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Series: "Truth to Build Your Life On"

Title: *The Parable of the Sower*

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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As most of you know, my dad grew up on a farm in Mississippi a few miles from "downtown" Tomnolen. The "town" of Tomnolen consisted of a gas station/grocery store---sort of an antique version of a 7-11---and a tiny post office about the size of the sheds people put in their backyards to store their lawn mower.

I remember the special kinds of fun we had as kids when we visited our grandparents on the farm: fishing in the pond, hiking in the woods, helping feed the live-stock and drinking sweet cool water bubbling out of the ground from a spring not too far from the farmhouse.

When I was in college, my grandad died and my grandmom insisted on remaining on the farm---even though it was in a very remote place---with a mile-long driveway. I remember my dad and his siblings tried to get her to move in with one of them---but nope---grandmom would not budge and with the help of neighbors who drove several miles every day to check on her that's how she spent her last years on this world.

But grandmom didn't use her golden years sitting on the porch in a rocking chair. Nope, she did what she had always done---every day she carefully tended her garden. And---I'm not talking tiny garden---no, grandmom's garden was about 50 yards long and 30 yards wide. She raised potatoes, onions, squash, green beans, corn, tomatoes, okra---pretty much every vegetable.

Now my Grandmom was a tiny woman---very thin---but she was wiry and strong. So, she was able to labor every day under that Mississippi heat weeding, watering, and harvesting---tending her garden literally to her last day on this earth. My grandmom was also a gifted gardener---and as such she knew that the most important factor in reaping a good harvest is not the quality of the SEED---or even the WEATHER conditions. No---Grandmom Ora Bell Adams knew the most important element in harvesting a good crop---is the condition of the SOIL. After all, you can have the best seeds and just the right amount of sun and rain but if the soil is poor, your crop will still be nonexistent or poor at best. You can't have crop GROWTH with seeds planted in POOR soil. And that brings us to this morning's parable---the parable of the Sower---which many believe was the first parable---the first story illustrating truth to build our lives on---that Jesus told.

In this FIRST story our Lord used this "soil principle" that my grandmom knew so well---and He applied it to SPIRITUAL growth. Jesus compared SEED to the GOSPEL and SOIL to those who HEAR the gospel. Then, He took this word picture and used it to teach us that the key to bearing fruit in the kingdom of God---the main catalyst of spiritual growth---is the CONDITION OF THE HEART of the person receiving or hearing the gospel. More than anything else, this one factor determines our level of spiritual maturity.

Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 13:1-9 and let's read this parable together and if able stand in respect for God's Word as it is read:

Matthew 13:1-9

1 – 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.”**

I want to point out that that this thirteenth chapter of Matthew chronicles a definite TURNING-POINT in the ministry of Jesus. I say this because at the BEGINNING of His ministry Jesus taught in the SYNAGOGUES---but Matthew’s gospel tells us that at this point He left the synagogues and began to teach out in the COUNTRYSIDE.

And this shift of teaching LOCALES is significant. You see, Jesus changed His “classroom” at this point because the official leaders of Jewish orthodoxy had come to be in open opposition to Him. William Barclay writes, *“At this point in His ministry] when Jesus entered a synagogue, He would NOT find ONLY an eager crowd of listeners. He would also find a bleak-eyed company of Scribes and Pharisees and elders---weighing and sifting every word to find a charge against Him--and watching every action in order to turn it into a condemnation and an accusation.”*

So, because of this, Jesus took to the “*temple of the open air*” and began instead to teach men and women in the village streets and on the roads and in their homes---and by the LAKE-SIDE as He did here in Matthew 13. It was also at this point in His ministry that Jesus began to use mostly PARABLES in His teaching. When He BEGAN His teaching ministry, Jesus spoke to the people very clearly and forthrightly, making tremendous declarations about humanity and the Kingdom of God. During this initial teaching period He gave the message we call the “*Sermon on the Mount*,” undoubtedly the greatest sermon ever delivered in the presence of men.

Well, Jesus longed to open their eyes and minds and hearts even more fully, but a change had taken place. Don’t misunderstand—crowds were still pressing upon Him—but not to hear the Word. No—instead they came to be healed of their diseases. More and more, HEALING was becoming the thing that attracted people to Jesus. People had mostly shut their minds—turned off their ears—to the WORDS Jesus spoke and were intent only upon the DEEDS He performed. So, Jesus began to speak in PARABLES.

Now, why do this? I mean, why use PARABLES as a teaching method?

(1) Parables COMPEL INTEREST.

Everyone loves stories and will listen to them. Narratives have a way of awakening our curiosity. So, by using stories Jesus was able to take the people’s minds off His deeds and get them focused on what He had to say. With this new tactic He was able to motivate them to learn the truths of the Kingdom of God.

