

Heart and Soil — Bonita Joyner Shields

Scripture: Mark 4:1-9, 13

Those Were Weeds?

Vicky and I had good intentions. The only problem was that we were city girls. We'd never been in a strawberry patch before.

Vicky and I were best friends in childhood. We would play dolls, spend the night at each other's houses, sing to Elvis songs. One night while I was staying with her, we laughed so hard that we both fell out of bed!

When Vicky and I went to boarding academy, we worked summers in the cafeteria to help pay tuition. Our supervisor, Mrs. Dove, made sure we were kept busy. So, one day when there wasn't much to do in the cafeteria, Mrs. Dove "loaned" us out to pull weeds in the strawberry patch. We were young and willing, so we joyfully marched up to the patch and began pulling weeds. But we couldn't understand how the weeds had gotten so tall. . .

Fortunately, the farm supervisor came to inspect before we got too far along. As you might have anticipated, yes, we city girls were not pulling weeds out of the garden. We were pulling out the plants! *Unfortunately*, it wasn't the last time I was botanically challenged.

In my early twenties, my boss gave me an Amaryllis bulb. *What a nice thought*. I was sure it would be beautiful. The only problem was that I don't remember ever seeing an Amaryllis flower. I had no clue how to care for an Amaryllis: what things helped it grow, what things prevented it to grow. But I tried. I planted the bulb, watered it, but it wasn't growing. I took it back to my office to show my boss and to ask for help. I was a tremendous source of entertainment for him that day—as well as for my other colleagues. They proceeded to take the bulb out of the dirt and turn it right side up!

I've learned a few things since then. I've learned to acknowledge my ignorance. I've learned to distinguish between strawberry plants and weeds. And I've learned that dirt can tell us a lot about God's kingdom.

The Sower, The Seed, and The Soil

The Parable of the Sower can be found in all three of the synoptic gospels: Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. All the versions contain three main elements: a sower, seeds, and soil. But Mark 4 contains something that the other versions don't. It's found in verse 13:

"Then Jesus said to [His disciples], 'If you can't understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?' " (NLT).

In all the three gospels, this is the first parable recorded. Why is it so special and considered a precursor to the rest of the parables? I believe it is because this parable reveals the true nature of Christ's mission to earth as the Messiah. The Jewish people expected the Messiah to come as a mighty conqueror, to sit upon the throne of David, and to wipe out their enemies (see DA, p. 30; see Luke 4:19). *But He came not to subdue the enemies of Israel. He came to subdue the hearts of His people* (Matt. 15:24). *He came to subdue our hearts*.

What does a heart open to God's voice look like? What are some things that attempt to keep us from hearing, understanding, and obeying Him? How can we nurture our hearts so that the seed of God's Word will grow and take root? And how can God's Word produce spiritual maturity in our lives?

Before we get our hands into the dirt, let's take a brief look at the first two elements of the story: The Sower and the Seed.

The Sower. In biblical times, farmers carried seed in baskets or pouches attached to their waist. Taking a handful of seed, they threw or scattered it with a sweeping motion of the hand and arm.¹ Because of the great danger from violence in that day, the people dwelt mainly in walled towns. So the farmers went out early in the morning to sow the seed outside the walls.²

When a farmer scatters seed, he/she doesn't merely take one seed, place it gingerly onto the ground, and go on. While they designate an area of ground onto which they will sow, they throw as many seeds as possible because they know that not all of the seeds will grow to maturity.

Scripture Identifies God as the Sower (see Matt. 13:37). Ellen White wrote, "Like a sower in the field, [Christ] came to scatter the heavenly grain in truth. . . Christ, the heavenly Sower. . . left His home of security and peace, left the glory that He had with the Father before the world was, left His position upon the throne of the universe. He went forth, a suffering, tempted man; went forth in solitude to sow in tears, to water with His blood, the seed of life for a world lost."³

The Seed. Every seed has in itself a germinating principle; an inherent capacity to grow, survive, and reproduce—which is a good thing if you're a seed in *my* garden! And every seed brings forth fruit after its kind. Sow the seed under the right conditions, and it will develop its own life in the plant.

Scripture Identifies the Word of God as the Seed (see Luke 8:11). Just as the seed contains the life of a plant, God's Word is life to those who *receive* it. Anyone can read God's Word, but without faith and spiritual insight, it contains no transforming power. But God's Word received into the soul *by faith* will bring forth fruit: a life and character in the likeness of Christ. As a farmer scatters seed with a sweeping motion, it seems as if God *throws* His Word into some of the most unlikely places!

In the early days of the Communist revolution in Russia, a concerted effort to abolish the Christian faith existed. As a part of this effort, one of Moscow's leading theaters presented a comedy titled, "Christ in Tuxedo." A packed house saw the first act with a scene featuring a church altar arrayed like a saloon bar with bottles of beer, wine, and vodka. Priests sat around the altar raising their arms in drunken toast. Nuns squatted on the sanctuary floor playing cards. A degrading exhibition of atheism.

