

## **And Handful of Parables for a Lifetime of Blessing:**

### **1. Lessons from the Field**

Matthew 13:1-23

#### **Introduction – Stories for Life**

Life is about growing. If you stop growing, you stop living. Last year I had four-year-old willow tree in my back yard die. Stupid me, I wasn't paying attention. The stabilizing lines that kept it from bowing too much in the wind had become too tight and the tree bark grew around the lines. It stopped growing. It died. The same principle is true for our souls. Life is the continual journey of growth of our soul. It doesn't matter how old you are. A two-year-old child's soul must grow and learn that there are others in this world besides himself. The soul of the patient who is under hospice care is wrestling with the reality of their own mortality. Growth is a given in life. One of the markers of "a life well-lived" is how well we embrace the growth of our soul.

What are the ingredients for the growth of our soul? Well, certainly an environment of love is essential. Provision of our essential needs like food, clothing and shelter is another.

Understanding – not just knowledge, but the grasping of meaning – is essential if our soul is to grow. Parents get this as they are trying to raise their kids. Children, of course, want the attention of their parents. Some, learning that their cries for help will bring the attention they want, create a dramatic scene when the smallest things happen. Sometimes, they'll even create a scene out of nothing just to get the attention of their parents. For those children, one wise parent made up the story of the boy who cried "wolf." You probably know the story. It's one of Aesop's fables. It's about a bored little shepherd boy, who feeling lonely, cried out that there was a wolf was chasing the sheep. All of the villagers rushed out to protect the flock. They were disgusted to learn that there was, indeed, no wolf and they angrily told the little shepherd boy not to cry "wolf" when there wasn't one. Well, the little shepherd boy actually enjoyed the attention and the little game so a few days later when he got bored he cried "wolf" again. The villagers came as they did before. This time they were furious. Don't cry "wolf" when there isn't one they angrily told him. The shepherd boy felt badly. The next day, as we was dosing off, he heard the sheep running around and bleating and creating all kinds of noise. To his horror, there

was a wolf chasing the flock. He cried “wolf, wolf!” But no one came. He cried even louder and jumped up and down but no one came. Finally, the wolf chased him and ate him.

We tell stories like that to give understanding to our children. We can tell them not to do a certain behavior, but it seems to stick best if we illustrate it with a story. Stories are powerful conveyors of the understanding that we need for life. Jesus told lots of stories to stimulate the understanding his followers would need for the Kingdom of God.

### **The Word – Matthew 13:1-23**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 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. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

### **Prayer**

#### **Farming in Jesus’ Day**

Jesus’ use of an agricultural story to enlighten his listeners was very natural since as many as 75-80% of the population was involved in some sort of agriculture in his day. Though he was a carpenter by trade, he was speaking the language of most of the people. Unlike today, most of the farming that was done in biblical times was subsistence farming – that is, most of the harvest would go directly to the farmer for his own sustenance. It was backbreaking work. From the plowing, through the sowing, then the harvesting and finally the threshing, processing grain from the field required a strong body and tenacious persistence.

Before seed could be sown, the field had to be plowed. This was done by hand with a primitive instrument of wood and stone or iron pulled by a draft animal or animals – typically two oxen in a yoke. It is easy to conceive of the conditions related in the parable being in a typical field. The

pathway would most likely be the well-worn “shortcut” that people would take across the field. The soil would be hard and compressed and even the sharpest plow would just bounce right over it. When the sower would scatter his seed he would toss it on the pathway. Any effort to avoid the waste would also waste good soil right next to the pathway. So the seed gets broadcast everywhere. Many of you come from farming backgrounds so you know that rocks seem to grow during the winter season. When you come out to your field in the spring, it seems as if there are new rocks that sprouted during the winter months. Things never change. They are the same as they were in biblical times. Every field will have its rocky soil. And what can we say about weeds? There was no Round Up in Jesus’ day. Weeds were an ever present threat to healthy crops as they are today.

