

# **PARABLE OF THE SOILS**

Matthew 13:3-23; Christ's Object Lessons p. 33-61

We begin a series today on the Parables of Jesus, the wisest man who ever walked the face of the earth. There are approximately 30 of these stories recorded in the Gospels, about a third of Jesus' recorded teaching. Let me start with a question:

**What is a parable?** Parables are stories or illustrations designed to teach a spiritual truth. In fact we get our word ***parables*** from a Greek word ***parabolai*** which means, "to throw along side of" – Jesus would take an occurrence from everyday life, something everybody was familiar with, and throw it alongside a truth about the kingdom of God, so that everyone could learn the truth about God and His kingdom. He said things like:  
*Ever see a poor woman desperately searching for a lost coin, or a shepherd desperately searching for a lost sheep, than you now about God's heart for lost people.*

Jesus would tell stories about corrupt judges and plucky widows and buried treasure and lazy employees and bad debts and noisy neighbors, and people got it and they flocked to Him. Jesus wanted everybody to get it so he told these unforgettable, compelling stories.

And for 2000 years these parables have stretched the greatest minds in the world and fed the simplest ones; they have pierced the hardest hearts and shaped the greatest souls that have walked the face of the earth. Over the next few months I would like to look at the Parables of Jesus because I believe that Jesus is going to do it again. He is going to be our Teacher – He is going to stretch our minds and pierce our hearts and shape our souls so that at the end of this journey we will know God better than we ever have, and we will love Him more than we every have, and we will more faithfully than you ever have before.

Today I would like to examine the **Parable of the Sower** found in Matthew 13. Let us read it together.

*"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 the 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."*  
**Matthew 13:3-9**

The Jesus goes on to explain this parable so move down to verse 18:

*"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."*  
**Matt. 13:18-23**

This is a **parable about growth**, which is God's intention for His kingdom and all human beings. Growth is a normal sign of health. When anything is alive and healthy it grows. And there is something miraculous about growth. I remember when we brought our first child home from the hospital; I was struck by the amazing rate of her growth. She was about 6 lbs when she was born, and she ate and ate in unbelievable quantities – by the end of her first year she tripled her weight (almost 18 lbs) – I did some calculations and figured if she kept tripling every year... by the time she was 4 years old she would weigh 486 lbs!

There is something amazing about growth! And we grow in other ways. When your child is about a year old they usually begin to learn to walk. This is such a normal thing, but new parents cheer those first steps as if it has never been done before. Parent's big wish in one season is that their baby would take their first step and walk and then they do... and then he walks into the bathroom and pulls all the toilet paper off the roll, walks into the kitchen and plays with the stove, walks into the parent's bedroom without knocking and then they wish their baby never walked.

Growth is a normal sign of healthy life, both physically and in other areas. As long as we live if we're healthy we are gaining new skills, we're mastering new tasks. Growth is the sign of life, and it's the normative condition of health, when you cease to grow you start to die! I found out there is actually a medical diagnosis for a baby that is not growing or developing. Doctors will write on the chart **FTT = Failure to Thrive**.

Thriving is normal; thriving is what human beings were created by God to do. And when it's not happening doctors will go to great lengths to try to find the barriers. Growth happens in some mysterious way, but there are barriers that can prevent it, so when there is a failure to thrive doctors will search for them (maybe it's lack of nutrition, or disease or neglect), but they will try to remove those barriers so that growth can resume unimpeded.

Now this is true in the realm of spiritual life as well – God wants you to grow – to thrive. God wants you to be able to love somebody tomorrow that you couldn't love yesterday. He wants you to find that sin has less and less hold on you. He wants you to be able to share your faith with greater and greater boldness simply because it just flows out of you. God's desire for you is that you be able to pray more deeply, speak more truly, rejoice more fiercely, and forgive more freely every passing year. So that by the time you shuffle off this mortal coil people will say, "There was a human being that walked with God!"

Now that is what Jesus longed for, nothing less – He longed for human beings to thrive. That was the life He lived. He thrived. But Jesus didn't see it much as He looked around Him. He looked at folks and people whose lives were choked by anger, or paralyzed by fear, or whose hopes were suffocated by doubt, whose hearts were made small by sin. Jesus looked around him and kept seeing failure to thrive, failure to thrive, failure to thrive. How was He ever going to teach on this so that everybody could get it? So Jesus begins to teach.

Now back to the story...Jesus perhaps points to a nearby field where a farmer is working He says, ***"Listen, a sower went out to sow..."***

This is a story about three elements – seeds, sower, and soil. Now this is one of those parables where you notice which one of the elements hold constant, which ones don't change.

And then which element does change or is the variable, because when you find that, you find the hinge of the story, you find what Jesus is driving at.

Here the seeds don't change. This is not a story about good seeds and bad seeds. The seed represents the word of God, the good news of the kingdom. And the seed will always bear fruit if you give it half a chance.

