

The Shallow Heart

Mark 4.1-20

This morning we come to the second soil in Christ's parable. This second soil illustrates a second heart. Last time we saw the wayside or hardened heart. This time we will examine the stony or shallow heart. Please open your Bibles with me to Christ's sermon about The Shallow Heart. Mark 4.5-6; 16-17.

v. 16-17: SHALLOW HEARTS: What happens when God's Word falls on the Shallow Heart? Jesus says that He finds it temporary, unsubstantial, and with deep seated rebellion.

As Jesus taught He was usually surrounded by crowds of shallow souls. They followed, listened, enjoyed His messages – but never could get around to doing anything with what they heard. They were fascinated, entertained, even deeply impressed with His message and ability. They were responsive in some ways, unlike the hardened hearts. Moved by His message at times, able to talk about the Lord – but never deeply changed. They are unstable, un-rooted, temporary and fragile. Their spiritual life has as much life as a cut flower. They look great until they wither.

What would a shallow soil person look like today? Do we have any clear example to help us understand this person? Jesus illustrates the shallow heart in chapter 10.17-22.

Open there with me to Mark 10 to see the parable of Mark 4 illustrated. In Mark 10 Jesus lets us see what goes on in the heart of the shallow convert. And we at last see the second soil illustrated! The way to understand our passage on the soils this morning is to allow Jesus to interpret it for us.

The clearest Biblical¹ examples of the shallow, submerged rock soil is the Rich young Ruler of the Gospels. He is emotional, says all the right things, makes a splashy profession (with joy received Christ's word)

¹ See also Matthew 19.16-30; Luke 18.18-30 which also record the Rich Young Ruler account.

but then when the hard reality of obedience and submission comes at the insistence of Jesus – he withers right before our eyes. The huge rebellion (rocky ledge under the soil) caused the Son of God's shining the Light of truth upon his life – to scorch and wither that shallow profession of desire to follow Jesus. His rebellion to the rule of God, his resistance to the law of God, his unwillingness to acknowledge his lostness -- all show the shallowness of his profession.

Christ's story we look at this morning illustrates how we often unconsciously blend together the details of all the Gospels into one story. We usually call this the story of the Rich Young Ruler. All the gospels tell us that this man was *rich*, that is the point of the story. However –

- only Matthew says that he was *young* (Matthew 19:20); and
- only Luke says that he was a *ruler* (Luke 18:18).

So when we say Rich + Young + Ruler we have joined together elements taken from all three gospels (Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23).

One of the most amazing meetings in history took place almost 2,000 years ago. It is one of the best known stories in God's Word – we call it the Rich Young Ruler. A young businessman came to Jesus. He came willingly, he came excitedly, he came publicly, and he came directly.

And what was his request from the Savior of the world? He asked for eternal life.

And what was his method? He came by all outward appearances genuinely. He was on his knees, holding onto Jesus, and looking up into the face of Jesus.

Wow, that is what all of us long to someday do – kneel and look up at the One who loved us, and whom we have loved more and more with all our heart.

By any standard of measurement, this should have been the greatest day of his life. But it ended up being the worst! He became the only person who came willingly to the feet of Jesus who went away unchanged, unhelped, unforgiven, unhealed, and most of all unsaved.

This day was captured in Scripture by God to communicate a disaster of eternal proportions.

This man missed the opportunity -- of an eternity. A moment to determine his ultimate destiny was lost.

God left this story with a sad ending – on purpose. God wrote the ending of this story the way He did to illustrate once and for all the SHALLOW HEART.

Please stand with me and follow along as we read Christ's words in Mark 10.17-22.

For a moment examine this account. In these verses we find so much right about this young man. He seems to have sought the right person – Jesus alone has salvation. He came with the right approach – enthused and humbly. He came truthfully – he knew that he needed eternal life and did not have it. But he left empty handed and lost hearted. Why?

