

A couple of weeks ago, I came home from work and Lori mentioned there was a message on the phone from CRA – the Canada Revenue Agency. They are responsible for the federal government's taxes. I listened to the phone message. It stated that I had an unpaid tax bill. I needed to call the number provided immediately to avoid CRA taking legal action against me.

I was shocked. I've been keeping up with my taxes. So I checked the number. It had a 613 area code. Well we used to live in that area code – Ottawa. So I reasoned that this must be legit. I called the number. It was answered by a gentlemen who identified himself as a CRA officer.

He claimed he worked for the CRA audit department. They had reviewed my taxes from 2008 to 2013 and discovered some unreported income. He said that if I did not agree to pay the outstanding balance immediately, CRA would initiate legal action against me for providing false and misleading information. He also claimed that they had sent a letter to my previous address which had returned to them.

Well, we had moved 3 years ago and I might have missed something in a past return. So I continued the conversation. He asked me, "sir, do you want to resolve this or shall I hand this over to our legal department?" I requested that he send me a copy of the letter first. He said, "no, the letter has been returned and it's too late for that. You need to pay now. "

At this point, I began to get suspicious. So I asked him for some information about himself. He was ready with a whole list of info. He had a CRA badge number BS9906 and it was case number 32996. Then I asked "what is your name." He had an accent that sounded like it was from South Asia – India, Pakistan. But he identified himself as Officer Frank Jefferson. That's not a common Indian or Pakistani name. But he didn't want to stay there too long. He got back to my need for payment.

"Sir do you want to settle this or do we need a lawyer?"

"I'd like to resolve it," I said.

"Do you have the cash on you right now?"

"No, I don't have the cash on me right now?"

“Well you need to get it now sir. Here are you payment options. You can pay through Western Union or iTunes.” So CRA is now using Western Union or iTunes. Then he asked if this number was my cell phone or home phone. That was it. I was done. No more talking. Sir, sir, if you hang up this call, we will initiate legal action against you.” Click.

I immediately looked up Tax scams and found information on the CRA website describing an approach exactly like this. Yet my blood was boiling first at being accused of something I didn't do and then having to fend off all the pressure tactics. This person identified themselves as a CRA officer. But upon further scrutiny, it became clearer that he lied .

People can misrepresent themselves on the phone, on their resumes, online and in person. This can happen with people who call themselves Christians. Anyone can claim to be a Christ follower. But how do you really know? What indicates the true spiritual life of a person? Today, Jesus will show us. **Jesus' parable of the sower reveals the only legitimate response to God's Word that demonstrates true spiritual life.**

We return to the Gospel of Matthew, continuing our journey through it for the purpose of knowing Christ and His teaching. If we are going to be a disciple-making church, we must first be Disciples of Christ ourselves. The disciples or followers of Christ knew Him personally and learned His teaching. The Gospel of Matthew provides us with both. Matthew includes 5 major sections of Jesus' teaching that all relate to discipleship.

The first was the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. There Jesus taught us about every day discipleship lived in the presence and power of God. Then in chapter 10, Jesus taught about mission driven disciples as He sent the 12 out to minister throughout the region of Galilee. The third major section of Jesus' teaching is found where we start today in Matthew 13. Commentator Michael Wilkins calls this Jesus' instruction for underground disciples who live in a culture that on the whole rejects Jesus and his message. Chapter 18 will bring us to the fourth section of Jesus' teaching about local church community discipleship. What does it look like to be Disciples of Christ in community with other Christians in the church? Chapters 24 and 25 contain the last section of Jesus' teaching where he unfolds what it means to be expectant disciples who recognize this world is not their home and that one day Christ will return.

But we begin this third section of Jesus' teaching today in Matthew 13. When Jesus adopts a new teaching method. Instead of simple presentation of the good news like He did earlier, He now uses parables. This method invites

the crowds to a time of self-examination about their relationship to the kingdom of heaven. It also will instruct disciples of Jesus about the surprising nature of this kingdom. We'll talk a lot more about that next week. But today, we're going to look at this parable of the sower. We're first going to look at the parable itself. Then helpfully, Jesus interprets the parable for us where He will reveal indicators of the true spiritual life of a person. We will conclude with a time of self-examination and response to Jesus' teaching.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (ESV) Page 688 in the Bibles in front of you.

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow.⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil,⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower:¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy,²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.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."

Jesus has just finished an intense encounter with the Scribes and Pharisees. He charges them with refusing to repent in spite of all God has revealed through Jesus. He also charges that they don't believe in the true God because they accuse him of doing miracles by the devil's power.

