

**Parables of Jesus: The Parable of the Sower**  
**Matthew 13:1-9**  
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Today we are wrapping up our series on the parables of Jesus. We've spent 6 weeks looking at some of the most famous parables of Jesus. Remember that this is Jesus' primary way of teaching. And the word, parable, literally means to throw along side of something. And this is what Jesus did. He took something everyday and ordinary that almost everyone would recognize and then he would throw something more difficult, like the Kingdom of God, or God's purpose in your life, or the nature of God, alongside...making an analogy...this is like this.

As we are getting started today, I'd like to invite you to take out the insert from your program. On one side is the outline for the sermon today and I want to invite you to use this to jot down any notes, things you want to remember and keep with you. On the other side is our study guide for this week. We started reading the New Testament in January of this year. Bit by bit, day by day, we are reading through the New Testament together. If you haven't started yet, please join us at this point right now and begin to read the Bible for yourself.

In today's story, Jesus is teaching us about what God's ultimate desire for people is...what God expects and hopes from people. And to communicate this concept, he chooses to tell a story about a farmer. Now everyone understood planting seeds and waiting for harvests. In Jesus day, the agrarian cycle of planting and harvest was intimately intertwined with the rhythm of life. Most people made a living off the land, and those that didn't had little gardens. If you look at the feasts and celebrations of Israel, several of them are connected to planting or harvests, including Pentecost and the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles.

So everyone knew about seeds, and soils and harvests. And even though our society is more detached than ever from the farms and from gardens, we all still understand about seeds, and soils and harvests. So what Jesus wants to teach us about God's expectations of people. What God most hopes for in our lives is that our faith will bear fruit. And Jesus explains this parable and he tells us exactly what the different things in the story represent.

Jesus is the farmer in this story. And in this parable the seed is the Good News of the Kingdom of God. We've already talked about the Kingdom of God, so you'll remember that the Kingdom of God is a simple phrase that actually a lot of things: The Kingdom of God is the reality of a God who rules in heaven, who created you in your mother's womb, who knows you by name and has a purpose and meaning for your life. It is the reality of God's mercy and love and forgiveness and new life through Christ. The Kingdom of God is the reality that God calls us to do justice and love kindness, to love our neighbor as we love ourself, and to love God with our whole being. It is realizing that every part of life is a gift from God that we are meant to cultivate and multiply that gift and return to God for God's use in some way. It's everything...It's the buried treasure or the pearl of great value...it is that one thing worth giving everything else to have; Living in God's presence, place where forgiveness is found, like in the parable of the lost Son; place where God's will is done, like the Samaritan extending

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mercy to the man beaten by robbers; It's God's investment into our life that is meant to be put into action like in the parable of the talents...

The Kingdom of God is the primary focus of Jesus' teaching...it is what his life and purpose are all about. And he's been going around the countryside teaching and demonstrating what the Kingdom of God is.

So the seed is the good news of the Kingdom of God and the soils, well the soils are the hearts of people on which the seeds of good news fall. And through this story, Jesus is inviting us to do a little soil analysis. Just like you might have the soil in your garden or fields or even in your yard analyzed to ensure good growth, Jesus is asking us to look at our lives, our hearts and determine just which kind of soil are we. So describes 4 types of soil that are people's hearts, that he has seen as he's been preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Just picture Jesus, as he is preaching and teaching, and he looks around at the people who have gathered. He looks at some people, and what he sees in their eyes is disinterest, disbelief, or in a few people he sees anger at what he's teaching...they are totally closed...they do not hear the good news. They are like the hard ground in the story. They are unreceptive. The seed doesn't even penetrate.

Another type of heart Jesus saw was like the shallow soil. There was lots of shallow soil in Israel, with a skim of soil on top of the limestone. You know what happens here. The seed takes root initially and grows, but once the dry season comes, the plant withers because it cannot send its roots down deep. Jesus saw that people were like that. They had an initial interest in what he had to say, but then they came up against some hardship, and their faith was shallow and superficial. They did not send down deep roots and life that God so desires that they should have just withered away.

Jesus saw that some people were like a soil that was good for growing, but was crowded with weeds. So the good plant, the one meant to bear fruit, was stunted or crowded out by the competition. And the people Jesus was describing are those who became excited and their lives were transformed a little bit, but they also had lots of other interests and loves that were just as important to them and so their faith was in competition and it got limited and sometimes even choked out...defeated.

Then Jesus noticed people whose hearts were like good soil. They became excited and things started to change. The Kingdom took root in them and it turned things inside out! They grew in love, joy, and peace, and all the fruits of the spirit and they began to bear fruit. It grew out of their life...it began to spill over in the lives of others...more seeds of faith.

And of course, we're meant to ask..."which one of these is most like me?" And there are a several ways to answer that question. Which soil you are right now, today, is probably different than which soil you have been in the past, which may also be different than which soil you desire to be. Probably true for most of us that we have been all four types of soil.

There are some of us here who have been the hard soil. Either right now or some time in the past you were closed, disinterested, did not care. I know that I was at one point in my life. I may even still be from time to time. For this kind of soil to become receptive to planting, it has to be plowed up, right. That's what a plow is for...to break open the ground. And in life, for some of us that plowing up of our closed heart come with some difficult circumstance or tragedy and suddenly we realized that we

needed God. We hadn't been open to that before. Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Something happened and it made you aware of your need for God in your life.

