

ROOTED – PLANTING PROPERLY

There is an old book written in 1836 entitled *Picciola* (The Prison Flower) about a man named Count Charney. During the time of Napoleon he was thrown into prison simply because he had accidentally made a remark that offended the emperor Napoleon. Cast into a dungeon cell and left to die, as the days and weeks and months passed by, Charney grew bitter at his fate. Slowly but surely he began to lose his faith in God. One day, in a moment of anger, he scratched on the wall of his cell, "All things come by chance" which reflected the injustice that had come his way. He sat in the darkness of that cell growing more bitter by the day.

There was one spot in the cell where a single ray of sunlight came every day and remained for a little while. One morning, to his absolute amazement, he noticed that between the stones on the floor of that cell a tiny, green blade was breaking through. It was something living, struggling up toward that shaft of sunlight. It was his only living companion, and his heart went out in joy toward it. He nurtured it with his tiny ration of water, cultivated it, and encouraged its growth. That green blade became his friend. It became his teacher in a sense, and finally it burst through until one day there bloomed from the little plant a beautiful, purple and white flower. Once again Charney found himself thinking thoughts about God. He scratched off the thing he had scribbled on the wall of his dungeon and in its place wrote, "He who made all things is God." Somehow through the guards and their wives and the gossip of the community, this little story reached the ears of Josephine, Napoleon's wife. She was so moved by it and so convinced that a man who loved a flower that way could not possibly be a dangerous criminal that she persuaded Napoleon to release him. That tiny little growing flower changed his heart and ultimately set him free.

Today we are starting a new series called *Rooted*. It is spring and we see the signs of spring all around us. The trees are budding and the flowers are all coming up. In the coming weeks people will be planting and tending their gardens. We see new growth all around us, but are you growing spiritually?

Mark 4:1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." 9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mark 4:14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

The soil represents your attitude. It represents your heart, and your responsiveness to what God wants to do in and through you. Jesus said that if you learn from this story, you'll learn the keys to growing spiritually.

1. RECEPTIVE to Growth - the hard hearted (vs. 4, 15) hard soil

Growth starts with a right attitude. I must want to grow. I must be eager to grow. I must be ready to grow. I must be spiritually receptive to grow. The primary reason people don't grow is real obvious: They don't want to grow.

For those who are watching this service today, that showed a degree of receptiveness to learning spiritual truth. There are lots of people who are nominal Christians who are within driving distance of a church but do not show any kind of spiritual receptiveness to God. Why is that?

A path is an area where people have walked repeatedly so that the ground has become compacted. There are two things true of a path – they are hard and they are narrow. A lot of peoples' minds are like that. They are hard and narrow. They have already made up their minds about what truth is so that now they are not open to new ideas. Their hearts are closed so the love of God and message of hope cannot penetrate it and grow. As a result, the message is lost or stolen away. The book of Acts ends with the words of Paul quoting from Isaiah:

Acts 28:26 "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." 27 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.'

What makes a heart grow hard? Have you ever brought up the topic of God with someone and they immediately shut you down or tried to change the topic? You can just see the door slamming shut, the mind shutting down, the heart closing up. I lived for 10 years in Kuwait. I can tell you that it is much easier to share your faith there than it is in Canada. What causes us to be so defensive when people bring up the topic of God? It is often for one of 3 reasons:

The first reason many close their minds to God is fear. They realize that if God is real then they will have to change the way they live and that scares them. "What if I turn into a religious nut? What if I lose my freedom and all of a sudden I can't have fun anymore? What if I have to give up a certain lifestyle or sin that I have grown used to." These are legitimate fears. If you are afraid of God you are going to close your mind to Him and shut down because you don't really know what God is like.

The second reason people close down to God is bitterness. They have resentment over some way that they were hurt in the past. They think, "God, why did You allow this to happen?" Some of you may have lost a loved one; a child or parent or spouse. Some of you have been abused emotionally or physically or sexually. Some of you have been hurt by other 'Christians' – people claiming to be believers. Maybe you were burned in some other church by some self-righteous, judgmental, hypocritical person who was holding you to a standard that even they themselves couldn't keep. You think, "If that is Christianity then no thank you God!" When you hold resentment in your heart toward God there's no way you're going to grow spiritually. Never let another person or another experience get between you and God. If you do, that's dumb. You need to deal with the issue.

