

SMALL GROUP LESSON

The Parable of the Sower 1: Avoiding the Wrong Ground

The logo for 'hyphen' is located in the top right corner. It consists of the word 'hyphen' in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are colored: 'h' is blue, 'y' is green, 'p' is red, 'h' is blue, 'e' is green, and 'n' is red. The logo is set against a dark grey rounded rectangular background.

Lesson Aim

This lesson will teach you why it's important to avoid circumstances that trap your heart.

Preparation Necessary

Paper, Writing instruments, Whiteboard with markers

Scripture Text

"And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." -Matthew 13:3-9

Additional Scriptures

The Parable of the Sower can also be found in Mark 4:1-12 and Luke 8:4-10.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever met someone whose head was so hard, their mind so made up, that facts almost literally ricocheted off their foreheads?

If you haven't, then you only need to wait around for a huge natural disaster for them to appear. They're the ones who don't believe the killer hurricane is coming their way. When Hurricane Ike hit the Louisiana-Texas border in September, 2008, with government officials at all levels warning everyone to evacuate, of course some people didn't. Over 50 people died, but that didn't stop others from trying. According to "<http://www.wtopnews.com/?nid=104&sid=1477407>" WTOP News:

"In Surfside Beach, (Louisiana), retired carpenter and former Marine Ray Wilkinson became something of a celebrity for a day: He was the lone resident in the town of 805 to defy the order to leave. Authorities found him Saturday morning, drunk.

"I consider myself to be stupid," Wilkinson, 67, said through a thick, tobacco-stained beard. "I'm just tired of running from these things. If it's going to get you, it's going to get you."

He added: "I didn't say I had all my marbles, OK?"

Or with Mount St. Helens rumbling for two months in the spring of 1980, that entire area of Washington was on high alert. It was dangerous enough that no one was allowed on the mountain without a special government permit, yet 84-year old lodge owner Harry Truman refused to move. "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Truman_\(volcano_victim\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Truman_(volcano_victim))" Wikipedia records:

Parable of the Sower 1: Avoiding the Wrong Ground



“If the mountain goes, I’m going with it.” Indeed, he died in the blast, along with 56 other people, and his body was never found. He died at the age of 83. The site of his former lodge is buried under 150 feet of volcanic landslide debris, beneath the much raised bed of Spirit Lake.

The facts are there, yet some people refuse to believe them. Sometimes that happens to us spiritually. Scripture offers us some new facts, yet we find our hearts unwilling to accept them, to plant them in our own lives so that they can bloom and change us. We’ll investigate those spiritual conditions today.

IDEAS

The parable of the sower is Jesus’ most famous parable—a classic of simplicity, depth, and important personal application. To properly investigate it, we’re going to divide this story into two lessons, with this lesson focused on spiritual failures within this parable and in our next meeting we’re going to investigate the spiritual successes revealed within it.

Ask everyone to turn in their Bibles and read Matthew 13:3-9 [here](#).

It’s easy enough to see the ground in the parable as our hearts (and minds), in various conditions, at various times, when the truth—the seed in the parable—is sent our way. How we respond to the Gospel message and the resulting discipleship is portrayed with bone-chilling accuracy. Thus, each type of ground is worth investigating so that we can properly evaluate ourselves in light of Scripture.

1. The Way Side

Scripture tells us, “Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:”

We opened with a couple of examples of people who refused to accept the facts, refused to understand that just because something hadn’t happened to them before, doesn’t mean it can’t still happen.

Of course, maintaining a healthy skepticism is a necessity in today’s society. Many times you’ll be attending a class where the professor says something so patently stupid that you can’t believe it. Or perhaps it is so political it has almost no basis in reality, only in ideology. Or perhaps a news report was so biased that you couldn’t take it seriously without further investigation. (Like those well-reasoned newspaper editorials that take both candidates’ virtues into consideration and mysteriously only pick one party’s candidates.)

Still, there’s a difference between a healthy skepticism and a practiced cynicism. If the skeptic’s not careful, (s)he can become a cynic without even realizing it. Cynics assume everyone’s motives are suspect, that no one cares about anyone else, and that everyone is only driven by the primal desires of greed, pride, and sexual instinct.