And in this story the sower doesn't change. This is not a story about good sowers and bad sowers. In fact, the thing you notice about the sower is how generous he is with the seed, almost extravagant. He isn't very careful about where the seed lands – he just spreads it everywhere.

So **what changes?** The soil, right? Whether or not the seed takes root and bears fruit depends on the soil. Everything hinges on the soil. And the soil of course represents you and me. You can replace the word soil with your heart, or mine. Growth is normal in life. It is a gift from God. I cannot manufacture it or make it happen, but there are barriers than can prevent it. So today, I want to ask you to do a little soil analysis. I want to ask you look at your heart. And ask yourself, "Are there barriers to growth, are there some things that need to change?"

### **Pathway Soil – Growth Requires Soft Soil**

*As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.*  
Matthew 13:4

In Palestine, the fields were often crisscrossed with paths. Farmers and animals would walk on these paths. And in Israel the conditions were dry. So if seed fell on a well-traveled path, it didn't have a chance because the ground was hard.

So Jesus is saying, "*Growth requires soil that is soft.*" You can replace the word soil with your heart. Jesus understands that many people become hard in their hearts towards God and His word. Often they are people who have become disappointed, who have been stepped or hurt a lot. So they have formed kind of a protective coat and they become cynical or bitter. So you have to ask yourself, "Is my heart hard? Is there bitterness or cynicism inside me?"

Some of you may be in that hardhearted condition right now. Some of you may have hard spot in your heart right now because of a relationship meltdown. Maybe you have been hurt by somebody and you're holding on to bitterness and resentment. Will you ask God to make you tender? Will you go to that person and say whatever you need to say? Will you do your part to try to get the relationship right?

Some of you have been disappointed by a broken dream, a hope that has not been realized. Maybe a kind of shell has formed around your heart and you deal with disappointment by becoming kind of cynical. If you're honest with yourself there is a kind of cynicism in you that causes to tend to believe the worst about folks. You may tend to complain. You have hard soil in your heart that must be broken up that must be plowed.

My guess is that if soil had feelings, it would not like this plowing business at all. If you were to ask soil, "Would you like to be plowed?" I bet soil would respond, "I think I'll take a pass on that – thank you very much."

Cause plowing kind of hurts, breaking up hard ground kind of hurts. But I'll tell you that is not the worst kind of pain. The worst pain is to remain hard and barren and empty and never bear fruit at all.

But there is good news for hard soil when it comes to a seed, all it takes is one little opening. Just give the seed a crack and the seed is very strong. We have all seen that. Take a small crack in a sidewalk and there is often some little seed of grass or a weed that is forcing its way up through concrete! The Seed – the Word of God is powerful beyond imagining.

Well some of us may have hard hearts, and God is waiting for us to just give Him a little opening – a prayer maybe:

“God, whatever you need to do, I want you to plow up the hardness of my heart. God I want to tenderhearted towards you.”

You can say that prayer and God will begin to work in your heart. Because if there is going to be growth, the soil has got to be soft.

### **Rocky Soil – Growth Requires Depth**

*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.* Matthew 13:5,6

In the Middle East, much of the land is really on a foundation of rock that has only a couple inches of topsoil. Many seeds that are planted have little chance to develop roots. So here Jesus is saying *Growth requires soil that is deep*. So a little soil analysis – is your faith putting down deep roots, deep devotion?

It's shallow world we live in. shallow relationships, superficial conversations, hurried moments of prayer, too much television, and superficial commitment. And this characterizes people's lives, even lives of people who enter into faith and church. Early in their spiritual journey many folk look like they are doing great because they tend to grasp everything with great gusto but then Jesus says trouble hits – crisis, loss, persecution because of their faith, or something is demanded of them, some cost attached, and then they discover the roots don't go deep enough to sustain life.

This is very common in our world. When things are going well, many people do just fine. But when things get difficult, they bail – they change jobs, change marriage partners, change ministries, change small groups, change churches.

Roots require time and continuity and endurance. So what kind of depth is in your life? Are you in deep community these days? When was the last time you went really deep in a conversation, and where it was appropriate, you disclosed something you had been hiding? When was the last time somebody told you a hard truth about yourself, something that needs to change? How did you respond? Did you get defensive or were you receptive?

Is there depth in your life and walk with Jesus? When was the last time you had a deep conversation with Jesus, when you did not hurry through prayer? I hope you will make a commitment to do that.

### **Thorny Soil – Growth Requires Absence of Clutter**

*Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.* - Matt. 13:7.

This part of the story involves soil that is soft enough and deep enough to sustain growth but the problem is clutter. The problem with this soil is that it is wasting its nutrients on weeds and the seed is choked by competition. It's not bad soil, rather it's just cluttered soil.