There are two parts to Christ's parable. First he told of the quick response to the Gospel. Then He told of the rock getting in the way. Look at the immediate response to Jesus this Rich young Ruler had.

10:17 Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" ^{NKJV}

He Came to Jesus Unashamedly!

This man was young (Matt. 19:20) and rich (v. 22). In Luke 18:18 we learn that he was a ruler (*archōn* in the Greek text), which most likely means he was a ruler of the synagogue (cf. the same use of the word in Matt. 9:18). Thus it appears that he was a Jewish religious leader—devout, honest, young, wealthy, prominent, highly respected, and influential. He had everything.

He Came to Jesus Enthusiastically!

Mark 10:17 says the man came running.

He Came to Jesus Humbly!

He also came publicly. Unlike Nicodemus, who came by night, this man came in broad daylight and in front of other people. Mark says that the Lord was on the road, having just set out on a journey. No doubt there was the usual crowd around him. This fellow ran right

through the crowd, unhampered by the fact that the people knew who he was. He was bold enough to confess publicly and openly that he did not possess eternal life. For a man in his position to ask such a question took tremendous courage. He had a lot to lose by openly admitting that he lacked eternal life.

He Came to Jesus Directly!

In his search for the missing element on his soul he sought out Jesus. And how right he was to do so. "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

He Came to Ask the Greatest Question anyone could ever ask!

Nothing matters more in life than the destiny of your eternal soul. Nothing matters more in all the Universe than the salvation that God has offered to all the people on earth. What was this passage about? We know it was not about a post-conversion call to deeper discipleship, because Jesus was answering a question about how to obtain eternal life!

When Jesus speaks of *eternal life* (a term used fifty times in the Bible), it always encompasses all aspects of salvation -- conversion, evangelism, and the new birth. In fact, the most familiar gospel verse of all, John 3:16, uses the expression: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Now amazingly Jesus almost resists this amazing entrance. He does so to peel back the shallowness of this man's reception of Him and to expose the real problem – the bedrock of willfulness, rebellion, arrogance, and unyieldedness in this rich young man's life.

10:18-19 So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Do not defraud,' 'Honor your father and your mother.'" ^{NKJV}

10:20 And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." ^{NKJV}

The young man said he had never once broken any of the laws Jesus mentioned (10:19–20), and perhaps he had even kept the Pharisees' loophole-filled version of them. But Jesus lovingly broke through the young man's pride with a challenge that answered his own question: *Sell everything you have and give to the poor*. This challenge exposed the barrier that could keep this young man out of the kingdom: his love of money. Money represented his pride of accomplishment and self-effort. Ironically, his attitude made him unable to keep the *first* commandment, one that Jesus did not quote in 10:19: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3 NRSV; see also Matthew 22:36–40). The young man did not love God with his whole heart as he had presumed. In reality, the man's wealth was his god, his idol. If he could not give it up, he would be violating the first and greatest commandment.

In this story, we see clearly the essence of the gospel—repent and believe. Jesus told the rich young man to turn his back on his past (repent) and to begin following him (believe). The young man may have wanted to believe, but he was unwilling to repent.

10:21 Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." ^{NKJV}

But what went wrong? Dante the satirist of the 15th Century, called this story the story of the great refusal.

He was unwilling to confess that he was a sinner!

Evangelism must measure sinners against the perfect law of God so that they can see their deficiency. A gospel that deals only with human needs, only with human feelings, only with human problems, lacks the true balance. That is why churches are full of people whose lives are essentially unchanged after their supposed conversion. Most of these people, I am convinced, are unregenerate and grievously misled.

Law always precedes grace: it is the tutor that leads us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Without the law and its effect on us that God designs, grace is meaningless. And without an understanding of the reality and gravity of sin, there can be no redemption.

We need to adjust our presentation of the gospel. We cannot dismiss the fact that God hates sin and punishes sinners with eternal

torment. How can we begin a gospel presentation by telling people on their way to hell that God has a wonderful plan for their lives?

