

The Jesus Way / **SECRETS YOU NEED TO KNOW**
Secrets of Fruitfulness
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

One day, Jesus was talking to the crowd. His mother and brothers were nearby, outside the house, wanting to speak with him. Someone came to Jesus and said, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to talk with you.

Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50).

That very same day, Jesus left the house where he said this and sat down by the lake. Such large crowds of people gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them this story:

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.

He who has ears, let him hear. Matthew 13:1-9

This story is so well-known that it would be easy to do the very thing the passage warns us against – not allow the “seed” of God’s Word to penetrate deeply and grow up fully and produce its effect in our hearts. This story told by Jesus is not only *about* the seed of God’s Word; this story *is* the seed of God’s Word. And how we respond to *this very story* says a lot about whether or not we have “ears to hear.”¹

As I’ve reflected on this parable as well as Jesus’ explanation found in verses 18-23, I’ve asked myself the question: *What are the secrets of fruitfulness?* After all, of these four types of ground, only the fourth – the “good” ground – produces a harvest of a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

To answer that question, we need to understand just what this “crop” or “harvest” is that Jesus speaks of. I believe he’s speaking of *fruitfulness*. And what is that? Throughout Scripture, fruitfulness speaks of *good character and good deeds which ripen and scatter their blessings all around*. I sincerely desire that kind of “crop” in my life. Do you?

If you do, you need to understand what the *secrets of fruitfulness* are. Obviously, the secret of fruitfulness is not *only* in the seed. All four types of ground are exposed to the same “seed,” the

seed in this case being God's Word. God's Word is powerful, but not controlling. What you do with that seed in your life is your responsibility.

Furthermore, the "secret" is not in just "hearing" the message, for all four types of individuals – represented by the pathway, the rocky soil, the thorny soil and the good soil – "hear" the message. What distinguishes these soils is *not* that some heard and others didn't hear. When you come and hear God's Word each week, that's a good thing. But it must not stop there. Hearing is no guarantee of fruit-bearing.

The "secret" is also not found in "receiving" the seed. Both the rocky ground and the thorny ground are said to "receive" the seed of God's Word – one of them even with great joy – but neither produce lasting fruit.

So just what is the secret of fruitfulness? In other words, how can who I am and what I do continue to ripen and scatter blessing all around? What are the secrets of fruitfulness?

SOWING OF THE SEED

First, there must be a sowing of the seed. Take a look at that little sunflower seed in your hand. There is life in that seed. In June of 2008 an article appeared about a date palm that had been growing since 2005. But the "rest of the story" is that it was growing from a seed that was estimated to be 2,000 years old! It was recovered from Masada, the last holdout of the Jews in their fight against the Romans. Little wonder that they named the date palm "Methuselah!"ⁱⁱ

What is this "seed" of which Jesus speaks? Jesus tells us plainly in the parallel passage in Luke 8:11 – "The seed is the word of God." And the seed of God's Word is *living*. Martin Luther once said, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus said, "The words which I have spoken are spirit and are *life*" (John 6:63).

A word of encouragement here for those of us who are actively sowing God's Word, whether it be in our family, workplace, neighborhood, or elsewhere. Up to this point, while Jesus had many enthusiastic crowds who were enamored with his words and works, there was really very little fruit. Why is it that more people were not responding to the message of the Kingdom? This story tells us why. It's not because something is wrong with the seed. The seed is living. It's rather because something is wrong with the soil. What is *your* soil like?

GERMINATION

But for there to be fruitfulness, there must not only be the sowing of the seed of God's Word, there must also be *germination*. This is what Jesus is referring to in verses 18-19:

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 his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. Matthew 13:18-19

There were few fences in those days, separating one field from another. Most fields were distinguished by a path that ran between the fields. As the farmer would sow his seed, some seed

would inevitably fall on the hardened pathway. Then the birds would come and eat the seed, preventing it from taking root and growing. In the time of Christ, birds often symbolized Satan's activity. Birds are robbers. In this case, they represent Satan's emissaries who snatch away the word of the Kingdom as it is scattered.^{iv}

This happens so frequently today. The seed is cast, the gospel is shared, but the heart is unresponsive. And when one continues to say "No" to the message of the gospel, Satan comes along and steals the very message that was spoken and heard.

