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THE MOTHER OF ALL PARABLES

The Parable of the Soils is found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. Jesus said it was the most important parable and that it was the key to all the other parables: *Then Jesus said to them, "If you can't understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?"* (Mark 4:13, NLT)

About one-third of Jesus' teaching was in parables, brief stories from everyday life told by analogy to illustrate spiritual truths. A footnote in the NKJV bible says: "The purpose of parables was to make spiritual truths clearer to hearers; to put truth in a form easily remembered; to avoid offense with hostile people (for instance, if Jesus had openly said that He came to set up a new kingdom and that he was the king, the Romans would have immediately imprisoned or executed him); and to declare judgment on those who were willfully blind. Regarding this last point, Jesus said in Mark 4:11-12: *I use parables so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: When they see what I do, they will learn nothing. When they hear what I say, they will not understand, otherwise they will turn to me and be forgiven.* Whoa! This quotation from Isaiah 6:9 says that God is intentionally hiding the truth from certain people as a judgment on them! Friends, this is a very important concept. God only reveals His truth, He only reveals Himself, to those whose hearts are open to Him. At times we may wonder why people who have been raised in the church and who have heard the Gospel for years don't seem to 'get it.' This is the answer. Paul explained it as follows: *Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the light of the Good News.* (2 Cor. 4:4) The reason God allows Satan to blind their minds is because He sees their hearts, and He will not reveal Himself to someone who is living in defiance and rebellion.

Following is the parable from Mark 4 in the NKJV:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And it happened as he sowed that some seed fell by the wayside, and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. And some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred. He who ears to hear, let him hear.

Jesus told this parable in front of thousands of people, and not one person understood what it meant. Later, when Jesus was alone with his disciples, he had to explain it to them: *The sower sows the word. (FIRST) And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.* That's the way Mark reports Jesus' explanation, but in Matthew, Jesus says, *The seed that fell on the footpath are those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it.* Then he adds, *Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.*

Did you realize that Satan can steal the Word of God, the Word that gives life, right out of your heart? Yes, that's what Jesus taught. So we must guard and protect our hearts. Proverb 4:23 says, *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*

Note that in the book of Mark Jesus says "the birds of the air came and devoured it (the seed)." There are a number of words or phrases in Scripture that are usually figurative references to the devil or to demons: the birds of the air, the beasts of the field, the Chaldeans, the serpent, the dragon, scorpions, Leviathan, etc. (Check out the cross-references in the Bible and it becomes very clear.)

(SECOND) *Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.* The Bible is full of analogies, metaphors, parables, similes, anthropomorphisms. God is called King, Husband, Father, Judge, Shepherd, Hen, Rock, a fire, a fountain, food, bread, water, a tower. God cannot speak to us in heavenly language, since we would not

understand it. He speaks to us from the world of nature, which He created to reveal spiritual truths. Remember that everything we see is temporal, is passing away, but the unseen is eternal.

Jesus explained the second type soil as follows: *The ones sown on stony ground are the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.* (Mark) Matthew says, *since they didn't have deep roots, they died.*

(THIRD) *And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.* Jesus explained this type soil as follows: *They are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.* Luke adds to this list: *the pleasures of this life.*

(FOURTH) The final type soil Jesus describes as “good ground,” and *These are the ones who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.*

So Jesus describes a situation that is familiar to each of us. The Good News about Jesus Christ is simply the best news anyone can ever hear in this life. It should be foremost in our minds and lives from the moment we hear it until we close our eyes in death. But all kinds of things compete with that News and crowd it out until it withers and dies.

Consider that the four types of soil might not just speak of four different types of people, they might speak of the variable conditions of our own hearts. While you and I have been overjoyed to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and all that it means, at times our hearts can be a busy path that doesn't have time for Christ; at times our hearts can be stony and hard and resistant to God's voice; at times the cares of this world, the craving for riches, the desires for a hundred other things and their pleasures, and especially a little rejection or persecution, can push our love and commitment to Christ right out the door. Amen?

Robert Morris, who has a mega-church in the Holy Land (between Fort Worth and Dallas), teaches that there are four types of people attending church who correspond loosely to the types of soil in Jesus' parable.

(GROUP 1) **Exploring God.** These are people who are attending church periodically and are being awakened to the idea of God and who He is. Something has happened in their lives, all their false ideas about God are being challenged, and they recognize that they might need God. They are enjoying the FELLOWSHIP of the church, and they are thinking about God. They are not yet believers. What they need in order to move to Group 2 (those who are saved by faith) is an understanding of Grace, that we are saved through faith solely as a gift from a loving heavenly Father. They need a revelation of what Christ did on the cross.

