

## Parable of the soils Matthew 13v1-9 ( also Mk 4 v1-9, Lk 8v4-8). – Psalm 24

<sup>4</sup> While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: <sup>5</sup> “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. <sup>6</sup> Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” <sup>9</sup> His disciples asked him what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup> He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup> Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. <sup>13</sup> Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. <sup>14</sup> The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. <sup>15</sup> But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop

Who like’s Gardening? Who does it even though they don’t want to? Who likes thinking about the Garden sat indoors in an armchair? As a teenager, I spent much of my non-school time working on a Market Garden. I grew all types of fruit, flowers and vegetables. Once I grew a single tomato which was a 16 ozs in weight (1 lb of single tomatoes) , it was huge. I remember one Saturday, I was faced with a large brown field with rich Somerset soil that we had dug over. I was given buckets full of small flower bulbs, anemones and a planting fork. Eight hours later, I had finished. It was very hard work. The next Saturday when I returned I looked expectantly at the same field – and it was exactly that, the same brown field, there was nothing to show for all my effort. I would have to be patient.

Today we are going to look at one of Jesus’s most popular parables, the parable of the sower, and look at the four soil types that Jesus referred to. The parable is very relevant to my own life, so today I will share some of my testimony on route. Then we’ll see how the parable it relates to reaching out with the good news in tough areas like this one. [I was preaching at a Church on a rough estate].

**Context for Jesus & for parable:** Jesus was mid-ministry, and already spent a considerable time preaching around the towns, making known the good news about the kingdom of God. Many of Palestine’s inhabitants were rural peasant farmers or herders, and the literate elite often ignored this large population, but not Jesus. Jesus used parables to teach, these were simple memorable stories about every day things that would point people to heavenly themes such as the Kingdom of God, the importance of prayer, and the meaning of love.

There were two ways of sowing seed, one was to put a large sack of seed on a donkey and put holes in the side of the sack, then drive the animal up and down your field at an even pace. The other was to sow by hand from seed you carry. Perhaps harder work, but more accurate. The fields themselves were marked in large areas of open land with small paths through them, but also a larger highway, not tarmacked roads like today but wider well trodden paths. Often the weeds and thorns would be cut or burnt down, not pulled out, and the fields would not be ploughed before they were sown, so you could not see where a thin layer of earth lay over the stones. When you start sowing the field looks fine. The sower scatter seeds everywhere. It does not matter that some seed falls on the path, you would expect a yield of at least 10 to 1 from the seeds, so you can afford to lose some.

Some of them had stopped work to listen to Jesus. There was a big crowd, and Jesus had moved to a boat with his disciples, which he had pushed out a little from shore, to improve the acoustics and reach more ears.. One of the parables he told that day, is one of his most popular. It is usually called the parable of the sower, but it is not really about the sower, nor is it about the seed.

The sower in the story, is none other than Jesus the son of God, but can apply to anyone who follows him.

The seed is the Word of God, the message of salvation, the Good News about Jesus.

The sower and the seed, remain the same throughout the story.

The message Jesus was trying to get across was linked to the nature of ground in which the seeds are sown. This is really the Parable of the soils. Four different types. The soil is the person that you are sharing the Good News, the Gospel with, but in particular the soil types relates to the condition of their hearts and minds, with regards it openness to God & Jesus.

### **The Path**

On the path or road, the ground is too hard, and the seed either gets damaged under foot or is eaten by a bird. Jesus says that the truth is immediately snatched away from them, it never takes root. These are people whose hearts and minds are trodden down and hardened to God. No matter how much you share with them it won't sink in. Its not your fault, but you are wasting your time. It would be time better spent praying for that person, that God will do something in their life that would drastically change their heart, and the way they think about God. Some are even in Church, they like the company, even the thought of being in Church, but nothing has taken root, there is no personal relationship with Jesus, no excitement about the Gospel, no seeking after his presence, or taking on work to please him. Unless the heart changes, the response will never come. Is it possible – some people call floods and earthquakes acts of God, but when these come to an area, it often changes landscape – there used to be a path there, now its just a field of mud. It might take something drastic, but it is possible. There is not much you can do except pray, but the good news is that **God can transform hearts.**

