

The Kingdom and Growth

1. Seed is Formed – Luke 8:4-15
2. Growing Secretly – Mark 4:26-29 & Luke 13:20-21
3. Fruitfulness – Luke 6:43-45 & Luke 13:6-9

1. Seed is Formed

This is one of those passages that you don't really have to preach on. You know, often when I have a sermon to prepare on a particular text, I look through commentaries to see what different Bible scholars have concluded about what it means or how they think it should be interpreted. But this passage is one of the few examples where Jesus gives his own commentary about what the parable means that he has just told. So really all you have to do is read the parable and Jesus' explanation of what it means. And once you've done that, you can go and have an early lunch, if you want to.

But you know, if you can wait for that lunch a little bit longer then I think perhaps there might be something more that God wants to say to us through this passage today. You see, this parable was recorded in the Bible for a reason and we are exploring it today for a reason. God's got something that he wants to say to us today.

Well we don't really need to explore the meaning of the parable, that's there for us already. But it's all very well us understanding the Bible but of course the Bible is not just about knowledge, it's also about action. In other words the Bible is an interactive book. It doesn't just sit idly on our shelf we feed on it, we digest it and it affects our lives – or at least it should. But in order for that to happen, we need to ask ourselves a question when we look at scripture. "What should my response be to this?" Or you might want to ask, "What has this got to do with me?" Or as one Bible scholar puts it, you could ask yourself the question "So what?"

The Seed

The parable starts "A farmer went out to sow his seed". Don't you just love the way that Jesus taught? Not fancy theology but straight down to earth teaching using every day illustrations. Jesus was teaching in Palestine, it was an area that saw a lot of farming, that's because it was in an area known as "the fertile crescent" and so there were areas of good fertile soil. So everyone would have been familiar with the image of a farmer going out to sow seed. It stands a good chance that some of the people that were in the crowd were farmers themselves.

Or it is even possible that as Jesus spoke there may have been a farmer doing just this in view of the crowd, a live visual aid. What I'm trying to say is that Jesus' teaching was right up to the minute because he connected with people where they were. That's why his teaching had such an impact.

So if the people knew all about farming then he obviously wasn't trying to give them a lesson in agriculture, so what was Jesus getting at?

Later Jesus describes that "The seed is the word of God". Now the farmer could be anyone, there are loads of people who scatter the word of God – it's what I'm doing now. Every time you speak to someone about your faith, you are also scattering seed, you are telling people about what God has done in your life. I just want to point out a few things here.

- The seed is all the same seed – all perfectly capable of producing a good crop. Jesus doesn't talk about different kinds of seed being planted, all the seed is from the same batch. And it's not a case of good seed and bad seed either. All of the seed is good seed.
- Jesus only mentions one farmer. The same farmer sows the seed that produces a good crop and the seed that dies – it is not down to the technique or skill of the sower. Sometimes when we throw out seed (when we share our faith with others) we think that if they become a Christian themselves then it is down to the way that we presented the gospel. This can go two ways, if they become a Christian we can go into show off mode and think that it is because I am such a gifted speaker that they saw the light. Or it might be that the boot's on the other foot and our friend may not have become a Christian and we think to ourselves "oh I'm just not very good at evangelism, if only I could be more like such and such".
- Obviously God does work through speakers and yes there are some gifted ones but notice again that Jesus is not comparing different farmers here, he gives an example of one farmer who has both good and bad results.
- Jesus explains to his disciples that it is not the seed or the technique we use to sow it but it is the condition of the soil that it lands in (the heart of the receiver) that determines the growth of the seed. How hard is the soil (your heart) towards the seed (God's word)?

Jesus gives some variants on the kinds of soil and each one is a reflection on the state of our hearts and our responsiveness to the word of God.

The Path – Very Hard

I don't know if here Jesus was thinking about a stone path or perhaps it is more likely that he was thinking about a path of compacted soil where the farmer would walk. Either way it doesn't matter, the point is that it is so hard that the seed cannot penetrate it and so doesn't even begin to grow. All the way through this parable remember Jesus is referring to the state of our hearts, how responsive we are to God's word. So Jesus is talking here about a heart that is so hard that it won't even let the word begin to grow at all. It's a heart that simply rejects the word completely. Hardness of heart comes from deliberately and repeatedly rejecting God. You see if we continue to ignore God then we become colder and colder towards him and then it becomes difficult for his word to penetrate our heart as it once did.

It's not a new problem, early on in the Old Testament there are over 20 references to the hardness of Pharaoh's heart alone as he refused to let the children of Israel go. And we see the destruction that comes on Egypt as a result.

But they were not squeaky clean either, in Psalm 95 we read these words about the children on Israel.

Psalm 95:6-11

6 Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

7 for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.
Today, if you hear his voice,

8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, ^[a]
as you did that day at Massah ^[b] in the desert,

9 where your fathers tested and tried me,
though they had seen what I did.

10 For forty years I was angry with that generation;
I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways."

11 So I declared on oath in my anger,
"They shall never enter my rest."

So clearly we have to be careful that our hearts do not become hard, God does not like a hard heart but the point that the passage picks up is that there is a lack of protection. The seed is quickly trampled on and is eaten by the birds.

