

The Fruit of the Spirit: Soil

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness [again]; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:8-9).

THE NEED FOR PREPARATION

We live in a “now” generation. Hasn’t it felt that way for a couple of generations, though? Growing up, I remember the Burger King motto as “your way, right away.” Pizza was 30 minutes or less, or it’s free. We are told that the average person has a 12-7 minute attention span.

It seems so foreign this idea of “preparation.” Or contemplation. Or meditation. It seems strange that when Jesus has healed all manner of diseases and taught interesting truths, the apostles find him early in the morning in a secluded place. They say “Master, come with us, everyone is looking for you!” And Jesus says, “then let’s go somewhere else. It’s not my time.” You know, Jesus knew plenty about his calling and his mission at the ripe old age of 12, but he didn’t commit his life in baptism until he was 30. We get a hint as to why this was so back in Luke 2:52. Jesus leaves the Temple having shown he was smarter than them all. But he remained subject to his mother. And Jesus grew in wisdom, and stature, and in favor with God and man. It wasn’t his time. He wasn’t ready yet. We weren’t ready yet. More preparation was needed.

I once heard Jack Lewis tell a group of aspiring students why they should pursue a Masters of Divinity degree. He said, “Jesus spent 30 years preparing for a 3-year ministry. We are asking you to spend 3 years preparing for a 30-year ministry.” The early Christians produced a book called the Didache—a “how to do ministry” manual that probably dates to the end of the 1st century. It’s not Scripture, and I know there is a balance to consider when we see Paul baptizing people in the same hour of the night in which they first hear the good news. But in this book, the Didache encourages people who want to be baptized to spend 3 years in preparation for what that commitment will require.

It's a challenge to me. I want to jump into deeper spirituality, or this thing called “Christian living,” with both feet. And one can achieve disillusionment or burnout or a whole host of nasty ends if we aren't...prepared. If we aren't...ready.

UNPREPARED HEARTS: A PERSONAL PARABABLE OF THE SOIL

In his first parable in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus offers the parable of the Sower. In that parable, he tells us there are different kinds of hearts, some that are unprepared for the richness of the seed. We wouldn't throw our pearls before swine or allow crazy uncle Eddy to take the new Mercedes to his mudding derby. So why begin the long, treacherous spiritual journey unprepared?

I was an unusual kid. PK's (preacher's kids) are all unusual, but I was unusually unusual. When I was 8, I came to church in a 3-piece suit, bowtie, and carrying a briefcase. In that briefcase, I had a gigantic parallel Bible with 4 translations, and all the tools one needed to find every mistake in the bulletin. For fun, I transcribed sermons from my little tape recorder, and collected autographs of preachers at the Yosemite Bible Encampment. Naturally, I was quite the ladies' man. You've heard of the “unchurched”? I was “too churchied.” I was the churchiest kid if there ever was one. I also cut my teeth on sermon outline books, the tract rack that hung near the entrance to virtually every church we ever visited, and those mail-out pamphlets with titles that sounded both ancient and war-like, the ones that told you who the latest false teacher was, what everyone obviously already knew to be true, and who we should be marking and avoiding. I got a steady diet of this when I was learning to read. I'm sensitive in this area because its personal for me.

I loved Jesus Christ and wanted to please him. I assumed love for Jesus Christ was the same thing as being a fan of my group, loyal to people who agreed with me, and every right position on every single issue was on equal footing: to be faithful to Jesus meant being right about everything. To “disagree” was simply soft language for “to be a heretic, an outcast, someone who desperately needed me to set you straight and to walk in the way of the Lord more perfectly.”

It meant that when I was just a junior in high school, I loaded up the car with a bunch of friends and drove down Cox Creek Parkway in Florence, Alabama, visiting every church we could find with a different name, knocking on the door, and telling the unsuspecting preacher (or secretary) who answered the door “good news! For today salvation has come to your house. I'm here to tell you the truth.” It meant I invited Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses into my house through less than honest means,

because I wanted to trap them with my research, and when they felt trapped, they would recognize what a gift I was to them, and become converted to my way of thinking—you know, the “truth”!

It also meant that I was a very neurotic kid. I couldn’t figure out why. How could someone who knew every right answer, and all the right questions, someone who was God’s gift to the religious world, be worried, or afraid, or suffer emotionally like people who were unsure?

