

INTRODUCTION

This is the 40th message in the series I call "Parables and Miracles." The word "parable" means, "to throw alongside." A parable may be an analogy or metaphor where Jesus lays down a natural truth and then throws a spiritual truth alongside it. But in addition to the multitudes of word pictures Jesus used, some parables are actual stories. To distinguish these from analogies, I call these stories, "classic parables." In Matthew 13, we come to the first classic parable, "The Parable of the Sower." It is followed by six more classic parables in this chapter.

Jesus was a great storyteller, so let's read His words beginning in Matthew 13:1-9.

"That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: 'A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears let him hear.'"

We won't read this next section because we covered it when I began this series, but it explains WHY Jesus taught in parables. Spiritual truth is so valuable that you need to be willing to dig beneath the surface to find it. We don't have to wonder about the meaning of this parable, because down in verse 18, Jesus explains it. It's as if He's saying, "Since this is my first parable, I'll give you a freebie. I'll explain this one plainly to you." "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has not root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understand it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown."

Would you like to know how to multiply your influence by 100 times, or 60, or 30 times? In this parable Jesus teaches the secret lies in understanding the power of a seed. The largest known seed is that of the Coco de Mer tree which can weigh 60 pounds. The smallest seed is that of an orchid. Several orchid seeds can rest on a speck of dust. A seed contains life. It may be small, but it contains tremendous potential.

Most of you know one of our members, Dr. Sasha Vukelja, has written a best-selling book about her life. She entitled it *Seeds*. When she speaks to groups, she talks about the power of a seed. Since I knew I'd be talking about seeds today, I asked her for a quote. She writes: "Seeds look lifeless, but inside is great potential. When you buy a packet of seeds, you're not buying the little

brown things inside, you are buying potential. You are buying the picture of the beautiful yellow daisies on the package. And with the right soil, those seeds will realize their potential." The same can be said about the seed of the Word of God. There is amazing potential in that seed, but we must provide the right kind of soil for it to grow.

I. FOUR SOILS SYMBOLIZE FOUR WAYS TO RECEIVE GOD'S WORD

I've been preaching for 40 years. That's a lot of preaching, but that's also a lot of watching people listen to me preach! As I look out across this room, I see some folks who have their Bibles open; their pens and paper ready to fill in the notes. They are almost literally sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for a word from God. However, there are many others who are only casual listeners—they're paying attention, but don't really see the need to open their Bible or take notes. And there are others who are bored; they are yawning already. Their biggest concern at this very moment is "When is this going to be over?" Two people can hear the same message and one says, "Wow! God really spoke to me today!" While someone sitting next to them can scratch their head and only wonder what they meant.

How can there be so many different attitudes about the same experience? That's what Jesus addressed in this parable. He described four different ways people receive His Word. And I believe all four of these attitudes are present here today.

A. Hardened heart: God's Word is snatched away

Jesus said some seeds fell on the pathway and the birds swooped down and stole the seed. This represents a person who is "hearing" the Word of God right now (because I'm teaching it), but my words go in one ear and out the other. God's Word rolls off you like water off a duck's back. You don't consider yourself to be a hard-hearted person, but you just really aren't interested in the Word of God. Your heart is like a pathway trampled down until the dirt is hard-packed. What you are hearing today may be entering your ears, but it certainly won't enter your heart.

Jesus said there is a something going on right now, invisible to the human eye, which makes it even harder to receive the Word of God. He warned that Satan tries to "steal" the Word from you. Just as the birds flew away with the seed as soon as it landed on the pathway, the devil stands ready to try to steal the Word away from people as soon as they hear it. Don't be surprised if you have trouble concentrating when you are reading the Bible or when you are hearing the Bible being taught. One of the enemy's most effective strategies is distraction. At this moment, Satan would love nothing better than for you to be distracted by a crying baby, or someone walking in or out. He is actively attempting to steal the Word away from you.

