

Parables of the Heart
“**Four Soils; Four Hearts**”

Passages: Matthew 13:1-9
Colossians 2:6-12

The last series that Aisen and I did in Matthew’s Gospel was essentially about **our eyes**. Through our studies in the Sermon on the Mount, we saw how Jesus encouraged His new disciples to let God open their eyes to the invisible reality of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today, we begin a new series in Matthew 13. As we study these 7 parables, we will see how Jesus wants to take His disciples one step further. He wants to connect **their eyes** with **their hearts**. He wants to help them understand that following Him is not only about seeing the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s also about feeling the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, I know that emotions aren’t a popular subject in the church today. Many of us are afraid of our emotions. We’re afraid that we might become too emotional. We’d prefer to have a faith that stays in the head and only occasionally touches our hearts. But Jesus won’t allow this! He wants our whole being to be touched by His love, including our emotions!

Just last week, Kim and I spent three days in a conference in New York City entitled, “**Emotionally Healthy Spirituality**”. What I learned through these three days is that there is no way to have an *authentically healthy spirituality* without having *authentically healthy emotions*. Sadly, the church has overlooked this important truth!

In the 1997 movie entitled ‘**the Apostle**’, the central character (the Reverend Sonny Dewey) has a deep passion for Jesus. He travels throughout rural Texas leading men and women to faith in profound and astonishing ways! But it’s not long before we see that there’s a darker side to Sonny’s life. It turns out that he is also a womaniser, a drunkard, and (out of his deep and unresolved anger) even a murderer! Although Sonny is visibly zealous for Christ, he’s got a very disturbed and confused heart!

Many people in the church today are like Sonny. How often have we heard of dynamic and gifted preachers who were horrible husbands or parents? How often have we seen incredibly astute parish councillors behave with insecurity and defensiveness in their personal interactions? How often have we heard of

sincere prayer warriors who, behind the scenes, were critical and judgmental of others? How often have those who were zealous to help do things around the church shown little energy to help their spouse in their own home? How often have church members (who, publicly, showed great cooperation in church matters) secretly cause division and dissension behind people's backs?

This is known as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy happens when the emotional state of our heart is out of synch with what we say and believe. And you know what? It's a problem in **every single church!** Indeed, it's a problem in **every single Christian!** Just think about your own life. Wouldn't you admit that, to some degree, you have been a hypocrite? Haven't you said one thing with your lips but felt something entirely different in our heart? I sure have! Haven't your outward actions collided with what's going on deep in your heart? Mine have! As I said, hypocrisy is a problem in every church... and the problem starts with **me and my heart!**

That's really what today's *Parable of the Four Soils* is all about. In this parable, Jesus uses the image of *four different soils* to describe *four different types of heart* that are generally found in the people who come to Him. (For the fact is that each of us comes with our own emotional baggage.) And although the seed that He offers to us (namely, the healing Word of God's Kingdom) is always the same... and although He scatters that seed equally on all human hearts..., the sad fact is that we all respond to the seed differently, *according to the emotional state of our heart.*

Now, we might call the first of these four hearts 'the hard heart', as illustrated by the hard soil. Although God's good word of love and grace falls on this heart, it is so emotionally hard that the seed can't sink in. After a short time, Satan snatches that seed away.

What Jesus is saying is clear: There are people in this world who sincerely come to Him, but because they have such hardened hearts, they cannot receive His Word of love and grace! The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law were like this. Even though these religious leaders were known for their devotion to the Law of Moses, they kept the Law with cold, hard hearts! When Jesus came along, they were interested in His teaching but they wouldn't let His love touch their emotions! Jesus points this out in verse 15 when He says, ***"For this people's heart has become calloused..."***

I watched a movie on the airplane about a young woman who had a traumatic childhood-- Her mother died while she was still very young and her father was emotionally distant. As a result, this young woman had such a hard heart that, when a nice young man made loving gestures to her, she couldn't receive them! Her heart was cold.

This same thing can be true between us and Jesus! We can go to church, say our prayers, read the Bible, and put money in the offertory box...but without any emotional connection to Jesus! We do all the right things, but our hearts are cold and hard. In fact, we sometimes convince ourselves that God doesn't want our emotions. We can even tell ourselves that our emotions are bad, and so we try to hide them.

But, according to this parable, **Jesus wants our hearts!** He doesn't want us to be like the Pharisees! He wants to wrap us in His arms until we feel His love. He wants us to be emotionally penetrated by His Word of the Kingdom of Heaven, where God's love and grace flow freely!

