

“Soil Analysis”

Mark 4:1-20 ¹

Both of my parents grew up on farms, and my Dad was involved in the business of agriculture all his life. In retirement, he spent a lot of time as a gardener and a tender of rose bushes. I was a city kid, but although I never worked the land, I certainly heard him talk about the importance of caring for the soil.

It is the soil, of course—he resisted the word, “dirt”—that contains the nutrients, the water, and the living organisms that create healthy farms, landscapes, and gardens. People who are serious about agriculture are serious about knowing their soil.

The university extension systems of most states provide soil testing services, and these tests tell farmers and gardeners what nutrients are deficient or excessive in each plot or field. As the University of Maryland soil testing service puts it, “It’s better to plant a \$2 tree in a \$25 hole than to plant a \$25 tree in a \$2 hole.”² Hang on to that thought.

It was a beautiful day in the neighborhood. The sun was bright; the air was warm. The sea was calm, with gentle ripples against the shore. An enormous crowd of people had gathered, with energy and excitement bordering on hysteria. Jesus had become a celebrity among the people of Galilee, because “*the news about his miracles had spread far and wide, and vast numbers of people came to see him for themselves.*” The crowds were so large and so eager to be near Jesus that he “*instructed his disciples to bring around a boat and to have it ready in case he was crowded off the beach*” (Mark 3:8-9).

It became necessary to use the boat, and Jesus began to address the crowd from His floating pulpit. Although we frequently see Jesus speaking quietly and compassionately in private conversations, He must have also had a powerful and commanding voice to have been able to speak to hundreds—even thousands—of people with no amplification.

On this particular day, it may be that a farmer was out sowing seed on a nearby hillside, and Jesus may have pointed to this farmer as a clue to the nature of His kingdom. As the farmer broadcast his seed, some of the seed fell on a footpath. Some of the seed fell in rocky places. Some of the seed fell into a thorny area, and some of the seed landed on fertile soil.

It was the custom in Palestine in those days to sow the seed before plowing the ground, and so the sower, striding over the unplowed stubble, broadcast his seed across pretty much everything. He didn’t hesitate to sow seed on the beaten path through the field, or in the areas where thorns were growing wild, because he would plow the seed in later. The farmer even sowed in rocky places that were both unavoidable and unplowable, but he didn’t lose heart even though he knew that much of his work would come to nothing. As Jesus looked over at that familiar sight, He told the crowd, “The Kingdom of God is like that farmer.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 22, 2017. Parallel passages include Matthew 13:1-23 and Luke 8:4-15.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² <http://extension.umd.edu/hgic/soils/soil-testing>

Later in the day, when Jesus was alone with His disciples and with others who had gathered around, they asked Him, “What do your stories mean?” On first reading, our text seems to indicate that Jesus deliberately told the brief stories we know as “parables” in order to keep people from understanding what He was saying—almost as a secret code. There’s probably some truth to that, but we need to look more closely.

The text tells us that Jesus explained this parable to a larger group than just His inner circle of disciples. Jesus’ explanation was not just for the Twelve, but it was just for those who really wanted to know what Jesus was saying. Jesus didn’t talk to the large crowds in a way that was always obvious and clear. “His enigmatic teaching served to separate those who were curious from those who were serious, those who were seeking only a religious sideshow from those who were truly seeking after God.”³

It seems to me that Jesus’ parables are examples of the lengths to which God is willing to go in order to respect our genuine freedom to live our lives apart from God. The Bible is very, very clear that God passionately desires for all people to be saved (2 Peter 3:9), but the salvation God intends is a great deal more than some minimal “fire insurance.”

Anyone would “sign on the dotted line” with God if they were confronted with the reality of God’s awesome Glory, but such allegiance would represent nothing more than an attempt at self-preservation. God doesn’t want terrified lackeys. God wants sons and daughters with whom to be in loving relationship and creative partnership. As God said through Jeremiah, “*You will find me when you search for me with all your heart*” (29:13).

And so, to those who really wanted to understand, Jesus said, “Once you have met me, what happens next depends on the sort of person—the kind of soil—you are; and there are several kinds of people in the world.

“Some people have shut their minds. They think they already know all they need to know, and they come to worship not to meet me and to know me but to get another coat of varnish so they’ll look good to others.

