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Spiritual Soil Conservation

992-A

Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Spiritual Soil Conservation

We have avoided the inevitable as long as possible. We have looked at the parable of the seed from every conceivable perspective but one. And that one may well be the most painful, but most necessary of all. We have looked at what doesn't let seed grow, and we have looked at how our wonderful God multiplies the seed when it does indeed fall on good soil. All we haven't looked at is what constitutes good soil. We have determined that some of the seed will be wasted, and we have accepted that fact. We have determined that God will use many methods and many means to spread the seed, and we have accepted that fact.

And so today we come to our final lesson on this parable. It is a lesson on soil conservation. It is a lesson about what you and I must do if we are to be productive believers. We will return to the final words of the parable, and read it one last time:

First, the illustration:

²“But some fell into the good soil; and growing up and increasing, it brought forth results, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundredfold.” ³And when he had said these things, He exclaimed ²to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (1¹Matthew 13, 2²Mark 4, 3³Luke 8 LOCIS)¹

And the explanation:

⁴“But he who received seed upon the good soil is he who, ³hearing the Word in an honest and good heart, ²welcomes ¹and understands it and ³holds it fast, and with patience ¹bears fruit indeed and brings forth, ²some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundredfold.”

(1¹Matthew 13, 2²Mark 4, 3³Luke 8 LOCIS)

This is a serious lesson. It involves the very issues that make us either fruitful or barren, spiritually. It involves the ingredients for success in the realm of the spirit. The problem is they are, for the most part, ingredients we have seen in one form or fashion so many times, our ears may have become waxed closed until

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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we no longer hear, or they may have lost their impact through sheer repetition. What I would ask us to do today, then, is to pretend that this is all new and give God a chance to make a fresh impression on our hearts.

The title for this lesson, then, is “Spiritual Soil Conservation”. Our outline:

- I- Planting the Seed
- II- Preparing the Soil
- III- Personalizing the Scripture
- IV- Practicing Patience

Now we get to the meat of the parable. Jesus has told us what happens when the soil isn't right, and what happens when it is. Now He closes this incredible treatise on spiritual fruitfulness by defining and describing the conditions of the soil that are necessary for seed to grow, the environment that must be present for a life to bear spiritual fruit.

I- PLANTING THE SEED

Interestingly enough, Jesus once again begins with the assumption that makes it all work. “He who received seed upon the good soil is he who, hearing the Word...” (Matthew 13:23). Without the seed, you can tend the soil till your knuckles are raw, and your elbows are sore, but you'll never grow a thing. The one ingredient that is essential to fruitfulness is the Word of God. Churches have tried downplaying the infallibility of the Scriptures and virtually died. Denominations which have shifted from the centrality of Scripture to *anything else*, no matter how good, have lost their power. Christian leaders have substituted everything from love to good works for the Absolute of Spiritual Truth, and their congregations have wandered into nothingness. Individuals, once strong and vibrant spiritually, have quietly laid aside the Word as their only authority for conscience and conduct and ended up shipwrecked, useless, and in despair.

There is no substitute for the Word of God. It must be planted in the garden of our lives every day, without fail...and it must be planted in such a way that the soil will accept it. But, Beloved, *it must be planted...*or else. You simply have no hope of becoming spiritually productive if you have stopped spending time in God's Word. If you have made it out to be anything less than it is, *The Word of God*, you are on the highway that leads to a wasted life,

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no matter how spiritually vibrant you appear to be, no matter how active in the Christian community you appear to be, and no matter how fruitful in the Christian ministry you appear to be. Without the Word constantly flowing through your life, you are a fountain, dispensing what looks like water, but acts like poison. You have nothing to give if you are not constantly being filled with the Word of God.

Jesus said the key to the harvest is in the seed. You must be *hearing* the Word constantly. Now the word “hearing” used here, means exactly that. It means “to perceive by listening; to be informed by hearing.” In this passage, at least, it means nothing more than that. The Word used here does not refer to what you do with what you hear, only that you hear it. It is the same word used in I John where John exclaimed,

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you,
that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our
fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

(I John 1:3)

John said, “I am telling you only what I have seen and what I have heard. I am giving a first-hand report of what happened.” To “hear” the Word means you receive through the eargate a vocal expression of the Living Word of God. It is the same word used in Acts 11, when Peter shared the Word God had spoken to him with those in Jerusalem.

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and
glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles
granted repentance unto life.

(Acts 11:18)

In this phrase, it doesn’t necessarily mean “to be able to apply”. We’ll get to that later in the passage. And it doesn’t mean “to receive the Word in any fashion”. Here it means to hear. It means to “listen to the Word”. That is why we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together for the preaching and teaching of the Word. That is why radio and tapes and all of the other avenues of communicating the Word vocally are so important in our age. *Though they are not substitutes for personally studying the Scriptures*, they are a vital means through which the Word enters the eargate, where it can lodge and bear fruit. Step one: Put yourself in a position to hear the Word...regularly, consistently, faithfully. That in itself won’t make you fruitful. But without it, you are wasting your time tending the soil. Without the seed, you have nothing to water.

