The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-23
Key Verse: Matthew 13:15
“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.”

Has anybody here seen a Pixar movie? If you don’t know, Pixar is an animation studio that is now owned by Disney. They produce 3D animated movies and they were the first ones to do so. Their first movie was Toy Story in 1995, and every year or so, they put out a movie. Most of their movies are multi-layered so that they can appeal to adults and children. They come up with some amazing concepts that turn out to be great storytelling. From toys that come alive when nobody is around to a whole world of monsters that scare children to power their technology but are actually terrified of children to a rat the cooks to the emotions inside a preteen girl’s head. As an example, in 2008, Pixar released the move WALL-E. The main character is a robot that doesn’t really speak. It is set in the future in a time where people have left the earth because it got so filled with trash. One giant company says they have a fleet of robots to clean up the earth. Seven hundred years pass and all the robots stop working except one. There is one little robot that goes out every day to keep cleaning up the world. Up in space, the people have been getting lazier and fatter as they have their floating lounge chairs. They consume and consume. It is a story of a robot finding love and helping humanity to see the error of its ways. It is an entertaining story, but it has a deeper message: that we need to take care of the planet and stop being so consumed by consumption. There are a number of movies that have these deeper messages. The stories that they tell are entertaining, but they serve an additional purpose. They let someone watching know about a very important issue and gets that person to think. This is very much like a parable. Now, a parable is a short story, which illustrates or teaches some truth. On the surface, a parable is a simple story but it holds a profound truth. In today’s passage, Jesus starts to speak to the crowd in parables. He tells the people stories, and why he does so is the subject of his first parable.

We’re in chapter 13 of Matthew, but this passage is a continuation of the narrative that began in chapter 12. In that chapter, if you remember, Jesus began to butt heads with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who were very prominent religious leaders. Jesus was doing some amazing things, but the Pharisees were just hard in their hearts. They were calloused towards all the great things Jesus was doing. They even wanted to discredit him and kill him. The Pharisees kept demanding things from Jesus to prove who he was despite the fact that all the things he had been doing had proved who he was. With that thought, our passage today begins, “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.” (1) When I read this one verse, I get the sense that Jesus wanted a little alone time. All that had been going on that day made him need some time to himself and God. Unfortunately, it didn’t last. The passage continues, “Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.” (2) While trying to get a little alone time, a crowd formed around him. He wasn’t teaching or

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preaching. Jesus was just sitting by the lake and a crowd formed around him. Jesus has such magnetism that even when he just sits, he draws a crowd. You can see that whole reason the Pharisees and teachers of the law didn't like Jesus was because they were jealous of him. Everybody knew that the Pharisees were smart but no one really wanted to listen to them, but they hung on every word of Jesus. The people sought him out. When the crowd became to large, he got into a boat and sat in it.

While in the boat, Jesus looked at the crowd on the shore and he decided to speak, but instead of teaching the crowd, Jesus chose to tell them a story…a parable. "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (3-8) Picture it: the people went out to see Jesus and hear the great teaching that he gives, teaching with such authority the likes of which the world has never before seen. Jesus is the greatest public speaker to ever live and his words were the words of life. You gather around him, and he gets into a boat and takes a seat. You wait with baited breath for Jesus to give you the secrets of eternal life and when his mouth finally opens, Jesus says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed…" If you were to hear those words from Jesus' mouth, how would you respond? Would you be looking around to see how everybody else is responding? Would you be wondering where he was going with this story? Would you be thinking that Jesus was going to give gardening tips? Prior to this point, Jesus had been pretty straightforward in his teaching. He's given examples, but never before had Jesus just told a story.

You might wonder what this parable means. Well, Jesus actually explains it further down in the passage. Let me read it, "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 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. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." (18-23) I like how Jesus explains it and what he says in pretty straightforward. I don't want to go into a lot of detail about it, but I do want to give some examples.

Jesus said that the seed along the path is anyone who hears the message bout the kingdom and does not understand it, and then the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown. So, the seed is the message about the kingdom of heaven. You know, the title for our series is *Kingdom Come*, and we are constantly talking about the kingdom. The message that Jesus gives is all about

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the kingdom of heaven and that we need to repent and come to him to find forgiveness of our sins. When someone hears that message and doesn't understand it, there is nowhere for it to grow. It is kind of shrugged off and lost. If you talked to me more than sixteen years ago, I very much like this. You could have talked to me until you were blue about God and whatnot and I wouldn't have understood a thing. It would be about as useful as putting grass seed on the sidewalk. The seed couldn't sink into the ground and form roots. It would just get eaten by birds.

