

**“What Does Dirt Have in Common
with the Human Heart?”**
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
February 4, 2018
(Mt. 13:1-23)

Introduction.

My late wife’s father, Walter Wallace, was a gentleman farmer. (Here’s a picture of him on his tractor with my middle son Jason when he was very young.) Dad Wallace worked 9-5 in a white-collar job at the Universal Rundle Corporation to provide for his family, but then he came home and did what he really loved – raising Hereford cattle on a small 30-acre farm in western Pennsylvania. He was a man of the soil, and he liked to get his hands dirty.

This is a picture of the farm Dad Wallace cultivated and the barns he built. I remember the first time I visited Lorie and her family on this farm. It was the summer after we met in grad school in Boston, and I stayed with them for a week on my way back to Atlanta. On the third day I was there, Dad Wallace saw me heading out the door to go for a run, as I had done every day during the visit. He said to me, “Peter, if you’re really looking to get some exercise, I’ve got plenty of things for you to do around the farm!”

People who live close to the earth, those who farm the land, understand the rhythms and the cycles of nature better than the rest of us. They also have a greater appreciation for the life lessons that can be learned from these things. Dad Wallace was a man like that, and he especially appreciated the story about the farmer in the parable Jesus told.

Christ was a master teacher, and He had a wonderful ability to take the ordinary things of life and apply spiritual meaning to them. We read of one such instance in our passage this morning in the parable of the sower. These verses say as much about the human heart as they do the agriculture of Palestine in the ancient world. Let’s take a closer look.

*

Jesus returned to the lake region around the Sea of Galilee, and He continued His ministry of teaching. And the crowd that gathered to listen to Him was so large Jesus had to get in a boat. Perhaps He did this for safety’s sake, or maybe He simply wanted to use the water as a natural sounding board to project His voice so everyone could hear Him. In the message Jesus gave, He said that the Kingdom of God breaks into the world even as seed breaks into the soil when it is sown on the

ground. He also explained in the comparison of the soils that there is always a diversity of response whenever the Word of God is proclaimed.

The parable of the sower is faithful to the agriculture in Palestine at the time of Christ in which plowing always followed the sowing. This sounds odd to us with our modern western techniques of farming, but it's accurate to the life in Israel in the first century. And many developing countries around the world today still plant seeds in this manner. The sower was not careless when he scattered the seed on the path or among the thorns. He did so intentionally because all the ground would be plowed up later, and it was only after the plowing that the farmer discovered what kind of ground was there.

1. The Hard Heart. As we look at this parable, notice the four different soils and the four different hearts to which they correspond. First, there was the Hard Soil, which is like a path. Jesus said that there are people who don't do anything with the message God gives them. Immediately after hearing God's Word, any positive effect it might have had on their lives is taken away. They aren't receptive. And then Satan, who is our great adversary, snatches it away and prevents the message of the Good News from working its way into their barren hearts.

The use of the word "path" also speaks of people who are too busy to stop and listen. There are places to go and people to see, and they're unwilling to stop and think about what God has to say. Do you know anyone like that? Are you like that yourself? The truth of God can't find entry into your heart if you're too busy to listen, or you're hardened to the message.

2. The Shallow Heart. The second kind of soil, and the second kind of heart, is the one that was Shallow or Rocky. This wasn't ground that was full of stones. Rather, it was a narrow skin of soil over a shelf of limestone. All around the Sea of Galilee the soil was like this. In many fields the outcropping of rock under the shallow soil couldn't even be seen. It was only after the plowing that the farmer discovered the condition of the soil. Seed which fell there germinated all right, but because the soil was so shallow and held so little moisture and nourishment, the heat of the sun soon withered the sprouting seed. And immediately it died.

Is there someone you know who is like that in how they have responded to God? Maybe they acted on the spur of the moment at a spiritual retreat, or they responded instinctively to God's call on their lives in a particular moment of crisis. But something happened later on, and they fell away from the faith. Maybe trouble or hardship came their way. Or perhaps they just went back to their old circle of friends, and eventually they gave up what at first they had so enthusiastically embraced. It's always easier to begin something than it is to finish it. But perseverance is a key to the Christian life, and a shallow commitment rarely lasts whenever life gets hard.

3. The Preoccupied Heart. The third heart Jesus mentions is the Preoccupied Heart. At first, the seed makes good progress in this soil, but then the growth is choked out by a number of thorns and weeds. Any of us who have spent time weeding a garden or a yard can relate to these verses. You dig down and struggle to pull out the weed with your fingers until they're numb, and still you can't quite get all of it. Weeds are stubborn little buggers, so the path of least resistance is usually just to pick off the tops.

