

Pentecost 6 / July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:23

“As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Parables are perplexing teaching devices. They both reveal and conceal. They teach and they confuse. People were often confused about the meaning of Jesus' parables, including His disciples. Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables and afterwards He would explain the meaning to His disciples. They were confused! They asked Him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” His answer was just as ambiguous. He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” On the one hand, the parables were meant to keep the secrets of the kingdom of heaven hidden from the crowds, as Isaiah said, “You will indeed hear, but never understand.” On the other hand, parables were meant to reveal mysteries to the disciples, but they didn't get it either and needed further explanation. Does that make sense to you? Why not speak plainly, directly and clearly!

Jesus often spoke plainly, directly and clearly, but people didn't get His meaning either, including His disciples. In fact, He spoke plainly, directly and clearly before He began to speak in parables! Jesus told His larger group of followers that He is the living bread, who came down from heaven; and that whoever believes in Him, would receive nourishment that endures to eternal life; and that on the last day, He would raise all who believe to everlasting life. Plain, clear and direct! But John says, most of His disciples abandoned Him, because they couldn't bear His words. It wasn't that they didn't understand what He said; they didn't want to believe what He said!

The most important thing we believe about Jesus is that through His death and resurrection, He paid the debt of our sin and earned the promise of life everlasting. The scriptures teach that plainly, directly and clearly. Isaiah said, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace!” Jesus told the disciples plainly, clearly and directly that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die and rise again. Peter's response was to vow he would never let this happen to Jesus. Clearly there was a problem in understanding that wasn't caused by Jesus' teaching method. The problem is our thinking and capacity for understanding. Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Jesus spoke of heavenly things plainly, clearly and directly.

People didn't understand, because they were thinking the thoughts of humans. God said to Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” That's something we should always remember when we come across something in the bible that we don't understand, or sounds stupid to us. Remember, “My thoughts are not your thoughts!” Jesus told parables to challenge us to think according to the mind of God. Jesus told parables so would seek to understand the mystery of His words, which as this parable teaches is the seed that causes faith to germinate, grow and produce a harvest, culminating in eternal life.

Parables have been described as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. To understand we must discern the heavenly in the story. If we fixate on the earthly aspects, they often make no sense and may even seem silly! Jesus spoke about heavenly things with the Pharisee Nicodemus. He told him that to understand the things of God, he needed to be born again. Nicodemus asked how he could return to his mother's womb and be born again. Obviously, Nicodemus and Jesus were not on the same page. Jesus was speaking of heavenly things and Nicodemus was thinking earthly thoughts. Jesus' words made no sense to his thinking. No wonder he didn't understand Jesus, or the scriptures! Parables challenge our way of thinking so we ask, whether we are thinking the thoughts of God, or the thoughts of humans? Parables show us that our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Parables show us our need for the Spirit of God to enlighten our minds and enable us to understand the thoughts of God!

On the surface, this parable seems to be about dirt and a sower, who foolishly scatters seed everywhere; in bad soil, in shallow earth, on rocky ground, among weeds and even on the road, where it has no chance of growing. Although set within agricultural imagery, this parable is about the power of God's word; which never returns to Him empty, but always accomplishes what He desires and achieves the purpose for which He sends it, no matter what obstacles stand in its way! The parable is about the transforming power of God's word, which turns bad soil into good soil, clears away rocks, uproots weeds and produces a harvest in every heart, in which it takes root and grows. The seed is the word of God, specifically the good news of God's grace in Christ Jesus. The good seed

makes good soil, by transforming the hearts of those who receive it! The good seed gives a harvest of eternal life to all who believe!

If you did any planting this spring, you probably ensured you had good seed and good soil. Seed and soil are purchased from reputable retailers, to ensure they aren't contaminated with weeds. The last thing you want are weeds springing up with your plants, but that's a different parable. Gardeners prepare soil with peat moss and fertilizer. Before planting seeds in your garden, you ensure the proper depth of soil and clear away rocks and weeds. You can't plant seed just anywhere and expect it to grow. You certainly wouldn't cast seed on the pavement and expect it to grow! That's not deep, hidden knowledge.

