

Praying for Fruitfulness

Luke 8:1-21

Over the years, Teresa and I have tried our hand at gardening with only limited success. It began with a few rows of corn in Iowa, which the raccoons always seemed to find a few days before harvest. Little jerk bandits.

One thing that became very apparent is that a bountiful harvest doesn't just happen. It takes good soil. And good soil takes a lot of preparation, and a lot of work. Sometimes you have to prepare your soil weeks, even months before the seeds go into the ground.

You have to remove weeds and other things that are growing in the soil where you want to plant, otherwise it will compete for nutrients and choke out your tender new plants. You might have to remove roots and rocks. You might have to till the soil.

Things that grew well in Oklahoma don't grow so easily in our backyard here, even though we were only three hours away. That's because the soil is different.

Even once the seeds are planted, the cultivation of the soil doesn't stop. You have to weed. You have to water. You have to mulch. You have to make further amendments. You do all of this because of one simple principle: the better your soil, the better your fruit.

Our calling as Christians and as a church is to plant seeds. We are to plant seeds of the good news of Jesus. Those seeds will fall on all types of soil, some good, some bad, and a lot of in-between.

Like any farmer planting a crop, our hope, our prayer is to plant good seed in good soil.

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a parable, that's an earthly with a heavenly meaning. Jesus gives us a snapshot of everyday life that shows something about eternal life.

This parable is commonly known as the parable of the sower, although, as we dig into this text, (pun intended) we find that it's really a story about the soil. It's a story about the quality of dirt. What is the difference between fruitful soil and bad soil? What dirt is good for growing stuff and what dirt isn't?

And what can we do to prepare the soil? In fact, in Jesus' story the farmer, the one sowing the seed seemingly has no control over the soils at all.

So, put on your gardening gloves, and let's dig into this passage. Mt. 13 beginning with verse 3:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a

crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

10 The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

11 He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables:

*“Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

(Vss. 14-17 explain how all of this fulfills a prophecy made centuries before by Isaiah)

18 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

I. The Sower and the Seed

The focus of this passage is on the soil, but we should take note of a couple things about the sower and the seed. Jesus never identifies the sower, even in his explanation. He’s mentioned in the first verse of the story, and then he isn’t brought up again. However, Jesus clearly tells us what the sower is sowing. The seed is the word of God, what Jesus in vs. 10 calls, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God.” These secrets come only from the revealed word of God. This is the truth of Scripture, the knowledge of the Gospel.

The sower could be Jesus as he traveled preaching and teaching. It could be the disciples as Jesus sends them out. It could be preachers and teachers today as they share the good news of Jesus. It could be your mom or dad, or your grandmother. It could be your friend. Whoever shared the good news of Jesus with you is the sower in your life. The sower is you as you share a cup of coffee and the good news with a friend, or as you talk shop and truth with a coworker. Anyone who plants the seed is the sower.

The sower is not the focus of this story, but he is essential. Without the sower, the seed never gets to the soil. Someone has to share the good news to get it into someone’s heart. I’m thankful for all the sowers out there. Every word of truth you speak is seed sown. Everytime

you talk about what Jesus has done in your life, you are planting a seed. Everyone one of you who shares your faith is a sower. If you don't share it, no seed is sown.

The seed can be sown in all sorts of ways. Certainly, it is spread through preachers and Bible teachers and small group leaders, but seeds are also planted while you work out at the gym, or in the lunchroom at school. You can plants seeds at the office, over a piece of pizza at Post Game, or walking through the woods on the way to your tree stand.

There is a popular saying, "Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." It's clever. It makes a point. It is absolutely false. You cannot preach the gospel without words. It is not a choice between speaking it or living it. It takes both our words and actions to share the good news of Jesus. If you never use words to connect your acts of love to the truth of Jesus, then you're nothing but a nice guy, a generous girl.

Living the good news in your life breaks up the soil. It pulls weeds. It fertilizes and waters. Every act of love furrows a heart to receive the good news of Jesus. But without words of truth, there is no seed. It is the very nature of the seed to bear fruit, to grow, to spread, but if you never sow the seed, there is no fruitfulness. That saying would be much better if it said, "Live the gospel. Use words as necessary."

II. The Soil

As important as the sower and the seed are, this really is a parable about the soils, and again Jesus identifies for us exactly what the soil represents. It is the heart of the person upon which the truth of God's word falls.

The soil of every heart is different. It is conditioned by different things. It has been either tilled or packed down by past experiences. It has been affected by our various hurts and loves. The quality of our soil is determined by the choices we have repeatedly made. What grows easily in one heart might not grow at all in another.

