

“Sow what.”

Whew! Well we’ve survived another Christmas season, right? It seems like this season gets longer every year. I mean even right now, it’s 360 days until Christmas and people already have their Christmas decorations up... Good evening/morning, welcome to Heritage Christian Church, we’re so glad to come to church today. I’m Dustyn Vanzant, the student pastor here at Heritage. Next month Pavi and Andy lead us through a new series (**SLIDE**) called “Inside out, Upside Down”. It will be a challenging journey through the Sermon on the Mount.

The excitement level is building for our student ministry as all of our middle and high school programming kick back off next weekend. Both middle and high school classes start on January 6th. Middle school will continue moving through The Rescue series they started in the fall and our High school students just finished The Alpha course this year so we will start on a new series during the 11am service called Advocates. Sunday night kicks off our High school Group as we start a new series called “The Glow Up” and our middle school group comes back on Wednesday night, January 9 with “Bae Life”.

I’ve been working here at Heritage for almost five years. About four years ago, my wife and I purchased a house in Old Westerville, just South of Uptown. Since the day we bought our house, my wife has been stressed about the tree in our front yard (**SLIDE - TREE PIC**). It’s a big fifty year old Silver Maple. Generally the tree looks strong, but the ends of the branches continue to die and break off. We’ve had people come and look at it, even had one person thin it out, hoping to get nutrients to those deadened areas at the end of the branches and keep them from dying. But nothing seemed to work. My wife has been worried there is something more dire going on with the tree, something we can’t see.

So my wife's goal at the beginning of 2018 was to get rid of this scary tree in our front yard. So to kick off the year, she told me we were taking out the tree in the summer - prepping me for what would either be a lot of work or a lot of money.... and, let's be honest, it's probably going to be both. We had several companies give us quotes, \$1500, \$1800, and even \$2000 were the replies. I knew it was going to be expensive, and I simply don't want to spend that money to remove some dying plant from the yard.

Eventually June rolled around and Robin was adamant the tree needed to come out and I was adamant it was fine. Think of the money we'd spend! Think of the shade we'll lose from the front of the house! Our energy bills will increase if we remove it! It's going to be so much work and I don't even have a chainsaw! As adamant as she became, I became even more obstinate. Eventually I said, "There is no way, under any circumstances, I'm paying someone to take down that tree, and I'm not risking the house and my life to take it down on my own, so there!"

So, next week, as I was taking the tree down, I found a friend who took pity on me, and was willing to help me not die. This friend also happened to have a super sweet chainsaw. So armed with a battery operated chainsaw, we came up with the brilliant plan to take a grappling hook tied to a rope, hurl it up into the tree as high as we could, until it caught something firm. Then we attached the end of the rope to my Ford Escape and backed up to pull the rope until it was tight - because just the risk of hurting ourselves and the house wasn't enough I wanted to make sure the SUV could be lost to treemagedon too. Then we would cut off whatever limb was attached to the grappling hook, pulling it with the SUV. Now I don't want to brag about our engineering skills, but we definitely gave the neighbors something to talk about for quite some time. We slowly made our way around the tree, cutting branches off until we

ended with a massive trunk in the middle of my yard, surrounded by a mass of branch destruction (**SLIDE - PIC**).

I spent the next several days cutting, stacking, and cleaning up the debris in the yard, and the lawn waste guys were so kind to take it all. It was a ton of work, and call it a tribute to our engineering skills, the work of master tree cutters, blind luck, or an act of God, but somehow we got everything cut down and didn't hit the house, no one was maimed or killed, and the front end of the SUV didn't get ripped off.

We were left with a massive trunk in the front yard. Now my original thought was, what if I used this newly found tree cutting skills to carve this into some kind of masterpiece. Like a bear to welcome our guests, or a totem pole declaring our family lineage. My wife thought it might hurt the decor of the house. So I began the process of taking out this trunk piece by piece, chunk by chunk. We worked our way down the trunk from about ten feet in the air. The first several cuts were pretty hard. Hanging high in the air, solid wood, and a now dull blade made a difficult challenge. As we worked our way down the tree trunk we were absolutely surprised at what we found. At about six foot off the ground down to about two foot under ground the trunk was completely hollow. Carpenter ants had completely eaten through the bulk of the tree trunk.

Now this meant two things, first my wife was right. I thought the tree looked strong on the outside, just needed some trimming, but my wife had assessed something more dire was happening with the tree. Secondly, it meant that the tree on the exterior was only showing a few minor signs of distress, but inside this tree was hollow and could've fallen at any moment hurting us and destroying our house. It was vitally important to remove the tree before disaster struck.

