

The Parables of Jesus: Kingdom Farming
By Jason Huff
March 7, 2021
Jeremiah 17:5-10; 2 John 1:5b-6; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. May God speak to us today through His perfect, sacred, and trustworthy 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. 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.””

Since I was a little kid, I have been fascinated with movie reviews. Maybe it’s because I was fascinated with Siskel and Ebert, whose first reviews appeared on TV not long after I was born. What always amazed me was how these two guys, both really sharp, intellectual equals, would sometimes have vastly different opinions about a film. You’d wonder if they’d seen the same movie! Even movies that are supposedly universally beloved aren’t. *Citizen Kane*, often called the greatest movie ever made, has a 99% rating on Rotten Tomatoes – and the lone holdout is not someone trying to get publicity for a bad review, but a reviewer for the Chicago Tribune back in 1941 when it came out. I can think of countless debates I’ve had with friends about films we’ve seen. Likelihood is, you and I probably wouldn’t see eye to eye on every movie. I don’t think anyone does. Perspective is everything.

I mention this because this parable of Jesus has everything to do with our perceptions of the gospel message. As we dig into Jesus’ parables during this short season before Easter, we’re going to find that His stories are just as pointed at us as they were His first century listeners. His stories grab our attention and then turn in such a way that we realize they involve us. And this parable is all about our reception of the good news that God has sent His Son into the world in order to save the world. Just like no people sit down and experience a movie the same way, even though it’s the same two hours of entertainment, no two people hear the gospel message exactly alike. But unlike a movie, which comes and goes and means little in the grand scheme of things, how we perceive the gospel message has eternal consequences.

Here's the first thing we need to grasp from this parable: *there is one gospel spread freely to the whole world by God, the good sower*. Now anybody who's a farmer – even anybody who's just an amateur raising tomatoes or cucumbers – knows that the farmer described by Jesus in this parable is terrible at his job as far as the world is concerned. The only kind of farmer who would sow seed this way is if he had money to burn and the desire for his crop to spring up wherever it was remotely possible. A farmer cultivates the soil to make it ready to plant. The last thing a farmer is going to do is spend his precious resources on seeds that have no chance of sprouting.

Yet the truth is, God does have the resources to spread the seed of the gospel far and wide. And He does plan for people to become followers of Jesus in the most unusual and unlikely of places. Growing up living in a condo, we didn't have a backyard; we had a patio. And to be honest with you, it was not the greatest patio. The concrete was cracked, it wasn't a place you could hang out. But what was surprising was how things would grow there. A lot of weeds, sadly, but also sometimes some really pretty flowers grew up amongst the cracks in the concrete too. Without even trying, seeds got in there and grew in what was a harsh environment.

In the same manner, God is actually a good farmer, a good sower, because He plants the seeds of the gospel everywhere. Kingdom farming is different than earthly farming because the intention is different. What matters to God is not that every seed take root, but that the seed has every opportunity to take root, wherever it may go. God will bring His people to Himself far and wide, and so He intends the gospel to go into every corner of the earth.

This is a precious thing that God has done. You and I worship today because God has been planting the seeds of the gospel for centuries. For you and I to become believers in Jesus, countless people have been evangelized and passed down the faith to us. Some of those people, we wouldn't have expected would be good soil for the gospel. To the world, they looked worthless, unimportant, unlikely to change. And yet God continued to plant the seeds through His people, and we have Him to thank for making sure the message came down through the generations to us.

At the same time, we also need to be aware that there is one truly good sower – God – there is only one true gospel seed. The sower doesn't try to plant corn and, when that doesn't work, try wheat or alfalfa or rutabagas. There's only one kind of seed. He doesn't try a different crop later. What am I getting at with this?

The full gospel as described to us in Scripture – without taking anything away or adding anything to it – that's the seed. Nothing else is going to grow the crop God wants. Anything less than the full gospel is a diseased seed. I did some research this week and bacteria, fungus, and viruses can grow inside a seed, and they can spread the disease to the next season's crop and destroy it if they aren't treated.