Scripture says, "God is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11 KJV). A righteous, holy, pure God cannot tolerate evil. He will not save those who try to come to him harboring sin.

He was unwilling to see he had failed to meet God's standard!

The danger of works is that we always think we have done enough. The danger of self-righteousness is that we can always find someone worse than us. So he couldn't see his own personal lostness.

10:22 But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. ^{NKJV}

At this point, Mark 10:21 tells us, "And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him." That statement paints a pathetic picture. This young man was sincere, and his spiritual quest was genuine. He was an honestly religious person. Jesus loved him and was about to die for sinners like him. Jesus was not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Yet that was one thing this man would not do.

The Lord Jesus does not take sinners on their own terms. As much as he loved the young man, he nevertheless did not grant him eternal life upon request.

He was unwilling to obey Jesus!

Finally, Jesus gave the young man the ultimate test: "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matt. 19:21). This challenged his claim to having kept the law. In effect, Christ told the young man, "You say you love your neighbor as yourself. OK, give him everything you've got. If you really love him as much as you love yourself, that should be no problem."

The rich young ruler failed the test. Contrast this man's response with that of Zaccheus in Luke 19. Zaccheus had a deep sense of sorrow for his sin. He was willing to do anything—including getting rid of all his w²

²MacArthur, J., F. 1997, c1988. *The Gospel according to Jesus : What does Jesus mean when he says "follow me"*. Includes index. (Electronic

As J. I. Packer has written, "The repentance that Christ requires of His people consists in a settled refusal to set any limit to the claims which He may make on their lives."¹⁷

10:22 At this, the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.^{NIV}

He could not meet the one requirement Jesus gave—to turn his whole heart and life over to God. The one thing he wanted, eternal life, was unattainable because he deemed the price too high. The man came to Jesus wondering what he could do; he left seeing what he was unable to do. No wonder he *went away sad*. How tragic—to be possessed by possessions and miss the opportunity to be with Jesus. Nothing more was written about this young man; probably he never left all and followed Jesus. He loved his money more than God, and thus he violated even the first commandment (Ex. 20:3).

While the children came readily to Jesus, a rich young man had difficulty. He wanted to get close, but he wanted to do so on his own terms. Jesus reached out in truth and love; unfortunately, the rich young man turned away. In this story, we see clearly the essence of the gospel—repent and believe. Jesus told the rich young man to turn his back on his past (repent) and to begin following him (believe). The young man may have wanted to believe, but he was unwilling to repent.³

The ruler was more attached to his wealth than to the idea of obtaining "eternal life" (in stark contrast to the other rich man who sought out Jesus – Zacchaeus in Luke 19.8) which he had so remarkably sought from Jesus at first.

Then the man who refused Jesus walked sorrowfully away. Probably the eyes of Jesus and his apostles followed him until his figure receded into the distance.

ed.). Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House: Grand Rapids, MI

17 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1961), 72.

³Barton, B. B. 1996. *Matthew*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

This moment is the clearest picture in the entire Bible of what a shallow heart looks like. They say all the right things, do all the right motions, and to everyone who looks on – they come and ask for eternal life. And then after a while they completely scorch out, die, and all appearances of salvation withers away. What Jesus reveals in Mark 10 is that the shallow heart is only exposed by the passing of time and when the rocky layer of the heart gets exposed.

10:23 Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, **“How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!”** ^{NKJV}

What do shallow hearts look like? Humility is absent from their lives. Ambition drives them. Sorrow for sin is unseen, and confidence carries them along. These hearts with unseen rocks can be enthused and excited. Quickly they respond, talking much of the things of God. They are swept along by other’s experiences of God. And they profess to even want what others have. They seek to learn the “how to’s” but never the “whys”. Outwardly their growth appears extraordinarily and often meteoric. They are drawn to the warmth of fellowship but never repelled by the coldness of sin. They are attracted to the light of the Word but never emptied of the darkness of their own way. They want Christ without sacrifice, joy without contrition, growth without obedience.