So, let's take a quiet moment so that we can examine our hearts. Are you like the Pharisees? Is your heart hardened to the emotional aspects of God's love flowing down to us in Jesus Christ? Pray that Jesus will break open the soil of your hard heart that you might receive His love in a new and vibrant way.

The second type of heart that Jesus talks about in today's parable could be called 'the shallow heart', as represented by the shallow soil. It's clear that Jesus is speaking here about people who live life on an emotionally superficial level. There is no depth. They prefer a "*froth and bubble*" type religion rather than a deep, reflective faith. Indeed, when they first hear about the Kingdom of Heaven and about how God's love has come to earth in Jesus Christ, they get very excited. Suddenly, they're at church every night, for every program, every seminar, every guest speaker.

I was like this! In fact, of all four types of hearts being described in this parable, my heart most closely resembles this one—the shallow heart! It's my nature! I love the excitement of new things...new adventures...new ideas. I love jazz music! I love new and changing activities. I can easily get bored with the old ways of doing things. (If I was younger, I'd be one of "YOLO" crowd—"*You only live once!*")

Fortunately, however, I have come to see how shallow this style of life can be-- always running to something new without taking the time to reflect. I've realised that life is far more than hype and excitement. Life involves reflection, patience, hardship, even suffering. Life involves commitment, faithfulness and endurance. In fact, these are the things that make our hearts truly grow in deeply emotional ways. In the end, froth and bubble religion won't take you very far.

Let me again mention the conference we went to in New York City. A whole section of the conference was devoted to finding ways to renew and deepen our emotional connection with God. They spoke about keeping the Sabbath, making time through each day to pray, and having one whole day each month reserved for contemplation. As the parable makes clear, a shallow heart will only lead us to emotional burn out. Verse 6- ***"When the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root."***

So, let's reflect again on our hearts. Are you a shallow Christian? Are you always looking for something new and exciting? Are your spiritual roots only planted superficially in Christ? Pray that Jesus will deepen the soil of your shallow heart that you might start putting your roots into the depths of His love. (Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 2:6-7-- ***"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."***).

The third type of heart we might call 'the crowded heart', as represented by the soil choked by weeds and thorns. Although the Word of the Kingdom of Heaven may come into this crowded heart and take root, it will never be able to compete with all the worries and cares that are already there. The emotional state of this heart is so overwhelmed that, in the end, the Word of God's love and grace gets choked out.

My sister-in-law in Pittsburgh has an emotionally crowded heart. Although she was raised as a Catholic with a sincere faith in God, she is also a person who tries to please everyone, all the time. As a result, her heart is burdened by all sorts of cares and worries—particularly the worry of my brother who's an alcoholic. All these voices, along with the voice of her own inadequacy, shout so loudly at her that she can no longer hear Jesus speak His Words of love and care over her. Her heart...her emotional self...is so crowded that the seedling of God's love has been crushed within her.

Are you like my sister-in-law? Is your heart crowded by cares and worries? Perhaps all your emotional energy is taken by your job or by earning money that the tiny plant of God's love is being crushed inside of you? Pray that Jesus will take these thorns and weeds away, so that His Kingdom may grow and flourish in your heart.

Finally, we come to the fourth heart—the fruitful heart-- represented by the soil that ***“produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*** Unlike **the hard heart, the shallow heart, or the crowded heart**, the fruitful heart fully receives Jesus' Word about the Kingdom of Heaven. This heart not only rejoices in the fact of God's love, but it treasures that truth deeply and reflectively, nurturing it until it overwhelms every aspect of their life.

Notice: It is only this heart that can bear fruit. Why? Because it is the only heart that is calmly confident in what God, Himself, will do. The emotional state of this heart is secure in the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to make the invisible Kingdom of heaven visible on earth. This heart rests in the truth that the seed of God's Word will never fail to bear its fruit when we allow it to do so.

In summary, the key point of this parable can be restated in this way: **We are called to honestly take note of the current state of our heart...** whether it be hard, or shallow, or crowded, ... **and turn it over to Jesus!** For he is the only One who can take the unproductive soil in our lives and transform it into good and productive soil.

Or to put it another way, it is only as we allow Jesus to reconnect our **spiritual** to our **emotional selves** ... as we allow Jesus not only to open our eyes to see the kingdom but also open our hearts to feel the kingdom... that we will begin to discover a new fruitfulness in our lives and an end to the hypocrisy that has so long plagued the church and held her back from fulfilling her mission in the world.

Let's pray.