



**“THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS”**  
 or “*The Real Dirt on Spiritual Farming*”

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Matthew 13:1-23 *On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. 2 And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the*

*shore. 3 Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 "And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. 5 "Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. 6 "But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. 7 "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. 8 "But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 "For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. 13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; 15 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' 16 "But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; 17 "for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. 18 "Therefore hear the parable of the sower: 19 "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.*

As a believer, we can often struggle with spiritual questions such as “what is God’s part” of our faith experience and what is “our part?” This parable, while spelling out some great truths about ourselves and the battle for the kingdom as we know it, also helps us understand that when it come to others, we are to “sow, sow, and sow.” And when it comes to ourselves, we are to *plow, plow, plow*...consistently working to breaking up the hard ground of our hearts! No doubt this reflects upon Paul’s words in Philippians 2:12, telling us to “*work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.*”

In the work of the Lord, I as a pastor am effectively a farmer and a shepherd. And one of the great epiphanies that I have had in my growth as a minister is to coming to understand that my job as a pastor...while diverse and challenging, includes the sad aspect of literally “holding the door open” for those who choose to depart from faith, the faith community, a disciplined walk, or their personal calling. I certainly am to train, provide encouragement and opportunity, pray for and preach to those want to embrace obedience and an honest relationship with Christ, and sometimes such is not comfortable to receive. But 2 Timothy 4:2 says I am to: *Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*

I am also told in 1 Peter 5:2 to *Shepherd the flock of God that is among you*...When we consider the character of the action of shepherding, we see protecting, raising, and making decisions concerning the sheep...the separating, acknowledging and implementation of the best use for individual sheep...according to their strengths, as an active part of shepherding; always according to the will and design of the owner of the flock of course.

God told Moses in Numbers 8:14 *“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine.”* And He told Paul in Acts 13:2 that, even though the decision was made by the Holy Spirit, He still sought for human pastoral action to see it through: *“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”* And again in Titus 1:5 *“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you...”*

But the fact is, there will always be those sheep that will reject such and will seek to do or be what they are not called to do or be. This parable today speaks to this truth. And to “open the door” to such folks is as much a part of ministry as praying with someone to accept salvation or to train up disciples. Such baffling and illogical moves by sheep cannot be overtly blamed upon the great shepherd, and thankfully not the under-shepherds! The problem is not with the sower and we know the issue certainly is not the seed. This parable...often called the ‘Parable of the Sower,’ really speaks nothing about the sower, but everything about the soil! The one thing that we must get our hands around as we approach this parable is that *the sower and seed were the same in all four cases*. What was different was not the seed, and not the technique of the sower but rather it was wholly an issue of the *soil*.

John Piper’s **“Take Care How You Listen”**...his book concerning this parable (and will be Our “Book of the Month” in May) speaks to us about this nuance even as we first step into the story. Piper says this: *The parables are part of Jesus’ concealing and hardening ministry as well as part of his revealing and saving ministry....The Word of God was no longer effective to save them, but was only effective to render their hearts insensitive, and their ears dull, and their eyes dim. This teaches us something very important about preaching. Even when preaching the Word of God does not soften and save and heal, it is not necessarily ineffective. This preaching of the Word may be doing God’s terrible work of judgment. (Thus)Don’t be cavalier in the hearing of God’s Word week after week. If it is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling.*

Paul said in 2 Corinthians *“To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.”*

Piper went on to say *“Preaching is one thing...and it is crucial. But hearing is another thing...at it is just as crucial. There is nothing in this text about the effectiveness of preaching. It is all about the effectiveness of hearing...notice the reason given in verse 18 (Luke’s account of the story) for why you should be so vigilant over how you hear. It says, “For (or ‘because’) whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.”*

After Jesus presented the parable, He too stated the reality of such a heart in many of those who have heard the gospel. He said *“When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend. For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes — so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.”* So Jesus was talking, they just weren’t receiving! And if the parable presents any sort of accurate measurement, it says that 3 out of 4 of those who start the game will fail to finish!

### **Let’s look at Jesus’ explanation of the parable:**

The first group of people to “have the seed land on them” are those who fail it immediately. Satan ‘snatches the seed away’ before it ever finds root to begin with. This is the seed that lands in the ‘wayside.’ If you have ever gardened, you would recognize this as the walking path...the space between the rows of plants...the area away from the other plants. In hard soil, isolated from the areas that are weeded and fertilized, the seed never sprout.

The second group are those who receive the seed quickly and with great joy. We all have witnessed these folks! They hear the gospel, like what they hear and grab hold with immediate gusto. They are pumped up like they won the lottery! But there is seldom any real thought and consideration as to the cost. Even Jesus warned us in Luke 14 to “count the cost.” For being a disciple of Christ is not an amusement park trip. It is challenging and often difficult, but some come to Christ thinking it is the path to relieve the hardships of life and a way to attain the desires of the flesh with a ‘Jesus genie’ to grant them wishes. But when things don’t turn out that way, and they begin to taste the trials and persecutions, they are quickly gone.

