

SACRED STORIES: *The Parables of Jesus*
The Sower and the Seed | **Matthew 13:1–9**
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Pastor Jeremiah Knoop

Last week we began a summer sermon series through the **parables** of Jesus. We spent some time looking at the day when Jesus quit preaching to the crowds with straightforward truth claims and began telling stories instead. We learned that Jesus had two reasons for speaking in parables: (1) it was an act **divine judgment** on those who rejected truth, and (2) it was an act of **targeted grace** on those who were hungry for the truth. For those who didn't want to hear the truth, God was giving them what they wanted: no more truth. For those who were hungry for the truth, God gave them what they wanted: glorious truths that they would never forget.

Today we are going to look at **Matthew 13:1–9** to see the first parable that Jesus told: *the story of the sower, the seed, and the soil*.

Q. How many of you are (or ever have been) gardeners?

III. Some of you remember the story I told a while back about the time that **one of my friends gave Elizabeth and I a houseplant**. We weren't plant people, but we knew that all living things needs water and light. So, over the next year or so, we diligently cared for this plant: making sure it got plenty of sunlight, giving it a little bit of water every so often. The plant didn't come with instructions on how to properly care for it, and so we just did the best we could. And we seemed to be doing a decent job because, although the plant didn't seem to be growing, it wasn't dying either. Eventually, the day came when our friend came over to visit, and we excitedly showed them the plant that we had managed to keep alive all this time. And do you know what our friend said to us? *"It's fake."* It wasn't real. We hadn't killed it because it was never alive in the first place. *Let the reader understand.*

So, Liz and I don't know much about gardening or farming, but everybody knew about planting in first-century Israel. So the story that Jesus was about to tell would have been very **familiar** to everyone in attendance.

If Liz and I were listening to this story for the first time (as 21st century Americans living in the megacity of Minneapolis), we'd be like, *"Oh, wow. Really? I didn't know that. That's really interesting."* But everybody listening to Jesus that day would have been nodding their head in agreement.

If I was to tell you a story this morning about **rush hour in the Twin Cities**, most of you would know exactly what I was talking about – because it's a normal, everyday reality where you live. The same is true of all the stories that Jesus told. They were normal, everyday realities for His audience.

First-century Israel was a heavily **agricultural society**. Since they didn't have the massive farming equipment that we have today, they had to make their fields manageable to plant and harvest by hand – which means their fields were generally much smaller than what we are accustomed to seeing in our country today. **Their fields** were long and narrow and surrounded by **footpaths** so that the farmers had somewhere to walk when they were planting their crops.

The farmers used **"a broadcasting method"** to sow the seed in the fields. They would grab a handful of seeds and fling them in an arc across the field. The goal was to cover the entire field (even along the edge).

As they scattered their seeds, there were **four different scenarios** for where those seeds might land:

1. **Wayside (4)**: unplowed pathways on the edge of the field which were as hard as concrete. The seeds would either be trampled by the foot traffic or eaten by the birds.
2. **Stony places (5)**: stones that remained hidden just underneath the topsoil. The seed would germinate, and the plant would sprout; but since the roots couldn't go down, all the growth went topside. While this made the plants look extremely healthy for a little while, as soon as the weather turned harsh, the plants would die (6).
3. **Thorns (7)**: parts of the field where the roots of weeds and thorns were buried and hidden beneath the surface. As the plants grew, so did the weeds. And the weeds would block the sunlight and suck up the soil's moisture and nutrients. It was as if they choked the life out of the good plants.
4. **Good soil (8)**: this was the part of the field where the roots could go deep into the earth (*safe from the trampling feet and feeding birds*), where the soil was rich and clean (*free of weeds and thorns*). When the soil was good, the seeds could grow and thrive and give the farmer a remarkable return on his investment. When the Bible talks about a crop yielding "a hundredfold", it's signifying an extraordinary blessing from God.

How does Jesus finish this parable?

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

~ *Matthew 13:9*

What does this mean? It means that He's inviting everybody in the crowd to hear the truth that is hidden in this parable. Everybody is welcome. Everybody is invited. If you have an ear that longs to hear truth, then God has truth to give you here in this story. **But you have to come to Jesus in order to hear it.**

When Jesus was done teaching that day, most of the people went back home, but the disciples (the followers of Jesus) came to Him. And there, as the crowds were walking away, Jesus blessed their ears...with truth. He taught them the hidden truth of the parable so that they were the only ones who truly "heard" (13:18).

Q. So, what did they hear? What did the parable mean?

A. The parable is a lesson about growth.

1. The **seed** is **the word**. "The word of the kingdom" (Matt 13:19); "the word" (Mark 4:14); "the word of God" (Luke 8:11). And each of the four different soils received the same seed. It's not like the seed that landed in the fertile soil was better than the seed that landed on the wayside, and that's why it had better growth. All four locations received the same seed. And since the one location produced an extraordinary harvest, we know that **the seed was good**.
2. There is only one **sower** in this story. It's not like there is a skilled sower who really knows how to plant seeds and an unskilled sower who doesn't know how to plant seeds. All the seeds came from **the same source** and from **the same method**. This means that the growth has nothing to do with the skill or the method of the sower.

Q. Who does the sower represent in this story?

A. He represents anyone who spreads the Word of God. As I **preach** this morning, I am spreading seeds. As you tell your friend at **school** about Jesus, you are spreading seeds. As you share the gospel with your **neighbor** or your **coworker**, you are spreading seeds. As you read the Bible to your **children**, you are spreading seeds. Whoever you are & wherever you are, as you spread the Word of God, you are the sower in this story.

