

There are few things I know less about than agriculture, horticulture, botany. If an expert in those areas is said to have a green thumb, mine would be...purple! We had a beautiful bonsai tree at our old house and one day a neighbor came over and, thankfully, said "I don't think your tree is doing very well." I thought it was fine! But sure enough, the tree was under duress and dying from a number of invasive elements, and we were told we had to treat the soil in order to heal it. **We learned that the health of the soil determined the fruitfulness of the tree.** And what is true in agriculture is also true in our relationship with Jesus.

Our hearts are like soil and God wants to plant his word there and bear fruit. But just like my tree, there are many invasive elements, obstacles, that work against it taking root. Perhaps you are dealing with one this morning. As we continue our series called *Succession*, we're going to see the greatest teacher of all time, Jesus, use a parable about agriculture to show us these obstacles so that we can evaluate our own response to God's Word and be prepared for those same obstacles in others as we go out to create successors.

[Luke 8:1-3] Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Ch. 8 starts another transition in the life and ministry of Jesus. It begins what is called the second teaching tour. He continues to preach the Kingdom of God has come in him, but this time it's different. He started his ministry alone. Now he has companions.

Luke tells us the twelve apostles and a group of women whom Jesus healed are traveling with him and supporting him. Luke often highlights women to show Jesus' attitude towards them and their equal partnership in his ministry. This is where Jesus always wanted to get to because these are his successors who will ultimately lead his work when he's gone. This short summary shows **us relationship with Jesus and participation in his mission are inseparable.** These people were united to Jesus by his Word, his call, and his life-changing work in their lives. What follows is time together, intimate presence and community, and from that will come mission.

As Jesus relates with them, he models for them. If you've ever taught anyone to do anything, you know it usually starts with "I do. You watch." They will soon be sent out, but before that, they will learn by watching Jesus do it first. It begins with a lesson to check the soil of their hearts and prepare for the different responses they can expect when they preach the same message.

It's no different for us. Your ministry will be an overflow of your relationship with Jesus, and the fruit in your life will be determined by how your heart responds to God's Word. Will we have the ears to hear?

[Luke 8:4-15] ⁴ And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵ "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And

some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” ⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’ ¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

Jesus is attracting large crowds, but large crowds don't necessarily mean a large following. That was true 2,000 years ago and can be true in a packed church today. When God's Word is preached it demands a response and divides those who respond favorably from those who don't. Jesus used parables to reveal the secrets of God's Kingdom to those who sincerely had open ears and hearts but concealed it from those who didn't.

How many of you have had a “discussion” with someone and you listened to everything, but you heard nothing? You didn't hear because your heart wasn't right, which means you couldn't hear what was really being said. It's the same with parables. For those committed to Jesus, secrets of the Kingdom will be revealed. For those not open to Jesus, they won't be able to hear.

The parable: In those days, a farmer would carry a bag of seed on his shoulder and throw out handfuls as he walked up and down his field. Those seeds would fall in different places, and the soil conditions in each place would determine how that seed performed. Jesus sowed the seed of God's Word and the soil conditions of hearers' hearts resulted in different responses.

Some seeds fall along the path and are walked on or eaten by birds, generating nothing. This first group represents a response that never had a chance to germinate. Satan comes and takes away the word from the hearer's heart before it has a chance to believe and be saved. It is a sobering place to start because it is a reminder there are forces at work in opposition to God's Kingdom, and that opposition is fierce. Jesus says the word is trampled and devoured. Those are the tactics of Satan.

We must always remember that we have an enemy Scripture says prowls around looking for someone to devour, and the best way he can do that is to prevent God's Word from changing someone's heart. There are times when I just can't figure out why something isn't working, people aren't getting along, or I'm not in a good place mentally or emotionally, and then I think “Oh yeah. I have an enemy and he may be active right now.” We are not to fear Satan, for he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. But we must be aware, on guard, and prepared to resist him.

Some other seeds fall on rock, with a thin layer of soil on it that achieve some growth but are ultimately scorched by the sun because it hasn't taken root. Jesus compares that to a shallow faith

that begins joyfully but withers when faced with pressure and persecution. There is a public cost to following Jesus, and some opt out when the heat gets turned up. If you've ever been called a Christian as an accusation, you know how unsettling it can be. Trials can dissolve faith.

Notice Jesus does not say who is saved and who is not, at least for these middle two. That's not the point of his message and it's not something we should try to figure out. The height of spiritual arrogance is claiming to know if someone is saved or not saved. Only God truly knows, so it's really only God's business. Additionally, Jesus is not talking about anyone losing salvation. Romans 8 makes it clear you can't. That's not what Jesus is getting at. He is instructing the disciples on fruitfulness by pointing out obstacles that prevent such a response.

A third group of seeds fell among thorns that grew up with the seed and choked it, preventing mature fruit. Some of the thorny vines in that area can grow six feet tall as and steal nutrients from other plants. Jesus compares that to someone who had an initial response to the word, but nothing comes to complete fruition because other matters crowd out the word's ability to do its cultivating work. This is all about a divided heart, soil trying to nourish many devotions. God's word can't bear fruit when misplaced priorities of security, stuff, and comfort take root in our hearts.