There are a lot of diseased seeds out there. Anyone who says you can be a Christian after listening to a twenty-minute speech and praying a single prayer without discipleship, without sacrifice, without becoming a part of the body of Christ through a local church? Selling diseased seed. Christianity as a road to health, wealth, and prosperity? Diseased seed.

The church has planted a lot of diseased seeds because we've assumed it's our job to get people into the Kingdom of God by any means necessary. To our shame, we've compromised the gospel when we've preached some watered-down, diluted Jesus that happens to appeal to those most likely to come each week. The gospel is beautiful and difficult and requires real sacrifice and promises real rewards, many of which we won't see this side of heaven. The Sower never plants a different crop or a weakened, diseased seed. He plants the real seed expecting His crop to grow from it.

In fact, I believe this parable was explained to the disciples – not the crowds – because Jesus wanted them to spread the truth about Him, not some more palatable fantasy. Jesus wanted His disciples to realize that not everyone who heard the truth would understand it or accept it; some would violently reject it. In Kingdom farming, the disciple sowing on behalf of God is responsible for spreading the seed, not the reaction to it.

When I say this, I think of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement and an open-air preacher in England. He'd preach sermons prepared in advance, identical in content. In one city, hearts would be moved and huge numbers of people would repent of sin, turn to Jesus, and begin living lived devoted to Him. In another city, same exact message, same words, Wesley would be run out on a rail, having to flee for his life. But ultimately, he was doing God's calling, sowing the seed of faith. How it's received is not as important as that it's spread.

All that said, let's dive into the meat of Jesus' parable – these four kinds of soil situations, these four groups that hear the gospel of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection on our behalf and what our appropriate response should be. The first group is where the seed fell along the path, and the birds ate it. Jesus describes this as someone who does not understand the word of God, and the devil snatches away the seedling. Understanding here does not mean that they don't comprehend it, that it was preached at too difficult a level, that the words had no meaning. The first group are those who grasp the concepts but think them absurd or worthless or even dangerous.

Even though paths in first century Israel weren't made of brick or pavement, they were incredibly dense. Have hundreds of people walk over a dirt path over time and the ground becomes incredibly firm and unyielding. In the parable, the birds get at the seed easily; it hasn't even gotten so far as to be able to root. We might think of these people as atheists and agnostics, and it does include that group. However, the most religious people of Jesus' day, the Pharisees, also fit into this category because their only interest in Jesus was trying to trick and trap Him.

So it's not whether you believe in God or not that fits you in this category; it's whether or not you have the heart to hear the truth about Jesus. I'm going to say that there have been many churches where the people in the pews fit this category. If Jesus is only a good person, a noble character, or the embodiment of love with no further claims on us, or if we cannot accept His divinity, His claim of authority over us, and His hard teachings, we may be the ones with the hard hearts towards Him. And if your heart is hard like this, pray that God might soften it.

The second group of people are those who are the rocky places, where a plant springs up quickly only to be scorched for lack of a root. This is the person who, at first, looks like a perfect convert. They receive the Word of the Lord with joy. There's a Savior! I'm saved! I'm excited! Let me tell all my friends! But then dark clouds form on the horizon. Some of his old friends don't want to hang out with a weird Christian guy. His new friends encourage him to stop some sinful practices he'd grown fond of with his old friends. His boss has warned him twice now not to speak to his co-workers about Jesus; one of them filed a complaint. And pretty soon, the guy you saw at every church function comes every couple of weeks, then once every six weeks, and pretty soon, nobody knows where he's gone or what he's doing because he's broken off all those ties.

We've known this kind of person, and all of us face being this kind of person. Because God is good to us, sometimes we're even able to come back from it. Sometimes we get another chance because God is a god of second and third and fiftieth chances. But the question is, how can we stop our hearts from becoming this way, and how can we help others avoid it too? It goes back to what we mentioned before – *preach the whole gospel*.

Some people will hear the message and ignore what they want to ignore, sure. But if we preach the full gospel, then it's between them and God. If we preach a different gospel, one where trouble and trial and persecution aren't part of the equation, and someone falls away because we weren't straightforward with them, then that's a sin we need to address. I think in today's church, the number one reason people fall away when things get hard is because no one told them to expect it. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but I give you my peace." That's a "you will," not a "you might." But there's also the promise of peace.

