

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed.⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.” ...

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.²² 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.²³ But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:1-9. 18-23)

What Kind of Soil Are You?

One day last week, I got a call from a pastor in the area. His wife has been battling cancer and they had gotten bad news. So I went to see them. Of course, I reminded them of God’s promises. But I also spent time listening to them – especially to the wife. You know what? When I went home, I felt cheated. You see, I don’t know her very well. Before this visit, I had never done more than exchange pleasantries with her. I felt cheated because God has given her tremendous faith and I’ve been here ten years and I never got to experience it before. It was privilege to talk to her. But she’s not the only person I visited during the last two weeks. Last week, God called two of our members home to heaven. I was with both of them on the day they died. Each of them had confessed their Lord for many years. Each served him in their families and in the church in different ways. Again, it was a privilege to be their pastor.

What do these three people have in common? They all produced fruits of faith. They weren’t the same fruits. But they all confessed their faith in Jesus. They all looked forward to going to heaven and being with him. They all wrestled with physical illness and how they met that challenge and took comfort in their Savior were fruits of their faith.

Jesus talks about our faith producing fruits today. Now, at first glance, it might seem like he’s talking about the kind of soil the seed falls on. But his point is not that some people were naturally better soil than others. If that were the point, what would this parable mean? “Be thankful that you’re not some other kind of soil”? Or maybe, “There are always going to be delinquents in the church”? That isn’t what Jesus was getting at. He was talking to believers who might very well see that they have failed to produce fruits of faith. But Jesus’ whole point is that we don’t have to stay like that. We are not predestined to be the path or the rocks or the soil that’s full of weeds. We can become good and fruitful soil. But to get there, we do have to know what we are today. So my friends, **what kind of soil are you?**

You all know the parable, right? A farmer went out to sow his seed. In ancient times, they didn’t have tractors and mechanical planters. So farmers took a bag of seed and went out to plowed fields and they threw it in handfuls over the broken up ground. Of course, to feed a family, you needed to plant a couple of acres of wheat. That was a lot of throwing. Not all the seed went where you wanted it to go. Some of this farmer’s seed landed on the path. The ground there was beaten down hard and the seed just lay there on top. And the birds ate it. Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. In Israel it’s hard to avoid places like that, even in your fields. Because the soil there was shallow, the seeds sprouted really quickly. But they had no root. When the sun got hot, the plants withered and died. Some of the seed fell among the thorns. At that time, plows weren’t even made of metal yet. They were wood and they weren’t strong enough to really turn over the weeds. So some of the good soil was overrun with weeds and they choked the wheat and it didn’t produce much. But some of the

seed fell where the farmer wanted it to fall, on the heart of his field, where the soil was deep and rich and cleared of weeds. And it grew and produced a crop.

What does this parable mean? The seed is the word of God. It's scattered when it's preached. Jesus says, **"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."** There is only one way to heaven: through the good news about Jesus. But when someone doesn't understand that message or when they just don't listen to it, the devil wins. None of us here today is the path. We already have faith. So Jesus is not telling us to make some kind of decision for Christ. He's talking about what we do with the message once God gives us faith. His point is not what kind of people we are but what we do with the word when we hear it. He's warning us about traps for our faith.

The first trap is having no root. Jesus said, **"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 no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away."** The person who receives the word with joy believes it. But he or she has no root because their faith is all about emotion. They're excited that Jesus loves them. They probably want to tell everybody and sing Jesus' praises. That's a good thing! But they don't feed their faith and deepen their understanding of what God is really saying about us and about Jesus. So their faith is unprepared for trouble or hardship or persecution. The high is followed by a low. Those people who were so excited that Jesus loved them now don't understand why Jesus would let these terrible things happen to them. And they reach the only logical conclusion: the whole thing was a lie. They fall away. Their faith dies.

Jesus goes on: **"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."** Again, this is someone who believes. But their faith is unfruitful. They don't make the tremendous confession that those people I served this past week did. Their children don't grow up hearing them express their faith and seeing how important it is to them. They don't study the Bible and they don't share their faith. Why not? Because the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it. This is one of the greatest challenges to the church in America. When God gives you wealth, the devil gives you worries about how you're going to keep that wealth. You toss and turn at night wondering, do we have enough in our retirement fund? Will we have enough to make our house payment and our car payment and our insurance payments? Yet, at the very same time, the deceitfulness of wealth tells us that we need more money and newer cars and bigger houses or we just won't be happy. So we work more and come to church less. We make getting richer the most important thing in our lives. That idolatry chokes our faith. It can kill it. But even if it doesn't, it keeps our faith from producing fruit because it keeps us away from God's Word.

