

Why does Jesus tell parables? Maybe we think he tells them to make what he is saying memorable. We like stories, after all, right? We like to hear stories. Maybe he tells parables, these stories, so that we will understand and remember them more easily. Is that why he does it? Or maybe he tells parables so that they become clearer to us. To explain something difficult by means of a story, the way that we often do with very small children. We tell them stories so that they will know what to do. Is that why he tells parables?

Jesus actually tells us why he speaks in parables. Verse 10 of our reading, he says: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" So Jesus uses parables, then, to show the truth to some people and to hide it from others. Jesus tells parables in order to hide the truth, so that some will know it and understand, and others will not. And maybe that sounds a little bit confusing to us, or maybe even a little bit mean. Why would you want to hide the truth at all? Why not just speak plainly? But that has everything to do with the point of this parable in our reading for today. Because we need to ask this question: how do we hear the Word of God?

Because the parable itself seems simple enough, right? A sower goes out to sow his seed. He's planting his field. And in those days, that would've meant that he was walking, scattering seed everywhere. Handful by handful as he was throwing it out into his field. And because of that way of planting, the seed would've ended up absolutely everywhere. Some of it landed on the road. Some of it landed among the rocks. Some of it landed in the thorns. Some of it went in to the good soil. And of all of this seed that was planted, only some of it actually produced a harvest. All the rest of it withers and dies away. And Jesus even tells us what this all means. He says the seed is the Word of God. And these four kinds of soils are four different kinds of people. And he's talking about how the Word takes root and grows or doesn't in these different kinds of people. And he shows us that only one of them actually produces a harvest. That all seems pretty simple, right? It all seems pretty straightforward. How could that be difficult to understand?

But let me ask you, Christians: have we actually understood what Jesus said here? And if it is so clear to us, then why do we so often struggle to understand the Word of God? Let's look at some other passages so that we can see this. Jesus tells us plainly, for example, that the world is going to hate us simply for being Christians. John chapter 15, he says: "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." In other words, Jesus tells us, very plainly, very straightforwardly, the world will hate us for no other reason than being a Christian. But if that's so clear, why does that so often surprise us? Why are we so often shocked when the world does hate us for that very reason? Is Jesus not clear in what he says? Or take another passage, Matthew chapter 6. Jesus says: "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." And yet how often are we anxious and worried about tomorrow, worried about what might come? Why? Is Jesus not clear in what he says? And so, Christians, if we struggle with these passages, is it any wonder that we might not fully understand what Jesus is trying to say? Jesus tells us very clearly that we must be careful how we listen to the Word, because it is possible for us to hear and yet not to understand, which is exactly his point in the parable for today.

So let's look at that first soil that Jesus talks about, the first soil being the road. It is a soil which is hard and deeply compacted, a soil which nothing grows in. Our roads, for example, don't have

any plants growing on them, either because they're covered or because they're maintained. But even things like trails or cattle trails don't have anything growing on them, because we're going over them all the time. There's no chance for any plants to take root in that kind of soil. And this kind of soil is not just people who never hear the Word, Christians. This kind of soil is not just people who never come to church. It can also include those who come quite regularly, who actually hear the Word fairly often, but it has no effect on their lives. Nothing changes. They hear what God says, but it has nothing to do with their own lives. It's like it goes in one ear and out the other.

Does this describe our lives, Christians? Do we hear what God says and yet never change because of it? God tells us to forgive one another as we have been forgiven. Do we refuse to forgive? God tells us to love one another as he has first loved us. Do we refuse to love? Do we think that whatever God says is always for somebody else? It's for other people, because I don't need to change anything. There's nothing wrong with me. That's exactly the kind of thing that he's talking about. And Jesus warns us very clearly here: those with hearts like the road will not produce a harvest. If we do not listen to the Word, we will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But that second soil is the rock, either because it is a rock or because it's soil which is filled with rocks. Soil which is generally quite shallow. There's hardly anything there. And we know that plants can take root even in that shallow of a soil. After all, we've seen grass growing on top of rocks before or plants coming up through our driveway, through cracks in the driveway. We know that they can grow in those places. And they may even do kind of well for a while. We think of dandelions, for example, growing in our driveway. They seem to do pretty well. But plants ultimately cannot thrive in those conditions. It's like a plant which has been in a pot that has never been watered. It will eventually dry out and be burned away by the sun so that it withers and dies. This soil, Jesus says, is people who are excited about the Word, but they're not serious about it. What does that mean? They imagine that being a Christian is something easy, maybe even the easiest thing in the world. It's not that hard to be a Christian. You believe these things, and everything is just fine! But as soon as it costs something to be a Christian, then they turn away.