The second act featured Alexander Rostovzev, a theater star in Moscow, a disciple of Marx, and a sneering enemy of Jesus. The audience roared when the actor walked on the stage impersonating Christ. He dressed in a flowing oriental robe and carried a large New Testament. Soon after his entrance he was to read two verses from the Sermon on the Mount, remove his Palestine gown (leaving him naked), and cry out, "Give me my tuxedo and top hat!" However, when the actor began to read from the Sermon on the Mount, something happened. He slowly began to read, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." Instead of making his call for the tuxedo, he stopped as though paralyzed. A silence fell across the crowd as they saw the actor tremble. Then he started to read again, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled."

He read the entirety of Matthew 5 before the stunned audience. Those in charge of the drama tried to get his attention and to get him off the stage but he ignored them. Christ's Word had done its work in his heart. He had come on the stage to mock and revile Christ, but instead, he bowed his heart before Him. He made the sign of the cross in the Russian Orthodox tradition and cried out in the prayer of penitent thief, "Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom!"⁴

There is an unmistakable power in the Word of God. God created the universe by His powerful, creative Word. God spoke to Abraham with a powerful, enabling Word. God spoke through Nathan to David with a powerful, convicting Word. There is power, there is life, inherent in the Word of God.

Now, we're going to get our hands dirty!

The Soil. Sixteen nutrients are essential for plant growth and reproduction.⁵ When one is out of balance, it affects the life of the plant. When plants are strong and healthy, they have the ability to resist their "enemies": weeds, bugs, drought, etc.

The different soils represent the condition of the human heart. When the condition of the human heart is strong and healthy, it also has the ability to resist the enemy. In healthy soil, Satan cannot take the seeds of God's Word from the heart! The enemy becomes powerless!

The Work: Stewardship of the Soul

The term "stewardship" refers to the work that God is doing in our lives and to our roles as managers of His work and His resources. As stewards, we acknowledge Him as our Lord and submit to that Lordship in *everything*. Thus, we are called to be stewards of *all* the resources God has entrusted to us. So, as we study the different soils in this parable, I want you to view them through stewardship eyes.

Mark 4:3, 4 tells us, "Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it" (NLV).

Because of the hard surface of the path, the seed the farmer sowed lay exposed and had no opportunity to germinate. Wild birds, ever present at plowing and sowing times, devoured the seed.

Remember, the farmer is God and the seed is His Word. This group of people have no realization of their need of the gospel. They *hear* God's Word, *but they don't understand* its meaning to their lives. Unfortunately, because they don't value God's Word, they don't even take the time to try to understand its meaning.

This isn't merely directed at unbelievers. Sadly, many church members have no realization of their need. They hear, but they are inattentive. Ellen White tells us that Satan and his angels are in the assemblies where the gospel is preached. And while Christ is drawing the soul by His love, Satan is trying to turn away the attention of the one who is moved to seek the Savior. Ultimately, Satan will steal what was in their hearts. How? He'll distract their minds to insignificant matters, to criticism of the preacher, or to suggest doubts and unbelief. Thus, they will reject the truth God had for them. *They fail to be stewards of His grace.* They fail to receive God's grace into their own souls and to share His grace with those around them.

Mark 4:5, 6 tell us, "Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn't have deep roots, it died" (NLT).

Shallow soil creates special problems. Plants can't root deeply, so they're very prone to drought. The seed of truth that falls into the hearts of stony-ground stewards begins to grow, but because their experience is shallow, they quickly fall away when temptation, trouble, or persecution comes. They *hear* the word with joy, they *understand*, but they cannot accept the need for their habits, thoughts, and actions to be changed. They want to stay right where they were when Jesus found them. "I'm loved

just as I am." Which is true. But Jesus didn't deliver us from bondage and then just leave us there. *They fail to be stewards of His character.* They fail to allow God to transform their habits, thoughts, and actions so they will reflect the character of Christ in their lives.

Mark 4:7 says, "Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain" (NLT).

The thorny-ground hearers *hear* the Word, *understand* it, and even accept the need for their habits, thoughts, and actions to be changed. But they allow the worries/cares of life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for pleasure/other things to choke the Word. They never grow to maturity. They never experience practical sanctification; which is to say that they're not willing to pay the spiritual price for *all* areas of their lives to be touched by God's transforming power. *They fail to be good stewards of His blessings.*

This soil provides great insight into the potential danger posed by three powerful forces that an understanding of biblical stewardship address: 1) the worries of life; 2) the deceitfulness of wealth; and 3) the desire for other things. Do you see a common denominator of these three things? Yep. Money.

God talks a lot about money. I think as Adventists, we get comfortable in the fact that we pay tithe, and maybe even some offerings, so we don't feel a need to discuss how we manage the other 90 percent. We think that's ours, and you've gone to meddling if you try and talk to us about it. But we forget that it's not merely 10 percent that is God's; the other 90 percent is His also. The returning of our tithe is an act of faithful obedience. But how do we manage the other 90 percent of His money and possessions? Do we use it to build up God's kingdom or our own? What do we value? How we spend our money reflects what we value.