“Some people fail to think things through and go off ‘half cocked.’ They are eager to get onboard with me, but they hit the door just as soon as I ask anything from them. They’re flares that fizzle out; sound and fury signifying nothing.

“Some people begin to understand what I’m doing in the world, and they want to be a part of what I’m doing, but they don’t want it badly enough. When it gets right down to it, they’re more concerned about clothes, cars, and vacations than they are about changing the world. They’re too busy with bulging briefcases of second-rate stuff to be of any use to me.

“But there are a few people out there who are able to really see what’s going on. There are a few people who can see beyond the obvious, and they’re willing to cast their lot with me as I recreate the world. And while that partnership is going to be costly, it’s going to be worth what it costs. *So which kind of person are you?*”

Pastor Gordon McDonald told this story about his experience of running track in high school: “When I first ran track in prep school, my coach invited me to his home for dinner one night. After the meal, he pulled out a notebook displaying my name on the front cover. He

³ David E. Garland, “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 165.

immediately turned to the back page, which bore the heading ‘June 1957’—three and a half years away.

“Gordon,’ he said. ‘These are the races I’m going to schedule you to run almost four years from now. Here are the times you will achieve.’ I looked at those times. They were impossible! They were light years away from where I was at that moment as a runner.

“Then Coach began turning back the pages of that book, page by page, showing the forty-two months he had scheduled for workouts. These were the graduated, accelerated plans for my increasing skill on the track as the months and years would go by. He had a sense of direction and development when it came to my athletic growth.

“Coaches and leaders of all kinds understand the absolute necessity of strategic, long-range planning. Similarly, a wise and all-knowing God has a plan for our total lives—gradually, inevitably, down through the years, we become more like Jesus.” And that is indeed God’s plan: that you and I become “*mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:13, 2:10).

This is, in fact, what God intends to do in YOU: to make you more and more like Jesus, so you’ll see what He sees, think what He thinks, desire what He desires, and live every day in His power. The Bible makes it clear that God intends to transform you and me into creatures who can contain His Glory. This is pretty amazing stuff!

So how do we get there from here? You may be glad to know that the process that leads to full maturity in Christ is not fundamentally different from Gordon MacDonald’s track experience, or from the processes that lead to maturity in other areas of our lives.

Malcolm Gladwell has famously suggested that it takes 10,000 hours of dedicated practice to master any area of knowledge.⁴ While not all agree with Gladwell’s assessment, I think it’s pretty clear to most of us that practice is essential to excellence.

During the long-ago years when I really played the trumpet, I knew it was essential to practice every single day. Missing just one day would result in a muscular deficit that it would take three days to eliminate. I expect that most musicians and athletes would tell a similar tale.

The situation is very similar in the journey of faith. Most of us in this room accept the basic beliefs of Christianity as true. We attend worship off and on, we give occasionally, we live decent lives, and we support various charitable projects. Does that make us mature Christians? Nope. That doesn’t even make us Christians, because Satan himself accepts the basic beliefs of Christianity as true (James 2:19).

To be even a *beginner* Christian—that is, to be “born again”—we have to consciously choose to open our lives to the transforming power of Jesus. This is not a matter of head knowledge so much as it is one of heart change and life transformation. And to become a *mature* Christian, we need equipment, training, and practice, just as we do in golf . . . or music . . . or medicine . . . or cooking . . . or woodworking . . . or anything else.

The development of maturity is not a mysterious process, and we understand it in most areas of our lives. Somehow, though, we seem to have a hard time realizing that the same process that makes us mature in our vocational lives or in our sporting efforts is just as necessary if we’re going to grow spiritually. Let’s look briefly at spiritual maturity—at spiritual

⁴ <http://www.businessinsider.com/new-study-destroys-malcolm-gladwells-10000-rule-2014-7>

soil preparation that leads to spiritual harvest—using the ideas of equipment, training, and practice.

There are two pieces of equipment that are absolutely essential in order to begin the journey toward spiritual maturity. The first of these is a spiritually transformed heart; the second is a solid and growing understanding of the Bible.

