

THE BOOK - HOW WE GOT IT AND HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF IT - Part seventeen

Teaching #1975 - Sunday, June 18th, 2017 - 6 p.m.

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THE SOIL MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE - HOW WE DETERMINE TRANSFORMATION BY WHERE WE DRAW THE LINE OF OUR HEARING (continued)

Matthew 13:1-9 - "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, [6] but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. [7] Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. [8] Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. [9] He who has ears, let him hear."

Last week we launched into the first foundational point of this great parable. All growth begins with seed. There must be something to germinate. The reason people don't devote enough energy to the seed of the Word is, like all growth, there is a **time lag** between sowing and harvesting. And something else, sowing isn't nearly as **exciting** as harvesting. So sowing takes more **thought** and **discipline** than harvesting.

Yes, Bible study can sometimes **feel** boring. And yes, it can sometimes **feel** unfruitful when we don't see the sprouts growth poking through the soil of our circumstances as quickly as we'd like. That's why Jesus links sowing and harvesting particularly in the study of the power of the Word in our lives. If you don't develop faithfulness and maturity into sowing the Word into your life, you'll sow something else. **Something** is going to be planted in your heart. The Holy Spirit, your creator God, will sow His will and way, or Hollywood and MTV will sow theirs. Jesus will rule your thoughts or your BlackBerry, or Twitter, or FaceBook will fill your mind. Sow the Word into your life.

But there's so much more here. If last week's point was number one, today we'll pick up with point number two:

2) **THE WORD WILL LOSE ITS POWER IN MY LIFE IF I BECOME TOO ENTRENCHED IN MY OWN STUBBORN PATTERNS OF LIVING**

Matthew 13:3-4 - "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."

Matthew 13:18-19 - "Hear then the parable of the sower: [19] When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path."

Jesus tells us the enemy will steal away the seed - the Word - from our lives if it is not received with **understanding**. But there's a particular **kind** of understanding He has in mind. These people weren't **too stupid** to grasp the meaning of the Word. The understanding problem was of a different **kind**.

In quoting the prophet Isaiah Jesus said their hearts had **grown** dull - **Matthew 13:14-15** - "Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. [15] For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'

This is exactly the same thought Jesus played out in His parable. He said people's lives can **become** hard to God's truth. Like a path that has been packed down by lots of traffic, people get busy with the thoughts of their minds and the dreams of their hearts. The seed of God's Word is just one more thing bouncing off the surface of their lives.

Remember, Jesus isn't dealing with **atheists** here. He's talking about how people give their attention to His Word. He's talking about the crowd who have **exposure** to the Word - the crowd that goes to church. He's saying hearing God's Word is going to be a fruitless experience for many people because, while their bodies are in church, they've already become **distracted and cluttered in their affections and aspirations**. People can become **desensitized to spiritual truth**. People can actually pride themselves that they are not easily moved spiritually. They can hear God's truth in a **detached** manner.

And so, in the mind of Jesus, the first obstacle to overcome if I want to hear the Word of God unto fruitfulness, is **lazy, indifferent, presumptuous listening**. The seed is **useless and vulnerable** sitting on the surface of the hard soil. How else could Jesus make more clear the need for the Word to **penetrate** my heart, not just **land** on my ears. This takes incredible work - **more** work the longer I have followed Jesus and the more I already think I **already know** His will and way.

3) **I CAN'T RECEIVE THE WORD IN A FRUITFUL MANNER UNTIL I AM WILLING TO DISPLACE WHATEVER IS IN MY HEART THAT IS CONTRARY AND UNYIELDING TO ITS TRUTH**

Matthew 13:5-6 - "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, [6] but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away."

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."

Notice that Jesus uses the word "**immediately**" twice in describing these people. They receive the word with joy **immediately** (13:5, Mark 14:16 - "...receive it **with joy**"). Then, Jesus says they "**immediately fall away**" (Matthew 13:21).

Here we have Jesus dealing with the problem of **short-lived spiritual experience and commitment**. Why do Christians backslide? Why don't all our aspirations and goals materialize? Why don't so many people **end up** as well as they **start out**? That's the issue Jesus is dealing with in these verses.

You can picture the problem Jesus is addressing. The seed enters and begins to germinate. There is the **emotional excitement** that comes from that inner awareness of new life and spiritual transformation. But just as surely as the germination was **rapid**, it was also **shallow**. The roots went down into the soil, but only a short way. Then they hit solid rock.

And here's the point. From the surface, this whole process was invisible. These rocks weren't on the **surface**. They were **under** the surface. Nobody **saw** this going on. The leaves stayed green for a while, and then wilted and died.

And what Jesus **means** is this happens all the time in our hearts. Some kind of quick response was made to God through His Word. And everything felt pretty good. People rejoice that a sinner had come home. But there was disaster in the making. Things seemed fine for a while. The tiny shoots of growth seemed green and healthy. But all the while, **spiritual drought and death were in the making**.

Trials came. People poked fun. Old friends who didn't like the look of the new life began to desert. And the new plant shriveled and died. But the problem wasn't the persecution. This is a frequent **misinterpretation** of this part of the parable. The cause of the shriveled life **wasn't** the trial or difficulty. Those things only **manifested** what was already going wrong in the life.

