

SHALLOW SOIL

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This month's sermon series, "Sowing the Seed," is about helping seekers find Jesus Christ for themselves.

I remind you again that Jesus said, "The Son of Man (referring to Himself) came to seek and to save those who are lost." He is not indifferent. He is not bitter. Lost people matter to God. He is compelled by love to seek them until they meet with Him. He had no other reason to come here. To find Him is to find everlasting life.

You and I carry the light of God's grace and truth to our family, neighbors, and friends. We reveal Him for who He is, and we tell them about what He has done in our lives. This is seed-sowing. This is why each of us is still here.

To be effective, we must learn to identify people's Gospel Receptivity Level, because if we try to give them more than they are ready to receive, they will reject it.

To help us measure a person's Gospel Receptivity Level, Jesus told a story. It is the centerpiece of all His parables, because understanding this parable is the key to understanding all the rest. Hear it again, as Matthew recorded it.

Matthew 13:3-9; NLT

³ *He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:*

"Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. ⁴ As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. ⁸ Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted! ⁹ Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."

Matthew 13:18-23; NLT

¹⁸ *"Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: ¹⁹ The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. ²⁰ The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. ²¹ But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. ²² The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. ²³ The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"*

The sower broadcasts his seed. He is not planting them one by one, but scattering them as far and wide as he can. Consequently, he cannot control where every seed will land, nor what its future may be, whether fruitful or barren.

Last week, I spoke about the first element of this story, the footpath, where the relentless tamping of feet (the pressures and difficulties of life) had hardened the soil's surface, so that neither seed nor water could penetrate it. While human hearts remain so, they can bear no fruit.

This week we will explore the message about the shallow soil, which, in summary, reads like this:

Matthew 13:5-6; NLT

⁵ *Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow.* ⁶ *But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died.*

Matthew 13:20-21; NLT

²⁰ *The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy.* ²¹ *But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.*

Hearts of Bedrock

Jesus was describing "bedrock covered by a thin layer of earth," using a phrase that occurs in the New Testament only in this parable. But this condition is common throughout the earth.

Bedrock is impenetrable. Lying just beneath the surface, it severely limits the possibility of plant growth. There is no hope of roots getting through it, so they must try to survive on the meager amount of moisture that is available at the very surface. Sometimes, that is only the dew that lies on the surface in the morning.

Spiritually, how does such "bedrock" come into our lives?

Ezekiel 3:7; NLT

The house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to Me: because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.

Paul's final word to the Jewish leaders in Rome:

Acts 28:27; NLT

For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.'

Romans 2:4-5; NLT

⁴ *Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?* ⁵ *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*

The bedrock of hard-heartedness is a result of impenitence, an unwillingness to listen to God. (The Pharaoh who resisted Moses and refused to let the people of Israel go was an example of such hardness.)

The more we refuse to listen to God or repent of our stubbornness, the harder our heart grows — no matter how often we attend church services, or read our Bibles, or pray for God's help, or appear to be religious in any other ways. Eventually, our religion will be merely superficial and routine, without the dynamic and heart-rending power of Christ's presence.

Truth may continue to be gladly received, if there is at least a little depth of soil, but its impact will be short-lived. For we will be like the man James described, who took a look at himself in the mirror, but turned and promptly forgot what he had seen. We will become self-deceived hypocrites, living a lie.

The truth about Jesus is meant to bring joy. On the day that Jesus was born, an angel announced to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." The Gospel message about Jesus Christ is refreshing and life-giving.

Where else can you hear of such an amazing exchange? God offers to take away your sin's judgment and power in exchange for His forgiveness and grace — for free! Jesus has procured this for us by His death on a cross and rising from the dead. So, it's no wonder that those who really hear it receive it at once gladly.

The only concern we need have is whether or not their roots go deep.

Cedar Roots

Jesus said that in shallow soil seeds sprout quickly since they are never far from the surface themselves. But this same lack of depth means that the mid-day sun will quickly wilt the sprout and then dry the thin layer of soil, starving the roots, and killing the young plant.

Why? Because they lacked "deep roots."

If you read much of the Psalms or the books of the prophets in the Old Testament, you will often come across references to the "cedars of Lebanon." These large and splendid trees were prized for their size, their stability, and their longevity, and their fragrance. Their name was synonymous with deep-rootedness.

