

Four Soils (Part 2)
Matthew 13:1-23
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Last week and this week, we stepped away from our study of the book of Romans to explore a little more deeply, the relationship between divine election and human responsibility. And it is made, I think, profoundly clear in this parable that our Lord told. Let's read it together, Matthew 13, I'll begin reading in verse 1,

That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

Now, as I noted for you last time, the context of this parable is extremely important to understanding why Jesus tells it. A few hours before He shared these words with the crowds there on the beach, He had healed the demon-possessed man. It was such an amazing miracle, that some began to wonder if perhaps He was, in fact, the Messiah. In response to that, because of their envy of Jesus, because of their hatred of Him, the spiritual leaders of the nation responded to the claims that perhaps He was Messiah by saying, "Not only is He not Messiah, but He is in league with the devil himself".

A short time later, that same morning, the morning that Jesus shared this parable, Jesus' brothers had arrived in Capernaum from their home in Nazareth. And they had come with one purpose, and that was to take Jesus by force back to Nazareth. Because, as the gospel record tells us, they had concluded He was out of His mind. Jesus' four brothers thought He was nuts.

Now those two encounters, on the very same morning, leave us with some important questions. Why was it that the spiritual leaders of the Jewish nation rejected Jesus, their Messiah, as He claimed, and the message of the gospel that He brought? Why did even His own brothers refuse to believe Him during His ministry? And why do some, sort of by implication, as you think about all of this, why do some, who do in fact attach themselves to Jesus as His disciples, later turn away? Well in this parable, Jesus explains the answers to those questions. He explains why

not everyone believes the gospel. Why some, who appear to believe, turn out not to be, in fact, His true followers.

This parable, we just read together, is usually called, "The Parable of the Sower", and that's because Jesus refers to it that way down in verse 18. But by Jesus' design, the focus of this parable, is not the sower, or even the seed, it's the condition of the soil. Now the parable is divided into two parts. There is, in what we just read, the story itself. That Jesus publicly shared with the huge crowd that had gathered there on the beach, as He taught from a boat anchored just off shore. Verses 3-9 lay out the story. The second part of this parable is the interpretation and it runs from verses 18-23. And this interpretation Jesus shared privately with His disciples later that same day.

Now last time, we looked at the story in verses 3-9, and essentially we learned this... in this parable you have a farmer or a sower, you have some of the wheat seed that was common there in Galilee where He taught this, and you have four distinct kinds of soils on which the seed fell. And those soils are, in fact, the focus of Jesus' story. That's what we learned, and that's, obviously, a summary of the entire parable that He gives. If you weren't here last week, you can go back, at some point, and catch up with us. But today, I want us to look at the interpretation in verses 18-23. Notice verse 18, Jesus says, "Hear then the parable of the sower." Now remember, Jesus told the story along with a number of other parables from that small boat there on the Sea of Galilee. But it's clear from both Mark and Luke that it was only later, after Jesus had finished His public teaching, that His disciples came to Him and inquired in private about what this parable meant. And in God's goodness to us, we have that conversation recorded for us here. Here is Jesus' explanation to His disciples of exactly what this amazing parable, the one Jesus said, if you don't understand, you can't understand any parable. We have that explanation here; let's look at it together.

First of all, Jesus explains the *seed* in verse 19. He identifies the *seed*, notice what He says, as *the word of, or about the kingdom*. It's the spiritual kingdom over which He rules. Mark puts it slightly differently, in Mark 4:14, he refers to the *seed* simply as, *the word*. Luke, in Luke 8:11, refers to the *seed* as the *word of God*. You put all of that together and we could say it this way: *the seed is the word of God, and especially the message about the kingdom, or the good news about how to enter Jesus' spiritual kingdom*, what we would call the gospel. The good news that, while God is our righteous Creator, while He made us in His own image, while He has compelled us to walk in His ways, He has given us His law, both in writing, and the substance of it written on the heart; we have rebelled against Him. We are sinners, by birth, and by choice. We live in rebellion against Him. And in justice, He must extend wrath toward us. We would suffer, apart from grace, eternal punishment, but while God is holy, and just, and righteous, He is also merciful, and gracious. And driven by His mercy and grace and love, He sent His own Son, His eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, to become just like us to become fully, and

entirely human, truly God, truly man. And He lived on this earth for 33 years. He lived a perfect life of perfection. The life of obedience that you and I should have lived, and then He died. Not for His own sins, He had none, but He died suffering the justice of God for every person who would ever believe in Him so that God could, in turn, extend forgiveness to that person and even give to Him the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Then God raised His Son from the dead, putting His own stamp of approval on the work of Jesus Christ. He ascended into heaven, where He sits now and intercedes for His own, until He returns for His own in the days ahead. That's the gospel, that's the good news, and we have to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord in order to receive the benefit of His death and Resurrection. That's the *seed*.