I’m sad to say that many pastors these days have intentionally ignored this principle. There has been a movement in the past couple years that says pastors should only preach what is referred to as “*expository preaching*” It has become a “no-no” in many circles to use stories---illustrations.

I know a pastor in Chesapeake who embraces this principle. He’s a great guy but his sermons are like listening to someone read straight from a Broadman commentary. He goes verse by verse---word by word---and the problem I have with this is it’s hard to pay attention. With no illustrations---no stories---my mind wanders.

I think you can preach expository sermons---and follow Jesus’ example of storytelling. Good illustrations can open our eyes to spiritual truth we would miss otherwise.

(2) Parables make truth CONCRETE.

Few of us can grasp and understand ABSTRACT ideas. Most people think in precise pictures. For example---it would take me a long time to try and explain what “BEAUTY” is—but I could quickly show a picture of:

- A beautiful sunset
- Or a beautiful FLOWER
- Or a beautiful picture of fall leaves

And say, “*That is ‘beauty.’*”

It would be difficult for me to define “GOODNESS,” but I could easily convey its meaning by pointing to a good DEED done by a good PERSON.

So, one great quality of a parable is that it makes truth into a PICTURE which people can see and understand. It takes something FAMILIAR and uses it explain something UNFAMILIAR.

(3) Parables make truth more PALATABLE.

You see, our sinful minds usually find PURE TRUTH to be kind of hard to swallow. As Jack Nicolson said in the movie, “*A Few Good Men*” — most people just, “*CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH!*” They resist pure truth like kids often resist vegetables. I remember that the only way we could get Daniel to eat his veggies when he was a baby was to mix them with bananas. And using parables is a way of wrapping truth with the enticing “flavor” of a good story.

(4) Parables enable us to DISCOVER truth for ourselves.

This is really the best teaching method. People internalize truth far better if they discover it than if they are simply told it. As one youth ministry professor at Southern put it, “*Good teachers never TELL a teen something they could guide them to DISCOVER for themselves.*” But the main reason I think Jesus used parables at this point in His earthly ministry is this:

(5) Parables have a way of CONCEALING truth from those who DON’T want to see the truth while at the same time REVEALING truth to those who DO want to see it.

By using parables, Jesus was REWARDING the curiosity of the concerned, those who really wanted to know the truth. But He was also HIDING the truth from the rebellious—prideful people—those who were only listening to Him to find an excuse to arrest Him. Jesus referred to this teaching principle in Matthew 7:6 when he said, “*Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.*” I think this is also what our Lord was getting at in Matthew 11:25 when He 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.*”

Well, as Jesus began to speak from His floating lectern that afternoon, He no doubt gestured to a farmer sowing seed in a field nearby---and He took this familiar image of the various types of soils in that particular field---and used it as a platform from which to teach vital truth about four ways people respond to the “seed” of the Gospel. Let me put it this way. Jesus told THIS parable to compel His listeners to examine the “soil condition” of their hearts—their own level of receptivity to spiritual truth. And this morning I want us to use our study of this text for the same purpose. As we wind up this year’s vision---to BUILD UP THE CHURCH---I want us to look closely at this familiar parable to evaluate the condition of OUR HEARTS so that we can gauge how BUILT UP we are when it comes to our own spiritual growth.

1.) The HARD-PACKED soil.

In Palestine the fields were arranged in long narrow strips; and the ground between each strip was always a right of way—so, that ground was used as a common path---so it was beaten down by the feet of countless passers-by and became as hard as concrete.

I remember in my grandmom’s garden between each row of plants there was this hard ground where she walked throughout the season to weed and water, etc. That is what Jesus meant when He said that some, “*fell along the path.*” If seed fell there (and it often did) there was no more chance of its penetrating into the earth than if it had fallen on the road. This seed really became nothing more than bird feed because the sparrows and crows could easily get to it.

Jesus compared this hard SOIL to people who have HARD HEARTS. That is to say, their minds are shut—calloused—when it comes to the things of God. These are people in whose minds GOD’S TRUTH has no more chance of gaining an entry than the seed had of settling into the ground that has been beaten hard by many feet. They do not understand the things of the kingdom of God because they have become insensitive to Him. So, talking to them about spiritual things is like talking to a brick wall. As Jesus said in verse 13, “*They have ears but hear not and eyes but see not.*”

I've always wanted to learn to play the guitar like Kenn Owens. I've started learning several times over the years but got too busy to finish. And in my many attempts to learn to master this instrument---in the first week or so---my fingertips would hurt from constantly pressing them on the strings to form chords. After a while callouses would form---hard places on the tips of each finger---and when they did, I was no longer be able to feel or sense pain.

Like a guitarist's fingertips, HEARTS can become calloused---so that it is next to impossible for us to FEEL the presence of God or sense His voice.

