

THE FOUR SOILS
PATH ~ ROCKY ~ THORNY ~ GOOD

18 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

I will not say that a parable is “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning”^a in this sermon.

Jesus taught surrounded by enemies who wanted to kill him. From the very beginning of his ministry, the Pharisees, Sadducees and other Jewish groups became both interested in Jesus’ teaching and alarmed by his message and his apparent dismissal of their interpretation of the Bible. Jesus began to teach in such a way that his message would cause believers to pursue his words more deeply, but that his enemies would not be able to use the message against him as they sought ways first of attacking his teaching, then ways of arresting him, and finally seeking for any excuse and opportunity to kill him.

This way of teaching a message in plain sight is called a parable. Almost all of the thirty parables of Jesus teach lessons about one of three things (1) the way God gathers people into his kingdom through the gospel, (2) the value of the word of God and salvation, (3) or certain key truths, such as repentance, persistence in prayer, or using spiritual gifts.

Our parable today, the Parable of the Sower, is the first recorded parable in the Gospels. Since Jesus retells the parable and explains it, he gives us the key that unlocks all of the other parables if we apply the key correctly.

- The parables sometimes contain details that don’t have a direct spiritual application. They simply help to carry the story forward, and they often act as red herrings for Jesus’ enemies. For example, in the parable of the sower, the sun appears, but has no direct spiritual significance in Jesus’ application.
- The parables always have one key truth. The story part of the parable and the spiritual application are connected by this third item which is the key truth.

^a I have traced this saying to Scottish theologian William Barclay (1907-1978). Extremely well-read, he may have found the saying in an earlier work. Barclay did not believe in the deity of Christ and was a universalist. Although his statement (“an earthly story...”) is helpful to some, I am cautious of his teaching.

The Parable of the Sower is about how the gospel works, but in particular, how it's received by each of us. That's the key truth here. Jesus presents four kinds of soil: **Path~Rocky~Thorny~Good**. And each of the four soils, the Path, the Rocky, the Thorny, and the Good, represent human hearts, so that we can see that the gospel works with different results in different people, sometimes people of the same background, even of the same family – and maybe, for some, the same person at different times in their life, as the soil of their heart changes from path to rocky to thorny to good.

The **first** of the four soils is **the soil by the path**. The path in the parable is not the path of eternal life, but simply any old path or life where the soil is packed down hard by wear and tear or habits, so that seed thrown on it is exposed. The seed doesn't penetrate this soil. Jesus says that these are people who don't understand, and so the Enemy comes and snatches the seed away. The Enemy is of course the devil, along with his demons and human beings who, intentionally or not, do his work.

This may not be soil that many if any of us sitting here today have. But it's easy to pass this packed down and hardened soil to our children. Good soil is tilled, it's worked. Good soil is where seed has grown before, and it's well-watered, and it's cared for. If we don't do these things for our children, planting the seeds of the gospel and nurturing those seeds, we can end up trampling down the soil of their tender young hearts into a firmly beaten-down path where the gospel has no place later on.

This is a sin that destroys the future, it hampers and can even hinder the work and the word of God. Holy Father in heaven, keep us from this dreadful and damning sin!

The **second** of the four soils is the **rocky soil**. Jesus doesn't mean rocks that are on top, or the kind of rocks that seem to rise up out of the earth every spring to give farmers brand new work in old fields year after year. No, this rocky soil is the kind where a layer of bedrock lays just a few inches below the surface. This is often the thin layer of soil covering the sterile stone of an island or on the fringes of an oasis in the desert. Grass might grow there, a scrubby green covering just barely hanging on for life, but nothing can really take root.

In human hearts, this is a faith with no root. So there's joy at the beginning, but it goes untended, and it lasts only a short while. Jesus warns that trouble or persecution will destroy the seed of the gospel planted into such rocky or thin topsoil.

We ourselves can get quite rocky and stony over time if we never dig deeply into the word of God. We can ruin our loved one's faith by troubling them, keeping them from exploring the word, keeping them away from church and from Bible study, but embracing absurd notions like wanting our children to discover religion on their own – which is worse for a child than forcing a baby to discover how to breathe when it's born. Keeping away the Holy Spirit is only different from keeping away breath itself because keeping away breath only causes death, while keeping away the gospel and the Holy Spirit causes eternal death.

This is a sin that destroys other souls but is spiritual suicide in us. It shoves away the work of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. Holy Spirit, keep us from this dreadful and damning sin!

Jesus described four soils in this parable, path-rocky-thorny-good, and we need to examine the **third soil**, the most dangerous soil for us, **the thorny soil**.

Why is this the most dangerous? Because the thorny soil chokes the word of God. Jesus warns about two extremes: the worries of life, and the deceitfulness of wealth. On the side of worries is a mistrust that God will take care of us. On the side of wealth's deceit is the wrong kind of trust: trusting in wealth or power or luck instead of God. These are the thorns that choke a faith. These are the thorns that can grow up at any time in any of our lives. Mistrust, misplaced trust. Doubt, arrogance.

These are sins that eat away and choke our faith, and kill the Christian example that otherwise we might have set. Lord Jesus, keep us from these dreadful and damning sins!

After three bad soils in his list (path-rocky-thorny-good), Jesus turns to the good soil. And here we need to listen to the gospel of forgiveness. In this parable we have a bumper crop of warnings about the condition of our hearts, and who among us hasn't already been shamed, condemned, put in our place, and even frightened by Jesus' words? Well, that's what the parable is for! If this is what's happened to you, rejoice that the word of God has worked! Because the point of Jesus' parables is that they are not meant to be soberly and maturely understood by unbelievers. So when we encounter them and meditate on them and are heartbroken by them – or if we rejoice over them – we know that they have worked in us.

But you might not be rejoicing yet. So let me show you what has just happened – not on paper, not in your notes, but in your soil, in your heart and in your head and in your soul where your faith resides. You have just felt the hoe, the plow, the spade at work in the hands of Jesus himself.

You, with the tough soil by the path – your Lord Jesus is breaking up the iron-hard dirt with his own hands, softening it up with his blood and the water of your baptism. Let the seed of the word of forgiveness take root.

You, with the rocky, shallow soil, your Master Jesus has dug deep and smashed and carried away the bedrock and with the power of his word given you inches and feet and cubits and fathoms of faith where the word can take root and flourish.

You, with the thorny dangers of doubt or conceit, your Savior Jesus displays himself in the fear of your heart and has opened his own heart to you: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

This is the good soil, transformed by Christ, made new, and good and useful and ours by nothing else than the power of his word, here and now. Don't concern yourself today with what thirty or sixty or a hundredfold means in your response. Respond with your life, and know that that's your good soil worked by the word of Jesus Christ. Amen.