Next, Jesus explains the *sower*. Now, in none of the three Gospels that record this story, does Jesus tell us who the sower is. In the Parable of the Tares, that He told on the same day, down in verse 37, Jesus Himself is the Sower. And certainly that's true, but it's broader than that, because notice the generic way that Matthew puts it in verse 19, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom." That implies that the sower is anyone who sows the word. Sowing takes place when anyone teaches or explains the message of Jesus or about Jesus to someone else. A moment ago, I gave you in encapsulated form, the gospel. I just sowed the seed. I was the sower at that moment. And when you share the gospel with others, when any Christian sows the seed, here she is the sower.

Now that brings us to the major component in this story and it's *the soils*. The focus of this story, as I have said, isn't the sower or even the seed, it's the condition of the soils on which the seed falls. So what exactly are these soils? What's the significance of the soils? Notice verse 19. He speaks here of those who hear, but don't understand. Then He says this: "the evil one snatches what has been sown [where?] in the heart." The soil is the heart. So, the four soils on which the seed falls in Jesus' story, represent four different kinds of hearts. Four different heart responses to the truth of the gospel message. The seed is always the same, but the results depend on the condition of the heart. So, let's listen then, as Jesus explains, why it is that different people respond differently to the gospel.

First of all, we learned about the hard soil. It is the unreceptive heart. Verse 19, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom [the message of how to enter Jesus' spiritual kingdom] and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road." Now as I noted for you last time, in the first century, small paths separated one owner's field from another. Similar paths divided up the sections of your own property. So throughout the crops, there were these small paths. Every day, farmers and farm animals and even travelers used those footpaths, and so they became exceptionally hard-packed from constant use. And as the farmer came in October/November and he sowed his seed, some of the seed would have landed out of the tilled area, the prepared area, on one of those paths. But, of course, it couldn't penetrate that hard ground and it wasn't covered

with any earth, and so almost immediately, the birds swooped down and devoured those seeds. Jesus said that's like when someone hears the gospel and, notice what he says in verse 19, "does not understand it."

Now, don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying. He doesn't mean that a person can't grasp the words that are said or the basic concepts that are shared in the gospel. The gospel is, after all, a simple message. Profoundly deep in its implications, but a simple message. So, He's not saying they don't get the basic facts that you are sharing with them, He means, this person doesn't really grasp the truth, he doesn't understand it in a life-changing way. The truth doesn't penetrate his heart, because it's hard; it's unreceptive. He hears, but he doesn't really, profoundly, deeply, understand it because he refuses to think about it, he refuses to take it seriously, he refuses to seriously consider it. It never penetrates his heart. Here's how Luke puts it in Luke 8:12, "Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved."

Now, understand this, the hard heart is the normal human condition. Every person in this room was born with a hard heart. The prophet Ezekiel, in Ezekiel 36:26, says that human beings, who have not experienced regeneration, and that's every human being apart from God's intervening grace, has what? A heart of... stone. We have hard hearts. We don't understand because we do not want to understand. That's what Paul says in Romans 3:11, he says, "There is none who understands."

Now, when it come to soil or dirt, I think you understand, that dirt is not morally responsible for being hard and unreceptive to the seed, but we as people, are. When a person's heart is hard to the gospel, it is because that person has hardened his or her own heart. We're born with hard hearts because we're born sinners because of Adam's sin. And then, we harden our own hearts over time. Here's how Zechariah puts it, Zechariah 7:12, listen to this,

They made their hearts [talking about people], they made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets; therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. [What was that wrath? This is a chilling verse] Just as God called and they would not listen, [calling through His Prophets] so they called [and God says] and I won't listen.

