

## "Good Soil"

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Old Testament: Psalm 119:105-112  
New Testament: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

There is an ancient Greek legend that when the gods made the human species, they argued about where to put the answers to life so humans would have to search for them. One god said, "Let's put the answers on top of a mountain. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find them right away." Another of the gods said, "Let's put them in the center of the earth. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find them right away." Then another said, "Let's put them in the bottom of the sea. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find them right away." They sat in silence until finally another god spoke up. "We can put the answers to life within them. They will never look for them there." And so they did.

What answer lies deep within you? Can you think of a need that you have in life? Something that has eluded you, something *you've long since given up on*. Think of what that is. And for some, maybe nothing comes to mind. Yet, even those of us content with life have some need that God could meet – some blessing that awaits us – if we would just give it a chance, spend a little time digging around for it and nurturing it.

Christian missionary E. Stanley Jones would pass out a piece of paper at the start of his lessons on spiritual growth. He would say, "No one will see what you are about to write on this paper. I want you to write what your need is today." Inevitably, while his students were thinking and praying and writing, someone would always say, "Brother Stanley, I don't have a need. What do you write down if you don't have a need?" And Brother Stanley would say, "If you think you don't have a need, then THAT'S your need!"<sup>1</sup>

We can all pray for God to show us what we need most, what we truly need in life – right now. Would you do that with me? Right now, join me in praying for God's guidance: Pray that God would help you fill in the blank.

Dear Lord, you know our innermost need, that thing we long for, that which we are sure you desire for us but it never comes. It's been so long, Lord,

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Schuller, *You Are Wonderful* (Norwalk, Connecticut: The C.R. Gibson Company, 1987), 12.

since we've dared hope for your blessing that we're not even sure we believe it's possible anymore. But still, Lord, we pray. We pray for you to plant that desire in our hearts once more. Nurture in us the longing for this elusive blessing, that we might be inspired to nurture it in our lives, no matter what it might take. Name this blessing in our hearts this moment, God. Give it voice in our innermost being. The desire for ...; the need for ..., what? Amen.

Okay, for some of you, God has opened up an area of need. God has rekindled in you a desire or longing for something special, something miraculous, something that if it came about it would be wondrous indeed. I invite you to hold onto that as we have our time together today, as we look at how your particular blessing might arise in your life, as we explore what might be needed to cultivate it and lay the foundation so that God might work in us a miracle, grant you a blessing in answer to your prayer?

Or, for those of us here yet unable to think of how God might specifically bless our lives at this time, what can we expect once God does plant within us that seed of an idea, the notion of where or how we might be blessed, become more happy, grow spiritually, be more loving or easier to live with, receive inspiration to make a change for the better, get motivated to serve in our community, to become a blessing in the life of another person. What can *we* do to receive God's blessings more readily in our lives?

Because, as we listened just a moment ago to the Parable of the Sower, we got an assurance that our lives *can* all be richer, that there *is* fertile soil in which God has planted a blessing for our lives. We heard Jesus, surrounded by a crowd – a group of people not much different from this group gathered here – we heard Jesus say, "... What was sown on good soil ... this is the one who hears the word and understands it." The one sown on good soil is the one "who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

And in hearing this, we come to suspect that maybe *we* are the seeds of God that have been sown upon the earth; sown up the path, or the rocky ground, or amid the thorns, and, yes, many of us, upon good soil. And this means that the place where the seeds land – for better or worse – that place is our lives, our path laden, rocky, thorny lives; the lives we hope to cultivate as good soil.

Those who have been sown upon good soil are those who have a loving parent, the chance for a good education, children or brothers or sisters who love you and care about you, friends to encourage and support you, people who pray for you. Those planted in good soil are those who travel through life along side others who you can talk to about life's struggles, or with whom you can explore and search for the answers of life hidden within us. The ones planted in good soil are the ones who have a place to gather in fellowship with one another, who know that there are people they can serve along side in our community and the world.

Such people are those of us who have landed upon good soil. And if you count yourself among them, then you have the opportunity to take root in such fertile soil, to drink in spiritual and intellectual nourishment, to cultivate a life of good fruit abundant enough to bless the lives of others.

Anyone with access to good soil such as this has the opportunity to grow and to produce rich blessings in life. And if we're not doing that, it's because the good soil we were planted in has been covered up or washed away over the years. Let's face it, life is rough and sometimes there's nothing we can do but take it. Kind of like this video of a tree's lot in life that we're about to see. Let's watch.

Maybe somebody came in and laid down a path for your life, and ever since you've been wondering where true happiness lies, traveling a highway of someone else's making, stuck on a road that seems to go nowhere – a dead end. Maybe you're constantly stumbling over rocks; there's always something in life tripping you up. Or perhaps it seems like life is just out to get you – that there are evil forces at work, what Jesus might call thorns, ready to choke off of any hope to make your life better.

Such is the world we live in. But still, God expects us to produce good fruit, to grow and to flourish in life; to receive the blessings of a life well lived. Jesus tells us that God is like “a sower (who) went out to sow.” God is the sower, the one who sends us out into the world. And there we are, standing amid the crowd listening to Jesus, realizing that we are the ones sown by God. The ones landing on relatively good soil, but still experiencing rocks and thorns and well-worn paths that cause us to stumble, to suffer injury or despair, to take wrong turns and follow misguided ways.

And looking up, we see that Jesus, Jesus is the gardener. Jesus is the one whom God sends to ensure that the seeds God has sown can find good soil. Our job, as the seeds of God, as the young shoots of new life, as the mature trees that hug and shade all creation – our job is to grow, to seek out life-giving water, to push upward toward the warmth and light of the sun.

