

**Sermon**  
**Elim Community Church**  
**Bath, Maine**

**Title: The Parable of the Sower**

**Text: Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23**

**Introduction:** As we look around the church in North America these days we quickly discover that few professing Christians are really living productive spiritual lives. Every where we look we find people who have been exposed to the Bible and its teachings, but their lives have not been changed by it. Many have begun well in the Christian life but for one reason or another they have failed to mature in the faith as their growth was stunted.

It seems odd to me that all Christians respond differently to God's Word. It is weird to me that we can all come to church and hear the same sermon and even sit in the same pew, but some take something away from it and others don't. We all respond differently to God's Word and each of us came to Christ for a different reason and we each grow individually in our faith.

The thing that bothers me most is that so many Christians come to church and play church and the reason for that is the way in which their faith is rooted. When I started coming to church, my minister taught us the Bible, and that is all he did. I remember him telling me that we do not come to church to play games. He said, there is nothing wrong with games, but on Sundays and Wednesdays we are going to study God's Word. I realized soon the reason he did that was to root us in God's Word. I remember looking at other youth groups in the area and seeing that during church service the kids would be outside playing games instead of having a Bible study. I learned that what you win them with is what you win them to. I think that we need to try to reach people by all means, I am all for programs that will attract people to the church, but we need to make sure our focus is Christ and whatever we do people can clearly see that he is the reason why we do that.

So many times I think that Christians are lukewarm, or Christians are not growing because their seed was not properly planted.

I am not a great farmer or a gardener, but one thing I do know is that there are a few things that are essential for a seed to grow and to grow well. One thing that is important is the soil. The soil is important because the seed needs to build roots and if the soil is too tough it cannot develop good roots and the seed will soon die.

Our lives with Christ are very similar. Much of our spiritual lives are determined by the foundation in which we have. As you ask different people why they come to church they will all give a different answer. Some will say they come to church for the fellowship, some will say out of duty or obligation, some will say for an experience, and other will

say they come to hear God's Word and to grow in their faith. There is nothing wrong with coming to church expecting fellowship, because when the church meets together we naturally have fellowship, and fellowship is essential for growth. There is nothing wrong with seeing a duty to come to church; I believe that the scriptures teach that we have a duty to be in the Lord's house on the first day of the week. I think it should be our motivation though to come and to learn more about Jesus. Jesus is the foundation of our faith, and so many people have weak and shallow faiths because their foundation is not Jesus.

When a building's foundation is not properly made, the building will not stand. When a plant is not firmly rooted it will die because it cannot receive the nourishment it needs, and when a Christian does not have a good foundation they backslide. The question for you this morning is, How well are you rooted? And what type of soil are you?

An old American Indian tale recounts the story of a chief who was telling a gathering of young braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog always wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight." "Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks. The chief answered, "The one you feed."

It would seem that too many in the church have been feeding the wrong dog. When we feed the dog of our worldly desires he grows into a ferocious beast that controls and ruins our lives.

Jesus told a parable that illustrates for us why it is that so many of those who have been exposed to the Word of God fail to live productive spiritual lives. In this parable Jesus compares our lives or our hearts to various types of ground on which seed is sowed. From this parable we learn that the conditions must be right for God's Word to produce a harvest in our lives so we must properly cultivate our hearts to ensure that the right conditions are present.

There are many, very many Christians who are afraid of making an unreserved surrender to God. They are afraid that God will ask some hard thing of them, or some absurd thing. They fear sometimes that it will upset all their life-plans. In a word, they are afraid to surrender unreservedly to the will of God, for Him to do all He wished to for them and whatsoever He wills with them. Friends, the will of God concerning us are not only the wisest and best thing in the world; it is also the tenderest and sweetest. God's will for us is not only more loving than a father's; it is tenderer than a mother's. It is true that God does oftentimes revolutionize utterly our life plans when we surrender ourselves to His will. It is true that He does require of us things that to others seem hard. But when the will is once surrendered, the revolutionized life plans become just the plans that are most pleasant, and the things that to others seem hard are just the things that are easiest and most delightful. Do not let Satan deceive you into being afraid of God's plans for your life.

# How to Cultivate Your Heart for a Spiritual Harvest

## 1. YOU NEED TO PLOW THE SOIL. (13:3-4, 18-19)

The first type of soil described in this parable is 'the path'. There were paths through and around farmers fields and it was inevitable that some of the seed being scattered would fall upon these paths. The paths were packed down hard because of all the people walking on them. They were so hard that the seed being sown was unable to penetrate the soil and so they remained on top of the ground as easy picking for hungry birds.

