

“BARRIERS TO BELIEF”

Jesus was the greatest teacher in the history of man. He confounded the greatest scholars of His time with His answers to their questions, and with His questions which they could not answer. But because of their hard hearts, many of them were left not only unable to answer Jesus’ teachings, but unwilling to receive it. Those who believed Jesus, on the other hand, tended to be the common people who had no agenda, no thirst for power, no reason to be jealous of Jesus. They simply had a deep need within their hearts. So, Jesus took the sublime and recondite truths of eternity and reduced them down to practical lessons that the common people could understand. At the same time, His practical lessons were lost on the hardhearted savants, who didn’t want what He came to bring. That’s why Jesus did a great deal of His teaching in parables. A parable is simply a story or illustration. It’s been often described as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Some of the most profound truths of all time and eternity, Jesus conveyed through simple, everyday parables. Correspondingly, one of Jesus’ more basic and well-known parables illustrates a great lesson about why some people don’t understand, believe and obey the truth.

Matthew 13: 1-9 “The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

One of the amazing things about this simple story of the farmer who went out and planted seed in a field, is that every single person listening to me today is pictured within it. You and I are *somewhere* in this parable. In this story, Jesus explains one of the great mysteries of our hearts: that is, why it is so difficult to get people to believe and obey the Lord.

First of all, Jesus said that a farmer went out to plant seed. The farmers of Jesus’ day planted a little differently than the farmers of today. They didn’t use farm machinery to dig clean rows and carefully leave a trail of seed in the cultivated soil, but rather the sower that Jesus was talking about would typically go out with a bag of seed and, as he walked across the field, he would reach into that bag and grab a handful of seed and cast it out from side to side. Well, it wasn’t a very precise way of sowing seed, but it did cover a lot of ground. Jesus said that the seed fell in four different types of soil:

A) the wayside soil—referring to a pathway where, perhaps the farmer accidentally spilled a few seeds as he walked on his way to the field, or even a pathway through the field where animals or people would cross. That dirt would become packed down and hard. It's not difficult to picture what Jesus is talking about. The seed fell on that hardened soil, and instead of being covered up or nestling in fertile soil so that it could grow, it just laid there until a bird would come and get it.

B) stony/rocky soil—the ground back then wasn't plowed with machinery like we have today. If anything, perhaps the clods might be broken up with a crude hoe or plow of some kind. There were places where the soil was shallow and just barely covered the rocks beneath, and the seed would fall into that soil. Because of the shallowness of soil, the moisture and heat might make it grow quickly, but it did not have a good root system. When the real heat came and dried up that shallow soil, that plant just withered up and died.

C) thorns/briars—the seed that fell here would sink into the soil and spring up, but over time, the thorns around it would choke the little seedling and it withered and died.

D) good ground—every farmer knows that in order to really grow something worth growing, you've got to have some good soil, which has to have been prepared, at least to some extent. It has to be free of obstruction and cultivated, so that when you plant a seed there, it will grow and eventually produce fruit. Jesus said that the seed that fell on this type of ground grew. It germinated and produced fruit.

What was Jesus trying to tell them in all of that? There is nothing difficult to understand about a farmer planting a crop. But, the real lesson that Jesus was teaching is so often lost on people. He very simply explains why some people don't believe and obey the Lord. The disciples were a bit puzzled, and they asked Jesus about why He was telling them such a parable. Jesus explains the lesson in the next several verses.

Matthew 13:18-23 "Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

First of all, Jesus says that the seed in the story represents the truth, or the Word of God. He calls it *the word* or *the seed of the kingdom*. He says that the preaching of the gospel is just like that farmer's seed that falls on different kinds of soil. The Word of God falls on different kinds of human hearts: some good, some not so good. Now, the sower was just out sowing. He wasn't merely planting a clean row of seed in some specially prepared soil. Rather, he broadcasted the seed and let it fall where it would, and it either grew or it didn't. It's not up to me or any other gospel preacher to judge your heart or anybody else's—that's for the Lord to do. But as a gospel preacher, and as the Church of Christ, we are to broadcast the seed and let it fall where it will and do its work. Good hearts will receive it, and hard and corrupt hearts will not. What Jesus illustrates is the various barriers to belief that exist in many a heart that hears the truth. So, let's look at those.

Jesus says that some hearts are like the way side path where the seed accidentally fell. Again, I cannot go and discriminate in the preaching of the gospel. I'm always hoping and looking for someone who is eager and searching for the truth. But I don't know people's hearts, so I simply preach and other evangelists simply preach, and let the seed fall where it will. Unfortunately, a lot of seed that is sown falls on this kind of ground that Jesus calls "the way side." The implication is very clear: these are hearts that are hard and impenetrable. There has been no preparation, no cultivation. This is soil that, through days, months, even years, has become packed down and useless to the farmer. Seed cannot be received into that ground because Jesus said that the birds come and pluck it up and carry it off. That is exactly what Satan does to the hardened heart that hears the truth. Listen to Luke's account of this same parable.

Luke 8:12 "Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved."

He says that Satan comes and carries off the seed so that that person will never believe and receive salvation. Why does he do that? Because the seed is there for the taking. That person's heart is too hard to take it inside and let it work within him.

The Bible warns us about several things that harden a person's heart.

Hebrews 3:7-8 "...Today if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness."

