

"The Right Kind of Dirt"
Matthew 13:1-23
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"Until I was 17, I went to church because my parents went to church. But I began to make some choices with my buddies that were not right. It was then that I rededicated my life to the Lord. Ever since then, I fall on my face and get back up, get on my knees, and confess, and keep on trying to live for Jesus."

That is the testimony of Aaron Rodgers, the NFL quarterback, or I should say it *was* his testimony 15 years ago. Rodgers no longer considers himself religious or Christian. He prefers to focus on universal love and spiritual experiences, and uses ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic brew from the Amazon Rainforest.

Now, I don't know about ayahuasca, but Aaron illustrates something we face in the church today. What about the people who *used* to be Christians? What about those who at one time professed faith in Jesus, but now have little interest in following Him, or now say they have "deconstructed" and boldly proclaim they are no longer Christian?

I am not talking about people who just are not quite as involved in church as they used to be. I think of Kelly, a gal I knew back in college, who was very active in our Christian fellowship group. We were in dozens of prayer meetings together, and sometimes Kelly would even pray in tongues. But about 10 years after college, she was a lesbian, English professor who insisted she was an atheist. And the hard truth is that almost everyone in this room knows someone like Kelly, a person who at one time seemed to be a devout Christian but now wants nothing to do with the Lord and doesn't even believe in God. Why does this happen? What is going on with these people?

In the New Testament church some who had been part of the fellowship turned against Christianity. For example, in **1 Timothy 5:15** referring to younger widows in the church, Paul says **Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.** And of course, there is Judas, one of the 12 men chosen by Jesus, who for three years appeared to be a loyal disciple, but then betrayed Jesus to those who would kill Him. What is going

on when someone appears to go from being a Christian to not being a Christian?

Folks, these are tough questions. But I find our text today is helpful. Our journey through Matthew brings us to chapter 13:1-23. This is a story often called the parable of the Sower or Farmer, but really it is a story about different types of soil. Now a story about dirt may not seem very exciting, but I think the Lord has important things to say to us through this passage. Let's pause and pray we would hear and apply God's Word today.

In verses 3-9, Jesus tells about a farmer who was planting seed. Nancy has two brothers who grow sugar beets and grain in Minnesota's Red River Valley. They have planting machinery that costs tens of thousands of dollars. This farm has a bag with seeds in it. **Matthew 13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.** Feeding the birds was not the goal.

Matthew 13:5,6 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. These plants initially grow but quickly die.

Matthew 13:7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. These plants grow but eventually die. Yet the farmer is not a failure. **Matthew 13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.**

Apparently in first century Israel a yield of hundred times the seed planted was very good, while 30 times was a bit slim. Some of the good dirt was better than other good dirt. The point of this story is that we have one farmer doing his work. The seed he is planting is all the same. What determines whether or not there is a crop or how good the crop is, is the *soil* in which the seed is planted.

That really has not changed in 2000+ years. Nancy's brothers farm in the Red River Valley

because the black dirt there is some of the richest soil in the world. No one would make money trying to grow sugar beets or wheat on the Iron Range. Gardeners spend a lot of time and energy enriching the soil, because they know the better the soil, the better the results. But Jesus doesn't tell us this story to help gardeners. He is illustrating a spiritual truth that is relevant and important for us today.

In verses 10-17, Jesus explains why He chooses to teach through these parables, which some of His audiences were finding confusing. My summary is that Jesus uses parables because these stories make the truth more clear to those really seeking the truth. Yet parables also make things less clear and more confusing to those not interested in the truth. My hope is that you really want to learn the truth. If not, you might leave today feeling confused.

So, what is the meaning of Jesus' story. Well, there is no need to guess, because Jesus gives a rather detailed explanation to His disciples and for us. He does not tell us specifically who the farmer is. The farmer may represent Jesus or the Holy Spirit, or any Christian proclaiming God's Word. The seed represents God's Word, the message of Jesus' kingdom, the gospel. The soils represent four different responses people have to the great news about Jesus. These are four different responses we see from people today.

First are those who have no interest in the gospel. **Matthew 13:19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.** Now, these folks are not necessarily antagonistic to God's Word. They are not interested because they don't understand the gospel. It seems to go in one ear and out the other, not making any connection in between.