Near the end of my high school experience, I was invited to attend one of these summer camps at one of our Christian colleges. I had never been before and looked forward to it. The speaker that evening was a man who knew me when I was just a kid. A friend of the family. Also, someone whose name frequently appeared in the literature I read so carefully. I didn’t know him well. I didn’t know his heart, or what he thought, or why he thought it. But I knew he was supposed to be a false teacher, and I knew what I had to do.

After he presented his lesson, I walked on stage. Introduced myself. “I’m Nathan Guy, and I have something to tell you that you need to hear.” “Oh Nathan,” he said, “I knew you when you were just a little boy. It’s so good to see you again. Come walk with me. If you have something I need to hear, then I’m here to listen.” We walked to a dormitory nearby. He told me he needed to go into a back room for a minute, but to wait in the living room and talk. He would listen. So I did. I didn’t ask a single question. Didn’t ask to clarify. I told him what I had heard and why he was wrong. Occasionally, I would hear him say something back like “that’s a good point, Nathan. I need to reflect on that.” Or “I think that was a misquote, Nathan, I don’t believe I said that. If I did, it was a misspeak, so thank you for bringing that to my attention.” Or “I can see how someone could interpret what I said that way, but what I meant by that was...; I will try to be more thoughtful next time about how that might come across.” He was treating me like an equal, listening to my every word, and responding with humility and grace. And I thought, well, he should! After all, these are pearls I’m giving him.

He emerged from the back room, and I could tell he had changed out of his suit and into shorts and a t-shirt, with a towel wrapped around his neck. “Would you walk with me some more, I have an appointment, but I want to continue this.” So, we walked and talked, til we came to the school pool. I looked up and saw probably 100 people waiting to be baptized. He looked at me and said “Nathan, I have to go right now. But I’m glad we had this talk. You’ve helped me. Would you mind if I pray with you before we leave?” I thought, well, I should be the one praying for you, but go ahead. So, he prayed. I don’t remember all of it, because I stopped listening after he said this: “Lord, thank you for Nathan and what you are doing within him. And I pray that you will break in

him what needs to be broken.” It’s a line from Psalm 51, in the prayer of David (a deeply flawed man as well)—who, after his terrible list of sins toward the innocent Bathsheba, realizes the devastating nature of his sins against the Lord and begs that the child will live. What evil has he done? Let the child live. And the child dies. Because of David. Can you imagine watching someone die in your place—assuming the ultimate sacrifice because of you? Oh, I can imagine the size of the knot in the pit of his stomach as he falls on his knees before God and shouts to God, “have mercy on me, O God! I know my transgressions; my sin lies before my face every moment. I have sinned against you; I did that which is evil in your sight. My history of sin stretches back to my toddler years—perhaps even back to infancy. I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t like this—so much less than what you want. You desire truth deep in my bones—in the inward parts.” He is pouring out his heart in repentant prayer. That’s when the phrase comes from his lips: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness [again]; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:1-9). “O Lord,” he continues, “You have no delight in sacrifice...what you want as sacrifice acceptable to God—is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart. That, O God, you will never despise.”

Who would have thought that a broken heart would be the starting place for renewal? David needed it. His list of sins are almost too painful to even list! The mistreatment, the murder, the treachery, the cover-up! Then I read what God wants my heart to look like—and I compare it with my own—and in the light of His glory, my heart is as black as midnight. Without Christ, I am unworthy and unholy, destroyed by sin.

I didn’t know that verse at the time. What I thought was “what arrogance!” It would be years later before that story overcame my pride, and I was able to stand in front of the mirror and say “what arrogance!” I wasn’t ready. I was trying to turn a story about God into a story about me...and it made me delight in all that God despises—like keeping records of wrongs; it made me blind to my own selfish ambition which is listed as a major sin alongside slave trading. It made me all mouth and no ears, even though the Bible says a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be quick to listen and slow to speak. And it caused me to see people as projects and scorecards rather than people made in the image of God.

To say it another way, it was all word, and no spirit. It was strength of will, that turned into will worship. It’s what Paul is upset about when he sees it. So, when my friend chose to see me not as an annoying blip on his screen, but a person to be loved and taught...that was over a quarter of a century ago, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. And it serves as a defining moment in my life.

