



Week 1: Faithfulness and the Kingdom of Heaven

Day 1 - Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – Seed on the path, rocks, thorns, good soil

That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore. He said many things to them in parables: “A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention.”

“Consider then the parable of the farmer. Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don’t understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one.”

See also Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 and Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

Understanding the Passage:

There are two ways of understanding this parable, though in both cases, the lesson concerns our faithfulness. Most of us read this parable and see the various kinds of soils as the state of our hearts. In fact, Jesus explains each of these growing conditions and contrasts them with the way we receive and practice the Gospel in our lives.

The first kind of soil is so hard that the seeds lay on top and are easily plucked by the birds. The seed never takes lodging in the soil, which is what happens with us when we hear and fail to absorb the Word of God. It would be easy to fool ourselves into thinking this is just something that happens to non-Christians. But the truth is, we have all had times in which family, friends, and pastors try to point out where we’ve strayed from the path of faithfulness and we have continued to ignore them.

The seed that fell in rocky, shallow soil started to sprout but it died quickly because it didn’t have any roots. The heart of the hearer is eager but ultimately doesn’t have the discipline to truly implement any changes in their life. And so, when the initial excitement wears off and the adrenaline that goes with it, we find that it may be hard to keep moving forward in our faith because we don’t have the roots that provide sustenance and strength.

This third kind of soil, that which produces both healthy plants and thorny plants, is probably most reflective of our souls. We faithfully try to follow God but we are tempted by (and often succumb to) worldly interests such as power, money, material possessions, sex, and popularity. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that we cannot worship two gods, but many of us try anyway. When we split our hearts between two masters, the thorny plants of worldly desires often chokes the intentions we have of being faithful to God.

Seeds don't grow in soil that is not prepared for it. Likewise, our faith won't grow if it's planted in hearts that aren't tended. This is where spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, journaling, and fellowship can all come into play to strengthen our faith and our spirits.

There is an alternative way to read this parable, and that is to place ourselves in the position of the farmer who scatters the seed. Our faithfulness to God is measured, in this reading, by how our fidelity and consistency in scattering the seed – spreading the message of the Gospel through love, grace, and forgiveness – no matter how little return we see. Not every seed will take root – in fact, most of them won't. But the devotion we show by continuing to scatter seeds in the lives of others, in our communities, and in our world, is what God truly desires from us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Which kind of soil would you say describes the state of your heart right now?
2. If you are in a season of bad soil, what are some practical things you need to do in order to live in good soil?
3. Are you faithfully scattering seed, even if you don't know if it will grow? Or have you grown frustrated and given up?

Day 2 - Mark 4:30–32 – Mustard Seed

“What's a good image for God's kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it's planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade.”

See also Matthew 13:31–32 and Luke 13:18–19

Understanding the Passage:

Many vineyards in Napa Valley plant mustard seeds when they harvest their grapes. In January, the valley explodes beautifully with yellow plants growing between each row of vines. Early grape farmers found that mustard plants, with their high levels of biofumigants suppress nematodes, a type of microscopic worm that likes to feed on grape vines. They also keep the soil from eroding in the off season.

Mustard also has medicinal properties. It has phytonutrient properties that protect against gastrointestinal cancer. The selenium and magnesium help with inflammation and arthritis. Mustard seeds are also a great source of omega-3 fatty acids, phosphorus, copper, and vitamin B1.

Mustard is also just really tasty. And yet, it is none of these things that Jesus mentions when he talks about the way a mustard seed is like God's kingdom. It's not about its usefulness or appeal, but about its growth patterns. Mustard grows from the tiniest seed – just 1 millimeter in diameter – to a large plant that can reach up to 20 feet tall.

To the Israelites, the idea of God's kingdom beginning with a mustard seed would have been ludicrous. They were waiting for a second King David, someone who would come into town in a chariot and overtake the oppressive Romans. They assumed the kingdom would start with a full-grown mustard plant, to use the imagery in this parable. Instead, Jesus was trying to paint a picture of a kingdom that requires patience and long-term confidence. The eventual growth of the kingdom is not in question, but it will not always happen on our timeline or in the way in which we expect.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is something that starts small and insignificant and grows into something huge and significant? How is it like, or unlike, the kingdom of God?
2. What helps you remain confident in God's kingdom overtaking the earth?

Day 3 - Matthew 13:33 - Leavened Bread

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough.”

