

**May 10, 2009**  
**Riverside Covenant Church**  
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**Luke 8:5-15 – Miracle Grow**

**Today we are going to talk about growing.** How do we grow in our faith? Perhaps many of you have been planting gardens in the last few weeks or at least planting flowers. Or maybe in the past month you have planted grass seed. You understand that to make something grow you need to combine good seed with good soil. And then you just water and feed and water and feed. But the jumping off point is always good seed combined with good soil.

In the parable we are going to look at today, **Jesus says the Word of God is the seed and we are the soil.** The goal is for the Word of God to produce fruit through us. If the seed is the Word of God, then we know that is good. What about us . . . what about the soil? Are we a hospitable environment for God's seed to multiply?

**Miracle-Gro advertises their magically fertile soil** by saying, "Healthy flowers, vegetables and plants start with the dirt . . . Soils give you the foundation for fast growth, healthy root systems, and thriving plants."

Today, Jesus is asking us if we are fertile soil within which he can produce an abundant crop.

**Read Luke 8:5-15**

Like our parable last week about God's grace in forgiving the debts equally, this parable about a farmer is **not, on the surface, difficult** for us to understand.

The story is about **a farmer who is planting seed.** Most of the farmers around here wish they were planting seeds, but since it has been so wet, it has been hard to get into the fields. Since the moment that God put Adam and Eve in a garden and told them to manage it, images of seeds, sowing, failure of crops, and fruitful harvests have been among the most common metaphors to describe life and faith. The imagery is timeless.

**The farmer in Jesus parable is planting seed all around.** Scholars actually argue all the time about whether a farmer would have really sown seed so haphazardly. But that is not the point. This is not a

story about proper farming techniques. The farmer is planting seeds and the seeds are going everywhere. **The first seeds fall on the road where they get trampled on** and the birds eventually come and eat them up. The seeds that fall on the path don't ever enter into the soil at all. They just lay on the surface where they are eventually ran over or eaten by birds that see them on the surface.

**Other seeds the farmer plants end up on rocks.** In Galilee, where Jesus was at, there were often rocks buried just beneath the surface of the soil. And the soil is warm there, which leads seeds to sprout up quickly, but then die because of inadequate roots. When a farmer looked at the ground they would have seen soil, but immediately beneath the soil were rocks. Seed that landed on this rocky soil entered the ground, but could develop no root depth and thus dried out and died. Most of us understand for a plant to survive and thrive it needs to develop deep roots so that it can absorb the water in the moister soil below.

**Last summer Dana and I put some sod down** in areas of our yard where we had removed some bushes and as I read up on how to make sure that it did well, the experts all said to water it thoroughly, but not too much because you want the grass to develop deep roots that will benefit it in the future. If you give the sod tons and tons of water at first, the roots will be very shallow and it will die when the mass watering stops and it is forced to try to live only on the rain.

**Still other seed that the farmer planted fell amongst the thorns or the weeds.** It grew up initially again, but the problem with seed planted with weeds is that it must compete for nutrients, water and sun. It will generally lose that battle. The weeds will nearly universally squeeze out whatever plant you are trying to grow. That is why gardeners de-weed their gardens or put down a chemical preventing weeds from growing in the first place. The seed the farmer plants amongst the thorns is choked out and dies.

**Finally, our parable says that other seed that the farmer planted fell upon good soil.** This seed on the good soil, grew up and yielded a crop one hundred times more than what was sown. This was a plentiful crop. Estimates of normal yields in the ancient world ranged from 7.5 to 33 fold, but yields as high as 150 fold were reported.

**Jesus finishes the parable by calling out, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear."** I don't know why, but when I read this part it makes me laugh. I picture Jesus telling this nice story about a farmer planting

seeds and then he ends it by just yelling, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear.” I imagine Jesus thinking, “do – you – hear – what - I - am - saying?” And the disciples say, “what?”

**Adelaide is going through this phase** where she just says, “what?” to anything we say. Are you hungry? “what?” Do you have to go to the bathroom? “what?” Miraculously, she never asks “what” when we ask if she wants candy or to go to the park.

Jesus tells this parable and says, “do you hear me?” and the disciples say, “what?”

**And then the disciples ask what it all means.** They know some about farming . . . like we know some things about farming and gardening. What Jesus has just told them makes sense practically, but they want to know what this means with regard to their spiritual lives and “hearing.”

Before explaining the parable, Jesus tells them, **“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”**

Jesus is connecting this parable and his point with prophecy from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:9-10, Isaiah says, **“Go and tell this people: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”**

**These words are in response to the disobedience and sinfulness of the Israelites, God’s people in the Old Testament.** They are not an indication of what God desires, but of the result of their failure to truly hear God’s Word. Jesus is comparing the hardness of heart and the refusal to listen of the Israelites to that of the Jews in his day and now to us in our day. If we don’t choose to hear today, we will never understand . . . if we don’t choose to see today, we will never truly perceive God’s ways. Our hearts will become calloused and our ears dull and our eyes closed. We will never find healing for our souls.

