

How to Cultivate Good Soil, Part 1

Luke 8:15

Grab your Bibles, turn to the 8th chapter of Luke. As we have been doing in this study of the parable of the soils, let's read the parable again, along with its explanation. You'll find that located there in Luke Chapter 8, verses 4-15.

"And when a great crowd was gathering, and people from town after town came to him" (that is, Jesus), "he said in a parable, 'A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.' As he said these things he called out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'

“And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that “Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.” Now the parable is this: the seed is the Word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard, and then the devil comes and takes away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the Word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing, fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way, they're choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.’”

What makes good soil good? We're gonna think about the importance and the significance of fruitfulness. And as we think about the importance of fruitfulness, it's gonna give us the motivation that we need to cultivate fruitfulness in our own

Christian lives. Jesus identified for us, that the seed is the Word of God. We understand that the sower is anyone who spreads God's Word, starting with the great sower himself, Jesus Christ. And then the soils are pictures of different kinds of hearers, different hearts that either receive, or reject, or whatever, the seed of the Word of God.

The good soil is not hard like the first. It's not shallow like the second, and it's not unclean like the third. The good soil, instead, is the opposite. It's soft, it's deep, and it's pure. Soft, deep, and pure. The soil is soft. It's able to receive the seed. It's able to give sufficient access to the nutrients, the air, the water. It's deep. So it's capable of developing a very healthy root system to make use of all those nutrients, and air, and water. It's also pure, free from the seeds and the weeds, and the influence of noxious, life-stealing weeds.

With that in mind, look again at verse 15, and let's look at the heart that's pictured by that soft, deep, and pure soil. Three, you can write down three subpoints, jot down in your notes, it's, good soil is, number one: soft, number two: deep,

and number three: pure. Jesus said, there in verse 15, "As for that in the good soil, they" (those are the seeds who, the people) "who, hearing the Word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." These are the hearts that "hear the Word of God and hold fast to the Word of God in an honest and good heart," and then "bear fruit with patience," or another word is endurance.

First of all, first subpoint: The good soil is soft soil. The good-soil heart is soft. It's pliable toward God. Notice, it's a heart that "holds fast" to the Word of God. It says, it says, "In, in an honest and good heart." The verb tense, there, for "holding fast the Word," it's exactly how it sounds, holding onto it, gripping onto it. But the, the verb tense of "holding fast the Word" is in the present tense, which means that the kind of action that we're talking about here, of holding fast, is a continuous thing. It's not holding fast one time, and then letting go. It's holding fast continually. This is someone characterized by repeatedly, continuously clinging to God's Word.

The good-soil heart is one that is characterized by a softness toward God. By an eagerness to hear God's Word, an eagerness to respond to that Word in faith and obedience. This is a heart that embraces the Word, like a good soil embraces seed and clings to it no matter what, holds onto it. The word hold fast, *katecho*, which is often used in the New Testament of believers holding fast, and never letting go to sound biblical doctrine. Paul says, Hold fast the Apostolic traditions that he gave: patterns, forms of worship, ways of thinking, worldview, understanding, directly from God's Word. 1 Corinthians 11:2, "Hold fast to the traditions as I delivered them to you." Hold fast the Gospel message itself, 1 Corinthians 15:2. "Hold fast the true prophetic Word," 1 Thessalonians 5:21. "Hold fast the profession, the confession of our faith," Hebrews 10:23, "without wavering." Only those with soft hearts toward God hold fast to his Word like that. So, good soil is the first, soft. A good soil is the first soft, pliable heart toward God and his Word. It's a heart that does not reject God's word, but holds fast to it and keeps on holding fast to it.

Second soil: good-soil heart is deep soil. Deep soil. It's able to support deep roots that cause a plant to grow strong

even in the hot, blazing sun. Think about the hot, blazing sun of the Middle East. Instead of withering away under the heat of testing, the good-soil heart bears fruit for a long time, even in affliction. Even in testing, it holds it fast with endurance, persevering under trial.

