



2 EPIPHANY
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FIRST, MARSHALL
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PS 104 (selected verses) MARK 4:1-34

Good Soil

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus' parable of the **sower**, the **farmer**, the one who goes out and **plants** seed in his field raises some questions for me. Now, I'm about the last person who should criticize a farmer's methods of **planting**.



I love to admire fields of wheat and corn, soybeans and beets;
I delight in the beauty of flowers and trees;
and I love to eat fresh produce.

I also **honor** those who make their living by **tilling** the ground, **planting** seeds, and **harvesting** crops...but **I** couldn't do it.

And yet, even I, as *horticulturally* **challenged** as I may be, even **I** would not be so casual in my planting as is the **farmer** in today's parable. Why, do you suppose, did Jesus make his farmer appear to be so careless in planting his crop? **Waste** like that goes against, well, the very **grain** (!) of our upbringing!

Maybe we're reading too much into the story, but we're kind of left wondering if the farmer was **surprised** that:

- the **kernels** on the path were **carried away** by birds;
- the **grains** on the rocky soil would quickly **sprout**, but then **just** as quickly **die**;
- the **seeds** in the thorns would soon have the **life**...*choked out* of them.

If so, then he was a far worse farmer than **I** could **ever** be;
or maybe he was a novice, perhaps, who was **brand new** to the job;
or perhaps a hired hand who didn't **care** about **wasting** the owner's resources.

In short, it seems extravagant at **best** and wasteful at **worst**, to scatter those seeds to the wind...but then, **maybe** that's exactly what Jesus **intends**. **Maybe** Jesus **wants** us to see this **farmer** not as a careful caretaker of his crops, but as someone who is a **spendthrift**, who is a squanderer of *precious supplies*, who is a giddy giver of those precious seeds...

One of the most popular ways of explaining this passage has been as a **warning** by Jesus to his hearers (which now means **you** and **me!**) that we'd **better** take **stock** of what kind of **soil** we are: hardened, rocky, thorny or good. The parable then becomes an allegory for getting us to check the *quality* of our *character*, the *strength* of our *spirit*, the *merits* of our *morality*, and the *essence* of our *efforts* to live good, productive, *faith-and-good-works-filled* lives.

The **problem** with this approach is that the parable says **nothing** at **all** about just how those *bad* soils are supposed to go about **changing** themselves to the **good**, or **preventing** themselves from ever **becoming bad!**

How can the path move itself to the **field**, the rocky patch shed its **stones**, the weedy area **rid** itself of **thorns**...or the good soil maintain its **health**? That's the job of the **farmer**, and it's **not** easy work.

I was born and raised in a *dry land* farming area of north-central Montana. Now a life in the **agriculture business** is a **gamble** anywhere at any time. Yet a **lack of rain**, a **lot** of **rocks** and a **poor quality of dirt** tended to stack the deck against **those** farmers. Where precious few could irrigate their crops, the **majority** were simply at the *mercy* of Mother Nature who was all too often **stingy** with her rain, **generous** with her boulders, and seemingly **indifferent** to her dirt.

Contrast that with so much of the farmland in **Minnesota** – especially in places around here or up in the Red River Valley. The soil is so rich in some of these areas that it almost gleams blue or black with its rich nutrients.

The trouble, of course, is that...

Though we may **imagine** ourselves as good soil,
 Though we may **pray** that God **make** us good soil,
 Though we may try our best to **act** like good soil...
 That's not how it works, is it?



The **truth** is that we are **all** – at one time or another – different qualities of soil, right? Sometimes our hearts are like beaten, dusty paths, **impervious** to any type of growth. Safe underneath a hard exterior, we can repel any attempt to break down our defenses and open up our lives.



At **other** times, our spirits are like that **shallow, rocky soil** in which the Word starts to grow. We're **eager** to **improve**, we sense a **hole** in our **hearts** that we know Christ could **fill**, we **know** what we **need** to get **back on track**...

