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Speaker: Matthew Eckert - Executive Lead Pastor
Scripture: Matthew 13:18-23 Sower and the Seed

In the book of Matthew Chapter 13 the author writes about Jesus. And he begins by saying, "Listen, listen."

I'm not sure why he chose to put that word there. I'm not sure if Jesus said it or not. It feels like you are in a classroom sometimes, right? You are trying to get the attention of all the students or people around and you are saying, "Listen, listen, I've got something to tell you." He said,

A farmer went out to plant some seeds and as he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath and the birds came and ate them.

And everybody around is nodding and maybe smiling because they know exactly what He is talking about.

Other seeds, He said, fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow.

Probably warm and the germination could take place faster.

But the plants, they soon wilted under the hot sun. And since they didn't have deep roots they died.

While other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and they choked out the plants.

Maybe beside them where Jesus was speaking, there were such thorns, and they realized what was going on.

But still other seeds fell on fertile soil and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty,

even a hundred times as much as had been planted.

Anyone who has ears to hear should listen, should listen and understand.

In this chapter of the book of Matthew Chapter 13, the author puts seven parables in a row. Now I am not sure if Jesus actually taught these parables in a row like they are there chronologically. The author's role was to simply put in content that are there to guide the journey for our learning.

But there are seven parables in a row all talking about the kingdom of God from all kinds of angles. What is this kingdom that Jesus said He came to bring – a new kingdom – what was it all about? Over one third of the teachings of Jesus were stories, parables. Here was one of them. This was the first of the seven. Jesus gets up and He wants to talk about this so He says, "There was this farmer," and they all knew it and maybe many of them were farmers in the crowd. The farmer took his hand and he dipped it into his bag of seed and he starts to spread the seed. They didn't have equipment back then. The seed would go wherever the seed would go, right? They did their best to keep it in line but it would spread, and He said some of the seed, you know, it fell on a footpath.

Now maybe this was a footpath right beside the field or maybe it was someone who just walked through his field, I don't know. But some seed was there and it just really couldn't do much. It couldn't really grip in. It was hard.

Other seed actually did find some soil. It was shallow though. The seed quickly sprouted, He said. And up it came, but the sun, you know, came

down. There wasn't enough water to bring it in and he just couldn't; this plant just couldn't continue to grow, so it wilted, it wilted.

Other seed though found pretty good soil. It was pretty deep and the roots could grow and there was water. But unfortunately the water and the soil also supported weeds and thorns and they came up and they grew faster. The seed just didn't have a chance. It got suffocated.

But finally some seed did find really good soil. There really weren't many weeds there and it grew. And it produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, even a hundred times as much.

He who has ears to hear should listen and understand.

When we entered into this journey of this message series on parables, I knew exactly the parable I wanted to talk about. I think about this parable probably every single week. Something about this parable just resonates with me as I engage with people. I see people across this parable. If you were around six years ago I spoke on this same parable and I used this exact piece of art.

I give credit to my daughter-in-law who drew this. I asked her, would she just kind of take the parable and here's five pieces of paper. Could she try to articulate what it means, and she came up with this. All the black, if you want to know, is actually words. So the path is the Scripture itself and everything else are words – even the hand; it's all just words that came to her heart as she pondered this parable and tried to make it artistically rendered. But what is this about? What are we supposed to grasp in this parable?

Interestingly, this is one of the parables that the disciples came to Jesus and said, "We don't get it. You told us to listen and understand; we don't understand. Could You please explain to us what this means?" This is one of those parables that Jesus steps in and gives a full explanation to understand the nuances of this parable.

If we jump to Verse 18, He says the following about this parable. He says,

Listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds. The seed that fell on the footpath represents those people who hear the message about the kingdom and they just don't understand it.

Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.

The seed is a message. The seed is all about the kingdom. The seed is something that is supposed to take root in the heart and it's supposed to grow and emanate out of a life, out of a community. The seed continues to be planted to this day 2000 years later. If you come to services, if you listen to your radio, if you listen to TV shows, the seed is being planted – sometimes in a good way, sometimes not so good. But it is going forth around the world.

The message of the kingdom of God, (those are the words in Scripture), the good news of Jesus, what He did for us; it is going out. It is a matter of what kind of heart is it landing on? I have been thinking about this idea that some people just don't understand. I wonder what is He getting at? What does it mean to not understand? Why don't some people understand? And for sure some of you are thinking of a family member or a colleague or a neighbor or a friend that you have actually shared the seed of the kingdom of God, right, and they just look at you like, "I don't understand." And you wonder to yourself, what is there not to understand?