II- PREPARING THE SOIL

Now Jesus comes to stage two in the matter of farming. The soil must be ready for the seed. And here He gives two unusual ingredients, neither of which sound very specific on the surface, and both of which could be glossed over easily if we're not careful. But the Master is saying, "The Word must be heard by ears that are connected to a certain kind of heart. That kind of heart is one that is "honest" and "good". Now if ever there were two words in the English language that we could easily pass over, it's those. It sounds on the surface like the prelude to a Boy Scout pledge. So before we pass over them, we'd best be sure we understand what Jesus meant when He gave that apparently harmless prescription for soil conservation.

An "honest" heart, that's the first prerequisite for a productive life. The word translated "honest" here (*kalos*) literally means "that which is beautiful; noble; sincere; well-attested to." It is used in Acts 6:3, where the church was commanded to call out the first deacons. They were to be "seven men of *honest* report"; men whose conduct and lives were well-attested to, beyond reproach. In Romans 12:17, the commandment is given to "provide things honest in the sight of all men." That is, to be above reproach in your dealings with others. An accurate translation would be "that which is normally or naturally beautiful" as opposed to "that which appears to be beautiful by means of deceit." Please forgive me, ladies, but it would have to be likened to someone who is naturally beautiful without makeup versus someone who *appears to be beautiful* by virtue of adding unnatural ingredients. Please don't stop appearing beautiful. That's not the issue. The issue here is one of the heart. Jesus is saying a *naturally beautiful heart* is one that accepts the seed of the Word readily. A heart that is sincere. A heart that is guileless. A heart that is fair in its representation of itself. A heart that knows itself and responds accordingly. In other words, if everyone here could see your heart, would they still respect you? Ouch! That would be an honest heart. Jeremiah described the problem. He said,

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked:...

(Jeremiah 17:9)

Jesus prescribed the cure...a heart so inhabited by and controlled by the Spirit of God that it becomes transparent. It becomes in secret what it represents itself to be in the congregation of the saints. That's an honest heart...one that is an honest reflection

of Jesus Christ.

What troubles me about myself (and some of you might relate to it) is that the longer I am a Christian, the more I find is expected of me by others, so the greater the temptation is to represent myself to be more than I am. And the greater danger is that we then *deceive ourselves*. The heart is a deceiver. And once we learn how to convince others we are something we're not, we begin to buy the lie ourselves. An honest heart won't do that. An honest heart sees itself as God does. It takes regular evaluations in the light of the Word and humbles itself before the God who IS and worships.

The second prerequisite for healthy soil is that it be not only "honest", but "good". There's another word that has basically no meaning today. "Good" as opposed to "evil" means virtually nothing in our vocabulary. To some "good" means better than the worst. To others, "good" is a relative term, meaning you are "good" if you are in the upper 30% morally or spiritually of those you run with. To the world there are no absolutes, so anything not as bad as something else is "good". By humanistic standards, the one who is being assessed as good or evil is the same one determining the basis for the evaluation. So it is up to you to determine if you are "good" or not. With God it doesn't work that way.

The word "good" used in this passage (agathos) has a rich, powerful meaning. It means literally: *"inner harmonious perfection; the essence of the character of God."* Thus Luke 6:45 says that a "good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good." In other words, only a man inhabited by the Spirit of God has the capability of doing anything good. And he can only do that which is good when the character of God is being reflected in his life. You and I have defined "good works" as anything that benefits man. That's not true. "Good works" are those things God does through us. "Good works" are only done when the essence of the character of God is being reflected. Only God can produce good because only God is good. In Luke 18:19, Jesus made that clear. He said, "Why callest me good? None is good, save one, that is, God." Jesus was saying, "You're saying I'm a good man doing good works, but that I'm not God. That can't be. Either I am God incarnate or I am not good, because no one is good but God." Goodness, then, is not the act of doing something considered worthy by man. Goodness is the essence of the character of God reflected in life. Barnabas was a "good"

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man. We know that. The Scripture records it. Was it because of the deeds he did? No, “Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,” (Acts 11:24). He was good because God was in control of His life.

That which is good, then, is that which causes or reflects the character of God to be deepened or expressed in man. That certainly changes our perspective of “good”, doesn’t it? A tragedy might be “good” if it causes us to reflect more perfectly the nature of God. A disappointment is “good” if it causes the Mind of Christ to be formed in us. Now do you see what Romans 8:28 means? It means “All things work together to perfect the character of God in those who love Him and accept His calling to be conformed to His image.” That’s what “for good” means. It doesn’t mean something humanly good will come out of that untimely death or that lingering sickness. Of course not. It means it will work together to form the character of God in you and in those touched by you, if you and they will let it. Then it becomes “good”.

