

Cultivating the Good Seed

Prairie Tabernacle Church

Matthew 13:1-23

Sunday, Jul 11 / 21

It's so good to be back with you especially in these new circumstances and this time of year. I am so glad that we now have more freedom, shaking hands, sharing face-to-face and visiting with one another. God is good. One of the things that has made this transition a little unusual for me is that I haven't been able to meet people as I usually like to sharing in meals together and so on. There's been a little of that for which I have been most grateful. So, I am looking forward to our time this afternoon at the Picnic.

We are in the midst of the last phase of the transition—except we're not sure how long it will last. The Pastoral Search Team is doing what it can to advertise and connect with someone whom we think could be the next lead pastor but we are still praying and trusting for His definite direction. We don't want to rush this matter simply to get it done...

It's true that a new pastor can help shape the future of a lot that happens around here, but I hope you're not depending on a pastor in an extreme sense – thinking that the right person will be some kind of a Messiah who will be everything you've always wanted. I'm sure you've heard this before, but I want to remind you this morning it's important to take responsibility for your own spiritual growth and development. Wouldn't it be awesome if the new pastor found a people who were strong in faith and eagerly growing in their love for one another and for people in the community!

During these summer Sundays, we are exploring the Word of the Lord through the parables of Jesus. Two Sundays ago, Pastor Amir spoke to us from a parable in Matthew 20 (the workers in the vineyard) about the importance of trusting the Lord to provide the rewards He deems best for each of us as we do His work. Last Sunday, Pastor Glenn shared a parable from Luke 14 about not proudly promoting ourselves instead of others. Today, I'd like to continue with another parable that addresses how to cultivate the soil of our own hearts to receive the good seed of God's Word in order to produce a rich harvest of plenty.

You folks live in one of the richest grain-producing parts of our country. You know what planting and reaping is all about. As I'm driving around the country these days, I am so impressed by the beauty of the fields as the seed that has been planted grows, and it's not even harvest time yet. We all know something of what it means to plant seeds and see them grow. We know too that some do better than others. A critical aspect of it all has to do with the quality of the soil.

That's what the parable in Matthew 13 is all about. Let's read these familiar words in verses 1-9.

I've often wondered what it would have been like for those first followers of Jesus to listen to Him teach. Sure the crowds followed Him because of his healing ministry, but they also followed Him because of his ability to teach – which evidently was quite different than their regular teachers of the law. In Matthew 7:28, we read these words: *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the*

crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Sometimes Jesus gave very direct answers to very direct questions, but at other times his teaching was a bit more oblique. And the parables are an example of that. In fact His plan to teach by parables may pose a kind of theological question for us. Note what He says...

Matthew 13:10-17

So, Jesus was discriminating in who would hear the message of His kingdom! As Matthew points out, in this case, Jesus' words are a fulfillment of prophecy in which God predicted that He would *close the minds of those who rejected His revelation of grace*. This rejection and closed-mindedness has been true for the Jewish people even until this time. But according to the prophet Zachariah, a day is coming in which *the house of David will receive a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child...* (Zachariah 12:10).

But beyond all of that, there is a principle here worth noting: that understanding and response (as far as God's ways are concerned) are dependent on a person's desire to know. This is the great mystery between the sovereignty of God and human initiative. On one hand, no one can come to the Father unless he/she is drawn by the Father (John 6:44) and on the other hand, whosoever

will may come and drink of the water of life (Revelation 22:17).

Why is it, we may ask, that some are more responsive than others to the message of Christ? How is it possible that so many hear about Jesus and don't respond at all, or have known and yet turn away. How come people fail to get it? Well, according to another Scripture, spiritual truth is spiritually discerned. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14).

So should we be discriminating in our communication of the Gospel? No, because we don't know people's hearts, and the Scriptures say that faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word. (Rom 10:17). But it's also true that our efforts to share the message of Christ need to be accompanied by prayer so that people's hearts will become open to the message (Colossians 4:2-4). In the end, according to Jesus' words here, it is a great privilege to have insight into the things of God, to recognize the Gospel, and to know what we have come to know. We should never take for granted that the grace of God reached down to us to help us understand God's revelation in Christ.

The parable that Jesus told here demonstrates in many ways what we've just been considering. The seed is the Word of the Lord (Luke 8:11). What a powerful image God gives us here concerning His Word. His Word is like seed that has the power to germinate in people's lives

bringing about new birth and spiritual growth in a way that really changes them. This is what Peter writes about in 1 Peter 1:23 (*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*) It never ceases to amaze me how this happens. At some point, someone might be totally opposed to God and the things of God, but then, as the Word gently falls on that person's heart, something happens. It begins to sprout and to produce a spiritual response. The person repents of sin and turns to Christ. He or she embraces Christ and is overwhelmed with His goodness. Many of you know exactly what I mean because this describes what happened to you. If we've been in the church for any length of time, we've seen it happen again and again. This is what the church is all about – seeing this miracle of grace happen in people's lives!

But not everyone is equally responsive to the Word of God. It's helpful and important to realize that some, for a variety of reasons, are more responsive than others. The worst situation is that some obviously receive the Word but then don't continue on growing and producing.

1. Some hear the message but do not understand it and the Evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in their hearts. This is what we might call the *hard path factor*, or the *snatch factor*. It's tremendously important for us to recognize that we live in a world that in which Satan and his demons are extremely active. There are many Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments that allude to this reality. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul calls for prayer in a

concentrated way because “*we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers...* Satan has a way of snatching the truth away from our hearts when it lands there. This is a reality that we have to take seriously. I've noticed, over the years, that Satan has a way of interrupting spiritual conversations. Or a person may be responsive, but no sooner does he or she hear but then they are drawn away by friends or relatives from pursuing the Word.