There are people who come to our services and you might be one of them right now; I have had conversations with you. For some reason you are here; you are trying to understand but you just don't understand. What does it mean to not understand? I thought about this and how we can try to ponder it. Maybe for some, you just don't understand because you are waiting to have all the answers. Like, I don't understand this part of God, and why does God do this, so until I understand everything, perhaps you think, "I just have to declare I won't understand."

The reality is that on this side of heaven you will never understand all the pieces and nuances of who God is. He is just too vast and broad.

But perhaps you don't understand because over the years as a child and beyond you had parents or teachers or whatever that just kept driving home in you "God does not exist, God does not exist, Jesus is a lie; do not believe this."

And over time these things do something to our hearts, don't they? Like some of you here in this room that you have no confidence in yourself, even if people around you say you are amazing, you can do that. Something inside you cannot believe it because growing up, whether it was parents or friends or teachers, looked you in the face and over and over again they said, "You won't amount to anything; you're not good, you have no talents, you have no skills." This tape got played over and over and over again. It doesn't matter what anyone says to you about how amazing you might be and how talented and the skills you might have, somehow the seed just doesn't seem to want to plant, right, because it's just so hard, you've heard the same message.

Maybe that's people who don't understand; I don't know. Here is the reality though, this Jesus parable here, it was descriptive. I don't believe that Jesus says this has to be your state forever. I just think He is letting people know, the disciples, you're going to run into people that at a certain in their life are going to be this type of soil.

Let me move on before I try to ponder how we can move perhaps beyond these soil types. He says in Verse 20,

The seed in the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.

Boy I've seen these people. Maybe you have experienced this. You're just, wow; this is so amazing, right? You just hear the message of Jesus and something inside you just comes alive. It is so beautiful. You're dancing around; you can't get the smile off your face. But the roots aren't yet that deep and are having trouble getting through that underlying rock. And problems and persecution come, the Scripture says.

You know, you are trying to share the beauty of what you have and you're telling family and friends, perhaps a co-worker, and they are just looking at you going, "you have got to be kidding me." They start asking you all kinds of questions and you just don't have the answers yet because you are just so new and you're going...and it just feels like you're being beaten down and beaten down. Maybe what you did believe; maybe it's not true, because their questions are actually pretty good.

Or problems come your way, right? Boy when you come to faith, God just shows up in ways and you have these feelings perhaps that you never thought you would experience; this is going to be the most amazing thing ever, and you see this trajectory of life heading off. Then that relationship is just not working out and you're praying and it's not being repaired.

The financial situation; the job you so need is not coming through. The sickness is just getting worse. There are problems and you're feeling it and you're not sure of this faith in God; is this really good news because I'm not feeling the goodness right now. You start to sense the wilt of your faith because the God you chose to worship is not the God you think He is supposed to be. Jesus says you are going to come across individuals like this – the kingdom planted, but what's happening? But we go on. He said,

The seed that fell among the thorns represent those who hear God's word but all too quickly that message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no food is produced.

The two w's, the worries and the wealth – it's almost like they are the two extremes right? You are worrying about, oh, it's not going to work, I can't make it, there's not enough. And the other sense is oh, there's so much, like, let's just go for this, right? It's like the two opposite extremes, but what they are doing is they are crowding out the message. This plant inside of you, this kingdom is trying to grow and yet some things just aren't working out. Some of you I know, you have the spiritual gift of worrying. You just think, it's a blessing to your life. And the only worse thing about that is if you can't find something to worry

about, that's the most worrying thing, right, because there has certainly got to be something. People around you are wondering do you understand the beauty, do you believe the message of Jesus?

You're going, "yeah, but there's this and there's this and it's all..." and the worrying is kind of snuffing out the beauty of the goodness of God that is trying to grow. It's not going anywhere. People look at you going, do you believe that stuff you read?

Or it's the wealth. It could be financial wealth; it could be simply the wealth of opportunities, right? We have so much we can do here, don't we? I can sign up for this and register for that and my kids can do this, and it's so many great things, and the wealth of all that seems to kind of push away the rhythms of a journey of faith and love for God. The kingdom that had begun to grow is being snuffed out by the wealth because there are so many things to engage in other than this God thing. That is what happens, doesn't it? That's what happens; it gets in the way. We are wondering why the kingdom is not growing. But He said then,

The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest, thirty, sixty, a hundred times as much as had been planted.

