

# The Husbandry of the Heart

## Scriptures

Isa 55

Ps 65

Rom 8:7-17

Matt 13:1-9,18-23

## Opening

Among experienced and skilled gardeners, there's a saying given to enthusiastic beginners: if you have \$100 to spend on a new garden, spend \$90 on soil and \$10 on plants. To which I say: yeah, whatever. Nothing quashes the enthusiasm of an inspired new gardener than buying \$90 worth of dirt. Taking soil samples doesn't bring near the satisfaction of planting new hostas and hydrangeas. Not to mention that Tennessee gardeners enter a long and protracted war of attrition with compacted clay if the goal is loamy soil. But loamy soil I do *not* have because my impatience has gotten the best of me.

Soil is everything in today's parable. To his ancient audience, households of subsistence farmers, Jesus needn't explain the *importance of good soil*. Their very lives depended on healthy dirt in open grain fields, cleared of thorns and thistles. In those fields was their daily bread.

Our Lord turned their eyes on those familiar fields and taught his hearers to see the soil anew: here was a vision of the human heart.

## Of Parables and their Depths

Being made of dirt ourselves, we need help to see the unseen. This is what the Lord Jesus does with parables. He takes the familiar and ordinary; he speaks of well-known places, persons, routines; he even speaks of our practical knowledge and wisdom, places where we exhibit skill and ability, and he uses all these raw materials to reveal the word of the kingdom, the gospel.

We'll be reading parables for a good batch of Sundays, so it helps us know how these stories work.

Parables can't mean *anything* you want, but they don't just mean *one* thing either. Parables are a bit like a locked old trunk in your grandparents' attic. You need a key to open the trunk at all, but when it's open you see an item that catches your eye—an old photo album. That first item sparks the search. You want to dig because there's more around and underneath—a box of letters, cards from 50 Christmases ago, a quilt, a pocket knife, the *original G.I. Joe figures*. You can't fit everything in the chest, but you find more treasures inside the longer you search.

The key that unlocks today's story is the nature of the heart. Inside this story, there's several different items over which we could linger. We could have a month long series on this single parable. But when my remarks are ended, I pray you and I will have observed a single concern—the care of the heart.

## Sowing and Tilling Hardened Ground

It's good to begin with the obvious, though surprising depths are often hidden in plain sight. Our Lord compares the tending of the heart with four kinds of soil in four locations, yet only one soil proves fertile. Well, that's interesting on the surface already. The sower has a 25% success rate of seeds to possible harvest. Doesn't sound like a good year. But by the end of this little story, the farmer himself is doing just fine for himself even though only one portion

of his land yielded a harvest. He's got 30, 60, 100 times more crop from just a quarter of seeds sown. More on that later.

Back to the ground. Another saying among gardeners helps us here: even for the most experienced gardeners, not every seed germinates. This doesn't mean the gardener failed. The gardener sows aggressively. Germination failure happens due to excessive rainfall or excessive drought, pests or diseased soil.

There was no such thing as a "pure" plot of land in Galilee. About 80-90% of Galileans would have been farmers and all four of these features would have been common to every farm. Roads or paths were located along the perimeter of most farms. What crabgrass and clover are to our lawns, thorns and thistles would be to Galilean pastures. Mending the soil from compaction and erosion would be a constant duty. Work never ends on the farm.

So it is with the work of the heart. It never ceases. That's why few commit to the work. The Galilean ground was far more resistant to the sower's seeds than it was receptive, responsive, and fruitful. Most of the land was either hardened or too exposed to harmful elements.

How does the heart become hardened, resistant to the kingdom of God? Do nothing. All it takes is neglect. Just cease listening to the Word of God. The Enemy of God doesn't trouble you when you're running from and resisting the

kingdom of God. It's only when you begin tilling that hardened ground that you learn this work requires daily effort.

Just when you think you've weeded out bitterness, here it comes again. Leave the heart untended and buried resentments grow back like ragweed. I remember years ago clearing ground overgrown with briars. It's not pleasant. Also unpleasant is a soul overgrown with a thicket of ambition and anger.

