

Tim Allen Sermon - Sunday 2nd August 2020
The Stories of The Gospel: The Sower (Luke 8:1-15)

Just as it's becoming all too familiar for me to hear the sound of seagulls on Chelsham Road at 5 o'clock most mornings, so too was it a familiar sight to see the farmer scattering the seed in Israel over 2000 years ago. The farmer would have a huge bag of seed which he would carry on his donkey, and when he arrived on the field he would take his leather sack under his arm and then he would liberally scatter the seed all along the field in the hope that he would receive a really good harvest.

Of course there were a few hurdles to achieving that, because as with most fields there are public paths, enabling people to walk across a farmers field, and of course there were also flocks of birds which were almost spying on the farmer, as if stalking him for any opportunity for a free meal.

Some of the seed would have fallen on rocky soil. Soil which would have seemed absolutely fine on the surface, but had he dusted it a little he would have realised there was huge rock underneath it, and no hope of that seed ever become anything.

There would have been quite a lot of thorn bushes over the field. Very useful for the farmer had he wanted to make an outdoor fire for cooking a meal and things like that, but very deadly for any plantation hoping to grow nearby.

And so Jesus takes this familiar scene to reveal a profound truth - at the heart of this parable is; the heart. In the Bible the heart is always the centre of human life. It's the centre of your personality, it controls your intellect and your emotions and your will, to such an extent that no outward obedience is of any value whatsoever, unless your heart is turned toward God.

Today we're not going to be studying the anatomy of the heart, but we are going to be reflecting deeply on how diligent are we at guarding our hearts. The parable shows four possible representations of our heart that we may have towards God today. Four possible ways that someone - anyone in the world - can respond, when we hear or when we read God's word.

The first one is the hard heart, it's the path. Jesus says in verse 12:

"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

The truth goes out as a wonderful thing, is heard, and it falls somewhere where it can't ever settle - it can't take root because it's fallen somewhere where there's nowhere for it to bury itself. There is no opportunity for the truth to be internalised. There's no opportunity for deep reflection to take place that could potentially lead to conviction and repentance. Worse than that, what happens with a hard heart, is the truth falls somewhere where there is no shelter. There is no protection. There is nowhere to hide. It is completely exposed. And Jesus is very clear what a hard heart is good for - it's strictly for the birds.

Now I've read this parable many times, maybe you have as well. These words are very familiar. I normally blame Satan for all that happens with the first seed, but I do find what Spurgeon says about this very helpful, in terms of an insight. He says, "It's easy for birds to pick up seed which lies exposed on trodden paths. If the soil had been good and if the seed had entered it, the devil would have great difficulty getting to it in the first place. The reality is, that a hard heart does most of the devil's work for him."

I remember when I was studying for my undergrad degree at Exeter, not long after the "God Delusion" book came out, by Richard Dawkins. We had invited a speaker who had written a book basically debunking Dawkins, called the Delusion of Dawkins or something along those lines. He did a presentation, to which we invited the president of the Secular Society. It seemed to be going very well. Then the president of the Secular Society asked a question, and I felt the speaker was giving him a really robust answer, but as he did, halfway through this lecture, the president of the Secular Society got up in quite a huff and just walked out, after receiving what was for him, a very unsatisfactory answer, even though it seemed to be very reasonable and logical.

Perhaps we know many people like that, who have hard hearts to receiving God's word. They might say that they're happy to hear, but they really don't want to listen, to reflect and to be challenged by it. Hopefully we can have humility, because we realise in our lives that we often have a hard heart to hearing God's word, to believing it, and to submitting to it. Because that's the devil's tactic here. Hearing is fine, but believing and submitting to God's word is a big problem, and he does all that he can to snatch God's word from people at that point.

But, there is hope here, we mustn't be complacent and say that we've shared God's word with people - we've done our two minute gospel presentation and therefore it's hopeless - they've got a hard heart. God can work through hard hearts. God reminds us of the power of his word when he asks Jeremiah this question, *"Is not my word like fire and like a hammer which breaks the rock"* [Jeremiah 23:29]. If you've scattered God's word this morning or told someone in the last week or so, or you feel like you're telling a person again and again what God has done for you - you pour out your life yet seem to be getting nowhere - be encouraged this morning that even the hardest path, even the hardest rock, can be broken by the power of the gospel. That's the first seed - it falls on a hard path.

The second is the superficial heart, the rocky soil. Look at verse 13:

"Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."

