

It's important for a speaker to know his audience. So I believe what I'm going to say is going to probably offend at least some of you. But it's Sunday morning, so I need to be honest. Are you ready? *I don't think I've ever looked at a seed catalog (picture).*

I know, it's Wisconsin, and farming is a vital part of our culture. It gets worse. Personally, I think gardening and farming is boring. I've never driven by a farm and thought, "Wow! That is so cool! I must go and see this!"

I remember Mom Cummins, getting nearly giddy, as she'd pore over seed catalogs. Toward the end of winter when her little tomato seedlings started to pop, she had to show them to everyone. To me, they looked like bean sprouts, something you'd find on a salad bar.

Most of you know, I'm not a farmer much less a gardener. It's not for lack trying. We've been successful a few times but most of the time, not so much.

Other than a few of you, you're like me. You don't get excited about farming. Maybe you think tomatoes come in threes and grow in plastic trays. For you, farming is b-o-r-i-n-g.

If you've been in church for a while, you may feel that way about the passage of Scripture we're looking at today. It's a parable, Jesus most familiar parable. Because it's so familiar, our minds can go into autopilot and we think b-o-r-i-n-g. But understanding this parable is vital. Eternity hangs in the balance. What we have here is **Heavenly Farming**. What's being grown is the difference between eternal life and death, Luke 8:4-15 (p. 865).

This is the first major parable in Luke's Gospel. We've already encountered a couple of shorter parables but they're more similes (remember that from English class?), or figures of speech. This is an allegory, a story with a hidden meaning. It's known as "*the parable of the sower*" but would be better called "*the parable of the soils.*" It's repeated in all three of the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The fact it's taught and explained three times emphasizes how critical it is we understand it.

Several of Jesus' parables draw on imagery from farming, a very familiar scenario for His Galilean audience. This particular parable reflects the agricultural practice of a Palestinian farmer. Because the ground isn't uniform, he'd broadcast his seed widely, sowing inevitably with mixed results, much of the seed falling into unsuitable places. For someone in Jesus' day, it was a familiar scene: a farmer with a bag of grain slung over his shoulder, rhythmically moving his arm back and forth, casting seed on the ground. Perhaps as Jesus was teaching, the crowd was watching someone sowing a field off in the distance.

When God's Word is proclaimed, there will always be different responses, ranging from those who ignore it to those whose lives are radically transformed. The four soils represent four kinds of hearts. No doubt, all of them are represented here this morning. This parable should make us sit up and take notice. Each of us needs to ask the question: "*My heart is seen in Jesus' parable, which one am I? What soil is most like my soul?*"

This parable is all about listening to God's Word proclaimed. Are you listening? Are you hearing God's Word? If your taking notes...

1. To understand this parable, we must know...

a. We must know what a parable is. Maybe you've heard a "parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." While that's true, it's the heavenly part which is hard to understand.

Jesus has a greater purpose, one which goes against the conventional wisdom about parables. Verses 9-10, "*And when His disciples asked him what this parable meant, He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that "seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."*"

Huh? Doesn't Jesus want everyone to understand? No, Jesus wants to separate the crowd from true disciples. While human success is a huge crowd, it's not heavenly success. It's a consistent pattern we find throughout Scripture. God gave this mission to Isaiah, "*Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed*" (6:9-10).

When Jesus gave this parable, there were many there who hated Jesus, looking for something to use against Him. Others were there for the miracles or free food. But Jesus is not looking for a customers or a big crowd. He wants followers, disciples.

God is not standing at the edge of heaven, wringing His hands, hoping people will come to Him. We need God, He does not need us. Read Romans 1. If someone continually rejects God, He'll give them over to a reprobate mind. There are folk in churches like ours. They sit there week after week but don't have a clue. They're part of the crowd but they're not disciples.

Jesus uses parables to separate disciples from the crowd. He's still using His truth to do that today. If God did not open our eyes to see His truth, to see our need of salvation, we'd never see it.

