

Title: *Becoming a Kingdom Person*

Text: Matthew 13:1-23

We are beginning a series entitled Jesus and the kingdom. We'll be looking mostly at parables in Matthew where Jesus is making the effort to teach us about the Father's Kingdom. We'll be in this series until the season of Lent begins in March.

It's encouraging to read and to hear stories of the growth of the church around the world and to see pockets where there is genuine revival taking place, yet when we read the research of people like George Barna and others, we could be tempted toward despair over the future of the American church.

There are some trends and statistics that are not encouraging.

Among young adults in the U.S., sociologists are seeing a major shift taking place away from Christianity. Recent studies have brought the trend to light. Among the findings released in 2009 from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), one stood out. The percentage of Americans claiming "no religion" almost doubled in about two decades, climbing from 8.1 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008. The trend wasn't confined to one region. Those marking "no religion," called the "Nones," made up the only group to have grown in every state, from the secular Northeast to the conservative Bible Belt. The Nones were most numerous among the young: a whopping 22 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds claimed no religion, up from 11 percent in 1990. The study also found that 73 percent of Nones came from religious homes; 66 percent were described by the study as "de-converts."

Other survey results have been grimmer. At the May 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, top political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell presented research from their book *American Grace*, released last month. They reported that "young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate (30 to 40 percent have no religion today, versus 5 to 10 percent a generation ago)."

Another study probed for the reason that young adults are leaving the church. According to a 2007 study conducted by LifeWay Research and reported by *USA Today*, 70 percent of young adults drop out of Protestant churches, and 34 percent do not attend even sporadically after age 30.

The young adults polled cited the following reasons for leaving church (those polled could offer more than one reason): • Wanted a break from church: 27 percent, • Found church members judgmental or hypocritical: 26 percent, • Moved away to college: 25 percent, • Tied up with work: 23 percent • Moved too far away from home church: 22 percent • Too busy: 22 percent • Felt disconnected to people at church: 20 percent • Disagreed with church's stance on political/social issues: 18 percent • Spent more time with friends outside church: 17 percent • Only went before to please others: 17 percent.

There's a lot to chew on in those two surveys. It's interesting to look at all of this through the prism of the parable of the soils.

Jesus told a parable. It was a familiar image to anyone who grew up in the Galilee as Jesus did. He often told stories that use familiar imagery to communicate spiritual truth. It would not be unusual to see a farmer with a bag over his shoulder reaching in and taking a handful of seed and just slinging it wherever all across his field. We look at that today and there's a lot about it that doesn't really seem to square with good agricultural practices.

I'm a bit obsessive. I would want an even distribution of the seed across the field. I remember driving from Louisville up to my little weekend church during my time in grad school. It was about 88 miles one way and once I got out of the city, I was seldom out of sight of a cornfield. Not just any one or two rows of corn, either, but some huge cornfields. It was a beautiful thing to see row after row, perfectly straight. One of my enduring impressions from our trip to South Dakota last September.

It's inspiring to think about how much effort went into having straight rows and all that they had to do to prepare the soil and I can imagine that a lot went into it. I remember doing the interim in Mississippi and going out and for the first time in my life, watching one of the cotton farmers harvesting cotton. Driving his tractor through the field and having a machine that could take the cotton bolls and put them in the back of a big trailer so they could be ginned and taken to market.

There's a booming field in agribusiness and agro-technology as we try to figure out how to maximize resources to feed the 6 billion people on our planet. This farmer probably didn't have any of those concerns. He was likely a subsistence farmer. It doesn't say where he got the seed. He may have kept some from last year's crop, who knows. But we do know the seed was a valuable resource because that would be used to feed his family.

Rather than carefully, obsessively laying the seed out in rows, he takes it and slings it. As you haphazardly sling the seed, it's going to fall in a variety of places. He knows that a good bit of it will fall out in the field and it will fall on fertile soil and he'll get a crop out of it. He also knows that a lot of the seed will be wasted. That really doesn't seem to be much of a concern to him.

As Jesus tell the story, that's what happened. He scattered some seed and some of it fell along the path where there's nothing there that can happen to it except that it become bird food. And the birds came and ate it up. Some fell into soil where it could take root and grow for a little while, but eventually, it would run into a rock and it would wither up and quit growing.

There was a bit of Jewish mythology that said that at the creation of the Earth, there were two angels who had bags of rocks and were charged with distributing them all over the earth. The first angel's bag ripped though when he was flying over Galilee. The people knew what it was to deal with rocky soil.

Some seed fell among weeds where it could grow for a little while but a young wheat plant would be no match for the weeds that it had to deal with.

Of four categories of things that could happen to the seed, 3 of them are bad. That's not to say that 3/4 of the seed was wasted and was a total loss. He says, "some of that seed fell on

good soil and it produced an incredible crop.” Jesus even said that this crop was 30, 60, or 100 times what was sown.

Folks with a greater understanding of agriculture can correct me if I’m wrong, but a normal yield on a crop would be 7 to 10 times what was sown. The point here is that as the seed is sown, although some of it may fall into places where it doesn’t germinate and grow, there will be a substantial crop as the seed falls into good soil.

Some folks comment on the recklessness of the farmer. It seems to be a waste of a lot of good seed to throw it willy-nilly wherever. Some of it would go where there might be a rock 2 inches beneath the surface. How was the farmer supposed to know that? The soil was extremely rocky. It would be extremely tedious and time consuming to pick out every little rock. When it was planting season, the plants and weeds that would have thorns wouldn’t necessarily be growing and it would be hard to know exactly where they were. He might have been more careful in throwing it on the path because anyone knows that the path is hard and that seed thrown there won’t be able to take root and it will just be trampled under foot. This was the accepted practice and after the seed was scattered, it would then be plowed under.

