

2015 is still ahead of us and right now we can consider how it is that we will approach the new year.

Jesus once told a parable to a great crowd of people that was about how their hearts were like soil and his words, the word of God, was like seed. You can find this parable in Matthew 13 or Luke 8 or Mark 4. This is not going to be our main text but feel free to turn there. In this parable Jesus describes how four soils differ from each other and how the result of the seed falling upon them depends on the condition of the soil.

We need to understand that the condition of our hearts...that is to say our heart level attitude toward God's word is pivotal here. Our hearts, have the ability to be barren and dry, the ability to be shallow and weak, the ability to yield a heavily contaminated crop, but also the potential to yield abundant blessing to the glory of God and the joy of others. Jesus explained much of the proverb privately to his disciples, but there is no record of his explaining what the fruit or the crop or the yield is? I suggest it is the conformance of my heart and mind and my life to the likeness of Christ. Certainly it's no less than the fruit of the Spirit as described in Gal 5. Godwardly, or vertically, it is the miraculous transformation of my heart and mind in the development of a hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is the development of love and devotion toward God. It is the development of a passion for the killing of sin that would hinder my intimacy with God. Toward others, or horizontally, it is the miraculous development of love for others and a commitment to making others glad in God. It is Christlikeness in all family relationships and within the church and toward the lost. It is the great commission to reach the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is fighting for and pouring ourselves out for the afflicted, the destitute, and the oppressed.

So lets take a look at these soils...because each of our hearts is described somewhere here. Remembering of course that we are in process so we can expect gaps and imperfections, some significant, but consider which soil might best describe your heart...

The first soil is the path. The way Jesus describes this it sounds like this person is not intending to receive the seed and is really not really giving attention to it. This person is hardened and if they do hear the word, they do not allow it to penetrate into any level of reflection or honest evaluation.

The next soil is shallow and is among the rocks. It sounds like this person perceives the message and responds to it initially but does not follow through...does not seek to truly understand it and they soon wither when a trial or something challenges their thin or superficial understanding of the message.

Next comes **the thorny soil** and it represents the person who undervalues God's word because they are distracted by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. This person has competing interests that choke out their delight in the word and limits their devotion to God.

Finally Jesus describes **the good soil**, where we see the seed take root and yield an abundant harvest. This heart is described as honest and good and it yields fruit with patience. This brings us to our theme. I believe that we can make the choice to be good soil and we can get busy tending to the soil of our hearts. My goal today is to motivate and equip each of us to be good soil in 2015.

Today we will examine Proverbs 2 in order to learn how to receive and treasure God's word that we might be this good soil. So that by the grace of God, we might yield fruit 30, 60, even 100 fold. Although we will narrow our focus a bit, we will look at the whole Proverb to understand the context and the flow of the text... so let me share it with you as we begin. Join me in the second Proverb... you can find a Bible under the seat in front of you if you do not have one with you.

<Read Proverbs 2>

I hope the image of receiving and treasuring God's word here in this Proverb resonates with you as you relate it to what the good soil does with the seed. I take Proverbs 2 as instructional for the one who needs some soil tilling. But to begin, it's important to expose the serious problem with our soil... the heart problem that every person ever born, except Jesus, has. Remember that Jesus described the good soil as honest and good and patient... Yet we know that none are good and each has gone his own way, right?

I was born as a natural man unable to submit to God's law because from birth my **desire**, my **affections**, my **delight**, my **attention**, was set upon the flesh... See Romans 8:5-8

"5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 8:5-8, ESV)

This clearly explains why Jesus would tell Nicodemus that one must be born again to see the Kingdom of God. He clarifies the spiritual birth that is needed for the natural man. See John 3:6-7

"6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" (John 3:6-7, ESV)

Repenting of my self rule and trusting in Jesus as my reigning king and my dearly needed savior is surely the necessary first step... I need to be made right with God... I need to be justified or declared righteous. But even as a born-again believer I still wrestle with the presence of this old nature and I

am in a life-long battle to engage my mind and unlearn the treasuring of sin and rejection of God's instruction. I need sanctification. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2

"2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2, ESV)

If we do nothing...if we make no resolve to be good soil Paul tells us that by default we will be conformed to the world. But we can be transformed into good soil, if we have put on the new self, that seeks the renewal of our minds in the knowledge of God.