So the question here is, "Does anybody here have any clutter in your life?" Now, clutter sounds like such small nuisance, doesn't it? But I want to suggest in some ways this is the most dangerous condition of all because it's so subtle. It's not that the soil is necessarily cluttered with bad things. Someone in this condition can say, "My heart is not hard towards God. I'm not defiant or rebellious. It is not like my life is deliberately superficial. I've been in the same church and community for along time."

But Jesus says this deadly enemy can choke you of spiritual vitality. It can drain you of purpose. It will make a mockery of all your good intentions. It will choke off the spiritual life inside you. So even though you are not deliberately hard or shallow it leads to the same end result – failure to thrive! Jesus says that clutter involves things like:

*The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but he worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.*

Matthew 13:22

Clutter involves things like the cares of this world. What might happen? What might go wrong? What will I wear? What will I say? What will they think? A mind can be just cluttered with the cares of this world.

Or clutter can involve the lure of wealth. We live in a world where commercials bombard us with this all the time. I heard about a commercial for a very expensive car that said: "*You can't buy happiness, but now you can lease it.*" There used to be a magazine called the *Good Life* – and the good life consists, according to this magazine of "fine dining" and "weight reduction." Now, you can bet trying to combine those two will lead to clutter. You can eat too much, get in a car and drive too fast, go to a club that costs too much, get on a bike that goes nowhere.

Jesus says where there is clutter all you have is weed patch. Some of you may need to do some weeding. Now here is the thing about weeds – rarely will weeds just go away on their own. Weeds tend to stick around. In fact, they spread. They invite friend weeds to come over and have little baby weeds. And pretty soon, the weeds have taken over.

Just think about the way clutter works. You get a computer and then you find out there is so much software and the internet is so much fun to surf. Not necessarily bad things, but I'm just saying clutter tends to lead to more and more and more. Weeds are that way.

Some of you need to do some weeding. Maybe you're a workaholic and it's choking the spiritual life out of you. You may need to get serious about cutting back hours at work because you are not able to love God or love your family the way that you should. Some of you may be financially overextended and it's just choking the generosity and spiritual vitality out of you and you may need to do some financial weeding.

Some of you have kids and maybe they are signed up for so many leagues, clubs, and lessons that you are single handedly supporting the local park district! You may need to do some weeding. Will you remove clutter from your life?

### **Good Soil – Spectacular Growth**

*Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times, what was sown.* Matthew 13:23

But Jesus says, when the soil is soft, and when the soil is deep, and when the soil is uncluttered – watch out! You won't believe what will happen! If your heart is tender towards

God, and your devotion is deep and rooted, and your life is uncluttered, then your growth is unstoppable. It just is, and you're going to thrive!

And the people knew what a bumper crop looked like in great year. Jesus is talking a tremendous harvest, almost beyond what people could imagine. And the point He is making is that the fruitfulness of God's kingdom in the soil of a good heart is beyond our wildest dreams.

### **Joining the Sower and Sowing the Seed**

One reason Jesus told this story is to encourage his followers. Because not only are we soil we also are given the privilege of joining the sower and sowing the seed. Jesus is telling us that when we sow seed we should just know that sometimes it will fall on hard hearts and shallow hearts and cluttered hearts, and we'll often be tempted to give up. Don't do it! Because sometimes conditions are right and when that happens watch out!

We should be like the sower in Jesus' story who just sows seed everywhere because you never know. Some of you have worked and prayed and risked a personal invitation to a friend or neighbor to come to special event or program at our church and maybe you didn't get the results you hoped for. Maybe they came and they are not going to come back, or maybe they didn't come at all and there is a part of you that is tempted to think I must have done something wrong.

Jesus says, just expect it friends – sometimes hard soil, sometimes shallow soil, sometimes cluttered soil – but when your job is to be like the sower, just sow the seed extravagantly. Your job is not to make the growth happen. It's a miracle whenever it happens.

If you are tempted to get discouraged just think about Jesus. He drew great crowds but most of them melted away when He started to share deep truth. The religious leaders, who you would expect to be the most open to God; they were such bad soil that they were the ones who had him crucified. His disciples deserted him, his own family thought he was crazy, the Romans washed their hands of him and furnished the cross, the whole crowd taunted him.

You think He would have been wondering as he looked down from the cross, "Was any the seed really take? Was any of this worth doing? Was all of this a futile waste?"

But on the cross one of the thieves turned to Jesus and asked, "Would you remember me in your kingdom?" and Jesus with one of his last breaths casts one more seed perhaps thinking to himself maybe this will be good soil.

What happens? He finds a person with a soft heart, simple faith, and little clutter. He finds a person with good soil. And the harvest from that one seed's story is still growing.

So don't give up. Keep casting your seeds because the sower is still at work and maybe it's the next one that is going to take root and produce a bountiful harvest.