Ellen White has an intriguing insight about how we invest our money. It's found in *Acts of the Apostles*, page 344:

"Spiritual prosperity is closely bound up with Christian liberality. The followers of Christ should rejoice in the privilege of revealing in their lives the beneficence [goodness] of their Redeemer. As they give to the Lord they have the assurance that their treasure is going before them to the heavenly courts. *Would men make their property secure?* Let them place it in the hands that bear the marks of the crucifixion. *Would they enjoy their substance?* Let them use it to bless the need and suffering. *Would they increase their possessions?* Let them heed the divine injunction, 'Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine' (Prov. 3:9, 20). Let them seek to retrain their possessions for selfish purposes, and it will be to their eternal loss. But let their treasure be given to God, and from that moment it bears His inscription" (emphasis added).

"I'll prove this tithing thing doesn't work. I'll tithe my way into bankruptcy. God doesn't work in our finances in this day and age." These were the words of Gunnar Johnson, author of *Generous Life Journey*. While engaging in a Bible study group on finances, his friend had challenged him to tithe. But Gunnar would prove him wrong. At the end of the 12-week Bible study, Gunnar said, "I realized that I didn't have a financial problem. I had a spiritual problem that blocked me from experiencing all God had for me."

As you have probably guessed, Gunnar didn't tithe himself into bankruptcy. Gunnar tithed himself into his life work of pastoring in the area of financial stewardship. I've had the privilege of hearing him personally. He's told the story of how he and his wife have been called *twice* to give away all that they had, but the Lord keeps returning to them in abundance.

Mark 4:8 says, “Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times” (NIV).

What was it about the good soil that made it “good”? Was it inherently good? Are there people who just don’t have to struggle like you and I do to be “good”? You know, those people who seem so perfect, who seem to have it all together?

No. The ground is good because it is receptive to the seeds of truth, and it responds to the influence of the Holy Spirit. And in healthy soil, Satan can’t steal the seeds of God’s Word from the heart.

MIRACLE GROW

So, what can we do to keep the condition of our soul’s soil strong and healthy to bear fruit?

1. The description of the good soil in Luke 8:15 mentions that the people heard the Word “with a noble and good heart” (NKJV). Pray for a clean heart and a right spirit like David did in Psalm 51:10-12. We have all sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23; 7:14). And because of sin, even our good works are tainted with impure motives.

2. The second description of the good soil said that the people kept His Word. In order to keep God’s Word in our hearts and prevent Satan from stealing it, removing it, or choking it out of our lives, we must:

a. Hear God’s Word. Spend time with the Lord in His Word. Listen to the preaching of His Word. Share His Word with others. By beholding, we become changed (see 2 Cor. 3:18).

b. Understand God’s Word. Do we take time to study it? Wrestle with it? Ask others for guidance regarding it? God promises that His Spirit will help us. First Corinthians 2:10 tells us, “But it was to us that God revealed these things by his Spirit. For his Spirit searches out everything and shows us God’s deep secrets” (NLT). But we have a work to do, and that is the hard work of understanding. Remember: Nothing worth having comes easy.

c. Accept God’s Word. Acceptance involves a willingness to receive, to possess. Once we understand what God is saying to us, though, sometimes we just don’t want to receive it! You’ve had those times, I’m sure, just like I have. “Really, Lord?” is our response. But that’s when we must trust God’s character enough to believe Him—even when we don’t always understand Him.

d. Obey God’s Word. In spite of our feelings. Whether it’s committing to truths such as Sabbath-keeping, returning tithe, recognizing His ownership of all of our lives, giving up harmful practices to ourselves or others, or whether it’s a more private surrender, we must obey God’s Word in order to keep it embedded in the soul of our hearts.

3. The third description of the good soil said that the people will “bear fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15, NKJV). How often have you prayed, like me, “Lord, will you hurry it up? How long is it going to take for you to change me? How long is it going to take for John to make a decision for Christ?” It’s human nature to want our souls—and the souls of others—to spring up quickly. But God promises us in Philippians 1:6, “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (NLT). It may take longer than we would like, but He will do it.

Good Soil, Good Harvest

What is the condition of your heart? Do you value God's Word? Are you rooted in His Word so you can withstand the temptations of the enemy? Whatever is the condition of your heart, God wants to scatter the seeds of life within it. And He will accomplish it—even in the most unlikely places.

¹ *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. ?? (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 19 ??), p. 404.

² *ibid.*

³ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), pp. 33, 36.

⁴ Adapted from <http://storage.cloversites.com/dllowrieministriesinc/documents/rom4.htm> on March 17, 2016, and http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/b/bible_power_of.htm. Quoted from J. K. Johnston, *Why Christians Sin* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1992), p. 121.

⁵ The 16 elements or nutrients essential for plant growth and reproduction are carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, calcium, magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, zinc, molybdenum, and chlorine. Taken from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soil#Nutrients>.