So let's begin to open this proverb together. As wisdom literature we can expect the use of categories in this text. We will see the category of the righteous using words like good, upright, wise, one with integrity, the saint. We will also see the category of the wicked, with words like evil, devious and treacherous. It is important to keep in mind that these are not primarily meant to be a description of the person but as a category the person falls within. The righteous being those who submit to the Lord and delight in him. The wicked being those that rebel against the Lord and delight in evil.

There are three main parts to this Proverb. The first part describes actions by me. The second describes conditional actions by God in me. And the third describes covenantal actions by God for me. Beginning with the first section, my actions. These serve as our instructions...You can see this in vv.1-4 and it is marked by the phrase "**If you...**". These are actions by me and depend on my use of the means that God gives to me. The second section, God's conditional actions in me. You can see this in vv.5-15 and it is marked by the phrase "**Then you...because He...**". These actions are the response of God at work in me and they depend on the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit in order to make me more like Christ. I am wholly dependent upon God to accomplish this step. I see this as the miracle that Paul describes in 1 Cor 3:7 where he says...

"7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:7, ESV)

Paul was specifically talking about growth of a spiritual work by his word in men's hearts here. Then the final section is a description of God's outcome for me that results from his work in me in response to the actions by me to follow the instruction of verses 1-4. You can see this in vv.16-22 and it is marked by the phrase "**So you...**". This action is by God for me and it depends upon his own commitment to keeping his covenant.

So with an understanding of the flow of this text we are going to focus on the potential actions by me and then the two main responses by God within me...This means looking mostly at vv 1-4, 5-6, 9-10. Beginning at the top, I suggest that verse 1 is a summary statement for this section, which

essentially describes the good and honest and patient heart as the one that receives and treasures the seed. The first observation is that this word comes to me by a loving Father who desires that I know him...Notice that it begins with... “My son...” and contrary perhaps to how others read this, I see the speaker as God himself, not wisdom personified continuing from chapter 1. I get this from verses 1 & 6 where I see that it is the Lord who gives wisdom from his mouth and the speaker invites me to receive his words and commandments...no doubt the word and commandments of the Lord.

The action begins with a receiving of this Father’s words. I take this to be a head level hearing and comprehension of what God has said. What I see in this is that my tuning in and giving my careful attention to God’s word is critical for determining the condition of my heart. Then there is a treasuring of his commandments. I take this to be a heart level valuing and seeking of God’s rule in my life. Here I see that his word is treasured as wisdom...it is trusted explicitly and is given the place of absolute authority in my life.

Then in v.2 he begins to unpack this in greater detail with head level and heart level actions... Paraphrasing the first part of verse 2...I would say “if I will listen attentively, or carefully”. This is an engagement of the mind to clearly perceive the message. There are many ways to engage our brains in seeing all that is in a Bible text and I think he is calling us to put in some effort here. If we are not listening or looking carefully we can completely miss the point and then miss the benefit...Remember that my actions mean something here...I am somewhere on the scale between receiving and treasuring on the one side or rejecting and despising on the other side.

Then the second part of verse two I would paraphrase as, “if I will devote myself to understanding the message”. Any of us might brush over a topic that is not so important to us but we know that we have the capacity to hotly desire and resolve ourselves to understand something. It may just need to be something that we consider absolutely crucial. Perhaps if I approach the Bible with humility and with a view that God’s word is vital and powerful and completely authoritative, then maybe I will have a greater desire to understand his message thoroughly. Listen to how God describes the person in whom his Spirit will dwell as it pertains to this attitude we come to the Bible with...Isaiah 66:1-2 says

“1 Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? 2 All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.” (Isaiah 66:1–2, ESV)

Perhaps we should ask ourselves how often we would describe our attitude toward God’s word as trembling?

