

***No One Like Jesus: Failing Farming 101***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***Ecclesiastes 11:5-6; 1 Peter 1:22-23; Matthew 13:1-23***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 13:1-23. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “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, saying: “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. He who has ears, let him hear.”

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 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. 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. 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.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 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.”

“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 his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 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. 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. 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. 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.””

Have you ever returned to a song or a movie or a book and found tons of things you missed the first time? We recently showed the movie *Zootopia* for our Meal and a Movie Night. Because Catha and Cameron couldn’t stay for the movie, we watched it again later that night. In that second sit-through, I found all sorts of important things – including a clue hiding in plain site that revealed who the real villain was early in the movie! It made the movie all that more fun.

We've studied the parable of the sower together before back in 2009 and 2012. But it's important – one of the only parables to show up in all three Synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each time we look at it, we learn something different. At first it seems simple because Jesus explains it to us. But today we'll see some different angles that show us new things we've not talked about before.

By this point, Jesus is so well known that He is constantly surrounded. He goes out on the lake to teach so that everyone can hear without everyone being crushed. It's here He begins teaching in parables. We think of parables as a kind of proverb, but the word in Greek means “to place alongside.” The unique stories Jesus told highlight parallels between the spiritual world and the world we know. Parables illustrate the things of God in ways that we can fathom them.

Yet the funny thing is, people didn't understand the parables. This is one of the few that's fully explained in Scripture. Even the disciples themselves were clueless; Mark 4:34 says that Jesus explained everything to the disciples when they were alone by themselves. Even today, many scholars disagree about what all the parables mean.

That's one of our focal points today. Why isn't Jesus' teaching easily accessible to everyone? Why are some of the parables so tough to understand? My best teachers in school were the ones who made me think deeply and made hard concepts accessible. Can Jesus be a good teacher if the crowds didn't get the point of His stories? Maybe. Their confusion at the parables didn't keep them from following Jesus and listening to Him. And some of the crowd did grasp the parables and were changed by them.

That's the first thing I want to discuss from this passage: *God elects us and regenerates us before we have true faith in Jesus Christ*. That means He chooses us, not the other way around, and He remakes our hearts so we can have faith. This is controversial, and it sets apart Reformed and Presbyterian theology from other wings of the church, even though it's all over Scripture. But there's no other way to explain what Jesus says in this passage without it.

The disciples are flabbergasted. When they say, “Why do you speak to the people in parables,” they're asking, “Why do you make it so hard? Why don't you use plain language? Don't you want these people to keep following you?” The disciples expect that Jesus is seeking an earthly kingdom by popular acclaim among the Jews. But Jesus sets them straight.

Why does Jesus teach them in parables? To prove the prophecies true: people hear the message, they see the miracles, but they are still deaf and blind to the truth of God. Anyone spiritually enlightened shouldn't have a problem with the parables. Yet even the disciples, who've traveled with Him far longer than the crowd, the ones handpicked to carry His message, they are in the same boat. They don't get it. They are blessed not because they are wise and understand the parables but because Jesus chooses to reveal the meaning of the parables to them. As Jesus says, “The secrets of the Kingdom have been given to you, but not them.”

Why would God deliberately withhold Himself? Is that fair for God to pick and choose who will believe and be saved and who won't? There are two sides to this. In Romans 9, Paul argues that God has the right to make us the way we are and has the right whether or not to show us mercy. God told Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." God favored one of Abraham's grandsons, Jacob, and not the other, Esau. Paul's argument in Romans is that, as creator, God has the right to create persons and not to save them to eternal life. God has the right to share the mysteries of the Kingdom of God in parables that many cannot understand or appreciate.

We don't like that argument much, even though it's biblical. But the flip side is also true: we are not compelled to do anything we do not want to do. Since Adam and Eve's sin, we have freely chosen to disobey God, and we do it on a regular basis. In fact, without God's interference, every last one of us would go blissfully and headlong into the Abyss without a second thought about God, acting out of our own selfish interests all of the time. It is only by God's direct intervention that any of us ever comes to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. God must choose us not because we are unlikely to choose Him but because we are incapable of choosing Him. We cannot choose faith on our own.

If and when we become truly born-again believers in Jesus Christ as our Savior and our Lord, we are truly blessed because it is God who has chosen us and done the work of regeneration in us. He has already done all the heavy lifting. The Old Testament saints, the faithful who entrusted God with their lives before the time of Jesus, saw their redemption from a great distance. They trusted God would save them, but they never knew *how*. They never knew that the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, would redeem and restore people from every nation. They longed for the Messiah, but He remained simply in their prophecies and dreams. In Hebrews 11:40 we learn that the Old Testament saints were only perfected with us, once the work of Christ was done. We have the blessing to know the whole story and believe based on all God has accomplished.

When the seed falls on good soil – when someone hears the Word of God, understands it, and produces a crop – we aren't good soil because we made ourselves into good soil. It's because God did it. Before we ever believed, God worked in our hearts and minds so that we could respond. He tilled the rocky shallows of our hearts and made it into fertile ground. That's a huge blessing. We could never make ourselves understand God's Word and believe it. We who believe prepare for worship and ready ourselves through prayer and Scripture, but we do so because God's work has already started in us. If you have faith in Jesus Christ, give thanks... God has been good to you and given you that faith! If that faith is genuine, you won't lose it. It will grow stronger. Because it has been given to you by God, there is no chance of it fading.

