

Scripture Reading – 17th September, 2023
Overcoming Hindrances to Fruitfulness - Matthew 13:1-23

I want to quickly share few things from the passage we have read this morning. I know this is a very popular scripture – the parable of the sower. However, I want us to examine the main point behind the parable. The parable subjects on the topic of fruitfulness, especially among the hearers of the word of God. I will focus it though on believers since I want to believe most people here if not all, are believers.

Fruitfulness is an essential part of the life of a believer. May I even say that fruitfulness is not just an important aspect but key to our Christian life. Let us see what the Bible says about fruitfulness. John chapter 15 speaks a lot on this subject. Verse 5 says “I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me”. Here we see Jesus pointing out bearing fruit as the result of abiding in Him. But more interestingly is Jesus equating not bearing fruit to doing nothing, which results in being cut off. Verse 8 of the same chapter says “My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples”. Jesus then continues in verse 16 that “You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name”. These verses already show that being fruitful is a major expectation of God from any believer.

Let me reiterate that being unfruitful is not a matter that should be taken lightly. In John 15:5 we just read, Jesus says any branch that doesn't abide and consequently cannot bear fruits is cut off. The reason for the importance of fruitfulness becomes obvious when we think about it. Firstly, fruitfulness brings about continuity. A plant that doesn't bear fruit cannot sustain its continuity. And secondly, there is an expectation we are not meeting when we don't bear fruit. In Jeremiah 2:21-22, God compares His people to a choice vine, but they didn't deliver on His expectation. God places the expectation of bearing much fruits on us as believers and not bearing fruits means we are proving to be a bad investment for God (if I may put it that way). It is worth mentioning that fruitfulness in this context is a life that glorifies God in its actions. That is, when we are about to align our life with the will of God.

Not to take too much of our time, let us return to our passage of consideration for this morning where Jesus uses a parable to illustrate a teaching about why hearing God's word sometimes yield fruits in some people and doesn't in others. To begin with, what is a parable and why use a parable rather than just say things directly?

I remember back in my early days in high school, parable was defined to us as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Now I'm not a theologian and don't know what the most accurate definition would be but I don't think it matters either. What is important to know is that parables are stories based on the common understanding of the people which Jesus often used to illustrate things about God's kingdom to the people. It's leverages the knowledge and understanding of the known to better explain the unknown.

An interesting thing about parables which Jesus talks about in verse 10-17 of our passage today is that it simultaneously reveals and conceals the knowledge of what Jesus talks about. In verse 13 Jesus says he uses a parable because they listen but do not understanding, fulfilling the prophesy of the prophet found in the book of Isaiah 6:9-10. So, even though Jesus used an illustration the people understood to explain things, yet, they would not understand. But for those what would understand, it is a great blessing.

Anyway, this section of the passage isn't our focus for today rather, it is the parable we want to talk about and God helping, learn from it.

In this passage, Jesus explains things with the illustration of a sower scattering seeds in the field. I think we can all agree that the average person at this time knows something about planting. There were a lot of farmers among the people that the picture Jesus was painting in the parable would not be far-fetched for them to understand and they would know exactly what he was talking about.

So, what exactly happened? Jesus introduces a man who had gone out to sow corn – the sower. When he got to where I would imagine to be the farm, he scattered the seed in the field. Let's begin to take a few notes from here. The same kind of seed was scattered everywhere, all viable. The seeds were subjected to the same condition in the field with the only difference being where each fell onto. This singular difference is what created the different outcomes.

The first category Jesus mentioned were those seeds that fell by the path. These seeds were eaten by birds and didn't even have the chance to grow. Let me quickly share a little about how planting works and hopefully it helps us to better understand what is going on here.

Before farmers plant, they till and plough the ground to soften it so that the tender root of the young plant can better penetrate the ground. It also helps to aerate the soil which is important for the health of the plant. In contrast, the ground of a pathway is often hard and compacted due to the fact that it is constantly being walked on. It's often smoother some several footsteps and very hard for anything to grow on it. Most relevant to this passage is that when it rains, seeds cannot be pushed down into it due to the hardness of the surface. Going back to the parable, we can see why the seeds that fell by the path stood not chance of growth and got eaten by birds.

The second category Jesus talked about were the seeds that fell on rocky ground. There was very little soil on the ground which made the seeds sprout in a relatively short time. While this may seem like a good thing – germinating in a short time, the problem is that the root of the plant isn't necessarily deep into the ground and will lack water sooner than other well-grounded plants. Also, sitting on a rock would mean feeling the heat of the sun more and this is exactly what happened to these seeds. When the sun come up, these young plants withered and dried up.

For the third category, the seeds fell among thorn bushes. I would assume this is an area of the field that farmer hasn't prepared yet. While the ground would make a good planting area, it still contained thorn bushes. Usually, farmers would clear the ground before planting and regularly remove weeds from the field so that they don't share and use up the nutrients and resources meant for the actual plant. As expected, the seeds that fell on this bushy ground grew, but were soon choked by the thorn bushes.