### **Rocky ground**

A seed sinks down through shallow soil, onto a rock beneath. The sun and rain do their magic and a plant grows up, but its roots are very shallow. After a few hot dry days, the plant withers and dies. There are people who appear on the scene, and very quickly get excited about Jesus, perhaps a friend of theirs was baptised, and suddenly they want to as well. The excitement is infectious, and everyone is happy at this new Christian. Then a few weeks later something has happened in their life, and despite your visits they never come back to Church. This is hard on the sower, the Christian who shared and prayed. The deep culture, background and expectations of the person, persisted and won against their new but fairly shallow Christian experience. There are big rocks, obstacles in their lives which have stopped their new Christian roots going in deep. Keep the way back open for them. **God can transform hearts**

### **Thorns & Thistles**

A seed sinks into some good soil and grows into a young healthy plant, but around it the seeds of new weeds and existing roots of old thistle plants grow up. They are bigger, and take the nutrients, eventually suffocating and killing the plant. These are those who become Christians and develop a deep love of God, but they have kept hold of the roots of old habits, and are susceptible to new distractions. This was me as a young man.

Testimony: From a small child, I always believed in God and talked with him. As a teenager I wanted to be a Christian because I knew that was the Truth, but I also wanted the other stuff, motorbikes, girls, beer, and loud rock music. Not that listening to music at a festival and drinking a beer is a bad thing. It's another matter when it all becomes more important than pleasing Jesus, and then when you drink too much and join in with throwing your cans at a band because everyone thinks they're rubbish, you've crossed the line. I had a few beers on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday then got baptised the next day. But when I went to University. I got on an Engineering sandwich course where for the first 3 of 4 years, you spent 6 months working in Industry with your sponsor – your industrial placements. At University, God had plans for me, and unexpectedly found myself part of a lively Christian Fellowship, which I really enjoyed and put down good roots, growing

in my faith. Then after 2 terms I went on the shop floor, and found myself being dragged back into my old habits by the other apprentices and the men on the shop floor. I struggled to even admit as I was a Christian, and backslid. Then back at University, the thorns and weeds were gone and I built myself back up. This cycle continued for 3 years, and I was doing well in the middle of my final year which was all spent at University. One night it dawned on me that when I graduated my next industrial period was not 6 months, but would last for over 40 years. I wanted God in my life, I loved him, I loved worship, I loved knowing more about him, I wanted to live my whole life for him, but I knew unless God did something drastic in my life, I would eventually lose my faith back in the work place. I cried out to God, do something, help me, change me. Do something specific, something epic, something that will change my life for ever, so that I will never fall away. At the next Christian Fellowship meeting we had a guest speaker, an elderly missionary lady from Africa, called Helen Roseveare – she was an amazing woman – (read her books such as Give Me this Mountain, & Living Sacrifice). What she said drilled straight into me, and she challenged us, me, to go out and get some missionary experience. That night I had it out with God. Yes, if an opportunity presented itself to me, then I would go. I did not for one moment think it would. The next week at the Christian Fellowship a rather abrupt and edgy group of speakers came to speak from a new missionary movement based in Wales, and encouraged us to go down there for an information weekend. I had no excuses so I did, and that summer I was heading off from London with 16 others to the Sahara in a single transit van! I visited one country in which for hundreds of years there had been no Church, but in this one area there was a handful of believers, which we could not visit as it might bring unwanted attention to them. My experience in Africa deeply affected my heart, and changed me. It put my heart and mind in a different place. My behaviour in my teenage years had planted some roots that late as a young adult had kept producing weeds, distractions, pulls on me. I knew that in my own strength, when exposed to those temptations I would eventually give in again. The good news is that God can do it, he can change our hearts and minds. He can remove rocks and weeds from your life, it's as if he takes your heart and mind to a new place. When I left my old house we had a cherry tree in amongst other bushes, thin and about 8' tall, it had no space of its own, its prospects were grim. I dug it up and carried it on my shoulder through the village to my new build house (where there was just an empty lawn and planted it at the bottom of the garden on its own. 14 years later it is bigger than the house, and very beautiful.

