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DEVELOPING A SENSITIVITY TO THE TEACHING OF GOD'S WORD

THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOILS

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

At the tender age of ten, Allen was privileged to live next door to his grandfather. He became interested in everything that his grandfather did. Allen was his grandfather's constant companion as he followed him about the house, around the yard, and accompanied him on trips to town to visit the hardware store and other places of interest.

One warm spring day, they were working together in the small garden in the back of their yard when Allen became curious about the weeds which the spring rains had caused to grow on the garden plot. He watched with intense interest as his grandfather ignited the dried brush under the weeds. Allen's curiosity turned to amazement as he watched the fire consume the brush and the weeds. His grandfather explained that there was much work to be done in order to prepare the soil for planting. For days, they raked, bundled, and carried away the debris. Finally, the soil was ready to be cultivated. They turned it over and over until it was ready for planting.

Allen's curious mind prompted him to ask many questions. His grandfather patiently answered each one in order to impress upon Allen the need to prepare the soil for planting. The grandfather wisely took advantage of this opportunity to teach Allen a spiritual lesson which helped him understand that if the seed of divine truth is to produce a harvest in us, it must take root in the properly prepared soil of our hearts.

SETTING: Let us imagine a picturesque view of the Plain of Gennesaret, which provides the setting of this parable. In order to separate Himself from the crowds, Jesus entered a boat on the calm waters of the lake. Before Him, on the edge of the colorful sand, awaited the crowd of eager listeners. As Jesus looked at the crowd, He noticed in the distance a farmer sowing seed on the slope of a hill behind the beach. As the sower scattered his seed, the birds were flying all around him. Jesus immediately recognized the similarity of the sower's situation and His own experience. In His mind He compared the literal seed that the sower was dispensing, to the seed of the Word which He was about to impart so that His disciples could follow Him in preaching and teaching the gospel. Perhaps thus the parable of the sower was born.

PROBLEM: Jesus had just finished a sermon in which He had taught clearly the law which governs the use of the Sabbath Day. The Scribes and Pharisees had interrupted Him because His teaching contradicted their self-made laws. He refuted their arguments by performing a miracle. This further infuriated them because they thought His display of divine power would jeopardize their authority and reputations among the people. They immediately plotted to kill Him (Matthew 12:9-14).

Jesus knew of their intentions, but this did not deter Him. He continued to heal the sick and drive out demons, as well as restore sight and speech to the physically impaired. Because of His relentless efforts to continue the work of His Father, the Pharisees spoke blasphemously of His miracles and accused Him of being associated with Beelzebub (Satan) (Matthew 12:24). Jesus responded to their accusations by declaring that the purpose of His ministry was not in league with Satan, but that He was openly opposed and hostile to the plan of the evil one.

They requested that He perform another miracle to prove His divine mission. He answered their demands by reminding them that their generation had become adulterous against God, Who had chosen them to be His special servants. Jesus knew that His miracles needed no further confirmation as to their source and that the Pharisees were searching for an excuse for their unbelief. He immediately directed their thoughts toward the topic of necessary repentance. He referred to the experience of the Ninevites in the time of Jonah to teach a truth with which they should have been familiar (Matthew 12:41).

After addressing the Pharisees and teachers, Jesus turned His attention to the crowd of common people who were interested in hearing what He had to say. Another interruption occurred when members of His earthly family wished to speak to Him. This brief interruption afforded Jesus the opportunity to teach that all people who give their relationship with God first place stand as equals in His sight and are considered members of His spiritual family (Matthew 12:50). What a wonderful blessing that is to each of us!

One cannot help but wonder how Jesus had enough physical strength to continue teaching after such weighty confrontations. Scripture states that, “on that same day” He spoke to large crowds who had gathered by the seashore to hear Him speak from a floating pulpit (ship). The great numbers who flocked to hear Jesus throughout His ministry are proof of the great spiritual hunger that existed. The traditions taught by the Scribes and Pharisees offered no moral guidance or spiritual satisfaction.

READ: Matthew 13:1-9

QUESTIONS:

1. (a) What familiar occupation did Jesus use in this parable?

(b) Who is the sower in this parable?

(c) What method did the farmer use to sow the seed?
2. (a) How many different kinds of soil are mentioned?

(b) What was the condition of each soil and how did it affect the seed which was planted?

3. What is the admonition given by Jesus in verse 9?

Jesus used parables (stories with earthly themes) which illustrated spiritual truths. Parables had the effect of veiling truth from those who had already determined to reject it, while stimulating further inquiry from those who hungered for it. A parable compares a familiar concept with an unfamiliar one. Jesus' examples came from very common and down-to-earth experiences with which most people could identify. Sowing seed was a common activity in that part of the world in that day.