Many of you in this room, in my mind you represent the beauty of this. Your lives are just growing kingdom seed. Your lives are modeling something so beautiful. I have heard many of your stories and when times are great and amazing and there is wealth you continue to lean in and love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. When things take a turn and something goes wrong and horrible you continue, "No, God is good," and you keep leaning in. Your lives represent the beauty of roots growing deep and plants. You model. People look at you going, "You really believe this stuff, don't you?" You are blessing so many people because of the soil.

Now I have thought of this whole thing. How do we embrace this because I honestly think this is simply descriptive of points in time in someone's life? You are going to come across people in your life perhaps like this, or maybe you sense yourself in here.

But I honestly believe that we can move because I think our desire is to be the good soil, I would hope. We want to understand and just kind of blossom in an amazing way. How can we move ourselves perhaps along that trajectory to become people that represent and the kingdom of God just flourishes out of our lives?

Let me give you some things maybe to ponder. First of all it's the path.

How can you move from a path to actually have seed begin to grow? In reality it is hard and the Scripture says that Satan comes and takes away and that's another key piece of our belief and understanding and our theology of life that there is more to this life than what we can now touch, feel, smell or taste. There is realm beyond this realm, a spiritual realm, and there is an evil one and he is doing whatever he can to disrupt the kingdom from growing. If he can remove the seed, as this parable says, and get it away and it never has a chance, he will do that.

But how can we move? If this is you, if you kind of land here and you're going, "Yeah, Matt, I don't understand this, like, I'm here but I'm ready to walk away because this stuff makes no sense at all," can I give you a challenge?

For one month, for one month, will you simply live your life as though it's all true? For one month. You know, we ask people to do that sometimes, right? Sometimes I've seen this in students, I've seen this in schools; they will give the students a baby (not a real baby – a doll) that kind of mimics what a baby will do and they are told to keep it for a week and understand what does it mean when a child wakes up and needs to be fed and changed, and they are supposed to live, walk in the shoes of a parent to understand wow, this is a lot of work.

Or I have been told sometimes some guys are asked to wear these pregnancy suits – I've never seen one but I've been told about them – and to understand what does it mean to carry a child and to experience that and walk in the shoes of your spouse, right.

Sometimes in marriage counseling the counselor will look at the couple and say, "What would you do if you really loved your spouse?" And then they

say, “Just go and do it. Just go and do it.” So would you for a month, if you believe this is you, just simply live as though it’s true. When you come here on Sunday, when the songs are sung, just sing those words as though you really believe them; maybe even raise your hand and just act as though this stuff is great.

When you get up in the morning will you take a Bible and will you open it and start reading through one of the Gospels and just assume that that chapter you read is really happening and really took place and is true. And then pray. Pray as though God did exist. Pray for your day. As you go throughout your day, before every meal stop and give thanks to the God you are not sure you really believe in or understand – just do it. When you end your day, read a devotional and pray as though it really meant something. Over one month just see what might take place and maybe, maybe that path will start to develop some cracks and maybe a few pieces of seed will drop through those cracks and maybe it will find some softer soil and maybe you are going to start to understand and the kingdom of God is going to grow in your life.

But we move on. Maybe you sense yourself in the shallow soil. The kingdom of God is there; it is starting to grow but you recognize that there is persecution, there are problems and you feel your faith fading, you feel the heat of the sun and you just have the sense there is nothing, I am not getting anything, I don’t know what to do, and you think you are about to just faint over. Using the analogy of this parable, can you perhaps take your root – it can’t go any deeper - but can your root grow sideways and tap into the root of a plant that is going deep, and in one sense graft yourself into the beauty of a plant that is flourishing? You see this is the beauty of the community of Christian faith. You see we don’t do life alone. We do it together.

Did you know there is a spiritual gift in the Bible called the gift of faith? But some people have so much faith and in reality we can borrow someone else’s faith. They can lend it to us for a season because in reality all of us will go through seasons of life where our faith is wobbly and we are just not sure.

That’s the time we come alongside each other and say, “I need to borrow some of your faith right now because mine is being beaten down so much I cannot see my way through. If this is you right now, are you willing to reach over to someone you trust and say, “Can I borrow some faith for a while because I am wilting and I am not sure how I am going to make it through this situation?”

If you are a way for somebody who is going through this part of the journey, will you reach out and will you say, “I am walking with you; you are not doing this alone. Borrow all the faith you want; let’s do this together.”