In this scriptural example, somehow the seeds of truth never penetrate the hard ground of their heart—perhaps they even bounce off. The truth lies on the outside so that it is easily whisked away by the birds of busyness and culture and commitments and everything else. Still, the truth was easily plucked from this person’s heart because it never was allowed to settle inside.

Parable of the Sower 1: Avoiding the Wrong Ground



Biblical examples of this include: the philosophers on Mars Hill, the people of Jerusalem proclaiming Christ the Messiah as he entered on a donkey before proclaiming “Crucify him” within the week; the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Interaction

Why do people seem to resist certifiable truths?

Have you ever resisted something that everyone said was true, yet later found that it wasn't? Can you remember an example?

Have you ever resisted something that everyone said was true, yet later found that it was and you wished you'd listened earlier in life? Can you remember an example? What was the difference?

2. The Stony Ground

Scripture tells us, “Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.”

This challenge is more subtle than the seeds along the way side. These people open their hearts to the Word, yet somehow it never takes root.

Of course, bad habits make it harder to implement good truths. The writer of Hebrews differentiates between sin and bad habits, by calling them weights “that easily besets us” (Hebrews 12:1).

The reality is that this ground opens up to something new, but soon decides that it can't accommodate the newness because, as per too much of life, it must release something else or change its current habits to absorb the new truth. We've all seen parents who look longingly at a child's video game and say, “If I had the time to learn this game, I could beat you . . .” or “I can't start on that because I'm too competitive and it would eat up all my time...” Of course, they have the time to master anything, they would just have to sacrifice more important things in their life or give up all their spare time, and the game is not worth that sacrifice.

Sadly, too many people of all ages welcome the Gospel into their lives, often surfing on rising worship to God in services, yet when their walk with God requires genuine change, a commitment to a higher calling, or to pay their tithes, or become accountable to another brother or sister in the Lord, they find they actually don't have room for the Gospel after all.

Interaction

Have you ever walked into church, saw who was preaching and thought, “I'll never get anything out of this”? And then—amazingly—you didn't? Maybe tonight you thought, “I've heard this parable since Sunday school, what can it teach me now?” Why did you allow this attitude to settle before you even heard the Word?

Have you ever been walking along and saw a needy person and thought, “Someone needs to buy that person a meal. But I can't—I'm a poor college student”? Should you have volunteered yourself to the leading of the Holy Ghost? Or was it the Holy Ghost?

Have you ever found yourself threatened by an idea from a younger person or a new person to your group and thought “I know what's best, I've been here longer than you.” Is this a result of inflexibility?

Parable of the Sower 1: Avoiding the Wrong Ground



There's an old saying that "The good is enemy to the great." Often, what we have in our lives is not wrong, but it's not what's best for us. When compared to what's best, perhaps we should see the good as weights and decide to quickly divest ourselves of them. An Olympic athlete knows that to even compete for his or her final goal, an Olympic gold medal, they must say no to numerous small goods that others can enjoy. Perhaps if we started looking at ourselves as Olympic Christians it will be easier for us to do the same.

Biblical examples of stony ground could include: Demas, who forsook Paul because he loved "this present world" too much to change (II Timothy 4:10).

3. Removing Weeds (or "Thorns" in the King James Version)

Scripture tells us that, "And some fell among weeds; and the weeds sprang up, and choked them:"

Weeds, thy name is busyness! Do you know anyone in your dorm or apartment or life who doesn't complain about being too busy and never having enough time? Now how we evaluate what others do with their time may be critical, but the overall complaint is unchanged.

Just look at our habits.

The biggest negative to surfing the web, assuming sin isn't being pursued, is the way it encourages short attention spans, as if a return to childhood somehow made us better. It's as if we're training ourselves to have ADHD, where any web article longer than 3-5 paragraphs can be read later, any video over three minutes isn't worth watching, and any web site that doesn't instantly amuse and thrill isn't worth a return. "<http://www.thrfeed.com/2008/11/nielsen-tv-use.html>" Studies show that more people are simultaneously surfing the web and watching television, which means our attention is even more fragmented, draining comprehension away from maturity. If that's how we spend at least 142 hours of our month (4.7 hours daily), then is it any wonder many struggle to put a focused 15 minutes of prayer into our days or have difficulty living through a 90 minute church service?

