



TWO THINGS THAT ARE VITALLY IMPORTANT (PART 10)

The parable of the sower – ineffective growth

MAIN CHALLENGE

Often, human hearts produce growth which is ineffective, because it does not lead to life-transforming fruit. One reason for such ineffective growth is shallowness of soil, where the word of God can only penetrate so far before it finds hardness below the surface. We need to stop worrying about what people see in us and be far more concerned with what God alone sees if we are to combat this problem. We also need to allow time for God to challenge the deep issues of our heart, not avoiding them because they are too painful. A second reason for ineffective growth is the existence of competitive plants ("weeds") in our heart which choke the word of God. God does not need us to be perfect in order for him to work with us, but he does need us to have pure motivation. Two specific issues we are warned about are the worries of "getting on" in life (work, education, family, relationships, etc) and the deceitfulness of wealth. Both of these can appear to be both urgent and important considerations, but they are temporary and transient, and trivial in comparison with surrendering our whole lives to God. Is your fruitfulness being hindered by shallow soil or impure motives?

We are looking at the two things that (according to the Book of Hebrews) are vitally important: faith and holiness. In these days of easy electronic access to virtually any subject matter, we need to know what we should be focused on, and these two words go a long way to summarising what those priorities should be.

We are looking at the parable of the sower as a model of how true holiness in the heart results in the good soil that leads to growth-producing faith. We have also seen the converse: that where our hearts are hard as a result of being trampled on as the pathways of our preconceived ideas, the seed of the word of God is unproductive. In this message, we focus on the two other types of soil Jesus describes as also resulting in lack of spiritual productivity.

Unproductive soil

In the parable, seed sown on the pathway represents seed that never produces any result, because "the birds ate it up" (Lk. 8:5). This represents the situation where the heart in which the word of God was sown does not even realise that it has received a life-transforming message, because that message never penetrated the surface. God alone knows how often we have each been in this situation; we will never know (unless he chooses to tell us) because, from the recipient's point of view, it just as if the word had never been sown.

However, in the parable Jesus talks about two separate situations where the recipients *are* aware that they have received the seed of the word, and yet the word is still ineffective. The seed begins to grow, but before it is able to produce fruit, it is rendered ineffective by



the state of the heart in which it is sown. This is the frustrating situation that we are all aware of from time to time, where God begins to speak to us about something, but we never seem to be able to grasp what it is. For some reason or other, the fruitfulness of the word eludes us. For some of us, we spend all of our lives in this unwholesome state of spiritual immaturity.

In this message, we will focus on these two states, and provide some answers on how to escape from this situation. The fullest version of the parable for these two states of heart is Matthew's version, so we will use this one to analyse the two states of unproductive soil, which we will label the "rocky soil" and the "weed-infested soil".

Rocky soil

"Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ... (This) refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 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." (Mt 13:5-6, 20-21)

A seed needs nutrients from the soil in order to grow healthily. When it does not find these nutrients, it bursts forth prematurely through the soil, and has the appearance of healthy growth, but this is an illusion. Healthy growth is defined by Jesus as fruit – long-lasting, life-transforming consequences that flow naturally from the nature of the seed. When you are bearing fruit, you are not striving to produce the desired effect, you do so naturally – because healthy growth has taken place already at the deepest level of your heart.

Anyone who has been a Christian more than a very short while will be familiar with these sad symptoms – both in themselves and also in other people: Someone bursts forth either as a new believer, or else as a believer with a potentially life-changing revelation from God. They are excited, and their excitement is infectious; they can't help telling people about what they have learnt, they want you to learn it too, they continually talk about it to anyone and everyone. God has clearly birthed a work in them. But then, as quickly as the new growth burst forth, it dies again; the person stops talking about the revelation they received, perhaps even they stop being a Christian altogether.

What has happened here? Was the revelation they received real? Quite possibly it was. However, there is a salutatory lesson we need to learn, something I have learnt from bitter experience: *excitement about God's word is not fruit!* The only fruit in the Kingdom is life-transformation, and this takes time and often pain to achieve. Twigs and leaves and even full branches are not fruit – only fruit is fruit! And we should not settle for anything less than fruit in our lives.



Shallowness

According to Jesus, the reason why this quick-growing, quick-dying plant appears on the scene is because the soil is too shallow. On the surface, the soil is moist and receptive, but just below the surface it is hard and rocky, just like the pathway described in the previous message. Perhaps the person is more concerned with what other people see in their lives than what God alone sees; perhaps they are impatient and are trying to imitate fruitfulness by an act of human will; perhaps it is something else altogether. Whatever the reason, the person is able to produce growth but not fruit because of shallowness.

True holiness is about what goes on in the hidden recesses of your heart, the places where God alone sees. When we are worried what other people think about us, we are subconsciously short-circuiting this process: *"Fear of man will prove to be a snare"* (Prov. 29:25). The "snare" is that it forces us to focus on what others can see on the surface of our lives, rather than in our heart, where the important work is taking place, unseen by others. When we walk in the fear of other people, it is a recipe for the shallowness that produces fruitless growth.

