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May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Matthew 13:18-23

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. What was sown 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. What was sown 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. But what was sown 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.

Lord God, sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth!

Dear fellow redeemed,

Every year we witness a miracle when we plant our gardens. We open those little envelopes, and inside are the seeds, little seeds, shriveled up and dried up. They look like they're dead. They look like they're worthless. But from experience we know better. So we carefully plant those seeds in the soil. A week or so later, we find that they have sprouted into plants. As the summer progresses, the plants bear a crop of countless seeds of their own. All this from those little shriveled up seeds! What power is hidden within those seeds!

Jesus used the power of seeds to illustrate a much greater power; namely, the power of God's holy word. At first glance, God's word may not appear to be all that special, all that life-giving. But when people hear that word of God, when it is planted in their hearts, it has the power to sprout and grow, to produce saving faith, and the product of faith, a harvest of deeds of love done for the Lord.

Not every seed produces a mature, productive plant. Most often the problem is not with the seed, but with the soil in which it is sown. So also the word of God does not always produce a healthy and productive faith. In this case the problem is never with the seed, never with the word. God's word is perfect. Rather the problems crop up in human hearts where God's word is sown. So let us see what happens to God's word as people receive it in various ways. The Word Of God Is Sown. Some fell on the path. Some fell

on rocky places. Some fell among thorns. Some fell on good soil.

"A farmer went out to sow his seed," probably wheat or barley. He began walking through the field, with one hand holding the pouch of seed, with the other hand, scattering the grain. That was the way they planted fields, and it took a great deal of skill to sow the seed evenly. As the farmer started along the edge of the field, right away there was a fair amount of seed that was lost because it fell on the path, or on the field road. There the ground was untilled and packed down. the seed could not sink in, and as it lay there on the surface, the birds came and ate it up. No chance for that seed.

Jesus draws this comparison: "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 along the path." These are people who have heard God's word. It has been sown in their hearts, but it just doesn't mean that much to them. They don't understand it. Maybe they were not listening carefully enough. Maybe they had too many other things on their minds. A path can be very busy, you know. Or maybe, and this is really the case; they did not want to understand God's word. With hearts untilled and hard, they never gave the word of God a chance to sink in and even begin to grow.

Quicker than birds, the evil one comes and snatches God's word from them, as it lays on top of their hard impenetrable hearts. The evil one is the devil, whose main goal it is to destroy faith, and thus destroy souls for all eternity. What better way than to prevent faith from even beginning to grow? God's word is the one thing that produces faith. If the devil can snatch that word away, he has an easy victory.

The second seed spoken of at least got a chance to sprout. In fact, it sprouted very quickly. "Some seed fell on rocky places." Palestine is known for its rocky soil, places where there are only several inches of dirt covering the rock. At the beginning of the season, that shallow soil was looser and warmer, allowing the seed to sprout up very quickly. The plants looked great at first, but there was a problem, they had no root. Later in the season, as it became hotter and dryer, those plants withered.

Jesus says, "What was sown 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." This describes the Palm Sunday crowd in its wild enthusiasm for the Savior, shouting, "Hosanna!" Yet only a few days later the crowds shouted "Crucify him!" These are the emotional, superficial, sentimentalists who are so easily impressed by the word, who are moved to tears and make good resolutions. But theirs is a mere surface faith, a shallow faith that will not stand the test of trials, a faith that is not solidly grounded and rooted. Such a faith will not make it in the long haul. Soon troubles come into their lives, and they find that their faith itself causes difficulties. Persecution comes. They cannot accept the fact that Jesus would allow such things to happen to them, because they don't understand that Jesus uses such things to make faith stronger and more fruitful. They will not let the roots go down, won't let faith take over their stony unbroken hearts. Their sudden joy over God's word just as suddenly turns into grief, and their sudden acceptance to sudden rejection, and their newly created life of faith sickens and dies.

How our stony human hearts need to be crushed by God's law, and totally pulverized. We need to understand what terrible helpless sinners we really are. Then God's word can take root and fill us with true and lasting joy in the forgiveness and

salvation our Savior has won for us. That is a joy that will not be disappointed.

The third category of seed grows closer to maturity, but doesn't quite make it, that which fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. We know only too well that if we simply let the weeds go in the garden, they'll take over. Thorns and thistles will actually choke the plants. They cannot be allowed to grow with the plants.

Yet how many people allow thorns and thistles to take over in their hearts! "What was sown 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." These are people who, like the rich young man in the Bible, have a certain longing for salvation, but at the same time, they desire to hold on to the things of this world. They let those thorn bushes grow in their hearts; the love of riches, cares and worries of this life, love of pleasures, pride and glory, and the lusts of the flesh. They want to have both, both that which is of heaven, and that which is of the earth. But the two don't go together any more than wheat goes with thorns. These people attempt the impossible, the serving of two masters, God and mammon, God and pleasures, God and luxury, God and lusts of the flesh. One of the two has to be dismissed eventually. In their case, God is dismissed from their hearts, and the thorns of riches and lusts hold the field, and they fall from the grace of life eternal.

We regularly weed our gardens. Farmers know they must spray and cultivate their fields if they want to get a crop. Let's not neglect to do the same with our hearts. Pull those weeds out, those desires for the things of this world. Pull them out while they're small, as soon as you see them springing up, before your life of faith is choked. Thorns are thorns, and if they are not eradicated as soon as they appear and torn out by the roots, the good seed has no chance.

Finally the fourth category of seed made it to maturity. It fell on good soil where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. It is the whole purpose of the plant to produce a crop. All of the plant's energy is expended toward that end, and how beautiful those amber waves of grain are!

How much more beautiful is that which the word of God produces! "What was sown 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." Pray God that this ever be a description of us; people who hear God's word, hear it often, and listen and study it carefully. People who understand that God's word is all-important, that God's word has loosened the once hard ground of our hearts to make a place for faith to grow. May we understand that by ourselves we are wretched sinners, who apart from God's word are damned for all eternity in hell. May our stony hearts be crushed, so that faith in our Savior and his free salvation can grow; come what may. Even trouble and persecution can only make that faith stronger. May we understand that we remain sinners here on earth, and carefully pull out those weeds, that we may serve the Lord and bear a crop.

The crop that we produce is our entire life of faith, the life we live each day out of love and service to the Lord; as we serve one another, and as we speak God's word to others, that it might produce faith and a harvest in them also. It is God's word alone that produces that crop. Apart from that word, we can do nothing. That is why Jesus says, "He who has ears, let him hear."

Jesus spoke this parable to a large crowd of people. Isn't it interesting that in the parable he was simply describing the crowd before him? There were many who were following him only to see him perform miracles. They heard his word, but they didn't

understand it, because they weren't really listening, and the evil one was right there to snatch that seed away. There were those who listened with joy and enthusiasm, but who would not follow Jesus to the end, because their hearts were stony, and their faith had no root. There were those worldly-minded people in the crowd, about to be overtaken by the thorn bushes in their hearts. But there were also those who would produce a crop, and that harvest continues today. Praise God that he has brought his glorious word to our hearts, and has in every way prepared those unfit hearts, and caused faith to grow.

Amen.

May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.