

# Check Yo' Self Before You Wreck Yo' Self

Isaiah 55:10-13 | Psalm 65:8-13 | Romans 8:1-11 | Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

## MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

<sup>1</sup> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!' ... <sup>18</sup> 'Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup> yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup> But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

## INTRODUCTION

Advice. Parents give advice. Some of it is very helpful. For example, each time I would leave my parents' home, my mother would say to me, invariably: 'Be careful.' And I know this will completely surprise all of you, I would respond sarcastically, every time: 'Thank you so much, mom, I'm so glad you said that, I had planned to drive recklessly and engage in unsafe activities, but now that you've said this, I will, indeed, be careful.' The truth is, my parents have given me a lot of wonderful help and advice over the years. I've been thinking about that because I wanted to start today with some parental advice from the great Shakespearean drama *Hamlet*. In Act I, Scene III, Polonius, chief counsellor to King Claudius, gives his son, Laertes, advice as Laertes departs for France. It's one of Shakespeare's most well-known lines:

This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.  
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee.<sup>1</sup>

"To thine own self be true." Probably already a common saying of Shakespeare's day, Polonius is telling his son that he is a good and noble person, and so if he remembers to be that, to be himself in that way, he will be honest and true to other people as well. This is ironic, of course, because Polonius does precisely the opposite throughout the rest of the play, deceiving and scheming and revealing himself to be a profound hypocrite. But it is also unexpected to the late modern audience because it sounds oddly familiar. It sounds like a contemporary idea, the hallmark of the ideas of self-realisation and self-fulfilment that are only possible in the era of

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene III.

post-Freudian psychoanalysis. We are all told, over and over again, to be who we are, that inside, there is a person that we are or want to be, and we simply need to be that person, that, who we think we are, is all that matters and it not only has to be acknowledged, but affirmed. 'Be true to yourself. Be who you were meant to be. Follow your heart.' The problem with this, of course, is that the heart is pretty stupid. Follow your brain, maybe? Or better yet, be honest about your feelings and desires. In biblical terms, the Prophet Jeremiah put it like this: "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*"<sup>2</sup> Or in terms of Shakespeare, Polonius' advice only stands insofar as Laertes is a good and honest and true person. To the extent that Laertes is a sinner, prone to evil and rebellious thoughts and deeds, he should try to be somebody else.

Now, you may be wondering what in the world I am going on about this and why I have given this strangely long introduction. And it is this: The Gospel reading today, the parable that Jesus tells his disciples, is fundamentally a check on our hearts, a meditation on the things that cause us to deceive ourselves, and why following our hearts or being true to ourselves can be dangerous. And this is what we will learn, we need to keep a close watch on our hearts, lest we wander away from Jesus Christ. Or as O'Shea Jackson, Sr., once put it: "Check yo'self before you wreck yo'self."<sup>3</sup> Let's take a look at this strange little parable.

### 1. THE POINT OF THE PARABLE

The passage begins with Jesus teaching both his disciples and the crowds, but on the heels of a few confrontations in chapter 12. The disciples, and so the reader of the Gospel, are wondering, why the negative reaction to Jesus, the miracle-working prophet who does very little other than go around helping people? The parable, I think, provides something of an answer, but more on that in moment. In the parable, the sower sows seed widely and indiscriminately. It falls on four soils, which are then described—three which fail to yield fruit, but one that does.<sup>4</sup> The parable, in our reading, is followed by Jesus' explanation.

Now, of course, most commentators and preachers would focus on that good soil. It is the aspirational soil, after all. The seed, according to the explanation, is the word of Jesus; it is the message of the gospel of the kingdom of God that Jesus has been proclaiming. And those who hear and understand it, who repent and follow Jesus in it, become those who bear fruit. It makes sense to focus there. Except this: Jesus doesn't tell us what it means to bear fruit. Also, secondly, it is strange that there are three bad soils, if the focus is meant to be on the good soil. Then, thirdly, throwing seeds indiscriminately is really bad farming practice, a fact that would be obvious to the original audience, and so suggesting a focus on the peculiarity of the bad soils. Fourthly, there's the eight verses that the lectionary, again in its sort of pathetic way, omitted.<sup>5</sup> In those verses, before he resigns himself to having to explain the parable to his otherwise baffled disciples, he indicates that he teaches in parables in general, in part, in order to confound people. He even cites the ministry of Isaiah to show that he sees his teaching work as failing, as

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<sup>2</sup> Jer 17:9 (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> Ice Cube, "Check Yo' Self" from *The Predator* (1993).

