

The Farmer of Our Souls

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Let us pray: Lord, we love you. And because we love you, we love your Word. We receive it with joy. In the name of our beloved Lord Jesus. Amen.

There is nothing more blessed in our lives than meeting Jesus. In today's parable of the four soils, Jesus shares with us his good and gracious plan, his good news for our lives.

When we hear this parable, we naturally want to become the good soil. We think, "I should try harder to have a heart like the good soil." That desire is good. But the truth is, this is not something we can accomplish by our own strength.

In reality, there are times when our hearts become like the path, hard and unreceptive. At other times, stones or thorns seem to fill our hearts. These are remnants of our old self that still trouble us. When the winds of hardship blow, the true condition of our hearts is exposed, and even small worries can cause our faith to wither. That is an honest picture of who we are.

This is why we return to the Word, the source of our faith. When we read Scripture, we must see it from the perspective of its author, God himself. We must read it as his promise telling us what he will do in us.

This is especially true when we read the Gospels. They are good news. If the message were simply, "Try harder and do better," it would not be good news at all, because we know how often we fail. It is good news because Christ comes to us, causes us to die to sin and live to God, and now dwells in us by his Spirit to accomplish his work in us.

Before we believe in Jesus, our hearts are like the path, the rocky ground, or the thorny soil. But once we come to Christ, he enters our lives, and we begin to bear the fruit of salvation as good soil. No one begins life as good ground. Because of the Fall, all of us start as sinners.

In the days of Jesus, there were very few fields in Israel that remained soft and fertile. There were only two rainy seasons, and the dry season was long. Even fields that had once been plowed would quickly become rough and hard again. So when Jesus told this parable, the farmers listening would have understood it immediately. He said that when

the sower scattered the seed, some fell on good soil, but some fell on the path, on rocky ground, or among thorns.

We might wonder, "Wouldn't those seeds dry out?" But the farmers in Jesus' day would not have been confused. They knew that after scattering the seed, the sower would soon plow the field, turning the soil, removing the stones, and clearing out the thorns so the seed could settle safely into the ground.

This is because farmers in those days plowed after they scattered the seed. With their simple wooden plows, it was nearly impossible to break up the dry ground ahead of time. They had to wait for the short rainy season, when the soil became soft, and then quickly sow the seed and plow at the same time. After scattering the seed, they would plow the field so the soil could be turned over and the seed could settle securely beneath the surface.

This is exactly what Jesus came to do. He came to scatter the seed of the message of the kingdom and to turn over the three kinds of soil that could not bear fruit, so that they might become good soil. And he is still doing this work today through his Spirit. Those three soils are not transformed by our own strength. It is Jesus Christ who comes to us and turns the soil of our hearts. Even a life that seems like the path, unable to understand the gospel and trampled by the enemy, still has hope in the Lord.

There was a young man who had wandered away from the road of life and was living among the tombs, a place of death. His heart was like the path. He never came to Jesus like the woman with the issue of blood. He never waited for Jesus like Zacchaeus. He never cried out for mercy like Bartimaeus. Instead, he shouted, "What do you want with me?" More than two thousand demons had seized his soul. He was completely trampled, a true picture of the path where the seed could not enter.

But the Lord did not leave that hardened path as it was. In his eternal purpose and love, he came powerfully to that rough ground, drove out the demons, and in a moment turned that desolate soul into good soil. The Lord made him a messenger of the gospel who would go and cultivate the thorny fields of the Decapolis (Mark 5:1–20).

Right before Jesus met this man, something happened to the disciples that shows us the rocky soil. They received the seed of the Word with joy, but when they faced the storm and the wind on the sea, the Word dried up in them, and they cried out, "We are going to drown" (Mark 4:38). The sea represents the world we live in. The waves are the

suffering, hardship, or persecution that come from our circumstances. The wind may be the sickness of the heart that rises because of those circumstances. Jesus calmed the waves and the wind. If we look for anything the disciples did well in that moment, it is simply that they called out to Jesus.

