

This might surprise you because most of you know we live in a condo, but years ago in a former life, Julie and I had a garden when we lived in the mid-west. It was what people did where we lived. The dear people in my church hunted, fished and gardened, which were the main outdoor hobbies people enjoyed together there. I didn't like to hunt. Julie and I never really got into fishing together, that's another story maybe for a counselor, but we sure found a common interest when we designed and built a vegetable garden. I must say we had a beautiful vegetable garden. It was elevated with landscape timbers and we laid it out in four 10x10 quadrants with walking paths so that we could reach every corner of our garden without stepping off a path. In January, the seed catalogues would be mailed out. With the snow still on the ground we would plan our garden. We would buy the best seeds and even started some of the seeds under a heat lamp in our home to transplant outside when the weather warmed up.

All winter long I composted. I had a good friend who raised chickens and each spring I would pick up a big load of his manure and dump it in my garden. I would spread my compost and my chicken manure over the surface of my garden and I would rototill it until the compost, manure and soil became a beautiful dark loam. Julie and I enjoyed our hobby very much.

We learned pretty fast that the key to a successful garden wasn't the quality of seed; these companies sell good seeds. It wasn't the quality of the gardener; if we worked hard, planted, watered and used a hoe a couple times a week, there really wasn't much more to do.

The key to a successful garden we soon learned was the quality of the soil. Every year we took soil samples to test the acid and alkali numbers. We made sure we broke down the clay so the soil wasn't sticky or dense. We added good soil to sandy soil so the soil would retain the right amount of water. The best soil had the right combination of sand, clay and organic matter. And we had some wonderful gardeners in our church that loved to share their knowledge and secrets with us. Soon we all spoke the same language.

Our passage this morning is in the language that any gardener could appreciate and understand. Jesus used picturesque words when he taught. He used word pictures his audience understood. He talked about being sheep among wolves, camels creeping through the eyes of needles, people trying to remove specks from other people's eyes, while they had planks sticking out of their own, of vines, branches and fruit. These word pictures pop with life in our minds but more importantly, hopefully they pop with life in our hearts.

Today the word picture that will pop for us is a section of teaching titled the Parable of the Sower, or I've heard it referred to as the

Parable of the Sower and the Seeds, or the Parable of the Soils. You get the idea. It's a story about growing stuff.

We will see that Matthew chapter thirteen is a turning point. We have seen the Pharisees and the religious people were obsessed with killing Jesus at this point. But the time for Jesus crucifixion had not arrived. So Jesus being in control of timelines, changed his strategy and went from teaching religious people inside the synagogues to teaching the crowds outside in the open air. But we will see most of the teaching ahead is aimed at his immediate followers.

**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, (Matthew 13:1-3a)**

Who were these crowds? They were people who knew that Jesus had done some wonderful things in the name of God. Most standing on that beach saw Jesus as a prophet who had come to help usher in the judgment the Old Testament prophets had taught about. They hoped Jesus might be the fulfillment of what they had been taught their whole lives in their synagogues. Maybe this Jesus was their hope for change. They were asking themselves questions like, "Could this Jesus be here to help bring about the harvest that will usher in judgment on evil and gather God's people into new kingdom?"

Verse three says Jesus taught them many things in parables. In fact, chapter thirteen contains seven parables, which all have one theme: The Kingdom of God.

### What is a Parable?

*A way of expressing a spiritual or moral truth by laying it alongside something more easily understood.*

A parable is a story from real life, or a real life situation from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. Most of us learn truth better when it's embedded in a story. A story makes the truth more interesting and easier to remember. We could try to explain why someone is beautiful by spending a lot of time trying to put into words what beauty is, but if we point to someone and say "That's a beautiful person," then no more explanation is needed.