C.S. Lewis in the Four Loves wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket-safe, dark, motionless, airless- it will change. It will be not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell."

The third reason is pride. Pride keeps me from being receptive to God. Self sufficiency is the death of spiritual growth. If you think that you are fine and don't need a savior then you will never seek one.

Even as followers of Jesus we can have hard hearts. We don't give God the chance to work in our lives because we do not read His word. We don't give God the chance to answer prayer because we don't pray. We don't give God a chance to do a miracle in our life because we don't even believe in them. We don't give God a chance to grow us spiritually because our minds are closed and our hearts are hard and we're unwilling to listen.

Do you have a receptive heart or has it become calloused from wear? The longer you resist Him the more calloused your heart will become.

When we lived on the ship we had a friend who had grown up in Papua New Guinea. He had grown up never wearing shoes, so his feet were very callused. I remember that we were at this beach and the rest of us were jumping up and down because of the hot sand, but he did not even feel it. He could walk across sharp stones or burning pavement no problem.

Our hearts can become like that. Has God been trying to tell you something but you are just not hearing Him, or even worse resisting Him? Don't let the devil steal from you what God is trying to plant in you. Receive it and get it into your heart.

2. RESOLVED to Growth - the faint hearted (vs. 5-6, 16-17) thin soil

Spiritual growth is a decision we make. It requires commitment. I have to accept responsibility for my own spiritual growth. If you don't get anything else today, get this: Spiritual growth and maturity is a choice you make. You are as close to God as you want to be. Don't blame anybody else. It's not God's fault. If you feel far from God, guess who moved? Not God.

The faint hearted are those who receive the Word and their intentions are good, but they have no depth. Trees which grow in shallow soil are easily pushed over when the storms come.

In 1989 I visited SIM headquarters in South Carolina. This was just after Hurricane Hugo, the strongest hurricane to ever hit South Carolina. There was mass damage everywhere but especially to the trees. There were entire forests that had just toppled because the trees had such shallow roots.

Have you ever gotten excited when you heard a sermon or message that really touched you? Maybe a tear came to your eye. Maybe you were intellectually challenged or emotionally stirred. You got a quiver in your liver and you said, "This is really great!" But then you walk out the door and you forget it. There was no lasting change in you because you did not act on what you heard. There was no application.

The goal of preaching is not to inform but to transform. That means you let the Word of God penetrate the bedrock of our personality and you set your heart and will to change. I have to be resolved to grow. It has to be more than a feeling. It has to be an action.

If I asked my girls to clean their room it is not enough that they are excited to do it. They can thank me for asking them, sing songs about the joys of room cleaning, write books and tell their friends about the importance of cleaning their room but the important thing is DID THEY DO IT!

Matt 7:26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

It is not really learned and will not last unless it is put into practice. You have to let it sink in. This is the purpose of small groups. They let us take the truths we have learned and then discuss them and put them into practice.

Perseverance is something which cannot be learned until it is lived. You cannot understand long suffering until you have suffered long. You can know a great deal about weight lifting but never develop larger muscles. To strengthen your faith you need to use it. The more that you exercise your faith the stronger it will be. The more hardship you face and endure, the more that you will grow.

Jan Paderewski was asked by a fellow pianist if he could be ready to play a recital on short notice. The famous musician replied, "I am always ready. I have practiced eight hours daily for forty years." The other pianist said, "I wish I had been born with such determination." Paderewski replied, "We are all born with it. I just used mine."

3. RESIST DISTRACTIONS to Growth - the half hearted (vs. 7, 18-19) weedy soil

There are many things in life that can stand in the way of you growing spiritually. You must be ruthless with distractions since your most important objective in life is growing spiritually. God put you here on earth to get to know Him and to develop a relationship with him and grow spiritually to become what He meant for you to be. If you miss this you have wasted your life.

There are many things in life than you can do that are not wrong. However, just because something is not wrong does not make it right or something you should be doing. You need to focus not on what is good but on what is BEST. We will talk more about this next week when we discuss pruning.