We can also see the thorny soil in the life of a rich young man who sincerely desired eternal life. When Jesus told him, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matt 19:21), he went away sad because he had great wealth. His desire for eternal life began to grow, but the thorns of wealth and worry choked the Word, and he could not bear the fruit of discipleship. Scripture gives us these negative examples to warn us, to show us the red light so that we do not walk down the same path.

The thorny soil is another danger that even a born-again believer can face. John Wesley, in his sermon *On Sin in Believers*, teaches that within the heart of a saved Christian there still remain inner thorns such as pride, love of the world, and sinful desires. Even as believers, we are troubled by the thorns that keep rising within us. Have you not felt the weight of worries, large and small, pressing upon your heart the moment you open your eyes in the morning?

So what should we do with these thorns? We try to break them by our own will, but as Wesley says, it is like trying to grab a thorn bush with bare hands. It only leaves us more discouraged. Just as no one can empty the rough sea with a bucket, human moral effort cannot uproot the deep roots of sin in the soul.

The Spirit of Christ must come into our hearts and perform a supernatural spiritual surgery. The fire of the Spirit must burn away the desires of sin, and the power of the Spirit must circumcise our hearts, cutting away the love of the world (Deut 30:6). This is why we must stop the futile effort of trying to make our hearts into good soil by our own strength and instead fall completely before the almighty God, asking for his work in us.

If we have received Christ, we have already begun to become good soil. But when we come face to face with the remnants of our old nature, the hardened path, the stones, and the thorns within us, we must consider how we bring these things before the Lord. Of course, the Lord is already working through his Word, through prayer, and through the circumstances of our lives to make us good soil. Yet it is deeply helpful for us to know how we can cooperate with him from our side. John Wesley teaches a very concrete posture of prayer and way of life.

First, when we come before the Lord and lift up the condition of our hearts in prayer, we must trust three things. First, God is able, which means he can change us. Second, God is willing, which means he desires to transform the soil of our hearts. Third, God is able and willing to do it now. Wesley encourages us not to pray, "Lord, someday in the future you will fix my heart," but rather to cry out with present faith, "Lord who loves me, come into my heart right now, in this very moment, and heal me."

Wesley also teaches us to devote ourselves to the "means of grace," the channels through which the Spirit works. When we hold our hearts up to the mirror of the Word, hidden stones and thorns are revealed. Fasting and prayer are also powerful means of grace. When we fast and pray, our hearts become spiritually sensitive in a unique way. And Wesley encourages believers to join small groups where we hold one another up in prayer. Instead of despairing alone, we gather with brothers and sisters in faith and honestly confess, "These thorns have grown in my heart. Please pray for me." When we pray together in unity, the Lord brings his restoring work among us.

Are there any who feel despair when they see the stones and thorns within themselves? Are you condemning yourself, saying, "Why am I like this?" Do you spend your time meditating on how deep or sharp your thorns are? That is an area you cannot fix by your own strength. Instead, look to God, who is perfect love.

When we humbly acknowledge our inability and turn our eyes to the almighty God, the Spirit pours the infinite love of heaven into our hearts like a waterfall. When the holy love of God fills our hearts, the cold and hardened soil becomes soft, the stones of unbelief melt away, and the sharp thorns of worry and temptation disappear.

Hold firmly to the assurance of salvation that comes not by our own strength but by the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:16). And may your heart be transformed day by day, so that you bear the holy fruit of sanctification a hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold, to the joy of the Lord. I earnestly bless you in the name of the Lord. Amen.

Let us pray: Father, we do not lose heart, because even though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16). We trust Jesus, our master gardener, who takes responsibility for the soil of our hearts. We long for the gentle rain of the Holy Spirit that you pour into us. We belong to you. Rule over us freely. May the word of the kingdom bear abundant fruit through our lives, so that you may be glorified. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.