But next He talks about the weeds and the worries and the wealth that get in the way, things that are just distracting us. We may not even realize it but we are slowly but surely being snuffed out and the faith that is supposed to be growing in us, the kingdom of God that is supposed to be sprouting through us, it’s hard to see it anymore because we are just so worried or we’re just so distracted.

There are so many things to do and so much money to be made and so many activities to sign up for, it’s just a full spread, and we’re missing something. You know I’ve been pondering the whole idea of financial wealth these last two years. I’m not just sure why; God just keeps bringing articles and documents and ideas into my mind. He is really pushing and stretching me in my own growth and learning because I think here in North America we have no clue how distracted we are with the financial wealth that we have.

I read an article two weeks ago about this man who was 100 years old - he had just passed away. The article talked about the five million dollar financial portfolio that he had. It was kind of praising him, and “you too can have his investment strategy.” He had a basic job all his life and they were just cheering him on and I’m going, “What are you doing with five million dollars at the age of 100? Like, what is the reason for this?”

Paul Allen, one of the founders of Microsoft, just passed away a couple weeks ago in his mid-sixties. They talk about his net worth was almost 20 billion dollars. It’s like, yes, you can do this too! I’m thinking to myself, “Why? Like, why?”

If you want to have some understanding of financial engagement and the Christian faith we highly recommend the book “The Treasure Principle” by Randy Alcorn. Maybe it’s a topic you don’t want to go to because you’re trying to build this financial piece. As your lead pastor I’m going to be leaning into this one more and more because I think too many of us are missing out on the joy of the kingdom because we are just distracted.

Listen to what Randy says in the book. He says, “If we give instead of keep, if we invest in the eternal instead of the temporal we store up treasures in heaven that will never stop paying dividends.

Whatever treasures we store up on earth will be left behind when we leave. Whatever treasures we store up in heaven will be waiting for us when we arrive.” I’m not sure where you stand on this, but is wealth a weed that is stifling and knocking out the kingdom of God that is a beautiful thing that is trying to grow and bless others around you?

Now it could be the flip side. This is kind of a negative piece we’re trying to get out of, but it could be something that God is calling you into, something beautiful and you’re just not sure you can do it.

Two great stories – a couple of the guys that come to men’s prayer on Monday mornings at 7:00. They are great stories. They both have told me different stories over the years that they really wanted to lean in and be part of the prayer. They thought that God was asking this part of their lives to grow and develop but they were so worried, like, how do you sit in a group of people and like pray out loud? But they couldn’t shake it so they pushed aside the worries they had. The one guy said he would come here early before the prayer started. He would sit in his car and he would write out prayers that he could then read so he could have something to say. He said, “I have to get around it somehow.” The other guy said that he was awake half the night before men’s prayer; he was just so worried he would have to say something, he’d pray wrong. But he kept leaning in, kept leaning in, kept leaning in. He said, “God is calling me to pray. I am not going to let the worries of what I might look like get in the way of me doing what I think God has called me into.”

Maybe this is part of your soil. It’s a beautiful thing, isn’t it? And once again, I think we all desire

the beauty of the crop that is producing thirty, sixty, a hundred times. I think those of us who have chosen to accept Jesus truly do want Him to flourish in our lives. Because you see, it’s not a one-time transaction. We have to get that out of our minds that at one point we will come to a point where we will say, “Jesus, I can’t do it; I’m a sinner. There is this gap between me and God but because of what Christ did through faith I can believe that and that I will have a relationship with God.” But it just begins there. That is simply the planting of the seed and it just starts to germinate. It now becomes this lifetime.

You see if you see it just as a transaction – “God, I’ve done the eternal life thing” – it’s like getting a job, going to the HR department, signing the contract and saying, “I’ve got a job” and then you never show up for work. It’s like coming down the aisle and before family and friends declaring your vows till death do us part, and now we are married, and then you just go your separate ways. We’re married; here’s the piece of paper.

The journey of faith is a life of faith. The kingdom of God is this never-ending, outflowing of God in your life. It is the fruit; it continues to want to blossom and continue to grow. It never ends. Here is the reality as I look at this parable: every one of us, every one of us who are followers of Jesus has all four types of soil existing in our life all the time. We all have them all.

It depends on the area of your life that you are thinking of. You see some of us – and you all will have this – you have some beautiful soil and you need to rejoice and be encouraged in that. Some of you have a marriage that is just flourishing and the kingdom of God is alive in your marriage. Others around you are saying, “Can you help us? We just see so much in you, and you can just rejoice to God and say, “Yeah, we have done the work, but it is flourishing.”