The first thing we see here in Jesus' explanation is that unfruitful soil isn't the fault of the seed or the sower. The seed and the sower are the same each time. Each and every heart receives the same word. They are exposed to the same truth. This first soil didn't get a lesser quality seed than the last soil. It wasn't planted by a less qualified farmer. A seed doesn't care who plants it; only where it's planted.

If there is no fruitfulness in your life, don't blame the seed or the sower. We like to blame the preacher, we like to blame the teacher, we like to blame the church, when the real problem is in the condition of our own heart. The lack of fruitfulness here isn't because of a bad sower or bad seed. It's because the conditions of our heart aren't right.

A. Hard soil

The first soil condition we see is the hard soil. This soil is so hard and impenetrable that a seed never has a chance to take root. The seeds are no better off than if they had fallen on concrete or a rocky outcropping somewhere.

Farms in 1st Century Israel weren't vast acreages, but rather tiny plots with foot paths in between for the workers to walk on. These paths weren't tilled and they would become packed down hard as a rock. Any seed that fell there didn't stand a chance. It didn't matter what kind of seed it was. It didn't matter who planted it.

This hard packed soil represent a hard heart. Vs. 12 says, *"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."* This is a heart that has hardened itself to the things of God. It is impervious to the word of God. It has become calloused by constantly rebelling against the things of God. This is a heart that has been hardened by sin's deceitfulness and calcified in its love of untruth. It's not that they can't hear the truth of the word, but they won't listen.

There are some people that it doesn't matter what you say or how you say it, they're just not having it. You can listen with compassion, but they won't care. You can explain with patience, but they won't listen. You can love them, and they will only resent you for it.

Jesus says they hear the word, but it can't penetrate their heart. This is the spiritual equivalent of sticking their fingers in their ears and yelling, "Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, I can't hear you."

B. Shallow Soil

The next soil we see is the shallow soil. This is soil that gives every appearance of being good, fruitful soil. The problem is there is no depth. Living here in the Ozarks, you may have had this experience. You pick out a spot that will be great for a garden. You grab your rototiller or your shovel and you stick it into the soil and you don't get two inches before you hit rock. Some of these rocks can be huge. It's the bane of every southern Missouri gardener.

It's even worse in Israel. There are many places where the bedrock rises to the surface, and only the thinnest layer of dirt covers solid rock. You can't plow it, dig it, break it up. It is solid rock. Now this solid bedrock gets covered over with a thin layer of dirt and it looks just like the good soil next to it. You would never know the difference by looking.

It receives the seed readily and it sprouts quickly. The problem is that there is no depth. There's no room for the roots to grow. When the heat of the dry season beats down on these fledgling plants, they quickly wither. They can find no nutrients to sustain them.

This rocky soil represents the shallow heart. These are people who give every indication of an enthusiastic response. But listen to what Jesus says in verse 13, *"Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root."* They receive it with joy. There is gladness and rejoicing and enthusiasm. This is the person who responds at the end

of the sermon, and they are just bubbling over with happiness. They want to do cartwheels down the aisle. They go to Men's Encounter or Ashes to Beauty, and they respond initially with great gusto.

They begin their new life in Christ with so much passion and energy. They tell everyone at work. They Facebook all their friends. They come to church and they sing songs with passion. They are just busting at the seams with their enthusiasm for Jesus.

But they are like spiritual bottle rockets. They sparkle and whistle for a short time, they burst in a great colorful array, and poof, they're gone. Next thing you know, they've dumped God, they've dumped church, they're off pursuing something else, and sometimes this change seems to happen almost overnight. And we wonder what happened. They seemed like such good soil.

Jesus tells us they have no depth. No room in their hearts for roots to grow. Vs. 13 continues, *"They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."* The rocky heart is all for Jesus as long as things are going good. For them Jesus is all about making their life better. As long as they are healthy and happy and the bills are paid, and the relationships are going good, then they are all in love with Jesus. However, when the hard times hit; when they face difficulties; when their devotion to Jesus is tested, they bail.

They want a Jesus who is going to give them their best life now, not a Savior who is going to cultivate them for eternity. Know this, Jesus is more concerned about your character than he is your comfort. Jesus is calling you to be fruitful. He didn't die on the cross to pay your bills, help you find your prince charming, or get you the perfect job. He died to make you holy and be the Lord of your life.

