

**Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**A Kingdom Ministry**  
**Matthew 13:1-9**

*1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "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. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 He who has ears, let him hear."*

**A Kingdom Ministry (Matthew 13:1-9)**

One day I was visiting one of the sweetest older members of Central in the hospital. His wife and I had some time alone and I asked her, "Has he always been so sweet?" She practically jumped, "Oh my lands, no! His kids would say he was a tyrant when they were little."

That was a surprise! "So how did he change? Did he become a believer?"

"Yes around the age of forty, and he started to change, but not all that much."

What then? "When he was forty-six, he started to memorize Scripture. He memorized the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, and it changed him."

Everyone saw, everyone loved the change that lasted for forty years. It doesn't always work that way. For some people, the more they hear, the more they resist. That was surely true in Jesus' ministry at times.

Matthew 13 begins with three words: "that same day." That takes us back to events from Matthew 12 and a controversy described there. Jesus healed a man rendered blind and mute by demonic power. The witnesses wondered, "Could this be the Son of David"? The Pharisees had another explanation. "His power is undeniable but he is a sinner, for he works on the Sabbath and eats with sinners. Since he is evil, the source of his power must be evil, even satanic" (12:22-24).

Can you imagine how the apostles felt that day? Jesus performed signs that demonstrated His compassion and power. They show that He is the Redeemer, that God's reign is coming. But the nation's leaders reject Him. Why? With these the questions in the air, Jesus changes location and tactics. He moves from the synagogue to the great outdoors and where He had taught openly, now He teaches in parables, starting with a story about a farmer planting seeds.

**The sower and the soils (13:3-9)**

The farmer's methods seem odd to us, but they were typical of the day. Farmers often scattered seed first, then tilled the soil (they also plowed before sowing on occasion). The sower tossed his seed onto four types of earth: onto a path; onto rocky soil, that is, onto a thin layer of soil, with rocks beneath it; onto land covered with thorn bushes and onto good soil. Let's look at each one.

First, the sower cast seed on a foot-path that travelers had worn into his field. But the birds quickly devoured seeds that lay on the hard-packed dirt (13:4).

Second, seed fell onto a thin layer of soil atop stony ground. The seed sprang up fast and died fast because the thin soil allowed only shallow roots to grow and shallow roots will not sustain a plant in torrid weather (13:5-6).

Third, seed fell among thorns. The good seed faced competition – and lost.

None of this would seem unusual to Jesus' audience. If anything sounded strange it would be the yields of the good soil. A yield of ten seeds for each one sown was ordinarily considered to be successful within the Roman empire. A yield of thirty or one hundred to one was spectacular.

Jesus finishes by asking his readers to pause and think. Do you have ears? Do you hear the layers of meaning? They invite contemplation.

The first layer seems clear: Although the seed is the same, the results vary. The controlling factor is the character of the soils. The farmer does his work, but the results hinge on the nature of the soil on which the seed falls.

There is a simple moral lesson. The same labor can yield widely varying results. Sometimes a salesman makes forty calls and nothing happens. Then he calls three more and makes two sales. A student may study ten hours and earns a B- on a test. The next day, she works two hours and earns an A. A skinny tomato plant may bear five stunted fruits, but a healthy one can bear 120, plump. But there is another layer to the onion. There's more, if we have ears to hear (13:9).

### **The meaning of the four soils (13:18-23)**

So Jesus explains what the parable of the sower means (13:18). The four soils represent four types of people and four types of response to the word of God. These four are not an exhaustive list of all possible responses to the word, but the leading categories. Later, Jesus says He is the sower: "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man" (13:37). The parable, therefore, represents what happens when Jesus proclaims the word of God. It explains what has just been happening including the baffling behavior of the Israelites who reject his ministry. How could these things be? Jesus explains:

- Satan snatches the word away from some so they never really hear it.
- Others take superficial interest. There is brief joy, but it fades fast.
- For others the word interests them, but wealth and success interest them more, and that stunts their response.
- Some truly listen and the word bears great fruit. We can label four types: Deaf listeners, superficial listeners, distracted listeners, and fruitful listeners.

