

Introduction: Jesus' parables are important and revealing. They confront people with tough questions and difficult issues. "Why do people do the things they do?" Why is it one person can stand fast in integrity no matter what, but another person bends to every temptation? Why can two people hear the same presentation of the gospel, one believe, the other disbelieve? In general, why do people see and do things so differently.

The Biblical answer is "heart differences." In the parable of the Sower, Jesus specifically teaches that different "conditions of the heart" lead to different responses to hearing God's Word. The implication is this principle applies to human behavior in general. In Luke 6:44-46 that truth is made clear. Behavior, words and actions have their origin in the spiritual heart. The moral state of the spiritual heart determines whether what we think, say, or do is good or bad. Behavior is from the "heart."

Jesus gave His disciples His interpretation of two of His parables – The Sowers and Wheat and Tares. Jesus' comments give important insight on how to interpret other parables.

Parable of the Sower or Four Soils: This parable is in Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:1-15. A farmer sows seed in his field. The crop in some parts of the field are better than others. This is a concrete example Jesus' listeners understand very well. Jesus' uses the example as an analogy to how the condition of a person's heart determines their response to God's Word. Jesus speaks of four different soil conditions each producing different results.

Planting the seed represents spreading the good news of the Kingdom. Different soils represent conditions of the human heart. A hearer's response to God's Word depends on their spiritual heart condition.

Soil Types: In Israel, a variety of soil types are found. This was well-known to Jesus' listeners. The four types of soil in Jesus' parable are used to represent conditions of the spiritual heart. (1.) Packed soil of footpaths. (2.) Rocky soil. (3.) Thorny areas. (4.) Deep rich soil. The spiritual heart analogies are (1.) Hard hearts, (2.) Shallow hearts, (3.) Crowded hearts, and (4.) Fruitful hearts.

The process of sowing seed and growing a crop on different soils was a familiar picture to the people of Israel. Any area chosen for cultivation would have significant fruitful soil. In spite of careful selection of planting areas, there hard-packed footpaths

crisscrossing fields. Often layers of limestone existed near the surface. In some places there were firmly established, deep-seated roots of briars.

Planting, Cultivation, and Harvest: Planting season was determined by when the rains came. There were “early rains” and “late rains.”

Early rains came in late fall. The hot summer was over. That was the time to plant. Seed was scattered on top of the ground and crudely plowed in. If seed fell on the hard soil of a footpath, it stayed there until eaten by birds or otherwise lost.

Early rains enabled seeds to germinate. Late rains were essential for the crop to mature. During the early rains, both the air and ground were generally cool. For that reason, most seed would not germinate until it grew warmer.

The one exception was where the soil was shallow over the limestone base. The stone retained enough summer heat to germinate seed. Young plants initially thrived. But when the early rains ceased and the spring sun became hot, the plants would wither in the shallow soil for lack of moisture.

At planting time, briars were dormant. Seeds would germinate and begin to grow before the briars began their new season. But the briar roots were well established and soon they sprouted and rapidly overtook the wheat, choking it out.

When good deep soil is warm, seeds rapidly germinate, the seedlings grow, are cultivated, and after the late rains, mature, and a good harvest is reaped. The people hearing Jesus knew about seed, soil, paths through fields, climate, and the work of farmers. Jesus’ parable would make sense to them.

New Knowledge: The parable process lays new information alongside accepted knowledge. In this case Jesus’ laid alongside their knowledge of farming, new thoughts on how God’s Word is received by different types of hearts. 1 Peter 1:23 says only God can cause the seed of his Word to germinate. Further, only God can change a person’s heart. When God’s Word is sown, the sower doesn’t know, and doesn’t need to know, what type of heart the seed will fall on – the duty of those sowing the word is just that – sow God’s Word. 1 Corinthians 3:4-9 says that God takes full responsibility for seeing that His Word accomplish His purpose.

Like the soil of fields, spiritual heart “soil” varies. There are hard hearts, shallow hearts, crowded hearts, and fruitful hearts. Repeated sin makes a human heart hard as repeated walking on path makes the soil hard.

Hard Hearts: God’s Word doesn’t penetrate hard hearts. Like seeds falling on the packed footpaths in a field, the word lies on the surface, never sinking in. There is complete lack of understanding. Paul describes hard-hearted people in Romans 1.

Hard spiritual hearts suppress the truth about God which can be known from nature (Romans 1:18-20). That step inevitably pushes a person into spiritual ignorance and moral degradation (Romans 1:21-31). Eventually such people not only practice the sins of the heathen but approve of them as well (Romans 1:32). Sin leads to rejection of God’s truth and that rejection leads to ever greater sin.

