

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop-- a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series that I am calling Masterclass: Storyteller, looking at the parables of Jesus. If you're unfamiliar with the word parable, the best definition I found is by John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught using parables: there are about 40 parables of Jesus recorded in the Scriptures. He would use simple word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a seed" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward son," to teach a deep truth about God and what it means to know Him. And as we are going to find out in today's passage, there were a couple reasons that he used that form. We are going to read Matthew 13:1-23 this morning, which is often called the parable of the sower.. This parable is a great place to start this series, because in it Jesus reveals why He so often spoke in parables.

I want to begin by reading Matthew 13:1-9, and I want you to imagine that you are in the crowd listening to Jesus:

Matthew 13:1-23 - *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop-- a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."*

So imagine that you are in the crowd listening to Jesus. You've heard this guy is a great religious teacher and miracle worker, and so you press in to hear the deep truths he has to share. Maybe he's going to talk about heaven, or good and evil, or how to live a righteous life. But what do you hear? **A short story on how to get a**

good crop? Maybe you're thinking, listen, Jesus, **no offense, but I get it** – if I want to get a good crop, I need to throw my seed on the good soil and not on the path. Thanks, genius. **But the way Jesus ends his parable lets you know that there is more to the story** – “he who has ears, let him hear.” Maybe you'd walk away, dismissing Jesus as a nutcase. But maybe you'd wonder what he meant by “he who has ears, let him hear,” and you'd stick around a little longer, as the disciples did. Let's continue reading in verse 10:

¹⁰ *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"*

Great question. Why do you speak in parables? Jesus, if what you have to say is so important, why don't you tell them straight up what they need to hear? Why not just give a three-point sermon? Why be so mysterious, telling stories that can be so easily misinterpreted or dismissed?

Here is how Jesus responds:

¹¹ *He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹² Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not **hear or understand**. ¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵ For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' ¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears **because they hear**. ¹⁷ For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

Okay.... That clears it up.

What is Jesus saying here? Why does he speak in parables? Sure, one reason was that he was using a language familiar to his audience, word pictures that would stick in their imagination longer than a three point sermon. But that is not the main reason. Jesus answers their question by referencing an Old Testament passage in Isaiah 6. Isaiah was a prophet who was sent to Israel to tell them to repent. He

promised mercy and life to all who would turn from their sin, but his message was also a message of judgment on all who would not turn to God.

Jesus similarly is a prophet, proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God, that a relationship with God is available to all who would hear and respond in faith to His message. But to those who do not respond, there will be judgment, just as there was in Isaiah's day.

I think that by speaking in parables, the profound truth of what Jesus was sharing was hidden from the self-righteous, those who were too sophisticated, those who looked down on Jesus or were skeptical of him. All they would hear were tips on farming, and they would walk away dismissing him. But those who approached Jesus with childlike faith, eager to learn, would respond with questions, wanting to know more. And, as Jesus said: ¹¹ *He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them."*

It reminds me of this prayer of Jesus:

Matthew 11:25-26 - *At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."*

Why did Jesus speak in parables? Perhaps because his goal was not just to impart information, but to invite people into a relationship with Him. And his style of teaching revealed people's hearts as either self-righteous and dismissive of him, or eager to learn from him with childlike faith.

John 17:3 - *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

Jesus goes on to explain what the parable of the soils means:

¹⁸ *"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. ²² The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth*

choke it, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

So what does the parable of the sower mean? A message is preached about the kingdom of God, about the gospel. And Jesus tells them that one of four things will happen, depending upon the condition of the heart of the hearer. This is not a parable about the sower, or the seed. It's about the soils. It's about you and your heart as you listen this morning, or whenever you read the Bible or listen to a word from God. Let's begin with the last one to understand what God's desire is:

- 1) **Good soil** - ²³ *But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."* This is the heart that responds to God and produces fruit.

The message of the kingdom is that in Jesus, a way has been made to eternal life, to knowing God, to having His Spirit in us. Those who have good soil in their heart will bear fruit, which is best explained by Galatians 5:16-23:

Galatians 5:22-23 - *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

This is God's desire for us! He is creating a community of people who are people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. People who love and know that they are loved, who have joy, even when there is so much sorrow around, who have peace no matter how chaotic their circumstances are, who are patient, even with people who are difficult, who are kind & good to others, who are faithful, loyal, and dependable, who are not harsh but are gentle with others, and who are self-controlled, able to do the right thing even when it's hard. This is the kind of community, the kind of people the world is crying out for! And this is the kingdom He is building! The one with a heart like good soil hears the message, understands it, and responds to it, becoming transformed into a person who is fruitful.

- 2) **The second type is the path.** ¹⁹ *When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.* In a typical field, there would be a hard path of roadside soil surrounding the field. Some

seed, when the sower scattered it, would land on this pathway and be eaten up by the birds. Jesus says that this hard path represents the person who does not understand or care to understand the message, and so before it can penetrate the heart and transform it, the evil one, the devil, snatches it away.