B. Shallow heart: God's Word is heard but forgotten

This seed fell on rocky ground and started growing, but because there was no root, the plant withered under the heat of the sun. This represents someone with a shallow heart who hears the Word, but then forgets it when they face the heat of everyday living. Jesus said these people receive the word with joy. They react with an emotional acceptance of the Word. They listen and they are happy to hear the Word. They will smile, shout "amen" and may even shed a few tears

of joy when they heard the Word. But by Tuesday morning, they are downcast and defeated. The emotional boost is gone, so the commitment is gone. I call these people, "Alka Seltzer Christians," they fizzle furiously for a short while and then they fade away.

This is a real warning to us about the danger of basing your Christian faith on your emotions. Some people think the reason for church is to get happy and they hope they can get enough happiness to last them through the week so they can come back the next week and get a refill.

A few weeks ago on Easter I ended the message by describing Jesus from every book in the Bible. I heard from dozens of people saying that was a wonderful experience. I agree. Some people probably wondered, "Wow! Why doesn't he preach like that every Sunday?" Well, first of all, it would probably kill me. But mainly, as your pastor, it's not my desire to only touch your emotions; I'm trying to build healthy strong Christians, fully devoted followers of Christ. That's why I constantly feed you a steady diet of the God's Word Sunday after Sunday. We all love ice cream but if we ate it every meal, it would soon get old! Make sure you aren't just coming to church for a thrill, That's what Six Flags is for.

You may be wondering, "What's wrong with an emotional faith? I want to feel good about God!" In this parable, the plant had no root, so when the heat came, there was no depth so it withered and died. When the heat gets turned up in your life you need more than just an emotional faith. An emotionally based faith won't stand up when the thrill is gone. You need a faith that is rooted and grounded in the full counsel of God's Word.

C. Crowded heart: God's Word is planted but choked out

Some seed sprung up, but the thorns choked it out. There is a limited amount of moisture and nutrients in soil, so weeds and thorns compete with the good plants. This represents the kind of attitude that hears the Word, receives it, and it is watered and nurtured and the person begins to really grow as a Christian. I believe this person has a genuine desire to be a deeply rooted, maturing Christian. But somewhere along the way their growth process is interrupted. They allow their lives to become so crowded with other interests that the Word of God gets choked out. This person hears the Word and says, "I'm going to really apply this truth to my life this week." But they allow other things to make it to the top of their agenda. I'll talk more about weeding out these thorns in the next section.

D. Teachable heart: God's Word produces a harvest (100x, 60x, or 30x)

Jesus said this person really HEARS the Word and understands it, as a result they multiply their influence a hundred times, sixty times, or thirty times. In other words, they are fruitful.

I love tomatoes, so let's use them as an example. What's inside a tomato? Seeds, hundreds of seeds. We grow tomatoes in our backyard garden. Last fall I pulled the dead tomato vines out, but there was one that was already so wilted that I just plowed it under. I didn't realize it still had a few dried tomatoes attached. And this spring, suddenly, dozens of young tomato plants started sprouting where I plowed that plant under. In addition to the new plants we put in the garden, we

have been digging up giving away those “volunteer” tomato plants to friends. Those seeds are going to make tomatoes that will make more seeds that will produce more tomatoes.

We sometimes make a mistake in thinking this parable is about four different people. But the truth is most of us experienced times when we were more or less receptive to God’s Word. I agree with one of my spiritual mentors, Ray Stedman who wrote: “I used to read this story as though these various soils were four different kinds of people, who remained the same all through their lifetimes. Some were permanently hard-hearted, like the first example given; some were impulsive, some were full of concerns. But I have come to see that what our Lord is describing here is not four types of persons, but conditions of our heart at any given moment. Whenever the Word is being taught, people are in one condition or another, just as they are described to us here. We have all been calloused at times. We have all been impulsive in our reaction—emotional and shallow. We have all been overly concerned about other matters. And we have all had times of being open and responsive to the Word.” So, my question to you is not which of these four people are you, but which attitude best describes the attitude of your heart toward God’s Word right now? Would you like to multiply your influence a hundred times? Here’s how.

II. HOW TO BE A FRUITFUL FOLLOWER OF JESUS

The only difference between the fourth attitude and the first three categories is when you have a teachable heart there will be fruit in your life. John 15 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. In it Jesus employs another agricultural analogy. He says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) If you want to be a more fruitful follower of Jesus, here are three things you can do.