This is a severe form of the wrath of God in which He abandons, hard-hearted, disobedient sinners. There comes a time when God says, "Enough". And we then, have hard hearts, because we're born that way, because we make them harder by our own rebellion. We don't want to walk in the way of obedience because we like our sin. Satan, then, comes and takes advantage of that hard heart. Notice verse 19, "the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his

heart." Who is the evil one? Mark calls him "Satan", Luke calls him "the devil". And he *snatches*, that's a word of violence, he steals the seed. Before this person, who's heard the gospel, can really think about it, so that it leads him to believe, because his heart is hard, it hasn't penetrated. Satan takes advantage of that and comes and violently steals it away. And oh he has so many ways to accomplish that.

In the first century, the hard hearted, the unreceptive, were people like the scribes and Pharisees or even Jesus' own brothers. But the unreceptive heart takes many different forms. It can be that of a proud moralist. A moral person who is filled with self-righteousness. You know, "I am not a sinner, I don't really need that, I am a good person." Whether, in the Church, or outside of it. The unreceptive heart can simply be the indifferent, the apathetic, it could be the unconvinced. This hard heart, can be a person who's into organized false religion. Or it can be those who have created their own designer religion, which is becoming increasingly popular in our day. Some of the unreceptive have rarely heard the gospel, but they have been hard to it when they have. Others grew up in the Church and heard it every Sunday. There are even people with hard hearts sitting here this morning and that makes me very, very sad, but I know it's true. I know there are people sitting here who have come because, maybe your parents made you, maybe you've come because of a spouse. Or maybe you've come because of the social connection or you enjoy the people for some reason. But, you do your best not to really listen. Not to listen in a life-changing way. Listen, if you have a hard, unreceptive heart to the gospel, can I just plead with you to understand how serious that is? You ought to be afraid. Jesus told His hearers that there would come a time when they would seek Him and not find Him and they would die in their sins. God, through the prophet Zechariah said, there is going to come a time, where if you keep not listening to me, I won't listen to you.

Some people have hearts like those hard footpaths surrounding a first century field, utterly unreceptive. Let me ask you, is that your heart this morning? Do you have a hard heart toward these things? I plead with you to realize, you are headed for disaster. An ultimate and eternal destruction. Please, cry out to God, even this morning.

There is a second kind of heart. It's the superficial heart in verses 20-21. The superficial heart, the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places. This is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. Yet, he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary. And when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. Now the word *rocky* here, as I noted for you last time, is not referring to stones sitting on the surface of this farmer's field. He would have prepared his field more diligently than that. Rather, this describes a situation in which there is what looks like good soil, but beneath it, just below the level which the plow would have reached, is a large outcropping of limestone bedrock. So, the farmer saw what he thought was good soil, he sowed his seed, he covered the seed, but the soil was very shallow in that part, just a thin layer of top soil. Because of the small amount of earth,

that part of the field would have heated up much more quickly and that caused those seeds to spring up more quickly, and wow, out of the gate they looked like they would provide the best yield of any plants in the entire field. But eventually, the rainy season began to subside, and the hot desert winds began to blow, and these plants that had looked so healthy and so promising began to dry out and were scorched and eventually, they even died.

Jesus said, notice, "The one on whom the seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it." He hears the gospel message, he comprehends that message, and he accepts it as true and he even responds to that truth emotionally. Notice Jesus says, "with joy." When this person receives the gospel message, it's an emotional experience. There may be weeping. There may be thrilling joy. A rush of emotion, maybe a dramatic looking event. What does it mean, "he receives the message." Luke 8:13 says this, "they believe for a while." Now, I think you understand, that the rest of Scripture is clear that a person who truly believes, never stops believing. Mark 13:13, "the one who endures to the end, he will be saved." The one who has true faith continues to exercise that faith, to the end, and that's the one who will genuinely be saved. So in the case of the rocky soil, this belief is something short of saving faith. Both Matthew and Mark, call it *temporary faith*. Notice verse 21, "it is temporary." Now what is the problem? Why is it temporary? Verse 21, "he has no firm root in himself." The plant that begins to grow, doesn't sink its roots deep in to the person's heart. Theirs is a superficial response to the gospel. It is a shallow, superficial heart.

