

Introduction

Do you remember November 9, 2016? The United States of America woke up to news few expected. Donald Trump had been elected the 45th President of the United States. The reaction to that news went from extreme to extreme. On one end, the supporters of Hillary Clinton were shocked and depressed. In the middle there were the people who really did not care one way or another. But on the other end, the supporters of Trump were exhilarated with the delight of a great upset victory. Some were downcast. Some were overjoyed. And as always some were unaffected. When Jesus came speaking parables, the reactions were also varied though the conditions were more complex. And the same reality occurs today when the word of God is communicated. What we learn about the spreading of the word and the reactions to the word as it is spread is critical to us today. It helps us both in our call to spread the word as well as our obligation to hear it and respond to it.

[Read Text; Pray]

Jesus's purpose in telling parables was twofold. On the one hand, he was concealing the secrets of the kingdom from the hard-hearted who did not genuinely have an interest in the truth. He was refusing to cast pearls before swine. On the other hand, Jesus was revealing critical truths to those who do genuinely care to know and understand. In the parable before us this morning, Jesus communicates in such a way to help his disciples understand their basic responsibility in communicating the gospel and the varying responses that occur when the message of the kingdom is made known. We are going to look first at the sower and the seed. And then most of our time will be spent on the message of the soils.

I. The Sower and the Seed. (18)

A. Jesus began the parable saying, "A sower went out to sow." As the sower sowed, seeds fell. It is a mental image that would have been quite familiar to those standing on the shore. It is one I can imagine as well.

I have had some trouble with the grass in my yard over the years and have replanted some trouble spots on several occasions. When I do that, I stick my hand in the bag of seed and fling the seeds out onto the ground. That is the manner in which the sower would have sown wheat in NT days. He would wear a bag of seed over his shoulder and fling the seed out on the ground as he walked through the field.

B. Jesus identifies the seed as the word of God. The seed falling on the ground is the equivalent to when anyone hears the word of the kingdom.

And if the seed is the word of God, who is the sower? Well it is quite apparent that the sower is the one who spreads the word. In the context of Matthew 13, the sower is Jesus himself. But every follower of Christ is called to be a sower. Every disciple is commissioned to be a maker of disciples. And the way disciples are made is through the preaching, teaching, and sharing of the word. In each of these ways, the word is sown.

C. Sowing seed then is sharing the word of the kingdom, the word of God. The central message of the word of God is that God is holy and righteous and good, the maker and ruler of all things. His perfect standard is what we must meet to be acceptable to him. But human beings are rotten to the very core of our being. The sins we commit outwardly are but a reflection of the sin that is within our hearts. Murder is inward hatred. Adultery is inward lust. Our love of self is the worst kind of idolatry. Our very best outward deeds are corrupted by our unclean and selfish motives. We stand fully deserving the worst consequences God has to give in the form of his wrath. But God has provided for his righteous demand to be met by a substitute. Jesus Christ is the substitute. He is the focus of the word. He fulfilled God's righteous demands in every way. God's demand for punishment is met by Christ's death on the cross and his acceptance of God's wrath poured out on him. God's demand for righteousness is met by the transfer of Christ's righteousness over to the account of those who trust in him. These are freed from bondage in order to obey God and pursue holiness of living. These belong to the kingdom and the kingdom belongs to them. They belong to the family of God and they shall see God and live

with him eternally. Of course there is more to it, but this is the meat of the word of God.

This is the word that is to be sown on the fields. It is the message we need to proclaim to the people in the world. This picture is very helpful. It clarifies the responsibility of followers of Christ. It is our role simply to sow the seed. As we go we should simply keep putting our hand back in the bag and taking hold of seed and flinging it on the hearts of those around us.

This is what Jesus was doing. Here is the greatest preacher ever to walk the face of the earth or even to grace the glories of heaven. And what did he do? He simply scattered the seed. He proclaimed the word. Jesus confronted sin and self-righteousness and he pointed people to himself. He did not cast the message in terms that he thought would be more palatable or more enticing to the people. He just preached the word. He did not want to make following him appear to be something it was not.

