

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 29, 2023
Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9;18-23

Sermon: Condition of the Soil

The Ladies Bible Study at the church is currently studying a series by John Ortberg entitled *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You*. Last week we talked about having our life rooted in Christ so that we can stand strong in the storms of life.

Today I want to share with you some of the ideas John Ortberg has about our will, mind, body and soul. John Ortberg states, *“When we are preoccupied with unhealthy habits, when we are not centered in God, our soul cries out in distress. When you choose to live a shallow life, one that only skims the surface of spirituality, your soul shrivels from neglect. A rested, well-cared-for soul holds our connection to eternity and can help us see past the petty concerns of the present. It has access to the kind of peace, gratitude, freedom, and blessing that comes only from a heavenly well-spring.”*

John begins this series by telling a story called *The Keeper of the Stream*. Listen to this story carefully: “There once was a town high in the Alps that straddled the banks of a beautiful stream. The stream was fed by springs that were old as the earth and deep as the sea.

The water was clear like crystal. Children laughed and played beside it; swans and geese swam on it. You could see the rocks and the sand and the rainbow trout that swarmed at the bottom of the stream.

High in the hills, far beyond anyone’s sight, lived an old man who served as Keeper of the Springs. He had been hired so long ago that now no one could remember a time when he wasn’t there. He would travel from one spring to another in the hills, removing branches or fallen leaves or debris that might pollute the water. But his work was unseen.

One year the town council decided they had better things to do with their money. No one supervised the old man anyway. They had roads to repair and taxes to collect and services to offer, and giving money to an unseen steam-cleaner had become a luxury they could no longer afford.

So the old man left his post. High in the mountains, the springs went untended; twigs and branches and worse muddied the liquid flow. Mud and silt compacted the creek bed; farm wastes turned parts of the stream into stagnant bogs.

For a time no one in the village noticed. But after a while, the water was not the same. It began to look brackish. The swans flew away to live elsewhere. The water no longer had a crisp scent that drew children to play by it. Some people in the town began to grow ill. All noticed the loss of sparkling beauty that used to flow between the banks of the streams that fed the town. The life of the village depended on the stream, and the life of the stream depended on the keeper.

The city council reconvened, the money was found, the old man was rehired. After yet another time, the springs cleaned, the stream was pure, children played again on its banks, illness was replaced by health, the swans came home, and the village came back to life. The life of a village depended on the health of the stream. ***The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.***

Dallas Willard, famous professor, writer and close friend of John Ortberg writes, *“Our soul is like a stream of water, which gives strength, direction and harmony to every other area of our life. When that stream is as it should be, we are constantly refreshed and exuberant in all we do, because our soul itself is then profusely rooted in the vastness of God and his kingdom, including nature; and all else within us is enlivened and directed by that stream. Therefore we are in harmony with God, reality, and the rest of human nature and nature at large.”*

Dallas Willard also said, *“This is the most important thing you can know about your identity: You are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe. Your soul will live forever—and you are the keeper of your soul.”*

What does it mean to be the “keeper” of your soul?

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for the soul is **nephesh** (**neh'-fesh**). In the New Testament, the word for soul in Greek is **psyche** (**psu-kha'**) and the root words refer to “**breath or life.**” It all refers to what makes you unique and special in the eyes of God.

“Very few people in this world are seriously concerned about the state of their own soul. You have a soul, and for you to have a soul that is healed, that is healthy, that is redeemed by God, matters more than the outcome of any circumstance in your world or your life. Your eternal destiny rests on the well-being of your soul—and only God can heal the soul. The soul is the life center of human beings,” states Dallas Willard.

What exactly is the soul? John Ortberg’s view is that the inner circle of your life is made up of the human **will**, which is your capacity to choose. The second circle of the person is the **mind**, and it refers to a person’s thoughts and their feelings. Our mind craves to be at peace. The next circle outward is the **body**, and the fourth circle around all the others is the **soul**.