Another way to say this is that parables discriminate. God uses them to differentiate between those who are inside and those outside His kingdom. Parables serve two functions: They reveal truth to those who are spiritually responsive; they conceal truth from those who are spiritually superficial.

b. We must know who the sower is. The parable never tells us. Obviously, it's Jesus and any faithful follower who shares the Gospel. But the sower is anonymous. *Why?* Because the power is not in the sower. It's not his or her ability. The power is in the seed.

This is very, very important. If this were today, church growth experts would have blamed the sower for the poor results. In fact, they'd have had four different kinds of sowers, focusing on methodology and personality. We're told we must do certain things a certain way to reach a crowd. And you have to do things differently for each type of crowd – baby boomers, Gen-Xers or Millennials. But the power is not in the sower or methodology. It's not how he slings the seed. The power is inherent in the seed.

Raise your hand if you know who (**combined picture**) Joseph Parker is? How about Alexander MacLaren? Alexander Whyte? R.G. Lee? George W. Truett? What about W.A. Criswell? Those are all megachurch pastors of the past. Everyone knew who they were when they were alive. They're all gone. They were just sowers.

Do you hesitate to share the Gospel because you don't think you can do it well enough? You believe you need some special talent to throw seed. You don't. You just need to share it. It's the seed, God's Word that has power. It's not you or me. We must sow away. We don't know where the good soil is. It's why we must sow broadly. The only way to reach people is to sow the seed in as many ways possible, using every avenue open, reaching out to every age, every person and group you can find.

c. We must know the seed has the power. Verse 11, *"the seed is the Word of God."* The seed is the message and it has spiritual power. God uses His Word implanted in us to save us (James 1:18, 21).

As each seed has life in it, God's Word is alive. It can impart life to those who are spiritually dead. Seed has great power within itself. It can sprout and grow to the point it eventually cracks the foundation of a house. The Word of God can germinate in the human heart and do the mighty work of transformation. As seed can produce a tree that bears much fruit which gives nourishment, sustains life, and in turn produces more seeds to produce more trees and fruit, so the Word of God can bear fruit in our lives.

This means when we talk to people about Jesus, we must share the content of the Gospel from God's Word. You can't be saved apart from the Word. To be born-again, you must know something about who God is, who you are (you're a sinner), and who Jesus is (He's the Savior), as revealed in God's Word. Otherwise how would you intelligently repent of your sin and commit your life to Christ?

2. This parable's focus is the soil which represents the human heart. The key question is: Which heart am I? Although the seed is powerful, it has to fall on the right kind of soil to bear fruit. Jesus outlines four soils, only one of which is fruitful. When Jesus says, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"* (8:8), He's exhorting each person to examine his or her own heart and take the appropriate action to become good soil.

a. Do you have a hard heart? *"And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it...The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."*

How did this heart become so hard? Fields back then had footpaths going through the middle of them. Farmers used them for access to their fields. Travelers walked across them as they went through the countryside. As they were walked on, they became hard like concrete. The seed never had a chance. It's trampled. Soon birds, in this case, Satan comes and snatches it. Incidentally, Jesus isn't speaking figuratively when He speaks of Satan.

Scripture often speaks of the hardhearted (Psalms 95:8). Those stubbornly rigid in their indifference, if not hostile to the Gospel. Their hearts are never plowed by conviction, self-examination or an honest assessment of guilt.

Interestingly, some of the hardest hearted people you will ever meet are not atheists like Richard Dawkins (**picture**) or Kathy Griffin (**picture**). Many are very committed religious people. A prime example would be the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Their hearts were so hard, they crucified Jesus.

Have you ever read *Screwtape Letters* (**picture**)? The story is a series of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, Wormwood, a Junior Tempter. Screwtape's mentorship deals with the nephew's responsibility in securing the damnation of a man known as "the Patient."