Jesus explained to His disciples that those who had hardened hearts would not receive His truth, especially now that He was teaching in parables (Matthew 13:13-15). He desired, however, that His own understand fully what He was saying. Their opportunities to know divine truth exceeded those of the prophets (vs.16-17). He explained the parable of the sower to them privately. He called upon the disciples to listen carefully to His explanation.

READ: Matthew 13:18-23

4. (a) What does the seed represent and who does the sower represent?

(b) Who do the birds represent (v.19)?

(c) What method does Satan use to interfere with the growth of the seed (2 Corinthians 4:4)?

(d) What philosophies or other things in today's world cause people to harden their hearts against the Word of God?

5. (a) What do the rocky places represent (v. 20)?

(b) What contributed to the rejection of the Word of God (v.21)?

(c) What are some examples of present day situations which have this effect?

6. (a) What do the thorns represent?

(b) How do the thorns which Jesus mentions affect our Christian witness?

(c) How can we overcome the thorns and weeds, which represent things that hinder our growth?

None of the first three types of soil, which represent the hearts of individuals, bear fruit. The lack of fruit-bearing in their lives demonstrates their unsaved condition. Jesus teaches that true believers bear fruit (John 15:1-8).

7. (a) Who does the good soil represent (v.23)?

(b) Why was the seed which fell on good soil able to produce desirable results (Luke 8:15)?

(c) What is the spiritual fruit that is evidenced in the life of the Christian believer who hears the Word, accepts it, retains it, and applies it to daily living situations (Galatians 5:22-23)?

In conclusion, it seems fair to state that we have studied four examples of what happens when the Word of God comes upon the human heart.

In the first three instances, the results were not productive. First, the heart was hardened and did not understand or receive the Word. Thus, it bore

no fruit. In the second instance, the heart was shallow and very emotional, but it had no depth. The Word sprang up quickly. But there was no root, and it withered away in time of trouble. Thirdly, the Word did take root and began to grow. Because of a lack of repentance, sin crowded out the Word. Likewise, the weeds (which represent the worries of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for more glamorous activities) choke off the potential for a fruitful life. Does this conclusion render the Word of God ineffective because of the sin, carelessness, and insensitivity of the human heart?

Thankfully, the parable ends on a much more joyous note. While we must remain aware and watchful for the signs of the first three soils in our hearts, we can take delight in the truth that the Holy Spirit can prepare the soil of our hearts to resemble the fourth and good soil of the parable. He can enable us to receive the Word with open and receptive hearts and allow it to equip us with the stamina to persevere. Finally, the Holy Spirit can produce an abundant crop of fruit for the Lord through us.

APPLICATION: God sows His truth into the hearts of people through Scripture. We must permit our spirits to become teachable and receptive to the Word. We must not allow ourselves to become blinded by prejudices, distracted by evil influences, or allow mundane concerns to overshadow our interest in the Word of God. May we practice self-control and discipline to receive the Word and allow it to control our lives so that we may bear fruit for His kingdom.

As a way of encouraging us, Jesus promises additional insight if we are spiritually prepared to receive it. He stated, “For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matthew 13:12). This is an important principle in the understanding of Scripture. Understanding Scripture requires diligent study. Its truths are given to those who are willing to live by it.

May each of us strive to develop sensitivity to the teaching and preaching of God’s Word so that what we hear will enter our minds and hearts. What abides in our minds and hearts will affect our behavior. Our behavior will produce fruit commensurate with the truths we have learned. The amount of fruit may vary. But wherever the heart is tuned to the Word

of God, behavior will bring honor and glory to His name. This parable reiterates the spiritual truth: “Thus you will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20).

This parable teaches us to be realistic about our response to the gospel. Only a fraction of those who hear will believe, and the world will never be totally converted. We must continue, nevertheless, to sow the seed, praying that God will prepare our hearts to receive it.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. After a careful evaluation of the four kinds of soil which represent the conditions of the human heart, are you able to discern the category in which your response to the teachings of the truths of Scripture corresponds?
2. Has your heart become hardened so that the Word of God holds no interest for you? Do you allow the cares, concerns, and trials of this world to detain you from recognizing the importance of God’s Word? Have you ever embraced the Word but later lost interest in it? Are you constantly striving to be receptive to God’s Word and apply it to your Christian life?
3. Do you feel comfortable with the analysis of your own situation? If not, what positive action must be taken in order that your heart will become productive soil to bring blessings to your own and others’ lives while extending credit and honor to Jesus’ name? The remedy for such a situation may be found in Scripture (James 1:5; Matthew 7:7).

