

"Perfect Conditions" - Matthew 13:1-9 (16 Aug 2009)
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It's hard to believe the summer is almost over and our students are back to school in a couple weeks.

It seems like it was yesterday that I was outside planting this year's flowers and vegetables. For Mother's Day and Father's Day our girls gave Dave and I gift certificates to Crocker's Nursery. However, a lot of the stuff I planted hasn't grown quite as I hoped. They've either been eaten by insects, bunnies or deer, drowned by too much water and not enough sun or they weren't planted in the right location or the right soil. The conditions just haven't been right for the plans I had. I have yet to get a ripe tomato and we've only had one single strawberry so far...you should have seen Dave and I carefully splitting our very first little home grown strawberry! Does anybody else have yards or gardens that just didn't perform the way you wanted this year?

I was starting to feel like this one customer at the garden center:

She was talking to the store owner and said, "I want to start a garden, but my yard's a little problematic, I get blazing afternoon sunshine for about two hours, but otherwise it's all shade." "What kind of soil?" asked the owner. "Hard clay, lot of rocks, what do you recommend I plant." "Hmmm," he said. "Why don't you look down Aisle B. We've got a big new supply of birdbaths and flagpoles . . ."

It occurred to me that my yard is sort of like life. Sometimes things don't grow or go the way we want them to.

Jesus addressed this issue one day. He had been all over, talking with people whose lives weren't going the way they hoped. But trying to help was getting him in trouble and talking with them wasn't going well. He had gone to Galilee to teach and preach. He was trying to help people understand who he was.

He had been criticized for picking grain on the Sabbath and for healing a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath. The Pharisees even talked about killing him for this. He was criticized for driving a demon out of a man. They said the only way he could do that was if he was a demon himself.

So, he tried to explain things to them. He explained that he is the Lord of the Sabbath; he showed them how his cousin John the Baptist's ministry fulfilled the prophecies about him. He used everyday examples to try to help them understand spiritual truths.

When they accused him of being a demon he pointed to a tree and said, if the tree is good, the fruit is good and you can know a tree by its fruit. You should be able to tell a little about me by the works that I do. It had been a rough day for Jesus. People struggled with his words.

Later that same day Jesus left the house and sat beside the lake. A large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat there and taught as the people stood on the shore. He told many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:

"Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon

wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted! Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."

So, he tried again to clarify in a way they would understand, but even then the disciples didn't get it. So he explained:

- The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts.
- The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.
- The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced.
- The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" (v19-23)

The seed is the word of God, which is powerful (Heb. 4:12), but Jesus said that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time it wasn't productive.

The soil is our heart and four different responses we can have.

The seed on the foot path, (like seeds on cement), represents being **(hard hearted)**.

Being hard hearted makes it hard to absorb and realize what the word means, so he said that some heard the message, but didn't understand it. The phrase "along the footpath" is the same meaning as "along the way" in (Mark 8:27). Our faith is shaped along the way and sometimes our hearts are hardened by the events or people in our lives and it affects the way we hear the scriptures.

Sometimes we don't want to hear it and we don't want to do what it says because we want to do what we want, what we think will make us happy, even if it means ignoring God's word, we don't care!

I have a friend whose whole life was turned upside down in the space of one day when her husband walked away from her and their young children. Trying to find answers she started coming to church and reading her Bible. But she didn't understand or believe a lot of the things she read. She rejected the advice the Bible had to offer because it was the opposite of what she wanted to do. Blinded and confused by anger and bitterness her heart was so hard that she quickly gave up. She argued with me about everything she read and was almost antagonistic. She went the opposite direction and took a job that I can't describe in a sermon. From there her life hit a downward spiral.

A heart that's hard can lead to confusion, unbelief and doubt. It can affect our spiritual discernment so that we can't tell the truth in God's Word from all the stuff being promoted in the world. The temptation then is to go with the world's wisdom which is often at odds with God's wisdom.

The seeds that fell between rocky soil represent a heart that's **(Shallow)**.

