

As I began to read this passage from Matthew, I couldn't but ignore how Jesus moves into a pulpit that possibly sways from side to side. He has seen the large crowd that quickly has gathered to hear him teach and so he moves out into the boat I assume to help with crowd control. Now I have to say that you will never see me move out into a boat. For those that know me well, in particular Alison, you will know that I am not that keen on boats – they give me a queasy feeling, even before they've moved away from land. Boats and me don't get on. And so today I feel rather comfortable to be preaching from a steady foundation such as this.

But today we are not going to be so much concerned about why the crowd has gathered but more into this familiar parable which Jesus taught. This parable is one that I'm sure everyone of you today who was brought up through Sunday School will remember. And Jesus used parables as a means to teach a moral and spiritual principle in an everyday illustration that those around him would easily understand. It's interesting that you never read of how the Pharisees and other religious experts would use parables to teach about God. Instead they use deep theological, historical laws when they speak which go way over the heads of everyone, and therefore I'm sure Jesus' approach would have been somewhat refreshing to the crowds of ordinary people gathering to listen.

And again, that's not what I'm going to centre in on today. We all know the story, but let's instead look at the explanation of what this parable means and how it applies to us today. So the point of our passage today is not about learning how to sow seeds in the right places, it is of course all about how the word, the good news of God's salvation, is shared. Now where else do we have a similar picture shown in the bible where the word goes out to produce good fruit – well some of you will recognise the words of Isaiah 55:10 & 11 where God declares "*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*".

And who is that word for? Is it only for a select few? Is it only for those that come into a church gathering each week? Is it that exclusive? No, it is in any context that we can think of where God's word goes out. Verse 19 of our reading Jesus says that **anyone** who hears the word – that could be in a social gathering, in our recreation, in a pub, at a family meal. And God says that as his word goes out it will not return empty – in other words God's word has a purpose, it has life and it has incredible potential for kingdom growth. Have you ever thought about the words that come out of our mouths? Imagine the huge potential when as Jesus says anyone hears the word, the response could be so life changing, and yet as we will see it depends on how it is received.

We have the seed that falls along the path, seed that falls on rocky places, seed that falls among thorns, and then finally seed that falls on good soil. So let's look at these responses.

First the seed along the path. Now in any crowd that followed Jesus, many will have come and heard the words that he said, but they don't really feel that interested in it doing something to them. It's like water running off a duck's back – it has no impact.

They like hearing Jesus, but they don't like its application. And so behind this, Jesus says the Evil one comes and snatches the seed away. And for everyone that hears the word it means there might be a little voice floating in your head, sowing doubt – saying 'you don't need to listen to this'. That's what happens when the seed is beaten down on the path. So often in churches that remain faithful to the words of scripture, they will have people come and people go because they don't like hearing the truth. Yes they like the programmes and outreach of the church, but when the word is proclaimed it becomes very uncomfortable, they don't like that it means their lifestyle will have to change, and so they move on trying to find somewhere that will scratch their itch.

Next we have seed that falls on rocky places, but because there's no roots going deep down, they only last a short time. So this is where the individual hears the word, and will say "oh yes, I would really like to hear this for myself". Perhaps an emotional response, that is maybe helped along by the style or dynamic of the popular person whose preaching. It's actually relatively easy to build up that emotional response from people, whether through stories, or play particular songs that brings a particular reaction. People flock when they hear how cool the church is that has all the facilities, the trendy speaker, and yet the roots are very shallow. I've experienced situations where people have come and having heard a dynamic speaker and been surrounded by everything that looks so good, they respond almost instantaneously, they want to get involved in things within the church, but then something happens – something rocks them, maybe they see something in another member of the congregation, maybe the actions of a leader that shakes their core, maybe a big decision in their personal life brings them to that place of taking the easy road instead of the difficult one, and so they quickly fade away. The roots are shallow.

Then the third soil that is represented is one that's thorny, and as the plant grows it becomes choked by the thorns around them. Jesus explains that as the worries of life, and the deceit of wealth grows in a person, it makes the word unfruitful. The pressure experienced here is felt by the individual themselves and their own decisions – it's the worries around them, it's their success in a worldly sense. It's as the person charts their future, that they become something different to what they were when the word of God was proclaimed to them. Think about the worries that surround people every day – and yet Jesus has already said not to be worried about anything. He says seek first the Kingdom of God, and then everything else comes after that. Oh but you say, Jonny you don't understand – the pressures in work at the minute are so stressful that I can't give time to this church group, I've got to get on top of things in the office. I've got a deadline that just won't move – I need to focus on that. Jesus says in Mark 8:36 '*For what shall it profit a person, if they shall gain the whole world, and lose his or her own soul?*'. Don't get me wrong – these worries at home or work or wherever are very real and they are important. So the issue is not the worry, it's just how we respond to it in the context of what Jesus wants us to invest in where his word is concerned. You say you don't have the time to come to a bible study group or a house group, and you rely on my 10 or 15 mins each week to keep you going – well I guarantee folks that by this time next week you will have forgotten most of what I've said today. The pressures of daily life then begin to choke. That's why you have got to invest in the word. Jesus is saying there is a type of soil that will choke the word. And if it's not being choked by the worries of this life,