But in Jesus' parable the sower casts seed everywhere, without any apparent concern for where it falls. What's that about? Perhaps seed was cheap in first century Palestine, so a person could just throw it everywhere, even in places where it couldn't possibly grow, but I doubt it! Can seed clear away rocks and uproot weeds? Can seed increase the depth of soil or soften the road, so it can take root? Of course not! No earthly seed has such powers. But God's word can do all those things in the soil of the human heart. This parable challenges us to consider the power of God's word in our lives. This parable calls us to constantly seed our hearts with the words of eternal life! God's word creates good soil, creates faith, produces faithfulness and gives a harvest of eternal life!

God's word can uproot weeds, make good soil out of the hardest heart and produce a harvest of eternal life in the most dissolute, distracted, worldly soul. A Christian author related the change in the life of a woman who occasionally attend his congregation. He told how she went from being a lukewarm adherent, to a vibrant believer and actively engaged church member. When he asked her, she said, one day it occurred to her that this Jesus stuff was true. Since it was true, it should be the most important thing in her life. It was as if a light went on in her soul. The shallow soil deepened, the weeds were uprooted and the rocks were cleared away. What caused this transformation? It wasn't the minister, the church, or any social amenities the church offered. It was the word! The word did the work. God's word can soften the hardest heart and produce a harvest of faith, faithfulness and eternal life in the most unlikely places.

Do you know anyone with a heart hardened against God's word? The Pharisee's hearts were harder than the pavement on the street. You might just as well have sown seed on pavement, as share the good news of Jesus with them. Maybe we know people like that! They'd just argue with you and try to have you arrested. One day the Lord came to a disciple named Ananias and told him to go baptize Saul the Pharisee. Baptize Saul the Pharisee? Ananias thought the Lord Jesus was out of His mind. He reminded the Lord Jesus that this Saul was a bad guy and especially hard on people like Ananias, who believed in Him. Maybe we think that way about people we feel are hopelessly separated from God.

The problem was that Ananias was thinking like a human being! Just because we are believers, doesn't mean we naturally think according to the mind of God. It don't come naturally! We have to work at it, prayer about it and seek the Spirit's guidance. Jesus knew what He was doing. Jesus' word transformed Saul and made him Paul, the greatest evangelist the church has known. Don't expect earthly seed to work miracles. Be careful were you put it and make sure the soil is good. But count on God's seed to work miracles, to make bad soil good and produce a harvest of faith in time and life in eternity; both in your life and in the lives of others. Hold it in your heart. Keep it on your mind. Share it freely. Cast it everywhere, even in the most unlikely places. It is the most powerful seed in the universe. It creates faith in Jesus and gives a harvest of life everlasting!

Have you ever wondered, what's the worst thing a Christian can do? Everyone has an opinion, but from God's point of view, what do you think is the worst thing a Christian can do? Earlier in Matthew, Jesus said, "Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven." Maybe that's the worse sin? There's no good sin and that's a very bad one, but there is a worse sin; and that's cutting ourselves off from God's word. The woman with the lukewarm faith became an ardent believer and St. Paul became the greatest evangelist, because of the power of God's word to open their hearts, create faith and produce a harvest of faithfulness and eternal life. The worst thing we can do, is turn away from God's word. His word is the seed that uproots weeds, clears away stones, turns rock into good soil, creates faith and produces a harvest of eternal life.

Sow it in your life daily and abundantly. Don't let the weeds choke it out. Let it choke the weeds out. Don't let sin keep you from the word. Let the word keep you from sin. If you fall, return to it. It will raise you up! Consider Peter. He denied Jesus three times! He must have thought he had committed the worst sin. He had heard Jesus say, "Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father in heaven." That was a word of

law which condemned. Judas remembered that word too and he felt he had no hope. Peter had hope, because he also remembered the word of grace. Peter remembered the word of grace and took a better course than Judas. He remembered Jesus' words of forgiveness and so he didn't despair. Never turn from the word. If you do, always return to the word. Jesus has words of forgiveness and life. No matter what you have done or how you have fallen, His words will give you forgiveness and life! His words will transform your life! His words give eternal life! Remember the power of God, word: "The word that goes forth from my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I send it." His purpose is our salvation in time and for eternity. His desire is that we believe and have life in Jesus Name. May His word accomplish His purpose and achieve His desire in our lives! In Jesus' Name. Amen