Matthew ensures that we connect these previous events by the words "that same day, Jesus went out of the house." Jesus leaves the intense conversation with the Scribes and Pharisees to make Himself available to the crowds. He sits down by the sea. But great crowds gather about Him. So He goes out into a boat to do some teaching. This way, more people could hear Him. Many coves on the sea shore near Capernaum had good acoustics. So the crowd readies itself for another of Jesus' messages.

But this time He tells a story. A sower went out to sow, not the sewer who binds pieces of cloth together with needle and thread. This sower plants seeds like a farmer or gardener. This immediately connected with most of his listeners. About 90% of people worked and lived off the land. This planter uses the scattering method of planting. He

threw out seeds across the field. They landed in various places. Some seed fell on the paths near or through the fields. When people walk on the same path over and over again the ground hardens and plants don't grow. The seed along these paths just hit the hard ground and stay there. Then birds came along and helped themselves to easy pickings.

Other seeds fell onto rocky soil. Israel has a very rocky soil in places. So there is less room for plant growth and rooting. As this seed began to germinate or come to life, it would look for space to push down roots. But no space was found because of the rocks. So instead, the seed would sprout above ground. But when the sun became hot, the little plants had no roots to drag up some moisture to sustain the plant through the heat. So the plant would wither and die. Some seeds fell among thorns. There's only so much soil and moisture to go around. So when a seed has to compete with other plants like thorns, it has less chance of thriving. One common thistle in Israel is called "Silybum marianum," more commonly known as Milk thistle. It can quickly grow to reach a height of 1 meter or 3 feet in April with small pink or white flowers on its heads. Such a rapidly growing plant can crowd out other plants while stealing the soil and sun.

But some of the seeds fell on good soil. These produced grain or a crop – some a 100, some 60, some 30. You gardeners experience this throughout the summer. One little pea seed can produce a plant that yields multiple pods with multiple seeds. One tomato seed can produce multiple tomatoes. Jesus uses high numbers to emphasize the potential of seed scattered in good soil.

Then Jesus closes the parable to the crowd in verse 9. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Is Jesus saying, "All of you people who have good hearing should make sure you've used your ears to hear my little parable?" Well, that would be kind of useless after He said the parable. If He meant that, He would have called them to listen before He spoke the parable. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," must mean something more like "you may have just heard this parable in your hearts but have you understood it? I'm not just telling a simple story about a farmer who needs to learn how to scatter seeds more efficiently. There is something deeper here. There is something that you need to think about. I have been teaching and ministering in this region for a long time. But how have you responded to it? Do you understand? Is it making any difference in your life?"

Then notice in verse 10, the setting changes. "Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" So verses 1-9 contain Jesus' parable given to the crowds. Verses 10-23 contain Jesus' explanation to the disciples. I don't think the disciples suddenly rowed out in a boat to where Jesus' taught to ask this question.

Matthew inserts this explanation here to give context and purpose to parables, will look at versus 10-17 next week.

Throughout this chapter we will see Jesus teach the parables to the crowds but explain the parables to the disciples.

With that in mind, we can jump down to verse 18. Here Jesus explains the parable to the disciples.

He made 3 main points. **1) Like the sower, God spreads His Word widely among all kinds of people.** If you are a serious gardener or farmer, you know that wasting seed can cost you a lot. This sower seemed to carelessly waste seed on unfruitful soils. But perhaps Jesus describes the sower like this to emphasize the widespread proclamation of God's Word. God does not only reveal His Word to Christians. God does not limit the Good News to people who have already received it. We saw a couple of weeks ago in Acts 17 where Paul spoke at the Areopagus in Athens. Most of the people who listened to his message that day mocked him or left without responding. A few responded. But they all heard the message. God sends out a universal appeal for all to believe. If you've been in any sort of ministry position where you have called people to respond, it is a very rare case that most people respond. Usually, it's a minority though everyone has been offered the opportunity to respond.

So the sower is Jesus or God Himself and anyone who spreads God's seed in other contexts. But what is this seed? Jesus identifies it in verse 19. "When anyone hears *the word of the kingdom*" – that's the seed – the word of the kingdom. Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven earlier in this Gospel. It refers to the reign of God in the world and in people's lives. At present and at Jesus' time, it was an invisible kingdom. It advances in the hearts and minds of individual people. The good news announces the arrival of the kingdom of heaven along with the invitation to join it. Jesus demonstrated the arrival of the kingdom through healing, driving out demons, miracles and His teaching. So the sower or messengers spreads the kingdom's word widely. That word has been spread to you or proclaimed to you in your time in this community and over your life. That's the first point of Jesus' parable.