And to do that, we need to maintain and cultivate the good soil that God planted us in the first place. Psychologist Laura Schlessinger hosts her own radio program and says that the question most frequently asked of her in radio, magazine, TV or newspaper interviews is: “What’s the number one, most typically asked question on your internationally syndicated show?” Her answer? The caller usually wants to know this: “Now that I’ve done all these things I shouldn’t have done, how can I avoid the consequences I knew, but denied, and just hoped would not happen?”<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever noticed that anytime a blessing arises in your life, it comes after you've pursued another direction, embraced a new pathway or endeavor, turned over a new leaf in life, allowed someone or something new into your life?

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<sup>2</sup> How Could You Do That?!: The Abdication of Character, Courage and Conscience [New York: Harper Collins, 1996], 9.

*What is it that got you to where you are right now?* What change, what blessing, what turn of good fortune? Maybe it was your pledge of love to that certain person, which then led to a new home and a growing family (children and grandchildren or, for some of us our beloved pets, and friends and neighbors). Or sometimes the blessing comes from branching out in new directions; just trusting ourselves and others and God enough to be vulnerable to life's unknowns: will the surgery help? ... will I get the job? ... will she accept my apology? ... can I really stop my bad habits, abstain from risky behaviors? ... if I turn my back on the "friends" who pull me down, what if my best friends walk away, too; will I have any friends at all? ... is there anyone or anything ready to fill the void if I put myself out there? ... if I show the world I have a need?

Or will the world see my vulnerability and ridicule me, trample on my needs, take advantage of my weakness, leave me to wither away to nothing? You know, we are all vulnerable to some degree or another even the most rugged man or the sturdiest women. For instance, I hear that if you look up vulnerable in the dictionary, you'll see two entries: one for women and one for men. The first entry says, "Vulnerability – Female: fully opening up emotionally to another person." The second entry says, "Male: playing football without a helmet." Okay, not really. But it is true that we all approach life differently.

Jesus knows we are each in a different place, and that everyone has something holding them back. Sometimes we're on a path of our own making and won't let anyone or anything redirect us. Sometimes we're tripping over rocks with every step we take. There are people in our lives who rise up like thorns just choking us off from any possibility of hope, or encouragement, or new horizons.

And yet, no matter what life seems like for any of us, Jesus assures us that somewhere there is good soil for us to sink our roots into – that God has surrounded us with what we need to not only survive but to thrive. Jesus sees within us that part of us just waiting for God to reach out and touch us, to plant us anew in the rich soil, to grant us that very blessing that will meet our heart's purest desire.

That thing you prayed for a moment ago or which God is ready even now to reveal to you. Remember what that is, can you think of what that might be? Whatever it is your desire or need, if it's truly God-given, then there is a way to have it take root in your life. We just need to remove any rocks we may be stumbling over, avoid any thorns that might be stabbing at the very heart of our most cherished hope – those people who bring us down and kill our dreams – we need to muster the courage and faith to leave the path we're on and seek fresh, rich ground in which to plant an inspiring idea or undertake a new endeavor.

Now all this may be nothing new for you. Perhaps you've tried and tried and failed and failed. But remember, in Jesus' parable, we are the seeds sown by God. And as the seeds of God, we have the power to seek out good soil, to inch our way off the wrong path, to slowly and persistently nudge the hugest rocks out of our way, to rise up even amid the thorns.

As the seeds of God, our power comes from nurturing God's word. We learn this when Jesus says, "Hear then the parable of the sower," and then goes on to reveal its secret and powerful meaning. He says, "when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand," then "what is sown in the heart" is snatched away and yields nothing.

Here, Jesus is pointing to the ever-elusive answers to life – those answers that the ancient Greeks knew were planted within us, the word or the truth of the kingdom of God that Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit has planted in our hearts. Jesus is the word, the Word that is received with joy, the word that overcomes the cares of the world; the word that resists the lures of wealth.

Jesus is the word inside us that empowers us to cultivate and maintain the good soil of our lives so that we might grow and produce the abundant fruit of God's blessing. As you look at what God has planted in your heart as a future blessing in life, ask yourself, ***what do you need to get to the next step?*** What pathways must you move away from, what rocks might you or I need to clear out of our lives, what thorns must we steer clear of in order to satisfy our deepest, purest desire, fulfill our most heartfelt need, achieve our God-given potential? Ask yourself. Ask God.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, creator and keeper of the world and all that is in it, we thank you for helping us to live our lives that the world may be a better place for all your creatures.

We praise you for creating us in your image and preserving us through the power of your Holy Spirit, and for providing us with all the blessings of this life; but above all, for your boundless love and care through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Help us, God, to cultivate that which would nourish our souls. For every soul belongs to you, O Lord. The soul who sins is one who will die inside, and we sin when we nourish our souls with things of the flesh.

Teach us not to fear that which can kill the body and yet not touch our souls, but rather to fear that which can destroy both soul and body through a living hell.

Create in our sacred soul space, the yearning for that which only you can bestow – the hidden manna available to those who overcome any difficulty in the name of Jesus.

And help those, O Lord, how are beset at this moment with struggle, or temptation, or injury or loss. Help those with any need find their answer in your Word, O Lord, whether your word comes from sacred texts or our faithful attempts to share the life-giving message you implant in our hearts and in our minds.

For it is your Word that leads to eternal life – life in abundance both here and in the time to come. We turn to that word now, Lord, as we turn our hearts and minds to the words you taught us to pray, saying: .

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.