The second type of soil is rocky ground. In this ground that seed cannot take deep root, so when the sun comes up, it dries up the ground and the plant withers. This is a person who hears the word and is very joyful to receive it, but since their belief is not deep, when there is trouble or persecution, they give up quickly. This rocky soil is not soil with lots of small rocks. You know the dirt in the back of our building is full of rocks. It is really hard to take a shovel to it, but it still is able to produce weeds that are nearly as big as trees. The rocky soil in this parable refers to large rocks like boulders just underneath the surface of the dirt. A person that is like this has to root to their faith. A person's own sin might be preventing them from going deeper or the truth of the message is different to what actually comes. When a person first comes to Jesus, there is talk about healing and blessing and as a new believer, you might think that life as a Christian is all rainbows and unicorns. When a person like that faces trouble or ridicule because of what they believe, then begin to question what they believe and even abandon it. They read the comments section on the internet and begin to agree with the naysayers and fall away from the word that gave them so much joy.

The third type hears the word and starts to develop roots, but the worries of the world and the desire for wealth strangle the word. This happens to a lot of people. This happens when the believers get too busy in their lives, going from point A to point B, and just rushing, rushing, rushing. A person like that is worried that they might not get everything done or they might be killing themselves to get more money. We don't trust God to protect or provide, so we take the burden on to our shoulders. If you have ever tried to grow something in a weed-infested patch of ground, you know that what your planted does not have a chance. The plant will get choked out very quickly. It's the same way when worries and wealth fill our thoughts. There becomes no room for God to work in our lives and the word produces no fruit.

The last type of soil is the good and fruitful soil. There are no rocks to prevent deep roots from forming and there is nothing to choke the fruitfulness out of the plant. This last type is a person who hears the word and understands it. This person is able to take the word and put it into practice. This is the type of believer that demonstrates the love of Jesus throughout their lives. They are so joyful and thankful that it overflows from their heart. These are the kind of people that share their faith wherever they go no matter the situation. They see hard times as an opportunity to grow and have no worries because they trust wholly in God.

This parable is a story about people's attitude towards the message of the kingdom of God. It's about how they respond when they hear the message and whether or not they hold on to it in their

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lives. It's wonderful way to share this message, but this is really the first time we see Jesus talk to the people in parables. It seems a little odd and I am certain that the people in the crowd weren't expecting Jesus to talk to them in parables. After Jesus said the parable and before he explained it, his disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (10) The NIV translation gives the question a pleasant feel, but when you consider that Jesus hasn't been speaking in parables all the time, the question is like one of a confused person. It is almost like, "Jesus, what are you doing? Why are you speaking to the people in parables? What's going on?" One translation translates the question as, "Why do you always use these hard-to-understand illustrations?" (10, TLB) The disciples were genuinely interested in the reason for the parables. However, I find it interesting that the reason why Jesus is speaking in parables is actually the reason for the parable itself. But before we get into that, lets see how Jesus responds.

"He replied, 'Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.'" (11) Jesus says that he speaks in parables, in stories, because the secrets of the kingdom have been given to the disciples and not the crowd in general. That makes it sound like Jesus is speaking in code. Jesus is encoding his message so that only certain people will understand. That seems a little weird. Jesus always spoke to the people very plainly, but his tactics have broadened. When you look at this in light of what had happened in the previous passages, you might see some motivation to this tactic. Jesus was starting to receive stronger opposition from the religious leaders. In fact, they were already looking for ways to kill him. I think that this signified to Jesus that it was time to deepen the roots of those who were listening to him. He had to build up those with real desire and let those who have absolutely no desire fall away. Jesus said, "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." (12) The people with knowledge and desire will be given more, but the people with no knowledge and desire will have what little they have taken from them. People with hard hearts toward Jesus would become even harder and those with soft hearts will be imbued with life everlasting.