-but the **cares** of this world are just too **commanding**,
 -the **difficulties** of life just too **demanding**... And like rootless plants, we quickly **wilt** in the face of life's **problems** and **pain**.



And **always** our frail human resolve is susceptible to Satan's sneaky schemes – sometimes it only takes a thought about:

-some-**thing** we **want**,

-some-**one** we **hate**,

-some **fear** or **fault** or **failing** that we're **powerless** to *let go of*...

and those thorns just **choke** the life out of our **trust** that God will **never** let us go, that God is **dying** to forgive us, and that God is **always eager** to give us new life in Christ...

But that almost goes without saying – I mean, who among us **never** falters, or fails, or falls prey to the foolish temptations of sin?



The **truth**, though, is that we don't have to **worry** about **any** of this, because there's some **very good news** here – in fact, there are a **few** wonderful things to note in this story.

The **first** is the **richness of the good soil** – it which can produce 30, 60, even up to 100 times itself – what an **incredible yield!!** That's a word of good news for an obvious reason: growth is **good**, and great growth is **fantastic!!**



The **second** piece of good news in this passage is that the **seeds** sown in bad soil **ARE NEVER WASTED!** **Think** about it – if it's true that we **change**, that we **morph** from one kind of soil into another, eventually that **good** seed sown by God in us will **take root** when we re-enter our good soil stage – and we know from experience that anything planted by God **will not fail**.

The third bit of good news has to do with the **seed** itself – *what power it has!!!* **Did you catch what Jesus identified as the seed?** Shout it out if you know the answer... In v. 14 the Lord says plainly that “the sower sows the word”...the farmer plants **THE WORD... God's Word!!**

As in: In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with God, and the WORD was God...(John 1:1)

As in: The WORD became flesh and lived among us...(John 1:14)

God will **never cease** planting JESUS CHRIST in our lives. Even if it happens to be *one of those days* when our **hearts** are *hard*, or *rocky*, or *full of thorns* – that’s OK. **God’s** not worried – the Spirit is continually planting Jesus Christ deep in our **hearts**, deep in our **spirits**, deep in our **lives**.

And God’s also quite confident that when those seeds of faith find good soil, **nothing will be wasted**. In fact, says the Lord, that WORD will yield an abundance of faith: 30, 60, 100 times over!



That seed will eventually take root in us – we’ll **hear** God’s Word, we’ll **absorb** it into our lives, we’ll **dare** to **believe** that **God** truly **loves** us unconditionally, that **Christ** has **died** for us completely, and that the **Spirit** now **lives** in us that we might live faithfully – **hard hearts**, **rocky souls** and **thorny spirits** all!!

It’s **God** who does the **planting**, it’s **God** who causes the **growth**, and it’s **God** who brings in the **harvest**.

It’s God who does **all** this...**to** us and **through** us – you and me together. Speaking his word of Good News to us, Jesus then **invites us** to speak with others, and then helps us through the power of the Spirit speak and serve as servants of the Gospel.



We’re **not** called to judge the quality of our neighbor’s soil; neither the condition of their *hearts* nor the strength of their *efforts* to live a life of faith. Instead, we’ve been given the job of the foolish farmer: God puts a big bag in our hands and then sends us out into the world to cast our seeds of grace wherever they may fall. It may seem a little wasteful, but don’t worry – we have a great role model to follow.

Who knows where it all goes? says God with a smile as the foolish farmer who casts seeds everywhere and anywhere.



Yet these are very **special** seeds: seeds of the good news of Jesus Christ who died and rose that **all** people might know God's forgiveness and love. It's not that God is **careless** – it's that God is **care-free** and quite **confident** in the power of this seed to make us **all** into good soil.

Hardened paths, rocky dirt and thorny weeds may take their toll, but the good soil is there, the good soil is **here**, and in it God will cause faith to grow and multiply – and through us bless the world with this good news!

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord says, ***So shall my WORD be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty...***

Lord, let our hearts be good soil. Amen.