### **Hard/indifferent/deaf listeners (13:18-19)**

Sometimes the word falls on ears and hearts that are as hard as a path that a thousand footprints have packed down until it's hard as concrete (13:19). They hardly hear what Jesus says. They don't know that Jesus, very God and sole Son of the Father, had come to earth and started to perform mighty deeds that show he is the Messiah. This is the message the crowds were hearing but not understanding.

The crowds lacked understanding – but so do disciples, at times. The problem: the crowds were content to lack understanding. They were careless listeners, picking up scraps of information here and there. But they never bent heart and mind to the whole message. The word made a faint impression, the kind of impression a seed makes on hard-packed earth. They liked to watch Jesus and listen to him. But their watching and listening amounted to nothing. Everything slipped from their hands. Thus Satan snatched the word from them.

There is a book on punctuation, entitled “Eats, Shoots and Leaves.” The title comes from a sign at a zoo outside the panda habitat. The sign should read, "Eats shoots and leaves." That is, pandas eat two things: shoots and leaves. Instead, the sign, by someone who knew not the right use of commas, read: "Eats, shoots and leaves." This means pandas do three things: eat, shoot (with a gun?) and leave (departing in haste?). We imagine a surly panda dining at a restaurant, getting into an altercation with the server, firing a round or two into the ceiling, then fleeing the crime scene. The book became a best-seller; the author appeared in bookstores. One day, the author was signing copies of the book when a woman came up to her table and moaned, "Oh, I'd love to learn about punctuation!"

The author chuckled, "Then this is the book for you." She picked up her pen and waited for the name. But the woman, acting as if the author had disagreed, replied, "No, I mean it. I really would love to know how to do it. I did learn it at school, but I've forgotten it now and I put everything in the wrong place."

The author nodded and smiled, "Shall I sign it to anyone in particular?" But the woman lamenting, "And I'm a teacher, and I'm quite ashamed, so I'd love to know about punctuation, but there's nowhere you can turn." The poor author sat there, tempted to thump the woman with her book.

Some people simply will not be helped. They cry, "If only I could use a comma correctly." A heap of books lies before them entitled "How To Use Commas Correctly" but they trudge away, head down, in despair.<sup>1</sup>

So it goes. People call out for the truth, perhaps even a word from God. They pray, "Say something, if you are out there." God exceeded this request. He visited our earth, spoke, acted, lived in perfect justice and love, died, rose, and moved his servants to write it in a book, so we can re-read his word, should we ever forget his message. Further, this book has been translated into your tongue. You can purchase a copy and consult it whenever you wish. You tell to a friend and he replies, "But I want God to speak to me." Well, he has, but you must listen.

### **Superficial listeners (13:20-21)**

The second flawed response to the word is superficial enthusiasm. Jesus says the seed that falls on rocky places represents people who hear the word with initial enthusiasm, then quickly fall away.

Occasionally, a new face greets me at the door and says, "Pastor, that is the best sermon I've heard this year." Sadly, I have learned that for many who say this, the morning sermon is the only one they heard this year. They are happy and enthusiastic, but the enthusiasm is temporary and shallow.

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<sup>1</sup> L Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* xxi-xxiii.

People get excited about Jesus, the Bible, the church, but as soon as trouble or persecution comes, they falter and turn away. The Greek verb (skandalivzw) can mean to stumble, fall, or, most often "take offence." That meaning fits here. The minute the life of faith becomes difficult, some are offended. This is not what they expected. In a preemptive strike against the prosperity gospel, Jesus says we should expect trouble (Matt 5:11-12). Yet, some think having faith means all will go well. Then when hardship or persecution comes, they want nothing to do with it.

### **Distracted listeners (13:22)**

Distracted listeners are cousins of superficial listeners. They take interest in the word as long as nothing more pressing happens. If hardship and persecution thwarts the first group, success and wealth stymies the second. This listener understands the word, but gets caught in affairs of this world: opportunities for advancement, threats to success. We worry what our rival is doing, will our job be there, can we protect assets? There is a lot worry about, if we have a mind for it.

### **Fruitful listeners (13:23)**

But some do listen and the seed bears fruit, one hundred or sixty or thirty times what was sown. These are superb results for that day. So too, when the word of God takes root in us, the fruit is spectacular. That very day, many heard Jesus with deaf, superficial or distracted ears. That very day, others listened and began to bear fruit. That fruit may appear quickly or develop slowly.