Parables differ from fables because a fable is not a real situation. In *Aesop's Fables* for instance, animals talk and represent people. A fable suspends reality. A parable is different from an allegory because in an allegory, every detail has meaning. The most famous allegory ever written is probably John Bunyan's classic, *A Pilgrim's Progress*. Parables usually have one main meaning. It's important as we study parables in the next couple of weeks that we don't force meaning into each detail.

So with that in mind, let's imagine ourselves on that beach looking out at Jesus in the boat. As he begins to talk, he looks over at a field and points to a common site in spring. He sees a farmer walking in his field, dipping his hand into his seed bag slung over his shoulder and pulling out handfuls of seeds, which he cast out over his field. Remember this is Galilee. It's a great place to grow things. I remember when I was in Israel years ago, I looked out over the fields on the west side of the Sea of Galilee and except for the lake it looked like a smaller scale of our central valley with row after row of lush irrigated crops.

I'm going to read the parable of the sower. You might have heard this parable a hundred times, but don't let that cause you to conclude there is no deep spiritual truth about the kingdom of God for you today. From the boat Jesus said,

**"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."** (verses 3b–9)

That's it. That's the entire parable. Some of you might be thinking, okay that's a story, but it's not that interesting. Maybe to a gardener it is interesting, but not to me. Seems like a weird and inefficient way to plant seed. If they had our modern equipment they would have not have wasted their seeds on hard surfaces or hungry birds, or stony or weedy ground. We get the idea that planting seeds on good soil is important.

But we are likely still asking, "Why Jesus are you teaching about your kingdom with this parable?" If you are asking that question, you are just like his disciples. You notice he doesn't explain the parable to the crowd. He just lets it hang out there.

When Jesus returned to the beach, his disciples came to him with an obvious question:

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

In other words, "Jesus, why don't you just speak simply and straightforwardly to these people? And by the way, what in the world are you talking about? This sounded like a lecture on farming methods."

**He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them"** (verse 11)

Did you catch that? Jesus tells the disciples the secrets were not for the crowds, they were for them. God shed His grace on these disciples and gave them the secrets of the kingdom. Today, each one of us has been given the same grace and the same access as followers of Christ. If we have embraced God's free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ as Savior offered to us, by God's grace we have been given eyes to see and ears to hear about the treasures of the kingdom of God. We don't deserve it. We can't earned it It's all because of his grace. Then he goes on, **"but not to them."**

As we think about the kingdom of God, part of the judgment is that people will look and listen, but not see or hear what God is doing because they are blind or deaf to what God is doing around them. They hear something and see something but they are not changed. So these secrets are precious to the insider and meaningless to the outsider. In fact, Jesus goes on to tell his disciples, privately now,

**Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.** (verse 12)

At first look, this sounds cruel. If I have I will be given more, and if I don't have much, even what I have will be taken away. What is Jesus saying here? Let's think about our relationship with Christ.

The nearer we align ourselves to Christ, the more of his goodness touches us, the more of Christ's goodness we have the more we want and the more is available to receive from him. But the other side is judgment. The farther we drift away from Christ or reject him, the less of a taste we will have for his goodness and we will find we will lose even the taste of his goodness we had.

Okay Jesus, why did you even bother to speak to the crowd if all this secret kingdom stuff was meant only for your followers? And Jesus, you still haven't answered our first question, "why did you only speak to them in parables?" So Jesus continues.

**This is why I speak to them in parables:**

**"Though seeing, they do not see;**

**though hearing, they do not hear or understand.**

**In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:**

**"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."** (verses 13–14)

Jesus compared his ministry to the ministry of Isaiah. He is saying, "Just as people who saw and heard Isaiah preaching and didn't follow back then so it is today. They hear me and they see me but in the same way, they don't follow me. The secrets of the kingdom fall on deaf ears and are like riddles that make no sense to them because they are not really hearing or opening themselves up to understand."

**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** (verse 15)

Now that's quite a statement. What does it all mean? I think Matthew is telling us Jesus is teaching to the crowds in parables because the crowds had pretty much rejected Jesus. He was still giving them opportunity if anyone from the crowd chose to pursue truth, but his primary objective in the time he had left was to teach his disciples the deeper truths of the kingdom.