Jesus' analogy is very good. Just as the seed on the path stays on the surface and never gets into the soil where it can grow God's Word stays on the surface for these folks. It never penetrates into their hearts or even minds. To some extent being hard-hearted is the natural condition of human beings. Apart from Jesus, Paul says (Ephesians 2:1) we were dead in our trespasses and sins.

Yet, here Jesus points to another contributing factor, the evil one, Satan, who snatches away the seed of truth. That is what Paul is speaking of in **2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** Our natural, fallen condition, combined with the work of demonic forces, results in **1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.** Often people don't embrace the gospel because it just doesn't make sense to them. Their lives are like the hard path where the seeds cannot grow.

Now, I know a lot of people that seem to fall into this category. You likely know some of them. Often those of us who've been forgiven through Jesus, who have found meaning and hope in our lives, who've experienced God's healing in our souls and maybe even bodies, find it difficult to understand how many folks can be so apathetic toward the great news of Jesus.

If a doctor tells a woman with cancer that he has found a cure for her disease, it would be crazy for the woman to say, "Thank you but I am not interested." Likewise, when Jesus Christ offers a cure for the cancer of your soul, it seems crazy someone doesn't want to *at least learn about it.*

Yet, in this story Jesus tells us why that happens. These people don't understand the gospel or Christianity. It doesn't mean anything to them. So, it is not surprising when they have no interest in listening to anyone tell them about Jesus and the salvation He provides.

Now, many of us have dear family members and close friends who fit this description. This is their condition. Do not be discouraged. Jesus doesn't address this issue in the parable, but someone who is like the hard path doesn't have to stay that way. God's Spirit is in the business of plowing up those hard paths, softening people's hearts, opening their eyes and making them ready to receive God's Word.

There are countless Christians who are devout followers of Jesus who had one time had no interest in the gospel. The Apostle Paul was one of those people. After Jesus' resurrection, Paul

had no interest in this Christianity stuff. It made no sense to him. He, as a Jewish Pharisee, was the one faithfully serving God, he thought.

But as he was traveling to the city of Damascus one day, God opened his spiritual eyes and blinded his physical eyes. He came face to face with the risen Jesus and embraced Him as Savior and Lord. If you have family members and friends who are like the hard path, pray God would work in their lives to make them receptive to the truth of the gospel. It is not too late.

Second are those with a temporary faith. **Matthew 13:20-21 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the work, immediately he falls away.**

Some folks find these verses confusing, but Jesus is speaking of a hard reality. The picture He gives us is someone who hears the gospel and is excited about Christianity, or at least what he/she thinks is Christianity. But that excitement lasts only for a short time, and then they seem to have no interest in anything related to Jesus Christ. Again, I have known people like that and many of you have as well. Individuals have sat in my office, prayed, asking Jesus to be their Savior and yet within a few months they seem to have zero interest in anything Christian. Now, I am not in the position to judge if they are the rocky ground Jesus is talking about, yet it appears they could be.

Let's explore this category a little more. People wonder, is Jesus describing people who actually become Christians by receiving Jesus Christ as their Savior? No, I don't think so. Jesus says the reason this person's faith lasts only a short time is because "He has no root." There is no connection to what is needed to nourish and sustain life, or, to put it in theological terms, there is no connection to the Holy Spirit. Thus, the faith was never real, never genuine and this person was never truly a believer in Jesus Christ.

But why would they receive the Word with joy? Why would do people claim to believe in Jesus if they really don't? There are a number of reasons why that might happen. The most common is when people believe *about* Jesus, but do not

believe *in* Him. They believe historical facts about Jesus, but don't trust in Him for salvation. You might say they believe with their head, but not their heart. There is intellectual belief, but no Biblical faith, not a genuine faith in Jesus.

Others give an outward profession of faith in Jesus, not because they really trust in Him, but because they want to *please* someone else. A teenager may go forward to receive Jesus at a youth rally. But she does this basically because some friends have gone forward. I have seen people make a profession of faith, not because it is something they wanted to do, but it is something their spouse or parents or girlfriend wanted them to do.

Numerous times a Christian girl has said, "I'm sorry, I cannot date or marry you because you are not a Christian." The fellow responds, "Okay, I will be a Christian. What do I need to do?" And often a prayer to receive Jesus follows, but it does not flow from genuine faith. Or you might say it is a faith with no root. And when troubles come, or just something more interesting comes along, maybe another gal, they forget all about their Christianity.