You know the story, someone is having trouble, running out of places to turn. They've tried this thing and that and finally try the church hoping for some quick fix. They hear a sermon or something that promises the relief they need and they respond very quickly with a lot of passion, but then time goes by, and when things don't magically change the way they want them to, they lose interest in the church and in God. That's flash in the pan faith...here today, gone tomorrow.

My mom was one of those people that gave her life to Christ at an altar call at a Billy Graham Crusade. If you've ever watched that or something like that on tv, a big church gives an altar call and hundreds or thousands go forward and make a decision to become a Christian. They go away seemingly happy. I always wonder what happened to them after that when they woke up the next day. For my mom, she found a church and nurtured her faith till the day she died. But there's other folks who become disillusioned and walk away.

A heart that's shallow with no root lacks maturity and depth. Then when troubles come, or as James says, "the winds blow" they are tossed around with every wind.

The seeds that fell among thorns represents a heart full of **(weeds)**.

I did a lot of weeding when I was a kid. I hated weeding. My dad was the president of the men's garden club and our yard was sometimes featured in the news paper for it's gardens. But since vegetables aren't that pretty, we actually rented a neighbor's yard who lived down the street every summer where we could grow our vegetables. That meant we had weeding to do in not just one yard but two! It is for this reason that I don't do well with real plants. When I first got married I filled my home with plastic plants and you should have seen my dad grab his heart in dismay when he came to my house for the first time for dinner when he saw my plastic plants. The problem with weeds is that it can be really hard to tell them apart from the good plant. When I was first learning to weed, every other plant I would have to ask my dad, is this a weed? Is this a weed? And some weeds can be really pretty so I'd ask can't we leave this one, and he'd say no, it will prevent the good plant from growing.

Have you ever come to church and heard a sermon that really spoke to you, and you went home feeling really good. But then just a short time later, life happens, frustrations and problems mount and the joy you had on Sunday is gone, in fact you can't really remember what the sermon was about? Weeds have a way of getting in there and choking the life out of the good that was there.

Jesus mentioned two folks that illustrate the way weeds can affect our lives.

There was *rich young man* who was very genuine in wanting to please God, but when Jesus told him to sell all he had and follow him, he walked away sad because he didn't want to give up his money. (Mt. 19:16-24)

Then there is the story of *Mary and Martha* (Lk 10:38-42). Jesus and the disciples went to their house and while Mary sat listening to Jesus, Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."

But Jesus said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

Weeds can mess with our priorities. The cares, anxieties and temptations of the world can be distractions that change our focus from what God wants to what we want.

They compete with our faith and hinder our growth leaving us confused and exhausted with problems we never seem to master.

One day during my deployment, I was out walking with a troop on patrol. She was telling me about a relationship problem she'd been having for years. She was a Catholic but in her own words, "not a very good one." She made decisions and acted in ways that she knew were contrary to the Church's teachings, but faced with the challenges in her life, she just continued to do the same things over and over again that were getting her no where. In fact they were hurting her but she couldn't seem to help it. She didn't have a faith strong enough to stand up to the problems in her life. When I addressed one of her issues with a scripture, she'd say, "well I don't really believe that," and cite a common world view. She was familiar with some of the scriptures I quoted, but they didn't hold huge meaning for her, they were just words in the Bible...seeds that couldn't take root in her heart because it was so crowded with weeds.

Can I ask you a question? I think it's a question Jesus would ask us.

Has this (Bible) been helpful to you? Has it changed your life? Helped you find the answers you need for the problems in your life? Has it helped you in your relationships? I mean really made a difference, helped you make your choices based on what the words in the book say? Has it helped heal the wounds of the past? Helped you make wise decisions and comforted you in times of grief? Has it taken you back to the years you thought you'd lost, helped you with mistakes you made or reach for the dreams you thought impossible? Has it helped you discover who you really are and given clear meaning and purpose to your life? Has it given you the courage to do or face the unexpected and unimaginable? Has it influenced your priorities and values? Has it changed your understanding of God and your relationship with him? Has it deepened your faith and trust in the work and words of Christ? Are you becoming a better disciple?

The words in the Bible are seeds that are living, active, powerful, with them we have help and hope. However they have to take root and grow to be productive. But we live our lives in less than perfect conditions.