it will be choked by the deceitfulness of wealth. Jesus again made it clear, you simply cannot serve God and also serve money (Matthew 6). We've got to get a perspective folks, where He must come first in all things. He's not saying that other things aren't to be enjoyed, but he wants us to place him first. The writer to the Hebrews makes it absolutely clear when he says in chapter 12, '*let us throw of everything [Everything] that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles*'. And you might say but I'm a good person, I'm coming to church. Folks, it isn't necessarily bad things, it's anything, it's good things that we might enjoy but actually have begun to hinder us from our growth of God's word. It could be our love of sport, it could even be our commitment to the wellbeing of our children, these could well be the things that result in us neglecting the power and the fruitfulness of the word of God to command our lives. And before you know it, you start realising that you've lost interest in the things of the Kingdom, you realise you have lost the zeal to study God's word, and slowly by the slowly those thorns begin to choke the life out of you. Maybe for some of you today, you have allowed other things, and they may be good things, to slowly by slowly get in the way of your time in God's word. Today it may be necessary to re-evaluate where your priorities lie.

And then finally, Jesus explains about the seed that was sown on good soil, and he says that it produces a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. Jesus says that the person who not only hears the word, but receives it, who accepts it, who applies it to their own lives, well such a person will grow immeasurably, they will yield much more fruit as a result. Folks, you can sit and listen to the Word of God being read every week in church, but unless you receive it into your heart, that you submit to the word each and every day, then it's not going to bear fruit. I've discovered in my pastoral ministry that the people I meet who sit in the word of God each and every day, they are the ones who are able to endure any challenges that come in life, because they know the strength, the power that comes from being fed from the word of God.

That's why I encourage all of us that when it comes to the reading of God's word each week in church, to open up your bibles. Don't be lazy and just hear it from someone else, or expect me to explain it to you. You've got to read it yourself to prove that what I and others explain each week is in fact true. I digress slightly and yet it is so important for your spiritual health.

So then if we now understand these responses to the word of God, let's quickly look at how this applies to you and me. Have you wondered about how widespread the scattering of seed is from the sower? It's scattered here, there and everywhere. Jesus is not selective in where the seed goes, but everywhere where the word goes it's for a purpose? And so can you imagine how Jesus feels when the word that is sown doesn't bear the fruit that he hopes. His word isn't any different or diluted in each context, but those that hear it often respond in a way that must be extremely discouraging. I'm sure any school teachers that are here today will understand what I mean. The material goes out to little Jonny in the class, the material goes up on the board, and yet little Jonny stares back struggling to understand why oh why is he being put through this torture. He's longing for that bell to go, so he can race back home and get back on that PlayStation again. And it's very similar to the Bible teacher – Sunday after Sunday, year after year, the word is preached but all you get back are the stares of people's faces hoping that the sermon will be wrapped up

soon, a bit like little Jonny in the classroom, so they can get back home to enjoy a Sunday off. But remember that this parable is not about the sower, it's about the seed and how it's received. The word faithfully will be proclaimed but it's up to each of us to receive it and believe it. And yet while many will ignore the word, God ultimately promises to fulfil his plans. Many will have said over centuries that the Christian faith would be a thing of the past, and yet God's word continues to transform lives today. And God says that '[His word] will accomplish what [He] desire[s] and achieve[s] the purpose for which [He] sent it'. That's why the faithful proclamation of the word is so important today.

Each of us today has to ask the question, which of these soils represents me when it comes to receiving the word of God? How do I receive His word? If we do not humbly accept the word of God and apply it to our lives, then instead of being helped by it, we become hardened by it. If you come regularly to this church or you listen regularly online to us, and you hear from the teaching of God's word but not respond to it, then you will find you will eventually lose interest in it entirely – Sunday by Sunday becomes more a ritual rather than a re-energizing.

On our summer holidays these past weeks we had the opportunity to visit Mount Etna, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. And even though it had erupted only 2 months ago causing a lava flow to move down the mountain, even though the day after we visited it, it briefly erupted again, it's astonishing to see the amount of shops and businesses set up within a relatively short distance of it – all with the aim of making more money. Even though the warnings are real, people have become so used to the mountain billowing out smoke that they just carry on regardless. And it made me think about the word of God being preached here Sunday by Sunday. Has it become so part of the way of life for you, that you don't see it's power and the need to respond to it. What will it take for you to listen to the word, and not only receive it but believe its power, and then respond to it by changing your ways. Folks let's not take the word of God lightly – remember Paul said that they are '*God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*'. In this period of Summer, I feel it's not only a good time, but it's also the right time to ask yourself the question, what changes do I need to make to my life to make his word become the centre of my life. Only you can answer this, but be wise, because there will always be other distractions and interests that are ready to come along to pull you away from his word – that his word bounces off you without any impact, that something crops up in life that without the foundation of God's word you fall away, or that other priorities get in the way of soaking up his word. So what will it be? He or she who has ears to hear, listen. Listen.