(GROUP 2) **Beginning in God.** These are people who have accepted Christ by faith and have thereby been born again, saved, born from above. They are marked by RELATIONSHIP with God and with the other members of the church. They are now a part of the body of Christ on earth. What they need in order to move to Group 3 (disciples) is God's word. *Be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*(Romans 12:2)

(GROUP 3) **Close to God.** They are entering into the realm of DISCIPLESHIP. Key verses are Romans 12:1-2: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* To move to Group 4 (God centered) they need to surrender their lives to giving.

(GROUP 4) **God centered.** They are entering the realm of LORDSHIP – *Jesus Christ is Lord*. They are learning the discipline and delight of giving.

To reiterate and emphasize what is necessary in order to progress in these God-given stages of Christlikeness: To move from “Exploring God” to “Beginning in God” necessitates grace, an understanding of the cross. To move from “Beginning in God” to “Close to God” necessitates God's Word. To move from “Close to God” to “God Centered” necessitates giving (of time, talent and treasure). The people in Group 1 - rarely talk to God; Group 2 – occasionally talk to God; Group 3 – frequently talk to God; Group 4 – consistently talk to God.

The groups listed above and the soils in Jesus' parable are not a chronology or time series. You can go backward, backslide, as well as progress forward. The birds of the air are flying overhead from the beginning to the end of our Christian journey. How many people have you known who started out with Jesus full of love and zeal but who soon got distracted by their pursuit of a better job, or a luxurious home, or travel, or sports? Or maybe all they focus on and talk about is the political situation, and they are doggone angry about it. Or maybe they got offended by someone at church and

decided they didn't have to put up with those people. Hearts get wounded, and it is easy and natural to withdraw and allow our hearts to grow cold and hard. There are a thousand reasons to dial back our zeal for Christ or even to tune Him out altogether. After all, we are busy people and we have families and friends and responsibilities, and we deserve some time off.

The Good Ground are those who have heard the word, retain it, and continue to bear fruit....and continue....and continue....and continue. The Good Ground are those whose hearts are set on holiness. Not perfection or sinlessness. We simply can't get there from here. But we can set our hearts on obedience, and we can repent every time we catch ourselves falling back into our old ways. The Good Ground are those who call Jesus "Lord" – and mean it, even when it is uncomfortable, boring, costly and involves pain.

Isaiah wrote: *As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* The Word produces the fruit - - if I will just guard my heart and keep it good.

If you will do that, *You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.* (Isa. 55:10-13) The trees will be clapping their hands over you, brothers and sisters. Ha! What a time of joy and celebration when before all of creation the Lord proudly displays the fruit borne by his faithful sons and daughters.

POSITIVE PREACHING

I just heard a message on TV by Joyce Meyer. She was commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, which reads: *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.* I only tuned in for a part of her teaching, but she seemed to be questioning how Scriptural it is to only have positive, uplifting, inspiring sermons, since Scripture itself not only edifies and inspires but is also quick to reprove and correct when we are not living right or when we are twisting Scripture to make it more comfortable and less demanding.

When King David, whom God loved and called "a man after His own heart," fell into the terrible sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, her husband, the Prophet Nathan didn't preach a comforting, positive sermon to David. He boldly confronted David with his sin and warned him about God's judgment that was coming. David repented and God forgave him, but terrible consequences followed David and his family thereafter. "The sword never left his house," as Nathan had prophesied. The baby conceived by Bathsheba died. One of David's sons raped his half-sister, and that son was later murdered by his brother. Another of David's sons "Stole the hearts of the people" and stirred up a rebellion against his own father. A civil war in Israel resulted and that son, Absalom, was killed, which broke David's heart. One of the most moving scenes in Scripture took place when King David was told that his son, Absalom, had been killed. It is reported in 2 Samuel 18:33 – *Then the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said: O my son Absalom – my son, my son Absalom – if only I had died in your place! O Absalom, my son, my son!* Just imagine what would have happened if David had not repented!

When we fall into sin or doctrinal error, the loving thing for God to do, and for His preachers to do, is to reprove and correct us. To do less than that is very dangerous. As the Apostle Paul was preparing to make his final trip to Jerusalem, where he knew he would suffer persecution and possibly death, he preached his final sermon to the church at Ephesus. He had spent years in Ephesus and deeply loved the people there. He told them (in Acts 20:26 and following) that: *I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God to you.* It would be good for every preacher to carefully consider the implications of that statement. Then he warned them that the Holy Spirit had shown him that, *After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after themselves.*

Frankly, after spending 60 years in the Christian church I can only think of a handful of ministers that I think would have the courage to preach such a sermon to their congregations. Brothers and sisters, are we preaching the whole counsel of God? Do we realize that the blood of our listeners will be on our heads if we don't do so?

