

Teaching #1559 - Sunday, May 6th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

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GROWING DEEP IS AS IMPORTANT AS GROWING UP - Listening to the Word in a World that Mocks its Truth

Matthew 13:1-5, 20-21 - "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2] And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. [3] And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. [4] And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. [5] Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil....20-21....As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, [21] yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

The parables Jesus told in Matthew chapter 13 form one of the main and best known teaching blocks in Matthew's gospel account. And it's significant that Jesus *begins* this prolonged teaching time analyzing the listening habits of His hearers. The seed of the Word is consistently good and potentially fruit producing. It's the soil - the human heart - that varies and fluctuates.

Probably the *best* known teaching block in Matthew's gospel is the Sermon on the Mount. And it's striking to me that Jesus ends *that* teaching time with exactly the same kind of warning with which he *begins* this one in Matthew 13. He cautions His hearers about how they *listen* to His words: **Matthew 7:24-27** - "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. [26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. [27] And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

So again, we find Jesus cautioning that not all hearers are alike. People's *lives* depend on how they listen to Jesus. In Matthew seven His words form different *foundations* depending on how they are heard. If people listen carelessly to the Word their lives will inevitably collapse. In Matthew thirteen His words have varying degrees of *fruitfulness* depending on the receptiveness of the human heart. But the point is the same in each case. Strength in the face of trial, or fruitfulness for the needs of life - in each case how we *receive* what we hear from God's Word - how divine truth gets *under the surface* of our lives - how it *shapes thoughts and desires* - is an issue of life and death.

Then, notice something else. When Jesus finishes His famous Matthew 13 parables, He heads directly to His home town, Nazareth. There He encounters the community with whom He had some of His closest social ties. These are His friends and family. And they can't get used to Jesus being a teacher who spoke these great words with such authority. The text actually describes the way these people were *bugged* by Jesus and His Words:

Matthew 13:53-57 - "And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, [54] and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? [55] Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? [56] And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" [57] And they took offense at him....."

They couldn't listen to Jesus properly because they *thought they already knew everything about Him*. They couldn't make a bigger space in their hearts for Jesus because of their pre-conceptions about who He was and what claim His words had on their lives. Again, this repeated theme of how we *listen* is peppered throughout these accounts.

Last week we studied the first of four soils - four types of heart - analyzed by Jesus. We studied the *way-side* heart - the heart that had become *hard* and *unresponsive* to the seed of the Word scattered upon it. Then we took a whole week examining how hearts can become ploughed up and open so the Word can penetrate and get under the surface and bring a self-multiplying harvest of Christ-like love and character. So there is a wonderful hope that *hard, dull* hearts can become *listening* hearts.

Today we turn attention to the second heart mentioned by Jesus. Here Jesus reveals that if some hearts are *indifferent* to the Word they hear, others too trite, thoughtless, and emotionally impulsive to divine truth. Jesus surprises us. One would think, after Jesus' rebuke of the unresponsive heart, that *any* response would be better than *no* response. But such is not in Jesus' mind at all.

1) **THE EXCITEMENT OF CONVERSION, IN ITSELF, IS NOT ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN LIFE IN CHRIST**

Many areas in Palestine contained areas of very shallow soil spread across limestone mere inches beneath. The almost rain-like dew left this thin soil very damp and conducive to quick germination for any seed landing on it. But when the sun rose hot in the afternoon these same shoots were the first to wilt because, lacking a strong root system due to the limestone layer, they couldn't withstand the intensity of the mid-day heat.

There's a reason the inch deep soil is the only one getting *two* verses of attention rather than just the one each of the others receives. There is a joy in responding to Christ. He really is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and, as such, is precious beyond telling. Precisely because this is all true, it is very easy to think that *conversion* to Christ is all there is to *life* in Christ.

This common misconception is the reason Jesus specifically highlights the *joy* of a sudden, unhesitating reception of His Word of grace -

“...this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it *with joy...*”(13:20).

This important sentence from Jesus is given to rid our minds of any notion that this experience of receiving wasn't *genuine*. The experience was real and the joy was genuine. There was an organic, living plant sprouting through the surface of the soil. That word *organic* is important. The life of the *seed* is the life of the *plant*. I've had plastic, artificial plants before, but none of them ever grew from *seed*. That's Jesus' point in this parable. This sprout was not an *artificial* plant. It was not a *weed*. It was the same plant in *kind* as any other sprout from the cherished crop poking its head up to the sun. That's what genuine seeds *always* do.

There is much needless confusion here. I know John describes those who were in the church but not genuine believers - **1 John 2:18-19** - “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that *antichrist* is coming, so now *many antichrists have come*. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. [19] *They* [still talking about *antichrists*] *went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*”

Verse 19 has to be kept linked up with **verse 18**. John's not writing about people who were *ever* genuine Christians. His whole point is these deserting false teachers were always *antichrists*. They never had an ounce of interest in Christ. They were fakers who only used the Body of Christ to air their ego-centered false teaching in front of a ready-made audience. And when the genuine church started experiencing persecution for the gospel, they abandoned their game and left town.

But that's not the same situation as Jesus sets up in this parable. His whole point, if words mean anything at all, is that these fast sprouting plants didn't just *look* like plants. They *were* the same plants, from the *same* seed. They weren't *fake* plants, or *plastic* plants.

Except for the first soil - the *hard-hearted listener* - where the seed never germinated at all, all the soils produced the genuine life contained within the seed. Without this great, stubborn, central fact, the whole parable loses its meaning.