2. Another reason some people don't continue on is because of what we might call the *rocky road factor* or the *rootless factor*. They receive the Word enthusiastically, but it doesn't have a chance to take root because the soil of such a person's heart is rocky, And when trouble and persecution come along, it dies, -- the person's faith quickly falls away. We need to recognize in this word, that trouble and persecution are an inevitable part of our lives. Just because you become a Christian doesn't mean that there aren't going to be difficulties, and they come in many different forms – sometimes from other people who give us a bad time. I have seen this response often in my work over the years. Someone will respond and get all excited about being a Christian but then fall away because of the difficulties that arise. I wouldn't doubt that there are many in this town that have had some exposure to the Christian Gospel but are not now walking in fellowship with Christ and other believers. Some difficulty, some offense, some form of persecution has caused the Word to die in their hearts and they are no longer with us.

3. And thirdly, there is what we might call the *thorny path factor* in terms of response. This is a case of people hearing the Word, but they become distracted by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of material wealth. It is true that life has many thorns – temptations that come to us in the form of worry and the attractions of this world. People obsess with worry about many things – relationships, family matters, money, and things that they own -- even pets and bad neighbors. And because they don't choose to trust the Lord with these things, they become distracted. Or they become so focused on making a living, making money, and having certain possessions that their spiritual desire for God's Word is choked out. This is the sad commentary of many people who have become believers.
4. But there is another place where the seed falls, (good soil) germinates, and then produces an *abundant harvest* of righteousness. The work and ministry of the Spirit, or the church, or attempts to communicate the Word of the Lord are not *all* fruitless. There are some hearts upon which the seed of the Word falls that are very responsive –that manage to get past all the crud of life (the difficulties, the persecutions, the offenses of other people, the worries of life, and the distractions of the things of this world). Somehow, by God's grace they manage to rise above all of that junk and produce a harvest that is very satisfying both to God, to themselves, and to others.

Several questions come to mind: **Of what does this harvest consist? What are the conditions that**

produce this kind of harvest? And, the biggest question of all, **how can we ensure that *our* lives, in this coming year, produce the best possible harvest?**

When possible, I like to illustrate what we're talking about in a sermon such as this by a live example. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit with Timothy Bowman of our church. You may know his story. What struck me was how the Word of the Lord changed everything for him. I've asked him to come and share with us how God has been using His word in his life to produce good fruit.

This is just one example of how God's Word can produce a harvest of righteousness. In the context of this parable, I ask the question, of what does the harvest consist? One of the difficulties of the work of the kingdom or the church is that it's not always easy to measure a spiritual harvest in terms of numbers. But the Bible speaks extensively of spiritual fruitfulness (the fruit of the spirit), of winning souls, and of yielding a harvest of righteousness. Take Psalm 1, for example: *He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water...* Or like Psalm 92:12 – 14 says, *The righteous will flourish as a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green...*

Prosperity in the context of God's kingdom is always about lives of true righteousness, of giving to others for the sake of God and eternity. Perhaps one of the best summaries is found in 2 Peter 1:5. *For this very reason,*

make every effort to add to your faith goodness... knowledge...self-control...perseverance...godliness... brotherly kindness...love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. So these are some of the ways we think of fruitfulness. As has sometimes been pointed out, the parable is not so much about the sower and the seed as it is about the *four kinds of soils* and how they are receptive and responsive to the Word of the Lord.

As was mentioned at the beginning, the first requirement for receiving the seed of the Word is to have hearts that are tender and responsive to the Lord. If we hope to see the harvest that is so desirable and that God promises we need to have hearts that truly seek the Lord, that are humble to acknowledge our need for Him, that are quick to listen. This is what is meant by the often repeated phrase in Scripture, *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

The point here is that we have to get into a position in which we really do want to hear from the Lord. But this hearing is more than simply allowing the word of the Lord to fall on our ears. It is a hearing that results in doing. It is a matter of taking the Word seriously and obeying that Word as God speaks to us. It's a matter of allowing the Word to affect our behaviour in some way.

This week someone shared a book with me that relates to what we're talking about here this morning. It's called, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in a Digital Age* by Kavid Kinnaman and Mark

Matlock. This is what they write: *As in that ancient story, today the soil of many hearts is rocky, dry and dusty or filled with thistles and weeds stifling what really matters. ... Deep spiritual longings which ought to be lovingly tended and skillfully cultivated are choked to death by binge television, immersive gaming, and social media scrolling... technology and the lighted rectangle are not bad in themselves. But if we are not vigilant and intentional, digital Babylon glitzes and blitzes our days so completely that we never get around to pursuing the deeper things of life.*

The question I really want to leave with you today is one that I've been asking myself: What can I do to ensure that my life will produce a harvest of fruitfulness? And I think the answer to that question is that it begins with a genuine prayer for such – a prayer that recognizes the dangers and distractions and asks for God's grace to make our hearts tender and responsive to His Word. So I have this suggested prayer for us today:

Lord, you know the difficulties and challenges that I face. You know that I'm prone to distraction, to becoming tied-in-a-knot about many things, to being easily tempted by the deceitfulness of wealth. Please forgive me, Lord. Please help me to have a heart that is tender and responsive to your Word. I want to live a life this year that is truly fruitful – fruitful in producing the fruit of your Spirit, fruitful in loving and caring for others, fruitful in seeing others come to know you and love you. Don't let me live my life merely in the here and now. Let me live my life for what really counts – for your kingdom and for eternity. In Jesus' Name, Amen.