It makes me pause and wonder, are there things in my life that on the exterior look healthy and strong, but deep inside are eaten out and rotten? Is there anything in your life, where on the exterior it looks like everything is strong and put together, but on the inside it's rotten and eaten away? Will your foundation stand strong in the midst of the storms of life?

Jesus, shared an incredible story with his followers that is found in three of the four eye witness accounts of Jesus. The parable of the sower is found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. It's such an important story that it was included three times. Now all three, are extremely similar, but we'll be reading Mark's retelling of the story. So turn with me in your Bibles to Mark chapter 4. We'll be starting at the first verse.

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mark 4:1-9;14-20

The author of Mark moves quickly through the beginning of Jesus' ministry in his first three chapters. He tells of Jesus baptism, Jesus' temptation, Jesus selecting his disciples, Jesus healing people all over the area, and Jesus' teaching people throughout the area. Now, in chapter four, Mark says a very large crowd gathered to hear Jesus, so he decides to go into a boat in a makeshift, "Floating pulpit" on the sea. The crowd gathers around on the shore and he begins teaching.

Jesus tells a story many in his audience at the time would understand. Many of them had a personal garden of their own, and many others have been farmers themselves, growing food for both their families and for selling to others. They've planted before, making this an easy story for them to envision, there may have even been someone not too far away planting their own field within eyesight for them to get a visual of Jesus' story.

Now at first glance, for our eyes we may be confused by this sower's methods of scattering seed. Maybe you've had a garden, or planted your own field, this sower sounds foolish and wasteful. Everyone knows to plant seeds into the ground, we know side walk isn't fertile ground, that we should remove thorn bushes from the land and rocks from the field. This sower doesn't do so. Remember our techniques, technologies, and cultures have changed since this story was told by Jesus. In these days, they would walk around with a pouch on their hip and literally cast seed out from the pouch with their hand. They would hand spread the seed over the whole ground, hoping the seed would catch in the fertile ground, and knowing it would also sprout some in the areas that weren't as fertile. They would spread the seed liberally, because they weren't always sure which was fertile and which soil wasn't. They broadcast the seed everywhere on the land hoping to get as much coverage as possible.

So we have a sower planting seeds, scattering them everywhere, hoping they produce a solid crop. Now for many parables in the Bible, they are open to interpretation, they aren't always explained in the Bible, so we have to spend time figuring out what Jesus meant when he wrote them via context, historical usage, and the Holy Spirit. This one however, is explained later by Jesus himself. We read starting in verse 14, the disciples ask what the parable means and Jesus decides to explain it to us all.

Jesus' explanation of the Sower story starts in chapter 4, verse 14, Jesus says:

14 The sower sows the word.

Aha, see that's different. We started with seed in the parable and now Jesus says the sower sows "The Word". We know throughout the Bible, that the Word is significant to the gospel, and Jesus himself, right? That Gospel is Jesus came as a human, died on the cross, and rose again on the third day proving he has power over death and sin, that if we believe in him, we have our sins forgiven and live forever with him.

The next question might be, so who is sower? Well the moment, in this story it's Jesus, right? He's the first to come and tell the world that it was time to repent and turn back to God. But after Jesus completed his Gospel mission, it's now anyone who sows the Word into anyone else. It's a preacher on Sunday morning. It's a student at the lunch table. It's a father reading to his child at bedtime. It's a CEO during her board meeting. It's a kid at their scout meeting. It's a business owner during a transaction. It's anyone who spreads the seed as he or she goes about their day.

What's incredible about this sower, as we'll see in a moment is that they sow seed everywhere, even in places they know it may not grow. This sower spreads the seed throughout the land, waiting in expectation to see where it

will catch and grow. He spreads the word of God far and wide, reaching into the places others would find bordering on the edge of stupidity. He goes to the ones forgotten, trod down, pushed out, and removed, just as he goes to the ones in the castle, on the throne, in the public eye, and loved by many. The sower does not care where the seed lands because every inch of dirt is an opportunity for growth in God's kingdom.

It's funny, we see a sower sowing his land with seed indiscriminately, and that's the example for us to sow the word of God, but that's not what we do is it? God knows the potential for this seed, yet Christians let up when we feel someone is uninterested or even simply different from ourselves. What if we sought to emulate his extravagant love for the seemingly unreceptive?

