

There is **rocky soil**. No self-respecting farmer leaves rocks in a field, so Jesus must be referring to a rock ledge under the field's surface. The underlying rock would be invisible to the farmer when he plowed the field because of the few inches of good soil covering the rock bed. In such soil the seed can only send its roots down a little way. The crop will look good at first, but it will soon wither away from lack of water and nutrients.

There is **weed-infested soil**. Specifically, Jesus mentions one type of weed: thorns. In Greek, the word is *akantha*, and it is the same word used to describe the crown of thorns given to Jesus before his crucifixion. The seed sown in this soil also makes a good start, but the thorns and weeds grow faster and choke the life out of the young plants.

Finally, there is **fertile soil**. This is clean soil, free from weeds and rocks, with room for the seed to grow. This is soil prepared before the seed is ever scattered, soil plowed and ready to receive the seed. The seed that lands in this kind of soil sprouts and puts down good roots, it receives water and nutrients to support good growth, and it yields an abundant harvest.

How big a harvest? Luke says, "a hundredfold" (Luke 8:8). Such a yield is not a measure of the seed itself. A single pumpkin seed, for example, can produce ten to fifteen pumpkins. The total number of seeds they contain is far more than a hundred. So, a hundredfold in seeds would be a poor harvest. Luke speaks of the return on the farmer's original investment. For every denarius spent on the seed, the farmer earns a hundred denarii in the sale of his crops. A tenfold return would be a healthy return. A hundredfold is an incredible profit. The seed that bears fruit in good soil is a blessing from God, with a yield of staggering proportions.

But this parable is not about profit. It's about the soil. And just so we're clear, we are the soil. That is, our hearts are the field in which the Word of God may grow and bear good fruit. Our response to the Word of God is dependent on the condition of our heart.

In this parable, Jesus gives us the description of four different types of hearers who encounter the Word of God. First, he portrays the **Wayside Hearer**. The pressed-down, dry, and hardened soil by the wayside pictures a heart that is impervious to God's truth. This is probably the most disturbing and hopeless of all the heart-conditions Jesus depicts. Belief and truth cannot possibly penetrate, much less take root. There hearer is oblivious, hopeless, spiritually dead and totally susceptible to the tricks of the devil.

Jesus explains: *"Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved"* (Luke 8:12). That verse, by the way, explains the Sower's true goal: that people might believe and be saved, and the only way to be saved is through Jesus Christ. As Luke writes in Acts 4:12: *"There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."* When the devil comes, he offers sweet temptations to lure the Wayside Hearer's heart away from the truth.

The heart of the Wayside Hearer is not fenced in or protected; it lies exposed to all the evil stomping of everything wicked that comes along. It is never plowed by conviction. It is never cultivated with any kind of self-searching, self-examination, or true repentance. This heart is hardened against the sweetness of God's grace. The Wayside Hearer is the fool of Proverbs who despises wisdom and instruction (Pr. 1:1) and who *"has no delight in understanding, but [only] in expressing his own heart"* (Pr. 18:2). There is nothing to be done for the Wayside Hearer.

Jesus then portrays the **Shallow Hearer** who is like *"the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up"* (Ps. 129:6). Shallow Hearers seem receptive to God's Word at first. They *"receive the Word with joy"* (Luke 8:13). They are excited by it. But all that enthusiasm hides the fact that there is no root. This is surface-level faith, without depth or staying power. It's not a question of *if* but *when* this shallow faith will fail. And whether it is temptation or hardship or simply apathy, shallow hearers will ultimately fall away and abandon their faith completely.

Such faith is short-lived because it believes Jesus can fix our problems now or that Jesus owes us a reward for our faithfulness. This is faith from selfish motives. It does not understand the sacrificial nature of Jesus' Gospel and is easily discouraged.

Next, Jesus portrays the **Worldly Hearer** who is too occupied with earthly matters to devote proper attention to God's Word. Like the Shallow Hearer, the Worldly Hearer responds positively at first, but soon "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in choke the word, and it unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). The heart of the Worldly Hearer is well-prepared and plowed, but this person is too in love with the world to bear good fruit for God.