The apostle Paul followed in Jesus's footsteps. He did not alter the message in an effort to make it less offensive or more acceptable. He did not modify his approach so that people would more likely to accept it. He preached Christ and he came in fear and trembling. His confidence was not in his methods and tactics and reasoning ability. His confidence was in God the Holy Spirit to do the work. Just like Jesus, he wanted people to come to Christ not to a set of reasons or to a philosophical argument. He wanted their faith to be in Christ Jesus not in human wisdom. He expressed it this way when he wrote to the Corinthians. "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Every one of us disciples is called to be a sower. And in the gospel we have everything we need. Our seed bag is full. We just need to be like the sower in the parable and go out to sow the word. Put our hand in the bag and fling out the seed. Open our mouths and declare God's holiness, man's sin, and Christ's gracious sacrifice. We are not called to manipulate. We are not called to convert. We are not called to figure out what is important to the people to whom we speak. If we appeal to people on a fleshly level,

we will get a fleshly response. Let God do the heavy lifting. Our role is simply to communicate the timeless word of God.

And that brings us to the soil on which that word is sown.

II. The Message of the Soils. (19-23)

This is where the bulk of Jesus's explanation focuses. The soils represent the nature of the heart on which the seed of the word is sown. The seed sown is the word is spoken, and what happens next in the life of the hearer depends upon the condition of the heart. Jesus cites 4 conditions.

A. The first is the soil along the path. Paths were roads between grainfields worn and packed by travelers on foot. Back in chapter 12 Matthew described Jesus and his disciples as going through the grainfields on the Sabbath. They would not have been walking through the middle of someone's field but along the path that went between the grainfields. This kind of path is what Jesus has in mind here. The ground would be hard and compressed. It would be beaten down and resistant to penetration by the seed. This picture, says Jesus, is indicative of those who hear the word and resist it. They do not understand. It does not matter to them. It does not sink into their comprehension, and it is not welcome there. They hear. They are aware, but they do not affirm what they hear. The import of the message is lost on them. They simply do not get it. They quickly turn their attention elsewhere (birds gobble up the seed) and there is no lasting impression from what they heard.

On July 4, I was passing out tracts at the New Berlin parade with Kyle and Jeff Mathison and Jarrett and Lizzie. I went under a canopy to hand them out to a group. A guy at the back asked if what I was handing out had to do with Jesus. And I said, "Yes, it in fact it is about Jesus." He replied quite confidently, "Well, I don't want it; I am Catholic." I remain puzzled by the comment, but he certainly evidenced a hard heart. Whenever you sow the word, you are going to run into many who are like this even if they do not act snarly. The word is preached but they do not care. There is no welcome to the message. There were people like this when Jesus preached, and you can be sure they will be there when you share as well. You certainly want to be sure that you are not one of them.

B. The second soil noted by Christ is called rocky ground. Do not imagine gravel or rock pieces mixed with dirt. Rather conceptualize a thin layer of dirt covering a bed of solid rock lying just beneath the depth of the plow. Such a soil would receive the seed and the seed would actually appear to sprout more vigorously than other seed because as the root went downward it would encounter the solid rock. Unable to penetrate the rock, the expanding root would act to push the stem upward rather than the root descending downward. People might remark, "these seedlings are really taking off," but in fact they would soon turn brown and shrivel up because they were not properly established to receive moisture and nourishment.

Jesus explains, "This is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. [there is an element of emotion here], 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."

This person is not a persevering believer. He embraces the word with emotion, but he falls away. Jesus is not condemning emotion, but he is giving testimony that an emotionally-charged response does not prove a person has genuinely received the word. It does not take much to affect human emotions. They can easily be pumped up or brought down by many different things. Here is a person who with an emotional response. They receive the message of the gospel only shallowly. They may even continue on that level for an extended period of time. Jesus says, "they endure for a while." But at some point the gospel in its wholeness meets a hard heart beneath the surface. Underneath the surface of a welcome to the gospel, reality sets in through persecutions or tribulations directly tied to the gospel, and the actual condition of the person's heart is revealed. It was soft to some parts of the gospel, but it was hard to the deeper aspects.