After 3 Africa trips, I thought I would be a missionary, and was offered a permanent role, but God had done the work in me, so that I could go back into industry and not only serve the 40 years but thrive in it – I have just completed my 30<sup>th</sup> year of this long industrial placement, and still love Jesus with a passion. If we suffer in a certain environment, then we may need to be taken out of it for a while so that God can do a work in us before we return. If you give up smoking, you do not want to spend all day around smokers or you'll likely to give in. After you have been off cigs for a couple of years, it is unlikely to be a problem when around other smokers. It's not the environment that is the thorns and weeds, it's the combination of the state of your heart and the environment you put it in. When God sorts you out, so you are not tempted by those same distractions, in fact it could well be that God calls you back to share his love in that very environment that used to cause you a problem. Guess what – **God can transform hearts.**

### **Rich soil**

Some seed fell into good soil. The most fertile area in Jesus' time was the Jordan valley. Whilst normal yields were amount 10 to 1 in most of Palestine, it was not unheard of to get superabundant yields of up to 100 to 1 in the Jordan Valley. The rich soil are hearts and opened that will be open and ready to receive the Good News about God, about Jesus. Those that will put down deep roots and become fruitful, do great things for God.

So I went back into industry, and became involved with the small Baptist Church in the village I first stayed in after I left home at 18. It was 1984 just after the Billy Graham mission and my Church had run coaches to a football stadium in Bristol. I immediately joined the leadership team of a lively youth group. To start with there was a lot of activity but no real fruit. Then after our second weekend away with the group, that the floodgates opened and we saw scores of

teenagers accepting Jesus into their lives, we baptised up to 8 at a time. It was the largest Christian youth group in the county and our young worship band went on to be the most successful Christian band in the UK at the time, Eden Burning, headlining all the festivals. Not bad for a small village Baptist Church.

Back to the my brown field, after a few weeks I arrived at work one Saturday to see green shoots coming up everywhere, these then turned into a field awash with beautiful flowers. If we are sowing seed into rich soil, then we just have to be patient, and marvel at what God does. Not that it's easy. I was doing youthwork at least 6 nights a week, was busy most of the weekend. It was like having two jobs, but I loved it. I loved seeing God work in the lives of the young people. Yes some fell away quickly like seed on the rocks. Some got choked by distractions. Both were hard to take. But some have gone on to be church leaders, worship leaders, deacons and others who found many other ways to follow Jesus. I went on with my wife to plant another Youth group in a Congregational Church, which is still going strong after 23 years. At the Baptist God was great, but for me at both churches I had been falling into the numbers game. How many came this week, how many were baptised this year etc. It was all about being successful for Jesus, but then God took me on a journey, one where I had to learn an important lesson, we are called first to 'obedience' not to be 'successful'. If we are the job of sowing into rich soil and do it then we are blessed – if we are giving the job of working with a stony field and do it, then we are equally blessed, for we are following the heart of God and doing Gods will.

### **The Rock Garden**

I had friends that did detached work on an estate for 'Youth for Christ'. I admired and pitied these detached workers, they toiled away with the hardest kids, and never seemed to get a breakthrough. I was glad to be in a fruitful Church based ministry. Then through a bizarre set of circumstances I found myself doing detached work every week on a needy estate. I was there for several years. There were no more numbers to talk about. There were drugs, car thefts, pregnant girls, court visits, prison visits, even guns. I came to see it as a salt and light ministry. Being a preservative in a rotting culture, being a light in the darkness. Being Jesus for those who had no other witness. It was hard, but at times wonderful, exciting and always humbling. God had transferred me to working in stony ground. Young female hearts that expected to be mistreated by men, and whose right of passage was to get pregnant young and thus get their own flat off the council. For the boys, joyriding in stolen cars was their coming of age. Those on drugs would sell their kid sisters mobile phone for a fix. It was a journey into what felt like wilderness years, but God was doing a new work within me. Somehow, I believe I received more from God during that time than I gave out, and I gave a lot.