2) Like the three kinds of unfruitful soil, many will respond to his word with less than saving faith. Saving faith refers to a faith that will lead to a person's slowly salvation from sin, death and the devil. Some respond to the Good news of the kingdom with saving faith. But others respond with a faith less than saving faith with different consequences that Jesus is about to explain. We must remember, most everyone, standing on the beach listening to Jesus' teach, thought they were among God's people. They thought they were in. Jesus reveals three less than saving faith responses to the good news.

The first kind of unfruitful soil is the hard path. **The hard path represents a complete lack of positive response to the words of the kingdom.** They have hard hearts. Verse 19 – “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.” It is like the word goes in one ear and out the other because of the person’s hard heart. Who is responsible for the seed not penetrating the path? Is it the person themselves or the evil one who snatches away the seed? I think both. The path was already hardened before the seed fell on it. People, in this category, already had hard hearts towards Jesus and His message. Yet the devil presents any possibility of the seed penetrating that soil by quickly removing it. The preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom does not impact this person. They look like the Pharisees and teachers of the law from Matthew 12 who went against Jesus.

Maybe you were once like this. Nothing about God or Jesus came close to penetrating your heart until the Spirit of God broke through. But then God softened the soil of your soul and slowly but surely the word grew in you to the point that you received it. If that describes you, then praise God today for His work in your life. Most of us know people with hard hearts towards God. We need to continually ask the Lord to break through that hard surface. We need to earnestly pray for them. But we must also keep scattering seed when we have opportunity. So we need to pray to be sensitized to those opportunities with those around us.

Another response of less than saving faith comes with seed thrown onto soil filled with rocks. **Rocky soil represents a temporary shallow response that masquerades as true faith commitment.** The people in this category have shallow hearts for the things of God. Verses 20 and 21 describe this person. They respond to the message with enthusiasm. They may come forward at an invitation. They may fill out a response form indicating they have received Christ. They may repeat a prayer offered by someone at a concert or in a worship service. They seem like they have received Christ. Yet, when trouble or persecution arises because of their Christianity, they fall away. So is Jesus saying that you can at one point be a Christian with Christ in your life and then at another point fall out of a being a Christian? Well, one commentator skillfully points out where the life resides in this person. “It is important to recognize that the life is in the seed, not in the soil.” The seed comes to life because it is life. But if there is no suitable environment in which this life will thrive, it will not take root in a person.

We see this in our church community. Someone new comes because they are searching for something. They seem to seek and respond to Christ. But then some pressure comes along in their life. They may get more hours at work. Someone in the family makes fun of them. They may have some family issue. They may have trouble at work. They may have started a huge renovation project. They may have over-committed themselves to sports or some club or some activity. So they have to find more time and space to deal with the pressure. The first thing tossed is their Christ commitment. It can show up as they stop participating in a church community. Or they find making time for Bible intake and prayer a bother or irritating. There are times in life when we have to adjust our volume or priorities of commitment in a church fellowship. There are times when our personal walk with God goes through valley. But if we just stop or just give up because some opposition of our faith, we have to seriously reevaluate our hearts.

I have been there myself friends. I remember times in my life when I spent personal time with the Lord – if I had time; if I wasn't tired; if it was quiet; if it didn't interfere with one of my other pursuits; after this season of stress would be over; after I was done that major project; once I was back into a regular routine – then I would enjoy time with the Lord. If our Christian life depends on everything going well and us having lots of time, we don't have much of a Christian commitment. Our faith is pretty shallow if it exists at all. I thank God that He has been patient with me and is growing me to the point where I can't wait to meet with Him or I desperately need to connect with Him multiple times a day to live His way. Is our faith a saving faith or a shallow faith that crumbles under pressure?

The third response of less than saving faith is found in verse 22. **The thorn filled soil represents interest in the truth that falls short due to the high demands of discipleship.** People in this category have thorn filled hearts. They show an initial openness to the Gospel but then other priorities compete for their hearts. In the end, these other priorities choke out the life brought by the seed. Jesus specifically identifies 2 of them – the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. If we allow the cares of the world to choke out the life of God it shows we have not yet placed God's kingdom above all else. We try to manage our lives on our own while squeezing Jesus into a tiny compartment. When there are less cares in life, we might think again about Jesus. But cares always come along that have the potential to take over. If you have a garden, you know the weeds never give up trying to take over.

Jesus also mentions the deceitfulness of riches or money. We can allow our lives to be driven and directed by the pursuit of money. We can believe that life is all about pursuing all that money offers. We can spend countless hours

maintaining, repairing, adjusting and updating that which money buys. Jesus said back in Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” Then in Matthew 6:24 Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

We live in a culture that doesn't even try to serve two masters anymore. Money is our god. Christians and those interested in Christ face the tension between loving money and loving God. Money or earnings are necessary to live. But when we begin loving money, that's when we get into all kinds of trouble. It becomes a thorn that chokes out the life of God and leaves a person destitute spiritually.