The temporary faith Jesus is describing is not true faith at all. These are the same type of people that the Apostle John speaks of in 1 John 2. Folks who were once part of the church, had left and now opposed the gospel. John says **1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.** Temporary faith is not real faith. It never was real faith.

Third are those who find other things more important than Jesus. **Matthew 13:22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.** This verse is not easy to understand. What is the difference between these folks and the ones we just talked about?

Well, for one thing it seems to be a much slower process than what Jesus was talking about with the rocky soil. That type of faith popped up quickly and disappeared just as quickly. Here

Jesus seems to be speaking of a much slower process where the faith seems to fade away as other things become more important. Do these people end up saved and getting to heaven? Were they genuine Christians to start with?

Well, I am not sure. Bible scholars disagree. Some say these are true Christians who simply get their priorities wrong and as a result are not as godly or fruitful as they should be. Others say, “No, John 15 says the branches that don’t bear fruit are thrown away and burned.” People who demonstrate zero evidence of being born again and indwelled by the Holy Spirit are not truly Christians and never really were. They have the temporary faith we talked about a few minutes ago.

Friends, I am not sure who is right, though. What I do know is that “the cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches” keep many folks from following the Lord as they should. Some of these may not be true believers in Jesus. Others are individuals who I am confident are genuine Christians, but who have some mixed-up priorities.

My application here is very simple. If you are allowing “the cares of the world, or those deceitful riches” to keep you from following Jesus, if you are treating other things such as your job, money, house, sports, hobbies, even our friends or family as more important than Jesus, it is time to change. Those other things are not wrong in themselves. But if not kept in proper perspective they will either prevent real faith from ever taking root in your soul, or they will make the faith you do have weak and anemic. Don’t be like the soil that was full of thorns.

The fourth response describes those transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Matthew 13:23 As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”** This is describing those who are truly trusting and following Jesus.

One thing to note is that the good soil can still produce different yields. We need to be careful not to judge those who we think are less fruitful than others. Many of the differences we see between various Christians are not because some

people are more godly, but simply because the Lord calls each of us to different roles. In football, a running back will likely score more touchdowns than a left tackle, but that doesn’t mean he is a better player.

In the church, the fact someone seems to accomplish more in ministry doesn’t mean he/she is a better Christian. Oh yes, some Christians are more mature in their faith than others. Some have a more Christ-like character. Sometimes that does mean God will use them in greater ways. But please don’t assume that just because someone can point to greater accomplishments in ministry he or she is more pleasing to God than someone else.

Jesus says that whatever the yield, as long as the soil produces a crop, it is good soil. As long as a person is trusting and following Jesus, he/she is a Christian and is promised eternal life. It is up to God how He will use this person to accomplish His work. All of us should want to be like this soil.

Friends, the question I have for you today is fairly obvious. What type of dirt are you? What type of soil in Jesus’ story represents your life? Maybe you are like the hardened path and have never really understood what this Christianity stuff is all about. Oh, you have gone to church and heard sermons, but it just doesn’t connect with your life. If that is the boat you are in, I encourage you to pray and ask the Lord to help you understand the gospel. Ask Him to open your spiritual eyes so that you can embrace Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. I believe He will answer that prayer.

Or perhaps you are like the rocky soil. At one time you made a profession of faith in Jesus, but now you realize you were just going through the motions. Maybe you repeated a prayer someone asked you to pray, or you went forward in a meeting, or maybe you even got baptized, but you never really trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Friends, it is not too late. As God enables, I encourage you to turn to Jesus Christ today.

Or maybe you are like the thorny ground. If I asked, you would say, “Yes, I am a believer in Jesus. I am a Christian.” But if you are honest, you will also admit that your Christianity is not really near the top of your priority list. So many other things consume your time and energy, and you just don’t have a lot left for the Lord. Our faith is

being choked out by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. Again, if that describes you, *it is not too late*. Ask God to help you start cutting away at some of those thorns, those other things and begin getting your priorities in line with what God desires. It is not always easy to do that, but you will be glad you did.

And friends, if you are like the good soil, producing a crop. If you are good dirt, living for the Lord, that is wonderful. Just praise God for that today. Remember it is all of grace. You have nothing about which to boast, but you have every reason to give praise to God. Let's do that now as we sing.