When the simple gospel is preached unadulterated and pure in the best of outward circumstances, there will be those who look and feel as though they welcome it. However, they have heard it only superficially. They have become excited over the positive promises they heard and how easy it is to lay hold of them. But taking up one's cross and suffering for the gospel are not realities that they considered in the deep-down recesses of the soul.

And when the hard truth meets their hard heart, they shrivel up and fall away.

If that can happen in the best of circumstances with the likes of Jesus himself preaching, how much more when you and I are doing the sharing. How even MUCH more when preachers and worship leaders, like many today, are directed away from truth and focus on stirring up the emotions of the worshipers. Their main concern for the congregation is how they FEEL. So-called worship then is designed to raise the level of emotional experience and give the participants a spiritual "buzz."

What happens is you get leaders who are all excited about the show of many emotional people whose raised hands and excited shouts and motions surely prove they are worshiping ardently. And the people themselves are excited and believe the same.

I am not criticizing raised hands and emotions! But there is a problem in this approach. It is articulated well by Josh Blankenship. He wrote an article entitled, "How Emotion-Driven Churches are Ruining Christians." He writes:

The problem is that too many of us are making worship about how it makes us feel. We expect to come to a worship service to "feel" the presence of God. We often judge the success of a worship service by how many people lifted their hands or shouted "Amen." Those things are not bad.

Participating and being involved in the music is usually good. The problem is that it tends to teach people that unless you are emotionally involved in singing you are not really worshiping. . . . It seems to me that we are more interested in giving people a spiritual buzz than teaching and showing them what true worship looks like. The problem with a spiritual buzz is that people come down from those. They often head to work on Monday not as hyped for Jesus as they did the day before. Be careful that your actions are not harming people more than they help. An emotional "close to Jesus" moment can be good, but it also can teach people that God only shows up in those moments instead of being there in your everyday (sometimes mundane) life."

Josh has several good things to say, but it fits what Jesus is saying about the shallow soil in a particular way. If we center in on emotions so intently, we are not only side-tracking true Christians, we are also catering big-time to the shallow-soil listener who actually is no Christian at all. There is an underlying warning here in what Jesus says. There is danger in equating emotion with spirituality and worship and faith. It creates false converts.

Feelings and emotions are not the engine that drives saving faith though they may be the engine that drives false faith or no faith. Properly understood, feelings and emotions an experience that RESULTS in the heart of those whose faith is real, who have accepted the true and unvarnished gospel in the depths of their soul. They have counted the cost and said, Christ is worth it. Truth fuels the response rather than emotion.

Some in this room today may be rocky soil. If you are living in the shallow end of the gospel and equate spirituality and worship with emotional experiences, that just may be you. Examine yourself to see that you have you embraced the gospel deeply and truly.

I am certainly not saying that if you are emotional you are lost. I am saying that you should not invest in your emotion as the tell-tale sign you are saved. And you should be sure that your professed ties to Jesus are about more than an emotional pick-me-up. Be sure that you are willing to lay your life down for his cause as surely as he laid down his life for you.

C. Jesus points us to a third soil.

It is infested with competing interests. "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."

This person hears the word and accepts it. This listener wants what the gospel promises. But in the end they choose the world. There is a battle within their hearts for supremacy and the pleasures and cares of the world win out. There is no fruit here because the love of the world CHOKES out the love of the word. This person sets their heart on the temporal instead of the eternal. These are not necessarily people who have riches (which to a certain degree is every single one of us) but whose riches have them.

Paul warned Timothy, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." He also said mournfully to Timothy that "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica."

