

Some Fell Upon Stony Ground

We tend to view the passage in Mark 4 as referring to the conditions in Society. But when it comes to the “Good Ground” reference, how can we reasonably expect that society can in any way provide that Spiritual Growth Environment?

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A profound Parable was presented to assembled followers as recorded in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. The narrative reads as follows:

Mark 4:3-9 *“Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:*

[4] *And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.*

[5] *And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:*

[6] *But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.*

[7] *And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.*

[8] *And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.*

[9] *And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”*

I suppose it is reasonable to envision seed falling where it couldn't possibly grow, exposed to being 'eaten up', to a societal setting. Stony ground also to some extent. We might even envision a thorny environment being the overwhelming influences of a world negative to the things of God. But it's when we come to the "good ground" that a question becomes more obvious.

Blessed with GOOD Soil Conditions

That question is just what and where does that good ground exist? It can't be society. How could we expect the world, as we know it, could in any way, provide the environment for significant spiritual growth where much good fruit is produced?

It's with this realization that we see need to review our interpretation of what this parable is telling us. It's no surprise that the world, even the religious world, can be an environment seriously detrimental to spiritual growth. While the world to some extent is 'seeded' with the Word, it can and does take root in only the rarest of individuals.

It's when this seed is expected to, and actually does have the necessary environment to sprout, that spiritual growth conditions are viable. It's when we realize this that the message stands out with its fullest meaningfulness. As verse 9 states, *“...He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.”* Like the 'followers' who heard it in person when it was given, not all can understand the full implications. Having ears to hear suggests that the message will not be generally or widely comprehended.

The question is, do WE?

I must admit that for most of my adult life I regarded these varying environments as describing the conditions in the world that pose difficulties for those *called* of God and who find themselves needing to deal with life's adverse situations. It wasn't until presenting a message on the conditions within our congregations that it dawned on me that what is being described is the varying environments to be found within congregations.

Just consider the "good ground". We couldn't expect the world in its hostile stance against God to ever be considered 'good soil' for growth (except perhaps as providing exercise of overcoming its evil). No, the good ground is the environment that can only be found within the Churches of God.

The sobering thing is the realization that the other conditions might be found there as well!

“By the Wayside”

We can equate these with those people who are at first somewhat attracted to the Truth, but who are easily dissuaded from really believing it. They're easily susceptible to being told they don't really need to change, or that some false teaching is truth instead. Their opportunity flits away like happens with devouring birds. They never have any real desire to 'put down roots'. Theirs' is more of a passing interest: More for entertainment, something interesting to listen to, rather than repenting and growing in grace and knowledge.

Another aspect of this is reflective of members not fulfilling their obligations of (in those cases where it can be) sweeping the seed off the wayside into more fertile soil before the 'birds' come!

“Sprouting on Stony Ground”

This situation has many possible comparisons. We realize that being in this world poses a hard ground of its own against developing righteous character. But what we need to consider is whether or not this actually refers to encountering hard conditions within the church. Some religious organizations impose strict requirements, far more difficult for new people than what Jesus requires.

Such responsive individuals can plunge in with initial enthusiasm, but then be tripped up by conditions imposed on them from their affiliation. The world also (our life situations and our pasts) can factor into the stony situations as well. But a great deal of the growth environment can be greatly enhanced with a right-shepherding congregation and ministry. There are so many stories where the ministry (and an overly fearful membership) are found to be hard people to deal with!

“Encountering Thorny Situations”

Personality defects, both within ones' self and those evident in others, can provide people with many a 'thorny trial'. Not all have the fortitude to deal with them. Political intrigue, backstabbing, personality clashes and false accusations can also pose difficulties that can stunt or choke off spiritual development. Find us the member who can't equate with that!

Considering the Soil Conditions

It's primarily this condition that clinches the idea that these seed environments actually refer to the conditions within the Church. It speaks to what OUGHT to exist within each congregation. There should be none of those other factors that inhibit or choke-off spiritual growth.

Organizations that we have encountered have demonstrated many of them. Not all, but there are those 'experiences' that illustrate these sour environments that we've seen. In fact, the situation is especially prevalent in those 'spin-off' groups that were trained in the 'parent organization' of decades past. Ministerial preeminence was taught, emphasized and firmly imposed. So much so that the 'sheep' became the minor entity and the ministry the major, despite Jesus' description of the true inter-relationship we read in Luke 22:27! This exists in the greater religious world as well. Those who 'minister' are supposed to be those who serve, not who impose their authority over helping the maturing believer in every way possible.

What is too common is where the ministry doesn't care to provide growth opportunities. They are inclined to not identify potential Talents, but rather to squelch them (called 'quenching the Spirit'). As a result, we have gentrifying congregations where long time members have little to no real experience having gained in proficiency in teaching or exercising their senses of discernment. Where the Apostle Paul chided the long-time members for not becoming the Teachers they ought to be,¹ modern leaders seem particularly content to keep it that way!

This addresses itself to how it ought to be, not so much how it is.

The point here is that it's the congregations that are to provide that fertile 'good ground' for spiritual growth. Have we adequately provided that?

Each member needs to look down and check his spiritual root environment. Is the situation that's being provided one that encourages growth or does it stifle it? The answer to that should determine if we should seek out environments where we can be growing as we ought to be. 

¹ Hebrews 5:12-14