A pregnant woman who doesn't love babies may wonder if she will be able to love her children. She finds success there... Will she able to love her children's friends? Yes, and in time her home is open to any child from anywhere.

So we read the parable, but it reads us. The parable describes Jesus. He is the sower, sowing the word right now (13:37). That was true then and it's true today. The parable asks, "Do you hear what Jesus is saying? What kind of soil are you? What kind of listener are you? Are you deaf? Distracted? Superficial? Fruitful? Are you happy with the kind of listener you are? Do you want to listen better?"

- If deaf, would you like to hear? Ask the Lord to open your ears and heart.
- If superficial, would you like to sober up? Ask the Lord for seriousness.
- If distracted, ask the Lord for clarity, for the ability to block the worries of life, the burdens brought by the quest for success.
- If fruitful, give thanks and ask God to direct you to good places for service.

Jesus said, "He who is not for me is against me" (Matt 12:30). There is no neutral ground. Each is one kind of listener or another. Do you know yourself? Have you taken a stand? If you want to be a disciple, brush away your distractions. You can make a fresh start. You can pray, "Lord, I want to be fruitful for you, not just for a season, but always."

See how God speaks. His word comes gently, like a seed. As easily ignored or crushed as a seed. A whisper, not a shout. Jesus comes as a farmer, not an army commander. Some Christians like a forceful approach. They like the hammer. Loud denunciations of sin. I understand; hammers can be great. But let's not be wiser than God. He brings his kingdom with words, not swords. The kingdom comes like a seed, without power or compulsion. But when it settles in a willing heart, how it grows!

His word is as soft and insistent as a whisper: What kind of soil are you? Are you listening? Are you like the woman who can't lay hold of that book about punctuation? Or the man who memorized 1 Corinthians 13 and changed? Offer your ears, your heart, to God. Let the seed send its roots deep in you, so you bear much fruit.

Of course, it's not that simple. There is opposition to the Kingdom. After the sower sowed good seed in his field, an enemy came at night and sowed weeds among the wheat. They sprouted and their roots became entangled with the good plants so it was impossible to uproot one without destroying the other.

The Kingdom has come, but this world continues. The sons of God and the sons of evil grow beside each other until Jesus comes at end of the age. Then he will uproot all evil and the righteous will shine like the sun.

This is not the age of glory. We wish evil and folly would cease. Isaiah promises a day when people will stop admiring folly and laughing at virtue: "No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be respected" (Isa 32:5, 8). But, Jesus says, that day lies in the future. We must endure evil, proclaim grace and offer mercy. So Jesus' message instills sober realism. But there's more.

### **Mustard seed (13:31-32)**

In the next parable we have seeds again - mustard seeds. The mustard seed was the smallest common seed at the time. The mustard seed ordinarily grows into a bush six to twelve feet tall. But this plant grows until it's like a tree, like the largest lilac. Birds come and build nests in its branches.

The point is simple. Jesus and his disciples were a miniscule group, a tiny movement at the beginning. Yet, Jesus says that they will grow steadily, far more than anyone imagined. The church grew by thousands through the preaching of the apostles. For 300 years the Empire threatened Jesus' people at every turn. Christians suffered violence. The church had no funds, no media outlets, no training centers yet it spread constantly. After 300 years, seven million Christians ranged through every corner of the Empire. Today no religion, faith, or philosophy is more widespread than Christianity. In virtually every nation on earth, Christ is worshipped. So the Kingdom has a small beginning, but a great climax.

### **Yeast (13:33)**

The parable of yeast makes a similar point. Jesus pictures a woman at work, placing yeast or leavened dough into a bowl filled with flour. In the Old Testament yeast is often a symbol of corruption. But symbols are fluid in the Bible (Jesus is compared to a lion and Satan is compared to a lion). But the point here is that yeast changes things. A little yeast transforms a large amount of flour.

I used to bake bread (and pancakes) occasionally. Debbie would remind me: Put in the baking powder, baking soda, or yeast. Without rising agents, the cookies, pancakes or bread is spoiled. If we forget the yeast and we place bread dough in the oven, we get hot semi-edible rocks. But a little yeast transforms all the dough. The gospel, like yeast, slowly transforms all that it touches.