This week Cambridge scientists have created a Superwheat. The synthetic wheat programme involves crossing durum pasta wheat with wild goat-grass using traditional crossing techniques in the glasshouse combined with tissue culture in the research laboratory to guarantee seed germination. The resulting hybrid plants produce the 'synthetic' seed which is then used in crossing programmes with current varieties. These are much more resistant to drought and disease and give bigger yield. The seed is still in its very essence wheat, but can now be presented to a tougher environment. We may need to think about how we package the gospel message to bring a good yield in a tougher environment.

Remember it's not the area that is stony ground, it's the hearts and minds of those that live in the area. Though the negative life experience of living in that community or culture is one likely cause of the stony hearts. But is there hope when that's your mission field. With love, prayer and patience it's a resounding yes. God can change stony hearts just like he changed my thorny one, and eventually there will be enough rich soil for new life to flourish and not die away.

Its been 30 years since I went to Africa. I've often prayed for the region I went to, with just a handful of believers. The odds were stacked against them. That is until God enters the equation. Last month, I met some-one who had recently

been to that region, and heard Christian worship music. He investigated and found a Church 400 strong. They were amongst thousands of new believers. That night, I got a picture of my mind of a Rock Garden with one beautiful flower in the centre. I'm no longer a keen gardener, but I do love rock gardens, rock plants, the slow growing mini conifers. I could see this stony soil turning into a beautiful rock garden. If you are working in stony soil and cannot see it being transformed into a flawless field of anemones then pray for your rock garden. Pray for pockets of rich soil that can receive what you sow. Love the person in front of you, model Jesus to them, be salt and light in your community. Pray, pray and pray. Be patient, but be expectant. Jesus loves your community and hears your prayers. It may come soon, it may come much later – but you are called not first to success, but first to obedience, to do his will. Be faithful in what he has given you to do.

### **A time for scattering, and a time for focus.**

A sower can perhaps try and avoid the path and some rocky areas, although there could still be good soil next to some stonier ground, but he would not be able to tell where under the soil there are the seeds of weeds, thorns and thistles, ready to grow up alongside your planted seed. So the sower who has plenty of seed, will cast it all over, knowing that some will be wasted and bear no crop. When you know where the good soil is, then you can give some time over to that good soil to make sure you yield a really good crop.

Jesus had reached a point in his ministry where there was a change in priority, he had thrown the good news out in all directions, including on those whose hearts and lives could be considered equivalent to the paths, rocky and weedy soils. Now he was going to concentrate on those who had shown themselves to be good soil, and with a good heart and perseverance would produce some great fruit and do some great things for the kingdom of God. So he told the parable to all around, but the explanation was just to his disciples. As time went on, he invested more time into the rich soil of their hearts and minds.

There will be a time for you to share widely on your estate, and a time for you to focus on a few whose hearts are more receptive.

### **Your Heart**

Finally what of your own heart. Perhaps you have heard the gospel for years and yet never been moved or excited by it. You never will be no matter how many times you hear it, until God changes your heart. Perhaps instead you do really love God, but you feel a hard pull away on you, too many exciting distractions. You desperately need to pray for God to give you an experience that will change your heart and mind so that you can grow deeper roots. If that's the case then cry out for him like I did back at University. Ask him to do something in your life, anything, that will mean you can stay close to him. He might not take you to Africa like me, but be prepared to have a life changing experience, even if you get put on a hard road to teach you the lessons you need. Without that change of heart, the truth won't grow within you, and you could be lost forever.

Perhaps you once did great things for God, but over time you've not cleared the rocks that have been thrown your way, and you've let weeds grow on your patch. It's time for some gardening. Put the work back in, get closer to Jesus, focus on him more, and work with him to put your life back on track, be thankful, and find your Christian joy again.

Amen.