Paul says there that the people had forty years, while trekking through the wilderness, to see all of God's works and dedicate themselves to Him and to repent of their sins, but instead, he says that they hardened their hearts, and therefore fell in the wilderness. They died there.

Do you know why many people don't believe, and why they will likely never believe? It's because they heard the truth too many times without doing anything about it. How many times have you turned on this broadcast and listened, and the next week you turned it on and listened, and the next week...Maybe you've been listening for a long, long time. You may have even said, I need to obey the gospel. I need to start attending worship. I need to do something about my soul because I'm not prepared to meet the Lord. But for some reason, day after day, week after week, month after month, even year after year, you

may be full of good intentions but you do nothing about it. You might think that the more you hear it, the closer you'll get to doing something about it. That one day, somehow, you'll have some kind of epiphany or you'll just finally make up your mind and obey the gospel. I pray that is true. But, you know, the opposite is generally true. I pray that the Lord gives you time, and that one day you will act on that good intention, but the fact is you are not more likely to obey the truth the more times you hear it. The Bible teaches that you are actually less likely to obey it the more times you hear it. That is because every time you hear it but don't yield to it and obey it, you are actually building a spiritual resistance to it. You make excuses and rationalize your situation until your heart becomes hard to it. The Bible tells us that living in sin will harden your heart.

Hebrews 3:12-13 "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

Pride, prejudice, pleasure...all of these things will harden your heart so that the truth simply cannot penetrate it. Do you know why most people reject the Bible as the Word of God? Hedonism. That is, the desire to live for self and sinful pleasure. I mean, it's really simple. People don't like what the Bible says about sexuality, chastity, purity, soberness, self-control, restraint, holiness, goodness, virtue, righteousness...So, what do they do? They try to discredit it. That's nothing new. Paul draws a very ugly picture of a world without God in **Romans 1**.

Romans 1:18 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;"

That phrase, "*hold the truth in unrighteousness*" means *to suppress the truth*. He goes on to say:

Romans 1:19-21 "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible thing of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

In other words, they can know the truth just as easily as anyone else, but they don't want the truth. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness. So, what is the result? *Their foolish heart is darkened.*

Romans 1:28 "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; "

Romans 1:32 "Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them."

So, why do men not believe? Because, through their desire to hold on to sin and pleasure, and to live for themselves, they harden their hearts. And Jesus said that the seed will not grow in hardened way side soil.

Secondly, Jesus said that some seed fell on a rock, or on stony soil. This isn't good soil, but it is a little different from the way side soil. There is just enough usable soil to let the seed settle and break open. A little seedling begins to grow, but it doesn't last very long. Jesus says that it withers away. Why? Because it has no root. Now, practically speaking, we might say this is due to spiritual neglect. This is the person who isn't really converted to Christ.

Matthew 13:20-21 "But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended."

In other words, he is not ready for trials and tribulations. He's not prepared to withstand opposition and persecution. When those things come in the course of time, he falls away. All is well, as long as everything is going your way, as long as it's easy to be a disciple. But the very moment that trouble presents itself, you fall away from Jesus and the faith. That's because you haven't cultivated a true and daily, life-sustaining relationship with the Lord Jesus. You don't ever pray, unless there's a problem. You don't pick up your Bible and read and meditate on its truth, unless maybe you're trying to win an argument or twist some scripture to try to justify something you want to do. How could you expect to survive the attacks on your faith, if your faith is that shallow? You see, that is a barrier to belief for so many people; their own neglect and failure to search the scriptures, to seek the truth, to establish a true and sustaining relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thirdly in this practical lesson, Jesus talks about the soil that is filled with thorns and briars. He says that these people hear and believe the word, they obey the word, but they eventually lose their faith. Why don't these people grow and become faithful, fruitful believers? The Lord says it's because they are choked, and that word means just what you think: they are strangled by the things that Jesus mentions. These things grow up around them, leaving no room for a spiritual life.

Matthew 13:22-23 "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful."

Here is the person who gets all caught up in physical and worldly things. He is too busy making a living and acquiring things and making plans for retirement and striving for success, trying to make a mark or a name for himself or amass a fortune for his family. He is too bogged down in the minutia of life. He has cluttered his life with worldly baggage or cares that will consume him, that really aren't of much value. How many people around us-- not that they are evil, immoral people—but they don't truly serve the Lord because they're so caught up in worldliness and worldly pursuits? Listen: churches across America are filled with people like that. Their lives really consist of temporal things, not eternal truths.

Now, cares of life are legitimate. We all have cares of life to attend to. The Bible commands man to work for his living, even saying that he shouldn't eat if he refuses to work.

2 Thessalonians 3:10 “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.”

And there’s nothing wrong with certain kinds of pleasure, as long as they’re not unholy or sinful in nature. But so many people will never know what living for the Lord Jesus is about, because their lives consist of those things. Jesus said the word is planted in their hearts, but their hearts are choked by the cares, riches and pleasures of this life.

Lastly, Jesus says that it is the good ground that received the seed. It is the good ground that believes the word, obeys and is saved. It is the good and honest heart that lets the Word of God work within him, and make him fruitful and make him know the abundant life of a Christian. I like the way Paul puts it in **1 Thessalonians 2:13-14:**

“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”

What did Jesus say? **“But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit...” (Matthew 13:23).**

So, what makes a good heart? Jesus tells us.

Luke 8:15 “But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”

Honest, good hearts, ready and eager to receive the truth.