Then in v.3 he brings us to the inevitable result of this effort, which is a recognition that we need help. Paraphrasing here: If I will call out to God in prayer seeking his help in seeing clearly and

understanding truly...He repeats himself with a slightly different variation of the same word translated “understanding” here. I take it we should not give up with one request, but be persistent in our prayerful response and dependence upon God to help me. I am to come to God’s word with a habit of responding to him...just like I would acknowledge and respond to my earthly father when he speaks to me.

Then in v.4 he indicates that if I make this a relentless pursuit...It is as if the value of understanding his instruction exceeds the value of the competing interests in my life. Notice that he concedes the fact that there are things we tend to value more and he challenges us to place his instruction on par with these treasures. Think about the dedication that we give to the things that our heart values most in life.

So thinking over this first section of verses 1-4. I take it that this listening carefully and prayerfully seeking the help of God to gain wisdom and understanding is to be a serious pursuit that rivals, even exceeds, any pursuit in my life. The process described here is very active and intentional. It is disciplined but dependent. This is how good soil receives and treasures the seed, but this is not the whole story...we do not yet clearly see how God responds to our actions here...so far we have been studying and praying with an intent to hear and understand.

The second section, vv.5-15, tells us how God responds by working to transform us. Remember we said this is work done **by him and in me** by his Spirit. There are two “**Then you, because he**” clauses here. one at verses 5-6 and the other at verses 9-10. The first speaks to my understanding and knowledge of God’s holiness and character, which I gain from his teaching me about himself. The second builds upon this and speaks to how my knowledge of God gives me the ability to choose the right path in order to honor God and reject wicked influence. The remaining verses contain more detailed explanation regarding how this happens.

Looking first at vv. 5-6. Verse 5 is a radical shift from the natural state of rebellion and self-rule. This represents an acknowledgment of my separation from God due to my sin and a surrender to him (which is the fear of the Lord) in order to know him and be in a right relationship with him (which is the knowledge of God). It should be plain to see that sin (or rebellion from God) separates us from him and in surrender to him we draw near. There is no true knowing of God without a real submission to his authority. This is of course a huge problem for the natural man as we discussed earlier. The idea is captured in Hosea 6:6, which uses the same Hebrew phrase יְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים , or “the knowledge of God”.

“6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6, ESV)

God desires my devotion to him and not my apologies. He desires that I would know him rather than bring empty religious exercises as if the goal is merely to appease him. He wants my heart, he wants

me to know him, to be in communion with him. vv. 6-8 explains how he does this in me. He freely gives wisdom to those who seek him. He does not hide knowledge or understanding from those who surrender to him. Notice his actions are toward the upright, those who walk in integrity, the path of justice, his actions are toward those he calls his saints. He offers protection and guidance along the path of knowing him to those who come under his influence and listen to him. Those who receive and treasure his word. So I learn that the fear of the Lord is to come under his authority and in this I begin to know my God and understand his care for me. Prov 1:7 aptly informs us

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Now to the next “Then you, because he” clause in vv. 9-10. So here he indicates that my knowledge of him leads to my ability to discern the right path in order to honor him and to reject wicked influence. He says I will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path... And v. 10 tells me this will be because **wisdom will come into my heart and knowledge will be pleasant to my soul**. If I will follow this instruction, the Lord will give me a wise heart that delights in receiving the word and knowing my God. This transformation of the heart is the **biggest key** I see in the Proverb regarding how God overcomes my natural born heart problem. Because the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and he comes into our hearts says Rom 5:5. Then through v. 15 he continues to explain how this new delight in the Lord’s instruction will guard and protect me from the influence of the world.

This brings us to the third section where vv. 16-22 tells us of the outcome God will bring for us and how he will do it. The hard or shallow or thorny soil goes down to death, never to return...But we are delivered from this natural outcome by receiving and treasuring God’s word. I see that the outcome of the one who receives and treasures God’s word will be a life that is conforming to goodness and righteousness, which is to say that I will be transformed or molded into the likeness of Christ and I will arrive and be blessed in the promised land.

So in surveying this Proverb... First I will point out 1 Cor 1:24 and 30 where we see that in the NT God reveals Jesus himself as our wisdom...

