

Matthew 13:1-23

SI: None of us like to be left in the dark.

We all want to know what’s going on, and we especially love it when we have the inside scoop. I’m starting a sermon series that will take us to Easter.

We’re going to look at the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

In our reading today, Jesus gives us a clue for understanding his parables.

He says his parables are an inside scoop about the kingdom of heaven.

INTRO: Suppose you had to make some deviled eggs for a picnic.

Your mother and your grandmother and all the Southern cooks you know use the same basic recipe.

A little mayonnaise, a squirt of mustard, and a spoon full of sweet relish.

Why is that the way they all do it? Because it’s good. It works.

Suppose you had to write a sermon on this parable.

So you decide to listen to some sermon recordings, or find some printed sermons and read them to see how other preachers have approached this text.

What you would find is that most of them use the same basic recipe.

They preach this parable by asking a question:

Which of the four soils describes your heart and your response to God’s word?

Is your heart like the soil along the path?

Have you never really been interested in God’s word or understood it because the Devil has snatched it away?

Or is your heart like the shallow, rocky soil?

You’ve responded to God’s word, but it’s superficial. You don’t have roots.

And sooner or later, when trouble comes, you are going to abandon the faith.

Or is your heart like thorny soil?

Once again, you’ve responded to God’s word, but you love other things.

You love money, you love comfort, so those choke out spiritual growth.

Or is your heart like the good soil?

Has the word of God gone down deep, taken root?

Are you growing spiritually? Are you bearing spiritual fruit?

That’s the way this parable is usually preached.

And it’s a good way to preach it. It works. I’ve preached it that way.

It challenges everyone who hears to examine where they are with God.

But that’s not the recipe I’m going to use this morning.

Instead, I'm going to focus on verse 11.

This verse is going to be my touchstone throughout this sermon series.

Verse 11 says:

Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

What does that mean? Look at the context.

Large crowds came to hear Jesus and he spoke to them in parables but he didn't explain the meaning of the parables.

Then later, when he was alone with his disciples, they asked him why?

He said, because the secrets of the kingdom of heaven are for you, not for them.

In other words, after Jesus told this parable, he did not then say to the large crowd:

All of you here, examine yourselves. Which of the four soils describes your heart?

Instead, later he privately explained it to his disciples and said:

This is a secret for you. This is a secret for good soil people only.

Other people are going to be spiritually deaf and blind to this teaching, so I'm not going to explain it to them.

When Jesus tells his parables, he introduces them by saying:

The kingdom of heaven is like, or the kingdom of heaven will be like.

So the primary purpose of the parables is to tell followers of Jesus Christ what to expect about God's kingdom in this world.

What is the reign of God in the world through Jesus Christ going to be like?

How will it progress? What it will become in the future.

That doesn't mean it's wrong to use the parables to preach an evangelistic message

and say: Examine your heart. Of course they can serve that purpose and have.

But their first purpose is to help believers understand God's kingdom so that we know what to expect in this life as citizens of the kingdom.

They give us the inside scoop, so we know what's really going on.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells us to expect three things:

- 1. Steady but uneven growth**
- 2. Disheartening and unsettling developments**
- 3. A harvest and vindication**

MP#1 The parable tells us to expect steady but uneven growth

Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed.

We're so familiar with this parable that it's easy to miss what a surprising description this is of the kingdom of God.

The reign of God in this world through Christ is like a farmer planting crops? Really?

What did Jesus' disciples expect the kingdom of God to be like?

They thought the Messiah was going to be a warrior king like David.

That he was going to liberate Israel through battle and establish his throne.

If they were going to depict the kingdom of God in a parable they would have said:

The kingdom of God is like a warrior riding a white horse before a vast army.

Or they might have reached back into the book of Exodus and said the kingdom of God will be like the Ten Plagues or the parting of the Red Sea all over again.

Earthquakes and fire and pillars of smoke.

In other words, something dramatic and decisive.

There are places where the Bible describes Christ's reign exactly like those things, but they are all descriptions of his Second Coming.

His first coming and his present reign and God's kingdom in the world right now in our experience is not described in any of those dramatic, decisive images.

Instead, Jesus says: It's like a farmer planting crops, watching them grow.

It's not flashy or particularly exciting.

It's a slow, steady, methodical process. It's dependent on times and seasons.

As Jesus himself details in the parable, the results are uneven.

Some seed doesn't take root at all, some doesn't do well.

And even the seed that produces grain doesn't produce at the same rate.

Some is more productive than others.

We know from early church history that it took the first believers some time to understand this and adjust their expectations.