3. We might also note that all of this took place in **the same field**, which means the growth had nothing to do with the location, the environment, or the weather conditions. Every seed received the same amount of sunshine, the same amount of rain, and experienced the same weather conditions. **The external conditions are the same.**

How is it possible that there are Christians who are growing in places like China or northern Nigeria (in the midst of such harsh circumstances)? Because... external circumstances do not prevent the Word from growing in somebody's life.

How often do you point to the external circumstances in your life as an excuse?

- I'd be a better **Christian** if I had better **friends**. *No, you wouldn't.*
- I'd be a better **husband** if I had a better **wife**. *No, you wouldn't.*
- I'd be a better **employee** if I had a better **boss**. *No, you wouldn't.*
- I'd be a better **church member** if I had a better **pastor**. *No, you wouldn't.*

The circumstances in your life are not what prevent you from growing as a Christian. In this parable, the seed is **the same**, the sower is **the same**, the field is **the same** (and so the external circumstances are all **the same**).

So WHY is it that some seeds grow to produce massive harvests, and some seeds never grow at all? What is **the variable** in this story? The answer: **the soil**.

4. **The soil** is a picture of someone's heart.

How do we know this? Look at **verse 19**.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart...
~ *Matthew 13:19*

Where is the word planted? *In a person's heart*. The soil represents the different conditions of a people's hearts when they hear the Word of God.

1. Some hearts are as **hard as concrete** (**19**). For one reason or another, their heart has been so hardened against the truth of God's Word that it no longer has any affect on them. They don't understand it. They don't like it. They don't want it. They outright reject it without ever giving it a chance. And so, instead of the Word taking root in their heart, it gets snatched away by the birds (which is a picture of the wicked one).

How many of you enjoy feeding the birds? When Liz and I were on our honeymoon, we spent a couple nights at a hotel by the beach. I remember waking up one morning, and our balcony was covered with pigeons. Liz was standing in the doorway feeding them. They greedily took all the food she had to offer, and what did they leave in return? Poop!

This is exactly what the wicked one does in the hearts of those who reject the gospel: *he snatches the truth and leaves them with nothing but waste.*

2. Some hearts appear to be receptive but are **extremely shallow** beneath the surface (**20-21**). For a while...they seem to be excited about the Word, and they exhibit all the evidence of spiritual growth: *joining a church, reading their Bible, singing the songs, going on mission trips*. But the Word never took root in their heart, and so as soon as something comes along that threatens their beliefs...their faith dies.

I think this is what we are seeing all over our country today in the **deconstruction** movement: people had an experience with God's Word at some point in their life (e.g., *through their parents, Christian school, Christian camp, youth group, conference...*), and so they lived like a Christian – **for a while** (for a year or two; some for a lifetime), but the Word of God never took root in their heart. And so when they faced their **crisis of faith** (*death of a loved one, betrayal, abandonment, injustice, doubt, unanswered questions...*) their faith died.

3. Some hearts are infested with **worldly distractions** (22).

We also see a lot of this in our American landscape today. We are surrounded by 10 million things **competing for our attention**: *material possessions, endless distractions on our cell phone, unlimited possibilities for hobbies, the pull to make just a little more money, planning for that vacation, pursuing that education, entertainment options everywhere we turn our head, access to global news whenever we want it – not to mention family responsibilities, work responsibilities, community involvement.* We are (by far) the most distracted society in the history of the world.

And Jesus said that when “**the cares of this world and deceitfulness of riches**” take over our heart, they “**choke the word**” so that we become “**unfruitful**” in our Christian life. Because that's what weeds do. They steal the sunlight. They steal the water. They steal the nutrients. And eventually, the plant dies.¹

4. Some hearts are ready and **eager for the truth** (23).

This is the good soil... This is the heart that hasn't been hardened against the Word of God. It's the heart that absorbs the Word deeper than just a surface social level. It's the heart that isn't consumed with endless distractions. It's the heart that loves God. That loves truth. That longs to understand the things of God.

When the Word comes to this heart, it finds a home.

In this kind of heart, the Word of God bears extraordinary fruit.

Summary:

1. **The Word of God is 100% good.** Every word that comes from God is pure and right. God gave us His Word through inspiration of the Holy Spirit – which means we aren't changing the message just because some people don't like it. The farmer didn't change out the seed because it wasn't growing well on the hard soil, stony soil, or the thorny soil – because **there was nothing wrong with the seed.** It was the soil that needed to change, not the seed. Likewise, when the Word of God isn't bearing fruit in someone's life, **it's not a Bible problem**, it's a heart problem.²
2. The sower is **NOT** the one who produces the growth. All the sower can do is spread the seed. Whether or not that seed takes root and bears fruit is totally outside of our control. The same is true for us as Christians (parents, pastors, neighbors, friends): we cannot force spiritual growth in those around us. All we can do is give them the Word... **and pray** (Matt 9:38). We can't force the gospel to grow in hard hearts, but we can pray that God would soften them. We can't force the gospel to grow in shallow or distracted hearts, but we can pray that God would cultivate their hearts and remove whatever is hindering the Word from taking root.

We plant. And we water. *But where does the growth come from?* God (1 Cor 3:7).

So we plant. And we water. And we pray...that God would bring growth.

¹ This is why the author of Hebrews talked about laying aside the weight which so easily ensnares us (Heb 12:2).

² This is why prayer is so important before you spend time in your Bible. Before you go to work. Before I stand behind the pulpit. This is also why songs like “Show Us Christ” are so important: “*Prepare our hearts, O God. Help us to receive. Break the hard and stony ground. Help our unbelief. Plant Your Word down deep in us. Cause it to bear fruit. Open up our ears to hear. Lead us in Your truth.*”