In one letter from Screwtape, Wormwood learns how to distract his victim. He describes a man who goes into a library to read and think. And as he does, he starts thinking about God and his relationship with God. Confronted with his own standing before God, he starts thinking in terms of his eternal welfare. But the demons are told to keep him from

discovering truth and distract him with the sounds on the street, the newsboy calling out the latest news, or that he's hungry, ready for lunch. Thanks to his hard-heartedness, it's all it takes. All thoughts of God disappear and he's again involved in the mundane affairs of life. From the point of view of these demonic emissaries, he's delivered from the danger of thinking about God.

Think about this. Where is the Word of God sowed most freely today? In a Bible-believing churches like ours. Mark it down. Satan loves to distract, to snatch the Word out of our hearts so it doesn't take root.

Everyone should sit in the back of a church at least once. You probably won't get a lot out of the message. You'll get to watch the potty-parade, find out who's sleeping, what kids are cutting up, who's acting like they're reading Scripture on their phone but is on Facebook. Who comes in late? And heaven help us, if there's a happy baby. What geezer preacher can compete with a cute baby? Then, we wonder why we get so little out of the worship service and feel bored?

This doesn't mean we should give up on hardhearted people. In St. Paul's Cathedral, there's a tablet in honor of Samuel A. Barnett (**picture**). Samuel Barnett, preached to the hardened crowds in East London for a half-century. It was a very difficult mission field! The tablet has an engraved figure of the sower, with these words: *Fear not to sow on account of the birds.*

God used Barnett to sow in that hard place because the seed of God's Word has divine power. Even the most calloused people can be saved. Never give up hope! God is not intimidated or discouraged by hard hearts.

b. Do you have a shallow heart? *"And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture... And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away."*

So when someone comes to Christ, does heaven open, a bright light shines out, trumpets sound? No, sometimes we oversell the Gospel. We act as if when someone comes to Christ, all of their troubles are over. Their marriage will come back together, wayward kids return home, they'll be healed if they have a disease, they'll have money in the bank, etc.

Yes, it's true, you're forgiven. You now have inner peace and peace with God. But life is still difficult. This is a sin contaminated world but you now have the Holy Spirit indwelling you and God's grace is readily available. But all your troubles are not over. Jesus tells us to *"take up our cross"* if we're going to follow Him (Matthew 16:24).

Shallow hearts are "five minute wonders." Helmut Thielicke (**picture**) said, *"There is nothing more disintegrating than people who have been merely 'brushed' by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth and no rootage. Therefore, they fall when the first whirlwind comes along. It is half Christians who always flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test."*

Palestine has limited quality farmland. Much of the land has a thin layer of topsoil with limestone or rocky ground underneath. Seed hits the topsoil, springs up but when the hot Middle Eastern sun hits – it withers and dies. The ground can't hold water to keep the plant alive. It's not a field with many rocks, but a base of rock under the soil. It's the picture Jesus paints. The point is the seed is ultimately unproductive.

You've met individuals like this. They come to church with a heavy heart. They're emotional. They make a profession of faith. They flicker for a while but then life hits...and it's obvious there's no depth, no reality or life.

A young person grows up in the church. They seem to have vibrant faith but they head off to college. Many of them repudiate everything they once said they believed. I remember a young lady some years back. She seemed to have a heart for God. She served faithfully. I thought she might head to the mission field. Then, she went off to college, got involved with a party crowd, moved in with a guy. Today there's no evidence she ever knew Jesus.

I've seen folk make a profession of faith because they're dating a Christian. Or, they're marriage is falling apart, and they're desperate. It's easy to make an emotional decision, but when the heat of life hits, as it always will, that type of faith withers and dies. It has no root; it's not real.

The Greek word for *"fall away"* is the root of the word for apostasy. Some of the most vicious enemies of Christianity were once professing Christians who had a shallow heart faith. Dan Barker (**picture**) was once a preacher. He worked with many Christian musicians but it wasn't real. Most of us have heard of the *Freedom From Religion Foundation* (**picture**). Dan Barker, along with his wife, Annie Gaylor, founded it. He hates Christianity.

