

## CULTIVATING RECEPTIVITY

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Mtt. 13:1-9; 18-23

### INTRODUCTION

In this last week's super cold temperatures, I know I wasn't alone in having some frozen pipes. Fortunately for us, it was only the water to the washer that froze. The laundry room is on the lower level of our house, and the pipes are in the north wall. Well, in this cold, our lower level has stayed pretty cool, and the laundry room is the coolest part. I hoped for a simple solution like putting a space heater in the laundry room and closing the door to thaw the pipes. After close to eight hours of this, with the heater directed right at the wall, I realized more drastic measures might be needed. Finally, I cut a hole in the drywall to see what the problem was. I found the insulation was placed on the wrong side of the pipes. Instead of being between the pipes and the outside wall, it was between the pipes and the inside wall. The insulation was being very effective in keeping the heat from my heater from thawing the pipes.

I've thought of that as a parable of our lives. How often do we get things backward? We are open to the world's influences, but close ourselves off to what God is wanting to do in our hearts. We spend hours with TV's drivel and twisted perspective and can't find 15 min. to seriously read and meditate upon God's Word. Some Christians know more about the lives of movie stars than the lives of saints. We have the insulation on the wrong side!

Sometimes our spiritual practices can look good on the outside, but we insulate our hearts to the warmth of the Holy Spirit's transforming power. While certainly we may be open to some changes, we often run into things we don't want to let God deal with and shut down. I trust you know how it is when your heart is open, hungry, receptive, and relinquished to the Lord when you come to worship. Everything has new dimensions of meaning and ministers to your heart. Other times, we come in our relatively closed mode and go away empty.

Let's pause and think for a moment, "How would you like to be more like Jesus in terms of His character, personality, nature?" Is there any of us who wouldn't like to be more loving, patient, gentle, focused, and self-controlled? Do you have sins that seem to regularly mess you up? All of us have good things we know we should do but don't get around to. We all need change and growth in our spiritual lives, don't we?

This morning, I want to focus upon a key to spiritual growth. Jesus explains it in a memorable way in what is commonly called the Parable of the Sower. Actually, it would be more accurate to call it the Parable of the Soils, since Jesus talks about four soils as conditions of our hearts. Here we find the challenge to us to have open, receptive hearts to God. I don't think there is any clearer teaching Jesus gives on how we grow in the spiritual life than in this parable.

## THE SOURCE OF LIFE

The farmer and the seed are the constants in this parable. God is the farmer scattering the seed (much as we would do in planting grass seed). And, the seed is the message about the kingdom as Jesus says in the interpretation of the parable we'll look at in a moment. Or, as Luke's version of this parable simply says, "The seed is the word of God (Lk. 8:11)." The main point is quite simple: God scatters the seed— the message of the Kingdom explained in the Word of God. That is the source of life and our spiritual growth. The production of our lives, our spiritual growth, the graces, and how much of the character of Jesus we have depends upon what we do with the Word of God that is given to us (scattered in our lives). God's Word is the source of life.

Jesus said, "The words I speak are spirit and life (Jn. 6:63)." I don't think we're used to thinking of God's Word being filled with creative energy, and life like a seed. But then, seeds aren't terribly impressive when you look at them. It's what they do once they're planted that's impressive. We search in all kinds of other places for the power and motivation for change. We try all sorts of programs. But what Jesus says we need is His Word.

What are the sources of this seed of God's Word? Jesus is the Living Word. His life and teaching proclaim God's way and the answer to life's problems. The Bible is where we learn about Him and other things God has spoken through the Holy Spirit to and through others.

A few days ago, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed with the stuff of ministry. I was also a little discouraged over something that had happened that day. That night my sleep was fitful. I was awake almost an hour before I wanted to be. I figured I might as well get up and have my devotions. I always begin with reading a Psalm— it's the prayer book of the Bible. So, I just read through the Psalms in their regular sequence, one a day. The Psalm that morning was the 144<sup>th</sup>, a Psalm of David. The last few months, I've been using *The Message* paraphrase to help me hear these prayers in a fresh way. That morning, these words from the second verse began to minister to me:

*He's the bedrock on which I stand,  
the castle in which I live,  
my rescuing knight,*

*The high crag where I run for dear life...*

God's Spirit began making it all very alive, creative within me. Now, the original message of this Psalm had little application to me at the moment— David is battling enemies. I wasn't at war with anyone. But that one phrase, *He's the bedrock on which I stand...* was used by the Holy Spirit that morning to recenter me, assure me and give me perspective. It restored peace to my soul. I found the thought of God being my bedrock, solid, unchanging, immovable support beneath me energizing and renewing.