This is the person to whom the gospel looks wonderful, attractive, appealing. In some cases, but not all of the them, this person receives the gospel for what they can get out of it. They're sold the gospel like this, "Listen if you'll just believe in Christ, it will fix your marriage, it will improve your life. God will grow your business. It will make you more successful. So, try Jesus." Well, what sinner wouldn't be tempted to try Jesus on those terms? But what happens? The kind of faith, that's all about what you can get out of it, is, at best, temporary. Because there are things that happen that upset that whole idea. What happens? What happens that shows this person's faith to be only temporary. There are two kinds of events that happen, notice verse 21, "when [number one] affliction or [number two] persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away." By the way, did you notice? *Immediately* he receives it, and *immediately* he falls away. Now what are these two events that can cause temporary faith to become obvious? First of all, the word *affliction*, means *pressure*. It's the word used most often in the New Testament to identify the external pressures that afflict all of us in this life. It's the distress caused by real hardships throughout life. Problems in your life, problems in your home, problems at work, financial difficulty, sickness, illness, cancer, death of a family member, and on and on and on the list goes. Affliction, trouble, hardships.

The second kind of event that reveals the superficial heart, is persecution because of the word. Now when we think *persecution*, our minds shoot to what's happening to our dear brothers and

sisters in China. Physical persecution of some kind, and that is persecution, but the New Testament details a lot of other kinds of persecution. Persecution includes ridicule, insults, saying false things about you, loss of your position, loss of your wealth, loss of friends, loss of family or, in extreme cases, physical abuse and death. All of those are persecution. And when persecution comes because of the gospel, because of our commitment to Christ and to follow Him, it can be a catalyst to show temporary faith for what it is. You see, what Jesus is describing here, is when either affliction, trouble, difficulty in life, or persecution comes, this person, who responded so well immediately, immediately falls away.

The Greek word for *falls away* is *skandalizo*, you recognize the English word in that word. Trouble and persecution come and scandalize this person. Those troubles, that persecution, becomes an offense, a cause of stumbling. Thayer, one of the Greek lexicons, defines *skandalizo* this way: *to cause a person to begin to distrust and desert one whom he ought to trust and obey*. Here's how it works, although for a time this person looks like the real thing, when trouble, just general trouble in life, or persecution comes, he begins to distrust and desert both the one and the message that he once professed. And it becomes obvious in his doing so, that he was never a believer at all.

Turn over to John chapter 6, there's so many things that can scandalize. Jesus teaching scandalizes and that's the point here, in John 6:60. Jesus has just given that statement where he says, "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood," which, by the way, has nothing to do about communion. It is an invitation to the gospel, and it's saying, "If you want Me, you get all of Me. You have to be all in, follow Me." Verse 60,

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, [notice they are His disciples, that is, they have attached themselves to Him], He said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble?" [to be scandalized? Same word. The answer is, yes it did, verse 64], "But there are some of you, [Jesus says], who do not truly believe." [You're my disciples, in the sense that you said you are, but you don't really believe]. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray Him. And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.

Not true followers of Christ, but those that had attached themselves to Him. Why did they leave? First John 2:19 says, "They went out from us because they were not of us." They never truly, genuinely believed. Judas Iscariot is another classic example of a superficial heart. He came to hear the message of Christ and to receive it, undoubtedly with joy. For more than three years, he

looked like the real thing; so much so, that when he left the Last Supper to go get the officers and police to arrest Jesus, nobody suspected a thing. He had preached Jesus, he had cast out demons, he had traveled with Jesus day and night for more than two years and maybe more like three years. He had been enthusiastic in his support of Jesus, but when he saw this kingdom thing wasn't going to turn out exactly like he expected, according to his desires, he was scandalized, and he turned on Jesus.

I remember the first time in my life that I saw this up close and personal. I was in high school. There was a student a couple of years older than I was, who was an absolute pagan. I went to both public schools, as well to a private school at one point and this was in a private, Christian school. And this guy was, frankly, one of the worst pagans I had ever known in any school system. He was well-liked, he was a great football player and he was a real ladies' man. My freshman year, this man had a dramatic, emotional conversion experience and I heard his testimony and it was a powerful, tear-jerking, testimony. He was zealous, he shared his faith with everybody, he showed up at every Bible study. But a year later, he had returned to his old life because it just didn't deliver what he thought it would, and he met the affliction of the loss of his friends. Sadly, many make professions of faith in Christ, and then trouble comes or persecution, and they walk away from the message they once received with joy.