This understanding is important because it gives this parable its proper focus. Jesus' concern in describing the fast-sprouting seed is very *pastoral*. I learn here how easy it is to respond *quickly* to the *benefits* of Jesus without giving adequate attention to the *demands* of Jesus. I learn how easy it can be to *measure* the reality of my *faith* by the *joy* I may or may not feel at any given moment. This is a fickle foundation for long lasting, durable faith.

How many Christians have no other way of establishing their hearts in times of struggle than questioning whether or not they're saved at all because they don't feel the luster and brightness in their walk with Jesus that they did when they were first converted? They fill up their own hearts with suspicion and doubt.

This is the danger of these fast sprouting seeds in Jesus' second soil type. There is a certain type of response to Christ that confuses the *joy* of a conversion experience with the *faith* to sustain it.

I know this isn't a simple point to catch on a Sunday morning. Many Christians get confused here and it *matters*. There is a difference between faith resting on Christ's finished redemptive work plus nothing, and faith resting on the way my *emotions respond* to Christ's finished work. Please make this burden-lifting discovery. My faith is in the *finished* work of Christ, not the way I *feel* about the finished work of Christ. You will get more lasting joy in looking to *Christ* than looking *for* the evidence of your own inner joy.

The next point will demonstrate why this is so important:

2) **FAITH IN CHRIST IS DEFICIENT WHEN IT IS NOT PREPARED FOR FUTURE PERSECUTION RIGHT AT THE FIRST MOMENT OF CONVERSION**

Matthew 13:20-21 - “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, [21] yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when *tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word*, immediately he falls away.”

Here is Jesus' warning for the church doing evangelism. Here is Jesus' warning to all who labor to convert the lost. Whenever we labor to air-brush Jesus - to heighten the joy factor - to make following Jesus appear utterly irresistible, and nothing *but* irresistible - by *not* telling the listener about the immediate and intense persecution that *will* come from honoring Christ, we do him or her no favor.

Is it incredibly *wonderful* to follow Jesus, or is it incredibly *difficult* to follow Jesus? And the answer is *yes*. This fast-sprouting convert was initially carried on in rapid growth out of a love for the *joy* that his conversion produced. But the love was so rooted in the *joy* of the experience that there was no motive to *continue* following when that joy turned to the pain of rejection of friends or family. At that point the *acceptance of the crowd* felt more joy producing than that *lonely, cross-bearing walk of discipleship*.

Jesus never did a breezy kind of evangelism. He always talked up front about what following Him would entail. Of course He knew there

was great joy in following Him - the greatest joy possible in this world. But He took the time to **explain** how deep joy would be obtained. You can see it right in these Matthew 13 parables:

Matthew 13:31-32 - "He put another parable before them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. [32] It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'"

This kingdom life and joy **unfolds gradually**. It is simmered and developed over time and obstacles.

Matthew 13:44 - "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Here is perhaps the most direct and specified link between the deepest joy of kingdom life and the greatest sacrifice a person can make. Make no mistake. Jesus knows salvation is **free** when He utters these words. He knew this better than anyone because **He** was the one **paying** for that salvation.

But Jesus isn't talking about **buying** His free grace. He's talking about how the richest **joys** of His life are to be experienced in this artificial, flashy, tinsel-up world. The joy of the kingdom and the sacrifice of all to enter it can't be split up into two separate compartments. They come like the light and heat from the sun.

Matthew 13:45-46 - "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, [46] who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

The pearl is wonderful beyond telling. But it **costs** everything. And you have to **sell** before you **buy**. Again, this is a joy that comes at the end of a very expensive process of personal sacrifice.

So Jesus tells all of these parables to keep our search for kingdom joy on track and realistic. You **endure** your way into Christ's deepest joy.

3) **THERE IS MARVELOUS HOPE WRAPPED UP IN THIS PARABLE WHERE THREE OUT OF FOUR SOILS PROVE DEFECTIVE**

I hope I can make you see this. Jesus tells us **in advance** that the seed of His word doesn't have even close to a 100% success rate in this distracted, non-listening world. Three out of four hearts don't yield anywhere near their potential. There is some measure of failure 75% of the time.

Is this good news or bad? Should this destroy your faith, or should it deepen your resolve? And I chose that word "**deepen**" specifically thinking about this second, shallow-rooted sprout. The persecution - the heat of opposition - killed this plant because it was all so shocking and discouraging. This person hadn't signed up for anything but blessings. And that unrealistic expectation proved fatal.

Jesus is talking about real life - real **Christian** life in this world. A new youth ministry is launched and does absolutely nothing to disciple anyone. The whole thing ends in failure. The home Bible study you were so excited about splits in an argument over end-times prophecy. The same-sex marriage legislation you were sure would be defeated passed with ease. For every new church plant in your town, there are two recent works that close down. You start a new Bible reading program but by June are 200 chapters behind. Your best friends in the church are finally separating after years of struggling in their marriage. You start studying church history and are shocked to discover all the innocent blood that had been shed in the cause of honoring God.

And these parables tell me **Jesus knew all about this**. More than that, Jesus **experienced** it. The crowds started to thin out around Him and you can hear the break in His voice as He asks His disciples, "**Are you all going to leave me too?**" He weeps over Jerusalem as He looks down on the city and says "**O, I would have loved to gather you under my wings. But you'd have nothing to do with me!**"

None of this can shake faith in Jesus because Jesus **predicted** it. He is sovereign over it. He tells us all of this not to **shake** our faith, but to **deepen** it. Never put your confidence in your **ideal circumstances**. Never put it in your **emotional experience of joy**. Deepen your **faith** and - in the long run - your **joy** by expecting something this radical to be opposed by those who still love the darkness. And keep looking to Jesus as the Author and Perfecter of your faith.