



GOOD SOIL FOR GOOD SEED

LESSON 1 // HOPE FOR THE HARDENED HEART

Soil sampling is an important part of agriculture. Before crops are planted, soil conditions are evaluated to determine the type of vegetation to be planted and any treatment that may be needed.

In Scripture, soil is often used as a metaphor for the human heart. This is the case with the “Parable of the Sower” (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23; Mark 4:1-9; 13-20; and Luke 8:4-8; 11-15) in which Jesus uses four soil conditions to describe conditions of our hearts. This helps us understand a key to spiritual fruitfulness, or the lack of fruitfulness, in our lives. The parable contains three basic elements: the sower, the seed and the soil. God, by His Spirit, is the Sower. God’s Word is the seed. The human heart is the soil.

In this lesson we’ll focus on the first soil Jesus taught about:

Luke 8:4-5, 11-12 (NIV) *While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ⁵“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. ... ¹¹ This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 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.”*

It’s clear that this soil is hardened. It has been trampled and compacted so that no seed can penetrate below the surface and no fruit can be produced. What can we do to identify and avoid this kind of soil in our hearts?

1. Acknowledge the causes of a hardened heart.

There are reasons why our hearts become hard. These include insensitivity to God, to personal sin and to people. We may be cynical or skeptical. Or we may be very self-focused, thinking mostly about “what’s in it for me”—taking much and giving little.

What conditions our hearts toward these things and the hardness they produce?

- Our sinful nature and selfishness.
- Our choices and practices—engaging in things that harden us, desensitize us and weaken an appropriate conscience.
- “Pressed in” pain—pain that’s pressed into our heart and not released.
- Lack of attention to softening influences and failure to maintain a softened condition.
- Distractions. We can become preoccupied with self-centered thoughts to the point that there’s no room for God’s thoughts.

2. Be aware of the consequences of a hardened heart.

Luke 8:12 is quite clear concerning the spiritual consequences of a hardened heart:

Luke 8:12 (NIV) *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 devil traffics on hardened soil. He specializes in hardened hearts. Hardened soil is his soil. He does as he pleases on hardened soil.

If the devil can keep us hardened, he is able to keep us hopeless. There is no hope for the hardened. Hope and help come to those who are softened.

3. Allow God to soften the condition of your heart.

What are some of the ways we can open our hearts to God's softening influence?

- Get alone regularly with God.
- Meditate on God's holiness and Christ's love for you.
- Contemplate and confess personal sins. Consider how they hurt God and others.
- Take time to pray for and care for someone else.
- Determine to address your internal pain.
- Purposefully and habitually add "softening agents" to your thoughts and words. Learn to temper your attitudes and words.
- Prepare yourself for worship and the study of God's Word at His house.
- Tears.
- Express your vulnerabilities to someone you can trust. Pray with them about these.
- Ask God to soften your heart and enable you to receive the planting of His Word.

Jesus tells us that the condition of our heart is important! As we understand the need for a soft heart before God and others, and trust the Lord to soften us, we will find healing, hope and fresh opportunities to serve Him.

Discussion questions

1. What are some things that cause your heart to become hard?
2. What consequences have you seen in your life when your heart has become hard? How should these motivate you to keep your heart softened?
3. What can you begin to do that would open your heart to more of God's softening influence?