Many a Christian parent convinces themselves their child is on their way to heaven because at one time, they prayed a prayer and made an emotional decision. But it's now been years, and there's zero interest in the things of the Lord. They're shallow heart professors who don't really know Jesus.

c. Do you have a crowded heart? *"And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it...And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature."*

Can I be honest? This one bothers me. I don't believe I have a hard heart or a shallow one. But I struggle with a crowded one. I'm not #1 or #2 but I can feel the prick of the Spirit when I come to #3. So easily is the Word of God

crowded out of my life, usually by good things, not bad things. How about you? What we have here is *arrested spiritual development*. Most of us don't struggle with open sin. We struggle with neglect, the bareness of a busy life.

Every gardener has seen this happen. Good plants never grow as fast as weeds. Before you know it, weeds take over a garden, choking out the good plants. As a result, the vegetables never grow or produce any fruit. Whatever fruit they produce is immature and virtually useless.

They say these thorns can grow up to six feet tall in Palestine. They choke out everything else. Jesus is warning us there are some things in our lives which compete with the Word of God. If we aren't careful they will choke out the effectiveness of it. He mentions *three* of these thorn weeds. Are you allowing these thorns to strangle the Word out of your life?

God's Word can be strangled by worries. The word "*cares*" is better translated "worries." Our English word *worry* comes from the German word "*wurgen*" which means "to choke." Worry puts a mental and emotional choke hold on us. You're reading your Bible and you find yourself worrying about your job, or kids or finances. Maybe you're listening to a sermon. Suddenly your mind is a thousand miles away and you're worrying.

Worry distracts us from God's Word. Usually, we worry about the past which is gone, or the future which we're unsure of. We worry about things we don't have any control over. It chokes God's Word out of our lives.

For several years one woman had been having trouble getting to sleep at night. She was petrified someone would break into her home. One night her husband heard a noise and went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he found a burglar. "Good evening," said the husband to the burglar. "I am so pleased to see you. Would you please come upstairs and meet my wife? She's been waiting for 10 years to meet you."

God's Word can be strangled by wealth. Please understand there's nothing inherently evil in wealth. How does money choke God's Word out of our lives? Well, who usually works the most hours in a company? The guy on the line in the factory or the manager? Who works more hours, the owner or the employee? Who thinks the most about work when they're not at work?

And what's the American way? The more money you have, the more things you must buy. Jane and I once had an opportunity to buy a cabin up North. We prayed about it and talked about it. We realized, we'd spend more time taking care of the cabin than enjoying the cabin. That can be true with boats, motorcycles, RVs, jet skis, snowmobiles...whatever. Or, you start making more money so you build a bigger house. Then, you've got to furnish it. Now there are more things to maintain or that can break down. It distracts us and strangles out time for God. We never quite find time for the Word of God.

God's Word can be strangled by pleasures. There are more pleasure distractions today than possibly at any other point in history. Our smart phones ding and ping. We read an article we're interested in on the Internet. Another one is linked. Soon we find we've spent hours with little to show for it. It can be TV or sports. I have a friend who'd start watching football early on Saturday morning and didn't stop until the last game was over that night.

It can be a new love in your life or a new friend. All of a sudden, you have no time for the Lord. You have to always be with that person. It can be a hobby. It can even be a new baby or grandchild. It can be nearly anything. All of sudden, the time you spent with the Lord in the Word is crowded out.

These are all good things. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of them. The problem is our hearts easily become crowded. We have time for everything except the Word of God and developing a deeper relationship with Christ. Jesus can't be just one of several good interests in my life. He must be the center and I work from the center to make time for everything else. When the center is off, everything is off.

One of the biggest enemies you'll ever face in spiritual warfare is busyness. We have such busy, cluttered lives it's hard to concentrate on the Word of God. And it's not getting easier.

