

5. How is your heart?

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Many people in America are very well informed about how to take care of their physical bodies. If you watch TV for any length of time, you are bound to see commercials about your health, especially cardiovascular. It is important to take care of physical heart which is one of the most important organs in our bodies. But what about our spiritual hearts?

I have seen numerous people who vigorously take care of their physical bodies and keep them in shape, yet their spiritual bodies are completely malnourished and decaying. I know a man who can pump 300 pound in bench press on bad day and his bicep is thicker than my thigh, but his spiritual condition is next to pathetic.

This morning, Jesus is going to speak to us about our spiritual hearts. So instead of turning your deaf ears to the Word of God, please be attentive and listen and examine your spiritual hearts and see how yours are.

A. THE PARABLE OF THE SOIL

Mark 4:1-2 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. 2 Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

At this point, Mark introduced a new word – ‘parable’. Jesus explained God’s truth, not by giving a lecture on theology, but by painting pictures that captured the attention of the people and forced them to use their imaginations and think.

Our English word parable comes from two Greek words that mean “to cast alongside”.

para: alongside

ballo: to throw or cast

A parable is a story or figure placed alongside a teaching to help us understand its meaning. It is much more than “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” and it certainly is not an “illustration” such as a preacher would use in a sermon.

A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and compels that listener to make a personal decision about God’s truth and his or her life. Jesus’ parables are so penetrating and personal that after the religious leaders heard several of them, they wanted to kill Him!

A parable begins innocently as a ‘picture’ that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as we study the ‘picture’, it becomes a ‘mirror’ in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look at the ‘mirror’ by faith, it becomes a ‘window’ through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us.

We are going to do some ‘Leap Frogs’ in this parable study. Since Jesus didn’t leave a room for an explanation of this parable to an imagination of preachers, we must hear from Jesus Himself.

According to Jesus, there are four kinds of hearts and they respond to God’s message in four different ways.

1) The hard heart

Mark 4:3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.

Mark 4:14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones by the way-side where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.

The seeds we see here is the Word of God and the soil is the heart of a person. 'The hard heart' resists the Word of God and makes it easy for satan to snatch it away. Often 'birds' represent satan and his demons in the Bible.

Soil becomes hard when too many feet tread on it. Those who recklessly open their hearts to all kinds of people and influences are in danger of developing hard hearts. Hard hearts must be plowed up before they can receive the seed, and this can be a painful experience.

Some of you might fit into this category. You come here and listen to the Word of God and walk out that door without being changed because of your hard heart. When the time of the Great White Throne Judgement comes, you can not blame anyone for not telling you about Jesus. It's your own decision to reject God.

2) The shallow heart

Mark 4:5 Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.

Mark 4:16-17 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 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.

Some people are like the ground that is rocky, but covered with a thin layer of topsoil. They receive the seed of the word with a flash of excitement that goes from sizzle to fizzle in a short period of time.

Some professing Christians have no root in themselves. Their root is in their parents, or in the Christian friends, or in the pastor. It is easy for fallen human nature to counterfeit "religious feelings" and get a spiritual false confidence.

Again some of you might be in this category. Just because you came to the church this Sunday morning, you feel like you did your religious duty and somehow thinking that God is obligated to you with something nice. If that is your thought, here is a surprise for you. He doesn't owe anything to anyone, period. We owe Him everything including the very life we are allowed to have.

3) The crowded heart

Mark 4:7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

Mark 4:18-19 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

The crowded heart pictures the person who receives the Word but does not truly repent and remove the 'weeds' out of his or her heart. This hearer has too many

different kinds of 'seeds' growing in the soil – worldly cares, a desire for riches, a lust for things – and the good seed of the Word has no room to grow in there.

This person wants to walk the worldly way and God's way at the same time and it cannot be done. That person must choose one or another.

To be honest with you, I see many Christians fit into this category. They are fearful with the things of the world. They toss and turn all night long to come up with their own ways to overcome whatever the problems they are facing instead of trusting God. They don't have the peace of God that passes all men's understanding. They don't have faith in God, because they don't want to trust God's power since they cannot see it.

Do you know what the bottom line is with this category of people? They don't have the Word of God in their hearts. They say, "I pray daily." I bet you do while you are in tight corner. They say, "I read the Bible." I bet you do that as a good luck charm.