Some hearts are unreceptive, others are superficial. There's a third kind of response to the message of Christ. In verse 22, it is the preoccupied heart. Before the farmer planted, sometime in October or November, he would have prepared that field. And in preparing it, not only would he have plowed, with the little rudimentary plow that they had there in the first century, but he would have pulled all the weeds and thorns and would have made sure that that soil that he was about to plant in looked pristine. But the roots of the weeds and thorns, that he had pulled up, were deeper than his plow could go. In addition, all of the seeds of the weeds and thorns that had been spread in the field the previous growing season, were all still there. And so as he sowed, some of the seed would have fallen into ground already infested with thorn roots and seeds. In a few weeks, he would be growing a fine crop of wheat mixed with weeds and thorns, and, of course, the wheat was gradually choked out. In verse 22, Jesus explains what this means, this kind of heart, He says, "And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

The seed of the gospel falls into this heart and this person also responds favorably. Like the superficial heart, this person temporarily accepts the gospel and begins to grow. But this heart is infested with thorns that begin to grow at the same time and will eventually choke out the gospel. Now growing up in the South, I saw a graphic illustration of this reality, almost every day of my life, in the scourge that is known as kudzu. Kudzu was introduced here from Japan into the U.S. in 1876. And starting in 1935, until 1950, the Soil Conservation Service actually encouraged

farmers and private citizens to plant kudzu to reduce erosion. But, as you know, if you have seen it, it literally has taken over. So in 1953, all of that was reversed, and it was named a *Pest Weed*. And that's because it is amazingly virulent. Kudzu can grow as much as 60 feet in a single growing season, that's 12 inches a day; you can almost watch kudzu grow. And it completely chokes out everything else. That's what Jesus is describing here with the preoccupied heart.

D.A. Carson writes, "This person simply never permits the message to control him." That's a very insightful comment, "He never permits the message to control him." Life has too many other commitments that slowly choke the struggling plant which never matures and bears fruit. So, what exactly are these thorns that kill the gospel in the heart into which it has begun to grow? Well Matthew lists two destructive influences on the gospel in the heart. Notice verse 22, the first one "the worry of the world." Literally, *the worry of the age*. This person's mind is distracted and preoccupied with the cares that are part of living in every age. And gradually over time, the message of the gospel, and their initial attraction to that message, dies. Choked out, by all of the worries and cares that go along with life. Things, that in and of themselves, are not wrong; things like careers, and mortgages, and houses, and cars, and hobbies, and responsibilities, and duties and associations, and fraternals, etc. etc. etc. Choked out, by the worries of life.

Matthew also identifies a second destructive influence on the seed in the heart, verse 22, "the deceitfulness of riches." Notice, the problem is not having wealth. You may, in fact, be wealthy by God's design, by His sovereign providence. It's not a problem to have wealth, the problem is the deceitfulness of wealth. Being deceived by it. And that can happen a couple of ways. It can happen when you don't have wealth and you desperately want it, because it has deceived you into thinking that it's going to make you happy, and you live your life pursuing it. Or maybe you already have it, and you are so desperately trying to keep it, and to increase it, that it deceives you into thinking that is some great advantage. The heart becomes so obsessed with success and money that even one's eternal destiny takes a back seat. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, "You cannot [it's impossible, you don't have the ability to] serve God and wealth." And yes, there are people who serve wealth in the same way that many serve God.

In his parallel account, Luke adds one more distraction, Luke 8:14, the, "pleasures of this life." The pursuit of pleasure chokes out the gospel. I think it's important to note that he leaves it vague. Because certainly this would be true of illicit, sinful pleasures that people pursue and absolutely destructive in their lives, whether it's drugs or sex. Yes, there are illicit things like that, that choke out the seed, but I think it is also to be true of legitimate pleasures, pursued to such excess, that it crowds out everything else. Things that you get so excited about that suddenly, you know, the Scripture, and Church and the fellowship of God's people, mean less and less and less. With the rocky soil it takes only one hot day, one sirocco off the desert to destroy that plant for it to wither and eventually to begin to die, but with the distracted, preoccupied heart, the process is much, much slower, almost imperceptible. Spiritual interest is

slowly choked out over time. Occasionally, the person with this kind of heart, will stop claiming to be a Christian. I have met such people. These things, so choked out the seed, that they don't even claim Christ anymore. On other occasions, this person may openly repudiate Christ and the Christian faith all together. That too, can happen, but neither of those are most common. I would say by far, the most common way this heart manifests itself, is this: the seed actually died years before and yet this person still claims to be a Christian. Because there was a time they were receptive and had great enthusiasm for spiritual things. They may still go to Church. They may be active in Church, in some way, because they enjoy parts of what goes on in Church, they like the people. And they may still profess Christ, but because of a preoccupied heart, the seed has died and they are just going through the motions. They're part of the Church, they're connected, but there is no life. That interest that once drove them, is now, an empty shell.