And finally, the seeds that fell on the good ground. These seeds grew to produce much corn; some 100 grains, some 60 and others 30. This is to be expected as these seeds fell on what is an appropriate ground for planting, which lead not only to growth but to fruit bearing.

Okay, so we've been talking about planting and seeds for a while now, but we know that the point of what Jesus was talking about wasn't to explain planting, or to merely narrate a story.

Each bit in the parable is symbolic in the actual message Jesus was passing across. Now, what exactly does each of the elements in the parable stand for?

That sower in this parable would be Jesus himself sowing the seed of the word of God (the gospel). The ground on which the seeds are sown represents each of the hearers of the word of God. We see the same sower in Jesus, sowing the same seed which is the word of God which falls on different grounds – each of listeners. The bird here is the Evil One who goes by other names such as Satan and the Devil. The thorn bush represents the desires in the heart of each person.

Now that we know what each of these things represents, let us look closer at the explanation Jesus gave the disciples when they asked him for the meaning of the parable and see how we can relate it to ourselves today.

We can broadly classify these grounds into two: the good ground and the not so good ground. Since the not so good grounds represent the factors that can lead to the word of God not being fruitful in the lives of the hearers, I think we should look at them from the perspective of hindrances to fruitfulness in believers or at least, the hearers of God's word.

The first hindrance as Jesus explains in verse 19 is the lack of understanding. When a person hears the word of God and has no understanding of what is being said, this can be likened to the seeds that fell by the path. As birds easily find these seeds and eat them, so does the Evil One picks these words from such people.

Now naturally, when we talk about people lacking the understanding of the word of God, what comes to mind is either unbelievers or young believers. This is not a wrong thought but I want us to look beyond that. While an unbeliever or a young believer can lack the understanding of what the word of God truly means, even a long-time believer can sometimes fall into this category. Let us even look at the days of Jesus, we had the Pharisees who were supposed to know a lot, and yet they didn't understand many, if not most of what Jesus taught. Why is this the case though, one might ask. A hardened heart and lack of openness can lead to lack of understanding. From the illustration in the parable, a seed doesn't go into a pathway because it is already so compacted. Likewise, when a heart is hardened, everything heard only stays in the head (meaning it doesn't penetrate the heart) where it easily gets lost or. Just as the Pharisees were stuck in their old ways which prevented them from the understanding of the gospel, believers, young or old today can hear the word of God but it will not find a root in their heart.

Another way to look at this is the unpreparedness of the pathway for growing things. When people hear the word without the preparedness to be blessed of it, the result is that the word goes in from one ear and goes out the other. This is something we need to ask and challenge ourselves about. Are you coming to the church as a matter of routine and something that has to be done or you are very intentional about it and being ready to receive God's word? If we don't prepare our heart to receive God's word and be open to His message, it will be difficult for the message to have impact in our lives, hindering fruitfulness.

Let's move over to the second hindrance represented by the seeds that fell on rocky ground. This one I call the external factor and we'll see why in just a bit. In verse 20 and 21 of Matthew chapter 13, Jesus describes these people are those who hear the word and immediately receive it with joy. However, the word is not deeply rooted in them and so when trouble and persecution

come as a result of the word, they quickly fall away. Like the relatively quick sprouting of the seed, these people receive the word with joy and are immediately ready to act on it. At first, this seems to be a rather good thing but there's a major flaw in it. The thing is there are two parts in us receiving the message: the head and the heart. When the word we hear appeals to our logical reasoning, there is the impulse to act on it. This doesn't necessarily mean that the heart is touched or changed as a result of the message and the word hasn't gone deep into the heart. Now, what happens is that the moment there is a resistance or opposition due to actions that are based on the message, the head concludes that the best thing is to give it up. We can't rush the word of God and expect a lasting impact.

Basically, the idea here is that decisions made from the head are not long lasting because our true nature is revealed by our heart. No wonder Jesus says in Matthew 12:34 that "the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" because everything originates from the heart. It's no surprise that the Bible focuses on the heart as this is what really dictates our actions. The psalmist knows this and that is why he wrote in Psalm 119: 11 that "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you". When God's word is not deeply rooted in us, it is easier to fall under social, peer or any form of pressure that is against the word of God. For a true manifestation of God's word in our life, we need the word to be deeply rooted in our heart.

The third hindrance which I think is the biggest one is what I call the internal factor. Jesus illustrated this with the seed that fell among the thorns, which he interpreted in verse 22 as those who hear the word but the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word. As we can see here, our own inner desires can really stand in the way of God's word in us. Jesus in Matthew 6:24 says "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money". We cannot be committed to our earthly desires and still be devoted to God's will. As Paul wrote in Galatians chapter 5 from verse 16 that these two things are against each other. This is like the case of the rich young man in Mark 10. Reading from verse 21:

²¹ Jesus looked straight at him with love and said, "You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me." ²² When the man heard this, gloom spread over his face, and he went away sad, because he was very rich.