The farmer in Jesus day would sow his seed across the entirety of his field, knowing that only a portion of it would eventually germinate and produce a good crop in healthy soil.

### **The Wisdom and Mystery of Parables**

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

““You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.’

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Some words regarding parables in general are appropriate at this point as we begin a series on five of them. A parable is a special kind of story that illustrates an important concept. A parable is always set in a very familiar context – an experience that all the hearers would relate to. It is different than an allegory – like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where every detail and every character has meaning. And it's important to make that distinction because we are prone to sometimes read more meaning into a parable than what Jesus intended. Often a parable will have only one basic truth in mind. The parable of the sower and the seed is illustrating four responses to the Word of God. We stray off track if we focus on the effect of different kinds of weeds on grain, what is the source of water that makes the crops grow and why a pathway was made in the middle of a field. All of those might be interesting thoughts, but they are merely speculations and they would not be the intent of Jesus teaching the parable. Better to stick with the intent of the parable than wander off into fanciful speculations.

But what did Jesus mean when he told his disciples that they were privileged to understand the gospel whereas others weren't? Commentators offer differing ideas. I think that Jesus is simply pointing out the reality of the hardness of people's hearts. It has always been that way – from the prophet's day, as cited in this passage, to Jesus' day, to this day. People can hear the Word of God many times and never receive it. There are biblical scholars who know the Scriptures better than you or I who don't believe. Jesus was acknowledging reality as he and his disciples would experience it. No doubt, at this point Jesus has hundreds or thousands of people following him. The parable illustrates why so few of them will actually stick. But blessed are those who do receive the word and persevere.

### **The Four Soils and Their Meaning**

Jesus goes on to explain the meaning of this parable.

### **The Hard Heart**

“Hear then the parable of the sower: 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.

This is the *hard heart*. There are many reasons people have a hard heart. They may have encountered hardships in their life that made them resentful of God. Perhaps the hypocrisy of so many Christians has made them cynical. Or they may be so inflated by their own self-importance that they are their own god – who needs the God revealed in Scripture. Whatever the reason for hardness of heart, it is a terrible place to be. Throughout Scripture God cites hardness of heart as the reason for unbelief. The tragedy of this kind of person is that they don’t even know they are rejecting God’s Word. It has no effect on them. They hear it and ignore it. And then it is gone. Satan whisks the opportunity away.

There are many people who come to church who have a hard heart. They may even be members. But the Word of God has no effect on them. They may sit in Sunday School or church for an hour or two and hear the Word but they go home the same way that they come in – unaffected and unchanged. What a tragic place to be! That’s why Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” To ignore the Word of God is to walk the path of eventual judgment and destruction.

### **The Shallow Soul**

Jesus continued...

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 word, immediately he falls away.

I don’t know how to explain how the *shallow soul*, illustrated by the rocky soil, came to be. Jesus doesn’t explain it either. He just observes the condition of many people’s hearts. How many times I’ve observed this throughout my life. It is perplexing and tragic. Some folks simply don’t have depth of soul and will jump on the next best thing that comes their way. When they hear the gospel, they embrace it with joy. It is, after all, good news! But it doesn’t go

down deep. They don't, as it were, take it to heart and make it the center of their life. They don't count the cost of true discipleship but join up because it seems so good.

But then life gets hard. There may be a serious illness or a sudden death. Perhaps there is unfaithfulness in a marriage relationship. Because their faith in God didn't go to the core of their being – they didn't give their whole life to Christ – they abandon it. One of my concerns is the brand of popular Christianity that promises that God will meet all our troubles and make life wonderful. It simply isn't true. Many Christians write and sing songs to Jesus as if he is their boyfriend or romantic interest. They want to be held by him and they say, "Jesus, I am so in love with you!" Like so many things, there is a measure of truth to such an approach. God does love us extravagantly and he should consume our affections. But when our relationship with God is reduced to a spiritual romance when times get tough we are tempted to break up with Him. Sadly, for many that is what happens.