Distractions! We welcome them with open arms, cramming our days as full as possible, then complain about exhaustion and being frazzled and overwhelmed by life.

Interaction

Why does American seem to worship busyness so much?

What are some ways you welcome distractions into your own life? (Think: leaving the cell phone on at all times, hanging with friends past the point of exhaustion, texting friends during class or a church service.)

When's the last time you enjoyed an extended period of silence?

When's the last time you returned to your real life refreshed and renewed?

The reality is, we inflict an unreasonable schedule upon ourselves too many times. Ensuring ourselves sufficient sleep is boring compared to the options of hanging with friends. Yet just because we can do six things simultaneously, too often we do those six simultaneous things without ever wondering "What is the best path?" or "What will help me chase spiritual excellence?"

Parable of the Sower 1: Avoiding the Wrong Ground



It doesn't matter if we receive the Holy Ghost and love to worship, if we can't maintain a daily relationship with the Master. It is our time together that he covets, not the big public displays that are easier to create when we're with like-minded believers. (Though they certainly have their place in our walk with Him.)

It is when we choose the simpler path of spiritual excellence that the weeds of busyness and distraction will lose their nourishment instead of suffocating our spiritual desires.

In a lecture given on August 21, 2008, John Eudes, retired abbot of the Genesee abbey in Piffard, New York had this to say:

To help develop our spiritual lives more, work out a schedule that accounts for every hour of the week. Then examine it and find out if we are spending time in those areas that mean most to us. If not, cut out those areas that can be cut and devote more time to the people/spiritual goals that mean the most to us. Reexamine this schedule after awhile as we may find our priorities change as we become more spiritual.

Here is another paradox of the material and the spiritual life: When material things are absent, we long for them—when they are present we lose our taste for them. For example, if we haven't eaten in awhile we are hungry for food, but after we have filled up we are no longer hungry and no longer desire it. When spiritual things are absent we lose all taste for them—when they are present, we long for them even more. For example, if we haven't prayed in awhile, we really don't desire to pray. However, if we make prayer a priority, and it becomes a spiritual action for us, we find that we long for more of spiritual things.

As hard as it is in our halcyon college years, recognizing, then removing the weeds is essential for a vibrant Christian life.

Biblical examples of this problem would include: Solomon, who started strong yet began filling his life with other cares to the point his love of God was squeezed out; the prophet Balaam who had prophetic gifts, yet Peter wrote "Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;" (II Peter 2:15), and ended up killed with pagans.

CONCLUSION

Just because we focused on the less successful soils in the parable doesn't mean you should feel like a failure. These examples are before us so that we can more easily identify our own weaknesses and/or prevent ourselves from stumbling into these easy human traps. By recognizing the similar circumstances, we're more likely to avoid them in the future.

LED-BY-THE-SPIRIT QUESTIONS

1. Which of these areas—the way side, the stony ground, the weeds—are you most susceptible to act like? Why?
2. Do the biblical characters related to these issues (Note: Reread the examples in each) grab your attention and make you rethink your own weaknesses?

3. Brainstorm some biblical solutions to all three of these maladies. (*Note: Write these solutions on the whiteboard.*) (For instance: Simplify schedules, Open yourself to other spiritual disciplines, etc.)
4. (*Note: Pass out paper and writing instruments for this one.*) What habits will you change this week to better prevent becoming like the grounds that produces nothing for Christ? How will you do this?
5. Will you ask someone to check on you in the coming weeks to measure your progress?

PRAYER

Lord, it's too easy sometimes to reject your urgings. It's too easy to skip by uncomfortable scriptures, to allow our hearts to imitate the wayside or the stony ground because it's easier to remain hard than to open ourselves up to you. Forgive us our unnecessary habits. Forgive us our insistence on our own choices to fill our heart and lives instead of yours. Help us to remember that you're always there to redeem and guide us back onto the good ground of 100-fold blessings. We know that a love to spend time with you is always your desire. Thank you for allowing us to examine these failed grounds so that we can live the good ground of spiritual success in our own. Amen. ★