Scan through the epistles of Paul, Peter, John and James once again and see how loving they were, but also how brutally honest and confrontational they were in their sermons. Do we see being loving and, when necessary, being brutally honest and confrontational as mutually exclusive? God apparently does not, but I think we do. Consider what Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: *I wrote and told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that. I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in*

sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people. It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, unbelievers. God will judge them. But as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you." (1 Cor. 5:9-13, NLT)

But we remember how loving and accepting Jesus was with the woman at the well, with the woman taken in adultery, with the tax collectors who were regarded as traitors and extortioners, and we wonder at the apparent contradiction between Jesus' actions and Paul's teaching. Jesus' teaching, also, was extremely demanding. Read Jesus' warning at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:13 ff, *Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.* And Jesus' call to discipleship in Matthew 16:24 ff: *Take up your cross and follow me. If you try to hang onto your life you will lose it, but if you give up your life for my sake you will save it...*

Are Jesus' sermons and his actions our example and model? He is the prime example in history of a lover and a truth teller, and He mastered the art of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. (We should guard against thinking that the "comfortable" are those other people.) He drew sinners and outcasts to himself like flies to honey because He loved and accepted them, but He confronted the religious pretenders and the powerful and corrupt with fearless denunciations. Was that inconsistency, or did both stances reflect the love of God? *The law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* (John 1:17)

God really does expect us to live holy lives, separated from the corruption of the world and committed wholeheartedly to Him. Jesus even commands us in the so-called Great Commandment, to *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.* Good night! That's an extreme expectation. Surely Jesus didn't mean for us to take that admonition literally, did He? Apparently He did. Paul stated twice in Romans 13 that *Love is the fulfillment of the law.*

God give us the love and courage to speak grace and truth to our "congregation," whether it is our family or a mega-church.

THE PRESENT PROBLEM IS NOT THE ISSUE, THE ISSUE IS THE LIE IN OUR HEART THAT MAGNIFIES THE PROBLEM

In the almost 45 years since God called me to minister to wounded and broken people in the church, the above statement encapsulates one of the most important truths I have learned (and it is certainly not original with me).

Recently I ministered to a man in his 40's who is a sincere follower of Christ. He gave me permission to share this story. I will call him Bill. Bill described an ongoing problem as follows: "When someone offends me by their words, actions, or attitude, I struggle inside to know whether the right thing to do is to forgive them or to confront them. Then, however I work out the problem, I can't ever let it go. Even though I forgive them, I find myself pulling back from them and building a wall of resentment around my heart. I can see that this is a pattern in my life and that it is sinful, but I can't seem to change."

I said to Bill – I have learned that the present problem is not really the issue, the issue is the lie in our heart, it is what we believe. So I led Bill to pray: "Lord, there is something in my heart that causes me to build a wall between myself and people that offend me. Will you show me when the lie that causes me to act that way first got into my heart?" In a few moments Bill said, "Oh. My father was distant, aloof, and unapproachable. My mother was busy and distracted. Neither of them ever had time for me. When I was 10 years old, my sister was 12 and was bigger and stronger than me. She was full of anger and violence. One time we got in an argument and she started beating me with a cheerleader's baton. As I ran away she hit me in the back of the head and injured me."

I had Bill pray: "Lord, what was the lie I started believing at that time?" The answer came to Bill immediately: "I'm on my own. My father and mother don't care enough for me to protect me, God has abandoned me and doesn't care what happens to me. My sister is going to kill me, and nobody will protect me."

I said to Bill: Look around in that memory and see where Jesus was. He was there although you didn't know it. After a moment Bill said: "I see Jesus. He is standing there watching me with concern. And when my sister swung that baton at my head He placed His hand on my head and absorbed most of the impact."

I told Bill to ask Jesus, Lord, what is the truth? Jesus answered him: "Bill, I am not distant. You are not all alone. I love you and I am with you. When you suffer, I suffer. I will never leave you or forsake you."

Now, was all of that an imaginary exercise? Did I implant suggestions in Bill? No, I did not. That was a real encounter between Bill and the Lord Jesus Christ. Everything that Jesus said and that He showed Bill can be found in Scripture. Jesus is always with us. He loves us with an undying love. He suffers when we suffer. He came to heal our sicknesses (physical, emotional, spiritual) and to set the captives free.

If you have a problem that you can't resolve although you have prayed about it and received ministry about it countless times, the problem is not the issue, the problem is the lie in your mind and heart. Ask the Lord to show you the lie in your heart that causes you to react in a crooked way. Ask the Lord to show you when that lie first got planted in your heart. Ask Jesus to speak His truth to your heart. Ask Jesus to reveal Himself in the traumatic memory. Ask Jesus to tell you how He feels about you. Repent for believing a lie and renounce it. Ask the heavenly Father to reveal how He feels about you.

The truth is that God loves you, you, so much that He sent His Son to die for you.

The truth is that He will never leave you or forsake you.

The truth is that Jesus came to heal the broken-hearted and to set the captives free.

The truth will set you free!

God Bless

Glenn

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