

God Makes the Soil Good and the Seed Grow

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NIV)

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 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." 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."

Today and for the next couple of Sundays, our Gospel readings are parables that Jesus spoke. What's a parable? It's a story, an illustration, designed to take something we know to teach us something about God and how he works. Parables help us visualize a spiritual truth using a physical world. Today's parable is the first one written down by Matthew, but all of Jesus' parables in this chapter focus on how God's kingdom works, how people are brought under his rule, how he reigns in people's lives through faith. In this first parable of the farmer sowing seeds, Jesus is helping us understand what happens when his Word goes out. Let's take a few moments to think about how this parable applies to us. "Whoever has ears, let them hear." (verse 9)

Jesus likens people to a field prepared for planting seed. The tilling, the plowing, the weed clearing has already been done. Now the seed – the Word of God – is cast.

Some of the seeds fall along the path where people and animals walk. The seeds don't sink into the ground. The birds eat them instead. Jesus says that this is when someone doesn't understand or comprehend his Word. They don't get it. They immediately reject it without a second thought. Jesus explains that this is the evil one, the devil, snatching God's Word away from someone's heart. Can you remember a time when you didn't understand or comprehend the Word of God, that it didn't plant home in your heart, that you discarded it, thought you knew it all or didn't need it – like seed on the hardened path?

Other seeds are scattered on places that have unseen bedrock underneath it. The seeds germinate, take root, grow, but the root doesn't go very far, and it can't stand up against the intense heat of the day. It withers and dies. This is someone who receives God's Word, the message of what Jesus has done to get rid of our sin and bring us to God. They get it, and it brings them great initial joy. But when life gets hard, when bad things happen, when people insult or challenge their faith in God, in what he has done for them, that faith withers up. When have you experienced troubles and persecution in life and then prayed to God, expecting a certain result, and you didn't get it. You thought life would be easier, happier, as a Christian, but it's not. You listened to God's Word in a shallow way, as a way for temporary happiness. Even trouble as simple as making a commitment to continue connect with God's Word is too much. The root doesn't run deep. Faith in God withers and dies.

Tied closely with the result of the seed cast with the bedrock underneath it is the seed cast where there are still roots of weeds. Again, the seed grows, but so do the weeds. The weeds choke out the good seed, and the good seed becomes unfruitful as the nourishment is taken up by the weeds. This is the person who hears the message of what Jesus has done for them, believes it, starts to produce fruit, live like a believer, but then the worries of life and deceitfulness of wealth choke out their faith. The person's time and energy go into how to provide, how to make life secure. When have you had the worries of this life - the very real concerns of how to pay rent, food bills, medical bills – lead you to prioritize work over spending time with God in his Word? When has all the unknowns of the future led you to looking to yourself as to how you will solve it all, spending nights awake worrying, instead of leaning on God and trusting him with your future, him to take care of you, that this choked out what you could do for God because you were too busy worrying?

Then there's good soil where the seed is cast. It grows and flourishes and produces a whole bunch of fruit! This is the person who hears what God has done for them, how he lived perfectly for them in their place, how he sacrificed his life to pay for all our sins, to

cleanse us from every bad thing we have ever done, and this changes how we want to live. We want to help others. We want to be nice to them. We want to be a wise steward of what God has given you. We want to share what we have with others – both of our wealth and of the good news of what God has done for us. The amount of good works that we do because we have been brought to faith in God, because Christ rules in our hearts, are countless – yet the Lord counts them all. He sees what we do and why we do them.

So, what do we take away from all this? Is the lesson that we who are here at church, we who do good works, that we are better soil than all those other people who are not here, that we stopped ourselves from being hardened, that we broke through the bedrock, fought off the weeds? Should we take away a message of pride in that there is something good about us that made God's Word work in our lives? Nope. We're just dirt. We can't make the seed grow. We can't even take credit for our conditions. The farmer tills us, cares for us, provides for us. Being good soil is not a credit to us.

In the same way, we also can't take away from this parable that some people – people who are the hardened path, the topsoil with bedrock underneath, the soil infested with weeds – are not worth casting the seed upon, not worth sharing God's Word with them. We like to prejudge who will believe God's Word and who won't. Yet, we don't know what kind of soil people are.

Take someone like the Apostle Paul. Would you ever think that a persecutor of the Church, a violent man who breathed out murderous threats, that he is a prime candidate to hear God's Word and believe? We also can see ourselves in all four types of soil. Yet God also made us the good soil. He broke up our hardened hearts. Maybe he even sent catastrophic events into our lives to open our minds and our hearts to listen to what God has done to overcome this world. Maybe he has brought tragedy and troubles and persecution into our lives because we are too self-reliant. We don't think we need God, until we encountered a situation that we couldn't control or make better. This drove us to him to fix it. Maybe he has taken away the financial security, the money, in order to kill the weeds of concern and worry as we saw him take care of us in spite of our best efforts.

God is very generous when it comes to casting his Word, and his casting of his Word never returns empty. He didn't prejudge any of the soil, any people, including us, as unworthy of having his Word cast upon it. When the seed went on the hardened path, he didn't go over and pick it up and recast it on the tilled soil. He let it be cast there, cast to us. It is kind of amazing where plants can grow. Just observe the cracks in the parking lot. Much to our dismay, there is stuff growing there, no matter the amount of herbicide or cutting or pulling we do. Even though weeds can pop up just about anywhere in spite of our best efforts – ask Chuck or Steve or Jeremy about that – God doesn't withhold casting seed where weeds may grow, where worries arise, where trouble may come. He still casts his Word to people like us to combat the worries and the troubles in our lives, to overcome them. God's Word never returns empty, but always accomplishes something - just like the Lord told Isaiah.

Although we can't make ourselves or anyone else the soil good nor can we make the seed of God's Word grow in them, let alone us, God does it. We plant and water, but only God makes us good soil and makes the good seed of his Word grow in us. He breaks through the hardened path and the bedrock. He kills the weeds and nourishes us. He makes us good soil. He makes the seed of his Word grow in us. He is why we bear fruit. His Word hasn't returned empty, just as we have seen evidenced in our lives and in the lives of others as we have produced fruit. All credit goes to him.

This is why we cast the seed of God's Word, why we tell people what God has done for them, how he has conquered our sin, how he has lived perfectly for us in our place, how he is in charge, ruling over everything. His Word does not return empty. It accomplishes his purpose. He made us good. He makes faith in him grow in our lives. He nourishes so that we bear fruit. Thank you, God, for making us good soil and making the good seed grow and produce fruit in our lives. Do this also for other people as we generously without prejudgment sow the seed of your Word to them. Amen.