Can I say, never underestimate the danger of a preoccupied heart? Left to grow, the worries of life, just the normal cares of life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the pleasures of this life, can choke out the beginning signs of spiritual life. And notice the tragic result, verse 22, "it becomes unfruitful." Luke writes, "they are choked... and bring no fruit to maturity." That's the key, the wheat plant never bears fruit, it never produces. I think one of the most graphic biblical examples of a preoccupied heart has to be Demas. Think about Demas, here is a young man who was chosen by Paul to travel with him. Paul, the Apostle Paul, believed he was a real, genuine Christian. And he did travel with Paul, and he ministered with Paul. And then you read this in 2 Timothy 4:10, "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me."

Sadly, today I think the most common example of the preoccupied heart, comes from those who grow up in Christian homes and grow up attending Church. Maybe that describes you this morning. There was a time when the Word had an influence in your life. When you read it and you found some joy in it. You heard the gospel and you responded initially with joy to it. And you made some profession of faith, maybe you were baptized. The Word brought, at some point in your life, conviction an attraction to Jesus and His gospel, but before that Word could complete its work, perhaps as a student in Junior High or High School or College, you began to face the worries that come with adulthood. You heard the siren songs of personal prosperity and pleasure. And gradually, gradually, over time, those things became increasingly important and all of your spiritual interest continued to decline until it was dead. And you're here, you're in Church, but all that you really have left is a childhood profession. There is no real love for Christ. There is no real love for his Word. There is no real desire to walk in obedience to Him. It is just an empty shell. Tragically, maybe, you have even lived in the confidence of that past profession as your only hope for 20, 30, 50 years- even while you have lived, as God knows you, most of those years like an unbeliever lives.

Listen, understand this, according to Jesus Christ, Our Lord, if that is true of you, you are not a genuine believer who has wandered away from Christ for years, and now you need to find your

way back home. Jesus said, the truth is you just seemed to be a real Christian. Let me put it as directly as I know how: where there is no fruit, there is no faith. Where there is no fruit, there is no faith. Instead, the good seed fell into bad soil and the worries of life, and the deceitfulness of wealth, and the pleasures of this life, killed the word that had been sowed in your heart. Yours, according to Jesus, is a preoccupied heart.

There is one other kind of heart, verse 23 it is the prepared heart. Much of the seed the farmer sowed fell onto the soil that he had prepared. Soil with plenty of depth and uncluttered by thorns. It was soft, and deep, and clean, and Jesus says in verse 23, "the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit." What makes for bad soil? What do you have to do to get bad soil? Absolutely nothing. Just let the curse have its effect. But, what makes for good soil? Hard work in preparation. The soil has to be carefully prepared. But listen carefully, this is the point, the soil can't prepare itself. The good soil can take no credit. It's right there alongside the bad soils. The only difference is what? The farmer's preparation. And here's where we see the relationship of divine election and human responsibility. We are each responsible. Alone responsible for the bad condition of our hearts. We were born with hard hearts because of our representative, Adam. And we only made them harder. We are responsible, but the only way our hearts will ever receive the word and bear fruit is if God prepares the soil. Ezekiel 36:26, God says this, "I will remove [their hard hearts] their heart of stone, and I will give to them a heart of flesh." Look at John 6:44,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. [How does the Father draw sinners to Him?] It is written in the prophets, that "they shall be taught of God". [And here's Jesus' commentary], "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me."

You see, it is in the Word of God, by the Word of God, that God prepares the heart. He prepares the heart. He makes it good soil. That's why we read in Acts 16:14 of Lydia, the Lord opened her heart to the things spoken by Paul. As Paul spoke, that word was used by the Father to prepare her heart, to make it good soil to receive it and therefore she did.