The third group...the seed that attempts to grow amongst the thorns, is consistently entangled in the pursuits and the traps of this world and the flesh. The ‘thorns’ around them rob them of all which is needed to vibrantly mature with health and thus produce fruit. Ironically, these folks can actually ‘sort of’ survive! But the ‘thorns’ around them steal all the water and the nutrients that are needed to actually thrive. What are these thorns? Worldly desires and pursuits. Selfish wants, hobbies and interests that take precedent over time and passion invested in God and kingdom.

The things that are not overtly sin, but rather “weights” as Paul puts it, things that slow us down and steal our energies. I have seen many folks complain that they have no time to serve God but they always have time to pursue other clubs and interests that have nothing to do with King and Kingdom. They have no time to participate in body life to any real amount, especially if they are not the leader of the group. They are consumed with temporal aspects of this world to such a degree that they have nothing left to give to growing fruit for God!

These can include such innocuous aspects as marriage, family, vocation, etc. Even though God says your love for him must be so great that our hearts toward our family must seem like hatred in comparison, and tells us that He clothes the very flowers in the field so we are not to worry about seeking money and career advancements. It’s not that God has not covered this issue, it is just that some do not hear it. So these folks hang on in a withered state out in the weeds and thorns, and never find enough spiritual health and maturity to produce anything.

Eventually ...sometimes even after years of such an existence, these folks finally wither a slow death and are gone. I have seen folks preach a path of living for years to others, only to eventually abandon themselves all they advocated for others, and thus effectively throw away years of effort, rendering everything they ever said as meaningless and making themselves into liars. The world outside then stand and smirk “see...it was all a bunch of garbage! Even *they* didn’t live it!”

Then there is the minority group. Those that have found the ‘narrow door’ and have entered into kingdom living. Jesus says that these “...hear the word and understand it, and they go on to produce fruit for the kingdom.” This is what God wants of us. To reproduce. Not to just attempt to survive while entangled in the world around us. It’s a simple concept really. The farmer wants to ultimately produce a crop bigger than that which he planted.

But oddly enough, it is this simple concept that so often gets lost in the hearts of those involved! And instead of basing our life decisions upon what is producing a harvest for God, we render such based upon our wants and desires. What is comfortable and worldly advantageous. What places me up front and center instead of simply what I should do to produce for God. Many folks have traded a place of great reproduction to go live amongst the thorns, and only ultimately manifest a heart that lives out the old saying “Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.”

Now there lies in this story a critical element that must be understood in order to truly grasp its meaning and live it out. And that is that while the seed may be your words and is for sure the gospel message, it is also essentially me and you bodily. We who are truly reborn are the embodiment of the gospel seed...grown from previous plantings, harvested from past crops. The soil is our hearts, and the seed is our purpose, our essence, our living, our minds. The seed is also therefore essentially us, and the gospel in us.

And in John 10:24 Jesus tells us that *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* **If it dies...**it bears much fruit.

How many of us are not hearing Jesus in Luke 9:24 where He says *“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”* And hanging onto our lives, and all the trappings that go with such, we never produce because we have never *died*. Galatians 2:20 - *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* Luke 9:23 - *“And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* Galatians 5:24 - *“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15 that he *“dies daily.”* He got it. He lived his life in that context. It was never about him or gaining anything in this life. In his eyes, he was out of the picture. He went where he was told by God and grew where he was planted! Yet how many of us are still living in the thorns and weeds? Living with the **“I want”** and the **“I need to”** and the **“I’m going to.”** We are still hanging onto our lives and our plans and our dreams.

This parable is imminently valuable to us if we are willing to hear it. As a pastor, it is sadly poignant, to realize that the majority of all those who receive God’s seed will never make it, and will never reproduce. It will be the hard ground, the heat of tribulation and persecution, and the strangle hold of the worlds thorns and briars. But *some* will hear it. Some will plow the soil of their heart and will come here each week ready to receive and grow. They will go to their bible daily, plowed up and ready to receive and grow. They will readily drink in the water of the spirit and the consume the nutrients of serving, loving, sharing with others, and receiving from them in order to reach full maturity. Jeremiah 4:3 calls out to us too saying *“This is what the LORD says to the people of Judah and Jerusalem: “Plow up the hard ground of your hearts! Do not waste your good seed among thorns.”* Hosea 10:12 says *“...Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you.”*

The great Charles Finney said this in closing: *Fallow ground is ground which has once been tilled, but has gotten hard and now lies waste. It needs to be broken up and made soft again, before it is ready to receive seed. If you mean to break up the fallow ground of your heart, you must begin by looking at your heart - examine carefully the state of your mind and see where you are. Many people never even seem to think about doing this. They pay no attention to their own hearts, and never know whether they are doing well in their walk with the Lord or not - whether they are bearing fruit or are totally barren. Now you must draw off your attention from all other things and look into this right now! Make a business of it, do not be in a hurry.*

*Self-examination consists of looking at your life, considering your motives and actions. . . calling up your past and seeing its true character. Look back over your past history. Take up your individual sins one by one, and look at them. This doesn't mean that you just take a casual glance at your past life, see that it has been full of sin, and then go to God and make a sort of general confession, asking forgiveness. General confessions of sin are not good enough. Your sins were committed one by one; and as much as you are able, they ought to be reviewed and repented of one by one.*