Four Soils of our Heart
Mark 4:1-20

It’s crucial how we listen and do Scripture. As an illustration, look at the parable of the four soils in Mark 4. Jesus finishes the parable by calling His disciples to listen attentively (4:9). When His disciples were alone with Jesus, He took the initiative to explain the parable (His way of training them after the “basics”). This parable is so crucial that Jesus explained: if His disciples have difficulty understanding this, how could they understand any teaching (4:14)? The seed is the Word of God sown into people, with four different conditions of their heart in this particular season. God’s Word, His Love-Letter to us, is sown:

First, along a trampled path. Over the years, the enemy of our soul has incited people to trample on hearts. Jesus says that Satan comes and snatches away the Word as soon as they hear, before it germinates.

Second, on shallow soil where the rock beneath the thin layer of soil has not been broken up to allow the roots to sink deeply. They initially receive the Word with joy, yet quickly turn away when hard times come.

Third, on distracted soil. The soil is fertile and so bears fruit. Fruit is quickly choked though by three very common practices in our society. The worries of this life; the deceitfulness of wealth; the desires for other things. Fertile soil will grow more than just good seed.

Fourth, on good soil. They have prepared their hearts to hear, accept, and respond, thus producing a flourishing crop of fruitful increase.

What is the state of your heart as you approach God’s Word? Which one soil best represents your heart today? __________

1. Trampled Soil: Satan immediately comes alongside and they listen to Satan’s whispered lies. “You will never understand this.” “Others maybe; not you” “You are not enough.” “You don’t measure up.”
2. Shallow Soil: Have you allowed the tough times of your past or present life to make you bitter or better? We all experience the hot water of trials…none are exempt. Place an egg, potato and coffee beans in the same hot water and one hardens, one softens and one releases flavor. What is the state of your heart? Has it been cultivated and prepared for a rich harvest by good responses to tough times?
3. Distracted Soil: Is your life full of worries about tomorrow, chasing after wealth and a desire to have more stuff than you now have? These very common societal goals will crowd out the Word of God in our hearts so truth does not have room to flourish in us.
4. Fruitful Soil: This is what Jesus is after, a life that produces a 30-, 60- and even 100-fold increase in what He sows. He calls this “good” soil because we welcome the Word into our heart, respond in ready obedience and retains it (Luke 8:15). God’s grace provides what is necessary for us to be able to respond quickly.

Write down which soil best represents your heart today. ________

How can we improve the fruitfulness of the soil of our heart?

We must give others permission to plough deeply into our lives to help us cultivate and prepare it for a harvest, 100-, 60- and 30-fold.

I believe there is a latent, God-given learning-potential lying dormant in the “normal folk” in the church community. I want to ask and answer in a way that raises additional questions. Any
study of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that finally settles everything and does not raise additional questions is very incomplete.

To affect change, a “critical mass” must be reached that propels us to new levels of sustaining growth and transformation. For instance, if a three-year old wanted to propel his three-wheeler to the top of a hill, he would exert a great deal of energy until the top was fully reached. Any energy exerted to go part-way up the hill would be wasted, though as the three-wheeler coasted back down the hill when the tyke stopped pedaling.

How much effort are you investing in becoming a lifelong life-learner who puts it into practice?

We meet together weekly, so we have the leisure to challenge one another and to stretch each other towards that “critical mass.” This comes in layers, which is why I attempt to sow “layer learning.” We learn most naturally one layer after another. In other words, we learn the first level of a book of the Bible. Read it rapidly (our “BIG”). Then go back and focus on a chapter for a week (“small”). Then put it back together by reading the whole book rapidly with your current understanding of the chapters in mind (the second “BIG”). Later you will want to return to the same book and discover more depth that the Spirit of God awaits to reveal.

Skills need to be introduced gradually and practiced enough to feel comfortable with them. I call this incremental-type learning “layer learning.” This best happens in the authentic give-and-take of an ongoing, community learning environment. Such open learning soil provides the leisurely time to learn one facet and then later build upon it. It takes time for new values to seep down into our inner being. This could be one reason why Jesus discipled the Twelve over a three-year period…and still lost one. Learning is incremental, connecting new truth with what has already been learned. Build upon the past, like climbing a summit, and seeing the surrounding area in new light. New groupings will show new relations and bring to light new aspects and uses.

If I wanted to study geography, the normal way would be to first pull out a globe and begin to see the big picture of the entire planet. Then I would find a good map of the continent I decided to first study. Only then would I begin to study the capes and bays, the lakes and rivers, the mountains and the plains of that continent. Incremental learning. A view of the whole materially assists in understanding the parts. I believe this interactive approach of a community learning together is the natural way God designed us to learn, one layer of learning after another, like children learn. This view of learning greatly impacts how we approach learning to study God’s Word.

Now, this is studying the Bible, not for knowledge’s sake alone, but for the primary purpose of knowing God more intimately through His Word. Also, learning ideally takes place in community in a way that changes our attitudes toward learning and develops life-competency, so we see how relevant Scripture is for our everyday lives. This builds healthy, inner motivation.

Therefore, week-by-week we want to build one skill and value onto previously learned ones in a way that will help each of us to put into practice what we are learning and give it away to at least one person. Ask questions! Explore. Unanswered questions excite our minds to dig for other possibilities. I believe this is one reason God calls us to embrace both sides of “paradoxical tensions,” which are inherent in God being God and us being His people.

Let’s reach together for that level of LifeChange where discipline is internal and we become disciples, that is, lifelong life-learners. Too little and we revert back to our old habits. As lifelong life-learners and doers, we can become disciple-makers who pass this life onto others. Stretch out of your comfort zone.
A "good" soil is prepared with such an approach to Scripture coupled with our ready response so we can bring forth a harvest for our Father, 100-, 60- and 30-fold.