²³ Jesus looked around at his disciples and said to them, "How hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God!"

²⁴ The disciples were shocked at these words, but Jesus went on to say, "My children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

It should be noted that the problem here is not having money but rather the impact of wealth has on our heart. The desires it sets in our heart, the priorities it sets and what it makes us do to sustain the wealth.

Still on the subject of our heart's desire, let us look at what James has to say in the book of James chapter 1 verse 14 and 15. It says "¹⁴ But we are tempted when we are drawn away and trapped by our own evil desires. ¹⁵ Then our evil desires conceive and give birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death". Those desires choke God's word in us, cause temptation which leads to sin.

Until we surrender our heart completely to God and He takes full charge of our longings, our desires will continue to stand in the way of what God expects of us.

Let us do a quick recap of what we have talked about so far. We started with the establishment of the fact that fruitfulness is a crucial part of the life of a believer. God is glorified in our fruitfulness and he expects us to bear much fruits. Before there can be fruitfulness, there has to be the sowing of seed and the seed in this context is the word of God. However, there are a few factors that may hinder the growth and fruitfulness of the word of God in us. The first of these factors is the lack of understanding which makes it possible for the Evil One to get the word out of us. The second is the external factor which is facilitated by the shallowness of the word in our heart. It is almost impossible to persevere when the heart is not committed and how can the heart be committed when word is not deeply rooted in it? And the last factor is the internal one which originates from our own desires. The desires and passions that conflict and compete with God's word in us.

Now that we know the hindrances to growth and fruitfulness, the natural question would be how to rid ourselves of these hindrances? Well, let's take them one at a time.

If we seem to lack understanding of the word of God which we keep hearing all the time, the first step I think would be desire to understand, to actually know what it entails. Then we must know that it is not by our own effort that we understand the truth about God's kingdom or His word but by the grace of God. James 1:5 says "But if any of you lack wisdom, you should pray to God, who will give it to you; because God gives generously and graciously to all". The ways of God are very much different from the ways of man (Isaiah 55:8) and so it is impossible to understand his word with just our own wisdom. When we pray for God's help in understanding, it is important that we prepare our heart to receive His word and be open to its transformational work.

Moving to the second factor, how can we make the word of God deeply rooted in our heart? Well, Joshua 1:8 says "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; 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". It's not enough to listen to the sermon on Sundays and get excited about it or just run out to go do something differently. We need to meditate on God's word, reflect on it and examine our life, see how it personally speaks to us and allow the word to mature in us.

We also talked about a hardened heart, but you know what, it is nothing God cannot soften. Ezekiel 36:26 says "I will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient hear". God can fix our heart but we have to allow it. God wouldn't force us, we need to first surrender to Him.

And lastly, overcoming the interal hindrance. How do we prevent our inner desires from hindering the growth and fruitfulness of God's word in us and consequently our own fruitfulness? Mark 8:34 says 'Jesus called the people and His followers to Him. He said to them, "If anyone wants to be My follower, he must give up himself and his own desires. He must take up his cross and follow Me"'. Jesus teaches us to give up our own desires if we want to follow him. This is similar to what Paul wrote in his letter in Colossian 3:5 when he said "You must put to death, then, the earthly desires at work in you, such as sexual immorality, indecency, lust, evil passions, and greed (for greed is a form of idolatry)"

One more verse I would like to add is from Romans 12:2 which says “Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect”. We see that we need to give up our earthly desires in order to fully manifest the transformational and fruitful word of God in our life. This we do by allowing God to transform us for within; we need to allow God to change our heart that our desires and longings will not be for the vanity in this world but to know him and fulfil His good and perfect will.

The result of overcoming these hindrances is not just mere growth but actual fruitfulness. This is important thing to note. In this context, growth is not the goal but a means to the goal. And this is an illusion that keeps many believers stagnated. Like the seeds that fell on the rocky ground and the thorn bushes, believers my experience some sort of growth but this growth doesn't produce any meaningful fruit. A noticeable evidence of this case is that after a while, all traces to the said growth will be lost and they will be unto something else. But the fact that they keep going through this cycle of hearing and some semblance of growth gives them the illusion of actually doing something right. Psalms 1:1-3 say:

Happy are those
who reject the advice of evil people,
who do not follow the example of sinners
or join those who have no use for God.

² Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD,
and they study it day and night.

³ They are like trees that grow beside a stream,
that bear fruit at the right time,
and whose leaves do not dry up.

They succeed in everything they do.

This passage shows that it's not just about growing but also bearing of fruit. And again, there is no continuity or sustenance when there is no fruitfulness. There is only a seed to sow because the seed were previously produced. The essence of our growth is that we become fruitful.

As I round off this morning, I want you to look inwardly and see if there is any hindrance to the fruitfulness of God's word in you. Examine yourself this morning and work towards making the right adjustments and amendments. It is my prayer that God will reveal to us any of our shortcomings and give the grace to overcome them. Amen.