A good heart, then, is not just a heart that means well. It is not just a heart that does its best. A good heart is a heart that is so controlled by God, that when the tests come, the nature of God responds, rather than the nature of man. That’s a good heart. So God is saying, *before lasting fruit can come forth from your life, two things must exist*. A heart that is honest with itself and with God, noble in its simplicity, guileless in its expression, and a heart that is so attuned to the Mind of Christ that it *supernaturally* responds in the Spirit to the tests of life. That kind of heart is fertile soil for the Word of God. You may be saying, “Well, that discourages me. I’m not that sincere or that yielded.” Neither am I. God isn’t asking us to *do it*. He is defining what He wants to become in us, and asking us to let Him do it. Don’t be discouraged. Be excited! This is the kind of heart God wants to give you. Let Him!

III- PERSONALIZING THE SCRIPTURE

Jesus is saying that “once the soil of your heart has begun to assume that kind of character, you are ready to begin the process of bearing fruit. Welcome the Word with understanding. The word translated “welcome” (apodechomai) in this translation, is often translated “receive”. And it is far different than the word “receive” as we think of it in English. It means you are jubilant over receiving something, and you show it. It means “to delight in”. Thus, even the translation “welcome” leaves something to be desired. If you

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come to hear the Word as though it were drudgery, or even as though it were nothing more than a classroom experience, you are limiting the kind of fruitfulness God can produce through that exposure to the Word. Do you want to leave that teaching or preaching situation with expectations of transformation? Then choose to be delighted that you are hearing the Word of God. Sit on the edge of your chair. Open your eyes wide. Open your heart wide. Listen with expectation. Welcome the Word.

Then go one more step. Turn the Word into “understanding”. To “understand” means literally, “to grasp or comprehend; to reflect morally; knowledge acquired by reflection”. Or more simply, as we have studied before, understanding is “knowledge personalized”. To hear the Word or read the Word and realize that stealing is sin is knowledge. To apply that knowledge to your life and realize you are stealing time from your employer is understanding. There is a world of difference. One is generalized information. The other leads to personalized transformation. And that is the purpose of knowledge. Knowledge not applied swells the head. Knowledge applied fills the heart.

So God is saying to us that even when the seed falls on a noble and God-controlled heart, it must be received with delight and personalized before it can bear any lasting fruit.

IV- PRACTICING PATIENCE

So much for the condition of the soil and the importance of the response. The last part of the sentence, however, is really the key, and it is really the hardest part to deal with. Let’s read it one more time:

“¹But he who received seed upon the good soil is he who,
³hearing the Word in an honest and good heart, ²welcomes
¹and understands it and ³holds it fast, and with patience
¹bears fruit indeed...”

(¹Matthew 13, ²Mark 4, ³Luke 8 LOCIS)

The phrase “holds it fast” comes from a word translated “keep” in many translations. It means literally “to grip firmly; to hold onto; to possess with no willingness to relinquish”. You can best picture a child clutching something his mother gave him that another child is trying to take away. Or someone holding on to their hat while the wind is blowing, lest the sheer force of the onslaught sweep it away. It means that the Word that has been welcomed into an increasingly guileless and Christ-controlled

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heart can expect to be attacked. An enemy will try to snatch it away. The winds of adversity will blow against it to test it. Either you clutch it firmly, and refuse to let go even when the storms of this world attack you, or *no lasting fruit* will result.

And mark it. You *will* be tested. You take the Word into your life and apply it with understanding, and the enemy will unload on you. Personalize the Scriptures, and you maximize your chances of getting tested. Who would you try to disarm if you were the enemy? The one with or without the weapon? Do you want to bear fruit? Then clutch the Word as you *apply* it, and *hold it fast* as the winds of adversity blow. The end result will be a harvest of blessings. But turn loose when the pressure is on, and you lose it all. That's why life's tests are so important. It is in those tests that we either cling to the Word until it begins to bear fruit, or we flee from the Word in order to lessen the impact of the storm.

There is a final word, and it is essential. Jesus says "Hold fast with patience". The word patience (hupomone) comes from two words which combine to mean "to remain under"; "to bear up under"; to "endure". Its literal meaning is "to give God time to work". When used in Scripture, it almost always accompanies a warning or exhortation about tribulation or testing, and almost always denotes the need for a quiet remaining in place so God can finish what He started. One of the most descriptive uses of the word is in Hebrews 10:34-37. There it says this:

For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward.

For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.