What happens in soil prepared to receive the seed? Well, this person responds in three primary ways. Look at Matthew 13:23; he hears, he understands and he bears fruit. The key is that he bears fruit. Different seed, Jesus says, based on a variety of circumstances, produces different yields. They tell us that the average yield in the first century is between 5-15 percent. So 30 fold here was great, 60 fold was wonderful, and 100 fold was an extraordinary, once in a lifetime yield. The seed may grow at different rates, produce different yields in different lives. All good soil isn't exactly alike. Some bears more fruit than others. But Jesus says, every soil that bears fruit is good soil regardless of the differing yields. Luke adds, "the good soil [listen to this]

produced with perseverance." That is really important. On-going fruitfulness is the only way to tell if the seed has fallen in a heart prepared by God. But what is this fruit that every good Christian will produce? I wish I had time to take you to a number of references I have in my notes, but let me just consolidate it for you. It's Christian character and good works. Christian character, that is the fruit of the Spirit. Those qualities that are outlined in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace and so forth. Those things that reflect the moral character of Jesus Christ. And good works, that is, obedience. So we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, solely through His work, but where the gospel falls in good soil, a good heart, prepared by God, it will produce the fruit of Christian character and good works. That's what happens when the gospel is sown in a heart that God has prepared.

Now very quickly, let me make a couple of general observations from what we have learned in this parable. First of all, I want you to notice, there are only four possible responses to the gospel. You have one of these kinds of hearts. Your heart and my heart they're either unreceptive, they're superficial, they're preoccupied or they're prepared. That's it, you fall into one of those categories. Secondly, three of the four responses to the gospel, are initially favorable. Why is that important to note? Because not everybody who says, "I am a Christian and I love Jesus, *is*." There are two of these responses that look like genuine salvation initially, but in time, prove not to be. Another observation I would make is this, only in a heart God prepared will the seed take root, grow, bear fruit, and prove to be permanent.

Very briefly, let me give you three practical implications of all of this. Three practical implications from this parable. Number one, this parable is a key that helps us interpret the different responses we get when we share the gospel. Or maybe, as you look at the lives of the people around you, maybe kids that have grown up to distance themselves from the faith. Maybe family, and friends, neighbors, co-workers. This is the key, Jesus is saying, expect these kinds of responses, based on these kinds of hearts.

Number two, this parable is a mirror that helps us examine the reality of our own faith. It's a mirror. Look in the mirror. You have one of these kinds of hearts. Have you sat here this morning, completely bored with the truth that Jesus is teaching here? Are you completely unreceptive? Then your heart is the hard soil Jesus says.

Did you profess Christ with great joy at some point in the past, but then trouble came, difficulties, things you didn't feel you deserved or life got hard or you experienced persecution and you just turned from it, because you didn't feel God was being true, and faithful to you and you walked away. Your heart is the rocky soil.

Do you claim to be a Christian because of a past experience, but frankly, the worries of life, the pursuit of prosperity, the love of pleasure has effectively choked out the word, and now there is

just a shell of a profession because you don't really love Christ with all of your heart. You don't really love His word. You don't really want to walk in obedience to Him. Jesus says you are the thorny soil.

Or did you hear the word, understand that word, receive it, and by God's grace, and the work of the Spirit, you have consistently and permanently, born fruit; the fruit that always accompanies true faith. If so, Jesus says your heart is the good soil. You need to examine your heart.

Number three, this parable is an invitation that urges us to repent and believe the gospel. Maybe your heart is one of the first three soils. Can I tell you this morning, you do not need to feel that you are beyond hope. Because as you sit here this morning, if God the Father is taking the truth that Jesus is sharing with us in this passage, and He is working on your heart, maybe there is within you, for the first time, a growing sense of your sin and a desire to turn from that. Listen, if you are willing to turn from your sins and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, that means that God has prepared your heart to receive the word, the seed today. I plead with you to do so. God can do that, and then, He can cause that seed that He has prepared you to receive to grow and to eventually bear a harvest of righteousness. This is an invitation. In fact, listen to how Jesus finished the story with the crowds, back in verse 9, he says, "He who has ears, let him hear."

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for this magnificent explanation by our Lord of the spiritual realities that surround us. Thank you for the insight to see what happens. Lord, thank you that this serves as a key for us to interpret the responses of others. Thank you that it serves as a mirror for us to examine ourselves. And Father, thank you for the wonderful invitation it is to whomever is here who has not repented and believed. May this be the day of their salvation. Father, use this foundational parable as a grid through which we see all of the spiritual responses around us to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don't let us be surprised. Give us wisdom and discernment. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.