Maybe you're here today and you are like the hardened ground on the pathway. You hear the message, you've been exposed to the seed. The good seed of the gospel has fallen on your ears. And now you have a choice.

But Jesus calls us to "receive" the good seed. When we do, spiritual "germination" takes place. The Bible calls this *rebirth*.

Behind me you see the process of germination of a plant. Apart from this, a seed will never bear fruit. Likewise, the seed of God's Word must "germinate" in your own heart of life. Ultimately that is a work that only the Spirit of God can perform in your heart.

TESTIMONY: I've asked John Steinmetz to share how this has become true in his life: In the late sixties I began to develop a childlike faith in Christ. Youth came and so did the worries for the good life. I felt I was a good person and so was deserving of all that I wanted.

Entitlement began to creep in and the beginning of duplicity. I needed to be two people to have all I wanted. As a young adult duplicity was now in full swing. I was entitled to what I wanted, I got what I wanted and gave to others only if it benefited me. I now had two lives. Married, good career, and politically savvy I was a fully committed dual person/ fully entitled to anything I wanted/ angry because I was not receiving all that I felt I was worthy of.....

April 19th 2004 God ran over me with a reality truck. He crushed me with the realization that I was nothing close to a good person and that I was entitled to nothing but hell. The Holy Spirit took over me that night. I did not ask to be saved, I could not even do that. I was overtaken by God. Taken captive... it was like He held me under water until I could hold my breath no more and had to draw water into my lungs. What filled me completely was His mercy and grace. My Savior fills me completely. My life is changed. Not because of my strength but by the Holy Spirit. I am now pure, I'm whole, no longer two, I am a child of the living God who made me.

This is the first secret of fruitfulness. There must be germination. There must be salvation. There must be conversion. I urge you today – if you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ, don't hesitate. Don't close your eyes. Don't stop up your ears. Don't let your heart become calloused. Will you receive the "good seed" of the gospel today, this very moment?

ROOTAGE

Not only must there be germination, there must be rootage. Notice Jesus' words in verses 20-21:

The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. Matthew 13:20-21

Roots are the part of a plant that is usually underground. The roots help to anchor the plant and to absorb water and dissolve mineral salts for nourishment. Roots usually grow downwards and towards water

Jesus explains that in this case the seed is sown, germination takes place, but there is “no root,” or better “no firm root” (as the NASB translates it). If there was any germination and growth at all, there had to be some kind of root. But there was no “firm root” because the seed fell on rocky soil. This probably refers, not to soil with a lot of rocks visibly covering the surface, but rather to layer of limestone just under the surface of the soil.^v The shallow soil allowed for rapid germination, but no firm rooting. As a result, what is rapidly produced is shortlived. Once affliction and persecution comes^{vi}, this person falls away from the faith.

We see this all the time. Someone hears the Word, he or she believes, and at first there is a burst of enthusiasm. Their off to a great start! But then they encounter a difficulty. Maybe it's the loss of a job, or an unresponsive spouse, or a rebellious child. Maybe it's financial difficulty. They can't make the payments on their home. Or maybe it's a health problem for which the outlook is grim. Or maybe they initially try and share their faith at work and they are ridiculed for being a Christ-follower. Suddenly, the initial joy and enthusiasm wears thin and their faith begins to falter. Just as quickly as the seed of faith sprung up, it now quickly withers and fades away.

On the other hand, when you allow God's Word to take firm root in your life, you will find strength and wisdom to face your problems. What keeps a tree from toppling over? Its root system...roots that go deep and bring nourishment to the tree. So also for the believer. As your roots go deep into the spiritual nourishment of God's Word, you will find stability in the storms of life.