Take education. Universal literacy is a biblical idea. Israel had the highest literacy rate in the ancient world. Israel had something to read: the word of God. The Protestant Reformation prompted a second wave of literacy for the same reason. The reformers believed everyone should be able to read the word. Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale and Princeton all began life as seminaries and then offered education to others. So the yeast, the quiet influence, of the gospel affects the entire world. The gospel is the core of

the kingdom's influence, but there is no limit to what it touches: schools, hospitals, law, all our work.

Pause to claim the lessons. Jesus knew the disciples' doubts and he knows ours, too. He says, "When my work seems pitifully small or sorely oppressed, do not be perplexed, do not despair." The kingdom has a small beginning, but it will transform all things and grow to a great size.

In fact, most things start small – businesses, causes. The kingdom of God is no different. It starts small and grows incrementally. So let us be patient while the kingdom grows. The next two parables affirm this point and then add one more thought. The kingdom not only grows larger; it also has supreme value.

### **Treasure in a field (13:44)**

Ancient people had nothing like banks or safe deposit boxes. When brigands threatened or war forced sudden flight, people buried their treasures in clay jars. If the owners never returned, the treasure was lost until someone stumbled upon it. In the next parable, a laborer strikes a buried clay jar. He suspects it's a buried treasure, so he takes a risk and buys the field so the jar is his.

His actions seem shaky, but the law and the custom of the time allowed it. Jesus makes a simple point. The kingdom is worth all we possess. The kingdom is not for sale. But if it were for sale and we had to sell all that we had to gain it, we should count it a bargain. So God's Kingdom often looks small, but it is worth all that we have.

### **Pearl of great price (13:45-6)**

This parable is like the last. Again man finds something of great value and sells all he has to acquire it. Again Jesus says the kingdom is supreme, but notice the twist. In the first parable, a worker stumbles upon his treasure. Here we have a merchant searching for fine pearls. He knows pearls, and decides that this one has greater value than all he owns. He sells all to obtain this one pearl.

So it goes. Some stumble upon the kingdom and find it through a happy accident. Others search for it. They examine the options. They consider the claims of Christ for a long time and decide nothing matches the grace and power of Jesus. It is worth all that they have.

And Jesus' kingdom is worth all we have. This is the treasure of the gospel: we do not do a thing to lay hold of it. Jesus did all that had to be done. We receive his rule by grace alone, through faith alone. It's worth all we have we need to let that show. How? Three examples:

A while ago someone told me to read "Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment" by Brian Godawa. Cool! But my admiration jumped when I learned that he doesn't just criticize, he writes scripts.

A friend of mine retired a few months ago, still feeling strong, wanting to serve God. He had been involved in our prison ministry for years, but decided to take a big step further. He sought the training and took the exams to become a credentialed Evangelical Presbyterian Church prison chaplain. That's his new "job" at least twenty hours per week.

I used to play basketball with a Christians physician. Eventually I learned about his work as an obstetrician. About twenty percent of his patients are single. Almost fifty percent did not have a plan. Many of them learn they are pregnant and say, "I have to make a decision." He has planned his response: "You already made your decision. Now you're a mother."

He trains his staff to handle things to promote and preserve life. They talk about "mothers" and "babies," not choices and fetuses.

If someone says, "I can't afford it," his staff says, "Let us tell you about the resources available to you." If someone insists, he says, "I can deliver the baby for free." He weaves this – these kingdom values, in all he does.

The physician, the retired banker, the script-writer – all know that they serve the king who loves them and gave his life for them. They know they are part of his kingdom. So they listen to his word and try to bear fruit. If it starts small, if there is opposition, that's OK. They expect to see fruit, one hundred and sixty and thirty times what was sown.

I recently spoke to a young man who loves to evangelize. He reads theology and he isn't afraid to debate well-armed skeptics. Half an hour into a discussion, an atheist attacked saying, "You Calvinists and the Sovereign God. It's suffocating." He was stunned. He'd never said "Calvin" or "predestination" or anything.

I said, "Yes, but you have a certain view of God and Christianity. You speak of a mighty and holy God. Your friend hears you say faith isn't about religious feelings or moral goodness. It's about the mighty God and he rebels.

People rebel against the idea of God the king. It feels oppressive. It creates Christians who think of influence, dominion, who dare to believe, passionately, that they are right and that good would come if their views prevailed.