Listen up. Some of you this morning are listening to the words I am speaking and they are just bouncing off your heart like seed off the path. There is no understanding, no response, no connection with your heart and mind. Though hearing, you do not hear. Though seeing, you do not see. Listen to how Paul put it:

*2 Corinthians 4:1-4 - Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has **blinded** the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

If you think this might be you, listen closely to me. **The message I am sharing with you is the most important message you will ever hear in your life.** This is the good news that Jesus Christ died for your sins, and that eternal life, a right relationship with the God who created you and who one day you will stand before, can be yours if you would only turn from your sinful, self-centered way of life to trust in Jesus' death for you. Nothing is more important than that. This is the message that has eternal significance for your life. And if you disagree, if you do not care or do not understand, it is only because the devil has blinded your mind. It's because before this message can connect with your heart, the devil is snatching it away. Wake up! Ask God right now to break up the ground of your heart, to help you to understand and respond to this message, that you might be transformed by the gospel.

And for the rest of you who do believe and who have trusted in Christ's death for your sins, do not think you are off the hook. Make no mistake, we all have areas of our life where our hearts are hard, like the path, where we don't want to hear or consider what God has to say, because we love our sin too much, and before God's Word can connect with our heart, the devil comes and snatches that word away. Oh, that we would not end up like the Pharisees, of who Jesus said:

Acts 7:50-51 - "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"

Repent of your hard-heartedness, of your stubbornness, and ask God to break up that path.

There are two more conditions of the heart that serve to keep us from becoming fruitful, that prevent us from maturing into the men and women that God wants us to be: a lack of depth, and the distractions of this world.

- 3) **The third type of soil is the rocky places, the shallow soil.** ²⁰ *The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.* ²¹ *But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.* This is the soil that may look deep, but underneath the soil is a rocky layer that prevents the roots from going deep. This is the shallow heart, the heart without spiritual depth.

This is the man who responds to God with joy and enthusiasm but, the change does not last because there is no root. Once there is trouble or persecution, once things get difficult, they fall away from God and the change does not come. In many ways this is typified by Christian teenagers or even adults who attend events and come away on fire for God, wanting to serve him with all of their hearts and give up anything that gets in the way. But after one week, or one month, they are right back to the person they were before.

The rocky soil is the man or woman who comes to Christ believing that God will make life easier, fix their problems, heal their diseases, give them that promotion. And then when they find that the life of discipleship involves suffering, carrying the cross, laying down one's life, they fall away.

This has the potential of happening every time you hear God's Word. You hear an encouragement to forgive, or to be more generous with your money, or to reprioritize your life around what really matters, and you leave convinced that this is what you need to do. But because there is no depth, Jesus says, when trouble comes, that seed, that word of conviction that you heard, dies.

So what is the answer? What helps cultivate deep roots? A few things come to mind: spiritual disciplines, rhythms with God that help the word take root like Bible reading, prayer, journaling, silence, and worship. Community, a rhythm with others who hold you accountable and encourage you and remind you of what matters, who help you connect the word to the particulars of your life. And spiritual counseling. Sometimes the rocky layer preventing us from going deeper is

the hardness that we have created in response to pain and suffering. And until that is broken up, there will be little depth.

- 4) **The fourth type of soil is the thorns** - ²² *The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. Some soil is infested with weeds, thorns, nettles, and thistles, that suck up the soil's moisture, drain out the nutrients, block the sunlight from the crops, and choke the life out of anything good that is growing in the field. The thorny soil is the heart entangled by the cares of the world.*

This person responds positively, but ultimately they are not fruitful because of the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth. They are too distracted by the cares of this world to follow God or become the men and women God has called them to be. Think of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19.

Matthew 19:16-24 - *Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" ¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." ¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" ²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. ²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, 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."*

The more preoccupied we are with the things of this world, the less effective we will be as a follower of God. The more distracted we are, the less fruitful we will be. The more we will be stuck right where we are.

Luke 16:13 - *"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."*

1 Timothy 6:9-10 - *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.*

¹⁰ *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

James 4:4 - *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

If this is you, ask yourself whether your pursuit of the things of this world is really worth what you are giving up. What is it you really want? What will truly satisfy you?

Isaiah 55:1-3 - *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*

The **missionary Jim Elliot** said something in response to this that is worth remembering: **"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose"**

Oh God we need help. When we put our trust in Jesus, God gives us a new heart:

Ezekiel 36:26-27 - *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*

And for the rest of us, let us pray:

Psalms 51:10-11 - *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

Give us a heart that is good soil, not hardened to you, not shallow, and not distracted by the cares of this world, but believing completely in your goodness and ready to do your will.