A text in the ESV says, in verse 15, "Bear fruit with patience." Patience is probably not the best way to translate the Greek word here. The word *makrothumia* is patience, but this is *hypomene*, which means endurance, which means perseverance, which means lasting under testing. Patience is definitely a part of enduring and persevering, but it is not the key sense in the text. The issue is enduring through trial, enduring when the heat is on.

How does that look in the life of a Christian? We're talking about a heart that's not superficial. It's not flippant. It's a heart that is deep and thoughtful, a heart that's reflective and meditative. This is somebody who takes the time and invest whatever energy necessary to do the hard heart-work.

The spade-work to go down deep, and do the hard work of self-examination. It's because of the depth of reflection that this person digs deeply, takes God's Word seriously, holds fast to it, with a depth of faith that we call, conviction. Conviction. It's out of that conviction, which is like that taproot that's anchored into and drives through the bedrock.

Emotions, godly affections grow up out of that, like shoots growing up toward the sun. There are positive emotions like love for God, love of holiness, holy living, love for God's people, love for Christ and his Church. All that grows through someone who digs deeply. There're also negative emotions, negative affections. The zeal for holiness produces a counter-corresponding hatred for sin, and anger over all that that offends God. And therefore there's a desire for self-denial. There is an aggressive posture towards sin in one's own life, to aggressively mortify sin. Zeal for God creates a hatred of all that offends God, all that blasphemes and slanders him, like, like fruitless Christianity. So the good-soil heart is soft. Holds fast to God's word. The good-soil heart is deep, bearing fruit with endurance even during times of testing.

Third subpoint: The good-soil heart is pure. It's pure. It's free of the thorns that suffocate a plant, that choke it, that kill its fruitfulness. Instead, in the pure, you might say, undistracted heart, all the nutrients are directed toward the growth of fruit. All the energies, all the limited energies that we have as human beings are not directed to that which is passing, temporal, even you might say frivolous. All the energies aren't devoted to the cares of life, the riches of life, and the pleasures of life. Energies, instead, are devoted to the growth of fruit.

And not just some fruit but, looking back to verse 8, we can see that this soil is abundantly fruitful. There's an incredible bounty that Jesus describes here in this hundredfold harvest, which is beyond the wildest imagination of any farmer who sows his field. A hundredfold harvest. Time to retire, right? Massive harvest of fruit because the fruit bearing just doesn't stop. And again, the tense of the verb here, *karpophoreo* is a present-tense verb. It's a continuous action of bearing fruit. It's always happening, it's always ongoing in the life of this kind of soil. This is the tree, Psalm 1:3, right, that is "planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its

season,” and you might say season after season bears fruit. “Its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

Pure soil, the good heart is characterized by repeatedly, continuously, over a lifetime, bearing fruit, and a lot of it. Purity of heart means that there is a regular attentiveness to weeding the garden of the heart, to uproot any sign of a noxious, troublesome little plant, a little weed in the heart. And it's gonna distract, and choke out the life of the heart. Jesus listed the kind of weeds that we need to watch out for and root out in verse 14, “The cares, and the riches and the pleasures of life.” But a pure heart is gonna give attention to purity, to keep on weeding that soil, getting rid of anything that will distract and take away life-giving energy.

So the good-soil heart is soft, and it's deep, and it's pure, and we can understand here why it would be fruitful. That is loamy soil in the heart, perfect for growing abundant fruit. But why does Jesus call this heart, in verse 15, “An honest and good heart”? We all know Jeremiah 17:9 says that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.” So how can Jesus here say that this heart is honest and good? There are two

words translated as honest and good. They are *kalos* and *agathos*. First word, *kalos*, it refers to that which meets a very high standard of quality. In fact, in verse 15, the soil or the earth is described with this word, as meeting a high standard of quality, that rich, loamy soil. This is that soft, deep, weed-free, loamy soil that's rich in nutrients, great access to water, air, all the rest. Verse 15, likewise, the receptive heart is described as good. And in this case, referring to a moral quality. Moral quality, so it meets a high standard of moral quality set by whom? By God. It is good or noble, praiseworthy. That's another way to translate it.