GOD CAN REWORK THE SOIL

God is the farmer in our story. He comes to us as to an empty, barren field after a long drought. And, taking up the tools he fashioned with his own hands, he slowly breaks the ground, retills the soil, replants the seeds, and makes preparations for a brand-new harvest. If we will let him.

It’s time for a heart check. Maybe your heart is rocky ground. Very thin soil. Everything in your life is thin—thin commitments. Thin desire for spirituality. Thin skin and thin tolerance for others. Thin knowledge of the Word. Thin prayer life. When you stick your neck out you get scorched. And your love for the disciplines or spiritual activities have been relegated to ‘have to’s’ or “pretend to’s.”

Maybe your heart is a thorn patch. Your desire is there. Your months or even years of study and living in the bubble made you feel invincible. But your plate has become so full—so full—with pressures from every side that your heart can’t hold it all. And the cares of this life have taken first priority.

Maybe someone’s heart is the roadway. There’s simply nothing there. These aren’t seekers who come to church or listen to sermons. These are hearts that wouldn’t know what to do with the Spirit of God if they ever encountered Him. No human in the world would buy a roadway intending to reap a harvest of fruit. But God’s no human. God is in the business of resodding. He can take down the parking lot and save paradise!

I forget so easily that forcing people to come to church assemblies, telling people to read their Bibles, writing articles exposing sin in the neighborhood, arguing about Christian values vs. worldly wisdom—all miss the point. God does the planting. God does the growing. God starts the process. And in God, the spiritual person can’t get enough of spiritual things.

Trying to experience a change of life by focusing on behavior or activities is like trying to move a train by jump-starting the cabooses! I can’t hear unless I have ears to hear. I must be broken down from the inside before I can ever see the problem.

And that changes how I read the fruit of the Spirit passage. Paul has spent chapter after chapter exposing the lies that come with pride, self-help, sin management, and behavior modification. He asks, “who has bewitched you?” Who put you under a spell? You were taught the gospel. The gospel—which is about a God who did what you could never do, to create within you what you could never create for yourself. And now, having begun with the Spirit, are you going to try to finish things out by returning to the flesh?

Do you think God’s finished work plus my two cents is what it’s all about? Of course not. God forbid. Paul has two problems to deal with: on the one hand was legalism. That’s what we’ve been talking about. A pride-filled, will-centered self-help view of the gospel that crowds out Jesus with my best efforts. Forgetting that I can’t be the solution since I am, in fact, the problem. But on the other hand, Paul has to deal with antinomian grace—the view that since we are saved by God’s sheer grace, who cares how we conduct our lives? What difference does it make if our lives look any better than they were before? So, Chapters 1-4 Paul says “It’s all about God in the person of Jesus Christ. Get over yourselves!” But chapters 5-6 is where Paul says “how you live announces whose you are!” And the link between these two important sermons is the Spirit of God. The message of the Spirit breaks us down so that we come to Jesus with empty hands, “nothing in my hand I bring, only to thy cross I cling.” But then, in the upside-down kingdom, it’s only the empty-handed ones, those broken down by the gospel, who are then able to be built back up as God takes over. It is God at work in you. It is the Spirit at the controls who produces God’s holy character within you. We hand over the orchard to a new farmer. We let go of the reigns and yield ourselves wholly His control.

So, I ask myself, do I want to be patient if it’s going to make me look weak?

Do I want to be kind if it means others win and I lose?

Do I want to be generous if it means I worked for this, I earned it—and you, who have too much and don’t need it, end up with it?

Do I want to be self-controlled if it means I have to watch what I say, where I go, and what I do?

Do I really want peace when I have the chance to really stir things up?

Do I really want to love even if I’m never loved in return?

Explore the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This fruit comes from a God-cultivated heart: one that wants to be different, and want’s God’s way of living, thinking, being, and doing to become one’s own way. I can’t orchestrate that. I can’t make you do it any more than you can make me do it.

But we can pray for it. We can pray that starting with me, God will break what needs to be broken. The soil can be hard as a rock. But God can break it. Why the anger? Why the desire to put up walls between you and I? Why the fear to change? Why the need to argue? Why the lack of desire to be of service in the kingdom? Bring him your broken life, so marred by sin, and he will create anew, make whole again.