(Illustration of someone who let their pursuit of money bankrupt them spiritually).

So we have seen Jesus make 2 major points in this parable. First, like the sower, God spreads His Word to people everywhere. Second, like the hard, rocky or thorn filled soil, people respond to the word of the kingdom with less than saving faith. **3) Like the good soil, the only saving faith response to the kingdom of heaven that demonstrates true new life and produces fruit is obedience and perseverance. (23)** The people in this category have open hearts. Notice that Jesus goes back to his little saying about hearing. Remember verse 9 – “He who has ears to hear, let him hear?” Then verse 23. “As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it.” But this does not mean simply – “Oh Jesus. I understand in my mind what you're saying. Hard path means hard hearts. Rocky soil means shallow hearts. Weedy soil means choked out hearts. Good soil means open hearts.” It is not just mind understanding. Its understanding leads to action and producing fruit. After all, that's what fruit, vegetable and crop plants are supposed to do produce a yield. They don't just grow to keep growing. They grow to produce.

So though coming forward at an invitation or signing a response card or repeating a prayer at a concert or worship service might be an important first step in the Christian life we can't rely on that as proof of the Christian life. It is more important to focus on the fruits coming out of the life today indicates authentic faith. Such fruit shows up in ministry to others. It impacts our spending. It shows up in the fruit of the Spirit that we looked at last fall. Do you remember

them? Are you seeing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control growing in your life? Does your life display a submission to the Lord Jesus as your king? Or is it all about you – or the worries of life – or the pursuit of riches – or other important activities that crowd out any time for God?

One commentator puts it like this – “the only conversions that count in the kingdom are those that result in a life of discipleship under Christ.” Another points out how startling this parable would be to its original listeners and the disciples. Most people standing on the beach that day expected the Kingdom of God to be imposed firmly, ruthlessly and suddenly. Their Messiah king would come and instantaneously overthrow their oppressors. They wouldn’t have to change their way of living one bit. But a parable of seeds in soils implies taking time. The Kingdom’s advance will not occur through a rapid and decisive strike. It would depend partially on the receptivity of the people to whom the message is preached. It required life change from the listener’s not just change of government.

So now we have travelled through the parable of the sower. Which soil best describes your life? Did you once hear the word and think something might be there? But the evil one came along and snatched that away. Maybe you were once interested. When it was convenient, you had time for God. But then some hard things came along and you dropped your God interest until a later date. But that later date has never come. Maybe you once were interested in Christ. But the worries of this life or the deceitfulness of wealth have choked kingdom life out of you. You’ve been producing no fruit. Or maybe you heard; received; believe and continue to live and depend on the Lord.

As I look at this parable and think about my own life, it seems like my heart has been like every one of these soils at one point or another. I came to Christ when I was 8 years old. I was baptized when I was 11. I followed Christ kind of through Junior and Senior High Schools. But I didn’t do anything like regular devotions – daily reading and responding to God’s Word. There wasn’t much fruit in my life.

Then I went on a summer mission when I was 19 and there we were mandated to do devotions – 7:30-8 every morning after breakfast. It was kind of easy to do it because the entire team had to stop and spend time with God. I found these times enriching, enlightening and empowering as I connected with the Lord.

Upon return, I continued somewhat with that practice. But through University there were times I wanted nothing to do with God’s Word. I wouldn’t open my Bible for days at a time and just went my own way. I still went to church but any word that was scattered towards me seemed to be snatched away as soon as the service was over.

Then, for a while, I had a shallow faith. Whenever I had time and it was convenient and I was rested and I felt like it, I would spend time with God. But during busy seasons or exams or pressure or opposition, I would stop until I had time again.

At times, I have had a choked heart. I too was once enticed by the deceitfulness of riches. One of my favorite pastimes was driving through the richest neighborhoods in town and imagining what it would be like to have a house like that or live a life like that.

Other times, the cares of life would choke out my spiritual life. Tim Keller points out that “when suffering comes, prayer and Bible reading are the first activities to go. In reality they are your only life preservers. John Newton wrote “The chief means for attaining wisdom . . . are the holy Scriptures, and prayer. The one is the fountain of living water, the other the bucket with which we are to draw.”

Then other times, my heart is receptive. The Lord works. His fruit grows and matures. But I never get to stay there. Just like a fruit tree, I continue to need pruning, rain, sunshine and tending by the Divine Gardener Jesus. Jesus calls all of us to live life of obedience to Him, growth that result in the fruit of the kingdom and a bountiful harvest.

Where is your heart today towards Christ – hard, shallow, choked or receptive? In light of that discovery, will you open your heart more than it is right now to Jesus and His life for you?