

My mother and wife are gardeners. Each has a garden which they've planted and tend to. They work the soil, add nutrients, till it, and do all they can to make it conducive to planting and growth. There are parts of their garden which they know a plant will have a stronger chance of growing than others. Such as where and when the sunlight hits the ground, how loose and deep the soil is, the nutrients, etc. There are other parts where they know there is no chance of a plant growing since they are well trodden paths, or there is too much rock, or not enough sun.

When a plant grows in good soil it will eventually seed itself and produce other plants. The process of life has begun, yet a gardeners job is extensive and ongoing. It starts with preparing the soil, it goes on to planting and watering, to weeding, and into constant care and pruning of the plant for ongoing future growth. The pruning process, the cutting away, actually produces more fruit - seems counter intuitive, but true.

Our current series is Revolution; the transformational teachings of Jesus. Today we are in Mark 4 and Jesus is going to talk to us about gardening. **Starting in verse 1 it says...**

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.

Ever notice when you are sitting on the side of a lake and you can hear the voices of people in a boat far out on the lake. Water carries sound better than land, so he probably spoke from the boat so his voice would carry over the water.

<sup>2</sup> He taught them many things by parables

A parable is a simple story using familiar illustrations to teach a moral or spiritual lesson.

and in his teaching said: <sup>3</sup> "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Paths are worn earth, hard packed from walking. Seeds just sit on top vulnerable to elements and critters. In the time he was speaking these words everyone would understand that farmers operated by a 10-1 ratio. For every 10 seeds thrown, one would take root and grow. Which tells us how much work it takes to see the Gospel root in a community. The work is slow at first, but later we'll see that after it takes root it can grow quickly.

<sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

There was a layer of limestone under some parts where the soil was only an inch or two deep. Not deep enough for plants to take root which essential for survival. Sun was

normally good for a plant, but without the roots drawing moisture the sun becomes its demise.

<sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

The tree of paradise, a large weed-like tree, long ago brought in from Asia, grows quickly and crowds out the sun for other plants and they die off. Weeds suck the nutrients out of the ground which other plants need, crowding them out by their fast growth.

<sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

When a plant has what it needs, planted in nutrient rich soil, with sunlight and water, it grows, seeds, and reproduces. There used to be a show on Discovery Channel which outlined what would happen if the human race was wiped off the face of the earth. It revealed that very quickly plants would overrun our cities and in a matter of a few decades we would have to dig to find the remains of civilization. It's an image of the multiplicative nature of the kingdom of God.

Addition is slow going.  $1+1=2$  /  $2+1=3$  /  $3+1=4$ , etc. But one seed planted produces one plant which produces let's just say for argument sake 1000 seeds. And if 1/10th of those take root you have 100 more plants plus the existing plant which would produce 10,100 more plants. Then they produce 100 more each which would be 1,010,000. And 100 more from each of those would be 101,000,000 and so on. One seed planted in you takes root and hundreds, thousands, even millions more are planted as a result. You and I actually do not realize how much effect our witness has!

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

What exactly does that mean? Everyone has ears, and he got out on the water so they could use those ears...obviously Jesus is teaching a spiritual truth here. We must remember Nicodemus last week and the imagery of the Wind and how that represents the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is referring to those in the crowd, the 1/10th, who are open to receiving the Word, and that gentle blowing of the Spirit in their lives as opposed to others, the remaining 9/10th, who were hardened and couldn't receive it.

<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

Now, you think the disciples would get it. But we can see by their questioning they don't. Are they the 1/10th, or one of the 9/10th?

<sup>11</sup> He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables <sup>12</sup> so that, “ ‘they may be ever

seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

Here we have a big crowd, many different kinds of people with many different motivations. Later many of them leave him due to his hard teachings. Jesus is weeding the garden of those with impure motives; addition by subtraction. He is sifting through these listeners knowing it takes more than intellect to grasp Truth. Knowing that he is looking for true followers who will press farther towards him in faith. Knowing that some of them are there only to get healed, or fed, or because it feels good for the time. Remember our first sermon in this series, when he chose the disciples he was looking for those who would be willing to suffer and possibly die for his kingdom. But we cannot make the mistake here that he is refusing salvation to some.

He is quoting Isaiah 6:9-10 when the prophet was speaking to rebellious hardened people. There is a difference in his quote though - in Isaiah 6:10 it actually says they might turn and be 'healed', whereas Jesus says 'forgiven'. That is because in the forgiveness of Jesus we are healed. He teaches with parable to produce a desire to know more, or to be healed, which the disciples have. Therefore, the message is not, "If you can't figure this out there is no hope for you". Rather the message is, "Come closer to Jesus to get more!". If the soil of your life is hardened come and be tilled; allow the farmer to work and make you ready to receive it.