They thought that after Jesus ascended into heaven, it wouldn't be long before he returned again in dramatic and total victory.

Now here we are 2,000 years later.

The reign of Christ has extended and grown tremendously over the centuries.

The church has spread around the world. But how has it grown?

Let's do an experiment.

Raise your hand if neither one of your parents were Christians.

Now raise your hand if at least one of your parents was a Christian.

This may surprise you, but most of the growth of God's kingdom through the

centuries has been believers having children and raising them in the faith. The church has grown mostly by nurturing the covenant children of the church.

There have been only a few, brief times when God's kingdom has experienced explosive growth.

In the history of missions, for example, there have been times when great numbers of people in particular tribes or nations have come to faith out of paganism.

A church has been formed in those places where there wasn't one before.

There have also been revivals in places where there was already a Christian witness but the church was small and struggling.

Large numbers of people turned to God and churches grew in size and influence.

Then the revival ended.

But those events are few and far between. Most Christians never experience them. Mostly the kingdom of God grows like a farmer planting seed, slowly and steadily.

One of the important applications is that you should be committed to consistent participation in the rhythms of church life and ministry.

Lord's Day worship week after week. Teaching and fellowship.

Don't look down on them because they are ordinary and repetitive.

Of course they are. Just like a farming.

This is especially important for American Christians to remember, because we like flash and quick results.

The other related point the Lord makes is that you should expect the kingdom of God to grow unevenly. Some places 100 times more, some 60, some 30.

Listen to this quote from a research publication on Christianity in Asia.

Since Korea and Japan share similar characteristics such as geography, history, and culture, it would seem safe to assume that they would also share a similar growth rate of Christianity within the two countries. However, in contrast to South Korea's nearly 49%, only 0.7% of Japan's population is Christian.

It might be possible to identify some reasons, but this parable encourages us to be thankful for all the harvest, even where just a little grows.

Praise God for 0.7% believers in Japan! There will be Japanese people in heaven.

So no matter where God in his providence places you, whether you are in a time and a place where his kingdom is flourishing or not, he wants you to continue to be loyal and faithful.

MP#2 This parable tells us to expect disheartening and unsettling developments

Let me read you the first-person account of a conversion story.

The man who wrote was a hard-drinking womanizer.

His mother kept urging him turn to Jesus.

After one night of crazy partying he was disgusted with himself.

Here's what he says happened:

As I knelt by my bed in the darkness, my mind was strangely vacant; thoughts and words wouldn't come to focus. After a moment, it was as though a black blanket had been draped over me. A sense of enormous guilt descended and invaded every part of me. I was unclean. Involuntarily, I began to pray, my face upturned, tears streaming. The only words I could find were, "Lord, come down. Come down. Come down. . . ." In a moment, a weight began to lift, a weight as heavy as I. It passed through my thighs, my belly, my chest, my arms, my shoulders and lifted off entirely. I could have leaped over a wall. An ineffable warmth began to suffuse every corpuscle. It seemed that a light had turned on in my chest and its refining fire had cleansed me. I hardly dared breathe, fearing that I might end or alter the moment. I heard myself whispering softly, over and over, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. . . ." After a while I went to mother's room. She saw my face, said, "Oh, Chuck. . . !" and burst into tears. We talked for an hour.

Chuck was Charles Templeton.

Went on to become Billy Graham's right-hand man. Founded Youth for Christ.

One of his biographers compared Charles Templeton's conversion with Billy

Graham's and said Templeton had a much more intense emotional experience.

But what happened to Charles Templeton? I've told you his sad story before.

After a number of years as a professing Christian he said the Bible was a fairy tale and then he renounced his faith in Christ.

He became a militant atheist, wrote books against Christianity, and he died confirmed in his unbelief.

There have been many like him through the centuries, even in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul had a ministry partner named Demas.

He mentions Demas in three epistles. In two of them Paul says, I'm sending greetings from my fellow workers, Luke, Mark, and Demas.

But in one of Paul's last letters, he says: Demas has deserted me because he loved this world.

I was once talking to someone in Cullman who was greatly perplexed at his own parents. He said: My parents raised me and my sister in the Christian faith.

We were always in church. My parents were very committed.

But after my sister and I left home, my parents started drifting from the church.

At first they said, We just want to spend time traveling on weekends.

But after they retired, they stopped going completely.

My sister and I love the Lord and when we try to talk to our parents about their

faith they don't want to discuss it. It's as if God and Christ and everything they once said was important doesn't even matter to them anymore.