(Hebrews 10:34-37)

Life is going to get tough on planet earth. But if your eyes are focused on Glory, you can *endure with patience*. You can relax and give God time to do whatever it is He is in the process of doing. So don't cast away your confidence. The reward comes from waiting. What you need is patience, so that once you have done the will of God, once you have taken the seed of the Word into an honest and yielded heart, greeted it joyfully, personalized

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it prayerfully, and held it fast determinedly as the onslaughts came, now you just need to rest...and wait. You have need of patience. God IS; therefore, God will accomplish His purposes. II Thessalonians says it all.

And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ. (II Thessalonians 3:5)

You and I have need of patience. We so want God to do what He is about to do quickly so we can see it happen and glory in it. We've missed, to a large degree, the whole scheme of His ministry. What He is doing cannot be done quickly. Character, you see, is not a mail-order commodity. You can't throw up a few faith-type prayers and suddenly become the man or woman God wants you to be, any more than you can sprinkle something in your child's soup and have him be an adult tomorrow. It wouldn't work; you wouldn't want it; and no one would believe it, anyway. Growth is a process. A slow, steady, painful process. And if you want the seed God is planting in your life to bear fruit, you are going to have to wait. Wait for the rain to fall. Wait for the sun to beat upon the soil. Wait for the clocks of life to run its course day after day after day. One day, you will awaken, only to find that a miracle has taken place: God has taken the seed of His Word, planted it in the soil of your increasingly pure and noble heart, watched you welcome it and clutch it against the wind and the adversary, and then let you seemly sit a spell while the process of spiritual transformation took its course. To you, it seemed like eternity. It did for Moses. It did for Abraham. It did for Noah. It did for Paul. It did for John. You will have listened to a thousand messages in the meantime, espousing "instant sanctification" and "immediate maturity" if you would just "do this" or have "that experience". But when the dust had settled, and the experience was behind you, still you knew that the God who began a good work in you *was performing it, but it wasn't near finished*. So you keep on keeping on. Faithfully. Lovingly. Patiently. Joyfully.

One thing I can promise you, God has promised you fruitfulness. You will get to Heaven one day and behold a multitude of spiritual offspring you never knew existed. Because you used a certain system? No. Because you belonged to a certain group? No. Because you continued, year after year, to hear the Word, to welcome it into a guileless and surrendered heart; and when the winds of adversity began to blow, you just stood still and stood firm. You held on, and you held out.

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Months turn into years. Gradually, a Christ-likeness settles into your spirit. A godliness beams from your face. A quiet kind of compassion inspires you to give yourself away. Your motives have changed. Your goals have changed. Most of all your character has changed. You are not you anymore. You are the personification of the nature of Jesus Christ. When tragedy strikes, He responds. When testing comes, He reacts. When adversity blows, He stands in you. You now are becoming the man or woman you were meant to be.

And it all began the day you determined to practice a little soil conservation...and the day learned to say to yourself:

BE PATIENT, MY SOUL

Be patient, my soul, our God is at work
Though we cannot see it now
He is tenderly, quietly, changing me
Though I cannot describe just how.

He lovingly feeds me His precious Word
In a thousand different ways
And He only asks that I tend the soil
For the rest of my living days.

Then He whispers, "Now, child, be patient
Faint Not! Some day you'll see
That the reason for all of the waiting
Was so you could become like me!"

So be patient, my soul, and simply wait
Trust His amazing grace
One day you'll proclaim, "It was worth it all"
When you gaze upon His face.

Be patient, my soul, and just relax
You are gradually changing within
And you will discover that glorious day
That you have become...like Him!

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An Assignment on Soil Conservation

1- Take a concordance and look up the word “hear” and “hearing”. See if you can determine various ways of “hearing” the Word of God. Make a list of the ways you “hear” the Word. Do you try to make “hearing” a substitute for spending personal time in the Scriptures? Why is that wrong?

2- Do you have an “honest” heart? How great is the difference between what you pretend to be and what you are? Are you actually deceiving yourself? If so, what can you do to put a stop to it.

3- What is God’s definition of “good”? What then is a “good” deed? How does this affect your understanding of Romans 8:28?

4- Do you “welcome” the Word? Do you come to hear or to study it out of duty? Out of guilt? Out of a sincere hunger? How teachable do you consider yourself to be? Do you easily “personalize” what you hear and turn it into understanding? Or is it more likely to remain objective information? What can you do to better apply what you hear and read to your life?

5- How would you define “holding fast the Word”? Can you think of an instance in the last year where the principles of Scripture have come under attack in your life? Did you “hold fast the Word”? or did you “abandon” it?

6- On a scale of 1-10, how patient are you? Can you define patience? What does the writer of Hebrews mean “Ye have need of patience that after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise?” Can you make application of that passage to your life? Memorize that verse.

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