Can you think of a time in our history where those three things seemed threatened? For most Christians, I believe this is the one that demands our greatest attention. This time of great turmoil has the potential to overwhelm our hearts. I was talking to another pastor this week and confessed that, at times, I'm just angry. Sick of it all. And when I'm in that condition, the word of God can get crowded out. What are you allowing to take root in your heart? What is this season exposing?

Finally, some seed falls on good soil, and fruit is the result. An average seed yields a return of 35. Jesus speaks of a hundredfold return. Jesus says what makes for good soil: a heart that holds fast to God's word through a devoted commitment and a faith that perseveres by patiently waiting in hope on God's promises, regardless of life's circumstances. This enables someone to overcome the obstacles of spiritual attack, persecution, and the idols of life. God's word has taken root in their heart and God has produced fruit in their life. This is the soil Jesus is calling us to be.

Check your soil.

Jesus said you can tell a tree by its fruit. Or, as a dad told me yesterday at our Trunk-or-Treat parade where his three boys were sharing one candy bag and I asked if they'd split it equally: "We shall see how much Jesus is in their heart!" If we have ears, hear what Jesus is trying to tell us.

If you are here and don't yet believe the word of God, I say welcome, and keep coming. If you are on a journey don't do it alone. Let us help. And as you leave today, remember that God loves you, Jesus died for you, and he's made it possible to be right with God and have eternal life.

There hasn't been much of a public price to pay for following Jesus in our culture, but that seems to be changing. Chris Pratt, who professes faith in Christ, was just voted worst Chris in Hollywood. The progressive cancel machine was out for him. While the exercise was somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it illustrates a growing divide between the values of the world and the values of the Kingdom of God.

I want to take a minute to talk to the millennials and Gen Z'ers. Baby Boomers and even Gen-Xers like myself didn't grow up with a great divide. But for you, growing up basically in a post-Christian America, you have faced the labels hater, phobic, denier, misogynist, and faced being shunned, castigated, or isolated if you hold to your biblical beliefs. I can only imagine the pain, grief, fear, and loneliness you face. I want you to know I pray for you. We should all be praying for our younger members. And I want to encourage you to really learn why we believe what we believe, be one another's loving and accepting community, spur on one another, and keep going because your generations desperately need you to be loving truth tellers for them. And that goes for all of us. If we continue down this path and become less and less popular, we'll need each other to stay the course and allow God to produce fruit in our lives.

God's word being crowded out is a gradual process. That's why it's so important to ask what is taking root in your heart. Normally, this would be a great time to talk about materialism and pace of life, but I believe the biggest obstacle Christians face today is fear. Fear and faith are opposites and fear will eat you up. It is a thorny vine that will consume your heart and move you far away from God. It's why he tells us over and over again in Scripture to fear not because he's with us. Election: We're pretty sure the nation will go to hell if the other guy wins. Be an informed voter but remember that we are citizens of God's Kingdom first, and nothing will tear that down for all of eternity. We live in fear of Covid. Yes, we should be wise in how go about our lives, but whatever Covid may do to us, including death, has been overcome by Jesus. His promises are true and your eternity is secure. The peace beyond understanding that God's word says is available to us is true! Give him your fear. Confess your anxiety. He is faithful and he cares for you and he wants to free you from the destructive thorns of fear.

If you find the soil of your heart is good, thank God because it is only by his grace. We need you to be an example to the rest of us, to show us how to hold fast to God's Word and live in hope. Let the fruit of your life produce fruit in others. Find a successor. And if you want the soil of your heart to be good, look back at VV1-3 and be reminded to stay close to Jesus who nourishes it. He's miracle grow! He will bear fruit.

You sow. God will grow.

Jesus sowed the word of God and passes that mission to us. God's succession plan calls us to sow and leave the results up to him. Some will reject it outright. I was working on a business deal many years back and one of the guys I was working with suggested I do something that violated my conscience. I told him I couldn't do that because of my faith in Jesus. That was followed by a long pause that seemed to last about six days, followed by a drawn out "Ok". I sowed. The soil of his heart wasn't ready, but that was God's business. You sow. God will grow.

You may sow among the second and third soils. They may not be ready. They may be working through persecution or priority, but you sow. It is easy to get discouraged when you are in the midst of these soils. Current statistics say the Covid squeeze has caused 25% to leave church. That is painful and can cause us to check out, particularly after an already challenging couple years for our church.

But God is not done yet. He is on the move globally and is on the move at Fellowship. In God's providence this passage was on the day we got to hear Troy's story. It's the first of eight Sundays with baptisms. But it doesn't stop there. There are others coming to faith, newcomers interested in joining our family and seeing what God is up to at Fellowship, an increasing spiritual sensitivity to many I talk to, and increased interest in their God-given purpose, and a growing number of one-on-one discipleship relationships are forming. God's succession plan is at work. He is on the move at Fellowship. There is good soil that is eager to be fed with the word of God. You sow. God will grow. Don't lose hope. Don't give up. Draw near to him in relationship. Let him cultivate the soil of your hearts, bear fruit in our lives, and send you out to produce fruit in others.