In Romans 1:18 Paul says rejection of God’s truth arises from determined opposition to God’s nature. He describes such opposition as human “godlessness and wickedness.” People love sin. Though light has come into the world, men love darkness because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

People want no instruction on how to make right decisions. They don’t want Christ to rule over them. In all ages, the most likely human reason God’s gospel of grace is rejected is hardness of the spiritual heart.

Shallow Hearts: Listeners with shallow hearts respond positively but temporarily to the word. Their response is primarily emotional and lacks depth. They hear and rejoice but don’t truly receive. Many profess faith, become active, enjoy the warmth of fellowship, but the Word is never fully rooted in their heart. Shallow hearts are especially attracted to the joy and excitement of a busy church. But, when real or imagined difficulties arise, they quickly fall away. Shallow hearts have only a superficial interest in Christ and are more interested in worldly benefits that come with their expression of faith.

Crowded Hearts: Crowded hearts are like soil which contains deep-seated briar roots. Briars may be dormant for a time, but the roots remain ready to bring forth new growth when conditions are right. Briars represent worldly influences which choke spiritual interest. A person living a double life – religion Sundays and worldly life during the week – fits the picture.

Soon the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and desires for things take over, and faith withers. The gospel message is choked out by worldly interests and bears no fruit. The harvest is all thorns and thistles.

Fruitful Hearts: A fruitful heart exists only through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. A fruitful heart is receptive to God’s truth. The whole being – will,

intellect, imagination, and emotions – is touched and changed by God’s Word. Spiritual growth occurs and fruit is produced. The Word is obediently heard, believed, and acted upon.

Changing Spiritual Heart Conditions: The influence of Christ and the Holy Spirit can change the spiritual heart’s condition. John describes a woman whose “heart soil” changes in response to the words of Christ changing step-by-step from a hard heart to shallow to briar filled to receptive to the word.

The story is the well-known one of the Samaritan “woman at the well.” It is in John 4:1-26. Initially, the woman has a hard heart (as is true for each of us). Jesus sat near the well where the woman came to draw water. Jesus asked the woman to give Him a drink. The woman was surprised that a Jewish man, and a rabbi at that, would talk to her in public, for Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans.

She had no understanding of her need or what Jesus had to offer. Having asked for water, Jesus said to her, if she understood who He was, she would have asked Him, and He would have given her living water. She remarked that the well was deep, and Jesus had nothing with which to draw water. Jesus said everyone who drinks water from the well will be thirsty again, but He could give water which would become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The woman’s heart changed from hard to shallow. Her response to His offer of living water was enthusiastic. She saw that His water was desirable so she would thirst no more and never again have to draw water. It was an emotional response with no depth. Jesus began to plow the shallow soil of her heart to break up the underlying rock of sin. He asked her a disturbing question.

Jesus asked her to go get her husband and return. That request touched the most sensitive part of her life, for she had been living a wicked life. ***“I have no husband,”*** she replied. Jesus responded, ***“ You are right when you say you have no husband. ... you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is true”*** (John 4:17-18).

She changed the subject beginning to argue about religion and demonstrating a crowded heart. Old briars of prejudice and worldliness sprouted and grew. Jesus refused to argue whether Jerusalem or Samaria was the proper place to worship. Her great need was to worship God in Spirit and in Truth and He was bringing her to that point.

As Jesus continued to speak to her, her heart began to be open and prepared for truth. She said, *“I know that Messiah ... is coming. When he comes he will explain everything to us”* (John 4:25). Jesus revealed to her that He is Messiah. She believed. Soon she was bearing fruit, spreading the good word to the people of her village.

Believers need to listen to the Word with the intent to obey, cultivating their good heart soil in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Heart: “Heart” is the metaphor the Bible uses to signify the hidden spiritual inner person, the “true you” – those aspects of our person usually called intellect, emotions, imagination, will, and spirit.

Our spiritual “heart” includes all the non-material aspects of our being. The condition and content of our heart is invisible to other people, but God sees all. Our physical body, our actions and words are observable by others. Often people’s words and actions are carefully structured to mask the true state of their heart. They don’t want anyone to know what they are like in their inner being.

The Source of Good Heart Soil: No one in their natural fallen state has good heart soil. Each person begins life with a “hard” heart that will not accept the gospel. Apart from the working of God’s grace, no one could ever receive God’s Word and produce fruit for God’s glory. God’s regenerating power can change any heart to a heart receptive to His Word.

Good receptive heart soil then comes with being born again spiritually through regeneration. Regeneration converts the bad soil of your heart to good soil, ready to receive the gospel seed. With proper cultivation and the water of the Holy Spirit, your regenerated heart soil will produce an abundant harvest. As Martin Luther said, “We are saved by faith alone (*not our works*), but not by faith that remains alone.”

What’s Next: Three parables of warning.