The environment around us can be hostile, and Jesus knows that, yet he wants us to be productive anyway. He said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." (Jn 15:16) And for that we need good soil.

The last seed in Jesus story fell on good soil that represents a **(receptive heart)**,

saying those who truly hear and understand God's word will produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" Good soil is cultivated when we hear and

understand God's word. There is a difference between those who simply hear the word and those who really listen and understand the word.

Once there was a mother who gathered her four children around her. "Listen children, I will show you how to make the bread that my mother taught me to make. And, while we make the bread, I will tell you about my parents and the story of how they came to this land. You must know the story."

The four children, who appeared as identical as grains of wheat, gathered around the table. However, although these children looked exactly alike, each was different inside.

- The first child, not knowing anything, was silent.
- The second, immature child asked, "why do we need to learn how to bake bread?"
- The third child asked, "Why do you think knowing how to make this bread means anything to me?"
- The fourth, who wanted to know, asked, "How do we make the bread?"

The mother gave each child enough ingredients to make a loaf of bread.

- The first child mixed the ingredients, but when the flour spilled, dusted it away.
- The second child did not knead the dough enough and the bread was lumpy.
- The third child put in too much flour, and the bread could not rise.
- The fourth child measured the ingredients carefully, kneaded the dough for a long time, and listened thoroughly to the story. The dough was smooth.

The mother told them about their grandparents, the land they came from. The work they did, the things they valued, their dreams more numerous than the dust of the earth. All the children appeared to be listening to the stories.

"Now," said the mother, "while the bread is baking, tell me what you remember."

- The first child responded, "I remember nothing. I didn't hear you."
- The second said, "I only remember a little; my mind wandered."
- The third said, "I will not remember anything. I heard you, but I did not listen"
- The fourth said, "I listened, Mother. I remember. And, when I have children I will show them how to make bread and tell the story."

There's hearing that goes in one ear and out the other, and then there's hearing that makes a difference.

First-rate soil comes from hearing that produces understanding that leads to commitment and action.

Just as we nurture and tend to our yards and gardens, we check to see if our plants need water or weeding or whatever. Before summer's over, I just want to encourage us to do a little internal gardening.

Jesus is the sower and he's still sowing today...with a book full of possibilities, promises, instructions and assurance. He has so much to share with us, but sometimes we have trouble hearing because of our own stubbornness, or the problems or temptations we're facing.

We may need to do some weeding if there's some beliefs or values, some thoughts or feelings growing in there that go against God's word, reject them and pull them out.

We need hearts that are receptive and patient, good and honest and trusting, hearts that are unrelenting in how many times we forgive, hearts that are sensitive and generous and understanding. Under the right circumstances, growth is natural and easy and we will produce fruit like, love, joy, peace, patients, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. We'll have the kind of fruit that will make a difference in our everyday lives and in our faith, producing a faith that will see us through all that life brings.

It's all just a matter of the heart. If our hearts have good soil, then no matter what the season, we will always have perfect conditions for God to do more than we ever imagined in us and in our lives.

LET'S PRAY: Dear Lord, thank you for using an example as simple as planting seeds so we can understand. I pray for our hearts soil. At times we can be so hard hearted that nothing gets through and sometimes so busy and distracted or so tempted or preoccupied with our problems that we have more weeds than word growing in our there. Help us to do some gardening, to identify the weeds, walk along and show us, "yea that's a weed, and that's a weed," so we know which ones need to come out. Prompt us to water and nurture the soil so that when you do some planting we'll have more growth. Remind us that our hearts need regular checking so unwanted stuff doesn't take root and cause over growth, crowding out the good. Help us when we listen to your word or when we read your word, to be able to understand and apply it to our lives and to think of it as seed that will grow in our hearts and in time produce a garden of beauty, plantings for shade and rest, fruit that will nourish and sustain and multiply for sharing and growth that will change forever the landscape of our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.

BLESSING: (From Hosea 10:12 and Psalm 1:2-4)

Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of Love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord so he may come and shower righteousness upon you. For you are the righteous, delight in the word of the Lord, meditate on it day and night. You will be like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Your leaves not wither, and you will prosper in all you do. Go and grow in the peace of the Lord. Amen.