The shallow souls can freely discuss needs, fears, conflicts and struggles. They are pleasant and fit right in for a time. But down deep in their lives resides a large outcropping of unrepentant sin. Hidden by the soil of profession, by the foliage of activity, and by the enthusiasm of the moment – the submerged rebellion in their life is unseen. But as soon as troubles come they wither. When afflictions come they dry up. When persecutions come they flee. When God brings them to a point they must turn to Him or go their own way – they abandon all appearances of Christ.

10:24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, **“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!”** ^{NIV} Jesus’ words *amazed* the disciples, and so he repeated them. Deceived by their own sins, they remain unwilling to give up their own ways. Lostness is never faced, sins are never repented of, the Spirit is never received, the Word is never grafted into their souls. Their old life isn’t passing away, and they have nothing new that Christ begins. They have never been converted. And so when the heat of troubles comes they walk away from the Christ they never knew. They were

never rooted into Christ, His Word was never implanted in their souls. They were never saved. Sin and not Christ -- is the anchor that holds them.

10:25 “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”^{NKJV}

Thus Jesus explained that it would be easier to get a camel (the largest animal in Palestine) through the eye of a sewing needle than for a person who trusts in riches to get into the kingdom of God.

10:26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”^{NRSV} The disciples were *greatly astounded* almost to the point of exasperation.

10:27 But Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.”^{NKJV} The answer to the disciples’ question, “Who can be saved?” turns out to be quite simple. *No one* is saved on merit; but *all* are saved who humbly come to God to receive salvation. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9 NRSV). Here was the answer to the rich young ruler’s question about how to obtain eternal life (10:17). Jesus explained that by submitting to his authority and rule, making him top priority over all else, and giving up anything that hinders following him, each person can have eternal life. For the rich young man, that meant giving up money as his idol. For each person the sacrifice may be different, though no less difficult. We may have little or much, but are we willing to give it all up in order to have eternal.

Jesus notes that these people joyfully receive the good news of the gospel. It is common to see this because of all the wonderful promises that God’s Word offers. There is short term responses, but no long term relationship. They learn the outward elements of the Lord, not the inward reality —*they have no root* and thus *last only a short time*. When trouble comes (the scorching heat, 4:6), they have not believed and received the Gospel, they have just tried it and decide it is not for them. Often in Christ’s day the cost was great, even excommunication from home and synagogue (see John 9:22–23). So often, Satan brings persecution to scare off the shallow. Amazingly, for those rooted in Christ tribulations and trials actually refine and strengthen their lives and draw them even closer to God.

An analysis of Christ's methods in evangelizing this man would either cause us to criticize Jesus – or to examine ourselves. In this instance Jesus did not scoop up this eager seeker. Jesus did not embrace this correct seeker. Jesus rather exposed the heart of his problem. Jesus peeled back the thin soil and revealed the bedrock of personal rebellion. The stones of the true self of this man, that were immoveable by his own choice. He came correctly – Jesus is the only One that can save. He believed correctly – Jesus is good and thus the Son of God. He understood correctly – Jesus is the One before Whom we must bow. He accepted correctly – God's Word is the basis we must come.

But with all that Jesus failed to encourage him to pray a prayer. Jesus refused to lower the bar for him. It was either Christ's way or no way. And the young ruler chose his own way and not Christ's. If Jesus did not hurry into a closing on the deal – maybe we should examine our methods at times.

Money is a marvelous servant but a terrible master. If you possess money, be grateful and use it for God's glory; but if money possesses you, beware! It is good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose the things that money cannot buy. The deceitfulness of riches had so choked the soil of this young man's heart that he was unable to receive the good seed of the Word and be saved (Matt. 13:22). What a bitter harvest he would reap one day!⁴

⁴Wiersbe, W. W. 1996, c1989. *The Bible exposition commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"-- Jkt. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.