With respect to a transformed heart, the Bible says that “*people who aren’t [born again] can’t understand these truths from God’s Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). As Jesus told Nicodemus, “*If you’re not born again, you’ll not only never enter the Kingdom of God; you’ll never even see it*” (John 3:3). Without the new heart and the new mind that only God can give, we cannot begin the Journey at all.

The second piece of equipment we need is a solid and growing understanding of the Bible. The only way we’re ever going to know what God is up to on this planet and in the cosmos is to know what God has told us in His love letter to us that we know as the Bible.

And this brings me to the idea of training. Being born again is not a complicated enterprise, but its result is a baby Christian, not a mature one. Maturity requires training and practice.

It’s not enough merely to accept the Bible as God’s Word to us. If we’re going to experience the Bible’s transforming power in our lives, we’ve got to learn how to understand and interpret it. We need to understand something about the circumstances in which and to which the various books of the Bible were written. We need to develop understanding of the major themes and principles of the Bible, and so on.

For this reason, weekly Bible Study is not optional for persons who are serious about following Jesus. Many people have spent more time studying for their driver’s license than they have spent seriously trying to understand the requirements for and the process of becoming a mature and productive Christian. We often spend years preparing for professional certifications of one sort and another, but we consider studying the Bible unnecessary.

For example, do you know what the Bible teaches about sexuality? Biomedical ethics? Public policy? Marriage? Vocational direction? Worship? Persons with disabilities? Achieving peace in the world? Evil and suffering? Healing? Leadership? Grief? Addiction? Self-esteem? Personality? Abortion? Capital punishment? Gender roles? Hope?

These are the kinds of questions that are worthy of our study, and that lead us toward maturity. Some of our questions don’t have definitive answers, but serious mental effort is just as necessary in faith development as it is in learning anything else of value. We can learn the most likely direction in which such answers may lie.

Even if you’re in a Bible study group every single week, that amounts to less than forty hours a year. You spend more time than that watching commercials. And your children know it. This isn’t about simply knowing Bible verses, though that’s important. This is about knowing the King.

Finally, maturity requires practice. Even if you’ve got the right spiritual equipment, and even if you take advantage of weekly Bible Study and other opportunities for spiritual growth, that will not be enough to develop spiritual maturity in your life. Maturity requires daily and disciplined practice.

Our family went to some lengths to see the Blue Angels fly over Baltimore Harbor last fall, and I read an interview with one of those pilots in which he talked about how important it is for them to repeat their maneuvers over and over until their muscles “remember” what to do with very little conscious thought. That’s also how we become followers of Jesus whose lives are prayer-filled, virtuous, Bible-centered, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful. We practice every day.

I’m never going to be good at anything if I don’t practice. And you and I will never be useful as followers of Jesus unless we spend daily time in prayer and private Bible study. We won’t get there unless we practice living compassionate and virtuous lives every day.

Someone has said that Bibles that are falling apart usually belong to people who are not falling apart. So what does the condition of your Bible suggest about your level of practice? Those who are satisfied with their present level of devotion to God but dissatisfied with the abundance of their “stuff” will never bear a harvest worth taking away.

Jesus told us that some people who hear His words have hearts that are hard and untillable. Some people who hear Him have hearts that wilt under the slightest pressure. Some people have hearts that are too full of the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things. But some people have hearts that accept God’s message and produce a huge harvest of Great Commission living. Which of these are you?

Let’s return to the matter of soil testing for a moment. As God’s Spirit examines your heart right now, in this very moment, what needs to be added? What needs to be removed? It is awfully easy for our lives to become caught up in the thick of thin things, and the Kingdom of God is fighting a losing battle in many of our lives because we are too busy with our bulging briefcases of second-rate stuff.

But the good news is—and it IS Good News—is that whatever is the case at this moment, anyone can *become* “good soil.” We ourselves are the ones who place ourselves in one category or another.

At Friday’s Inauguration, Senator Schumer read excerpts from a letter that Major Ballou of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers wrote to his wife on July 14, 1861, as the first battle of The Civil War loomed near. After expressing his undying and passionate love for his wife and family, Major Ballou wrote, “If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready.

“I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing – perfectly willing – to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.”

Major Ballou was in fact killed in the First Battle of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), but that’s not really the point. The point is that he was fully and unreservedly committed to the premise that his life was going to be “good soil” for our nation. Can we do any less for our Lord?