Others of you, the kingdom of God is alive at work. You are at work and people love being with you and you are just a person of integrity and God flows through you. Maybe you are a manager or you own your own business and people love working for you. You are a person of deep humility and you love the people around you and the kingdom of God is

flourishing in your life, it's growing. I think to start with all this we need to look at each other with our family and friends and say, you know what; I see the kingdom of God in you in this area. We need to cheer each other on and encourage each other. "When you love your neighbors, man I wish I could do that. The kingdom of God flows through you in your neighborhood." That's the start of the journey I think.

But as we look at this, we all have areas where the kingdom of God is not doing too well. Oh it's trying to get out but for some reason we are crowding it out or we're just not going deep. There are problems in that area and it's just not going. A parent and a child just aren't connecting as they should and the kingdom of God is dying and it's supposed to be flourishing. For whatever reason, whether things are crowding it out or there is too much whatever going on, it's not as it should.

For some it is loving those who are not like you. "I don't really connect with them well and I don't want to" and you're calling names and whatever it is, and the kingdom of God is trying to get out but for some reason it's being snuffed. It is not how it is supposed to be. How do we discover and lean in and pull the weeds and have the soil go deeper so the kingdom of God can begin to flourish in an area of your life that it is not flourishing in? I think we can all recognize those areas, can't we? If we are all honest with ourselves and we reflect enough with saying, "yeah, God is really not there."

But thirdly, it's those path areas that we don't even know. It's the areas that we don't even have a clue that the kingdom of God is not present and we're not even aware of it. How do we move ourselves beyond that piece? You know you can begin by asking those around you because the reality is whatever we don't know, they know. Whatever I am missing, my wife knows, my kids know. If you are willing to have an honest conversation, you're willing to say, "Can you tell me where the kingdom of God just isn't present at all?" If your house is a safe place I'm sure they will be very willing to say, "Yeah, right here. You don't even see it; it's your blind spot."

You know, as a church we have developed this thing called "The Personal Reflection Exercise" and

perhaps this is one step you can do. It just looks at six areas of your life and it makes some statements and asks you to reflect. Perhaps taking a journey like this, you will reveal things to you that you never even knew, you never even thought about. It's like the soil hard path; it isn't even growing, it hasn't even started to grow. Maybe this can be the start of your journey to kind of figure out, "God, what am I completely missing?" because the kingdom of God is meant to flourish in every area of our lives.

See, as a church we want to inspire support and mobilize one another to live like Jesus, have His kingdom flow out of us as a transforming and life-giving presence in our families, in our communities and in the world.

What would it look like if each of us leaned in always and did the hard work to allow the kingdom of God seed to flourish in every area of our lives? For some of us it's going to be a lot of hard work because there are a lot of weeds. Are you willing to lean in though? What would it look like in your family if the kingdom of God was flourishing in every relationship? What would it look like in your neighborhood if you became a seed planter and a kingdom of God bringer? What would it look like in the city of London if North Park Community Church was known as a place that produces a crop thirty, sixty, even a hundred times?

It will only happen if we all choose to lean in and do the hard work to make sure our soil is ready and prepared to receive the seed and to allow it to grow for the honor and glory of God whose kingdom is the one that reigns and that we serve in.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father we just give You thanks. Lord, we give You thanks for the kingdom of God that is flourishing in our lives. Lord, we give you praise where the kingdom of God is reigning in our lives. And God, we need to just encourage each other and Lord, would You encourage us.

But Lord, there are areas that we need to step before You and say we're sorry that the kingdom of God is being snuffed out. Jesus, help us to enter into these moments. Lord, may we do it together. If someone

needs a guiding hand, may they receive that guiding hand. But in all things Your kingdom would flourish, Your kingdom would reign in the city of London as it is in heaven. Guide our journey, Jesus. May we be known as a flourishing community in this city. Amen, amen.

Points to Ponder

What's the Big Idea? ~ Matthew 13 Sower and the Seed

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What has been your experience in planting/gardening/farming? What have you enjoyed about it? What have you learned about plants and their health?
2. Read Matthew 13:1-9. What stands out to you about this parable?
3. As best you can, describe different people you have met who represent the various types of soil. What did you notice about them? What aspect of their faith is most represented by the type of soil?
4. Thinking of your life overall, what type of soil do you think represents you at this point in time?
5. Can you identify different aspects of your life that are represented by each type of soil? What would be a next step for you in moving forward?