as FAITH, and thus when their FEELINGS fade, so does their FAITH, because it wasn't really FAITH! It was an emotionalism devoid of any level of commitment or determination to persevere and walk with Jesus for the rest of their life – come what may.

Of such people Helmut Thielicke says they are "*half-Christians.*" People merely "*brushed by Christianity.*" "*They...flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test... A person who let's Jesus only half way into his heart is far poorer than a 100% worldling.*"

This superficially emotional response to the Gospel is something that happens so often at well-orchestrated evangelistic crusades. There's the excitement of being part of a big crowd. The lights are "way down low." There's a sense of anticipation.

The music begins and like King Saul listening to David play his harp, they are caught up in the mood of the moment. It's all so soothing. So when the "altar call" is given, they go forward and "receive the message with joy," or great excitement.

The problem is that often, it's not really conversion. It's a response to the emotional stimulation they felt through the atmosphere that had been created. It wasn't a permanent and supernatural change of nature wrought by the Holy Spirit, but a very natural and temporary state of stirred feelings created by the ambiance.

But that raises a very perplexing question: How does one know the difference between a response wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and a response prompted merely by the natural stirring of human emotions due to the atmosphere and ambiance of the event?

And the answer? The only way to know the difference is by what happens the next day or the next week, after the crowds have dispersed, and the music has faded, and the excitement of the moment has worn off, and its back to the daily grind, or worse yet, the person has become the brunt of ridicule by someone who heard "he or she went forward," or the heat of trials begin.

You see, at the moment it all seemed so right! So the message was "*received with joy!*" But when the atmosphere changed and the excitement went away (because the things that created it were removed) the "*plant withered*" because it had no root. The soil was shallow, and when the feelings that watered it dried up, it dried up.

Thus the person "*falls away,*" because they never really intended to commit themselves to Jesus in a life of discipleship. They simply responded to a heightened state of feelings that disappeared as soon as they woke up the next day. They were looking for the quick fix, and Christianity doesn't offer a quick fix! It demands your all — heart, soul, mind and strength.

It calls us to turn from sin, and commit ourselves totally to the Lordship of Jesus — come what may! / It calls us to enter into a life of discipleship / die to the sinful self / transform the way we think / persevere through hardship / weather persecution / discipline ourselves for godliness / and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus through the habits of prayer and study and meditation on God's word.

It calls us to bring our appetites and urges and feelings under the control of the Spirit, so that they are our slaves and not our masters — subjecting our feelings to Jesus, not making our commitment to Jesus subject to them!

It calls us to persevere in the faith to the very end! And only if we do will we know we were converted and saved and not simply responding to sentimental emotions that faded as soon as the first heat of trials began.

Which brings us to our **THIRD** soil — the soil infested with thorns. This soil obviously refers to people who are so busy, and have so much going on in their lives, and have their hearts set on so many different things, that Jesus becomes just one more of many things they try to keep abreast of. They are the people, says Jesus, who ***“allow life’s worries, riches, and pleasures to choke out the seed so it never matures.”*** Are they saved? Maybe or maybe not — depending on how “choked” the plant becomes. It could be “choked” as in limp and drooping over, or “choked” as in dead and lifeless.

Speaking of one such person, Paul says of Demas— ***“having loved this world, he deserted me, and has gone to Thessalonica.”*** Or again ***“Some people, eager for money (eager to get rich) have wandered from the faith...”***

And if I were to pinpoint the most common soil today, this one would have to be it. People’s lives are insanely busy. Their schedules are overloaded. / They go around the clock. / They run here and there, doing this and that, and do so in such a way that Jesus takes a back seat. / Other commitments become more important and more pressing and of a higher priority than their commitment to Jesus.

The problem is, Jesus refuses to ride in the back seat. His divinely ordained role is to be the driver, not the passenger! He’s not the co-pilot, folks, He’s the pilot! And when we take that role away from Him our lives veer way off course!

Jesus refuses to be one of many mere sideshows! He will not tolerate competitors in the heart! The Kingdom of God is not something we dabble in, its something we seek first and foremost above all else! ***“And you shall seek me and find me when you shall search for me with all your heart,”*** says the Lord in Jer. 29:13!

God isn’t someone to be trifled with! He won’t settle for second place in your heart! Jesus isn’t someone we add into the mix of life in order to have a little religion to balance things off and be a little more whole!

Jesus demands your all! He can only do what He desires in your life when He holds first place in your life! There’s only room for one master in the human heart, so when we try to make room for two or give more of our time and affections to other things, we nudge Him out! / He must own your heart or else someone else (or some thing else) will!

He’s to be priority #1 — before husband or wife or children or careers or wealth or pleasure or ANYTHING ELSE!

But you know what? In our culture we don't believe that's necessary nor true. If the way we live in America says anything, it says we believe we can indeed clutter up our lives with every type of inconsequential busyness, and slews of other pursuits and pleasures and activities and idols (and hordes of competing masters) and still have healthy, vibrant, spiritual lives! We THINK we can have it all!

But Jesus says "no!" To us He says what he said to the Church in Laodicea: "***Behold I stand at the door and knock***"— not speaking to unbelievers, but to believers who had allowed the cares of the world and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure to nudge Jesus out, "***If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into him and eat with him and He with me.***"

You see, it's **NOT** a passage about becoming a Christian — ***it's not an evangelistic text***—it's a text about letting the Jesus who got nudged out of their lives by their pursuit of wealth and pleasure, back into His rightful place in their lives!

Will you? If the pursuit of worldly riches and pleasures has caused Jesus to be nudged out, will you make room for Him and let Him back in? "***Behold I stand at the door and knock,***" says Jesus to a church that is all too busy... Do you hear Him knocking?

Which brings us to our **LAST** soil. The "***good soil.***" The soil that lets the seed in and then produces a soil 30, 60, 100 times what was sown. What's the "good soil?" Is it people whose hearts were so good and so pure that unlike all the others they let Jesus in? No, my friends! No one is good but God alone, says Jesus.

Remember we are speaking in agricultural terms. And in agricultural terms soil that receives the seed is soil the farmer has prepared. And in the spiritual sense it's soil that has been prepared to receive the seed by the influences of people and the Word and situations and the gracious activity of the Holy Spirit.

It may be the **PLOW** of TRIALS and HARDSHIPS that break through the hard compacted earth.

The **STORMS** of adversity or **SHOWERS** of sorrow that soften that soil with our tears.

The **FERTILIZER** of grace or the **FEET OF THE DIVINE FARMER** stomping on the hard clods of overturned earth to break them into even smaller pieces — so that when the seed falls on it, it penetrates and germinates and grows into a plant that produces a harvest 30, 60, 100 times what was sown!

That's what's the "GOOD SOIL" is: *Its soil that God, by His grace, has prepared to receive the seed. It's not that we better than others, or did something to make ourselves worthy of receiving the seed.*

It's that God graciously worked in us to prepare our hearts to hear and believe the Gospel. It's all because of His grace, not because of our goodness!