We are not only talking about materialism here, however. The thorns and weeds can just as easily be a love for sin. The cares of this world also choke out the word. If you are not concerned about the sin in your life, if you do not hate evil, if you are unwilling to engage in combat against the desires of your flesh, you have strong reason to think you might well be infested soil that ultimately does not belong to Jesus. Love of the world and identifying with Christ cannot exist together.

D. We come fourthly, to good soil. Good soil is distinguished from every other soil in that it produces fruit. Only this soil represents a person who has genuinely embraced the gospel. This soul receives the word willingly and understandingly. It is not easy. There are trials and persecutions relating to the word—hot days and days with no rain. The flesh competes against the word here as well, but the word is most precious to this soul. There are battles with sin and the world. This life is hard. But there is fruit.

1. There is a yield of the word in this one's life—some 100, some 60, and some 30. In one sense the different numbers reflect the variation of productivity from person to person. Not every believer is equally productive. Some are more diligent than others. Some are more sacrificial. Bottom line—some disciples of Jesus are more fruitful and some are less fruitful. Which would you rather be? The song John sang earlier expresses what we all should want to produce—100-fold, as much as we can.

This point is a challenge to each of us as believers in Christ, as fruit-bearing followers of Jesus. Why don't we produce more? What is keeping us from bearing fruit 100fold? Can you be satisfied knowing that 100 was possible but you only produced 30 or 60? Now it is not about comparing ourselves with each other to value one and not the other. But the thing is we ought not only to want to produce for Christ at the highest level but we ought to want to help each other as much as possible to produce 100fold.

This point goes to the intensity level and the purposefulness of how you and I go about each day. Every single day is one day in the process of our production for the glory of Christ. Can you start each day with a resolve in all you do to be productive for the sake of the kingdom? It is going to require an absolute commitment to the basics—to the word and to prayer to obedience and to being sowers who sow the word.

But I want you to understand something in particular about the return Jesus talks about. Perhaps this is the most striking thing about the parable. Even if you were standing on the shore and didn't understand the deeper meaning of the parable, there is one remarkable aspect you could not have missed. But it is an aspect that you and I might miss if we didn't know something of plant production of the day. According to John MacArthur, the average agricultural yield or return in that day was 8fold. Putting it in perspective, a 10fold yield would be extraordinary. What then would 30fold be but absolutely amazing and 60fold mind boggling. But 100fold is beyond one's wildest expectations. The message of Jesus is of the power of the gospel in our lives. When the soil is good, the result is plenty. The gospel is so powerful in us that the result is mind-boggling.

You know sometimes we get a little down because we think there is not much happening in us. And sometimes that is totally legitimate. But sometimes we need to look back and acknowledge that if the gospel had not taken root in our hearts; if we had not experienced the grace of God; we would be fruitless for the kingdom and for the glory of God.

I say this to encourage you to go forward with anticipation. If you will keep absorbing the word and let it grow deeper and deeper in your heart and clear out everything that competes with it, the results in your life will be incomprehensible. It is possible . . . in . . . you and me!

Now, what is the fruit?

The fruit is everything that is produced in your life when you let the word grow deep and when you remove competitors. The fruit is the proof of genuine saving faith. James says, "Faith without works is dead." Jesus is showing that faith without fruit is dead. The fruit is fellowship with God and impact in the lives of others. Being salt and being light. The fruit is

obedience. The fruit is character—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. The fruit is walking in a manner worthy of the calling which you have received. It is righteousness, godliness, and holiness. Ultimately the fruit is to see God and to know God. This is what the word does in the hearts of those in whom it takes firm root.

Conclusion

Four soil types. Only one is good. Only this last one represents a saved person. Only good soil produces a plenty of the fruit of the word. The sower flings the seed. The seed is the same. It is not dressed up, sweetened up, or changed up. It is the simple word of the gospel. The difference is the heart. Which soil represents you this morning?

You should pursue seeing the word deeply rooted in your life to avoid fruitlessness and death. But you should pursue the word in order that your life overflow with an abundance to the glory of God.