That's the parable, and in verses 13-20 Jesus patiently explains it to the disciples. He explains, the Seed represents the Word of God, contrasting 4 different types of people; the Hardened Heart, the Shallow Heart, the Ambitious-Worrisome Heart, and the Fruitful Heart. The proposition is to allow the Word of God to bear fruit in us we must be fertile ground. And the question is, "How do I become fertile ground?".

He starts with the Hardened Heart and says some of the Word falls on people who are hardened like a well trodden path, and the seed is quickly snatched away, it never takes root. Although, it's possible for this soil to be fertile. There was a man in Texas who bought a house with hard dry packed soil. Nothing would grow. But over the years he would break it up and till in mulch, manure, and grass seed, until he had a lush green lawn.

The farmer in Jesus' day would cast the seed first, and then till it into the soil. Therefore, the image is of the Word being robbed from someone's heart before tilling starts. This person could still be fertile ground if the process would be carried through. If we are hardened, hope is not lost. The question is, how do I allow Jesus to till the soil of my heart mixing in the Word?

He then goes to the Shallow Heart. Other people hear the Word and receive it excitedly, but maybe they receive it only since it feels good in the beginning - there's a shallowness. The soil of their heart is only an inch deep and underneath is a hard layer which the root cannot break through. As soon as trouble or persecution comes they are

gone. The sun, which normally fosters life, shines on them and becomes their demise. The Shallow Heart says, "I want the benefits of Jesus, but want control of my life".

They come attracted to the fun of community; music, friendships, and activity, but when conflict happens, or expectations are put on them, they run. When they find out there are standards of purity and holiness which they cringe at, they cut loose. When they realize a community expects them to serve, they leave. When they find out they're expected to be Jesus to others, they don't want that responsibility. They blame others, "I tried church, but they're screwed up". They don't run from just the church, they run from Jesus, since they would not stay around long enough to see Jesus work through conflict, or reveal himself through spiritual discipline. Jesus works through the local body of believers and obedience in communal life.

This is often the narcissist. The self-centered soul. The soul which wants to feel good and can't understand the deeper reasonings behind discipline, hardship, and suffering. But again, this could be remedied. On ground like this farmers would bring in top soil adding depth for roots to grow.

He then explains the Worrisome-Ambitious Heart. Maybe the soil is good, but seed is planted among the weeds. Weeds rob the soul of nutrients and crowd out plants until they die off. When I was young I worried about my future, so much that it consumed me - worry can be a self-fulfilling prophesy - when you worry about something in essence you often make it come to pass. I had to go back to Jesus and let him pull those weeds of worry and sin in my life. It seems counter intuitive to a person like this that rest and spiritual contemplation will bring greater depth and joy to life while the world tells them to become busier to get what they want.

Yet another person may not worry as much as they allow their ambitions to override the kingdom in life. They're enticed by goodies, and chase after them. They disregard the call of Jesus, and over time, they wake up surrounded by their toys, feeling lost and empty. The Vigilantes of Love, have a song which says, the world beams dreams and wishes to a big dish on my front lawn. True that, we confuse our wants and needs and are suffocated by keeping up with the Jones's.

Jesus told the story of another guy who was like this - the guy who said to him "let me first go back and bury my father". The problem was the man's father was not dead at that moment. What he was saying is, let me go home, build my life, build my nest egg, my retirement fund, see my family grow and pass on, find success, and then I'll have time to follow you.

When Jesus calls we answer. You remember the last day of High School? When you walked away from the building, knowing that you were leaving behind a chapter to life. You would never see most of those people again. From now on life would be different. That was a good walking away, but it still left us all with a pit in our stomach. One of the worst feelings in the world is to hear Jesus call, but walk away. I imagine when those disciples who decided to leave him due to his hard teaching walked away and began to

hear his voice fade, some of them looked back with a pit in their stomach and asked, “Did I just make the biggest mistake of my life?”

Finally, he gets to the fourth person, the Fruitful Heart. Those who stay at the table through thick and thin. Those who mature and grow deep roots, and when the sun beats down, or the torrential rains come, or drought, those roots are so deep and strong in Jesus that they will not die. They may get stepped on. They may feel dry for long periods. Church may not be fun for them at times, but they stay. They may be blown hard, but in the end they find what Paul said is true; we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. <sup>1</sup>

These are the people who have the scar tissue of conflict, the callouses of hard work. They’re weathered. They’re the reliable, faithful, available, teachable, service, and other-oriented people. They’re ambassadors of Christ in the Kingdom Opportunities of our Community Groups. They’re the Spiritual Midwives we spoke of last week, reproducing the life of Jesus in others. They’re revolutionary transformational producers of seed.

So the proposition; in order for the Word to produce fruit in us we need to be fertile ground. The obvious question is not just, “Which ground am I?”. But rather, “How do I become fertile ground?”. You may feel hardened, shallow, or overcome with worry and ambition today - but that does not mean Jesus can’t change you. Jesus often leaves us with open questions. He leaves us with the uneasiness of wrestling with our hearts without giving absolute clear direction. He dangles a carrot in front of the horse through parable. He doesn’t lean over to the disciples and say, “Don’t you worry, you’re in - I’m speaking to those other dolts out there”. He leaves us all wondering, where are my roots? Am I hardened, shallow, ambitious & worrisome, or fruitful? Am I the tree planted by the water, or a withered sapling on a rocky ledge?

