

*The Covenant Pulpit*



***"Soil Samples"***

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During the late 60s his evangelistic rallies packed auditoriums and stadiums across America. He led thousands to Christ, performed miracles, wrote bestselling books, and was on a first name basis with evangelical superstars like Billy Graham and Oral Roberts. When I became a youth pastor, I took my kids to his rallies, and used his books and recordings to teach them. He was the model of everything I wanted to be in ministry.

But it's a dangerous thing to put anyone on a pedestal.

One day he abandoned his family and walked away from the ministry, sending shockwaves through the evangelical world. He headed to San Francisco where he moved in with a male lover. There he plunged into a downward spiral of depravity and drugs. He even denied the existence of God. Later he became a gay activist, and announced that he had found God again. He's now a pastor in the Metropolitan Church, a group of congregations committed to advancing the cause of homosexuality.

Sinners can become saints, and saints can return to their sins.

Just before he began painting his masterpiece *The Last Supper*, Leonardo Di Vinci was walking in the cathedral in Milan when he saw a young man whose angelic face took his breath away. The artist knew that he had found the person who would model the Christ of his painting, and took him to his studio that very day to sketch his portrait.

Other projects distracted Di Vinci and it was years before he was ready to finish *The Last Supper*. By now everyone had been depicted on the canvas except for Judas Iscariot. The artist heard about a notoriously-brutal criminal condemned to die for a series of heinous crimes. When he went to the prison, and peered through the bars, he recoiled in horror at the grotesque evil in the convict's face. He knew instantly that he had found his Judas. The brute was brought in chains to the studio.

When Di Vinci finished his sketch, and the man was being led away, he broke free from his guards and rushed to the artist. Falling on his knees, he cried out, "Look at me, Leonardo Di Vinci! Don't you know who I am?" The old master peered intently into the prisoner's face and replied, "No, I've never seen you before." "Have I sunk so low?" cried the condemned man. "Di Vinci, look at me again! I'm the same man you painted years ago as Jesus Christ!"

The most pious people can become brutal beasts.

When Jesus chose him, did he know that Judas would betray him? Was Judas a hypocrite from the beginning, or did he start out with the same sincerity as the rest of the disciples? He left everything to follow Jesus. He preached the gospel, performed miracles and cast out demons. Jesus even made him the treasurer of his apostolic band. But, like the evangelist I had admired as a youth pastor, Judas later plunged into a downward spiral of depravity. In the end, he jettisoned his faith and betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Finally, he fashioned a noose and hung himself.

The history of Christianity is littered with people who shipwrecked their faith. John Maxwell did an exhaustive study of 400 leaders in the Bible only to discover that a mere handful finished well. Most stumbled and fell before they crossed the finish line. We must never take our faith for granted. That's why another apostle urges us in 2 Peter 1:10,

"Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall."

Although those who are truly saved by Christ are eternally secure, we must never take our eternal security for granted. In the *Parable of the Sower* Jesus wants us to know that it's not enough just to hear the word of God. Here's the third and final principle that we learn from this parable:

**You can loaf your way into hell, but  
God's kingdom can only be seized by force.**

In Matthew 11:12 Jesus says, "...the kingdom of heaven has been advancing by force and forceful men lay hold of it." The King James Version of the Bible says, "...the *violent* take it by force..." If we want God's kingdom, we have to grab hold of it with all our passion (even *violent* force), and hold on for dear life. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12, "...continue to work out your salvation by fear and trembling..." Did you catch those words: *continue, work out, by fear and trembling?* An evangelist can lead people to Christ one day and lead them astray the next. An angelic young man in the cathedral of Milan can end up a brutal killer. Judas the apostle can become Judas the betrayer. The crowds that follow Jesus today can all vanish tomorrow. Don't take anything for granted. Seize the kingdom by force and hold on to it with all your might.

Jesus tells this parable at the height of his popularity. Verses 4&5 say, "While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed...'" The news about Jesus spreads like wildfire, and towns across Israel empty as

people stampede by the thousands to see this Rabbi from Galilee. Matthew's gospel tells us that the crowd is so huge that Jesus is forced to speak from a boat on the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by hills that form a natural amphitheater. There may have been 100,000 people in the crowd that day.

But things seldom stay the same, and Jesus knows that the cheers will soon turn to jeers. The crowds that follow him for his miracles will soon desert him because of his hard-to-swallow teaching. He will be left with a pitiful handful of followers. Before the year is out, he will be handed over to the Romans for crucifixion. Then, even his closest disciples will desert him. Jesus knows that people are fickle. There is urgency in his cry in verse eight: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." But he knows that few really hear. He then turns to his disciples, who are most likely in the boat with him, and speaks to them privately. He begins to explain his parable in verse ten:

"The secrets of the kingdom of God have 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.'"