In the message on good soil (#8 in this series), I described a process by which we need to persevere with the word God implants in our lives if we are to prove to have the "good heart" God requires. This is an important process, for it enables us to expose the depths of our hearts to God so that he can deal with us as he needs to. The process described is an antidote for the fear of man that promotes fruitlessness. It requires us to be honest – brutally honest – with ourselves about how we are responding to God's revelation in the deepest recesses of our being, and what the impediments are to us believing what he has said from the depths of our heart. This process takes time – sometimes a long time indeed; but it cannot be short-circuited.

Here is another way of looking at the same issue: long ago I read a piece by the famous Welsh preacher Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones about how to preach the word of God to people effectively. He asserted that the correct approach is to first appeal to their mind by giving them factual information they can work with (e.g. "Jesus died for your sins"); only then to engage their emotions (e.g. "he loves you so much; how tragic if you do not experience this for yourself!"), and finally to appeal to their wills in order to seek a response (e.g. "you therefore need to commit your life to following him"). We need to engage all of the mind, emotions and will in order to produce a complete response, he maintained, but when we alter the order of approach in our preaching we are in danger of producing a shallow and short-lived response – either emotionalism (feelings without true belief) or self-striving (willpower without intellectual or emotional conviction). There is a lot of truth in this model.

Persecution

Jesus says that the seed planted in shallow, rocky soil dies away quickly when it faces "persecution". This refers to attacks that come from outside that make it difficult for us to follow through with our commitment to what God has said. This concept is similar to another one of Jesus' teaching, where he likened those who fail to build their lives on his words to those building their house on sand, where the combination of rain, wind and floodwaters causes the house to crash (Mt. 7:26-27).



It is not easy producing life-transforming fruit in your life! Why? Because each one of us has reasons – often very powerful, deeply entrenched reasons – why we are the way we are. If God is to change us, he needs to challenge those reasons, and we need to respond positively to every challenge. Some of those challenges will come from other people, both friends and enemies; some will come from circumstances, both good and adverse; and some will come from direct onslaught by the enemy. To withstand the onslaught; our faith needs to be based on solid ground: as Dr Lloyd-Jones asserted, it needs to be based on an internal consistency in our souls: a decision of the will based upon an emotional commitment in change based upon a firm mental understanding of God's requirements. These are the three pillars of true repentance; they are three guy-ropes that need to be solidly planted in the ground to protect us against the raging winds and surging floodwaters if we are to hold fast under all circumstances. If any one of these three guy-ropes is not firmly planted, we may feel secure in the short term, but we are exposed to a horrible risk should the winds of adversity blow from a different direction.

Let us not be negative about this: the word of God implanted in our lives, if it is firmly implanted, has power to totally change us no matter how firmly entrenched our sin or brokenness is. The truth is, if we are prepared to allow God to deal with the deep recesses of our heart, then when this persecution arises from whatever source it arises, such attacks will only serve to make us stronger. But the key is to not be impatient, not to short-circuit the process of transformation, and to give ourselves wholly unto God. Thus, the process (paradoxically) is both simple and hard; simple, because it depends solely on trusting God and surrender to his will; but hard, because it involves facing our deepest hurts and fears in the presence of God, and being willing to allow God into those places of deepest brokenness. May God grant us grace to follow through with this important work!

Weed-infested soil

"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ... (This) refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful." (Mt. 13:7, 22)

The rocky soil produces growth which dies off because the soil is too shallow; the weed-infested soil produces growth which dies off because it is swamped by competitive plants. The seed of the word of God takes root and begins to grow, but other plants (weeds, or undesirable plants) have also been sown in the same soil.

God requires our hearts to be pure in order to produce fruit. "Pure" does not mean "perfect" – if that was the requirement, who of us could possibly grow? But it does mean "uncontaminated by competing motivations". It does not matter what sins we have in our life, God can and will deal with them in his own good time; but it *does* matter that our motivation is completely attuned to what God requires. Do not worry about your imperfections; do concern yourself with the purity of your motivations. God is not interested in playing religious games with us.

A "weed" is simply any plant in your garden that is not meant to be there. Jesus uses the analogy of weeds in another parable (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43) to describe things sown into the Kingdom by the devil to counterfeit the works of God. Such counterfeits will not be pulled up and exposed for what they truly are until the final Judgment Day, because they



resemble (and can be mistaken for) the works of God. However, they do hamper the growth of the Kingdom and, in this parable of the sower, they strangle the effectiveness of the word of God in our lives.

Note an important point here: *weeds are deceptive*, because they can look like the real planting of God in our lives if we are not vigilant. We are told not to judge others for this reason, but we should and must be discerning when we look at our own lives. If we allow weeds to flourish in the soil of our heart, they will be so much harder to deal with if we do not attack them before they have grown strong.