The second word here, is *agathos*. *Agathos*, also, just like *kalos*, refers to conforming to a high standard of quality. But this referring to a high standard of quality it's that which makes this useful or beneficial, like bearing fruit. Back in verse 8, the Earth there is described as good, and it uses this word *agathos* to emphasize its usefulness. How beneficial the land is that produces a hundredfold crop. That is good, beneficial land. So in the same way, what makes this heart good, useful, and beneficial in God's eyes is that it bears fruit, and it bears much fruit, and it bears fruit with endurance. This is

the kind of heart that is robust, persevering, able to produce. That is a good heart, beneficial, useful to our Lord.

Matthew and Mark also record this parable of the soils, and it's notable that the Gospels do record the parable of the soils and have it at the very entrance into the parables. This is the gateway through which we are to enter into Jesus' teaching through parables. It's so important. In Matthew, Jesus says that the good heart is one that "hears and understands the Word." In Mark, the good heart, "hears and accepts the Word." So there's understanding and then there is acceptance.

In Luke we see the hearing and understanding and receiving are joined together here as "holding the word fast and then bearing fruit with patience," or endurance, perseverance. So in Luke's account, our attention is drawn to the elements of faith and obedience. Biblical faith, faith described in Scripture, true saving faith is that which has an intellectual, and an emotional, and a volitional component. Intellectually, you must understand what is taught. Emotionally or affectionately, you must embrace what is taught. But it must also drive action.

That's the volitional component. It must change your life, and that is what Luke summarizes here. Faith and obedience.

The good-hearted here, after hearing the Word, he believes the Word, that is, he understands it, he embraces it and accepts it, and he also holds it fast. And then it says he obeys the word; that is, he bears fruit. Hearing and obeying, biblically speaking, one and the same. True biblical hearing means to be obedient with what you hear. That is the first and most fundamentally moral quality that makes a heart good, and noble, and praiseworthy. But there's also that utilitarian component, that quality that makes this heart good and useful and beneficial. Because it does what the Master wants it to do. It's beneficial to his purposes. The soft-hearted, deep-hearted, pure-hearted are those with hearts that are both *kalos* and *agathos*. They are noble and they are useful. They are praiseworthy and they're beneficial.

Now, are there such people? Again, didn't Jesus describe the heart in Matthew 15:18 as that which "defiles the person"? Namely, evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. Is Jesus talking about, here in

verse 15, that there are those who receive the Word with an honest and good heart, a noble, praiseworthy heart, and one that's useful and beneficial? What is he talking about here? It's vital that we clarify this.

In Jesus' day, the word heart, the word is *kardia*. The word heart didn't refer to the seat of emotions or, or feelings like, like you might find in a Hallmark greeting card. They didn't think of the heart primarily in an anatomical way either, like a large muscle in the chest that pumps, uh, blood through the body. They had words and concepts for the heart muscle and the feelings. But the *kardia*, the word heart represented something else in their minds. The heart in both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) culture referred to the mind. It referred to the thought life.

So, biblically speaking, the heart is your mind. It's your thinking. It's your Mission Control center. It's where you think, and understand, and process, and, and embrace, and then do, and plan. It's your Mission Control center. It's the place where understanding and comprehension occurs. It's the place where affections originate and thrive, and it's the place where

thoughts, and intentions, and decisions of your will take place. It's the driving center of your entire life, the heart.

So, coming back to Matthew 15:18, where Jesus says, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles the person." What Jesus means is that, before sins like actual murder, and adultery, and sexual immorality, and theft, before all that becomes manifest externally, like in breaking a law, in doing something immoral that he can be seen, that you can take a picture of, before all that happens, all those thoughts and ideas are first hatched in the heart, in the mind, in the thinking. And that's why he began that list with evil thoughts. "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that's what defiles a person." So a bad heart will obviously produce bad thoughts. Bad thoughts then lead to bad intentions, bad plans, bad willing, and that leads to bad behavior.