The sad thing is the hearer really wanted to receive the Word and be fruitful. He's not hard hearted or shallow; just too busy. I wonder how many people will be lost for eternity because they were just too busy to fit Jesus into their lives. Jesus' words in Matthew 6:24 apply to our lives and not just to money: "*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.*" You can't serve Jesus and serve anything else. It's one or the other. You can't multi-task spirituality.

d. Do you have an accepting heart? "*And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold... As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.*" Very few farmers could survive long with a 75% failure. Can you imagine a high school where 75% of the students who started as freshmen never graduate?

Scripture does not teach Universalism. Universalism is the belief ultimately everyone will be saved. Sadly, many professing Christians believe in Universalism. At nearly every funeral, people talk about the deceased person, even if they had zero interest in anything spiritual or didn't go to church a day in their life, as if they're in heaven. Or when someone dies, the typical statement is, "Well, he/she is in a better place." The person could have been an ax murderer but

someone will still say, “Well, he’s in a better place.” Not if they didn’t know Jesus, not if they never trusted Him as their personal Lord and Savior.

God’s Word is clear, not everyone is going to heaven. Only those who are redeemed and have committed their lives to Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 25:46, “*And these (the unsaved) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*” So how do we know if someone is truly saved? How do we know if someone is authentic? Two indicators...

They persevere. They “*hold it fast in an honest and good heart...*” The key word for a true believer is *perseverance*. Perseverance is the identifying mark of genuine faith. Jesus said in John 8:31, “*If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples...*” All the other soils never started or fell away. Someone truly regenerate perseveres. They don’t fall away.

They produce spiritual fruit, “*and bear fruit with patience.*” Galatians 5:22-23, “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” If there’s authentic salvation, there will be fruit of the Spirit.

And there will be the fruit of evangelism. Jesus says it “*yielded a hundredfold.*” It should frighten us when the majority of folk in our churches have never led a single person to Christ. John 4:36 calls this “*fruit for eternal life.*” Read the New Testament for yourself – believers consistently reproduce believers. It’s normal Christianity.

You may be thinking, “Scott, are you saying if a ‘Christian’ never leads someone to Christ, they’re not saved themselves”? No, but I think we need to consider the possibility. Could it be that some Christians never share the change Jesus has brought into the lives because Jesus has never brought a change into their lives? They can’t share what they don’t have.

You can’t read the New Testament and what’s described as normal Christianity, yet not be shocked or have serious questions when a professing believer never shares their faith or leads someone to Christ. We need to be concerned when there’s no fruit. If there is no fruit, it may be there’s no life.

Farmers are excited with the harvest. We need to be excited when we see the Word bear fruit in a believer’s life! This is a heart which hears and does God’s Word. A hundred fold is a bumper crop! Authentic faith produces authentic fruit. It’s not how much ground is covered or how much seed is sown, but how much fruit is produced.

Conclusion: So which soil/heart are you most like this morning? Are you the **hard** heart? The **shallow** one? The **crowded** one? Hopefully, you’re the **accepting** one. Which soil are you most like this morning?

This time of year you may have received an advertisement from a lawn care company offering to do a free soil test, to evaluate the condition of the dirt in your yard. They do this hoping you’ll be convinced to pay them to add nutrients to make your soil healthy and productive.

Each of us needs to ask God to perform a test on the “soil” of our hearts. The Psalmist’s words need to echo in our souls, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*” (Ps. 139:23-24).

Each Sunday’s service should provide us with a time of self-examination, a time to evaluate our walk with God, to allow the Spirit to search us and guide us to respond to His sowing.

How are you responding to God’s Word? Are you bored? Distracted? How you respond is an indicator of the condition of your heart. Which one are you? If you’re not the accepting heart, if there’s no fruit, then your greatest need may be for a new heart...for salvation.

Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? If you don’t, please come to Him today!

If you do know Him but one of the other hearts is descriptive of you, then come to the Savior and give Him your heart. Repent of whatever is limiting the Word in your life. Let Jesus do some weeding and spring cleaning, and make your heart fruitful once again today.