His will for your life is that you will be fruitful, not that you have a nice house and a nice car, and a cushy life. And once people figure out that Jesus isn't going to be their cosmic vending machine, they won't last. They have no depth of heart.

3. Crowded Soil

The third type of soil Jesus discusses is the crowded soil. There's too many weeds and other stuff growing in this ground for new plants to thrive. These other things hog all the sunshine and steal all the nutrients. This is the person Jesus talks about in verse 14, *"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."*

This soil represents the crowded heart, the distracted heart. This is the heart that so crowded with other things, it has no room for Jesus.

We might think we can be all about Jesus, and all about our careers, and all about our families and all about our hobbies, but Jesus says that our hearts only have enough room for one

number one thing. If our relationship with Jesus isn't the number one thing we're growing in our hearts, then all of these other things will choke it out.

These are the people who are perfectly alright with Jesus. They believe in him. They think church is a good idea. They believe the Bible is true, and they will give it all the attention it deserves as soon as they're done with school, as soon as they get that promotion, as soon as they get the kids raised, as soon as we retire, as soon as... There is always something else on the list. Jesus keeps getting put behind one thing and then another. After a while, his word is choked out entirely. Is Jesus competing with anything in your heart?

4. Fruitful Soil

The final soil Jesus the seed falls upon is the good soil, the fruitful soil. This is the soil that receives the word. It sprouts. It grows. It puts down roots. It grows some more. And then it bears fruit.

The good soil is the fruitful heart? It's simply this- it is the heart that both hears the word and does it. The focus of this whole passage is on listening- hearing the word with the intention of doing what it says. When Jesus explains the good soil down in verse 22, he says it is the heart that both *"hears the word and understands it."*

We all know how to how to hear someone without actually listening. Every husband has this as a superpower, especially when we're watching our favorite sport or doing our favorite hobby? Wives, know this, anything you tell us or ask us while we're watching the game, the race, or while we're fishing or golfing, or whatever, is as good as not having said anything. We hear you, but all we're really hearing is Charlie Brown's teacher. Why? Because our mind is somewhere else. Our heart is focused on something else.

But to actually listen means you get it. A connection is made. It's that "A-ha" moment. A revelation of insight where something clicks and we understand some important truth and we realize that something in our lives has to change. We have to do something different.

a. A - Awakening

I love how Kyle Idleman defines AHA in his book AHA. AHA is Awakening, Honesty, and Action. Awakening comes when we realize an important truth for first time. That light bulb moment. It's the sudden realization of an insight, a perception, or seeing reality as it really is for the first time. It's the awakening of realizing that you've spent your whole life climbing the ladder only to realize it's leaning against the wrong building. It's the awakening of realizing that nothing you do can make God love you any more or any less than He does right now. It's the awakening of realizing you can't make it on your own.

b. H- Honesty

The H in AHA is Honesty. It's that willingness to look in the mirror and admit the truth to ourselves. The awakening we had in the first part, isn't just true in theory. It doesn't just apply to other people. It's the truth about me. It's the reality of my life. This word of God, this scripture applies to ME and my life.

c. A - Action

Then the second A in AHA is Action. Now that I know the truth about myself, what am I going to do about it. There's going to be follow-through. There's going to be repentance— a change of direction. There's going to be obedience.

That's the good soil. That's a fruitful heart. We listen to the word and we awaken to its truth. We're honest about it. We take action. This is when we share the word with someone else, and they awaken to its truth. They're honest with themselves about it. They willingly take action.

So, what can we do to make the soil of our hearts better? What can we do to prepare the soil of hearts of our friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers? Is there anything we can do to break up the rocks that prevent deep roots? Is there a way to pull the weeds that choke out the truth of God's word?

Interestingly, in Jesus' parable, the seed falls where it falls, and there is nothing that the farmer does about the soil. All he can do is plant the seed. A farmer in the real world can add nutrients to the soil. A farmer sprays herbicide. A gardener can weed their garden. But when it comes to the spiritual garden of the human heart we are limited in what we can do.

We can't make someone else believer, no matter how hard we try. We can't remove all the obstacles in their lives. Even in our own hearts we seem to have limited power in tilling the soil and removing our own rocks and weeds. We have deeply embedded habits that we can't dig up, and stubborn attitudes that we can't seem to pull.

This is where prayer comes in. What we can't do, God can. What is impossible for us is possible for God. As Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 19:26, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Pray for Fruitfulness in our Own Hearts

Pray for Fruitfulness in the Church

Pray for fruitfulness in the hearts of others.