The soil appears to be good, but under it is a rocky surface. This is the person who perhaps lives off instincts and emotions, very intuitive, is very dependent on their circumstances, and how they feel at that point. They received the word with great joy, there is feeling there, but we soon realise that there's no real faith.

Maybe they are the person that has responded to the altar call at every single Soul Survivor, but the trouble is they respond to most things like that, whether it's the latest pop psychology or a new political movement or a food fad, as Jesus says, *"They believe for a while."* They're like the salmon fish. Have you ever seen salmon? They leap out of the water with energy, but it would be very silly to think that the fish has left the water altogether, because in a moment it goes right back in and it starts swimming again. It really hasn't ever left the stream. It's the water and the water only that is still its true home. And the reason why they respond with feeling rather than real faith is because the word hasn't gone deep, because they haven't really counted the cost, so when any form of struggles come their way, they really can't stand the heat and what was there, just withers away altogether.

Perhaps as a challenge for all of us, that when we do share God's word and we share the gospel with people that we need to be careful not to simply paint a rosy picture, because yes we must emphasise the great blessings of the Christian faith - that we received joy unspeakable; that we have peace which surpasses all understanding, but if we're honest, we all know that being a Christian is really hard. It doesn't mean that when you become a Christian your problems get solved - in many ways they may get worse. You see we fight a fight of faith, and while we are assured of the final victory, the final triumph, the battle can get really tough in the meanwhile; it can be pretty ugly for now. So that's the second type of seed, the superficial heart - it falls on the rocky soil.

And then thirdly the crowded heart, the weeds and the thorns. In verse 14:

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they then go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures and they do not mature."

This is wanting the best of both worlds. The garden flowers are blossoming and are beautiful but so are all the weeds right next to them. These weeds are life's distractions - the terrible three - cares, riches and pleasures. These are the weeds that choke us, which figuratively means it crowds around us, it presses upon us and eventually crushes us. It's being overwhelmed by the pressures and pleasures of life, rather than being overwhelmed by the goodness of God. Perhaps this is a battle that we can relate to every time we come to read the Bible. I know in the morning when I sit down to read the Bible, it is really hard. It's funny isn't it how watching TV, watching something on Netflix, is never a challenge, it's a pretty easy thing to do, but we sit down to read the Word and we feel like we're dragging ourselves in the morning sometimes to the

Bible. We've done all we could do we get up early. We have our caffeine beverage. We go to a quiet place where we can have some solitude. We attempt to read. We start to think about God's word and as we try to meditate it seems that everything else just becomes fascinating. We get a ping on our phone and someone has given us kudos on Strava, or someone has liked something on Facebook, and we get distracted, maybe we see a cobweb that needs cleaning in the window.

There are many distractions that form us, that order us, that are ultimately driving us. How do we know what they are? They're the things that are often on our mind when we first wake up and when we go to sleep, when we sit down to have that quiet time and we're distracted they prevent us perhaps from having it altogether. Rather than being overwhelmed by God's goodness they are the things that are overwhelming us.

In 1975, six armed gunmen broke into some deposit boxes in a London bank, and they stole valuables worth up to five million pounds. A lady who had her jewellery stolen, which was valued at half a million, said these interesting words, she wailed, "Everything I had was in there! Everything I had was in that box! My whole life was in that box!" What a sad situation. What a sad commentary of what she valued more than anything else.

I wonder, what is choking you this morning? What is choking you from enjoying your relationship with God? It could really be any unhealthy obsession; it could be ballroom dancing, sports, social media, things to do with home improvement, it could be something to do with church. Perhaps this morning is a bit of a wake-up call that we need to invest in some good weed-killer. Perhaps we need to take radical steps over the summer, to get rid of things that will otherwise choke us.

The last seed is the open heart, the good soil. Verse 15:

"But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

I don't know what the state of your heart is this morning but wouldn't you love for it to be something like that - an open heart shaped by nothing but God's word and God's word alone - not a hard disbelieving heart, not a superficial flippant heart, flipping from one emotion to the next, each day, or a crowded heart overwhelmed by the things of the world.

Whatever the stage, wherever you feel your heart is this morning you should know today that there can be real change; the path can be broken; the rock can be shattered; the thorns and the weeds can be uprooted for Paul tells us this, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." [Romans 5:5]. If you have received the Holy Spirit, if you know the Lord today, you can also pray with Paul, "I pray that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which we are called." [Ephesians 1:18a]. Amen.