

Sermon

Mark Twain once said, 'Its not the things in the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the ones I do understand. The parable that Jesus told falls into the latter category. It's straightforward enough, but it is one that should leave us uncomfortable rather than complacent. The meaning is clear - the farmer in the parable is Jesus, the seed is God's word and the soil is our hearts and lives. There are four different types of soil. In each case the sower is the same and the seed is the same. The only variable in the parable is the soils – the varying degrees to which we allow God's word to penetrate into our lives.

Firstly, there is the pathway. The soil is hard; impenetrable. The seed is quickly carried away by the birds.

It is easy to be hardened to the word of God in our lives. If we want nothing to do with God, we simply block God's message from entering our minds. We erect a barrier to keep the things of God out. God won't force His way in; He waits for us to open up the way. Jesus says in Rev 3:20, 'Listen, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.' He waits for us to open our hearts and lives to Him and his word.

The second category is the person who responds to Jesus' message enthusiastically but then soon falls away. This person is like Mr Pliable in Pilgrims Progress. This is the person who over-promises and under-delivers

This person allows God's word into their mind – because that is where God's word enters our lives, doesn't it? The problem with this person is that that is as far as it goes. It stays up here in the head, in the mind.

Such people don't necessarily forget it; they just don't allow it any further. It doesn't make that important trip from the head to the heart. It is simply information in their mind, like the times table or the names of King Henry's wives – it doesn't have any impact on their lives.

Then there is the third type of soil. Here the soil is deeper, and the seed begins to grow well. This person not only receives the word, but also allows it to take root – to begin to influence their attitudes and behaviour. A good example is Mary, the mother of Jesus. After the mind-boggling events of His birth we read these words, 'Mary remembered all these things and pondered them in her heart.' She thought deeply about them.

Here it's not just about knowledge in the mind, it's about something that is pondered deeply; something that affects our feelings and desires deep down.

The Bible needs to become more than a book with information. It needs to become for us a love letter that touches us and moves us. It's not just about relationship with the Bible, it's about a relationship with the Lord of the Bible. If you receive a letter from your bank, telling you about changes they are making, that letter is only on the level of information. But if you receive a letter from a beloved family member its very different. The words in that letter are not mere words; they are feelings that reach from the heart of your beloved to your own heart. That's how it can be with God's word. We need to realise that this is not just a book of information, but it is a love letter. Through it, God's heart is reaching through to our heart.

But Jesus warns us in this parable that in the world there are many other things that seek our attention and affection. They are the weeds and the thorns that Jesus speaks about – the concerns and temptations of the world. They too seek our allegiance. A mother was explaining to her daughter the reality of the struggle within each of us between the good and

bad. She explained that it's as though there are two types of dogs in us. The one is wild and destructive; the other is obedient, submissive and faithful. The child then asked, 'Which one is stronger?' The mother replied, 'The one we feed the most'. Do we feed the good seed, or do we feed the weeds and thorns? Which gets our attention and affection?

Finally, there is the soil that receives the seed and allows it to grow unhindered and produce a plentiful harvest. That is the person where the word of God has entered the heart as well as the mind.

But there is one more step to take – acting on the feelings within the heart. Because the other desires and attractions are still there – the weeds and the thorns - but here the will is strong enough to make the right choices.

So, in effect, there are three vital elements – the mind, the heart, the will. It's a bit like entering into a relationship with someone. The first time that I noticed Angela, in my mind I registered the fact that she had many good qualities. The facts were there. I knew these things in my mind. But it needed to go further – it needed to touch my heart, my emotions. I needed to be moved within. But there was still another step. I needed to commit myself to her; I needed to stand at the altar and say, 'I will – for better or worse.' First my mind; then my heart; then my will. As Lisa Doolittle said to her suitor in 'My Fair Lady', don't talk of love, show me.

I'll finish with a practical example. God's word says that I must forgive those who have sinned against us. I know those words in my mind, but that may be as far as it goes. I think to myself, 'That's a nice sentiment, but it's really not realistic. Does the Lord know how badly I have been hurt? And, what's more, the other person hasn't even asked for forgiveness'. So that's when things remain. But if I sincerely desire to obey that instruction in Scripture, I need to allow it to touch my heart; I need to take it to heart as an instruction from the one who himself forgave even his executioners and who has graciously forgiven my sin against him and others. And then as an act of my will offer forgiveness to the other person – to ask the Lord to change my feelings of resentment into feelings of compassion towards that person; to stop talking to people about how much I have been hurt; and to pray for the one who has wronged me.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, 'Whoever hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise person who built their house upon rock. The wind and storm came but the house stood firm – like a life build on obedience to God's word. Or in terms of our parable, 'Whoever hears and receives my word and puts it into practice is like that good, soft soil which received the seed, allowed it to take root and in the end produced a great harvest for my kingdom.