What causes this heart problem?

Some people allow their hearts to be hardened by bitter DISAPPOINTMENT or GRIEF or by unfulfilled DREAMS or by PRAYERS that aren't answered in the way they want. Another cause of "heart-hardening" is SIN. The more we disobey God---the less likely we are to be receptive to His truth. God warns us of THIS repeatedly in Scripture.

- In Psalm 95:8-10 He says, ***"Do not harden your hearts...do not be a people whose hearts go astray."***
- In Hebrews 3:15 it says, ***"Today, if you hear [God's] voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."***
- In Isaiah 6 God talks about sinful people whose, ***"hearts were calloused and ears dull."***

Let me just stop and ask, "Christian---how hard is your heart? Have you allowed disappointment or grief or unanswered prayers---or willful sin---to make your heart less receptive to God? Have any of these things stolen your joy as a Christian and stunted your spiritual growth? Before we move on to the second type of soil, I must remind you that ANOTHER cause of hard hearts is the refusal of some people to invite God into their lives. It's like all people have a "NO" muscle and the more we exercise it the stronger it becomes.

I'm reminded of Felix, the ruler of Caesarea. In Acts 24:25 when Paul confronted him with his need for God Felix said, ***"That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."***

The problem is that the more we say "no" to God---the easier it is to do so---but listen---if you have a spouse or a parent who reminds you of Felix---if you have a loved one who refuses to accept Jesus, DON'T GIVE UP. Keep praying---keep taking every opportunity to tell them about Jesus because even people with callous hearts can be won to God.

In St. Paul's Cathedral, there is a tablet in honor of Samuel A. Barnett, who preached to the rebellious, sinful people of East London for a half-century---a very difficult mission field! The tablet portrays an engraved figure of the Sower, with these words: ***"Fear not to sow on account of the birds."*** You see, Barnett learned that sowing with this kind of people is NOT ***"just for the birds."*** Even hard, calloused people can be led to the Lord. In fact, this particular parable was used to reach John Bunyan and lead him to Christ. That blasphemous old tinker of Bedford was known as the most godless man in his village and was regarded as so hardhearted and committed to godlessness---that no Christian had any hope for him at all. But Bunyan heard this story of the Sower and its truth penetrated his hard heart. He said to himself, ***"Even the devil knows that if a man believes the Word he'll be saved."*** Bunyan believed and was saved. He went on to write *Pilgrim's Progress* and his conversion became a tremendous testimony for God in his age. Like a Potter working with hard, dried-up clay, if we let Him, God can break us when we are hard-hearted, and in that way make us soft and pliable again---receptive to His leading.

2.) The SHALLOW soil.

This was ground that was actually a thin layer of earth on the top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock. On such ground the seed would germinate quickly, because such ground easily grew warm with the heat of the sun---but there was no depth of earth so when the plant sent down its roots in search of nourishment and moisture, it would meet only the rock and would soon be starved to death. Its roots would become weak---unable to stand when storm or drought came. And this kind of soil would also be familiar to Jesus' listeners because Israel is a very rocky place. Shallow soil is common there.

In fact, there's an old Arabic story that says that when God was creating the world, He entrusted all the stones that He had made to two angels, each with one full bag. As they flew over Palestine one of the bags broke spilling half the stones intended for the whole world.

Of course, that's just a story but I remember looking out the window of the airplane the first time I visited Israel. I looked down and saw rocks poking out everywhere. Much of Israel is indeed very rocky and because of this it can be a tough place to farm. Well, this second type of shallow SOIL over a rocky layer represents people who have a SHALLOW HEART--individuals who are drawn to the BLESSINGS of salvation but repelled by the COSTS of following Jesus---like the people who FLOCKED to hear Jesus when He did His miracles---but LEFT when the going was hard---as did the teacher of the law who went away when Jesus told him, ***"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head."*** (Matthew 8:20)

And many of us today still fit this description. We are attracted to the joy and excitement of a church where a lot is happening. We enjoy SPIRITUAL HIGHS—but we don't sink deep roots. We don't mature—so when tough times come just as Paul warned in Ephesians 4, we are: ***"...tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men..."***

Listen---every Christian will face crisis situations that test our "roots" in God. After all, we live and minister in a fallen world, filled with difficult, trial-filled times. It is just as Jesus warned, ***"In this world we DO have trouble."*** (John 16:33)

How many of you are SPIDERMAN fans? I confess I am! As you should know, this particular friendly neighborhood hero uses his web to swing from building to building. That's how he gets to crime scenes. So---as cool as Spidey is---he wouldn't be very effective in downtown Derwood. Even downtown Rockville doesn't have that many "sky-scrappers." No—Spidey only works effectively in a big city like New York---where there are HIGH buildings.