Our soul seeks to connect with our will, mind, and body, and it wants to connect with other people, with creation and with God, who made us to be rooted and grounded in him the way we talked about last Sunday. A deeply rooted tree will be healthy and stand strong in the midst of the storms of life and will be nourished and fed and so will we when we are rooted in Christ. When you are connected to God and other people in life, you have a healthy soul.

John Ortberg says, (p.45-47) *“The point is that what Jesus said is true: gaining the outside world doesn’t help you if your inside world collapses. We live on the planet of lost souls. That is the human problem. It is not some superficial thing that only relates to getting the right afterlife if you affirm the right doctrines. It has to do with the depth of the human condition, which Jesus identified as nobody else ever has. Our world has replaced the word “**soul**” with the word “**self**,” and they are not the same thing. The more we focus on ourselves, the more we neglect our souls. To focus on my soul means to look at my life under the care and connection of God. We pay more attention to*

our bodies, finances and hobbies than we do to our souls. But the soul is what we will take into eternity.”

Our scripture lesson this morning is often called the *Parable of the Sower* but it would be better to call it the *Parable of the Soils* because it is a teaching for us about our soul. Parables are to enlighten us spiritually if we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see.

The sower is God who scatters the seeds generously everywhere, not just on the good soil. The seed is good and healthy, and the soil is a metaphor for the soul. Depending on the condition of the soil can mean life or death to your soul. So as we look at the different soils in this scripture lesson, replace the word “soil” with “soul.”

The Hardened Soil (The Hardened Soul)- The path is hard and dry and where many have walked. This is the soul that has been hurt or disappointed. The person has been hardened in their heart to God and the person has a difficult time rooting themselves in Christ. This is the soul that has no room in their life for God or his teachings. Even if they hear about God they are unchanged, unmoved, and unresponsive to God.

The Shallow Soil (The Shallow Soul)- Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. There is some topsoil but underneath there is rock, so the seed was not able to take root, grow deeply into the soil and withers quickly in the heat of the sun. This is the soul that begins to be changed by God and praises God but when life gets hard and suffering occurs, they go from praising God to blaming God. The soul attached to Jesus will grow and mature and have roots strong and deep enough to withstand strong storms of life. A mature believer clings to Jesus in tragedy and in difficulties; not so with the shallow soul.

The Cluttered Soil (The Cluttered Soul)- Some seeds fall among thorns, which grow up and choke the plants. Jesus said that is the condition where the worries of this life and the desire for other things come and choke the soul. It is a divided soul that tries to love God and love the world. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:24, “*No one can serve two masters.*” Or as John puts it, “*If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*” (1 John 1:15) Busyness can also shrivel our souls, pulling us away from God and the things in life that really matter. The desire for other things adds clutter to our days and causes

our souls to be unhealthy; not being nourished and fed by a connection with God. Clutter prevents the seed from taking root but if you create space for God the seed will begin to grow and take root.

Good Soil (Good Soul)- The fourth soil is the good deep soil, the good soul, that has a soft heart to receive the love of God, dig their roots down deep and be healthy and strong bearing much fruit. A tree produces fruit for reproduction. In the same way, through our witness, we invite others to consider the condition of their soul and what kind of soil they are.

Jesus is not just describing different types of soil but he is talking about our will, mind, body and soul—the condition of our life and our heart and our relationship with God. We are rarely just one type of soil. We are all four at one time or another in our life. The four soils are about how we live, relate to others and to God. When Jesus tells what happens to the seeds, it is describing the consequences of each kind of soul.

This parable makes us look at our life and helps us examine the kind of life we are living or have lived or what kind of soil we want to be in the future. What is the condition of your soil?

Thankfully this parable is about God's faithfulness and not about farming. In the sower's world, wastefulness gives way to hope, inefficiency to love, and profitability to the generosity of God. No ground is declared undeserving of the sower's seeds.

The Good News is that God can change hard, rocky, and thorny soil into fertile gardens. Ezekiel 36:26 says, "*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*"

1 Corinthians 5:17 reminds us, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.*"

Strive to be the good soil, the good soul. Open your mind and heart to God's Word, and let it transform your life. Hear it, obey it, and let it turn you into a fruitful child of God rooted deeply in the love of God.