He quotes from Isaiah to remind them that not everyone who hears the gospel really understands it. The church is full of people who are in the crowd but don't know Christ. They hear the message, but don't walk with the Master. They appear to be disciples, but appearances are deceiving. Many professing Christians have *not* grasped what it means to follow Christ. Like the soils in Christ's *Parable of the Sower*, the seed of God's Word has either never penetrated their souls, or not taken root, or been choked out by things of this world. Only a few receive the Word, let it take root, pull the weeds, and persevere until there is a good crop of spiritual fruit in their lives. Many either fall away, or settle into what St. Paul describes in 2 Timothy 3:5 as "...having a form of godliness, but denying its power."

Jesus wants his disciples (both then and now) to get two things out of this parable: 1) as a *sower* of God's Word, we should never get discouraged when we don't see big results. Most people *won't* respond the way we want them to. 2) As *soil* we should never take anything for granted. The fact that we have heard the Word of God doesn't mean that we will produce a harvest. Look at Jesus' words in verse fifteen: "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 good crop." Grab hold of those three words: *hear*, *retain*, and *persevere*. Let me repeat it: you can loaf your way to hell, but God's kingdom is seized by force. Are you passionate about going the distance as a Christian? Then take these two challenges:

## 1. Take some soil samples.

Farmers who want good harvests are fastidious about taking soil samples. The stakes are too high for us to make assumptions about our spiritual life. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven..." That's why St. Paul urges us in 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." Which of these four kinds of soil are you?

### 1) Hard dirt?

Verse five says, "As he was scattering the seed some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up." Jesus explains this in verse twelve: "Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so they may not believe and be saved." He is describing those who hear the word, but never really get saved. Why is this soil so hard? Jesus tells us that it has been trampled. These are dirt roads alongside the fields that have been beaten down by travelers in a hurry to get to somewhere; travelling to do business, to find pleasure, to see family, or to go to a place of worship. Armies march these paths on the way to war. People hurry on their way to do some good deed. Between the fields are smaller paths that farmers use on their way to scatter seed, or work the soil, or harvest the grain. They also lead to small out-of-the way villages or homes that are off the main roads.

Jesus is giving a profound truth: many folks are like paths beaten down hard by travel. They are constantly on the move, going somewhere in a hurry, preoccupied with too many things. In an age of email, I-Phones, text messaging, a television in every room, and activities galore, we have become a hyperventilating, Attention Deficit Disorder society that seldom slows down enough to really talk, listen, meditate, or reflect. We are a generation of people who seldom go deep; a people who are saturated by information, but haven't grasped the things that matter most in life. The seed is scattered, but folks are moving too fast to let it sink in. So it is soon snatched away.

Pollster George Barna has discovered that less than 20% of churchgoers glance at their Bibles between Sundays; only 7% belong to Bible studies; on average they pray less than 3 minutes a day; and they attend church less than 3 Sundays a month. The seed penetrates their lives. There is great spiritual danger in busyness (even in the busyness of church work). We have to slow down long enough to find quiet places where our souls can be plowed and softened until the seed of the Word of God sinks down deep.

## 2) Shallow soil?

Jesus goes on in verse six: "Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture." In verse 13 Jesus explains, "Those on the rock are those who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for awhile, but in the time of testing they fall away." These are the people who are listening to Christ's parable. They are looking for something to fill the "God" vacuum in their lives. They are caught up in the euphoria of a religious movement that is sweeping Israel, and mesmerized by the miracles that Jesus performs. His passion stirs their souls, his sermons intrigue them, and his words give them hope. A lot of folks are inspired by what they see in the lives of Christians. They come to church, are caught up in the worship, and touched by the sermons. They might even come forward at a gospel invitation and pray a salvation prayer. For a while they are enthusiastic. The seed of the Word seems to take root, and there are some immediate (and even dramatic) changes in their lives.

But the problem is the rock below. In Palestine, limestone shelves of rock run under the soil. A seed can germinate in the warm soil, moisturized by the dew of the earth and an occasional rain. A plant will shoot up. But the root hits that shelf of rock, and doesn't find the water that runs deep down in the earth. They wither away when the hot sun begins to beat down.