Finally, Jesus points to the good soil. **"But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it."** Not just understands what the words mean, although that is part of it. The real point is that we understand that this is true. This is God speaking to us. And God means me when he says that Jesus is our Savior. That understanding changes our hearts into good soil. It's what makes us fruitful. The more you grasp who Jesus is and what he has done for you, the more you will serve your Lord and confess your faith.

So, my friends, which type of soil are you? Obviously, we'd all love to be the good soil – even more, the part that yields a hundred times what was sown, right? But how often don't we have to admit that the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth get in the way of our faith? How much more time and effort do we put into having more stuff than we put into growing in our faith? I'm not talking about feeding our families. I'm talking about never being satisfied with what God has given us. Does that ever apply to us? Do we find that we don't have time for church because we work too much? Do we find that we can't be bothered to help with our congregation's mission because we have too many other things to do? Now, taking care of our kids and our elderly parents and loving and honoring our spouse are fruits of faith. I'm talking about putting the church in last place behind all our social engagements and all our work obligations and all our ambitions to have more. Do those things make our faith less fruitful?

Worse, do we no interest in digging deeper into God's Word? Do we find the whole idea of reading the Bible on our own uninteresting? Do we dismiss the idea of doing family devotions? Do we think that coming

to a Bible study or Sunday morning Bible class would be boring? Are we in danger of having no root? Will we be prepared when trouble and hardship come? Will we be able to stand when our faith is attacked?

It can be hard to say which type of soil we are, because it's easy to see ourselves in all three of the types of soil that represent believers, right? Jesus is not saying that you're born one type or another and there's nothing we can do about it. He's saying that how we respond to the word determines which type we are today. God gives us faith. But then we Christians either faithfully hear the word or we don't. Now, the Holy Spirit blesses our study and he decides how great our yield is – one hundred or sixty or thirty times what's sown. I don't think we can even accurately measure our spiritual yield. But faithful Christians do bring forth fruits of faith. Finally, it's sin to neglect our faith. It's sin to love money or to worry about money so much that we don't bring forth fruits of faith. Aren't we all guilty of those sins, at least sometimes? I know I am. How about you?

What is the answer? Jesus. Just as it's true that I was born the path and I still am the rocky soil or the weedy soil sometimes, it's also true that Jesus is my Savior. Before the world began, Jesus chose us to believe. Two thousand years before we were even conceived, Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Son of God took on flesh and brought forth all the fruits of faith any Christian ever could. He did that for you and me. God counts his fruits as ours. Then Jesus died for all the times we didn't want to serve him. He died for all the sin in our hearts that doesn't want to understand his word more deeply, that doesn't want to think about the fact that God means me. Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross and then gave up his soul and died so that all that sin is washed away. Jesus rose to tell us now, God only sees us as the good soil. Now, God only calls holy and perfect and loved and forgiven. Now, we will live with him forever.

God makes us the good soil by pressing that point home, especially when we feel guilty about how unfruitful we have been. We are forgiven for Jesus' sake. That makes us want to understand the gospel more. It makes us want to share the gospel personally and be a part of our congregation's work. It makes us want to teach our children to know the Lord and to show them our joy in our Savior. Guess what? All that – even the desire – is a fruit of faith.

Out behind the parsonage, my wife has a vegetable garden. For nine years, I've rototilled it in the spring and again in the fall. We've fertilized year after year because every year, we plant a garden. And every year, we have a crop. Some years are better than others. This year, we've had our best pea crop ever. My wife plants those peas for me. I pick them off the plant and eat them raw. This year, our garden is more lush and green than we've ever seen. When I first rototilled that garden, it was hard clay. It didn't even really have grass in it. It was all weeds. But now, the soil is black and rich. All that work has had an effect. In the same way, God has changed all of us into fruitful soil. Year after year, he works in your heart through the gospel. Don't change back. Dig deep into his word. The more you focus on Jesus and his love, the more you understand that he came for you, that God loves you, the more you will be the good soil. God will bring forth the fruits he wants in the measure he wants in your life. Your job is to be that good soil, to hear the word and understand it, to focus on Jesus. Amen.