<sup>4</sup> In the text, the seed is thrown into four locations—only the second and fourth of which are called soils (v.5 and v.8). I am calling them soils throughout because that terminology is helpful in keeping the presentation simple. There are four distinctions clearly denoted by the use of the verb fell (πίπτω)—seeds were sown and fell in four locations: path (v.4), rocky ground (v.5), among thorns (v.7), and on good soil (v.8).

<sup>5</sup> See Matt 13:10-17.

preaching to the deaf and blind.<sup>6</sup> Let me just quote one verse from that section. Jesus said: *“For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.”*<sup>7</sup> All of this indicates a focus on the bad soils. And so, if the focus of the parable is on the bad soils, why?

## 2. THE PROBLEMS OF THE SOILS

Why focus on the bad soils? I think it is because Jesus is explaining why people keep rejecting his message. ‘To thine own self be true?’ We need to know about ourselves and this parable is an explanation as to why, when his word is sown into the heart, it might not produce fruit. In short, it is a meditation on the many reasons we reject Christ Jesus and his gospel proclamation, choosing to go our own ways, following the deceptions of our hearts, being true to the worst versions of ourselves. And what are those reasons? Three soils, three reasons:

- First is the path. In his explanation, Jesus describes it as the evil one coming and snatching away that which was sown in the heart, the word of the kingdom. That is, sometimes we are so stubborn, so hard-hearted, that the word of Jesus just simply does not penetrate. We get so set in our ways, so comfortable in our sin, so hopeless in our outlook, that the message of the kingdom, the message of grace, simply does not capture our hearts or minds. We either seek to be beyond God’s influence or we think we are beyond his redemption. Either way, the message does not get through and we do not respond to the word of Jesus.
- Second is the rocky soil. Here, the word seems to have an effect, at least initially. But fear, being scared of what it means to be committed to the word of God in the long term, anxiety about what it means to fully give yourself to the life of faith, can drive you away. There is no root, just initial excitement and the fleeing in the face trouble or persecution, consequences, of what it means to be a follower of Christ Jesus.
- The third soil is that of the thorns. In the explanation of this soil, the problem seems to be distractions, being side-tracked by the cares of the world. That is, sometimes the desire for comfort, for financial security, for control over our circumstances drives us to depend on ourselves rather than on the word of Christ Jesus. These things are not inherently evil, mind you, just when we prioritize them over the gospel of our Lord. It comes down to a question of whether we really rely on ourselves or on God—the God who provides even for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field—how much more will he provide for us?<sup>8</sup>

The truth is, each of these soils can be us on any given day. ‘To thine own self be true?’ We are often stubborn, sometimes scared, and far too easily side-tracked. And we are in good company, by the way. The disciples themselves demonstrate each of these—whether it is Peter preventing the others from understanding,<sup>9</sup> Peter, again, denying Jesus when the trials and persecutions

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<sup>6</sup> See Isa 6:9-10, which is quoted by Jesus in Matt 13:14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 13:15.

<sup>8</sup> See Matt 6:25-33.

<sup>9</sup> See Matt 16:22-23, where Peter is compared to the ‘evil one’ by Jesus.

came,<sup>10</sup> or James and John or even Judas prioritizing the cares of the world and the accumulation of wealth over following Jesus.<sup>11</sup> And that is the question for us. How do we get pulled away from Christ? What prevents us from understanding his word, turning and following him, and ultimately bearing fruit? Think about it. Really consider your own lives. How are you tempted? Is it obstinacy? Is it fear and anxiety? Is it the distractions of this world?

Whatever it is, know this. There was hope for the disciples and there is hope for us. Christ took up the cross and died for us, saving us from these very sins, so that we may follow him boldly, without fear, and without diversion. Turn to him, read and understand, and commit to following his word.

## CONCLUSION

Because, friends, we must be careful in this world, keeping a check on our hearts, understanding and watching for all the reasons that will pull us away from following Christ Jesus and his word, his word that requires both difficult obedience in this life, and which also provides all that is necessary to find salvation in the life to come.<sup>12</sup> Be careful trusting in your own heart, unless it truly is the word of Christ that has been sown in your heart. Be careful listening to advice telling you to be true to yourself, unless who you are is in Christ and Christ is in you. But in that case, let's just call it what it is. 'To thine own self be true?' No. Be true to Christ. Live as one in Christ. As Paul reminded us in the Romans reading:

But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.<sup>13</sup>

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to follow your Son, to listen to his word rather than the desires of our own hearts. so that we may truly live. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> See Matt 26:69-75.

<sup>11</sup> See Matt 20:20-28, and 26:8-9, 14-26.

<sup>12</sup> As Article VI begins: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation..." See Article VI, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*.

<sup>13</sup> Rom 8:10-11.