And if you're struggling with this right now, know that trouble and trial is not necessarily a sign of God's displeasure but a common experience among believers and just ordinary people in the world. Don't give up hope because things are difficult or you struggle. Hebrews 12 tells to "endure hardship as discipline, for God is treating you as sons and daughters...no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." As the church, we're here to help you through the dark times so that your faith might come through unscathed.

Third type, maybe the most important type for us – seeds surrounded by thorns that choke the plants. This is the person that genuinely accepts the Word as it is. Problem is the cares and worries and anxieties of the world choke out the Word's effectiveness. This word in Greek means to be drawn in different directions, distracted. The chief distraction is money; it's not the only one, but one so important Jesus mentions it. The plant grows up, but there's no fruit. No signs of real life, what it was made to be. For us, it's the person who claims Christ, but no one outside of church knows it. She's not more loving, caring, thoughtful, gracious, joyful, or patient than any of her secular friends. He's the one who knows he should be more involved in Bible study and praying to God, but he's too busy with all his entertainment, his luxuries, his toys.

If I had to tell you which of these three is the most dangerous for us spiritually today, it's this one. Most people who ignore God or want nothing to do with Him, they aren't pretending about it. Those who fall away because of trouble, they choose what they think is the simpler path. But this one? This one is where a lot of us get stuck. I think that we can grow out of it, we can tend the weeds, God can manage killing off the thorns, but most of us either think we're fine when we're in this stage, or we find ourselves paralyzed to do anything about it. I believe that this stage is where a lot of Christians today actually are – wanting to see fruit but hamstrung by our own desires.

The danger lurks in how we plan our time, or don't. There are two things that are huge for the Christian life. One is planned time spent to know God and to be known by Him. The other is planned time for Kingdom building with God. I've done the first more often than the second. I'm speaking from experience here; I know these things are very difficult for me, and I don't expect they'll be easy for you. But they are paramount, I think, in avoiding being unfruitful and on dangerous ground spiritually.

Most of us don't intentionally neglect our relationship with God, but we wind up neglecting it anyway. It's fair to say in my life, and I'm guessing in yours, that we all feel like we just don't have enough time. But this week, this passage kind of made me do an inventory of my time. What I realized is that I typically work, on average 40-50 hours a week. OK, fine. I spend time picking up groceries, one son from school, occasionally making dinner – OK, mostly picking up dinner, Catha makes it far more than me – paying bills, checking the news. But I have time most nights for at a couple hours spent in front of the TV, watching or playing something. I have time to check in on Facebook. I have time to talk to friends. I figure that most days, I have plenty of time that I can do what I want. Not having time for a devotional and prayer is simply an excuse.

But even if we prioritize time alone with God, we also need to prioritize time doing God's Kingdom work. Not everyone is inspired by the same things; not everyone wants to work in a soup kitchen or folding clothes at the thrift shop. But the only way you're going to find your niche God has for you in His Kingdom, ways that He can grow you and use you to grow other people, is to set aside time for it. What might you do as a tutor? As a coach? As a volunteer at a non-profit? How might God use you to spread the seed of the gospel? Unless we set aside time to do it every week, we'll never know. Let's see how we might clear our schedules of our own stuff so that God can be fruitful in our lives. Because that's what this is about – either we let the concerns of the world and its pleasures rule us, or we let God rule us. It can't be both.

The good news, there's a fourth soil, fertile ground. Not only does it produce a crop, it's far more than what was planted. This is the person who not only comprehends the gospel, she loves it. He puts it into practice. She is undeterred by trials. He is unswayed by the distractions the world throws at him. They set aside time with God and for God. And they bear the signs of fruitfulness – growth in character, richness in spirit, a heart that attracts others to God. God will bless richly anyone who hears the gospel and lives out its implications. And thanks be to God, we can be these people. Will we ask for it? Will we pray for it? Because this is our hope and joy. This is the desire of every true Christian, to be fruitful for God's Kingdom. May it be so for all of us today.