A. Develop a hunger for God’s Word

The Psalmist observed, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.” (Psalm 119:103). Do you have a voracious appetite and desire to read and hear God’s Word? Sadly, many people are more interested in their next meal than in hearing from God.

The French have an interesting phrase. When you sit down to eat a meal they say, “Bon appétit,” which means “good appetite.” Why don’t they say, “Good food?” Because they understand your enjoyment of a meal is directly related to the intensity of your appetite, not necessarily the quality of the food. If you haven’t eaten in two days, a bowl of soup tastes heavenly. On the other hand, you can sit down to the finest meal prepared by the most talented chef but if you’ve just eaten three Big Macs, you won’t really enjoy that fine meal. Why? Obviously, because you are already full. You may not hunger for the Word of God, because you are already full of something else.

Do you desire to hear God’s Word as strongly as you want to eat when you’re hungry? The reason some of you aren’t fed by the Word says much more about your lack of spiritual appetite than about the quality of the food. For example, a person who truly hungers for the word never asks on Saturday night, “Am I going to church tomorrow?” That question is as superfluous as asking “Am I going to eat today?” If you hunger for the Word, your only question on Saturday

night is "What time am I leaving for church?" You aren't coming because there's a crowd, or a special program; you come because you have a hunger for the Word.

We tend to tune our ears to what we really want to hear and we tune out what we don't. A farmer was visiting a friend in New York City, and as they were walking down a crowded sidewalk the farmer said, "Wait! I hear a cricket." His friend said, "Come on! With the sound of all this traffic and the subway below us, you can't possibly hear a cricket!" But the farmer insisted, and he walked over to a large concrete planter containing a tree. He dug down into the mulch and found the cricket. His friend scratched his head and asked, "How in the world could you hear a cricket in the middle of downtown Manhattan?" The farmer said, "Well, it just depends on what you're listening for. Here, let me show you." And he reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change—a couple of quarters, and three or four nickels and then he said, "Now watch." He held the coins waist high and dropped them to the sidewalk. Every head within a block turned around and looked in the direction of the coins. It all depends on what you're listening for. Are you really *listening* for God's voice as you study and hear His Word?

B. Weed out whatever competes with God's Word

In verse 22 Jesus clearly identifies the two things that most often keep Christians from being fruitful. He said, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." The two things that will keep you from being fruitful are (1) Worry and (2) Wealth. And some people are in double trouble because they worry *about* wealth!

Our English Word "worry" comes from the German Word "würgen" which means, "to choke." Worry is when the devil puts a mental and emotional choke hold on you. I'm convinced the most prevalent sin among Christians is worry. There are two categories in of trouble in life, (1) Troubles you can't do anything about it (like the weather); and (2) Troubles you can do something about. If you can't do anything about your trouble, then why worry? If you can do something, why worry? Do something! My attitude about worry can be summarized in a little poem I've quoted for years: "For every evil under the sun; either there is a cure; or there is none. If there be one—seek 'till you find it. If there be none—never mind it!"

God's Word promises that He will take care of you and worry is an insult to God because it basically says, "I don't believe You, God. You're a liar." Worry will choke out God's Word in your life like a massive thorn vine that takes over your garden choking out the good plants.

Besides the worry weed, there is also the wealth weed. Jesus didn't say there was anything wrong with wealth; instead He mentioned "the deceitfulness of wealth." Wealth will lie to you. It can give you a false sense of security and worth. Wealth may deceive you into thinking you control your own destiny and that you don't need God.

Your heart is like a garden, it needs to be tended. Even a good garden has weeds that spring up. But you can't just chop off the weeds; you must pull them out by the roots. If you want to be a fruitful Christian, you must constantly attack the root sins of worry and the craving for wealth.