Since the Lord Jesus used the word 'the seed' for the Word of God, let me put it this way. You can study the Word of God, categorize it, analyze it, or even love it. But if you don't put it into your heart and believe that God will do the rest, nothing will happen and you will still be fearful for everything.

4) The fruitful heart

Mark 4:8 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."

Mark 4:20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

The one who hears with thankfulness and joy and receives the Word of God into his heart. He trusts the Lord and starts to serve the Lord and His church. That person will have the peace that comes from God alone in spite of all difficulties around him. That person will bring the glory to the Lord with his witness at his workplace and home. That is a process of becoming a mature Christian. I've never seen any mature Christian who doesn't trust the Lord and serve Him consistently.

Each of the three fruitless hearts is influenced by a different enemy: the hard heart – the devil himself snatches the seed, the shallow heart – the flesh counterfeits religious feelings, the crowded heart – the things of the world smother the growth and prevent a harvest. These are the three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

By now, some of you might wonder if these first three categories of people are saved or not saved. First of all, it is not my place to judge whether they are saved or not. And that is not the point we are emphasizing here. The main point is to find out how your heart is: Is your heart a hard heart or a shallow heart or a crowded heart or a fruitful heart?

Don't give yourself extra points when you are examining in your heart. Let God evaluate it. But the soil of your heart can be changed by receiving the Word of God into your heart daily and trust the Lord in spite of the circumstances around you.

I believe the v9 is an appropriate one for this:

Mark 4:9 And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

B. THE PURPOSE OF PARABLE

Mark 4:10-13 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.' " 13 And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

Jesus used parables both to hide the truth and to reveal it. The crowd did not judge the parables. The parables judged the crowd.

The careless listener, who thought he knew everything, would hear only a story that he did not really understand. In result his life would be judgment. But the sincere listener, with a desire to know God's truth, would ponder the parable, confess his ignorance, submit to the Lord, and then begin to understand the spiritual lesson Jesus wanted to teach.

C. LIGHT UNDER A BASKET?

Mark 4:21-25 Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? 22 For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. 25 For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

In this parable, our Lord used a common object, a lamp. The lamp was a clay dish filled with oil, with a wick put into the oil. In order to give light, the lamp had to "use itself up" and the oil had to be replenished. If the lamp was not lit, or if it was covered up, it did the home no good.

If we have the truth of God, we have a solemn responsibility to spread that truth in whatever way God gives us opportunity, just as someone who has the cure for a life-threatening disease has the moral responsibility to spread that cure. That is not just pastors' and evangelists' job. God didn't light our lamps so that we would hide them.

The more we hear the Word of God, the better we are able to share it with others.

D. THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED

Mark 4:26-29 And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, 27 and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. 28 For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Here is an unusual parable that our Lord gave and only Mark records it. It takes a good deal of faith and patience to be a farmer.

This shows that the word of God works invisibly within us. God promised that His word would accomplish the purpose for which He sends it.

E. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Mark 4:30-34 Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? 31 It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; 32 but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade." 33 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. 34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

This parable gave the disciples both warning and encouragement:

The encouragement was that, from very small beginnings, the kingdom would eventually grow in size and in influence. While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, it was probably the smallest seed that the Jews sowed in their gardens. It was a traditional symbol of that which is tiny.

Our Lord began with 12 Apostles. Later, there were as many as 500 believers. Peter won 3,000 at the Day of Pentecost and throughout the Book of Acts, that number steadily increased. Eventually, saints from every nation shall worship before His throne.

But the warning for them was the birds in the branches. In the Parable of the Sower and Soils we just have studied, the birds stood for satan, who snatches the seed. If we are to be consistent in our interpretation, we must take this into consideration. In fact, some of the growth will give opportunity for satan to get in and go to work within the rank of Christianity.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Don't give yourself extra points when you are examining in your heart. Let God evaluate it.

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.

2) We need to keep our hearts as fertile soil to receive God's Word daily with gladness and willingness, so that we may grow in Him and serve Him.

3) If we have the truth of God, we have a solemn responsibility to spread that truth in whatever way God gives us opportunity.