I think all of us could tell similar stories of believers who have done the same. They have either blown up and kicked over their faith over in hostile fashion or they have simply drifted away into other things. It is perplexing and disheartening and unsettling.

But Jesus told us to expect it to happen. He said some seed falls on the path and is eaten by birds. Some people don't understand or respond to the Gospel at all. That's tragic, but it is in a sense an understandable category of people.

But Jesus goes on to say that there is also seed that falls on shallow soil and weedy soil. These are people who do appear to believe. They receive the word of God with joy and they spring up. They grow and participate in the life of the church. They talk the talk and walk the walk. But then some crisis happens and their faith withers away. Or they have a love for other things that eventually wins out. That's a lot harder to understand than people who never believe at all.

I'll be honest, this is one my worries about the pandemic. I'm afraid it's going to be the occasion for shallow soil people and weedy soil people to pull away permanently from the fellowship and worship of the church. They are going to become spiritually isolated from the body of Christ and become ineffective and unproductive, or even wither away completely. Maybe it would have happened anyway. But in normal times, we would have been able to urge them to return. Now, they are provided with a ready-made excuse to separate themselves.

But I can't be overly disheartened or unsettled by that, because the Lord Jesus told me to expect it. We've got to focus on the growing seed.

MP#3 The parable tells us to expect a harvest and vindication

What is the crop that Jesus is talking about in the parable?

He doesn't tell the disciples explicitly.

He just says that the seed on good soil is the person who hears the word, understands it and produces a crop yielding 100, 60, or 30 times what was sown.

Hearing the word and understanding it. That's pretty obvious.

It means believing the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Believing in Jesus as the Son of God, risen from the dead, present in his Holy Spirit, coming again in judgment—and committing your life to him.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!

So what then is the crop?

What is the fruit that Jesus is referring to that multiplies in the lives of believers? I've heard sermons that equate it specifically to evangelism.

The crop is leading other people to saving faith in Christ.

And there are some Christians who are quite amazing in how freely they witness and how many people have prayed to receive Christ as a result of their witness. Some of them could literally say that in their lifetime they have led 30, 60, or 100 people into the kingdom of God.

I think that's part of it, but it's certainly not the whole thing.

Because when the Bible uses these metaphors of fruit, crops, multiplication, harvest, and so forth, it's a much bigger image.

It embraces the whole of our lives, both individually and corporately, and it stretches to the end of history.

Let me break that down.

The crop in the parable is the whole of our individual lives in Christ.

Everything we do and work at and seek to become in Christ.

Like growing in the fruit of the Spirit:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control

Allison and I had a conversation about patience this week and the value of it in our interactions with some particular people in our lives.

We recognized that patience as a fruit of the Spirit is supernatural.

It not only goes against the grain, it's completely different from stoicism, which looks like patience but it's a counterfeit that turns your heart to stone.

Your hard work in maintaining a Christian home, your commitment to your marriage, your approach to your work as service done to the Lord, your sacrificial giving of your money and time to the causes of the Kingdom. You see, it's much more than just witnessing, Jesus is talking about your whole life as the seed that is producing a crop.

It's not only our individual lives, it's also our corporate life as a church.

I grew up in a very old church, founded in 1824, the sanctuary was built in 1827.

That's where I sat, Sunday after Sunday as a boy, worshipping, listening, being formed as a Christian.

The church members who paid for that sanctuary were long dead, but their common faith, their common effort, their prayers, the pooling of their money and talents—it not only honored God in their lifetime, it brought glory to the Lord Jesus in future generations yet to be born.

We're growing a crop together at Christ Covenant through our faith in Jesus.

All the things we do together, the uplifting things like singing hymns in worship, the mundane things like committee meetings, the fun things like family night suppers, the serious things like exhorting one another are preparing for a harvest. We will enjoy some of that in our lifetimes, but the fullness of it won't be realized until long after we are gone.

And that is really where this parable is pushing us.

When do you really know how much the seed has produced? At the harvest.

When is the harvest? It's at the end of the age.

We certainly have some fruit and crops along the way, but the final harvest won't happen until Jesus comes back.

It's going to be awesome. It's going to be a time of joy.

Because you will see the multiplying growth of every good thing you've every done for Jesus, every time you showed patience, every kind word, every dollar given.

All the tears you've shed and the prayers you've prayed.

The invisible spiritual effects of those things will be revealed and celebrated.

It may seem to you, and it often does to me, that the kingdom of heaven is barely advancing in this world and barely advancing in my own heart and life.

But Paul says in Galatians 6: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

That's why Jesus told this parable to his disciples. We can't see the harvest.

But he can, and he has promised it will be yours in the end.