Well, many times in the Christian life we "swing" like Spidey from one spiritual high to the next: from a conference at The Cove---to a Beth Moore retreat---to a concert by NCC. And these are all great in and of themselves---the problem comes when we think of our lives as a series of "spiderwebs"---that take us to one spiritual high to the next and so on. And this is a very dangerous thing because there ARE a lot of "Derwoods" in life. There are times when there are more TROUBLES and TRIALS than there are "TALL buildings." In fact, there are times when life seems like a prairie with no buildings at all.

The truth is life "swings" along much more evenly when we develop a minute-by-minute, intimate, ever-deepening relationship with the TRUE vine, Jesus Christ. When we cling to HIM—when we allow our faith to grow deep---then we are ready---no matter what kind of topography shapes our life journey.

3.) The soil that was filled with WEEDS.

Every gardener knows that the WEEDS grow with a speed and a strength that few good SEEDS can equal. The result is that weeds are so strong that they throttle the life out of the good seed, and it dies, while the weeds flourish. All this would represent THE OVER-INVOLVED HEART, which belongs to those people who have so many interests in life that certain things (and often the most important things)---get crowded out.

Redland Youth, I apologize in advance---but there is something I need to tell you about what some kids your age are doing these days. You probably already know about it---so, think of what I'm about to say as "tough pastoral love." This week I came across the story of a cell phone ringtone that junior high and high school kids are using to keep teachers from discovering that they are using their cell phones in school. The pitch of this ringtone, called the "mosquito tone," is too high for people over 25 to hear. So---with their young---rebellious ears, teens can still send and receive text messages during class without the teacher knowing. The mosquito tone was first developed in Great Britain to irritate teenagers who were loitering around convenience stores and keeping customers away by their loud and obnoxious behavior. Some kid simply figured out how to use that sound as his cell phone's ringtone and---voilà---kids are downloading it by the millions.

How does it work? Well, inside our ears we have tiny, microscopic hairs that move with the impulses of incoming sound waves, and those hair movements send electrical signals to our brain. As we age, those hairs get worn down---damaged---so our hearing becomes less sensitive. We first lose the ability to detect the sounds of high frequencies. People over 25 can't hear sounds above 16 kilohertz. (The highest note on a piano is 4 Khz; the mosquito tone is 17 Khz.) A lot of students are missing out on a lot of learning---because they are too busy texting in class.

And---a lot of people---of ALL ages---are missing out on what God says to them because they are too BUSY listening to the things of this world. To them---to us---TOO MANY TIMES---God's still small voice sounds like a pesky mosquito and we swat it away.

4.) The GOOD soil.

The fertile ground was deep and clean and soft. The seed could gain entry. It could find nourishment. It could grow unchecked. In this good ground it brought forth an abundant harvest. And this reminds us that there are times when we are like the good ground---prepared to hear---not too proud or busy to listen. This is the soil of the OPEN HEART. These are the people who are receptive to God's truth. They hunger for it. They grow and mature and bear fruit for His kingdom. Jesus said, they, ***"...produce a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown..."*** ---which would have astounded these people who knew that the average crop yield in those days was less than 8 to one. As Hebrews says, these believers grow and produce fruit. They: ***"leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity."*** (6:1) They are like the young man described in Psalm 1 who is, ***"like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaves do not wither."***

Now I want you to be sure and note something about this parable: ALL OF THE FOUR SOILS WERE FROM THE SAME FIELD. In other words, Jesus was saying that this does not necessarily represent four different types of people but four different responses in the same person. And when you think about it, all of us have times in our lives when our hearts are HARD---or SHALLOW---or OVER-INVOLVED---or even OPEN. Our lives are a blend of many responses to God: at times callous to His voice---at other times we settle for a shallow, artificial faith---at other times we are overly concerned with things that don't really matter ultimately. And there are those rare times when we are like the warm and fertile soil---productive responsive to His bidding. In times like this, we grow in His likeness and bear much fruit in His kingdom.

Which soil are you most like this morning? I get an add every spring from companies offering to do a free SOIL test---to evaluate the condition of the dirt in my yard. They do this in the hopes that I will be convinced to pay them to add the nutrients to make my soil healthy and productive. Today I think we all should ask God to perform a test on the "soil" of our hearts. Let's use King David's words in Psalm 139 and say ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."***

I pray every week that worship will provide us with a time of self-examination---a time to evaluate our walk with God---to allow Him to search us and guide us to respond to His sowing!

Perhaps our worship has shown you of a specific way you need to respond to God. You may feel led to join this church or commit to do all you can to deepen your walk with Him. There may be some here this morning who are not Christians and our time together has shown you that you are ready like the good soil upon which the word has fallen---you are ready to receive Jesus into your heart and life. If you have a decision to make public, I invite you to do so by walking the aisle as we stand now and sing.