

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

As you drive along the interstate highway, especially in approaching a city or town of some size, you see dozens and dozens of signs advertising one thing or another—places to eat, places to sleep, places to shop, things to do. Some of these signs we notice; most we ignore. If it's approaching mealtime we may pay attention to signs advertising restaurants. If we're a ways from home and it's approaching bedtime, we tend to notice motel signs. But we don't stop at every store that advertises with a sign. The store-owners don't expect that. They will place a sign along a road knowing that a certain number of people each day will see it. And yet they know that not everyone who sees their sign will stop and make a purchase.

I'm not a market analyst, but let's assume that 10,000 people each day drive past your sign. Of those 10,000, say 3,000 notice your sign. Of those 3,000, only 2% (or 60) will stop at your store. Do you get angry at the 9,940 people who did not do what your sign said to do? No, you put the sign out to sow seeds—to let people know where your store is and what you sell. Most will not come, but some will; and for those you are thankful—your sign was worth it.

Let's jump to farming. As a store-owner trusts that his sign will work, so the farmer trusts the seed that he plants in the ground. Not all of the seed comes up. But the farmer plants his seed not worrying that some of it will not produce a crop. He knows that much of it will come up, and that in the fall he will reap a harvest.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed is better understood if we consider that farming was done a little differently in Jesus' day. Back then, the farmer would walk among his fields and scatter the seed by hand as he walked. The plowing took place after he sowed the seeds. So the seeds were not sown into the ground as they are today. They were scattered on top of the ground.

And some of the seed hit the hard paths that crossed from field to field. The wild birds always flocked in the area at planting time. These seeds on the pathways were easily visible and the birds would swoop down and gobble them up. Other seed fell on rocky soil. The farmer did not throw it there to waste the seed. For an inch or two of soil would cover the rocks so that they could not be seen. This seed would then spring up quickly because the rocks beneath the surface would make the soil very warm. However, the rocks also prevented the roots from growing down into the ground, and so these young plants would soon wither away in the heat of the summer sun.

Other seed fell on thorny ground. Again, the sower did not throw it there to waste it. For the thorns themselves were seeds in the ground when the sower went out to sow. But as the seed grew, the thorns threw with them. Soon the thorns choked out the young plants and they died. Other seed, however, fell on good soil. No rocks, no thorns, no hardened paths—and these seeds produced a good crop, yielding an abundance of grain in the harvest.

Now this parable is not about farming, even though the principle applies to seeds, and signs, and many other things in life. This parable is about people—about listeners—about hearers...hearers of the Word. For the seed is the Word of God. The sower is the one who

proclaims that Word. The different types of soil are the different types of people who hear the Word.

There are some people who hear with their ears but not with their heart. They sit in the pew and go through the motions of worship rather unconsciously. The Word of God never reaches the heart of this type of hearer. Satan plucks it away as the birds of the air pluck the seed off the hard paths. When this person goes home from church, if you were to ask him why he went to church that day, he would be hard-pressed to give you a reason. For him, the Word of God may just as well not have been spoken.

There are others who hear the Word of God and they have real joy as they worship. They walk away from the service uplifted. Worshiping, for this type of hearer, was a true spiritual experience. But the Word of God falls upon a rock. It touches only his emotions and not his will. It does not affect his determination. When the next trial in life comes this shows up. On his next date with his girlfriend he will find himself falling into moral laxity once again. On his or her next test at school, or on his income tax report, he will find himself trying to cheat. He will join in with the crowd at work in using foul language. The smiles and frowns of the world affect this hearer very much. The seed of the Word has not been planted very deeply.

And then there are hearers of the Word who are like thorny ground. This hearer loves to worship—his church means something to him. But somehow he or she can't quite come to apply all of the wonderful Gospel message to himself or herself. When things go wrong this hearer is inclined to worry and fret as though his God in heaven was dead. He becomes very upset and distraught because of the pressures of his job and trying to keep up a high standard of living. He does not understand the peace, and joy, and power that the living Christ can give. Oh, he knows these things are there—he hears about them often enough. But somehow the cares, and pleasures, and worries of living in the world choke out the desire to have them.

But then, some seed falls upon those hearers who are like good ground. This hearer comes to church, not to be critical, but to be fed. He knows that when the Word of God is spoken and applied to his life, it's not just another lecture—it is the living Christ at work within him. As he listens his heart is firmly fixed on the Lord. His desire is to feed his soul on the pastures of the living Word.

Now when Jesus finished teaching this parable He said something interesting: He who has ears, let him hear! In other words, "Sober up! Think about what I just said. I'm talking to you!" Let's ask a somewhat similar question this morning: Which type of soil are you? Are you like the hardened path, or the rocky ground? Or are you more like the ground full of thistles? Or are you the good soil, producing the fruits of faith in your life?

You know something? I really don't care. Now just a minute...I'm not being flippant here—I'm being honest. The sower went out to sow. He did not go out to check out the ground. His job was to sow the seed. That is my "job"—my calling from the Lord. I am to sow the seed of His Word. It's not my job to worry about where that seed falls, or what happens to that seed once I scatter it. That's God's job, not mine. He causes the seed to grow and produce as He pleases—not me, not you. I couldn't sleep at night if I had to worry about these things. Can you imagine a farmer going out each day to see to it that

every seed he planted produces a crop? Or a store-owner standing by his interstate sign waving his car toward each car to try to get every single driver to stop at his store?

“The sower went out to sow.” This text is comforting to me as a pastor. It reminds me that I am not in charge of your spiritual growth—God is. I’m in charge of sowing the seed, under His direction. I can care about you, and I do. I can pray for you, and I do. I can encourage you—I can sow the seed of the Word day after day, far and wide—but I cannot make you grow as a Christian. That’s up to God.

God does not run His Church like a business. He runs it by grace. The store-owner may be paid by the number of people who read his sign, but that’s not the church. When the pastor’s salary is determined by the number of people he brings in the door, that church is in trouble—it has fallen from grace. The sower is called to sow the seed, not to cause the growth.

And here is that seed being sown into your ears: Dear sinner, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die in your place. It doesn’t matter which type of soil you think you are—He died for all types. He has forgiven all types of soil. Whether you’re a hardened path, or rocky ground, or full of thistles, or good soil—you, you, you, and you are forgiven. In your baptism, He planted the seed of His Word in your heart. He keeps planting, and watering, and cultivating as He proclaims His Word into your ears, and places His body and blood into your mouth. And because He is gracious and merciful, He keeps drawing you back here to where His sower is sowing—because He loves you more than you or I can ever know, and He will never reject you, no matter what kind of soil you may be...and even though your soil may change week after week and month after month. Jesus died for every type of soil—for everyone who hears His Word.

And do you have a child, a grandchild, maybe a parent, or a spouse that you dearly love—but you are so concerned that they’re not walking with the Lord as they could? You’re afraid for their eternal soul, for the seed of the Word is not growing in their life. Take comfort and trust the seed. Pray, encourage, keep sowing His Word by how you live and what you say. But let God handle the growth. That’s His department, not yours. Let the seed do its job. It is the living Word, His strong Word, the Lord Jesus Christ—and with Him “all things are possible.”

“The sower went out to sow.” Be sowers with me. Make that seed an important part of your life. Watch it take root and produce fruit. And keep sowing it in the lives of those people you love. And let God, in His own time, cause the growth. Trust the seed. Amen.