

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Parable of the Sower**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:1-23

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: January 20, 2008

Spirituality is much in vogue today. I Googled the term on Wednesday and discovered there were 82,100,000 entries. After checking each one I am convinced that the term “spirituality” can mean just about anything you want it to mean. And the people who talk about it the most seem to be the most confused. Spirituality is a regular topic on Oprah and on Dr. Phil. Political candidates feel compelled to let the voters know how spiritual they are, and sometimes stub their toes badly in the process (I still remember Howard Dean’s response when he was asked what his favorite NT book was—Job). Spirituality has become a topic at the highest levels of business discussion. Shows like the X Files deal with the paranormal. Questions about God are finding their way into the lyrics of alternative music performers. Spirituality is hot.

It is hard to say exactly why this is happening. Oh, we know why the politicians are doing it, but what about normal people who aren’t looking for votes? Some of it may be attributable to boomers growing up and finding that prosperity produces emptiness. Some of it may be driven by decades of indoctrination about evolution, which leads to the logical conclusion that one’s life is an accident. If you feed on that long enough, despair will drive you to want something more transcendent than Carl Sagan. But it is also true that some of the search for spirituality is God-designed. Solomon said that God has put eternity into every person’s heart. Blaise Pascal put the same thought in another way: “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator.”

Whatever the reasons, people are searching for ways to connect with that which is beyond them. In our passage today, Jesus offers His answer to the question so many in our culture seems to be asking, namely: “What is the secret to spiritual growth?” The answer is not what most are looking for, but I’m convinced it is the only answer that works: *The secret to spiritual growth is allowing the Word of God to produce fruit in the fertile soil of a responsive heart.* I guess that’s my sermon in a sentence today.

We are entering a section of Matthew that is full of Jesus’ patented parables—many of them found only here in Matthew. Everyone likes a story, and Jesus was the Master Storyteller. The parable we will focus on today is often referred to as *The Parable of the Soils*, or even *The Parable of the Seed*, because the story focuses more attention on the soil and the seed than it does upon the sower. In fact, He doesn’t even identify the sower, though I would assume that He Himself is the ultimate Sower and His followers are secondary sowers as they teach and preach His Word. But we have good reason to stick with the traditional title of the parable, because that’s what Jesus Himself called it in Matthew 13:18: “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means.”

Outline of Matthew 13:1-23

The Parable of the Sower (1-9)

The purpose of teaching in parables (10-17)

The meaning of the Parable of the Sower (18-23)

There are three distinct parts of this passage in Matthew 13. In verses 1-9 we have the parable itself. In verses 18-23 Jesus Himself explains the parable to us, making this one of the few parables of which we don't have to be in any significant doubt about its meaning. But in between the parable and its interpretation Jesus is asked by His disciples why he speaks in parables, and so in verses 10-17 he tells us why.

Now I think this parable reveals two key thoughts: that God's Word is sufficient for spiritual growth, but that the effectiveness of God's Word depends upon the condition of the heart of the hearer.

The Parable of the Sower reveals that God's Word is sufficient for spiritual growth.

Listen to Matthew 13:1-9:

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

Now I don't see any point in commenting on this fascinating story without first reading Jesus' own interpretation in verses 18-23. Otherwise we would be wasting valuable time on idle speculation.

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 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. 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 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. 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."

The first truth we must grasp here is this:

The seed that is sown is the Word of God. The seed is defined in verse 19 as "the message about the kingdom," which I believe is just another way of speaking of the Gospel. But from that point on it is called "the Word," which is larger than the Gospel and includes God's

revelation about Himself, ourselves, and the answer to our sin problem. What exactly are we talking about when we speak of the Word? This is an extremely important question, because many religions claim to have the Word of God. Is *The Book of Mormon* the Word of God? How about the *Koran*? What about the TV preacher who says that the Lord spoke to him and told him the church should do X? I would respond to all those questions in the negative.

The writer of Hebrews begins his amazing letter by saying,

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." (Hebrew 1:1-2)

God is a talking God. He didn't *have* to tell us anything. He could have remained silent. But the writer of Hebrews says that God has spoken, and to be specific He has spoken twice—i.e. during two unique periods of time. During one period in the past He spoke through prophets. The writer has in mind the Hebrew prophets like Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Malachi. He spoke to them in a number of different ways spanning at least 1000 years. The collection of the writings of those prophets is what we call the Old Testament.

But God spoke a second time during a period the writer of Hebrews calls "these last days," identified as such from the author's perspective, not ours. During this second period God chose to speak by His Son Jesus. The record of what Jesus said and did is, of course, found in the apostolic writings of the New Testament, and the author of Hebrews urges us to pay special attention to what God is saying through the Apostles (2:1-4):

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels (that is one of the ways God revealed Himself in the OT) was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

In other words, God went to great lengths to give us His Word and then to validate it so there would be no question but that God was speaking.

So God has spoken twice, once to give us the OT, a second time to give us the NT. The writer then goes on to tell us what we have in the Word of God. He adds in 4:12-13,

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The Word of God that all these passages speaks of is the Bible itself. There is no other book that is God's Word, and there is no other book that can accomplish what this book can. I believe we have all we need in this Book to know God and to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. We don't need to look further for long-hidden truth for latter-day saints, as Mormonism regularly claims in its radio ads.

In fact, we evangelicals hold that God has not spoken *since* this Book was completed. Oh, I don't mean that God has not communicated to any individual in any way, but rather that He has not spoken normatively, i.e. He has not given further truth for the whole church. In fact, He promises judgment on those who add or subtract from this book. In the last book of the Bible, the last chapter (22:18-19), it says:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

So the *Koran*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, *The Seven Laws of Spiritual Success*, *Embraced by the Light*, and any other books that claim they are speaking authoritatively for God are making false claims.¹

Friends, I have tremendous confidence when I teach, not because I personally have anything special to offer you, but because I am convinced that the Word of God does! It is sufficient. Now having identified the seed that is sown as the Word of God, I would like to share two simple corollaries that arise from our parable:

1. The content of God's Word remains the same regardless of the hearer. (5-7) In our parable the same seed is sown on each kind of soil. Today we can genetically alter seeds to accommodate different kinds of environments, but that was not true in Jesus' day. The seed didn't change, and likewise God's Word does not change. God's Word is true. It has been. It is now. It will be tomorrow.

2. The potential of God's Word is the same regardless of the hearer. (11-15) A kernel of corn has within it all the genetic material necessary to produce a corn plant, with two or three ears on each plant and with hundreds of kernels of corn on each ear. Whether the seed falls on the path or the rock or the thorns or the good soil, each seed has the potential to germinate and multiply.

God's Word has the same potential to bear spiritual fruit. It is capable of producing spiritual growth in each and every listener. That's what gives me hope and confidence to preach every Sunday. I am not so naive as to believe that every individual present is listening and anxious to apply the sermon, but I do have confidence that to the extent I am accurately conveying God's truth, the potential for life change in each individual is enormous.

Then why don't we see more of it? Why do some people sit in church week after week, month after month, and year after year without any appreciable spiritual growth? Well, in some cases it could be that the sower (in this case, the preacher or teacher) is simply failing to spread the seed. He may be spreading his own ideas; he may be sharing heresy; or he may be confusing in his presentation. Dr. Howard Hendricks used to chide his students in seminary for lack of preparation with the warning that "a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew." But this parable assumes that the sower is doing his job and still the results are not uniform. Why?

The Parable of the Sower reveals that the *effectiveness* of God’s Word depends on the heart of the hearer.

Sufficiency is one thing. I have absolutely no doubt about the total sufficiency of Scripture. But efficiency is something else. If the Word is planted in hearts that are not prepared and responsive, nothing will happen. It’s not the Word’s fault; it’s the listener’s fault.

The soils in our story are obviously representative of four kinds of people, each of whom has a different kind of heart. The first is what we might call “the unresponsive heart.”

The unresponsive heart is raided by Satan, who snatches away the Word. (4, 19) In the parable some seed is sown on the path, where it cannot penetrate the hard soil. The birds come and eat it. Jesus explains this in verse 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.” The path is hard and narrow, just like the minds of some people. They hear the Word, but they do not understand it, and clearly Jesus considers the person responsible for his own lack of understanding. The idea is not that he *cannot* understand but that he does not *try*.

This may be the materialistic person, the humanistic, the atheistic. He hears something about God or ultimate truth, and for a moment he wonders, “Maybe there is something to this.” But the passing impression requires more thought, more self-evaluation, and he doesn’t want to be bothered, so he shrugs it off. And immediately the Enemy comes, i.e. Satan, and snatches away the thought. Jesus is not the least bit shy about attributing at least part of the reason for this person’s lack of spiritual growth to the work of the Devil. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, describes a man who goes into the British Museum and sits down to read. Something he reads suggests to him a thought about God. But then Screwtape (one of Satan’s demons) manages to divert him with the thought it is time for lunch and that he would be in much better shape to tackle this important subject after he has eaten. Screwtape goes on to say,

Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man’s head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of “real life” was enough to show him that all “that sort of thing” just couldn’t be true.ⁱⁱ

The seed has been snatched.

The second kind of person might be called impulsive.

The impulsive heart demonstrates momentary spiritual growth but withers during times of testing. (5-6, 20-21) Some seed falls on rocky places, referring not to rocks in the soil but rather rock covered by a thin layer of soil. The seed sprouts quickly but when the sun comes up the plants are scorched and wither because there are no deep roots. I’m reminded here of the mistake of planting grass in the spring without a sprinkler system. In Kansas there simply isn’t time for the grass to put down roots before the wind and sun do a number on it.

Jesus defines this person as “the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.” I’ve known people like this. The first time they hear the Gospel they get all excited, make a profession of faith, and immediately want to get up front and share a testimony. They gush about how great God is and how much they are in love with Jesus, but their faith is largely driven by emotion and experience, and the enthusiasm doesn’t translate into life-change. They don’t get into serious Bible study. They don’t develop a regular prayer life. They don’t become accountable to anyone.

Well, let me tell you a little secret. Emotions and enthusiasm will only take you so far. Jesus describes what can happen to this person with the impulsive heart: “Since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.” Times of testing put his faith on trial. Personal adversity leaves him thinking that God must be against him. A family member or friend ridicules his faith or questions his loyalty to their family's beliefs. Or a step of obedience is just too difficult to make because it is too disruptive to the lifestyle he has enjoyed. And pretty soon he falls away from the Faith.

Please understand that the point here is not that emotions and enthusiasm are out of place, but rather that they can’t sustain spiritual growth by themselves.

The third kind of person might be called preoccupied.

The preoccupied heart is choked by less important matters. (7, 14) According to verse 7, “other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.” This represents the person who shows signs of spiritual growth but doesn’t mature because, in the words of verse 22, “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” Other priorities grip his soul and distract him. Now some of the worries of this life are things we can’t avoid; we all must cope with them everyday: work, bills, traffic, food preparation, raising children. The battle we all face is how to deal with these things without allowing them to consume us.

But other worries are unnecessary and can be debilitating: like enrolling our kids in 3 or 4 sports and then feeling guilty if we’re not at every game, becoming consumed by collections or hobbies of various kinds, or working beaucoup hours in order to get ahead.

I’m fascinated by that term in verse 22,–“the deceitfulness of wealth.” What’s deceitful about wealth? Simply the notion that it will satisfy, that if we have enough our worries will be over, that the more we have the less we’ll want. The ambitious desire for wealth, friends, can and does suck all the joy out of life.

I find it interesting that Jesus doesn’t seem to be warning about evil things so much as He is warning about distracting things. Gordon McDonald, in his significant book *Ordering Your Private World*, tells this story,

"Years ago my father wisely shared with me that one of the great tests of human

*character is found in making critical choices of selection and rejection amidst all of the opportunities that lurk in life's path. 'Your challenge,' he told me, 'will not be separating out the good and the bad, but in grabbing the best out of all the possible good.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul exhorted his young pastoral protégé, Timothy, with these words, “train yourself to be godly. For physical training has some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” (1 Timothy 4:7-8). Making the nurture of our soul and long term spiritual development a priority will mean that we must say NO to some good things in order to say YES to the best things. But doing so, Paul says, pays a huge dividend. It pays now and it keeps on paying when we stand before God.

The fourth kind of soil represents the responsive heart.

The responsive heart experiences strong spiritual growth. (8, 15) Verse 8 says, “Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” This person is different from the other three in two important ways. First, he has an undivided heart. After he hears God’s Word he understands it. I suspect this means he holds on to it, meditates on it, applies it, and perseveres in it. It doesn’t mean he never has doubts or asks questions, but he presses on, seeking to integrate God’s Word into his life whatever the cost.

This person is also different in regard to the results. God’s Word reaches a fruitful end in the heart of the responsive person. Life-change occurs, spiritual growth happens in a major way. It is interesting to me that Jesus does not standardize the crop. He doesn’t tell us that the responsive heart will memorize 500 verses, win X number of converts, attend X number of Bible studies. In fact, he says the crop will look different for every person, because the circumstances are different. Some will yield a bumper crop, some less, but in every case the Word produces a significant increase of spiritual fruit.

Now before moving on to the last section of our passage, I want to pose a couple of thought questions. First, are any of the people represented by the first three kinds of soil true Christians? I think it pretty obvious that the answer is negative for the unresponsive heart. But if your heart is impulsive or preoccupied, can you still have eternal life? I think Jesus is deliberately ambiguous and leaves this question open. The only thing we can say with certainty is that Jesus does not hold out the unresponsive heart or the impulsive heart or the preoccupied heart as lifestyles to emulate and He does not offer any false security to them. In fact, the question may be a little like asking, “How immature can I be and still go to heaven?”

A second question is, “Why doesn’t the farmer plant seed only on the good ground? After all, if it’s not going to grow on the other soils, why waste it?” Good question. Of course, farmers in Jesus’ day didn’t have GPS units that enable a tractor to drive itself and plant seed only where it is desired. In that day farmers had to throw their seed by hand. The wind would carry some of it on to the path and elsewhere. Also, the land in Palestine wasn’t terribly fertile, so the farmer couldn’t be too picky about where to scatter the seed. He hoped for the best, and depending upon the weather, there was always a chance the seed might sprout, even in soil that wasn’t

ideal.

There may be a spiritual lesson here. There's a lot we can't know about the hearts of people. Our task is to prepare the hearts as best we can, but we too shouldn't be too picky about where we plant, nor should we get impatient when the seed doesn't sprout immediately. I think of a good friend named Chuck in our St. Louis church. His wife came to faith in Christ and to please her he started coming to church, but he resisted making any personal commitment. He sat in our services for five full years and heard the Word every Sunday. It was obvious that his heart needed to be prepared, so we worked on that by answering his questions patiently, treating him with respect, inviting him to retreats, including him wherever possible. Finally one Sunday he told me he had given his life to Christ. He soon got baptized and has become a growing believer. I know some individuals much like Chuck in this church as well.

Now our parable ends with a familiar refrain: "He who has ears, let him hear." It's Jesus' way of saying, God gave you ears, use them! He gave you a mind, use it! He gave you the ability to study, so do it! *The secret to spiritual growth is allowing the Word of God to produce fruit in the fertile soil of a responsive heart.*

Now in between the Parable of the Sower and the explanation Jesus provides we have this strange section where He is asked by His disciples, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Let's take just a few moments to consider His strange answer.

Jesus explains why he speaks in parables. (10-17)

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables."

The essence of what Jesus says here is that He speaks in parables for two reasons: to reveal truth and to hide it—

**To reveal truth to those whose hearts are responsive
To hide it from those whose hearts are not.**

Parables are a powerful way of teaching, but some degree of commitment is required in hearers if they are really to understand what a parable is saying, and certainly if they are to apply it to their own lives. A parable drives truth home to the believer but it goes right over the head of the unresponsive.

Here's the primary point Jesus is making: When anyone uses the spiritual truth he is given, that truth grows in its impact on his life. And God adds more to it. In contrast, however, if he does not use it, he finds it slipping away. The same principle can be seen in many areas of life, like

sports, for example. If a basketball player refuses to practice, his skills deteriorate. The person who does nothing with what he has received finds eventually that he loses it.

Jesus sees a fulfillment of prophecy in the way much of his audience is responding to his teaching. Isaiah predicted some 700 years before (verse 14),

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.

That, of course, not only describes the religious culture of Jesus' day but ours as well! So much talk about spirituality and so little attention paid to the Bible!^{iv}

But then Jesus turns to His disciples and offers very encouraging words (16-17):

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

With the incarnation of Christ and His teaching and healing among them, a new level of knowledge and intimacy with God became possible, a level unknown in OT times. But it's only available to those with responsive hearts.

Conclusion: This passage begs each of us to ask the question this morning, "What kind of soil am I?" As you try to answer that question I want you to understand something very important— hearts can change. Jesus never says that once a person is like a certain kind of soil he is unchangeable. In fact, it is quite possible that a single individual can pass through all four of these conditions. Probably many of us do.

Some of you today may have unresponsive hearts. I know threats don't work, so I won't threaten you. But I beg you to at least ask God to open up your heart so that you can hear what He wants you to hear.

Some of you are new believers and perhaps at this point have an impulsive heart. You feel like you're on a spiritual high. Praise God, but my pastoral concern is that you might fall away when testing comes. And testing will come! We want to help you grow up in Jesus Christ. I beg you to expose yourself regularly to the Word of God—on your own, in a small group, in an ABF or a Lay Bible Institute class, and in our corporate worship. Let God's Word impact your everyday life and relationships.

Some of you have been Christians for a long time but have never matured in your relationship with Christ. You have a preoccupied heart. I challenge you to take inventory of your priorities. Learn to say "no" to good things so that you can say "yes" to the best things.

But many of you have responsive hearts, like those of Jesus' disciples, and I thrill at that fact. I don't mean you're necessarily spiritual giants—just lunch pail believers hungry for the Word of God and working each day to see it lived out a little more in your life. It is *your* hearts that make this a great church and make me say "there's no place I'd rather be; there's no one I'd rather

teach, no one I'd rather serve alongside of." I thank God for you.

Friends, spiritual growth is no accident. It is not a gift for some and not for others. *The secret to spiritual growth is allowing the Word of God to produce fruit in the fertile soil of a responsive heart.*

Prayer: Father, watch over this flock of people. Give us the courage to weed our hearts of those things that keep us shallow and distracted. Fan into flames a heart that pants for You like the deer pants for water. In particular, Father, protect our elders, pastors and leaders so that their hearts will be always responsive to you. Give them each something new to apply and live out so that their walk with Jesus will be fresh. Give them ears to hear. Jesus be praised. Amen.

i. Most of the time here at First Free we preach paragraph by paragraph from this Book. We pick up where we left off last week and pick up next week where we leave off today. Why do we do that? It's not very sexy, and any of you could come up with topics that would draw bigger crowds. We do this because the staff and leaders of this church share a conviction that the best meal we can serve is not an idea that comes from the preacher but rather what was given to us by God in His Word. I know myself well enough that when I pick topics to preach, I am tempted to pick topics I enjoy or know a lot about. I ride my own personal hobby-horses. But when we preach through an entire book, we're allowing God to pick the topics. Some of those topics are NOT ones I would choose, but God knows we need them.

ii. Borrowed from "The Case of the Lavish Farmer," a sermon by Ray C. Stedman.

iii. Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, 82.

iv. Then Jesus quotes this enigmatic statement (15b):

"Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

It's not that He doesn't want them to repent and be healed; God is not willing that any should perish. But some are bent on perishing, and the point is this: Jesus' use of parables is educational to disciples but disciplinary to those who refuse to become disciples.