“24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God...30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” (1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV)

Now in our Proverb we are presented with a conditional or cause and effect relationship where my actions matter...“**if you receive and treasure God’s word...**”, And when I do this, the response of God follows that miraculously changes me from the inside...“**Then you** will understand the Fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God, **because he** gives wisdom to my heart and makes knowledge pleasant to my soul”. And then he secures an outcome for me in this life and in eternity...

“So you will walk in the way of the good and keep the paths of the righteous.” This is our lesson from Proverb 2

Now to a question about doctrine: What does this proverb teach us about how God works in our lives as we reflect upon the soils...Or what does this teach us about how God molds us in Christlikeness...Or what does this teach us about the need for God’s word as a steady diet for the Christian? Can I expect transformation of my heart and mind without filling my mind with his word? Can I expect to glorify God and bless others around me without filling my soil with the seed of God’s word? Finally, can I expect to be killing sin and rebellion in my life without the intake of God’s word? While praying to the Father for us, Jesus said:

“17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.” (John 17:17–19, ESV)

The Answer to the question “what does this teach us about how God works in our lives” is clear: God intends his word to be the means in which his Spirit will work transformation in our lives. By our interaction with him in studying his word and in prayerful dependence upon his work, God will guide and protect us. Most importantly he will do this by changing what I perceive as wisdom and what my heart delights in. He will change what I welcome as influence upon my mind and what I seek as pleasure to my soul. It also teaches me that my soil and your soil cannot yield spiritual fruit without the seed landing upon it. This soil that is void of the seed will have nothing more than the contaminants of the world to treasure. Thorns are the only thing that will be produced in this heart.

I hear the following message to each soil: To the one who does not often hear or read the word...the message is “**listen up!**” Pick up your Bible...it is the voice of your loving Father, Almighty God. There is no life transformation...no sanctification without a diet of God’s word.

To the one who hears or reads but does not make the effort to understand and does not wrestle with God in dialogue...the message is “**Go deep!**” Respond to God and ask him for understanding with persistence. Slow down and meditate upon God’s word. I have heard one pastor say to Plunder each passage for all it’s worth.

To the one who has competing concerns and interests and desires that keep him or her from truly valuing God’s word with trembling... the message is “**Get serious!**” Put down the idols and commit yourself to be on a treasure hunt as if everything you ever valued depended upon it. Put this pursuit of the knowledge of God above all else. What else can it mean to put God first?

So in conclusion I wonder what will be our response to God’s word today? I see two potential responses that we might have to God’s word today as we close 2014. For the one who knows God I see a response of committing together with the Crossroad family that we will make being good soil our highest resolve in 2015. If you are one of these soils and want to commit freshly to God in

response to his word today...please consider coming forward during the response time and encouraging all of us in your commitment to be good soil in 2015. Also- I am pleased to announce that Pastor David has decided that we will promote a common Bible reading plan for our congregation to begin January 1, 2015. There are two main purposes for this 1. To encourage the private receiving and treasuring of the word...2. To encourage us to be discussing the Bible together as a church body and within our families. Please visit the website and look down the page for the 2015/16 Bible Reading Plan...click the link for more information and resources to help you. You will also find resources available at the table in the lobby if you do not use the internet.

But then, for the one who is here today and realizes that they have not had this Spirit of God within them...The one who recognizes that they need to repent of self-rule and need to come under the authority of God through his Son Jesus. The one who recognizes that they need to re-orient their life around what God has spoken to us in his word. The one who for the first time senses a believing and a longing within them for Christ...For this person I see a response of surrender and a running to Jesus. For this person I see a response of calling out to God for salvation. For this person I see a response of celebrating new life and confessing Jesus as the Lord of their life. You can do that publicly right here, right now if you want. After we pray you can come to the front here during our last song and simply tell me that you are trusting Jesus and we will give you someone to talk to and pray with in another room. Or if you are uncomfortable coming forward you should still come see me afterwards so we can come along side you and support you as you confess Jesus as Lord in your life.

Join me in prayer as the band comes up for our final song during the response...