

It Is No Secret
Mathew 13:1-23

Imagine for a moment that you were part of that large crowd that gathered on the shore that day to hear Jesus preach. Earlier in the day you would have seen Him heal a demon-possessed man, all the while wondering how such a thing could be possible. A short while later you would have witnessed a heated discussion Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees about the kingdom of God and the deadly consequences of blaspheming the Holy Spirit of God, and all of that before lunchtime! Now you are standing on the seashore, listening to His second or perhaps third sermon of the day and thankfully this time Jesus is talking about something much easier to understand, gardening. Even those of us with little knowledge of sowing and reaping understood the basics of what He said. It remains a mystery how God turns a tiny little seed into a great big plant, but it is no secret that good soil is a requirement. What does seem to be a secret is that worship is like good soil that helps us to grow and mature into the loving people God desires us to be.

Like hundreds of times before, Jesus words to the crowds that day centered upon one of the primary reasons you and I are here right now; to learn from Jesus and grow in our love of God and neighbor. Of course, we are also here to worship our Lord. God created us to worship Him. In fact, the more we worship God, the more we worship God in spirit and truth, the deeper and higher our love will be for God. An added benefit is that our love for each other will also grow deeper and higher.

Much like gardening, spiritual growth does require some work. It involves planning, preparation, and daily attention. But as we saw last week, when we seek to learn from Jesus, we will find rest for our souls. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. Tending to our spiritual growth is a pleasure rather than a chore. Jesus used the parable of the sower to illustrate to the crowds how it is done. This parable is unique in that Jesus explains its secret or hidden meaning to his disciples, and also to us.

He begins with some seed that falls along the path. Those of us who have planted grass seed will immediately see the problem. Grass doesn't grow in concrete. When the wind carries the seed to the concrete driveway or the sidewalk or the road, it becomes little more than bird food. It's the same way with our spiritual growth- we should not allow things- or people- to influence and carry us to places that don't support spiritual life. That is an invitation for the devil to gobble us up, as Jesus says. I will allow you to discern who those people and places might be. It is not that we don't know where the good ground is, but that we allow ourselves to be carried somewhere else.

The seed that fell on rocky soil is similar. There was just enough dirt and moisture to allow it to sprout, but there was not enough to sustain it. The soil wasn't deep enough for the roots to take hold. The spiritual principle in view is that some people make a commitment to Christ, but when the going gets tough and things don't work out like they think they should, they return to their old ways. Part of the problem lies with modern day preachers who claim that the blessings of health and wealth are ours for the asking. God's grace and providence are not that simple.

Then there is the seed that fell on good ground. It begins to grow tall, but soon the weeds come and rob the sunlight, moisture, and nutrients it needs to grow. The principle here is that the things of the world- money, pleasure, envy and all the rest, can steal what we need to grow in Christ. Or perhaps someone in the pew next to you or behind you will. The church is for saints and sinners alike.

Three of most common things that can stunt our spiritual growth are hardening our hearts to the invitation to follow Jesus, a lack of commitment to following Him when the roads of life get bumpy, and substituting the false pleasures of the world for the real joy we have in Christ. Now that we have identified them, what can we do to overcome them? How do we take His yoke upon us and learn from Jesus? How do we see, hear, and understand Him and be blessed as the early disciples were? (vs 18)

The first thing we can do is pray. Prayer is communication with God, and good communication can strengthen any relationship, spiritual or earthly. Think about our church family. I'm sure you'll agree that you are a lot closer to someone you talk to on a regular basis, rather than someone you see once or twice a year. It is the same way with God. People that spend daily time in prayer with God, rather than just asking for things when the need arises, will grow spiritually.

The next thing is to spend daily time in the Scriptures. The Bible is a great collection of love letters written to the people of God. People that take time out of their day to read and love God's Word will grow spiritually. Think about how the words and basic principles found there apply to your life and those around you. When you do that, a special love for what God has written for us will grow and those principles will soon turn into actions.

Prayer and Scripture help us become good soil that allows us to grow spiritually. But there are times when we will need more, times when we need help because we are not strong enough to go it alone. We need to be with other believers. Just as a friend can make an unpleasant task more fun a helping hand can make things go much better. When we are experiencing those times when life seems to be crashing in around us, Christian fellowship provides the support we need to remain standing tall. Our time together, including Sunday worship and other opportunities throughout the week, help deepen our trust in God and be willing to do what He asks of us.

Though spiritual growth can and does take place in solitude, something special happens when a group of people, large or small, come together to glorify and worship God. Like the cross, worship is vertical and horizontal. We sing praises to God in heaven, lift our prayers and petitions to Him, and give thanks for all that God has done, is doing and will do for us. We also greet one another, share our burdens and joys, catch up on things that have changed since we last met, and perhaps break bread together and discuss how God is at work in our lives.

Many of us spend so much time during the week with people who do not have a relationship with Christ that we just need to be with other people who love Jesus. We need relief from the struggles and hardships of life, we need some special time together with God and each other so that we can leave here renewed and ready to face the challenges that this earthly world brings. Every time we gather for worship brings a new opportunity to bless and be blessed by God. The recent pandemic taught us to find new ways to gather for worship together even though distance separates us. What some meant for evil God continues to use for good.

Prayer, Scripture, and Christian community complete the rich soil that allows us to grow and mature in our faith. Those that diligently seek the truth will find it, and those that don't will be disappointed. Let us apply this parable to our lives and see what kind of soil we are in. Some of us may need to move to more fertile ground, and the good news is that God can even use a hungry bird to do that if need be! Others of us might need to do some weeding. Whatever it takes, let us be intentional as we seek to learn from Jesus and grow spiritually in faith. It is no secret that with those things and His grace we will bear much fruit. Amen