Finally, Jesus portrays the **Fruitful Hearer** whose heart is well-cultivated and who produces good fruit. In Luke, Jesus says Faithful Hearers are, *“those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience”* (8:15). In Matthew, the Fruitful Hearer is the one *“who hears the word and understands it”* (13:23). In Mark, Fruitful Hearers are *“those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit”* (4:20).

In all three accounts, Jesus is describing someone with a heart so well prepared that when that person hears the Gospel, he or she receives it with true understanding and genuine faith. The phrase Luke uses, *“they keep it and bear fruit with patience”* suggests a tenacious hold on the truth, and perseverance in the faith. This is the key to the whole parable: the marks of authentic faith are endurance and the good fruit such faith bears.

Such endurance and good fruit require a heart that is clear of rocks and weeds, a heart well cultivated and prepared to receive God’s Word. Making our hearts ready is not something we can accomplish by ourselves because we are human, tainted by the world, easily distracted, and rebellious by nature. Only God can make a heart ready to receive the Word. God does this through the Holy Spirit who convicts us of our sin (John 16:8); awakens us spiritually (Romans 8:11); enlightens our minds to the truth (1 Corinthians 2:10); washes us clean, removing our stony heart and giving us a new heart (Ezekiel 36:25-26); indwells and motivates us to righteousness (Ezekiel 36:27); engraves the truth of God on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:3); and pours the love of God into our hearts (Romans 5:5). In this, we remain faithfully dependent on God.

When we proclaim the Gospel or teach the Word of God to our neighbors, the results will vary according to the condition of the hearts of our hearers; but success or failure does not hinge on our skill as sowers or the quality of the seed. Some of the seed we scatter will fall on hard, shallow, or weedy ground. If we are faithful at the task, some of the seed we throw will find well-cultivated soil, and the result will be abundant fruit.

Prayer: Ever-Living God, create in us new hearts! Fill us and renew us by your Spirit. Give us patience and endurance in faith. Give us conviction and courage to share the truth of your Gospel. Give us opportunity to spread the seed of your Word to those who need to hear your good news. May we be faithful hearers and reliable communicators of your Word through our words and our deeds. All this we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Source: John MacArthur, *Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told*, Nelson Books: 2015, 17-38.

## The Four Soils

Sunday, September 30, 2018

Luke 8:4-15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

The parable of the Sower is a surprisingly simple story. A man went out to sow seed in a field. Fields in the first-century were long, narrow strips marked off by footpaths, not fences or hedges. The sower used a broadcasting method, taking one handful of seed at a time and flinging the seed over a wide swath. If you’ve ever spread grass seed on your lawn, either by hand or with a spreader, you get the idea.

This method had the advantage of covering a large area of ground with evenly scattered seed. A skilled sower wouldn’t waste seed by letting it fall in concentrated patches or mound up in little piles. He would throw the seed as widely and evenly as possible. The goal was to cover the whole plowed field, with no parts left unseeded. Of course, it’s impossible to get every throw right every time. Once the seed leaves your hand there’s no way to control where the seed will land. So, predictably, some of the seed fell onto less desirable soil outside the plowed field.

Now, before we go any farther, let’s clear up a few things. First, this is not a parable about the Sower or his skill. This Sower knows his business. The key difference between the seed that bears a good harvest and the seed that is devoured by birds has nothing to do with the Sower or the method he uses to cast the seed.

Second, this is not a parable about the quality of the seed. It all comes from the same source. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each record this parable, and all three identify the seed as the Word of God. This is good seed. The seed that survives and bears fruit is the very same kind of seed that gets choked out by weeds. There’s no problem with the quality of the seed.

So, if the parable is not about the Sower or his skill, and it’s not about the seed, what is the parable about? It’s about the soil! Jesus lists four different kinds of soil. There is **roadside soil** which is the well-beaten footpaths that separated the fields. This soil is unplowed and hard as concrete. Seed that lands on the roadside has no hope of penetrating the hard ground; it lies there and is trampled underfoot or eaten by birds. It never gets the chance to sprout.