So what is the purpose of Jesus' parables? Yes, it was to teach a moral truth through a relatable and compelling story, but it had a more mysterious purpose as well. A parable is designed to conceal truth from those who don't want to hear truth or submit to truth. It is designed to conceal truth from those who reject the grace of God extended to them. Jesus said to the disciples...

**But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (verses 16–17)**

What is another purpose of Jesus' parables? It is to reveal truth to those who seek after it with all their heart. And to those who hunger to understand the mysteries, who are willing to work at discovering the kingdom secret inside it. A parable to those who seek truth is a blessing. A parable is a gift of God's grace available to all who seeks to follow Jesus, to ponder, understand, and be challenged to apply that truth to their lives.

With the Parable of the Sower this morning, we are especially blessed because Jesus chose to explain the meaning of the parable in the final six verses.

Thinking about the parable we read about a sower who is not identified. Which is likely intentional. The sower could be God of course. Or the sower could be Jesus. Later in the chapter Jesus refers to the sower as being the Son of Man, which is a title he gives himself. Or it could be the sower represents any preacher, parent, or teacher in the church. The sower represents anyone who tells others of the good news of Jesus Christ and His kingdom.

The next thing is the seed. The seed symbolizes the Word six times in this parable. And for this parable the Word is the Good News of Jesus Christ and His kingdom.

Then we come to the soils. In this parable there are four different soils. The key to this parable is to see the four soils as four heart responses. The same sower sows the same seed onto four different types of soils but only one soil is good for producing fruit. In the same way the same Word of God is sown upon four different heart conditions and only one of the heart conditions is good for growing and harvesting fruit. The key to understanding this parable can be sifted down to this big idea.

*There is a particular condition of the heart that is necessary to receive the truth of God, obey it, and bring forth fruit.*

As we shared earlier in verse four, ***“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.”***

So the sower sows good seed indiscriminately and some of the good seed lands on the hard path next to the field where people have walked. It was likely a common picture to see birds following the sower and diving down to snatch up the seed that landed on the hard path. And Jesus said,

**“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. (verses 18–19)**

## **The Hardened Heart**

It's hard to see someone like this, but we know them, love them, and pray for them, and we pray against the evil one who wants nothing more than to keep the good seed from taking root.

The evil one is the devil who is working to harden hearts, but we can't ignore the notion of human responsibility. Satan can't be held completely responsible for closed hearts and minds. We all understand the sadness of sharing Scripture with someone only to watch it run off them like water off a duck's back. We know others who are just not interested. They are more interested in politics, sports, or business but are not interested in the Bible.

Jesus told this parable to a crowd who listened, but they were not affected by the truth. This is a warning to any of us who hear the Word without allowing it to effect change in their lives.

I mentioned John Bunyan earlier who wrote *A Pilgrim's Progress*. Did you know that for 30 years of his adult life, Bunyan was known as the most godless man in his village? He was regarded as so hardhearted and committed to godlessness that no Christian had any hope for him to be saved at all. But then he heard this story of the sower and these words seized his heart. Later he wrote, “Even the devil knows that if a man believes the Word he will be saved!” Evidence of an active evil one working in his life convinced John Bunyan that God was real and the Gospel was true. John Bunyan believed and he was saved.

Now the second heart condition. In verse five and six we read, ***“Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.”***

So in this second heart condition, the sower does his job, and the seed does his job.

**The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. (verses 20–21)**

## **The Shallow Heart**

The person with a shallow heart believes the gospel when it is reasonable and fashionable to do. They have some great experiences. It's the best! They are so excited! But when normal testing and pressures come they turn away.

It's a surface kind of thing. There is no real desire to evaluate, change and go deeper in the Christian faith. This appears to be someone who has a shallow, or emotional religious experience that never really takes spiritual root. I picture a person flitting from one experience to another never satisfied, never content, never putting down roots in a community or in a church. They may endure for a while, but their profession of faith will pass over time.