Does this describe our lives, Christians? Are we fair weather Christians? So that it's easy to believe in God when the sun is shining in our lives, when everything is going well, but as soon as a storm rolls in, well, then it's not so easy. Do we love to hear about Jesus carrying his cross, but not about carrying our own? Do we love to hear Jesus promise us life, eternal life, but not when he says that we must lose our lives for his sake? Jesus warns us here as well: those with rocky hearts will not produce a harvest. If we don't listen to everything that the Word says, we will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The third soil is filled with thorns. It's basically like an untended garden which is full of weeds. And in that case, there are few things that grow quickly, and even fewer that actually grow all the way to maturity. Sure, the weeds might do okay. I have Canada thistle in my garden that always seems to do just fine, no matter what I do. But we don't want the weeds to grow. The weeds choke out all the other plants so that there's ultimately no harvest. This soil, Jesus says, is people who are distracted by the world for whatever reason. Maybe they're distracted by the cares and the concerns of this life. They're always worried about what's going to happen next. Or maybe they're simply distracted by the riches and the pleasures of this life. You always find time for

entertainment, no matter what might be going on. And these kinds of people may even hear the Word and try to do it--on Sunday. But soon after, they turn to something else. They're distracted by the things of this world.

Christians, does this describe our lives? Are we always running after something else? Do we always have time for God later, but not right now? I have no time to pray, because I have to do this. I have no time to go to church, because I must do that. And this can even be a danger for those in the church too. It could be a danger for pastors as well. We can become so busy with life that we think that we're serving God at the same time, but we're just busy, distracted by the things of life. Jesus warns us again: those whose hearts are full of weeds and thorns will not produce a harvest. If we have no time for the Word, we will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fourth soil is what Jesus calls us to be: the good soil. Soil which is good and deep and rich, soil in which seeds take root easily and grow to harvest. This soil is those who hear the Word of God and keep it. All those other soils might hear what the Word says, but they ultimately don't listen, or at best, they only half listen. The other soils hear, but they do not understand. But the good soil hears the Word, and it does understand. Because these people hold on to the Word. They are in the Word. They listen to what the Word says and do it, even when it hurts to do so. That's what it means to hold it fast in an honest and good heart and to bear fruit with patience.

Well, how do we become this soil? we ask. Through the work of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit transforms us. The Holy Spirit makes us new creations in Christ. The Spirit speaks to us. The Spirit leads us into all truth, because he is the Spirit of truth. Without the Holy Spirit, we would be nothing. Without the Holy Spirit, we could not listen at all. But in the Spirit, we can know and listen to the truth. In the Spirit, we can hear and understand the Word, because the Spirit opens our ears to hear what God has to say, so that we can bear fruit as the children of God. So it's good for us, then, to pray for the Spirit, to pray that he would lead us into all truth, that he would lead us to listen. And in the power of the Spirit, we can hear and listen to what God has to say.

So Christians, let us not grieve the Holy Spirit. Let us listen to the Word of God and do what it says. Let us not quench the Spirit by despising what God says or only half listening to it. But as Paul says in 2 Timothy 1: "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." Guard the Word which has been given to you. Hold on to that precious seed, and God will cause it to sprout and to grow and to bear fruit in you to everlasting life.

Let us pray. Almighty God, give us your Holy Spirit to open our ears and our hearts to your living Word, so that we may hold it fast in an honest and good heart. Lead us into all truth through the Spirit of truth, and give us a heart which longs to do what you say. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.