How is it, something written 3000 years ago for an entirely different situation, can speak to my heart and provide spiritual renewal? It is because it is God's Word. When God

speaks, His Spirit goes with the word spoken to accomplish His will. So it was in creation. God spoke and the Holy Spirit made it happen. So, in Scripture, we have something entirely different available to us than in any other writing. In the original writing of this Psalm, the Holy Spirit took David's words and infused them with Spirit-power and Spirit-controlled accuracy so that, to the listening, receptive heart, they can communicate on a spirit-level with believers throughout all time. The same Spirit that inspired these words resides within a believer to reignite them in our hearts to effect change. Reading Scripture to provide growth, transformation, and power in our lives is not unlike plugging something into an electrical outlet to make it run. In the Bible, we have God's ordained medium through which Spirit-power is transmitted to us. II Tim. 3:16 affirms,

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

The word the NIV translates, "God-breathed" is a literal rendition of the Greek. Other translations use, "inspired." The word for breath and spirit in the Greek is the same. The point is, Scripture is absolutely unique. The Holy Spirit accompanies it to empower it to do God's will. Remember also, the Scripture Paul is referring to here is the Old Testament, for that is all that was written at that time. Sometimes we are inclined not to give the Old Testament it's proper level of inspiration and respect for being God's Word.

Jesus ends this parable with (as he often does with other parables), *He who has ears, let him hear (9)*. What Jesus is saying, and explains in the verses following, is that there are two levels of communication going on. There is the surface story. But it contains Spirit-truth. Only those with spiritual ears, those who've been born again and have the new life given by the Holy Spirit will hear this deeper level of communication where God's Holy Spirit ministers to our hearts with creative power and energy.

God also speaks through the proclamation of the Word in preaching. It is my desire and prayer that my preaching be anointed by the Spirit of God. By anointing, we mean empowered with the Holy Spirit. I'm sure most of us can remember change points in our lives sitting under that Word as it was proclaimed. Rather than just words being shared, it was suddenly alive inside you, an inner "aha!" which we obey and find significant momentum is there in change. Maybe a transformation of heart you've wanted for a long time is suddenly yours.

God also can speak through other believers as they share what God is doing in them. The Holy Spirit resides in us, and can prompt the sharing of just the right thing to help someone else. Christian literature is an extension of this sharing. There are so many good books available anymore. And you don't need to buy the books to take advantage of them. We have a great library here at the church, right next to the kitchen. A lot of Christian books are available through the public library. Polly and I order a lot of them from Wenatchee when they aren't here.

And, as we pray, God can communicate directly to our hearts through His Spirit. This is most generally in ideas, impressions, or feelings given to us in our mind and heart— but,

we know it is of God.

Now let's look at the other half of the equation. The word must be received before it can grow and bring forth its marvelous fruit. Here, we get to the four responses to the Word. I think most of us have all four soils somewhere in our hearts. Let's think through them a little more.

## **HARDENED SOIL**

*Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed that was sown along the path. (18-19).*

The hardened path soil is impenetrable. Every gardener knows the seeds need to get into the soil. Since these seeds lay on the surface, the birds come and eat it. You've had that happen with grass seed, haven't you? Jesus says the birds are "the evil one", the devil, who comes and "snatches away what was sown in the heart." In fact, the snatching away of God's word is the major work of devil. It started in Garden of Eden with, "Hath God said....?(Gen. 3:1)" Ever since he has been casting doubt on the trustworthiness of God or the truth of what He has said. Or the devil suggests it just might not work for you or apply to you in your situation.

These hard hearts are ones who, when they hear the message about the kingdom, don't receive it into their hearts— don't let it penetrate beyond the surface where it affects attitudes, lifestyle, and our thinking. We hold it at arms length, keeping it "out there," evaluating or discussing but not letting it take hold. Now, not all evaluation is wrong. God has given us minds to discern, evaluate, and apply things.