Here's what happened. Somewhere, amid all the excitement of new spiritual life, the Lord began to deal with something **under the surface** of the life. All the while the new convert was singing choruses and giving testimony, God was trying to reach a level of sacrifice way down deep - under the emotions.

And for whatever reason, while the emotions were stirred, this person's **will wasn't totally dethroned**. And the Holy Spirit will **always** go straight to the **unyielded** areas rather than the already **yielded** ones.

There are whole churches who teach people to just live by their feelings and impulses. There are whole churches who thrive on keeping people on the edge of their seats with emotional excitement. **And there is nothing wrong with an emotional quality in our Christian walk**. But sooner or later, God's going to come to some area of my stubborn will that is as immovable and unbreakable as a rock.

Nobody else will know whether I have listened to the Lord or not. Nobody else will see how real Christ's Lordship is **under the surface of my life**. But that one issue - that one part of life where I refuse to budge, will determine my future survival.

Jesus explains why in **Matthew 13:12** - "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."

Most of us understand that Jesus, through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, speaks to our lives and plants truth in our hearts. So "**to the one who has, more will be given.**" Fine. I think we all appreciate the way the Holy Spirit germinates fresh life in our hearts. It's the **last** part of that twelfth verse that's a bit harder to swallow. Did you know that Jesus will actually **take away previous benefit from His Word in your life when you cease to live in obedience to what He has revealed?**

It's not just that you won't make any further progress. That seems fair enough. But He actually **removes** what has been gained in previous years of discipleship. You don't stay at the same level. You can't. The Word of God is **living and active** - **Hebrews 4:12** - "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Underscore those words "**living**" and "**active.**" They're full of great comfort and also **holy terror**. The Word of God reaches into lives in ways those lives don't recognize. Thousands of careless Christians will go to church today and never realize that, because of their persistence in sin, or their lazy listening habits, or their proud assumption that they already know what's being said, will never realize that they've been robbed during the service. Just as surely as their purse could have been taken out of the choir room, the Holy Spirit, in an act of **stern grace**, reached into their hearts and **removed** previous levels of spiritual growth and apprehension.

People fail and fall in all sorts of ways spiritually. God is patient, merciful, helpful and forgiving with repentant sinners. But He is absolutely intolerant of the **stubborn refusal to yield**. Any area of persistent unwillingness to heed the Word, will shrivel the life of the seed and destroy the possibility of abiding fruit.

Let me wrap this difficult truth up with these thoughts. It's not that God is loveless or in any way willing that any should perish. We all know that. And that's **not** what I'm saying in this point. God does everything He can to force us to see when something is seriously wrong spiritually. And, as we become **less spiritual sensitive** we will usually only be awakened by the increasing awareness that there must be something more wrong than we might think as even the graces we used to simply assume are stripped away from us. In fact, let me tell you one of the most important lessons I'm just on a learning curve with in my own life.

I'm learning that spiritual growth is **seamless**. By that I mean you can't break it up into pieces and components. It can't even be broken up into the usual chronological distinctions of past, present and future. Holy decisions in present open up my life in the future just as careless ones shut out future options and grace. It all moves ahead **together** or crumbles **together**. So we're studying how the habit of **not hearing** when truth confronts **actually removes** previously known truth. But perhaps that's not the whole story either. I'm fascinated with the way Luke deals with this same parable - in fact, this very same thought about losing what was already possessed:

Luke 8:18 - "Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."

Did you catch the slight difference? It's in the last phrase - "**...even what he thinks he has will be taken away.**" And now I have a bit of a handle on that idea that spiritual growth is always **seamless**. Luke shows it's very easy to **assume** the possession of truth that **isn't** truly possessed at all.

Then how can I tell - how can I **measure** where I'm at spiritually? Well, spiritual life can't be had in pieces. It's a **seamless** life. There are no **perforated sections**. It's **every** area, or **no area at all**. And the areas in which I **think** I'm walking in maturity are revealed **suspect** if the Holy Spirit is ignored in another area.

Or, here's the way God's dealing with my own heart. Let me word the same truth like this - **the parts of my walk with Jesus I think I have down pat are revealed genuine by how I respond to other areas yet unreached, but about which the Holy Spirit will speak next Wednesday, or next Sunday. Past** growth only stands validated by **future** sensitivity and obedience. **Present** spiritual depth is only authenticated by **future** spiritual attentiveness.

In other words, no part of the Christian walk **comes all by itself**. Each part is attached to another. The whole Christian walk is of one piece. It can't be broken up into "**obedient**" and "**disobedient,**" "**willing**" and "**unwilling.**" I know we **talk** about our Christian walk like that all the time. But past spiritual growth never stays in your account as a credit.

And my final comment is that this is a **loving** action of God, not a **cruel** one. It's the Spirit's way of turning my heart away from a deadly **spiritual coasting**. It's how God builds **safety** into my walk with Him. It's how God pulls my life constantly into His **next** stage or growth, rather than resting on **past** ones. It's how He takes you and me from being **thirty** folders to **sixty** folders, to **one hundred** folders.

Remember this concept. God wants **heart holiness**, not **list holiness**. The difference is crucial. You can keep **part** of any list - 6 out of 10 commandments. But you can never give the Lord a **part of your heart**. Love is never like that.

Of course, none of us will ever be perfect. But there can be no **segments** in the offering of our hearts to the Lord in submission and discipleship.