Jesus goes on to explain, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: '"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 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."'" (13-15) The people's sense are working, but the ability to comprehend is not there. It's also not because what Jesus is speaking about just goes over their head. I could start talking about the difference between Newtonian and non-Newtonian fluids and your eyes will glaze over because I am talking over your head, but what Jesus is talking about here is people willfully refusing to understand. The prophecy from Isaiah mentions that the people's heart has become calloused. It has become hard and desensitized. Defense has been built up and anything that happens is defended against. Look at the Pharisees in the last week's passage. Jesus healed a man and removed a demon tormenting him, but the Pharisees attributed the healing to Satan and not God. They had such hard hearts toward Jesus, that they could not

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deny what had happened, but they could not accept that it was God that was what happened. When the great work of God appeared, they couldn't help but harden their hearts even more. They were calloused.

Do you know what callouses a heart? Do you know what creates callouses in general? A callous is formed on your skin when it is repeatedly irritated in a certain spot. If you play the guitar, the strings will irritate the skin on your fingers and your skin will react by forming a tough layer to deaden the pain of the irritation, a callous. The same thing happens on your feet when your shoes keep rubbing up against a certain spot. A callous is formed by a slow build up over time until it becomes so hard that you can't feel anything there any more. A heart is calloused in a similar way. Sin irritates a heart and it starts to feel dead. When you repeatedly sin, your heart slowly starts to feel less and less until you are filled with complete apathy. It's calloused. Now, some might say that feeling nothing is better than feeling all the pain, but a callous reduces your sensitivity, but can cause pain as well. I've got some callouses on the bottom of my big toes. I've had them for as long as I can remember. Over time, the callouses can form a really hard ball of skin and that ball starts to feel like I am stepping on a small stone. It hurts. The callous is actually hurting me, and I have to go in and remove the hard spot.

Jesus' change in tactics is because of these calloused hearts. Now, you might think that when Jesus encounters these hard hearts, he might want to push even harder to break through the callous, but his change in tactic reveals a truth about calloused hearts. Calloused hearts are reactive and they become harder when more force is used. I am going to give you a few examples of what I mean. If someone has been living in darkness for so long, when the light comes, it blinds them and they close their eyes because it is so bright. If you really want to show them that light, you might try to shine it even brighter so that they can see it, but their eyes will only close even tighter. Instead, you might back off with the light a little so that their eyes can adjust and they open their eyes. Here's another example. Does anybody know what this is? It is Silly Putty. Has anybody played with it before? Silly Putty is an interesting material. It is a non-Newtonian fluid, meaning it has a changing viscosity. If you put it over a small hole, it will pour through the hole, but it can also hold its shape. It is a strain-rate sensitive material. If you apply a force slowly, it is really moldable and it stretches a lot. If you apply a lot of force quickly, you can snap it and shatter it like glass. If you make it into a ball, it can be a really good bouncy ball. Another interesting fact about Silly Putty is that it was developed here at Illinois Tech in the old IIT Research Institute, or so they say. When we slam a calloused heart, it become harder, but if a gentler approach is used, the callous can melt away. That is what Jesus' change in tactics means. Jesus is using parables so that he can heal the hardened hearts.

Make no mistake, it is only Jesus that can soften the calloused heart. In that prophecy, it talks about turning so that Jesus can heal. It is up to us to recognize that we are in need of healing and for us to turn to him. This turning is repentance for our sins and acknowledging that only Jesus can forgive us for our sins and apply the ointments required to soften our hearts. It is only Jesus and the Holy Spirit who have the power to change us. There is very little that we can do on our own. If

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you look at the parable again, the people are the different soils in different conditions. The parable doesn't tell us how to get from one type of soil to another. It merely identifies the different situations that a person can be in, because we are just the dirt. It is Jesus that is the farmer. It is a warning to us that whether we are the path, the rocky soil or the thorny one, it will all end up the same. What is important is that we have to get deeper in our relationship to Jesus. We have to identify what is preventing us from getting deeper in our faith and ask Jesus to break it up…ask Jesus to take the callous and heal our hearts.

Let's take a step back for a moment and look at the condition of our hearts. How calloused is your heart? How is God's word not working in your life? In tough times, do you just abandon God's word. Do family members make flippant remarks about the church and God, and you shy away from sharing your faith or even act like a non-believer? Is your life hectic right now? Are you unable to find any time to do anything? Do you live your life worried about what is going to happen next or how you are going to survive? Is stress weighing down on you so much that you feel like you want to die? Well, there is hope. Jesus can change all that. He can change us so that we can get deeper in our faith and be fruitful. Hope is alive. Calloused hearts can be softened and Jesus can change the atmosphere.

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