See also Luke 13:20-21

Understanding the Passage:

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ ministry is summed up in two sentences:

“Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people.” (Matthew 4:23)

The “good news of the kingdom” was his primary teaching focus. In Matthew, the kingdom is “of heaven” while in Luke and Mark it is “of God.” These are two sides of the same coin and the difference in language comes down to the customs of the audience. Matthew didn’t use the phrase “Kingdom of God” because he had an especially Jewish audience and they were sensitive about speaking the name of God. Yesterday’s reading helped us understand how the growth of the kingdom would surprise us, and today’s reading focuses on how the kingdom transforms us.

Folks who bake with yeast know that it is the secret to breads which are light and airy. Breads made without yeast, often called “quick breads,” are generally dense and have a consistency closer to cake than brioche or sourdough. When water and flour are combined, they create a sticky paste. But when yeast is added to the flour and water, the starch in the flour is turned to sugar and fermented by the yeast, releasing Carbon Dioxide and transforming the formerly sticky paste into an airy dough.

The yeast makes the flour-water mixture grow, yes. But more importantly, it changes the **character** of that mixture so that it becomes something else entirely. In the same way, the kingdom transforms the **character** of the world.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. In the same way that the yeast changes the character of the flour, how has being a Christian changed your character?
2. What are some examples of yeast (transformation starters) that you see in the church and in the world?
3. In what ways do you see the world, or your community, changing because of the church?

Day 4

Matthew 13:44 - Hidden Treasure

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.”

Matthew 13:45-46 – Precious Pearl

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.”

Understanding the Passage:

William Barclay writes of this parable that while it would seem silly to modern readers to imagine someone finding a treasure buried in a field, that it would make perfect sense to Jesus’ hearers. In the first century CE, Palestine was a land of wars and in order to protect their valuables, many folks would bury them on their property.

There is an ethical conundrum in this parable in that the purchaser of the field knows that there is a value there that the owner ostensibly does not know about. That is beside the point in today’s lesson, for the focus here is that the purchaser sells everything he has in order to procure the treasure. In the same way, Christ-followers are instructed to sacrifice everything in their lives that would stand in the way of them truly following Jesus. As if sacrificing everything one has isn’t enough, there is a second, and very critical, part of the man’s actions that led to him securing the treasure. He acted as soon as he knew about it. He didn’t dilly dally around or wait for confirmation from others or take a chance that could cause him to miss out. No, he immediately sold everything he had so that he could buy the field.

Unlike the story of the treasure in the field, which the man seemed to just happen upon, the parable about the pearl relates the story of someone who was specifically searching for the pearl. Sometimes we encounter God when we are least expecting it, and sometimes it is after a long period of seeking that we find God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How are the two parables similar and how are they different? What do you think is important about the difference?
2. Do you treat your faith as if it is of great value? Or do you take it for granted?
3. What have you sacrificed for the kingdom of God?

Day 5 - Mark 4:26-29 - Growing Seed

Then Jesus said, "This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground, then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how. The earth produces crops all by itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full head of grain. Whenever the crop is ready, the farmer goes out to cut the grain because it's harvesttime."

Understanding the Passage:

In this week's video, Dr. Pace talks about how God uses us as signs, foretastes, and instruments in the kingdom. Christians are to be signs that point to God; they are to be foretastes so that when folks come to church or are around Christians, they get the feel of what it is like to be loved by God; and they are to be instruments that God uses to build the kingdom. Through our labors – through taking meals to people who are sick, or mucking our flooded houses, or babysitting for someone who is going through a rough patch, or being a shoulder to cry on for a grieving widow – we bring about God's kingdom.

But the important thing to remember is that it is a privilege that God extends to us that we get to be a part of inaugurating the Kingdom of God. There is clearly a mandate here that we take part in the kingdom, but the kingdom is actually coming whether we do anything or not. That is the promise of Jesus. This parable demonstrates that truth: we can do the work of scattering seed to bring in the kingdom, but ultimately it is God that brings about growth.

This parable is also a reminder to be patient and that we are not in control of God's timing. We live in an instant society in which we are frustrated if we don't see immediate results from our labors. The agrarian nature of the parable – slow, organic growth rather than quick, even growth – mirrors the way that God's kingdom is inaugurated in this world. It's not happening overnight, but it is surely happening.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is the human side of the growth equation in this parable? What are the limits of our responsibility?
2. What is the God side of the growth equation? What does this mean for us as a church?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 3:6-9. How is this passage in Paul's letter similar to this parable? Does it shine any new light on the meaning?

Video Questions:

1. Do you like reading and learning from parables, or do you find them confusing?
2. What is your favorite parable? Why?
3. What do you imagine the Kingdom of God will be like when it is fully realized? What specifically will be different from the way it is now?
4. Do you see any signs of the Kingdom of God in your community?
5. What are some things that hinder the growth of the kingdom?
6. How are you following Jesus' command to help build the kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven"?