

## ***“How Does Your Garden Grow?”***

*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

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How many of you like to garden? In our back yard we have a small raised bed in which we grow a few vegetables from time to time. It really doesn't require that much work which is what makes it enjoyable. First of all it's up off the ground so there's less bending over. Second, it's not too large so it is easier to maintain. Third, it's filled with good soil with lots of organic matter. So when it's time to plant about all that's required is to pull out the weeds that have grown up, turn the soil over with a trowel, plant the seeds and water.

Farming, however, is not quite the same as gardening. Farming takes place in the ground. The farmer doesn't have the luxury of perfect soil and easy work. Farming takes up lots of time. In fact, farming is not just a job, it's a lifestyle, a way of life and the people who came to hear Jesus speak understood that way of life. That's one of the reasons Jesus taught in parables the way he did. Remember, parables are stories or illustrations that come out of real-life situations. They're stories that the listeners can identify with.

This first set of parables is often referred to as the Parables of the Kingdom. There are seven parables in chapter 13 and they all have the same theme: the kingdom of God. That's not surprising, though, since the kingdom of God has been one of the main themes in the Gospel of Matthew. And this first parable is about how we experience the kingdom of heaven. It's usually referred to as the “parable of the sower.” Jesus even refers to it that way when he is about to explain what it means. But the parable is really about the four different soils. Jesus says that as the farmer was scattering his seed, some of the seeds fell along the hard, worn path that either ran along the edge or through the middle of the field. It didn't get buried in the soil so it never

germinated and the birds came and ate the seed.

Some of the seeds landed on shallow, rocky soil. It sprouted but then dried out in the hot sun. The third place some of the seed landed was among thorn bushes, which choked out the young seedlings. But some of the seed landed on the fertile ground where it sprouted and yielded a healthy crop.

As you know, one of the things that drew people to south Texas, and to most of the South for that matter, was the farmable land and one of the things that made it farmable was the absence of rocks in the ground. In many places, including Israel where Jesus lived and taught, the ground is filled with rocks. So to be able to farm it, the farmer must go through the field and remove all the rocks. But he has to have somewhere to put them, so they are usually piled up along the edge of the field, where they can get overgrown with weeds or small trees. I think this is a helpful image for us to understand this parable. It's these rocky hedgerows that Jesus is likely referring to when he talks about the rocky ground and the thorns.

One of the things that makes this parable easier to understand is that it's one of the few parables that Jesus explains. We are not left trying to figure out what Jesus meant. He tells the meaning to his disciples. So let's look at the different parts of this story.

The first thing I want to point out is the seed. Jesus says the seed is the Word of God. It's the good news of the kingdom of heaven, that in Jesus God has visited his creation. The seed, then, is the gospel and so the goal is for it to bear fruit by transforming the life of the hearer.

But as Jesus points out, not everyone who hears the good news of the gospel receives it the same way. He gives us four ways that people respond to the good news. The first

way that Jesus says people may respond is with total rejection. They are not interested in hearing anything about God. In fact, they may be downright hostile. Jesus says their heart is hardened like the hard path where the seed fell. We saw this in our reading from Exodus. Pharaoh's hard was hard. He didn't acknowledge God even in the midst of terrible plagues.

Atheists, especially the so-called "New Atheists," would fall into this category. They not only reject the claims of the Bible, they actively work to convince others to do the same. They have come to the place where they suppress the truth that is revealed in nature. As a pastor friend of mine frequently says, "It takes a lot of faith to be an atheist." What's really happening is a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of "me."

It's not just self-avowed atheists that fall into this category. There are lots of people who would not call themselves atheists but who still reject the gospel. Their hearts are hard as well. Jesus says that when they hear the Word of God it has not effect on them and so Satan comes and snatches it away. What causes people to reach the point in their life that they are unwilling to hear from God? Sin is the obvious answer. Repeated patterns of sin can wear a hard path in our lives. The more we sin the easier it is to do it again. I also think that repeatedly rejecting the gospel, whether actively or passively, hardens their hearts to its message.

But the one that we need to be most careful about is the third way that people's hearts are hardened, which is by other people walking on it. Our actions as Christians can either draw people toward God or push them away. When you and I encounter people who are engaged in sinful behavior do we react with love or with rejection? It seems to me that each of us has the power to impact the hearts of people and that we have an obligation to help plough that field to receive

the gospel rather than trample it, making it hard.

The next type of soil Jesus mentions is the rocky soil that isn't very deep. The seeds sprout but there's not enough root depth to keep the plants alive. Jesus says, "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 word, immediately he falls away. People often get excited about joining a church and may even immediately get involved. But over time the excitement wears off. Maybe they run into some difficulty in life and they don't go as often. Eventually they quit attending worship altogether. In the end, this person is not any better off than the first.

The third type of soil Jesus tells us about is closely related to the previous one. In this case the seed falls on good soil but among thorn bushes. If the first type is the hardened heart and the second the shallow heart, this soil represents the strangled heart. These weeds or thorns represent worldly cares – a job, money, time, even family. These concerns end up choking out the word of God. None of those are bad things until they get in the way of your relationship with Christ. James Boice points out that riches do not choke a person all at once. Rather, it's a gradual process, like weeds in the garden.

The final type of soil we learn about is the "good" soil. We'll call this the open heart. Jesus says, "This is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit." He's not talking about "good" people. None of us meets that standard on our own. It's the work of Holy Spirit regenerating us that makes us good. There's nothing we do that brings about our salvation, it's all God. But as Jesus shows us, living the Christian life is a *partnership* with him. We have responsibilities to learn and study the Bible, to pray, to gather with other Christians for

worship and service. That's called "sanctification." It means becoming the person that God has already declared us to be. The more effort we put into it, the more "fruit" we bear.

The last thing I want us to see in this passage is the sower. We're never explicitly told the identity of the sower. However, we can get some ideas from the context. In a later parable, the parable of the weeds, Jesus says, "the One who sows the Good Seed is the Son of Man. So on one hand the sower is Jesus. But Jesus says that the seed is the word of the kingdom, so the sower is the one who spreads the word. That's the job that Jesus gave to the Church. The work of the church is first and foremost to spread the Word of God. The Reformers said the marks of the true church were the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments.

The church's primary job is to tell others about Jesus. In the parable Jesus says, "A sower went out to sow." Right. That's what sowers do. They sow. If they don't then you

couldn't really call them sowers. If we're not spreading the Word of God beyond the walls of our building then we're not really a church.

So I have two questions for you this morning. First, are you receiving the Word of God and producing fruit for Him? Does your life truly reflect the work of Christ in it? Can your neighbors, friends and co-workers see your faith without you saying a word? It's impossible to be a Christian without producing spiritual fruit, becoming more like Christ in the process. Have you given your life completely to Christ to rule and use the way he wills? What kind of soil are you? The second question is this: Where are you sowing? Are you walking on people's fields making it harder for the Word of God to grow or are you helping them to dig up the rocks and plough the soil? My prayer is that together, as the church, we will produce a bountiful spiritual crop.

*Amen*