Where is the water? Throughout the gospels Jesus says that he is the living water. He says in John 7:27, "Let him who is thirsty come to me." This soil represents the hearts of people who get excited about the things of Jesus, but they never get rooted in Jesus himself. Christianity is not about religion; it is about a relationship. It's not about what you do or what you know, but about *who* you know in an intimate, life-transforming way. If you aren't rooted in Christ, when things get hot, when persecution comes, and when times get tough you will wilt and fade away. There are a lot of wilted people sitting in churches, or who have abandoned Jesus when things didn't go the way they hoped they would. Let me ask you this morning: Are you in a deep personal relationship with Christ, or are you just along for the ride? Be prepared for lots of professing Christians to wilt and fall away when the tough times come before Jesus returns to take his people home.

## 3) Thorny soil?

Jesus describes this soil in verse seven: "Other seed fell among the thorns which grew up with it and choked out the plants." Jesus explains the meaning in verse fourteen: "The seed that fell among thorns stands for those

who hear, but as they go their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." Are these people true Christians? Perhaps. Their roots are in the water, which means they are in Christ. But they never grow up. In the soil of their lives are other seeds: thistles and thorns that crowd out spirituality; pleasure, materialism, activity, worry, anxiety, family, even religious stuff that take priority over the things of God's kingdom. Eventually the thistles and thorns take over their lives and crowd out the work of God, stealing the nutrients in the soil, and siphoning off the water. These folk don't die spiritually; they just become puny, insignificant, and defeated by the other stuff.

We are preaching an incomplete gospel today. We tell people to pray a prayer inviting Jesus into their lives, and that makes them a Christian. We give them the impression that they can go on with life as it was before--that Christianity is just another add-on. We are like Hindus who just add Jesus to their other 270 million gods. But Jesus never evangelized like that. He said to his disciples in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." To be a Christian is to follow Jesus without reservation. It is to take up a cross and die to self. When a man took up his cross in Roman times, it was to go to his place of execution. He was never coming home again. He was saying goodbye to everything. To Peter he said, "Leave your boats and nets behind and follow me." To the rich young ruler he said, "Sell everything you have, give the proceeds of that sale to the poor, and follow me." To the woman taken in adultery he said, "Go and sin no more." Check out the gospel. There is never a salvation that doesn't involve walking away from everything that would hinder following Jesus. Grace is free, but it's never cheap. Again: you can loaf your way to hell, but God's kingdom can only be seized by force! What weeds do you need to rip out by their roots today?

#### **4) Good ground?**

There is only one ground that really matters. Jesus says in verse 8, "Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a hundred times more than was sown." The proof of good soil is in the fruit. The Word of God is wonder seed. When it takes root, it returns a great harvest of fruit in both personal piety and good works that pleases God and attracts sinners to the kingdom. But verse 15 says that it requires "a noble and good heart." No one has that kind of heart. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" But the sinful heart can become "noble and good" when it is transformed by Christ. Jesus is reminding us that we cannot produce fruit apart from being radically saved

by Jesus. But once that happens, verse 16 says we must do three things: 1) hear it; 2) retain it; and 3) persevere to the end. Once again: you can loaf your way to hell, but God's kingdom can only be seized by force! We must live out the truth and walk out the walk. Does this describe your life? Jesus says in verse 8, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

## 2. Do some soil management

I have digested this seed for several weeks. It has gripped my soul, and filled me with conviction and even fear. It has stirred my passions like few other scriptures. I've made three commitments that I challenge you to make: **1) I want to examine my soil, not others.** Jesus isn't calling us to evaluate other people. Sure, he wants us to understand why some folks won't respond to the gospel, or will fall away, or will remain immature all their Christian lives. But he isn't calling us to figure out what kind of soil they are. That's his business. Our business is to examine ourselves. When we get to heaven we will only give an account of our own lives. It's essential that we test our faith, and make our calling and election sure!

**2) The soils can be seasons of the same life.** The farmer in verse five goes out to the same field. In the same field are different soils. The field could be the world, or it could be an individual person. As Christians we can go through seasons of life. At one time we were diligent and saw a harvest from God's word in our life. But since then our enthusiasm has waned. We are no longer rooted in the life of Christ like we once were. We are wilting in discouraging times, and losing heart. Or the weeds have grown up and are choking out our spiritual life. We have become materialistic, or anxiety-ridden, or caught in some addiction, or tangled up in some bitterness, and the spiritual life is being choked out of us. Maybe we have even gotten so far away from Jesus, hardened by a life that is in the fast lane that the seed falls on us and is blown away. We need to always take stock, never living on what we stored up in the barn from past seasons of fruitfulness.

**3) A harvest comes through sweat and toil.** That's what verse 16 says. We need to get rooted again in the life of Christ, clean out the rocks, pull up the weeds, and get off to a quiet place to have the soil plowed again through prayer, Bible study and worship, recommitting ourselves that we won't loaf, or fall away, but will produce a harvest that is pleasing to our Lord.