For the one who would truly follow Jesus, our commitment must reach to the center of our soul. Indeed, Christ must become **the center** of our life. Just like today, Jesus and his disciples saw many who gladly joined up with his cause, but when the going got tough, they were quick to leave.

### **The Distracted Doer**

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.

The third kind of soil represents the distracted doer. This is the person who receives the Word and it takes root in their heart. But the complexities of life push their faith to the bottom of their list of priorities. Let's face it: life is hard. When the bills come due and there's little money in the bank we worry. Jesus told his followers not to worry about food or clothing or shelter. If God takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, won't he take care of you? (Matthew 6:25-34) But for the person represented in the weedy soil, Jesus' words can't be embraced. The person whose faith is choked by the cares of the world feels that they have to make their own way – they can't turn it over to God – or as Peter says, "cast all your cares upon

Him for he cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7) That is the weed of worry. There is another weed that is another side of the same coin: the lure of material wealth. This weed chokes out the Word of God because money and the things that it can buy become the obsession and idol for some people. These two weeds, worry and the lure of materialism, are the cares of the world. Both are seductive and strangle our spiritual lives. The people who struggle with these issues, I think, may represent believers, but their life is so choked with earthly concerns that they bear no heavenly fruit.

### **The Fertile Follower**

Finally, Jesus describes the fertile soil where the Word of God is received and bears fruit...

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.”

I find the phrase “hears the word and understands it” to be very interesting. Not everyone sees the light. Some people hear the gospel a hundred times but it goes in one ear and out the other. They never understand it. Oh, they may understand it intellectually. But the light never turns on and they see their need for God. That’s why you can never argue someone into the Kingdom of God. The kind of understanding that Jesus was talking about is a gift from God. Did he not say to his disciples, “but to you it has been given to know the secrets of heaven?” It is God who prepares the soil of our heart to grasp the gospel. The Bible teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. (John 16:8)

Jesus offered this parable to his disciples as the first in a series about the Kingdom of God. It is the only one that he explained. But with his explanation, he helped his disciples understand why the crowds would eventually fall away and why so many would reject him. Today, we like the sower in the parable, are called to indiscriminately scatter the seed of God’s Word in the fields of our life. We cannot make people respond. Some will reject it outright. Their hearts are hard. Some will embrace it enthusiastically, only to fall away when life gets difficult. Others will receive the gospel but it will never bear any fruit in their life because they do not surrender the cares of their life to God. A few will receive it where it will take root and bring forth abundant

fruit for the Kingdom of God. This parable is a great relief for those who labor in God's Kingdom. It is not our responsibility when people don't believe or they fall away. We leave that in God's hands. It is ours to labor faithfully to sow the seed of God's Word.

### **Digging Deeper**

The primary meaning of the parable relates to those who will embrace the Kingdom of God and become a Christ-follower. (This is obvious from the text.) We who are followers of Jesus, however, cannot easily dismiss this parable as only applying to evangelism of the lost. As we live, we are in a constant state of growth or demise. That's how I began this message. As followers of Jesus, the Word of God is the seed that is constantly being broadcast towards us. This parable applies to you and me right now even if – perhaps especially because – we consider ourselves followers of Jesus. What is the condition of your heart? Do you receive the Word of God that you read by yourself, or in a small group, or in here with gladness. Is it taking root and bearing fruit? Or has your heart become hardened for whatever reason and God's Word is unable to penetrate your hardness? Or do you take your Christian faith as a “value added commodity” to life where it gives you some benefits but doesn't penetrate to your core. Is this just some sort of religious game or habit or is Christ truly the center of your life so that the Word of God will penetrate your heart and change your life? Maybe you've got so many troubles that you just can't surrender to God. Friend, Jesus smiles at you and says “come to me, you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Trust him with all of your life.

This is the question that the lesson from the field confronts us with: what is the condition of your heart?

### **Prayer**