

“The Seed & the Soil”

Isaiah 1:10-20; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

August 7, 2022

One of the great joys of my life is being a pastor. It’s funny, after about seven years into ministry, I thought I wanted out. But it was during that dark and difficult time that I encountered some wonderful Christians. These individuals helped me see around the circumstances and returned me to the joy of ministry. It was during that time that I realized that was one of the greatest blessings of being a pastor. Being around honest-to-goodness Christians is bound to take your breath away with their acts of kindness, mercy and love.

Christians, the real ones, are amazing. But what’s interesting to me is how some people can hear the same words on Sunday, read the same pages of the same Bible and yet come out with completely different takes on faith in Jesus Christ.

I remember early in ministry taking the call of a woman who was looking to know more about Jesus. I invited her to the church, had a long talk with her, listened to her spiritual journey. This woman, it turned out, had dabbled in wicca for a while. But she wanted to know more about Jesus because she was feeling a calling in her life to Him.

This woman did everything I suggested. She started reading her Bible, she came to church and to Sunday school, heck, she even spent some weeks attending the men’s weekly prayer time. It was so encouraging to see someone take to all the many facets of the church. I. was too new to ministry at the time to see the warning signs.

Eventually, her enthusiasm waned. She stopped coming to the prayer time, then Sunday school and finally, worship. I ran into her months after she’d stopped coming and had one of those awkward conversations with her about why she’d stopped coming. According to her, our people were nice, she was learning some things but, ultimately, she decided that a better use of her time was reiki or some other spiritual practice.

I met another man and his family. They were down on their luck to say the least. At the time, we were able to help them – got them a place to stay and helped them get back on their feet. They came to church quite actively for a time but then, well, things happened. Work, family, the cares of the world all bore down on these folks until they disappeared into the ether.

I don’t know how their stories turn out. Just because I encountered them in a challenging time doesn’t mean that it’ll always be like that for them. It could very easily be the case that their abortive starts at my church were just the first steps in their pathway to full discipleship in Jesus Christ. That’s the great thing about the Holy Spirit – He stirs where and when He will. That is to say that while these people were good examples of bad soil at the time I encountered them, there’s no reason to believe or assume they end up like that. God works with people at a unique pace for us all, if we’re honest about it. And, oftentimes spiritual growth is a two step forward, one step backwards kind of process.

You see, this parable gives us a way to view people like that woman and that couple. People who are, on one hand, involved with the Word then, over time, they scatter away.

Jesus’ parable of the sower is a means by which Jesus speaks a revelatory word to those gathered around Him that day. That particular day, Jesus was outside on a boat on the sea of Galilee. The water would’ve provided excellent acoustics for his talk delivered to an audience that likely sat on the ground. Then, he begins teaching in parables

Why did Jesus teach in parables? On the one hand, he did so as with a keen knowledge of human behavior. We tend to remember stories far longer than we do propositional data. Further, we are able to extract deeper and more profound meaning from stories over time. Look around today and you’ll see businesses embrace the truth of that as they hire Chief Storytelling Officers. This isn’t someone to tell bedtime stories, rather it’s a marketing person who is tasked with telling the company’ story in a manner that encourages greater sales.

So, Jesus teaches in parables because they allow for greater and deeper knowledge to come through. But, as Jesus tells us in the parable of the sower, he also speaks in parables for another reason.

The parables are employed as the means by which faith hears the deeper truths of Jesus Christ while the uninitiated so to speak, hear only simple, undiscernible stories. That is to that Jesus use of parables is revelatory in that with the ears of faith, the parables will be rightly discerned but with the ears of doubt and unbelief, little will be understood.

To really get this, you need to go back to Isaiah 6. There in that great chapter that begins with the seraphim and cherubim and Isaiah scream out, "Here I am!" God reveals this: "*Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.*"

That's right. Isaiah was told to go out and proclaim the coming day of the Lord but, as he does so, he does so with the knowledge that the more unbelievers hear this, the less likely they are to believe. It's a special message for special people, just as Jesus' parable of the sower is.

But thankfully, we are given the means by which to interpret this sermon. Jesus tells us very clearly how to do so. The parable is ultimately about hearts and how they will react to the scattering of the seed.

And that should be our first concern. Who is the sower?

On the one hand, the sower can be anyone sharing the Word of God. But, ultimately, in the parable, the sower is none other than Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God.

He's the one out sharing the Word through us in the power of the Holy Spirit so he's the one that is rightfully called the sower.

Imagine that, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of the Most High God is concerned with sharing the Good News. To that end, Jesus displays the love of God. And notice how lavish is the scattering of the seed. While this commodity is precious, it isn't limited. And, when we think about that literally, that's true. There are Bibles everywhere in America, in churches, in homes, in hotels, in hospitals. The Word of God is ubiquitous.