**Jesus talks throughout the Gospels about ushering in the Kingdom of God.** This kingdom involves a proclamation about God and God’s purposes and actions. The kingdom calls all hearers to a reorientation

of life. And people must hear and respond with a lifestyle that “bears fruit,” that is, a lifestyle marked by obedience to God as revealed in the message of Jesus. The kingdom is presently at work and is established partly as people respond with believing obedience. God says that he will restore Israel and he is doing it through His word planted in people. You and I. And God’s focus is on us multiplying ourselves in the lives of others. But we must hear, because if we don’t we too, like Israel, will fall under Isaiah’s indictment.

After Jesus’ warning for the disciples to truly hear, **he explains to them that the seed in his parable is the Word of God.**

**I often have people ask me what I think of particular books and what books I would recommend to Christians.** Maybe what books I would recommend to new Christians or on particular subjects. Well, this is the book I would recommend. I don’t mean, don’t ever read anything else. I simply mean, don’t waste your time on other things until you understand this book.

The biggest mistake I made as a young Christian and I have this temptation today too, is to read a thousand books about Christianity, many of which are perfectly good books, without spending enough time reading **THE CHRISTIAN BOOK, the Bible.** You need to know this book!

**Growing starts for us with this book.** It starts with the word of God. It starts with God’s seed. Today we are lucky, we can take it home with us and we can read it in our houses or on our front porch or even listen to it in our cars. In the early church, everyone did not have their own personal copy that they could take home and read as often (or as little) as they wanted. In the early church they met together and heard it preached and they talked about it together. We have more access to the story of God and His work than at any time in history. Are we taking advantage of this in order to grow closer to God and to grow in doing more and more what God wants from us?

**Jesus says that the seed in this parable is the word of God.** Seed is power. That these tiny pieces of matter could explode into millions of different plants or into tomatoes or beans or whatever it is that you plant is nothing short of extraordinary. When Jesus uses seed as his illustration for the Word of God planted in us he wants us to understand that its looks are deceiving. Though it seems insignificant . . . you can put your Bible on the shelf next to a whole host of other books and it does not look remarkably

different. Last I looked our Bibles are not made of magic ink or anything. And they are just paper like any other book. Sometimes they have fancy covers, but so do a lot of our kids' children books. On the surface, our Bibles seem rather ordinary. But what makes the Bible powerful is that it is "*the book*." Actually that is what "bible" means.

**This is the book not because it is magic**, but because in it is the story of God. Adelaide has some great books. I particularly like "Go Illini," but that is just the story of the University of Illinois. And we could all name books that we love to read about a whole host of things . . . some even about God . . . but none are God's story. The Holy Spirit uses God's Word to help us not only get to know God, but to get to know ourselves.

We are told that "**all Scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**" (2 Timothy 3:16-17) We are told that "**the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.**" (Hebrews 4:12-13)

**The point is that God's seed isn't worth \$.05 at Menards.** God's seed is the good stuff. And it is made available to each of us. It is in some of your hands or at least sitting on the seats next to many of you.

**God offers us a promise** . . . a guarantee of sorts on the seed that He gives. This is good seed. The question is never the seed. The question is always what are we going to do with the seed. When cared for properly it will absolutely grow and produce fruit.

**It is the stance of willingness to hear and obey that determines whether God's seed will flower through us.** The focus of this parable is on human responsibility and willingness to hear. People place themselves inside or outside by the way they respond to the message.

**God is creating a people by sowing His Word.** He sows His Word and thus plants His people.

The only variable determining failure or success is the soil on which the seed falls. In the parable, failure occurs at increasingly later stages in the growth process. The emphasis is on the receptivity and conditions of the soil.

Again, **the advantage that we have with this parable is that Jesus explains it to us.** The problem for us is not understanding the parable, but doing what it calls us to.

**The first seed fell upon the path and was trampled and eaten by the birds.** Jesus says this seed is like those of us that hear His Word, but then the devil comes and takes it away, preventing us from believing and being saved. The Word is heard, but it does not sink in. It does not mean anything to us. It just sits on the surface of our hearts where it is easily stolen away.

**You can read the Bible like any other book if you want.** You can read it like Readers Digest – quickly – just to get through it. You can read it like forwards in your email. Skim it, pick out the key words, don't really think much about what you are reading. Or maybe like a text message that is not real high on content or even spelling and grammar for that matter. You read it to read it . . . perhaps to occupy your time, but it is not a resource. There is no depth of thought or struggle for understanding. It is all surface.

Surface reception of the Word of God is ineffective. **Indifference to God's Word means no difference in your life.**

**The second seeds fall upon the rocky soil. Jesus says these folk hear God's Word with joy.** They are not indifferent but believe in its significance at least initially. These folks embrace God's Word and they are excited about it at first. Perhaps they jump right in to the read the Bible in a year plan. Or they sign up for a Bible study or they start praying every night. The problem is that this initial vigor or the pumped up feelings that were the motivation for it eventually disappear. And when this initial jolt stops, then so does the commitment. The second the initial excitement begins to wear off, they are done.

**These are the people that go on retreats and come back on fire for Jesus.** Days later, though, they are back to their old ways and have not kept up in doing what they originally set out to do. We find this in all our Bible studies. There are always more people that sign up initially than actually finish the study. The initial joy is not the hard part. The hard part is following through.