I think we've all had the experience where God's truth has dawned on us, hit us in some way. Maybe it's been through a sermon, a Scripture, or in prayer. You knew it was something you should do or act upon. Perhaps it was:

- a movement in your heart toward repentance and a change in your behavior;
- someone you thought you should see or a phone call be made;
- forgiveness you need to ask for from someone;
- an act of compassion;
- a giving of money or time;
- or moved to intercessory pray for someone or a situation;

but, you let it pass. You think it might be better later, at another time, or you need to think about it, not be rash, and soon the motivation is gone. In fact, you are no longer able to move your heart to do what you know should be done. The evil one has snatched God's Word away. It is gone, because we didn't act, didn't let it penetrate. The seed needs softened soil to penetrate, to germinate.

What hardens the soil of our hearts? Sometimes it is hurt or disappointment with God or others that causes us to close up. We're afraid to trust again or try again. We don't want to be hurt again. It is a defense against being vulnerable, believing. Then, there's prejudiced, closed minds. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were hardened by presuppositions. We can easily be in the same boat in our religious attitudes— not open to the new, different ways, even though it checks out with God's Word. And, the hard soil is a footpath. People are more important to paths than seeds are. We can get too attuned to people, their needs, desires, and current events. Our hearts can get hardened by the traffic of our business and the trade of life.

### **SHALLOW/ ROCKY SOIL**

*The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the Word and at once receives it with joy. But, since he has not root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution come because of the Word, he quickly falls away. (20-21).*

Some soil in Palestine was thinly laid over limestone beneath. When the soil was moist, seeds here would quickly germinate and spring up. But, when the sun rose and cooked the dampness away, it quickly withered. There was no depth for the roots and nothing to hold the moisture.

Here is the shallow response to God's word. The heart in Biblical thinking is the seat of our emotions, intellect and wills. I think we can get out of balance in any of these three areas and thereby be shallow. Emotion and enthusiasm is good.. But there must be more. An intellectual approach is good. But only a thinking approach can be shallow if it doesn't embrace the feeling parts and the doing parts. Likewise, someone strong in volition, tackling difficult obedience is good, but without emotion, and intellect it can just be heavy duty. Depth means balance. Depth also means a root system to support us in difficult times. It involves a self-disciplined devotional life, knowing how to feed ourselves from the Bible, knowing how to prayer, and keeping ourselves in fellowship with other believers.

### **THORNS**

*The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. (22).*

This is listening that's choked out by the anxieties of living. Choking is a pretty good way to describe what worry does to the spiritual life. You can feel the constrictions of worry driving out faith, joy, and peace. Worries about health, about our children, about our finances all constitute cares and concerns that choke off our listening to and obeying God.

Jesus also mentions the "deceitfulness of wealth" as another strangle-hold choking off the fruitfulness of God's Word. This is thinking that more is better and putting our

security in things. An abundance of things can starve our souls. Both of these together can give life a quality of driven-ness where we simply don't seem to have time to listen to God. A saying worth remembering is, "If the devil can't make you bad, he'll make you busy."

### **GOOD SOIL**

*But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (23).*

Here, there is receptivity. Jesus defines it as "understanding." It is incorporating it into our hearts, letting it penetrate deeply, yielding to its authority, obeying it, and letting it grow. Dr. Dale Bruner hyphenates understand to convey the meaning: "under-stands" or stands under the word. This is letting it guide and govern our living.

The result is, it produces a good crop. The Greek actually has two verbs, "bears fruit" and "does things." By fruit, think of the fruits of the Spirit listed in Gal. 5:22-23— "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, faithfulness." The fruit of listening to and applying God's word is the transformation of our character. And, "does things" means we will be active for the Kingdom of God in ministry, service, and mission. It is all in various degrees of production, not all same— some 30, 60, or 100 times. Think of it as bushels per acre. We have gifts that differ for sure. But, all who open their lives to God's Word will be fruitful.

### **CONCLUSION**

God is faithful, doing His part in giving us the life-producing Word. Our response is the critical difference. How responsive is your heart?

My guess is, most of us can find a field of each kind of soil in our lives. Let's plow up any hard ground we find. Let's pull out the rocks preventing depth of root. And, let's pull out those nasty thorns of worry choking off the life Christ gives.