

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

How long do you think a farmer would make it in the business if only one-fourth of what he planted actually produced a crop? Yet this is the sower in Jesus' parable. The seed falls in four different places, but only in one of the four does the seed yield its fruit. Statisticians might be quick to point out that this ratio is seen today. About one-fourth of our world's population, twenty-five percent, attends church. And it would be convenient for us to say that churchgoers are the good soil in the parable, and the rest of the world are the three types of bad soil. It would be convenient, but not true. Wherever the seed is sown within the hearts of people, says Jesus, there are four different soils, four ways that hearers respond to the seed. And because the seed is sown regularly within those who attend church, within the church there is the hardened path, there is the rocky ground, there is the thorny soil, and there is the good soil.

And so when Jesus says, "He who has ears, let him hear," He is not telling us to figure out which of our unchurched neighbors are which of the three types of poor soil--because we, therefore, must be the good soil--Rather, He is pointing His finger directly at you, and at me, and saying: Of the four kinds of soil, which of those four are you?

But in the parable Jesus does not begin with the soil, He begins with the sower. "A sower went out to sow." It is important for us to take note of what Jesus does not say here. He does not say: A sower went out to grow crops. He does not say: A sower went out to survey his land before sowing. He says, "A sower went out to sow." Some members expect their pastor to grow their church. Some members expect their pastor to give them what they want...in worship and from the pulpit. But that is not what Jesus expects of His sowers. Not: A preacher went out to grow his congregation, but "a sower went out to sow." Not: A preacher went out to survey his congregation and give them the kind of seed they wanted, but "a sower went out to sow."

I find it interesting that Jesus' parable is called the Parable of the Sower. And yet the only time that the sower is mentioned is at the very beginning of the parable. It's not about the sower, but about what he sows. It's about the seed, the Word of God. But there are sowers who like to think that it's all about them. It's *their* church, *their* message, *their* face up on the billboard. When their church is active and growing, they become quite popular. They are sought after for their knowledge on how to grow a congregation. And when the growth stops, their popularity plummets. They search for newer and better ways to grow their church. Some even leave the ministry dejected because they have become failures as sowers.

The sower sows. And so it would be to your benefit to be on good terms with the sower. But this is only because of what he sows. The sower is not precious, but the seed is. Sowers come and go, but the Word of God abides forever. No sower can save you from sin, death, and hell, but the seed he sows can and does. No sower can grow the church; it's the seed which has that power. If you're hung up on the sower--you love him too much, or hate him too much--you're hung up on the wrong thing. It's all about the seed.

This seed is powerful for it is God's seed. The Seed of the woman who would crush Satan for you. And yet this seed is ever so fragile in the hands of men. God does not overwhelm you. His seed can be rejected. It can be snatched away by the devil. It can be choked out by the cares of the world. It can wither and die within a person's heart. But it also has the power to grow and produce fruit.

The question, "Which kind of soil are you?" is a question of the Law. And it's one that needs to be asked. Jesus did not speak only about the good soil in His parable. He spoke also of the soil--those hearts and lives--where the seed of the Word does not endure, where faith dies and salvation is lost. But it's not the fault of the seed; it's your fault, and mine.

The seed is not to be blamed when Satan snatches it away. It's the fault of our fallen sinful nature when people come into the church and head right out the back door. It's not God's fault that His Word barely makes an impression on them. The seed is not to be blamed when it withers and dies in a person's heart. It's the fault of our fallen nature that people in the church do not want deep, strong roots in the Word; that people want only an acquaintance with it. And so when troubles come, the Word of God which has withered in their heart is not, for them, a sure and strong foundation. The seed is not to be blamed when it is choked out of the heart by the cares of the world. It's the fault of our fallen nature that church members place others things in life above the Word of God so that, in time, they shipwreck their faith upon all the cares and pleasures of this world.

I'm not saying that you are one of these three types of soil, but because we also have within us the fallen sinful nature, these three types of poor soil live within us. And if we do not battle against them, we will be overtaken by them.

The seed is responsible, however, when it endures within a person's heart and produces good fruit. It's not the sower, it's not the soil, it's the Word of God that does this. Who would have thought that a pernicious little thief like Zaccheus was actually good soil? But it wasn't Zaccheus who caused this. It was Christ who entered, like a seed, into him and grew, and produced, and saved this sinner from hell. Who would have thought that a criminal dying on a cross was actually good soil? For when the seed of Jesus' words entered his ears it produced repentance and faith in his heart. Who would have thought that a blasphemer, and a murderer, a hater of Jesus would become soil producing a yield of one-hundred fold? But this is what happened when Jesus came to Saul on the Damascus road and yielded forth the Apostle Paul. And who would think that in a small town congregation in East-central Missouri a pastor would lay in bed each and every night giving thanks to God for the bountiful yield God's seed is producing here in and among you. It's not me, it's not you, it's the seed of the Word that is causing this.

Dear friends, no matter which type of soil lives within you, good or bad, turn away from yourself and look to the precious seed. As long as the pure seed is being sown here, God is at work here, and there is hope, and this hope is for you.

Jesus came, not for perfect soil, but for sinful soil; for soil which wrestles with thorns and thistles day after day; for soil which is hardened by nature; for soil which is full of rocks, rocks of all shapes and sizes. Jesus died for you no matter what soil you are. And friend, Jesus forgives you no matter how you have treated His precious seed in the past, no matter how bad your soil, no matter how sinful your heart. All of you God forgives.

You see, Jesus knows a thing or two about hardened paths, and rocks, and thorns. He walked the hardened path to Calvary. Upon His head thorns were placed. And after He died a large rock covered His tomb. Here in His sufferings and death He shows us that no matter what obstacles are in our soil, He has already overcome all of them for you. If He can conquer a crown of thorns and a large rock sealing His tomb, then He can conquer any thorns and rocks in your heart and life. And this He does, my forgiven friends, because He is God's Seed, precious and powerful, and He is being sown here for you. Amen.