**It's similar to a marriage.** The wedding is not the hard part. Everyone likes a party and receiving lots of gifts. The hard part is grinding it out when all the partying and gifts are gone.

**Jesus likens these people to seeds that quickly sprout up from the ground, but quickly dry out because they don't ever develop roots.** The wilt away and die.

**The third seeds do develop roots.** These people get their feet wet. They last longer than the initial excitement, but their problem is that **life circumstances start to rule their life.** So while the last seed fails because people run out of excitement, these seeds fail because they get choked out by the things of life.

I am afraid that this is **one of the primary ways that God's Word fails to produce in us in our world today.** Jesus says that His seed is "**choked out by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.**" God's Word never matures in us because we are too worried about other things. We are more concerned with being experts at playing Wii than we are in God's Word . . . or we are more concerned with keeping up on the latest news or the weather than we are about understanding God's plan for our lives . . . or we are too interested in talking about our wants and our desires and not interested enough in the hard work of studying God's Word.

And Jesus says, we "**do not mature.**" We stay like babies in our faiths. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul says, "**I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.**" Paul is dealing with the spiritually immature. He and God can't give them the good stuff, because they are too immature. They want the easy stuff and aren't willing to work for the best stuff.

**You can know every passage in the Bible and not be spiritually mature.** Spiritual maturity comes when you know how every passage in the Bible matters to you . . . or changes you.

**This Book is not a book of information.** I am all for **study bibles** and all those notes they put in the margins to help you understand your Bible, but they have really caused a serious problem in much of our Bible reading. We worry so much about the history of the Bible that we never ask what difference the text makes to us. We spend more time reading the notes than we do that actual text of the Bible.

Many of you would say that the Bible is the most important book in your life. And I hope you all get to that point at some time in your life. But **if it is truly important to you then it will become the basis upon which you live.** It will dictate your life. It will mature you.

Finally, Jesus describes the soil that encourages the seed to grow and produce a plentiful harvest. Jesus says it is those that have a **“noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”**

It starts with good intentions. You have to want to know God’s Word and to grow in a relationship with Him. The desire is always the jumping off point.

**And then it simply takes exposure to the Word.** You have to read it. You have to be around other people that read it.

**But mere reading is not enough . . . you have to study it and wrestle with it.** Again, it is not a novel that you can speed through and then “know” it. The Bible is meant to be wrestled with. It should be given the freedom to wrestle with you.

As you let the Word mull in your heart, it will produce fruit through you.

**The seed fails to produce for 3 reasons** in our lives: no receptivity, no depth, or too much competition.

**Often people want to talk about whether the Bible is relevant to their lives.** The first step though is to throw yourself into it. It will never be relevant to your life unless you are reading it. And not just for 30 minutes one day. You need to be in God’s Word regularly. Because only when you are in God’s Word regularly is it even given the opportunity to be relevant to your life. One of my seminary professors said that, **“when the word of God is central, you never know what becomes relevant.”**

**This is going to sound odd, but I don’t believe you should read the Word of God to get something out of it. I don’t believe you should read the Bible to get something out of it.** The Bible is not a manual or a guidebook for your life. It is written to be your life. It is intended to define your life. It should form you.

See, the problem with our Bible reading today is that we come up with an idea or a concept and then we look in the back of our Bible and we find “love” or “forgiveness” and then we start to read all the verses referenced. The ones we don’t like, “like love your enemies or forgive your enemies” we quickly skip over, and the ones that we like we quickly write down or bookmark. That is not what it means to be soil ready to receive the Word of God.

We must be people that let the Word of God read us. Let me tell you how the Word of God read me this week. This weekend Dana and I were on each other’s nerves. Sorry to burst anyone’s bubble, but the pastor and his wife fight. Good, no one got up and left. Anyway, we were on each other’s nerves and I was frustrated and in my pouting I began to think of all the reasons I was right and Dana was wrong. And I decided forget the things she wanted me to do, unless she treated me differently I was going to do my own thing.

So there I am pouting . . . and God places Ephesians 5 in my heart. This is the passage that talks about women being submissive and all that and some guys like to pretend that means that women have to do whatever they say . . . and that is ridiculous. But the part of the passage that was reading me was Ephesians 5:25, **“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”** It starts out fine, love your wife. That is easy, I love Dana . . . but then comes the dinger. **“Just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”** Let that read you husbands. What did Christ do for the church . . . he died for it. And guess what, that church is not so nice to that Christ. When Jesus was arrested his closest disciples split. Yet Christ died for them. When Christ died on the cross, people spat and him and ridiculed them . . . yet he died for them.

**So here I was pouting that my wife was making my life a tad more difficult . . . and my God was telling me through the seed he had planted in my heart . . . I have called you to give yourself up for her . . .** your wants, your desires, your preferences, your feelings. And when I could look at my Savior and the fact that he did that . . . my perspective began to change. I had to suck it up and really love her like Christ loved the church.

Letting the text read us. That is what it means to be good soil for God’s perfect seed.

References consulted:

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