Jesus tells this crowd that would understand how agriculture works the story and then says, “Listen up. If you’ve got ears to hear, use them!” The crowd is left to puzzle over just what it was that Jesus was trying to teach them in describing this ordinary scene that they had all seen before.

In the parables, there is always one thing in the parable that kind of sticks out and sets its hook in the mind that, as one scholar puts it, teases the mind into active thought. You get a hold of it and you can’t let go until you’ve figured the thing out. Then, when you’ve got, you’ve really got it. But when you think you’ve really got it, they’re so rich and complex that another meaning will pop out at you.

The disciples were a little bit put out that Jesus would tell the parable out there in the open. They had the idea that the stories that Jesus told were just kind of for insiders. They had rank and status as insiders and that made them kind of special. If those stories were for everyone, the disciples would have lost some of their status. It is possible that they didn’t understand why Jesus wouldn’t just tell the people what they needed to know.

Jesus says to them, “You are insiders. I have given you some of what you need in order to understand the parable. They haven’t received the orientation that you have. You’ve been given enough to build on and you’ve got the foundation you need and you can take that little bit of knowledge that you have and build on it and as you ponder and study over this parable, you’ll receive even more. It seems unfair and not quite right but these folks who don’t have what you have, they’ll have the little bit they think they have taken from them.

It’s almost like it’s a judgment against the people who hear the parable, but don’t give it the attention that it deserves and the due diligence that is required to work it out. I remember a couple of years ago trying to use TurboTax to do my taxes. Not a wise move for me. Clergy taxes are a bit more complicated and having a rental house makes them even more complicated,

but I tried. I remember a question about income from illegal activity. Who in their right mind is going to say, “Yes, I received a million dollars in kickbacks from government contracts.” Why would they ask that question? The only reason I can think of is that if they do catch someone in illegal activity, it gives them something else that they charge them with. It’s as if at the judgment, he will be able to say to them, you can’t say you didn’t hear. You were there when I taught but it didn’t mean enough to you to give it the due diligence it deserved.

He says, “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” They hear but they don’t really understand. Then he quotes Isaiah, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ ¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ 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.

Then Jesus tells his disciples, “You’re blessed because you see. You’re privileged because you have heard.” The prophets longed to see what you’ve seen and heard already. You’ve heard it, but they haven’t.

Jesus then does something that he doesn’t do very often, that is explain a parable. It’s interesting the approach that he takes. He takes an allegorical approach here telling us what each different character represents. That doesn’t mean that in all parables we are to go looking at each character in the story and try to assign some symbolic meaning to each character. Generally, there is one point to the parable and the meaning is found in the plotline of the story and not in making the story into some sort of allegory. In this case though, Jesus explains who each character represents. Character in this case being the soils.

The first allusion is to the seed that falls on the ground and is eaten up by the birds of the air. As a means of clarification, Jesus says, “They hear the word but they don’t understand it. The evil one comes and steals away what was sown in their heart. The spirits of the evil one are lurking around and somehow or other they create distractions and call people’s attention away and get them distracted before the seed ever has any opportunity to take root. That represents the seed that falls along the path on the hardened soil.

There are other folks who are so excited to hear the gospel and they respond, maybe even with great emotion and you get excited and you think, “Thank God. It really ‘took’ with them.” But, sadly, there are distractions and there are no roots. They last a short while and when they experience trouble or persecution, they simply fall away.

Then someone hears the word and they receive it with joy but they get distracted by the cares of life. Always some excuse why they can’t help out at church. Something always seems to get in the way of reading the Bible and maintaining a devotional life. Something seems to keep them away from church on Sunday and Sunday School or small group Bible study, forget it! Just so busy. Christ is still there. They are believers but their busyness and their preoccupation with

anything but their own spiritual growth makes them completely unfruitful in their knowledge of Jesus Christ.

There will be some folks though who hear the word, pay attention to it, give it priority and recognize it for what it is and they go on to produce much, much fruit in their lives.

You can ask, "Why would Jesus tell us this?" Is it just to encourage us when we see the practical effects of seed that doesn't produce the harvest that we would like? Maybe it's also to tell us that we need to check ourselves to make sure that our hearts represent good soil.

George Whitefield, the great 18th century evangelist, spoke these words at a funeral service:

Do you think any farmer would have a crop of corn next year unless he plowed now? You may as well expect a crop of corn on unplowed ground as a crop of grace until the soul is convinced of its being undone without a Savior. That is the reason we have so many mushroom converts, so many persons that are always happy, happy, happy, and never were miserable. Why? Because their stony ground is not plowed up; they have not got a conviction of the law. They fall away. That makes me so cautious now, which I was not 30 years ago, of dubbing converts too soon. Now I wait a little, and see if people bring forth fruit; for there are so many blossoms which March winds blow away that I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought forth.

Max Lucado writes: Confession does for the soul what preparing the land does for the field. Before the farmer sows the seed, he works the acreage, removing the rocks and pulling the stumps. He knows that seed grows better if the land is prepared. Confession is the act of inviting God to walk the acreage of our hearts. "There is a rock of greed over here, Father; I can't budge it. And that tree of guilt near the fence? Its roots are long and deep. And may I show you some dry soil, too crusty for seed?" God's seed grows better if the soil of the heart is cleared.

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