We need to pray for those who have rocks just under the surface that keep the roots shallow and unable to take hold. I remember when we first prepared our garden, we would be rototilling and the tiller would begin to shake and jerk. The tiller was doing its job, but its blades had found a large rock under the surface that would have kept my plants from taking root.

For those we know with shallow hearts, we need to pray that the Holy Spirit works like a rototiller to the heart, which keeps digging its blades down deeper into the soil of the heart, to expose, grab,

and pull the rock to the surface so it can be removed from the heart and allow God's word to take root.

We have seen Jesus describe a hard heart, a stony heart and now Jesus tells us about those with a thorny heart. As we heard earlier in verse seven, *"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants."* Jesus explanation is in verse 22.

**The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. (verse 22)**

### **The Strangled Heart**

This type of soil is full of thorns that take up space in the heart and choke out the growth of the good seed. Thorns can be worldly cares. Things that are not necessarily bad things, but simply busy things, which keep us from Christ's interests in our lives.

Also Jesus tells us these thorns can come in the form of the seduction of wealth. It's not wealth itself that chokes out the Word. Wealth is a tool we must use in this life. But money can also sing a seductive song in our hearts. It can sing a song of salvation, satisfaction, and it can promise to protect and provide. That is the deceit of wealth. Only God can meet our needs.

Two crops struggle to grow within our hearts and only one will win. We can't serve two masters.

Steven Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, shares a great illustration, which powerfully demonstrates the need for keeping our priorities straight. He saw a seminar leader show his audience a wide-mouthed gallon jar. The leader put as many rocks in the jar as would fit and asked the audience, "Is the container full?" Everyone said, "Yes." The leader smiled as he then poured some gravel into the jar, which filled up the crevices between the rocks. He asked them again, "Is it full?" By this time they were catching on, so most of the audience said, "Probably not." He then reached for some sand and poured it into the jar and asked, "Now is it full?" They had learned their lesson, and responded, "No!" And they were right; the leader then filled the jar with water. Afterwards he said, "What's the point?" Someone said, "Well there are gaps, and if you really work at it, you can always fit more in your life." His reply was, "That is not the point! The point is this: If you hadn't put these big rocks in first, you never would have gotten them in!" Make sure you do the big stuff first. The Word of God is the big rocks in your life. The rest is filler. Don't crowd out God's word.

Finally the healthy heart condition. As we heard earlier in verse eight, *"Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."* It's interesting, only one-fourth of the seeds sown lands on good soil. Some of us need that encouragement to keep on sowing the word in our world. It's not our responsibility to know who to share with. It's our responsibility to simply share. Sow seed anywhere you can and don't worry

about the soil. Let Jesus, the master Gardner, prepare the right hearts to receive it and bear fruit.

**But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (verse 13:23)**

### **The Open Heart**

Think about the math here. One tiny cherry tomato seed from one cherry tomato can produce a cherry tomato plant, which produce 100 cherry tomatoes if it is planted in the right soil. As Jesus tells us, "There was nothing wrong with how the sower spreads the Word. There is nothing wrong with the Word, it's perfect."

So we land on what makes the heart right to receive the seed and bear fruit. A heart is right when we welcome the Word immediately so it cannot be snatched away, when we take in the Word deeply so it does not wither under pressure, and when we hold on to it exclusively so other concerns do not strangle it. Then we bear fruit.

Our Lord Jesus adds in John 15:5–8,

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."*

What a statement! We prove ourselves to be a disciple of Jesus if we do what? Say we are his disciple? Go to church? No, the only evidence of being a disciple is when we bear much fruit. The true work of Christ in the believer should be as plain to see as an orange hanging from an orange tree.

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)**

Another poet who understood God's grace and who understood the power of God's Word planted in good soil was David and he wrote this,

**Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1–3)**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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