All of us are fallen. Born into this world as evil and wicked, as the Bible says, we are "dead in our trespasses and sins," Ephesians 2:1. And because of that, we are by nature children of wrath, Ephesians 2:3. And that means what Jeremiah says, in that context about the heart, is true of us when we're

born into this world. Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can know it?"

If you're having trouble believing that about the fundamental nature of humanity, you need to check out the news headlines. Peruse the daily news and you're gonna find that, that God's Word really does have the measure of the human heart. It's beyond controversy that the heart of mankind is exactly as the Bible describes it, desperately sick. And out of that heart proceeds all kinds of degrading and devastating sins. It's no surprise, then, that sinners are in need, desperate need of salvation. Since we're born into this world as children of wrath, and since we prove our parentage all along the way by our wicked thoughts and words and deeds, since we're manifesting the true condition of our hearts, all of our hearts come into this world as bad soil.

So then, how is it that anyone can exchange their bad heart for a good heart? How does someone make bad soil good? Truth is, nobody can. You can't do it. I can't do it. Not on our own. As God said through Jeremiah, Jeremiah 13:23, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Well then, also, you

can do good who are accustomed to doing evil." Yet we find Jesus speaking of those who are characterized by "hearing the Word, holding fast to, in an honest and good heart, bearing fruit with endurance." Look, that gives us hope. It points us to the biblical doctrine, essential doctrine, of regeneration. New birth.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Nicodemus, an older man, probably 60, 70 years old. He was, as Jesus called him there, "the teacher of Israel." The Teacher of Israel, familiar with all the texts of the Old Testament, the Law and the prophets. And as Jesus talked to Nicodemus about this new birth, "you must be born again," he referred back to Ezekiel 36:25-27. God says there, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart."

There it is. "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh." What's a heart of flesh? It's not a carnal heart. It's not a fleshly, worldly heart. "I will give you a heart of flesh" means one that pumps,

one that works, one that is living, one that is responsive to stimuli. "I'll put my Spirit within you," he says, "and I will cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." You know what that sounds like? That sounds like a soft, and a deep, and a pure heart.

Let me state this as plainly and as clearly as I can. For the soil to receive the seed which grows into a fruit-bearing plant, the soil must first be good soil. Otherwise, no growth. It has to first be good soil. In the same way, for the heart to receive the Word of God, which then grows into a fruit-bearing person, the heart must first be a good heart. And the only way to make an evil heart into a good heart is what Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

What makes good soil good? Spiritual regeneration. The life-giving, creative power of the Holy Spirit. "You must be born again," and once that sovereign work of God takes place in the heart, all the other dominoes fall. That is such good news. We don't have to gut out fruit-producing on our own strength or power. We don't have it. God does the work. He does the work. He won't obey for us, he won't believe for us, but he will empower

our believing and our obedience, obeying and fruit-bearing. The new birth means a new creation, and the new creation is fitted with a new heart that is able to be soft, and deep, and pure. And that soft-hearted, deep-hearted, pure-hearted person is possessed of a heart that Jesus describes here as *kalos* and *agathos*. Noble, useful, praiseworthy, and beneficial.

That's why Jesus said in Matthew 12:33, "You've got to make the tree good, if you want to get good fruit." Spiritual regeneration is the prerequisite to spiritual fruitfulness. Without spiritual regeneration, there will be no fruit. There may be counterfeit fruit, things that look fruitful. But no true spiritual fruit.

So if you're characterized by hearing the Word of God, holding it fast with an honest and good heart, bearing fruit with endurance, persevering to the end in spite of testing, producing fruit, like tribulation, persecution because of the Word, you're still producing fruit, then take heart. That's proof positive that the seed of God's word has found a home in the good soil of your good heart, which means you have been born again. What good news.

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