This story is called the parable of the sower, however, the sower and the seed are not the focal point - the soil is the focal point of this story. Jesus is getting ready to ask a big question of his listeners, and to us here today, listen to how he explains the soil. He continues in chapter 4 verse 15 of Mark:

15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

So Jesus discusses this first group, the seed that landed on the path and had the birds take it away. Jesus tells us this means there are some people who they hear the message of the Gospel and Satan takes that word that was sown in them, he snatches it away.

Whether you believe it or not, there is someone actively wanting to keep you from believing the message of Jesus. The seed that gets scattered in your life, will be met with scorn and derision within your mind. The excuses for why we can't believe, or why we can't follow come out of no where. Satan has lies that

pervade our thoughts and keep us from fully experiencing what it means to follow God. Lies like:

You've been away from God so long, he doesn't want you anymore.

You are too damaged and unsavable.

This Jesus thing is a made up hoax.

The Bible is too difficult to understand.

It's more fun to sin.

There's got to be more to this Jesus thing than simply believing.

One of satans greatest lies is that we should follow Jesus... tomorrow. This is one I hear often from my middle, high and college students. I'm young, I've got my whole life ahead of me to follow Jesus, I'll do it when I'm older.

They are all lies that rob us of the ability to allow the seed of God to germinate in our hearts. See **Path people are Unable to believe God's message.**

16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

Rocky soil people - believe the message but lose it

Some years ago a woman was attending a women's Bible study in order to learn more about God. She soon realized that the members of her family had a different view of God. They had a different faith. She started responding to the truth she was hearing, and a spiritual battle occurred within her about believing in Jesus. She strongly felt that what she was hearing was true but eventually decided not to believe in Jesus and give herself to Him because she was uncomfortable with the truth that loved ones who never believe in Jesus will go to hell. The fear of persecution and rejection tempted her to reject Jesus and she did. She is just one example of seed cast among the rocks. Lord willing, she may eventually believe and follow Him. We can only pray.

18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Thorn patch people - believe but leave no room in their lives for God

Overcome by materialism

Consumed with life

20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

Good Soil People - Follow Jesus no matter the cost. They listen obey and follow through on what he says.

If only one soil is good, how do we get it? Is it being a good person? If so, good by what standard? Is it by pulling out the weeds in our life? If so, how can you be sure you got the root? Is it by removing the rocks underneath? If so, how can you see down far enough? It can't be any of that. It must be another way

The "soil" (the disciple of Jesus) who is truly good soil, is one that doesn't just receive the Word of God/Kingdom and cognitively understands it, but is one who then takes the seed that was deposited in their life, and then begins to sow it into the lives of those who are around them. Starts living out the missional Kingdom life that Jesus calls each of us to. So not only do you then receive it, you also sow it, and then that is when the harvest truly begins, not only in your own life, but in the life of those around you.

But I have come to understand that if we are truly honest with ourselves and each other, we vacillate between each type of soil. Some times in our lives we have times when we are hard to the things of God, and we want to go our own way. Sometimes in our lives we are shallow and the roots of the Gospel don't seem to penetrate our hearts too deeply. We become religious looking on the outside but the inside is still hard to the things of the Kingdom. Or the Kingdom life gets squeezed out by the concerns of this world, and the riches of it. Or we maybe in a season where the ground of our life has been tilled, worked, and is really fertile and you are just growing and learning and applying the Kingdom of God to all parts of your life and in turn you are sharing the Kingdom in your spheres of influence.

If you've been following Jesus, the surest way to find out the kind of soil you are is to look at the fruit of your life. That's what Jesus tells us to do. The good soil produces a harvest. Not all of us will yield a hundredfold, but all who trust in Jesus yield something. How much is up to him. If you've not yet followed Jesus, the surest way to gain the good soil is to ask him for a new heart. All we

must do is offer our heart as the soil in which he plants his seed. He'll do the rest, which leads us into the deepest truth of this passage.

Galatians 5:22-23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Closing:

Can I be “cultivated” in my life? How correctable am I? How quickly do I repent? Can I self-correct?

It is a question from God to all of us. What kind of soil is our heart made of? When the sower sows his seed, what will the seed find to rest on?

We stand at the end of 2018, and the beginning of 2019. Don't let another year start and end before you get yourself right with God.

1 Corinthians 3:6-8

6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Small Group Questions:

1. Where or to whom do you think God is calling you to sow the seed of the Kingdom of God? How can this community support you as you sow the seed of the Kingdom?
2. What type of soil are you currently? What are some ways that we can cultivate good soil in our own lives and in the lives of each other as a community?
3. What is God saying to you and what are you going to do about it? What is God saying to us as a community and what are we going to do about it?