CLEARANCE

For there to be fruit in our lives, there must be the sowing of the seed, germination, and rootage. But there must also be *clearance*. What is clearance? Jesus talks about this in verse 22:

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. Matthew 13:22

Remember, just like the seed sown on rocky ground, this person represented by the thorny ground “receives” the Word. Receiving the Word is no guarantee of fruitfulness. And in this case, rootage is also no guarantee of fruitfulness. There must also be clearance.

According to Jesus' explanation, this seed germinated and may even have deep roots. But there is a problem. Thorns hinder the growth of the plant. The thorns keep keep light from the plants as well as intermingle with the roots of the plant below ground, choking out its life.^{vii}

I understand that there are about 250 types of thorns and thistles that grew in Palestine at this period of time. And just like there were many different types of thorns, these thorns can represent many things in our lives. Here Jesus says they speak of the “worries of this world” and the “deceitfulness of riches.” In Luke, Jesus adds, “the pleasures of this life.” What Jesus is saying is this: Keep my Word as a priority in your life, it will help you keep all your other priorities straight.

PRODUCTIVITY

But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”
Matthew 13:23

In the “good soil,” there is not only germination, rootage and clearance. There is also *productivity*. But basic to productivity is *understanding*. The one distinguishing feature of the “good soil” is that this person “understands.” “But the one who receives the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and *understands* it.” This word “understand” (Gk: *suniēmi*) is used six times in this chapter. Jesus says in verse 13 that he speaks in parables because his hearers “do not *understand*.” And then after telling eight parables, he turns to his disciples and asks them in verse 51: “Have you *understood* all these things?”

The word means literally “to put together.” But it is not just a mental thing, like putting together facts and drawing a conclusion. It’s a matter of the heart. That’s why Jesus says in verse 15 (quoting Isaiah 6), “Otherwise they might ... *understand with their hearts*.”

To “understand” is to “put things together with your heart” as it relates to the good seed of the gospel. This is more than *hearing* the Word. All four individuals heard the message. This is more than *receiving* the Word. Both the rocky and thorny soils “received” the good seed. Understanding is doing the Word and as a result producing a crop.

When you live according to his Word, it will bring about a huge harvest in your life. What is this harvest? The harvest is an image of good works which ripen and scatter their blessings all around.

Moses says the same thing as he writes to the people of Israel who are about to enter the Promised Land. He says this:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Joshua 1:8

The prosperous and successful life that Moses speaks of is the fruitful life that Jesus speaks of. And both are the result of not only hearing God’s Word and receiving God’s Word, but of *doing* God’s Word.

Jesus asked, “Who are my mother and brothers? He who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

By the way, that seed you are still holding in your hand...what are you going to do with it this week? Will you take that seed and place it in your Bible...right here in Matthew 13? Let it remind you of the true seed of life, God's Word. Let it germinate in your heart. Let it take firm root. Be sure there is clearance for its growth. And most of all, allow it to produce a great harvest in your life that spreads blessing to all around.

ⁱ In Matthew 13 Jesus tells 8 parables. The first parable, the parable of the sower, is introductory the others. And the last parable, the parable of the householder, is more like a conclusion to what precedes. The first four parables are given by Jesus to the crowds by the seashore. But the last four parables are given to the disciples in a nearby house. This parable is the touchstone of all the others. Jesus says in Mark 4:13 "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

ⁱⁱ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/06/13/date-tree-sprouted-2000-yearold-seed-doing-well.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther, "Martin Luther--The Early Years," *Christian History*, no. 34.

^{iv} Mark L. Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 1998), 180.

^v Bailey, "The Parable of the Sower and the Soils," 181.

^{vi} Jesus had already warned his followers that persecution would come (5:10-12, 43-44; 10:16-25; 24:9).

^{vii} Bailey, "Parable..." 182.