Hosea 14:4-7; NLT

⁴ *The LORD says, "Then I will heal you of your faithlessness; my love will know no bounds, for my anger will be gone forever. ⁵ I will be to Israel like a refreshing dew from heaven. Israel will blossom like the lily; it will **send roots deep into the soil** like the cedars in Lebanon. ⁶ Its branches will spread out like beautiful olive trees, as fragrant as the cedars of Lebanon. ⁷ My people will again live under my shade. They will flourish like grain and blossom like grapevines. They will be as fragrant as the wines of Lebanon.*

Deep roots are a symbol of rest and abundance.

Proverbs 12:3; NLT

*Wickedness never brings stability, but the godly have **deep roots**.*

Spiritually then, deep roots are channels of godliness.

Jeremiah 17:5-8; NLT

⁵ *This is what the LORD says: "Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the LORD. ⁶ They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, in an uninhabited salty land.*

⁷ *"But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. ⁸ They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with **roots that reach deep** into the water.*

Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.

Deep roots are the result of persistent trust in the Lord.

Trees that have deep roots are not bothered by the heat of the day, unlike the seedlings in Jesus' parable. They are not worried even by long months of drought, because their source is not at the surface, but deep in the soil where there is perpetual moisture and nourishment.

Of course, we are really thinking about the condition of people, godly people, as was Jesus.

How can you know if a person's "roots" go deep or not?

Problems

Matthew 13:21; NLT

²¹ But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.

Problems are to people like heat is to a plant. If we do not have a source of refreshing well beneath the level that the heat of our difficulties can reach, we risk the exhaustion of all that we possess.

Have you ever felt like you were in a dry place, spiritually? Do you ever seem to wilt, "running out" of grace to meet your difficulties? Does your confidence in God come up short?

Then you need to deepen your roots! As do others who are in a similar condition.

Remember this:

1 Corinthians 10:13; MSG

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.

Practice trusting Him, despite your feelings and fears to the contrary. He will show Himself faithful! And encourage others to do the same.

Too often, we substitute trusting people for trusting God. Trusting humans instead of God breeds all kinds of wickedness and spiritual instability.

Psalms 118:9; NLT

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Psalms 146:3; NASB

Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation.

Sometimes what people ask and what God asks overlap, but many times they are in conflict. Whenever that's the case, trust God instead. Things may grow hot on the outside for awhile, but inside, you'll find a spring of refreshing that will never run dry.

Persecution

Persecution is to people like drought is to plants. Eating up all your reserves, it threatens your very life.

Yet, Paul said:

2 Timothy 3:12; NLT

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

And Jesus taught us:

Matthew 5:10-12; NLT

¹⁰ God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. ¹¹ God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

Some persecution comes to all of us. Sometimes it comes from family members, or from those we thought were our friends. People with no depth of roots turn and run the other way. But the godly are “bold as lions” and hold their course, depending on God’s grace to see them through.

Jesus gave us clear direction:

Matthew 5:44-46; NLT

⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that?

This kind of response disarms persecution, for intimidation can neither withstand nor overcome real love.

You have been called to fruitfulness. You cannot produce it on your own, but God cannot produce it without you. Fruit requires pollination; spiritual fruit requires your cooperation with God’s Spirit.

John 15:5; NLT

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

Think Again

You will find people with whom you share the Good News about Jesus, who receive it gladly, but soon turn away because of difficulties. This is frustrating, but it is also not unusual.

To get past bedrock: one must listen often and carefully to God’s words, and surrender quickly to obey them. God’s Word, like a hammer, can disintegrate the stone beneath the surface.

Therefore, considerately and appropriately and frequently sharing bites of God’s words with others can do the same for them. Every crack in the bedrock will allow a trickle of life-giving water to emerge.

To deepen your roots: seek the Lord and trust His ways in your life. This is the great need of us all. He knows what you’re going through and can bring you safely through. God is not your adversary; He is your advocate.

Encourage seeking friends to trust the Lord in spite of their difficulties. Neither the heat of trouble, nor the drought of persecution, will last forever. In the meantime, God is the source of refreshing and staying power that they need.

God has promised to turn our desert wastelands into watered gardens.

Let us all pledge to draw closer to Him today and hold tightly to His hand.

Ephesians 3:17; NLT

Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.