Parable of the Sower: Characteristics of Good Soil

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INTRODUCTION

The Parable of the Sower is familiar and beloved, the parable that defines this form of teaching. Jesus spoke of different type soils. He described the wayside soil, rocky ground, thorny ground and good ground. However, the question arises: What makes good soil good?

What makes one garden spot productive and another one poor? The quality of the soil. Soil is to your garden what a foundation is to your home. It is the beginning of all that follows. The same principle applies to our hearts (Prov. 4:23).

*Proverbs 4:23 ... 23 Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. (NASB95)*

In this lesson, let us discuss the different characteristics of good soil. Jesus addressed this subject in the parable of the sower, which is recorded in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. Specifically, we will focus on Luke’s account of the parable of the sower.

**IT IS ADEQUATELY TILLED & NOT PACKED DOWN**

Good soil must be loose. Soil that has been trampled down and hardened is unproductive. In contrast, tilled soil is fruitful. Compaction results from repeated traffic over a particular part of your lawn. Dog runs, areas where kids play, pathways are common problem spots. Natural soil has about 25% air space, but compacted soil has only 5-10% air space. In such ground, seeds cannot germinate, roots cannot breath and plants cannot grow.

What is the spiritual application? We should not allow our hearts to become hardened in the first place (Luke 8:5, 12; Heb. 3:7-15). Such hardening occurs when we hear the truth, but repeatedly spurn it. This causes our hearts to grow callous, unfeeling and unreceptive. Those who reject God’s goodness and mercy seal their own fate (Rom. 2:4-6). Any who are in this condition must break up the fallow ground, lest they face the wrath of God (Jer. 4:3-4; Hos. 10:11-15).

*Luke 8:5 ... 5 “The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up. (NASB95)*
Luke 8:12 “Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. (NASB95)

Hebrews 3:7-15 ... 7 Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “Today if you hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, As in the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, And saw My works for forty years. 10 “Therefore I was angry with this generation, And said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, And they did not know My ways’; 11 As I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ “ 12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, 15 while it is said, “Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.” (NASB95)

Romans 2:4-6 ... 4 Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who will render to each person according to his deeds: (NASB95)

Jeremiah 4:3-4 (NASB95) — 3 For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, “Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. 4 “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds.”

Hosea 10:11-15 (NASB95) — 11 Ephraim is a trained heifer that loves to thresh, But I will come over her fair neck with a yoke; I will harness Ephraim, Judah will plow, Jacob will harrow for himself. 12 Sow with a view to righteousness, Reap in accordance with kindness; Break up your fallow ground, For it is time to seek the Lord Until He comes to rain righteousness on you. 13 You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, You have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your way, in your numerous warriors, 14 Therefore a tumult will arise among your people, And all your fortresses will be destroyed, As Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle, When mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. 15 Thus it will be done to you at Bethel because of your great wickedness. At dawn the king of Israel will be completely cut off.

How do you overcome this deficiency? When dealing with packed-down physical soil, the ground can be broken up by plowing and tilling. You can also rent a lawn aerator that will poke holes into the soil, thus allowing air and water to penetrate the soil. When dealing with spiritual soil, the answer is more complex. Hardened hearts must be broken (Psa. 51:16-17). Rebellious attitudes must be eliminated. We must yield our stubborn will unto God (2 Cor.
10:5). Frequently it takes some personal tragedy to shake us up, but even then, that is sometimes not enough. Often this condition is irreversible. Therefore, let us obey God’s will while there is time and opportunity.

Psalm 51:16-17 (NASB95) — 16 For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

2 Corinthians 10:5 ... 5 We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, (NASB95)

IT HAS SUFFICIENT DEPTH

Soil must have proper depth for it to be productive. Soil acts as a reservoir to hold moisture and nutrients. To a large degree, your plants’ success depends on the depth of their soil. Without sufficient depth, plants cannot survive the heat and drought of summer. Most trees do best when given a minimum of two to four feet of good loam topsoil. Shrubs need one to three feet of topsoil, depending on the size of the plant. Vines, ground covers and annual and perennial flowers need at least one foot of good soil. Turf grasses require 8 to 12 inches of topsoil.

What is the spiritual application? We must have depth of character. We should develop a reservoir of knowledge. A shallow faith will not withstand times of trial and temptation (Mark 4:5-6; Luke 8:6, 13). We must continually grow as Christians. We must be rooted, grounded and established in faith and love (Eph. 3:14-19; Col. 2:6-7).

