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The Storyteller: Overcoming Growth Barriers

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

By Dr. Matt Hook

By studying Jesus' parables, Jesus will do what only he can do: He will be your teacher. He will stretch your mind, pierce your heart, and shape your soul. We begin with this parable because it's one of the very few he actually explained to the disciples: Listen to Jesus the Storyteller as he explains, in Matthew 13:18-23:

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 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. 20 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. 21 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. 22 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. 23 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."

Normally when we read the parable of the sower, we think of the different soils as different types of people. But couldn't it also mean the several stages in the life of any person—after all, they say the line between these kinds of soils runs right down the middle of the human heart. I am several people—not like schizophrenia, but in the sense that what leaves me cold today may set my soul on fire next week. We have seasons of soils in our lives and they have everything to do with how we handle issues of life and eternity.

Jesus the Storyteller uses the parable of the sower, seed, and soil so perfectly. And yes, we're the dirt! The creation story describes God making us from the dust of the earth and then breathing into us the breath of life. Yes, we are soil. But we are particularly hospitable to God's eternal message because God's Spirit has breathed into us— aerated the soil of our hearts! Jesus the Storyteller suggests there are at least 4 different soils. We'll look at 3 briefly, and 1 more in depth.

First, Jesus says the seed of the kingdom falls "along the path" where "the birds come and eat it up." Sometimes I am that kind of soil. When our soil is like a beaten path in Jesus' day that people and animals have trampled hard, the seed of the good news survives so briefly we're not even aware of it. We simply don't understand it. Some people have been trampled and operate out of their wounded-ness. Sometimes people made up their minds long ago not to hear. Perhaps some wound was inflicted and they formed a big scab: too many disappointing moments. Other people harden themselves because when they receive God's Word, their conscious tells them they ought to do something about themselves. It's just easier not to understand! The enemy takes advantage of this season and creates this barrier for our growth.

Other times, Jesus said, the seed of the Kingdom falls on rocky ground. Shallow soil, the kind in which people get excited for a minute and then move on. Some people seem shallow all their lives, constantly skipping from one thing to another, looking for the next best thing, "new and improved;" even spiritual things.

Billions are spent every year to get us to move on to the next new thing.

Jesus said sometimes the seed of the Kingdom falls among thorns—things that distract us. And these weeds are usually “good” things! But even good things that distract us from the best becomes a weed. Gardeners say a weed is any plant that grows in the wrong place. It’s really only 2 things: There is the kingdom of seed and weed. The Storyteller leaves us no room for “other nice plants.” God’s seed gets choked!

Fourth, there is the good soil, capable of bringing forth great results for God. Did you know 90% of people who decide to follow Christ do so in their teens years? The decisions may be less mature, but often the best choices of our lives come during those years. But wait: Another powerful time in our lives when things become clear and our lives produce good fruit may just be times of personal crisis: times of grief, illness, the loss of friendship, marital break up, or personal defeat. During times like this people often see with clear eyes for the first time. The other stuff gets put back in its place and our priorities line up once again. If you’re in a time of difficulty or even personal crisis, stay close! Receive God’s Word abundantly.

Why does the farmer scatter the seed even in the bad soil? Because those are the conditions around him. So we dare not give up on the people around us, and especially we dare not give up on ourselves. Quiz time: How many good soils were there? (2—the good soil, and the weedy, thorny soil. This soil holds the greatest promise of *bringing life forth abundantly*. That’s why the weeds and thorns do so well! It’s the season in which you and I could do great things for Jesus. That’s why the thorns find it so hospitable, when it could be hugely productive for God...

Notice in Jesus’ story, in every single one of our cases, IT IS THE SAME SEED. In some it yields 30, 60, or 100-fold. In some, it’s lost. When the wheat seed is being sown, It’s *not* so obvious to see the differences in the soil, until that which was sown grows up. You don’t know the quality of the soil until you see the seed of the Gospel producing a love for God and people in your life. But if you and I merely promise and don’t perform, we know our hearts are something other than that: either stony, shallow, or thorny. And we will know. Because of the nature of sin, what happens in Vegas won’t stay in Vegas. I won’t have to judge you, and you won’t have to judge me, because God’s Word itself will judge. We’ll be judged by nothing more than God’s Word.