If we have no foundations to what we believe, if our hearts are so hard that we don't allow anything God says to penetrate, then we become very vulnerable and others will very quickly lead us away.

There are plenty of people out there rubbishing our gospel. For every Christian who witnesses for the Lord you will find another 20 people who are telling people it's all a load of rubbish. There are plenty who will trample the seed we sow, there are plenty who will snatch it away and gobble it up as soon as we sow it. A hard heart makes this very easy.

Stony Ground – Surface soil

Then Jesus talks about the seed that falls on stony ground. This is very common in the average field in Palestine. My interpretation of this is that it is ground where there is a top-soil but under the surface there are stones or rocks.

The result of this is that the seed grows quickly to begin with. Well, the ground is likely to hold the moisture quite well when it rains and so the seed starts to grow well but the problem is that the rocks prevent the seed from forming deep roots and when the scorching sun comes, the moisture quickly dries up and so does the seedling.

Now Ruth and I have a unique talent for gardening. Now I know that some of you in this church are excellent gardeners but Ruth and I have a talent that I think you would find hard to match. We have done the agriculturally impossible. Ruth and I have managed to kill herbs!

You see the herbs grew quickly to begin with but then we kind of forgot to water them and so they dried up and died.

Some Christians are like that. They are all fired up about being a Christian at first. They praise God enthusiastically and they seem to be growing quite fast but then suddenly they seem to dry up.

As Christians we need to ensure that we don't dry up. We need to be continually feeding on the word of God, not just at the beginning but even when we've been a Christian for many years. If we don't feed on God's word then we will die spiritually because we will dry up.

Thorny Ground – Weeds

This is when we let the things of life get in the way of our Christian life. This can happen to anyone and we need to make sure that our hearts are weed free.

Weeds are hard to keep down and sometimes it's a constant battle to keep a weed free garden. Weeds take all the light and they steal all the moisture and again the plant will die or will not be as healthy as it should be. Sometimes in our Christian walk other things get in the way of our relationship with God. The Bible tells us that God must come first.

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

(Mark 12:28)

29"The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 31The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

(Mark 12:29-31)

But other things get in the way don't they. Remember the rich man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life and Jesus told him to sell all of his possessions. The man went away sad because his material possessions were more important to him than following God and he knew that this was a sacrifice that he was not willing to make. There are plenty of things of this world that get in the way of our relationship with God. These are like the thorns or weeds that choke the seedling.

Paul talks about his problem with keeping the weeds down.

Romans 7

14We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.^[c] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

21So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

Paul knew this struggle of keeping down the weeds in his life. It's a constant spiritual battle for any Christian and it's hard work sometimes. And perhaps for us then we need to ask ourselves, have we allowed weeds to grow up around

us? If other things are getting in the way of our relationship with God then we need to get rid of them.

The Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us to take action. Let me remind you that if you are conscious of your sin then you don't have as big a problem as if you are not conscious of your sin. You see if the Holy Spirit is in you, he will be refining you and that means that he will be pointing it out when we do things wrong – it's part of the refining process.

If the Holy Spirit prompts you and you find that the weeds have got a bit out of control in your life then don't give up just yet because this is the whole point of the gospel, WEED KILLER. The blood of Jesus is an excellent weed killer. He died in order that the weeds in our life that stop us having the relationship with God that we ought to have, could be removed completely.

Let me finish off that chapter in Romans 7:

21So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul says yes I do feel like a slave to sin, it's always there eating away at me but praise God that he has given us a solution in Jesus.

Matthew 9:10

10While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. 11When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

12On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'^[a] For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus wants to reach into your life and help you to deal with the weeds, why not let him?

Good soil

This is the nice, soft, weed free, rock free ground where the seed can grow to its full potential.

This is the kind of heart that is responsive to God. This is the person who listens to the word, takes it in and acts on it. And what is the result - Shredded Wheat.

It's interesting that it says on the box that it helps to keep your heart healthy. Jesus was using the illustration to talk about the condition of our hearts. If our hearts are responsive to God then a crop will be produced 100 times more than was sown – a really good year for a farmer would perhaps mean 7 to 10 times more than had been sown. A crop of 100 times more would result in BIG celebrations as it would mean more seed to plant and harvest the following year.

8:15 – Jesus explained that ‘fertile soil’ people are those who hear the word, hold on to it, and share it with others.

If I give you a packet of seeds, you can choose to simply hold on to them. And you can keep it as a reminder of the sermon. That's nice but it might be better to plant them and then you can share the herbs when they grow.

Matthew 5:8

“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.” – part of the beatitudes / sermon on the mount

What a tremendous promise, I hope that it is true of you.

A painting by William Holman Hunt called “Light of the World” shows Jesus standing at a door knocking. Someone once asked the artist if he had missed out a detail in the painting. He said you appear to have forgotten to paint a door handle. Holman Hunt replied, oh no it's not a mistake you see the door can only be opened from the inside.

Revelation 3:20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.