Mark 4:5-6 ... 5 “Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. 6 “And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. (NASB95)

Luke 8:6 ... 6 “Other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. (NASB95)

Luke 8:13 ... 13 “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. (NASB95)

Ephesians 3:14-19 ... 14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ
Which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.
(NASB95)

Colossians 2:6-7 ... 6 Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, 7 having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. (NASB95)

What if there is a deficiency in this regard? If you are speaking of a garden, one can simply bring in more soil. If you are speaking of the heart, one must strive to develop a deeper appreciation of God’s scheme of redemption (2 Cor. 5:14-15). Study on a daily basis. Pray without ceasing. Put God first in your life.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 ... 14 For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; 15 and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (NASB95)

**IT IS FREE OF WEEDS, INSECTS & DISEASE**

Good soil preparation is the key to success in any gardening effort. This is especially true when planting flowers, vegetables and ground covers. Small plants can easily be crowded out and killed by weeds or other soil-born problems. In order for a garden to be productive, you must eliminate soil borne insects, diseases and weeds. Start by removing all the existing vegetation in the new bed area, either with a hoe or a square-bladed shovel. Be especially careful to remove Bermuda grass runners and all nutgrass plants and roots. Roto-till the area to a depth of 8 to 12 inches. Remove rocks, roots and other debris. If necessary, fumigate the soil with a product like Vapam to kill insects, diseases, weeds and nematodes.

What is the spiritual application? Hearts that are cluttered with the cares of this life are unfruitful and unproductive (Luke 8:7, 14). Anything that causes us to sin must be plucked out and cast aside (Matt. 18:7-11). We must serve God with singleness of heart (Luke 11:34; Phil. 3:13).

*Luke 8:7 ... 7 “Other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out. (NASB95)*

*Luke 8:14 ... 14 “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. (NASB95)*

*Luke 11:34 ... 34 “The eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness. (NASB95)*
Matthew 18:7-11 (NASB95) — 7 “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! 8 “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9 “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. 10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. 11 “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

Philippians 3:13 ... 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, (NASB95)

It is Properly Balanced

Soil needs to be balanced. There are three basic soil types, each with their individual strengths and weaknesses: 1) Clays are the smallest of all soil particles, having high nutrient and water retention capacities. They help bond sands and silts into crumbs for better soil structure. Soils with high clay content, though, are difficult to work with. The blacklands of northeast Texas are composed mostly of a waxy-clay soil called “black gumbo.” Farmers used to say, “If you stick with it in the summer, it will stick with you in the winter.” 2) Sands are the coarsest of all soil particles. Because they are well aerated and drain rapidly, sands are ideal for root growth. However they do not retain moisture or nutrients very well. 3) In size and physical properties, silts have a consistency somewhere between clay and sand. This kind of soil accumulates on the bottom of rivers, streams, or ponds. Silts are important in loam soils, but not ideal by themselves. Ideal soil contains equal amounts of clay, silt and sand, plus some organic matter. Such loams make ideal garden soil, since it is composed of a mixture of each soil category.

What is the spiritual application? Some have a very narrow view of Christianity. In their view, faithfulness is riding one point into the ground. Hobby-riders and cranks cannot get through a lesson without harping on their pet peeve.

We must seek to achieve a balance between various spiritual qualities (2 Pet. 1:5-9). There is a need for both positive and negative preaching (2 Tim. 4:1-2). For example, we must balance love and faithfulness. A nebulous commitment to love with no corresponding appreciation for truth leads to mushy sentimentality. However, a militant defense of the truth divorced from love leads to sectarian strife and bitterness. Love and faithfulness complement each other, the one helping shape and sculpt the other. Both are needed.
2 Peter 1:5-9 ... 5 Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. (NASB95)

2 Timothy 4:1-2 ... 1 I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (NASB95)

**IT IS SUITABLY NOURISHED & WATERED**

Good soil must be properly nourished. Fertilizer and water are required for a productive garden. Fertilizers are “vitamin pills” for the soil providing extra pep for your plants. They improve the quality of your soil. Few soils in Texas provide all the necessary nutrients, so gardeners must supplement those soils. We must provide the missing or deficient nutrients. Common fertilizers, such as 13-13-13 or 15-5-10, supply nitrogen to stimulate leaf growth, phosphoric acid to ensure root growth and fruit productivity, and potash to help develop heat and cold resistance.

What is the spiritual application? God’s word nourishes our hearts (Psa. 1:1-3). Those who obey God’s word and submit to His prosper and enjoy good success (Josh. 1:7-8). We must be nourished up in the words of faith (1 Tim. 4:6).

PSalm 1:1-3 ... 1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers. (NASB95)

Joshua 1:7-8 ... 7 “Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. 8 “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. (NASB95)

1 Timothy 4:6 ... 6 In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. (NASB95)
CONCLUSION

What are the characteristics of superior soil? Good soil is not packed down. It has the necessary depth. It is free of weeds, insects and disease. It is properly balanced and properly nourished. These principles apply to both physical and spiritual soils. In the Parable of the Sower, the good soil was productive because it did not have the deficiencies that limited the fruitfulness of the wayside, the rocky ground and the thorny ground. If your heart is hard, shallow, or cluttered, you will be unfruitful. So, how is the soil of our soul? Is your heart tender and receptive to God’s word?


ii Sperry, p. 9.

iii Sperry, p. 8.

iv Sperry, p. 17.