C. Cultivate a lifestyle of planting God's Word in others

Not only do we receive the Word of God into our hearts like a precious seed, we also are commanded to take that seed and plant it in the hearts of other people. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, it's because someone cared enough for you to share God's Word with you in your past. It might have been your parents, a relative, a Sunday School teacher, or your pastor. Are you actively planting God's Word in the lives of others? We can't "save" anyone, only God can; but we can plant seeds in the lives of others. When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth he pointed out, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plant, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow." (1 Corinthians 3:6-7 *The Message*).

What is the fruit of the Christian life? There is a list of nine personality traits found in Galatians 5:22 called the fruit of the Spirit. These are so important, we've printed them above the nine doors to this room. But there is a more obvious truth about what fruit represents. In fact, I've heard Ken Wheeler, a man who is committed to making disciples, stress this many times: **The fruit of the Christian life is another Christian.** An apple tree produces apples, which are full of seeds that produce more apples. If you plant an apple seed, you don't get grapes. In fact, someone said, "Anyone can count the number of seeds in an apple, but only God knows how many apples are in a seed."

When you are actively planting seeds in the lives of others, you multiply your influence a hundred times, sixty times, or thirty times. One way to know for certain you have a teachable heart is when you are producing enough fruit to plant seeds of the Word yourself. Are you a seed-planter? In Jesus' parable the farmer was so generous with his seed that he didn't only plant the seed in the fertile ground, he tossed it everywhere, when only 25% of the seed would be successful.

The Word of God is such a powerful force, you should just spread it around generously, don't be stingy with it. There are hundreds of ways to plant seeds. We support the Gideons organization because they plant millions of copies of God's word around the world. But you can plant seeds by giving someone a little tract that says, "How to have Peace with God." I keep some of those tracts in my computer case, so when I'm flying on an airline, I'll open the in-flight magazine to an article like, "How to make a million dollars before Friday," and I'll insert a tract between the pages. I won't be surprised to be in heaven and meet someone who says, "I came to know Christ because read a tract I in a magazine while on a business trip."

We're offering some precious seed today, by the way. They are the tickets to the events of Freedom Celebration. The tickets are selling fast, but there's still time for you to get two or three. And when you give that ticket to someone who needs to hear the gospel, you are planting a precious seed. But there are probably still come of you who haven't decided to buy a couple of tickets and invite someone. I don't want to ask you, "Have you invited someone to Freedom Celebration?" Instead, I want to ask you: Are you even *burdened* over people around you who need to know Jesus?

Consider this beautiful picture from Psalm 126:6, "He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to

sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him." The farmer in this picture goes out weeping. Is your heart broken over the spiritual condition of people around you? Jesus stood over the city of Jerusalem and wept because they didn't accept Him. Have you ever stood overlooking your neighborhood or community and wept because there are men, women, boys, and girls who are facing an eternity separated from God? When you have a broken heart for people and carry the good seed to them, then there is the promise that you will rejoice when God gives the harvest.

CONCLUSION

How can you multiply your influence? By aggressively and generously spreading the good seed of God's Word. The seed of the Word is so powerful all you have to do is plant it—God will do the rest. Dr. Gaylord Kambarami is the General Secretary for the International Bible Society in Zimbabwe. Once he was passing out New Testaments and a very skeptical man told him if he took the Bible he would just tear the pages out and roll them up to make cigarettes. Dr. Kambarami told him to go ahead and do that, but to promise him he would read each page before he smoked it.

Years later, he met the man at a Christian convention. The scripture-smoking man had been saved and was now an evangelist himself. His testimony was simple. The man told how he had received a New Testament to make cigarettes. He said, "I smoked my way through Matthew, Mark, and Luke but when I got to John 3:16, I couldn't smoke anymore. When I read that I got on my knees and that's when Jesus changed my life!"

What kind of heart do you have today? Hardened? Shallow? Over-crowded? Will you make a new commitment today to cultivate your heart to become more teachable? Will you strive to be rooted deeply in the faith? Will you weed out some of the things that are strangling the Word in your life? Will you become someone who is actively spreading the good seeds of the God's Word everywhere you go?

OUTLINE

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- C. Crowded heart: God's Word is planted but choked out
- D. Teachable heart: God's Word produces a harvest (100x, 60x, or 30x)

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Psalm 126:6

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes