

Today we continue our series looking at some of the parables Jesus tells as recorded in the Gospel According to Mark. We started last week with a look at a passage that contains three metaphorical teachings conveying one point Jesus is making, but none of the metaphors were actually parables. 😂 So, it was kind of an auspicious start to a sermon series on parables. Today, however, we come to a classic parable, one of the most memorable and impactful ones he teaches.

Now, there are a couple things to keep in mind about parables that I didn't mention last week since we didn't look at a parable. Let me touch on them briefly here. **First, a parable is a fictional story usually intended to convey one main point.** We would do well to try and understand that one simple point, rather than analyzing what every component of the parable represents. This is Jesus' teaching, not a Taylor Swift song, ok?

Second of all, we must remember many of the parables are about the Kingdom of God (today's is, for instance) but the Kingdom of God isn't only about eternity, but also is something to be lived out in our discipleship to Jesus Christ here and now. Reverend Billy Graham tells of a time early in his ministry when he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon. He wanted to mail a letter, so he asked a young boy where the post office was. When the boy had told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, “If you'll come to the Baptist Church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to heaven.” The boy replied, “I don't think I'll be there... You don't even know your way to the post office.”

So, these parables not only tell us some about the Kingdom of God in an eternal sense, but they also tell us about living Godly lives today. This should come as no surprise, since Jesus teaches us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:9-13). With that...**let's turn to Mark 4:1-9.** Pray.

So, he begins teaching the people with a boat as his pulpit. The beach has gotten crowded, he's at the water's edge, and so a little breathing room helps. He could have just walked out on the water and stood on it, of course, but that probably would have been a little distracting. So, a boat it is. And: **He teaches them in terms and stories that would resonate with them.** Jesus is the master of using culturally familiar language to teach his counter-cultural message. So, here, he tells a farming story. There's a lot that I don't know much about...like country music 😊 ...but my knowledge of agriculture and farming is even worse. I've told you before how I once killed a cactus by under-watering it. Enough said. Along with his audience, however, Jesus knows a fair amount about agriculture – which is what happens when you participate in bringing creation into existence, of course.

Now this is oftentimes called the parable of the sower, which on one hand makes sense, since the only human character in the story is the person sowing the seed (representing God). On the other hand: **The point of the story is really about the condition of the dirt and its impact on the planted seed.** So, this is not a parable about the nature of God; rather, it is a parable about the condition of our hearts and lives in response and devotion to Jesus.

The seed represents the “message about the kingdom,” as Jesus says in verse 14 in his explanation of the parable to the Disciples. So, this “message” is the Gospel message Jesus teaches about salvation through faith in himself. **This seed/“word” is how you find out about God, his kingdom, and what it means to be a part of that kingdom now and eternally through discipleship to Jesus.** You can't read the gospels and come to any other conclusion about what Jesus' life and teaching mean, and it's summarized in this parable.

As we go through the four outcomes of the seed being planted, using Jesus' own explanation of the parable that comes a few verses later, I encourage you to consider which of them seems to describe you. Allow this to be a mirror Jesus holds up in which we might each see ourselves. So first, some of the seed fell on the path where it never gets a chance to grow, because the dirt is packed down hard, and the seed is picked up by the birds. Jesus says this is what happens when the word is not “understood” by someone. **“As soon as**

they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them” (Mark 4:15). In this situation, there is a hard-heartedness toward the gospel, with nowhere for the seed to go or grow because there's no desire to let it sink in and become a part of the listener. And so it is then snatched away. This hard-heartedness could be for a variety of different reasons: bad experience with church growing up, a tragedy in life where you felt like God was distant, a prayer that didn't get answered the way you wanted, family upbringing or other cultural influences, and so forth. If a person is open even just a little bit, however, then the seed has a chance to take root. But for some people, their hearts are hard toward God and it never does.

In the second scenario, the seed falls on rocky ground. **It quickly sprouts up, but because there was again little depth of soil it doesn't last very long when the heat of the sun comes (Mark 4:16-17).** The word is received with great joy, but it withers away. The burgeoning faith doesn't last. This scenario often comes about because a person doesn't get connected to Christian community or engage in ministry or any spiritual disciplines. And so the faith that began to grow quickly then withers quickly because of a lack of roots; there's no support structure for it to grow and bear fruit.

The third scenario is the seed that falls on some decent dirt, because the person hears the word and the seed takes root and a plant grows. **But, even though the seed grows and looks healthy, it doesn't yield anything because it's too obscured and choked off by the thorny weeds around it – the “worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” (Mark 4:18-19).** Unlike the previous scenario, this plant lives, but it isn't fruitful. I would suggest to you that this describes the state of much of American Christianity today. Materialism, pride, power, greed, and other seductive worldly desires have choked back the faith of many Christians. They have roots and look good; they “look Christian:” Go to worship services some, are decent people, maybe give financially to the church – maybe even large amounts – but at the core of their life, something else is driving them and motivating them besides Jesus Christ and His Kingdom, such as giving an appearance of commitment and trust. The purpose of the plant, however, is not just to be a nice-looking plant; it's to actually bear fruit, so this plant is not really doing the job and the dirt needs

to be cleared of the stuff growing around it that's preventing the plant from bearing fruit.

About the final kind of dirt, Jesus says: **“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4:20).** Here is the right kind of soil where the seed can take root, grow and do what it's supposed to do: turn into a mature bush or tree that bears good fruit.

So, if you haven't figured it out yet: you and I are dirt. Given the Genesis account of Creation, where God uses the dirt of the earth to create us in his image, this should be no surprise...so let's not be offended by Jesus. 😊 In fact, if someone makes a derogatory statement that you're nothing but dirt: Thank them. It's a great theological truth. **The question this parable forces each of us to ask is: What kind of dirt am I?**

God desires that we'd be good dirt, where the word would sink into us, take root, grow to maturity, and produce an abundance of fruit. The dirt determines the outcome. And just because you've been path-like dirt, or rocky dirt, or weed-infested, that doesn't mean you can't change. **Within God's sovereignty and providence and rule over all creation, there is freedom that's granted to you and me to decide to be better dirt.** The seed is sown everywhere. It's not that the seed is only sown in good dirt. It goes everywhere. In fact, it is God's Word that can slowly transform us so the soil of our lives becomes a healthier place for faith to grow and fruit to be borne.

So, the word of God is sown all over, and you and I and people everywhere have the freedom to choose what kind of dirt we're going to be. **So what kind of dirt are you?** This parable is telling us to be good dirt. And while I'm gone the next three months on my sabbatical, my hope is that I will come back and be better dirt for Jesus and for this church, to bear more fruit. In some ways, I think of the sabbatical as God adding some fertilizer to the dirt so the plant of my life will be more fruitful. I don't know...maybe that's adding onto the parable too much because Jesus never talks about fertilizer. But I hope to be better dirt at the end of this than I am now.

And I think there's an opportunity for each of you as well, over the next few months, to consider the kind of dirt you are and the fruit that's being borne from the plant God is growing in your life and together as a church. The dirt of our church is the collective dirt of all of us mixed together, so there'd be a healthy tree with healthy good fruit here at Rose Hill Church. For some here this morning, maybe you're in one of the first two soils – hard soil that the seed can't sink into, or rocky soil where the seed takes quick root but there hasn't been a support system for it. I encourage you to give the seed a chance, and let the community of faith here nurture you so the soil of your life improves. It can happen. For everyone else here, we are the third or fourth soil: the seed has been planted and there's a bush or shrub or tree that has grown in the soil of our lives. **The question is: is there any fruit?** Is there room for God to bear fruit in our lives, and in our church, or is the plant covered up by and choked out by materialism, greed, accomplishment, busyness, pride, or other things that take up so much space in so many people's lives?

I think there are two ways we can each assess the dirt of our lives and whether there's a fruit-bearing plant in us or not. Maybe while I'm on Sabbatical thinking about these kinds of things, you might do the same this summer individually and as a church body. The first way to think about the kind of dirt we are is very much tied to the vision of our church: **Our Vision is to lead people toward Jesus where we live, work, and play.** It's about each of us living our faith so that in everyday situations, we help lead others closer to Jesus. Specifically, we each have 5 people, or 5 families we are praying for and praying for God to give us opportunities to lead them toward Jesus. And when we do this, we ourselves will also be growing closer to Jesus. So, our own roots of discipleship deepen when we live into this actively: the best thing you can do to strengthen your own faith in Jesus, is to lead someone else to faith in Jesus. This is not about adding a bunch of programs to our already full schedules; instead, it's about intentionally living like Jesus with the people God has already put us in relationship with. So, as you think about the kind of dirt you are, I would encourage you to consider it through this lens.

The second way we can assess the dirt of our lives is, admittedly, more programmatic...it is adding something to the calendar, and setting aside time to serve Jesus and people outside of our everyday lives. **And this second way of being good dirt is being involved in organizing, planning, and leading different ministries of the church.** In spite of our non-programmatic vision, we do still do have ministry programs, structured ministries, and administrative aspects of the church that are important to keep up – from a facility to maintain, to classes to teach, to retreats to put on, to money to count, to worship services to lead and more. These things all happen because of people like you and me being actively involved and participating in ministry using the gifts and talents God has given us in areas of ministry that we're passionate about. And there is always room for more folks – whether that's teaching kids, being a youth leader, leading worship in the choir or band, counting the offering on Sundays, serving as a greeter as people arrive, leading a small group...there is room for you to contribute your unique, God-give gifts, so that our church would bear good fruit.

But being involved takes time. And I believe the greatest obstacle to our fruit-bearing as a church is each of us clearing out some time to be regularly involved in ministries of the church. Being a Christian is not a spectator sport, but getting onto the playing field requires time. Jesus didn't invite the disciples to *watch* him, he invited them to *follow* him; to live as he lived, to minister as he ministered. So, let's prayerfully but intentionally clear out some of the stuff that has grown up and choked out the plant God is growing in us...**Let's make room so God can grow us and bear more abundant fruit in and through us together here at Rose Hill Church.**

So, when I return in three months, I hope and pray I'm better dirt than I am now, ready for God to work in my life so more fruit is born – 30, 60, or 100-fold, however that looks. And I pray that each of us would do that as well – individually and collectively as a church – as we work together to be the kind of dirt where God can grow something that bears incredible fruit for His glory. Let's pray...Amen.