But it's reception as the word of God is not. In fact, if we're to take the mathematics of the parable, the Word of God fails to reach maturity in a full 75% of the soils it lands upon.

But that doesn't prevent Jesus from scattering the seed prodigiously just as we should. There should be no one we are intimidated from sharing the Gospel with, it's just that important. One of the great crises of the modern church is just how little evangelism is going on. We're content with sharing our beliefs with other Christians but seldomly do you find pastors or laypeople actively out spreading the seed, so to speak. I don't want to get off on a tangent but, when we think about spreading the seed, we've got to think about it in terms of our fruitfulness. That is, if we're Christians, we're bearing fruit. Well, one of the fruits we carry with us is the joy that comes from sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But, sometimes, when we're sharing the Good news, it's going to fall onto different types of soil. There are all kinds of hearts, aren't there? Since this is a parable primarily about the nature of our hearts, it isn't surprising that sometimes the word falls in places that it can't naturally spring up.

The first type of these soils is the hard pathway. Jewish farming at the time didn't happen in big, open fields. There weren't acres and acres of arable soil in the rocky, arid terrain. There were just strips of arable land and those would be sown. Right alongside them joining one strip of farmable land to another were pathways. They're not like roads but they do get hard.

In our old house before they built it up, there was a pathway down to the pool through an uncleared area. But every spring, amid the growing grasses, a pathway would form. All those people walking to the pool formed it. It got trampled down from all the people going to the pool. I imagine that path when I think of these walkways upon which the first of our sower's seed lands.

This ground is so hard pressed and compact that the seed simply can't even penetrate the ground. This allows birds to come and gobble up the seed before it can begin to take root.

Jesus explains this in the explication as being those who don't understand the Word.

O what a shame that some aren't blessed to understand this Word. But it's true. The thing is much of society is progressing in such a way to make belief in the Word of God a harder thing. As faith has been excluded from so many areas of life, we've allowed the secular world to grow up around us with careful and understanding apathy to our Lord. The problem is that Empires always stand against Jesus because they claim and hope for our allegiance over and above that of our king.

So much of our educational system forces people intellectually away from faith. Remember, faith, thanks to Kant, isn't reliable and thus it is to be eliminated from the field in any intellectual pursuit. That's the legacy

of Kant and the academy and it's the reason why faith isn't given a level-playing field in quote-unquote intellectual quarters.

We see people like this, don't we? They've got an ideology that is anti-faith and they stick to their guns pretty hard. I've got friends just like this and it makes me sad. They are so hostile towards anything religious that to speak to them of the Bible is sure to elicit a negative, condemnatory response. The worst part of it all is that the most pernicious atheists were brought up in hyper religious households. A funny coincidence, don't you think? In fact, I think the tendency goes on from there. Some of the most ardent anti-Christian voices in academia were raised in religious households. That isn't to say moderation is necessary with faith. It is however to say that one's faith should never be employed as the means to actively hate other people.

The next type of soil is just shallow. Much of the land in this region would've been like this. A thin layer of dirt laying on top of rock. This kind of soil allows the seed to penetrate and begin growing but then, needing water and finding none by the rock, it withers and dies. This is the type of soil that woman was I mentioned in the beginning of the sermon. At the time, at least. The word sprang up fast and she grew. But as the faith became more challenging, there were still hardened objections to faith that prevented her from drawing upon that living water of Jesus Christ we all so desperately need for our faith lives.

Again, there are lots of people like this. We likely will see this tendency in churches as well. People who come for a time, very excitedly sometimes, only to see them wither away as the seasons move forward. I always find this type of person especially sad. What prevents them from getting to know Jesus Christ? What stops them from learning the joy of His salvation?

But the ones I think are most like we encounter are the ones where the seed falls in among the weeds. You know, the one where Jesus says that the cares of the world grow up around them and cut them off from the nutrients and water?

I meet a lot of people like this, don't you? You know the type, there's always something more important than church. Let me get through with kids sports or the next promotion or get over this crisis. It's always something that is preventing them from becoming faithful.

The cares of this world can bear down on us all from time-to-time. As Jesus reminds us, the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous alike and that's just the way things go in this world broken by human sin.

The final seed falls on what we all hope to be – good soil. But what is good soil. It's a heart that is in a active relationship with Jesus Christ. What does that look like?

Well, maybe a better way to come at it is to look at what it doesn't look like. To begin with, if the only time that you're going to think about Jesus Christ is right now until next week this same time, let me just say this, that's some really rocky soil right there, isn't it?

No, a relationship with Jesus Christ is an active, daily dedication to knowing your Lord and Savior savingly and completely through knowledge of his Word, through prayer and meditation and through active service in Christ's church.

That's the kind of relationship that bears fruit in this world. That's the kind of faith that inspires pastors and laypeople alike.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.