There are lots of problems and events that can waste your time and energy and dampen your enthusiasm for growing spiritually. Half hearted people are those who divide their commitments. They mix God's good seeds with the weeds of the world. A weed is anything that crowds out God. It could be a good thing. It could be my family, it could be my career, or my hobby, or fun things to do. Anything that crowds out God and keeps me from growing spiritually becomes a weed and chokes out my spiritual growth.

Why are there so many people who live unproductive lives? An overcrowded life. Why are there so many people that become believers but they never grow, they never bear fruit, they never grow to maturity? An overcrowded life. I saw this sign that said "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life." Never confuse activity and productivity. They are not the same. You can be very busy and still be unproductive.

We as people become so busy that we don't have time for God. Some of you used to be really close to God. You were on fire and there was a passion and joy and enthusiasm in your life. But you don't feel that way anymore. Those fires have gone down and your life has become kind of routine. The joy just isn't there anymore. You've allowed something else to sap off your energy and your joy and your vision, your vitality.

Farmers usually do not plant 2 crops in the same soil or else they will compete with one another. When we lived in Kuwait we had a basement apartment with an outside area that had a planter. It had some nice flowers planted in it, but it also had a vine. The vine was nice and green and complimented the flowers at first, but eventually it grew and completely destroyed them.

My wife will not share popcorn with me. The reason is that I eat too much. Likewise you cannot share your life between God and the devil because the devil eats too much, and God wants all of you.

Jesus talks here about three different kinds of weeds:

The first is the **WORRIES OF THIS LIFE**. The more you get in life the more you have to look after. The more you have the more you have to worry about. This is the stress of success. Success can draw you away from God. The word here for worry in Greek is the word **MERIMNA** means "pulled in different directions".

The second is the **DECEITFULNESS OF WEALTH**. Riches can choke your vitality. You can be so busy making money and watching your investments, you don't have time for spiritual growth. So busy making a living you don't make a life.

Matt 6:24 "No one can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.

The third is the **DESIRE FOR OTHER THINGS**. The word in the KJV is **LUST** and it means to long or desire something. You can be so busy trying to have fun that you forget God.

What do you do with weeds? You kill them – you pull them out by the root. I don't want to pull off the top of a dandelion and have it grow back in a week. So what needs to be uprooted? What is it in your life that needs to be eradicated from your schedule? Think of one thing in your schedule that's pulling you away from God. It may be good but it's pulling you away from God. You might even need to write it down. If we aren't ruthless in eliminating distractions, we end up wasting our lives.

Where are you at today? Do you have a closed mind? Do you have a superficial commitment? Do you have an overcrowded life? We are planted to produce fruit. You are blessed to be a blessing. What we're talking about this morning is of utmost importance. First, you need to cultivate an open attitude toward God: "God, I am receptive – anytime, anywhere, anything You want to do in my life, I'm open. I trust You. I know You want what's good for my life so go ahead whatever You want to do in my life, go ahead!"

Ultimately one day we are all going to have to stand before God and give an account of our lives. God is going to ask us what we did with the time, treasure and talents we have been given. On that day the real issue will be – where you faithful? Did you **DO** what God asked you to do?

If you are faithful, God is able to take the seed He has planted in each one of us and multiply it. If your soil is good the Word will grow and produce a crop thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown in you. This is what God expects of us and this is what God promises to do if we will accept from Him what He gives us and let it grow.

When Mike Kollin was a linebacker for the Miami Dolphins, his former college coach from Auburn University, Shug Jordan, asked him if he would do some recruiting for him. Mike said, "Sure, coach. What kind of player are you looking for?" The coach said, "Well, Mike, you know there's that fellow, you knock him down, he just stays down?" Mike said, "We don't want him, do we, coach?" "No, that's right. Then there's that fellow, you knock him down and he gets up, but you knock him down again and he stays down." Mike answered, "We don't want him either, do we, coach?" Coach said, "No, but Mike, there's a fellow, you knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up. Knock him down, he gets up." Mike said, "That's the guy we want, isn't it, coach?" The coach answered, "No, we don't want him either. I want you to find that guy who's knocking everybody down. That's the guy we want!"

That is also what God is looking for. Single minded, forceful and resilient. In the coming week, when you see the trees budding and grass growing and flowers blooming, I want you to ask yourself the question, "what about me Lord? Am I growing spiritually?" Listen to what God tells you, and then obey it.