Note also another thing: *weeds are stronger than the word of God*, in the sense that they can and will choke the word of God, not the other way around. This seems strange: how can anything be stronger than the word of God? The answer is, of course, that nothing is *intrinsically* stronger than the word of God; but the plant we are talking about is the word of God *growing in human hearts*, and it is the weakness of our human brokenness that gives the weeds of the enemy greater strength in practice. For God is committed to never forcing his hand on us; come what may, he has determined to let us decide whether or not we will surrender to his will. That is why the process of sanctification is so painful; each step of the way must be taken with our full co-operation and consent. But our enemy has no such scruples; he is content to entrap us with his schemes, so that each step we take in his direction makes it more and more difficult for us to get free of his influence and control.

What are the weeds?

So what are these “weeds” that Jesus warns us about? Well, they might be any temptation to sin, but Jesus simplifies it by mentioning two in particular: the “worries of this life” and the “deceitfulness of wealth”. Both have one thing in common: they focus on the visible necessities or desires of life, rather than the deeper things of the heart that drive the quality of life we experience.

The “worries of this life” refer to the pressing matters that determine how I am to “get on” in this world: education and work, friends and family, finding a wife or husband, and so on. All of these things, at various times in our lives, have the appearance of requiring our urgent attention. They also appear a lot of the time to be important. And let us admit that, up to a point, they are both important and urgent. But we need to recognise the limitation of their importance: they are the worries *of this life*. None of these things matter for eternity; they are shallow and surface issues that confront us only because of the fact that we live in this current age. Not only that, many of them are only “worries” because the world we live in is in rebellion to God. Thus, we only need to worry about getting a good education or job because we know that, if we fail to do this, the selfishness of the world will leave us exposed to significant risks and dangers; similarly, we only need to worry about friends and family because the love we experience in this world is a poor reflection of the unconditional love of God. In other words, not only are the worries of this life temporary, they are also transient; they will disappear the closer we press in to God and his eternal kingdom.



Similarly, the “deceitfulness of wealth” is something that is also both temporary and transient. It is also extremely self-centred, if not selfish. (I can’t remember ever hearing of anyone spending their life worrying about whether *other people* are doing well enough financially!). Note in particular that the “deceitfulness of wealth” is a particular problem for those well off financially (and that includes all of us in the western world, I am afraid), but it is not limited to the rich: the poor can be consumed by envy for those better off than themselves, just as surely as the rich can be consumed by maintaining their privileged position.

Wealth is “deceitful” according to Jesus; wherein lies the deceit? When talking about wealth, the New Testament seems to focus on its power to corrupt us by becoming an idol in our lives – a source of authority and priority. In other words, having wealth is never a problem, but being controlled by it (or loving it – see 1 Tim. 6:10) is. Jesus said that we cannot serve both God and money (Mt. 6:24), and he called the man a “fool” who focused on building bigger barns to hoard his wealth rather than building wealth with God (Lk. 12:13-21). How do we know if wealth controls us? if we are generous to others with what we have, and are willing to give to those in need, then we are not under its deceitful influence. People never give away their gods! That is why Paul commanded those who are rich to be generous with what they have and to avoid arrogance (1 Tim. 6:17-19). When the rich are arrogant towards those less fortunate than themselves, it is a sure sign that they think they are better somehow than others, and this is one of the greatest deceptions of all.

Another way in which wealth is deceitful is the way it consumes our time and resources. As anyone who owns their own home can testify, there is a lot of work to be done in maintaining an asset and preserving its value. Lawns need to be mown, buildings need to be repaired, and so on. The more valuable the asset, the more work needs to be done to preserve its value. Does that mean that we should not seek to prosper in this world? Not at all – it is something we in the western world cannot avoid. But we do need to ensure that we do not allow the tail to wag the dog, so to speak; we need to be aware of how much of our time and income will be taken up properly looking after the wealth we acquire. Simplicity of heart is a key virtue here – we should be genuinely content with what we have, grateful to God for it, and be good stewards of it. Do not seek more for yourself, unless you are convinced that it is God’s calling on your life; and it is only God’s calling if he wants you to use it for his glory. The more we have, the more we will be called to account for what we have been given.

All this is largely self-evident and has been covered many times before in innumerable places, so I will not belabour the point any more. However, the sad fact is that, even in spite of the numerous warnings in Scripture, many believers are still entrapped by the “worries of this life” and the “deceitfulness of wealth”. So how do we avoid these traps? The answer is, of course, to watch our priorities, to look at what we are doing (especially what we are spending our time and money on) rather than the reasons (often just excuses) we offer for our behaviour, and measure them all against the teachings of Jesus. Weeds are fast-growing and dangerous, and are easiest by far to deal with before they sprout up and begin to spread in our heart like gangrene. Apart from this, I really have nothing to advise; may God preserve us by his grace from such contaminants!



Conclusion

There are four types of soil, but only one produces fruitful growth; this is a sobering lesson we all need to remember. But the good news is that, when the word of God does take root in our lives, it produces such an abundant harvest that we and the Kingdom of God can grow enormously even when we are imperfect in our response to him. Ultimately, it is all of his grace.

We will finish this series of messages with a final discussion of how to take a holistic approach to faith and holiness, before summarising what we have learnt. May God continue to bless us as we open our hearts to this all-important topic!

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