And I want to spend a little more time on the thorny, weedy soil. I never looked at all my hobbies, wealth, interests, and stuff as covering me like thorns and briars! (Like the ghost of Jacob Marley and his chains). Aren’t you tired of having the seed growing in you but having it have to compete for space because of all the other junk that gets well-tended and well-fed in your life that has nothing to do with God’s message to our world? Allowing it to be choked out by all the weeds and thorns?

THE THORNS. Matthew described them as *"the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches."* Luke adds, *"and pleasures of this life,"* and Mark still further mentions, *"the lusts of other things."* This is the soil with stuff.

Understand that *weeds & thorns are natural to the soil*. They infested the Garden of Eden itself because of the Fall of humanity. Now, what’s foreign is God’s grace. That’s exotic. Thorns are indigenous. And they won’t get pulled up easily if they can help it. They won’t give way to the Holy Spirit or to the new life in Christ without a desperate struggle.

Not only that, but thorns steal away the nutrients of the crop, leaving it starving. We only have so much soil in our lives. If the thorns have it, the wheat must go without it. There’s only a certain amount of thought and energy in you; and if the world gets it, Christ can’t have it. Don’t let those cares grow in your field! Because you belong to the human race, you must give yourself to something. That’s what it means to be human. But when it’s other stuff, we miss out when it could be things that God cares about: the poor, and people who are lost. Why would we let any inferior pursuit become the master of our minds?

When all our energy, time, and spare change are spent on entertaining ourselves, making ourselves more and more comfortable, and more insulated and isolated, it’s no wonder the next generation says they like

Jesus...but not the church. Jesus never sold out for lesser pursuits.

Your faith is still there. But these things have suffocated the best life in Christ. After all, if you're going through your life choked all the time, you're not good for much. You've got to get your breath back.

I think in America, our faith may be alive, but for so many of us it is so choked out by all the material "blessings" around us it looks emaciated and stifled, unable to perform for lack of nutrients and air! Morning prayers, Sunday worship, (been to Dexter Little League Baseball practice lately?), Bible reading, family devotions, Tuesday men's prayer breakfast, Bible studies, small groups, and more... get choked out by absolutely anything and everything else. Because what's most important is not urgent. (It's my favorite TV night! I have to ride in my boat! I have to...fill in the blank." You get the picture.

In America, thorns have choked pulpits and entire churches, as well as each of us individually. We say "Who cares? I'm tired!" Because we've got no breath left in us. It's all been given to our weeds and thorns!

Remember the encounter with Jesus and the woman who washed His feet with her hair? Oh, mna! What would it look like for someone to break their alabaster jar on Jesus' feet! To give their absolute very best to Jesus! And rather than our hands get tangled by all the weeds, and we cling to the jars of our lives, forgetting the true wheat Jesus wants to grow in us!

Your eyes may just be beginning to be opened to the thorns and weeds all around you in your life. You may be facing a season of lament, ready to ask "I haven't done for the Lord what I ought to have done. I've been a believer now for years, but I haven't given to His cause what I ought to have. Tell me what I can do."

We're talking about the seed of God's Kingdom in the soil of your life. Have you been fruitful? Have you been fruitful with your wealth? Have you been fruitful with your talent? Have you been fruitful with your time? What are you doing for Jesus now? Remember salvation is not by what you do, but by God's amazing grace. But if you and I are so saved, we can live out our salvation by being devoted to His seeds. You can set yourself today to welcome the Sower's plans for His field. You can add things to your life (for Lent) and remove things from your life in order that God would be able to feed more people through your life!

Now, let me conclude by sharing the only good thing you can do with the thorns in you is what you did when you were a little kid. When you got a pricker in your finger, you'd run inside to your mom. And she'd take it out SO carefully. Let your cares drive you to God. Today, Jesus doesn't care how *many* thorns you have stuck in you. *Each* of them can lead you to prayer—talking to God and seeking His loving care to remove them. The only other good use of them is the same thing our neighbors did to keep kids from going back around to the river. They made a hedge out of them to keep the people who didn't belong back there away. Let your frustration and pain you've experienced from those thorns keep off the temptations that you know would only lead you to more pain and troubles.

The Sower is approaching you and me now. I believe he has business to attend to in the soil of our lives. (Prayer): Soften us, Lord Jesus. Right now, in this moment. Let this not be a quick fix that we'll leave when the next thing comes. And take our thorns, Lord. We see now how even the nice, comfortable ones cause us pain, missing out on your kingdom of goodness. Let us richly receive you right now in this moment. We love you, Lord. We love that you visit us and have shared your Good News with us and with the world. Amen.