This may sound out of touch, but I believe we lost a great deal, both in the care of good land and the care of good hearts, when we ceased to speak of **husbandry**. I know it's an archaic word, but I'm an old soul. Hang with me here.

Husbandry was considered the art of farming in previous generations. Yet there is a larger cultural meaning. (Some of you all can already feel a Wendell Berry quote coming). Berry says husbandry means “to use with care, to keep, to save, to make last, to conserve; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us.”<sup>1</sup>The husbandry of the heart, then, means caring for and tying together all the strands of the soul—our thoughts, our irritations, our anxieties, our desires, our loves—with the Word and Wisdom of God.

What, then, is the work of the well-tended heart?

The husbandry of the heart is a **tending** work. I tend my inner attitudes toward God and others. I observe the patterns of my thoughts and practice repentance regarding my attitudes and thoughts. One of my favorite spiritual writers said, “our thoughts determine our lives.” Tending our thoughts mends the soul.

The husbandry of the heart also trusts the tools of humility. To humble oneself, to admit fault, to think of others more highly than oneself, to even receive a word of correction from a trusted brother or sister in Christ—these are the tools of humility. Seeds must enter the ground to die if they will live. A well-tended heart trusts the tools of humility.

## A New Way of Understanding Understanding

Most importantly, the well-tended heart hears and ***understands*** the word of the kingdom—the Gospel. I thought I understood what it means to understand the kingdom. I realize I’ve misunderstood what it means to understand the ways and wisdom of kingdom.

The word ‘understanding’ is *the key word* of both the parable and Jesus’ explanation. This word ‘understanding’ doesn’t translate well from the world of the Bible to our world. We hear understanding and we think brain and mind, comprehending a subject, mastering a

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, “Orion Magazine | Renewing Husbandry,” Orion Magazine, n.d., <https://orionmagazine.org/article/renewing-husbandry/>.

body of knowledge. I understood algebra, but I never understood geometry. Understanding is academic work, the work of the mind, right?

This isn't what 'understanding' means in the world of the Bible. Understanding in Greek means 'to bring together,' 'to unite.' Think of two rivers joining together, like the Forks of the River where the Holston and the French Broad converge to form the Tennessee River. An even better image is downstream in Roane County where the Clinch River joins the Tennessee River. The Clinch is a strong and swift river, but it's far weaker in volume and distance compared the Tennessee. The lesser river joins the greater river. Deep flows into deep. That is the image of the heart (not just the mind) ***understanding the Gospel.***

Understanding means a heart becoming more fully alive because it receives the words, the ways, and the wisdom of the kingdom of God. Understanding is not a matter of intellect. Understanding is the lesser joining the greater. Understanding *is* the wisdom of God that only comes through the believing heart.

I'd like to share one of my deepest longings for our church. I long for us to be people of wisdom and spiritual depth. I see those qualities in our church, but it's like Lewis wrote, "further up and further in."

Have you noticed how rare it is in our time to find a person of spiritual depth, deep understanding, and wisdom? Shallow roots are far more common in our time. Our world treasures emotion and appearances more than understanding. Let it not be so among us.

Did you know that in nearly every age of the church's history, almost without exception, there has been a scarcity of wise, spiritual guides? You find that pattern in the letters of saints and seekers. That's why the letters exchanged between spiritual fathers, mothers, and their children are such treasures. It's rare to find people who unite their understanding with the wisdom of God.

It's about as rare as those grain seeds that grew to full maturity from good soil.

## A Staggering Harvest

It's a strange success story, this parable. Remember what I shared with you in the beginning. A really good year on a Galilean farm would have yielded 10-15 fold of wheat from sown grain seeds.<sup>2</sup> That's the surprise Jesus gives at the end of this story. "As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." The least plentiful harvest in Jesus' story is still double the yield of a really good year in Galilee.

There in the grain fields isn't just wheat. It's daily bread—the word and wisdom of God. I imagine you could look on ripened grain much like we look on ripening tomatoes. You can nearly taste the bread just by looking at the grain. The world is so hungry for the wisdom of God. That's why the seed enters the ground at all: to bring forth wisdom, goodness, and Gospel truth—true bread for the life of the world. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Vernon H. Alexander, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, 2016.