Scripture is replete with verses which give me hives when I read them. See I came from the conservative Evangelical world who liked to have all their theological ducks in a row - your’e either in, or you’re out. We like to have our theology of salvation tied up in neat little bows. But neat bows bring complacency. We must learn to live in tension with Jesus - and He always drives us to self-evaluation - not navel gazing, or complacent self-absorption, but healthy self-evaluation.

I don’t like verses like, “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”.<sup>2</sup> Or, <sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us

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<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version*. 2011 (Ro 5:3–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> *The New International Version*. 2011 (Php 2:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

who are being saved it is the power of God.<sup>3</sup> Or, <sup>12</sup> Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, <sup>13</sup> but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.<sup>4</sup> Fear & trembling, being saved, stands firm to the end? I don't like the idea that I am saved, but am being saved at the same time. I don't like this tension, am I going to grow cold, or stand firm? It's all too open ended for me! I just wanna be saved period! I wanna know I'm in. Although I believe, once saved always saved, I think Jesus drives every mature believer to healthy self-evaluation - am I still walking with him?

We have to go back to Nicodemus's story from last week, when do we receive the Holy Spirit? When do we actually change? When am I saved? Maybe these are the wrong questions to ask. Maybe I need to ask questions like, how can I become fertile ground? Do I need tilling? Do I need topsoil? Do I need weeding? How can I extend my roots deeper into Jesus? What chokes life out of me? What's the difference between responsibility and worry? Birds plan and work for their food, but they don't worry. Jesus said be like them.

So, what does fruit look like? When I was growing up, fruit was measured only by conversions, how many notches were in my evangelical belt. How many have I seen saved through my ministry? How many Gospel presentations have I made? Look back at Nicodemus again from last week. We are not responsible for conversions. We are responsible to sow seed. It's not the conversion we look for, but rather, are we being Jesus to others. To be Jesus means reflecting his love and holiness to others. In other words, do I look more like Jesus every day and does that naturally come out in relationship with others? So, being fruitful is twofold, it does mean do I reproduce life in others, but firstly it means is life being reproduced in me over and over? Because it is only through my connection to him which I will positively influence you.

One good way of measuring this is to look at Galatians 5, the fruits of the Spirit - <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>5</sup> Attractive things.

If I am growing in these then I am fertile ground since the first three people Jesus outlines have trouble living by and keeping in step with the Spirit. They are hardened, shallow, or have their eyes diverted to the worries & things of life. They resurrect the old self. They blame others, but it's really about their choices. However if we turn, we can be fertile ground. The answer is to come close to Jesus, and ask him to prepare the soil of our lives once again becoming something his Word can flourish in.

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<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. 2011 (1 Co 1:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 24:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> *The New International Version*. 2011 (Ga 5:22–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And like we said in the beginning, a gardeners job is not over once things are planted. Jesus continues to tend his garden, pruning, weeding, tilling the ground and adding nutrients. There'll be sunny days, rainy days, cold days, and snowy days. There'll be storms, torrential downpours, and drought. The gardner prepares us to weather it all. We will all go through points in our walk when we look more like one of these grounds than the others, the disciples obviously didn't get it right away. The question is will we draw close and allow the gardner to do his work? Or will we walk away? We let him do his work by submitting ourselves to his hand. How?

#### Community:

We attend one local church where we are knowing others and being known

We do not neglect corporate worship, prayer & fellowship

We involve ourselves as much as possible, making choices which allow us to do so

We recognize accountability, confession, encouragement, and ministry to each other as necessary and vital to spiritual life

#### Personal Growth

We do not neglect the spiritual discipline of personal study of the Word, prayer, and exploring the thoughts of mature Christians

We do not walk away from our call, we work out our faith with healthy fear & trembling

#### Mission

We recognize all of the above is for the fulfillment of the Kingdom in others - it's not about me

We engage the outside community seeking to follow, be obedient, and manifest Jesus to others - we sow seed

If 100 people in this room were allowing fruit of Galatians 5 to develop in their lives, and as a result were a witness to just 10 people each this year, by the 1/10th principle, we could produce 100 followers of Jesus. Next year, 200 will produce 200 more. 400 produce 400 more. 800 could produce 800 more. 1600 could produce 1600 more. 3200 could produce 3200 more. 6300 new disciples, plus the original 100, reproducing themselves! And that is just being a witness to 10 people in a year. How the world would be revolutionarily transformed by the Living Word if we are fertile soil!

**PRAY through the 4 types & THEN ANNOUNCE THE PRAYER MINISTRY!!!**