And that brings me to the other major point I want to talk about with you today in this passage: *the core difference between the seeds isn't belief or even a confession of faith but understanding, perseverance in faith, and producing a crop*. Now this might sound like total lunacy, or heresy. For all our lives the central teaching point of American Christianity has been something like this: you need to believe that Jesus died for your sins in order to get to heaven, and pray a prayer asking for His forgiveness. Do that, and join a church, and you should be good. But that's not what Jesus taught in this parable.

*The first sign of salvation is genuine understanding of God's Word and His promise of salvation through faith in Christ.* The first set of seeds is pretty easy. They are people who do not understand the message at all and the message is snatched away from them by the devil. The word "understand" here in Greek doesn't mean that they don't comprehend the meaning of the words. It's that they totally miss the point. They have no insight or perception into what God says and commands. They might be college professors with degrees in Theology! They can tell you what the words mean. But they have no insight into how those words could change them. Their hearts are hardened toward God just like the path in the parable. Unfortunately, we meet plenty of people who fit this category, who've been exposed to God's Word and God's love but they want nothing to do with it and never really have.

But surprisingly, they aren't the only ones who don't have a full grasp of the Kingdom of God. The rocky ground and the shallow ground – the passage doesn't say they have understanding, either! The only group given credit for understanding the message is the fourth group, the folks on good soil. The second group receives the Word with joy, but then they fall away when hardship comes. The third group hears the Word but lets the world's concerns kill it in their hearts. They don't get it deeply. Only the fourth group hears, understands, and grows.

The second and third groups of people look very much like the fourth, and they might for a long time. All of them, on the surface, are going to believe the same things, perhaps act the same ways, and perhaps be involved in the same church activities. We can't tell them apart just by looking at them in a snapshot. And we can't judge someone's eternal destiny from that Polaroid picture, either.

*The difference between them is perseverance in their faith.* The second group has really shallow roots, so there's nothing keeping them around when things get tough. That doesn't mean that they won't stay around when things are going well. They are simply superficial. A plant with shallow roots still does fine when it gets plenty of sun and water. It's when the winter comes and the soil freezes that it dies. This group is happy to enjoy fellowship, to come to events they enjoy, even to hear the Word of God when it promises blessings on God's people and assures us of God's love. But they fall away when things get tough. When someone attacks them or ridicules them for their beliefs, calls them a bigot, when trouble hits from being a believer, they walk away. They may leave altogether or they may still claim to be Christians, but only when it's convenient, usually denying classic Christian beliefs, preferring a Jesus they made up. They don't persevere in faith, and they don't persevere in growing in the ways of Christ.

The third group is harder and more painful to watch. This group has some roots. They aren't blown every which way when somebody challenges their faith; they might come to Bible studies and show some evidence of growth and genuine interest in Christ. But ultimately, their faith is choked out by other things. They begin to trust in other things than Christ. They trust their wealth; they trust their home; they trust their insurance plan. They wonder if they have a need for Jesus. Their faith in God becomes overpowered by their faith in themselves and what they have – a nice family, a nice car, a nice life. When there are so many good things to enjoy in this life, so many entertainments, so many events, why bother with church but once a month? Why bother with Bible study? Why worry about God when there's plenty to worry about in the quote-unquote "real world?"

In the book of Revelation, through John, the author, Jesus writes harsh words to the church of Laodicea. They had become identified with this third group. Jesus said to them, “Because you are lukewarm -- neither hot nor cold -- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.” Some people do repent and are shown to be in the good soil. Yet from the destruction of that church in the early second century, we know that many had their faith choked out by the seductions of the world.

The fourth group, on the other hand, perseveres. It doesn't mean that there aren't times when faithful Christians stumble and fall, when they doubt, when they get caught up in worldly things. The difference is that they always turn back to Christ and trust in Him alone for salvation. They grow deeper in Him, they learn to be more like Him, they act like Him in their everyday lives, and they long for more of Him...not just for a moment or a season but a lifetime. They continue in solid faith and express it despite the hardships, struggles, and temptations of the world we live in. If you want to know if you are saved, stay in the faith! The person who is genuinely saved will hold tight to Christ in the long term.

*Finally, only the fourth group produces a long-term crop.* What does the crop represent? Jesus doesn't say. I think that would lead us to look for specifics – to say that proof of being a true Christian meant you must do XYZ. But there are specifics that are part of the crop believers grow. The fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – grow in increasing measure and withstand the test of time. From those fruits follow other things, such as outreach to share our faith in Christ, a willingness to serve others, and using one's financial gifts to see God's Word go into the rest of the world.

The crop is tied to long-term perseverance. Sometimes, you'll see a result from someone in the second or third group. Leaders in the church, people we assume have a crop, fall away from faith sometimes. Before their plants die, they have something that looks like a crop. But at the end, the plant's dead. That's not what we want. Faithful believers want a crop that grows and matures throughout our lifetimes.

Jesus mentions that some produce thirty fold, other sixty, others a hundred. All of those are great yields! We aren't saved by our amount of fruitfulness. God saves us, and God provides the means for us to grow in His grace. It is our responsibility as faithful believers to become as fruitful as we can so that we can honor and glorify the God who has made us fruitful in the first place. Be diligent and dedicated. Don't willingly miss out on ways to meet with God, whether prayer or Bible study or worship or fellowship. The more we participate in those means of grace God has given us, the more we will see fruit multiply in our lives.

The parable is clear: many respond to Christ, but not all genuinely come to faith. Don't be hard-hearted, withered by the storms of this world or choked by its temptations. Hold tight to your faith, grow in your obedience to Him, and your life will be fruitful. You will enjoy those fruit not only in this life, but through your eternity spent in God's amazing Kingdom.