

Stepping Toward a Better Life:
Loosening Up for Better Production
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Some unknown lover of nature wrote this little poem:

The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth,
I'm closer to God in a garden,
Than anywhere else on earth.

For all of you nature lovers and garden growers, Jesus told a story just for you. In it He drove home a truth essential for the rest of us, too. We call it the Parable of the Sower, though Jesus interpreted it as an allegory of the soils, which poses no problem for ordinary readers, only for Biblical critics of the 20th Century.

When you and I plant a garden, we plow the ground, make straight little furrows, and carefully place each seed in a prime spot for germination. Not so with the farmer in this story. He broadcasts seed everywhere, on hardened roads, on rocky ground, in the midst of weeds and thistles, as well as good ground hoping some might take root and grow. Such is the nature of God's grace, a sermon for another day. As for now, let's consider the soils on which Jesus elaborated when he tried to explain this parable. What kind of soil are we?

In Verse 4 we read, "*Some seed fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up.*" Let's face the facts. Some of us are **HARD-HEARTED** recipients of the seed.

Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles recorded a song some years ago entitled Hard-Hearted Hannah, the Vamp of Savannah, the meanest gal in town. One wonders what had happened to Hannah that made her so hard. You see hard-heartedness comes from hurt, hate, abuse, abandonment, neglect, narrow mindedness. I wonder what had happened to Hannah that had made her so hard.

Sunday after Sunday we pray for the Lord to "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" I wonder if we really mean what we pray. People not only set foot on our property, they trespass on our personhood, trample our being, run over our feelings, leaving us hard-hearted and beaten down. People become hardhearted because life is hard. When Jesus pulls this story out of nature itself, the big crowd of people who were listening surely could identify.

Sometimes we become hard-hearted out of stubbornness, prejudice and an unteachable spirit. There are none so blind as those who will not see. A single

page out of John Wesley's journal goes something like this:

May 5, a.m.—preached at St. Ann's—they asked me not to come back.

May 5, p.m.—preached at St. John's—deacons said, "Get out and stay out."

May 12—preached at St. Jude's—can't go back there either.

May 19—preached on the street—got kicked off the street.

May 26—preached in a meadow, chased out of a meadow when a bull was turned loose during the service.

Preachers today have the nerve to complain!

Why waste seed on such hard ground? It's a question I was pondering when I noticed yet another sprig of grass peeking through the crevices of my concrete driveway. The grace of God is as relentless as that grass.

In Verse 5 and 6 it says, *"Some seed fell on rocky places. It sprang up quickly. But when the sun came up the plants were scorched because they had no root."* **SOME OF US ARE SHALLOW-HEARTED** recipients of the seed.

Sandy is the gardener at our house. I got my fill of dirt as a kid. Sandy came in the other day and said, "Some of our trees are under stress." This dry weather is killing them. You see, we live on a hillside lot. I wanted something that reminded me of Kentucky. The soil on that hill is about an inch deep; the rest is solid rock. It's almost impossible for our plants to develop a good root system.

Jesus said there are people like that. They look good on the surface, but they have no roots. They are a mile wide and an inch deep. As long as things are going great, they are fine, but let a drought hit, or a heart break, or a pain strike, and they go to pieces. They are people who make every party, but never attend a prayer meeting.

I've noticed over the years that some people are overly kind on the outside, but extremely critical under the surface. Many of our lives are littered with things we begin, but never finish. We are great starters, but the real question of the faith is how well are you going to finish, not just how you are going to begin?

Hear the words of Paul as he appeals to the Ephesians, *"Let us be fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive in Christ. No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for imposters. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth, and tell it in love—like Christ in everything."*

I ask you a question today,

- Are you rooted and grounded in Christ?
- Are you plowing deep into the Word?
- Are you striving for Christlikeness in all that you do?

"Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants" (Verse 7). Jesus says in Verse 22, *"These are the people who let the worries of this life*

and the deceitfulness of wealth choke them, making them unfruitful.”

SOME OF US ARE HALF-HEARTED recipients of the seed.

William Wordsworth wrote at the beginning of the 19th Century, “The world is too much with us.... Getting and spending we lay waste to our powers, little we see in nature that is ours. We have given our hearts away.” Is it any less so at the beginning of the 21st Century?

I know we love to wear the word “busy” as a badge. We say it in our conversation all the time. We walk up to people and to make small talk just say, “Are you keeping busy?” We love to wear our busyness as a kind of badge. I used to be proud of it until I ran into an article in which Martin Marty says “the word “busy” suggests a spiritual disease. A real bore is someone who, when you remark that he is busy, details how busy he is, believing the world can’t get along without him.” How busy are you? Are things crowding in and taking up your time that is not that important in the long run?

Dr. George McCauslin was one of the greatest YMCA directors the world has ever seen. But in his efforts to turn the declining Pittsburgh YMCA around, he burned out and found himself on the verge of a nervous breakdown. That’s when Dr. McCauslin, on the advice of his therapist, took a walk in the woods, sat down on a stump, and wrote this letter to God. “Dear God, today I hereby resign as general manager of the universe. Love, George.” As George McCauslin likes to tell the story, “And wonder of wonders, God accepted my resignation.” So life is filled with critical choices not always between good and bad, but between the good and the best. We are all faced with more options than we have time to fulfill. One of the challenges of the Christian life is to know how to set priorities in the right way. All of us are confronted with that. Wise are those who know the difference between better and best.

Life is filled with choices between grains and weeds. There is an old Native American tale about a chief who was telling a group of young braves about the struggle within. “It’s like two dogs fighting,” said the chief. “One dog wants to do right. The other dog wants to do wrong. They growl at each other all the time.” “Which is going to win?” inquires a young brave. “The one you feed,” replies the chief.

Verse 8 says, *“Still other seed fell on good soil where it produced a crop, a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”* **SOME OF US ARE WHOLE-HEARTED** recipients of the seed.

In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree.
In cocoons a hidden treasure, butterflies will soon be free.
In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

Who could imagine that a small pellet the size of your thumb has within it the growing powers to become a giant oak, or a beautiful rose, or a fresh tomato? The way of God blows my mind. I've never quite gotten used to it. It is more than I can comprehend.

Max Lucado says, "The best thing we can do is to become good soil. Confession is the act of inviting God to walk the acreage of our hearts." There is a rock of greed over there, Father; I can't budge it and that tree of guilt near the fence, its roots are long and deep. And may I show you some dry soil, too crusty for seed? God's seeds grow better if the soil of the heart is cleared."

So let our prayer be, "Plow me and till me and loosen up the hard places of my life that I may be receptive to the seed of your work and become capable of bearing much fruit.

The crop produced in receptive soil is nothing less than miraculous. Normal crop production in Jesus' day would be four, ten, at the most, fifteen fold of what is sown. This productive soil, the power of God's germinating spirit, yields a harvest of thirty, sixty, one hundred fold! Production like that would only exist in a farmer's sweetest dreams. Good soil, by the grace of God, produces much! So never underestimate what Jesus might choose to do with a life that is fully dedicated to his service. Never underestimate what God might choose to do with you. Will you offer yourself in service?

Jesus said to his disciples, "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish the work. You say four months more and then the harvest. I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are already ripe for harvest*" (John 4:35).

What a great time to be alive! Every morning when I awake, the first thing out of my mouth is that I thank God for the wonderful gift of life. The second thing is I want to do my part to bring forth a harvest in the kingdom of God, not what I have on my mind, but what You have on Your mind. I know you do too.

So let us have ears that hear and hearts that understand and a will to embrace what the Lord wants us to hear and see and do.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