Some people tend to do that in life. They just pick off the top of a few bad habits, and they think they have their lives in order. But the roots of these things come back, and they can choke out a person's fruitfulness in following Christ. There are three weeds Jesus mentions in particular that can choke off one's spiritual growth: *the worries of this life; the deceitfulness of wealth; and the desire for other things*. How are these weeds affecting your spiritual growth today? How does God want you to root out these problems from your heart?

4. The Receptive Heart. The final soil and the final heart Jesus discusses is the Receptive one. It's the fertile heart, the open heart, the heart that is ready to receive God's Word and put it into action. This person is willing to be tilled, cultivated, and shaped, even if it hurts. The result is that they bear fruit for the Lord, and the fruit they bear is 30, 60 and 100 times what was originally sown.

Fruitfulness in the Christian life is about becoming more and more like Jesus, reflecting His character and making an impact for Him on the world around us. Notice that in the parable there's a difference in that impact. Not everyone is the same. Some are 30-, 60-, and 100-fold. But the key to any fruitfulness is receptivity.

*

My favorite musical of all time is *Les Miserables*. Perhaps you've seen it. It's a great play. It is an adaptation of Victor Hugo's stunning novel by the same name. In the beginning of the novel, there's a young man named Jean Valjean. He had been unfairly imprisoned for 7 years because he stole a loaf of bread, and he comes out of prison with rage and anger in his heart. He's shunned by people and treated badly as he tries to make his way in life after being released from prison.

But then an amazing thing happens. One night Valjean goes to the home of Father Bienvenu, the Monsignor and bishop of the area. Valjean is given a meal, and the bishop invites him to spend the night. However, while everyone is asleep in the house, Valjean sees some silver candlesticks and tableware, and he steals the silver knives, forks, and spoons, and he runs out of the house in the middle of the night.

However, shortly after he leaves the rectory, the police catch him. They see the cutlery and recognize it as belonging to Father Bienvenu, so they bring the thief

back to the bishop's house. At the house Father Bienvenu says the most surprising words. "Jean Valjean, you didn't steal the tableware. I *told* you to take them. Here, take the candlesticks too!"

The police ask, "You mean he didn't steal this silver?" The Monsignor answers, "Oh, no. I gave them to him." The bishop extended grace to Valjean rather than what the thief really deserved.

I want to read to you the rest of that scene in Victor Hugo's novel. "Jean Valjean was trembling all over. He took the two candlesticks distractedly with a bewildered expression. 'Now,' said the bishop, 'Go in peace. By the way my friend, when you come again you needn't come through the garden. You may always come by the front door. It is only closed with a latch day or night.' And then turning to the gendarmes, he said, 'Messieurs, you may go.' The [police] left.

"Jean Valjean felt like a man about to faint. The bishop approached him and said in a low voice, 'Do not forget,...that you have promised me to use the silver to become an honest man.' Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of any such promise, stood dumbfounded....Then [the bishop] continued solemnly, 'Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you [today]. I withdraw it from the dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.'"

The rest of the story is an amazing tale of redemption and grace, all because of a seed which took root in the soil of the heart of a broken man. By contrast, the antagonist of the story, a policeman named Javert, was never able to accept the message of grace, even when it was extended to him personally. You see, the fruitfulness of the seed of God's grace is dependent on the receptivity of the soil of the human heart. And that makes all the difference.

*

We're about to celebrate communion and come to the table of our Lord. If you think back to the night when Jesus instituted this holy meal, you soon realize there were a variety of responses to His message of grace that evening too. No one really understood what was going on, and every one of the disciples struggled to comprehend exactly what Jesus was saying. Seated at the table with the other disciples was Judas, the one who would betray the Lord. And his decision to betray Jesus resulted from the hardness of his heart and his unwillingness to receive the seed of grace God planted in him. And the effects of this awful decision reverberate throughout eternity.

The fruitfulness of the seed is dependent on the receptivity of the soil of the human heart. What kind of response does the parable of the soils call forth from you this morning? What is God saying you need to hear? Is your heart too hard? Are you too busy to listen? Are you quick to respond to God's grace but slow to

follow through with it? What are the weeds that are choking out the life of Christ in you? And how are you bearing fruit for the Kingdom?

May the Lord give each of us ears to hear whatever it is the Spirit is saying today through this amazing story. To God be the glory! Amen.