For some of us, our faith is like the shallow soil. It's superficial. We've never really made the effort to grow deeper in our faith. We haven't put down our roots. We don't read the Bible, haven't joined a course or small group. We won't sacrifice the time to serve others. These are some ways of growing roots, but we're not that interested. We get briefly excited about our faith, but we don't sustain it by growing deep roots. We don't have a relationship with God that's deep, that sustains us in hardship, so when hard times come, we don't really know how to reconcile that with our faith, so we fall away, often blaming God, getting angry with God or maybe no longer believing in God.

Some of us have good soil. We are interested in growing in our faith and in serving God. We want to grow our roots and have a strong relationship with God, but the problem is that we have lots of other things we are just as interested in. So following God is just one among many interests we have. And the spiritual truth is that if our relationship with God is not the top priority, then in time it will get choked out by all of our other loves and interests. When others look at us they see a weedy garden. They can tell there's good stuff in there, but the good plants are competing with weeds that are as tall as the tomatoes, and the tomatoes you can find are smaller than they should be. Our lives can be like that. There's faith in there, but it's covered up by all our other interests. There's fruit, it's just not all that it was meant to be. The harvest we offer doesn't really look like the real deal.

But then there those times in our life when our soil is ready and we're pulling out the weeds and we focus on God. And we begin to see growth, there's transformation, and we begin to see a harvest and it is remarkable. At least in God's eyes it is remarkable.

Now this is what God desires of us, that we produce a harvest. This parable is about God's intentions for our life and God desires that we produce a harvest. That's what God expects. That's why he invests in your life.

Several years ago, Jennifer and I planted some sunflowers. Although we haven't planted them in several years now, we both really enjoy watching the sunflowers. If you think about it, they are a good metaphor for the Christian life. From this one little seed grows a plant taller than I am. And this huge flower grows on top. And if you notice, that flower follows the sun all day; as if it is in worship, staying focused on the sun. And God intends for us to be like that. And in time, hundreds of seeds develop from that one seed, and the flower bends over to drop those seeds back into the ground. These seeds nourish the birds and squirrels, and there are many left over that grow into volunteer sunflowers so that you have a whole crop of sunflowers when you started with just one seed.

And that's what Jesus has in mind when he tells us the parable of the sower. You're to look at your own life, understanding that the seeds have been sown. To look at your own heart; then to you are to ask, "what is your own heart like. "What's your soil like?" And then you're to ask this question, "What is my crop like? What does harvest look like?"

God expects a harvest from all of us. That is God's expectation. And throughout the scriptures, repeatedly, we hear from God that if something doesn't produce a

harvest, then cut it down and throw it into the fire. God is saying, "I'm looking for what is going to produce a harvest."

So now I'm asking you this question today. "How is your harvest"? Are others nourished and do they feel encouraged and empowered by your words and deeds? Do they find life because of the things you say and the way that you treat them? Are there people who eat because you offer out of what you have? Do people walk away from you feeling built up and encouraged instead of discouraged and torn down? Have you invested yourself in doing the works of the Kingdom? Are you living praise to God by your very being and the way you live your life?

Every act of worship; every time you pray; every moment you're selfless; every time you give encouragement; every time you share the good news and invite someone to church; every act of kindness; every time you forgive; you are producing a harvest. And that's what God is looking for from you. How's your soil? How's your harvest?

I want to briefly return to the Parable of the Lost Son. You remember this story. The younger son of a landowner demanded his inheritance and then spent it in wild living in a foreign land. In time, the money gives out and he takes the only job he can find...feeding the pigs. And he's so destitute that even the pig's food looks tasty. He comes to his senses and decides to return to his father. If his father won't have him as a son, he's willing to become a slave to his father.

You remember how the father is out looking for the son, like he's hoping that today will be the day his son comes home. And when he sees his son coming, he runs out to him and embraces him and welcomes him home.

The good news today is that if you've taken a look at your life and heart; if you've looked at the harvest in your life and you are disappointed in yourself – or maybe you just know that you're not where God would desire for you to be in life...it's not too late! God is in the soil reclamation business! God can transform your heart!

All you need to do is (like the son in the story) turn toward home. Turn to God. He'll see you coming a mile away and he will run out to you with mercy and forgiveness! He will give you another start. And he'll give you a healed heart. A heart that desires to please and serve him, and to produce a harvest for his kingdom.

**Prayer: Forgive us, Lord, for our hard hearts that won't allow you to speak your truth or wisdom or love into our lives. Forgive us for being shallow in our faith...for not making the effort to really be in relationship with you. Forgive us for making you one interest among many, and for letting our faith get choked out because it is not a priority in our life.**

**Today, Jesus, I want to make you the primary focus in my life. I want to grow the roots of my faith deep into your love...I want our relationship to be the rock that holds my life together. I will tend to the soil that is my heart. I will nurture it and water it, and I will weed out the distractions by reading my Bible, getting into a course or small group, and by serving others. Lord, I want my life to bear fruit for your kingdom.**