Jesus is referring to people whose hearts are so hard that the truth of His word cannot penetrate their lives. Just as a seed cannot grow unless it penetrates the ground so the seed of God's word cannot grow unless it can penetrate the heart. Farmers can remedy this problem in their fields by plowing them. The plow breaks up the hard ground so that when the farmer plants the seeds will be able to penetrate the soil. Just like those farmers some of you need to plow the soil of your hearts so that God's word can enter in. You need to prepare your hearts to receive the word of God. In 1 Peter 1:13 we are told that we need to "prepare your minds". If you are going to get anything out of coming to church on Sunday mornings you must prepare your hearts and minds prior to the service just as the farmer must prepare his soil prior to sowing. There are several practical things that you can do to prepare yourself for church. First, get good nights sleep. You're not going to learn anything if you are too tired to stay awake and pay attention. Saturday night is not the night to stay up late watching movies or playing games or anything else. It is a night to get to bed early so that you can come to church well rested so that you can give God your best. The typical American gets one to two hours less sleep than they need to function at an ideal level. If you haven't been getting anything out of church lately maybe its because you haven't been getting to bed. Second, ask God to open your hearts and give you understanding. You need to get to bed early on Saturday night so that you can get up early on Sunday morning and spend time with God before coming to church. It is His word that is preached and taught in our Sunday School and so just maybe you should think about asking Him to help you understand it. Third, seek to learn how it applies to your life and not the person sitting next to you. Anytime you walking away from a service and think, "That was great. I hope so and so was listening because they really needed that" . Anytime you walk away from a service thinking something like that, you have missed the entire point. The point of going to church is to hear from God personally.

If you're taking a look at your life this morning and you're realizing that you haven't been growing spiritually maybe it's because you have been hardening your heart to what God has been trying to teach you. Just like the farmer and the path, God has been sowing seeds but your heart has been too hard to receive them. It's time to let God plow the soil of your heart today. As you can well imagine, plowing is not always a pleasant experience. God needs to break up the hardness in your heart and it might hurt a little, but the results are well worth it.

## 2. YOU NEED TO PUT DOWN ROOTS. (13:5-6, 20-21)

The next type of soil that Jesus speaks of is rocky. He is not talking about soil that has rocks in it, but of a shallow layer of soil on top of solid rock. Because of the underlying rock the plant is unable to put down deep roots. It is important to understand that the real reason the plant dies is not because of the trial of the scorching sun, but because it doesn't have deep enough roots to deal with the trial. The same trial that destroys one plant will prove the quality of another plant. Everything depends on the roots. If the roots are shallow the plant will be scorched and die. However, if the roots are deep, the plant will survive and its very survival proves that it is a strong, healthy plant. The sun is absolutely necessary for a plant to grow. Without the sunlight the process of photosynthesis cannot take place and the plant will die. So what proves to be a devastating trial to the plant with shallow roots also proves to be a life giving source to the plant with deep roots. We need to put down roots so that we can persevere in the face of difficulties.

*There was a ten year old boy who decided to study judo despite the fact that he had lost his left arm in a devastating car accident. The boy began lessons with an old Japanese judo master. The boy was doing well, so he couldn't understand why, after three months of training, the master had taught him only one move. "Sensei," the boy finally said, "Shouldn't I be learning more moves?" "This is the only move you know, but this is the only move you'll ever need to know," the sensei replied. Not quite understanding, but believing in his teacher, the boy kept training. Several months later, the sensei took the boy to his first tournament. Surprising himself, the boy easily won his first two matches. The third match proved to be more difficult, but after some time, his opponent became impatient and charged; the boy deftly used his one move to win the match. Still amazed by his success, the boy was now in the finals. This time, his opponent was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. For a while, the boy appeared to be overmatched. Concerned that the boy might get hurt, the referee called a time-out. He was about to stop the match when the sensei intervened. "No," the sensei insisted, "Let him continue." Soon after the match resumed, his opponent made a critical mistake; he dropped his guard. Instantly, the boy used his move to pin him. The boy had won the match and the tournament. He was the champion. On the way home, the boy and the sensei reviewed every move in each and every match. Then the boy summoned the courage to ask what was really on his mind: "Sensei, how did I win the tournament with only one move?"*

*"You won for two reasons," the sensei answered. "First, you've almost mastered one of the most difficult throws in all of judo. And second, the only known defense for that move is for your opponent to grab your left arm."*

The boy's biggest weakness had become his biggest strength because his roots went down deep as he mastered that one technique. The reason that so many Christians wilt when they face the scorching heat of trials and tribulations is that they have shallow root systems. They have failed to "go on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1). The Bible teaches us

that it is very important that we “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith” (1 Timothy 3:9). That is why Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be “rooted and established in love” (3:17). A shallow Christianity simply cannot survive times of trouble. But those who are not content with a shallow religion and so go deeper in the faith will discover that “the chains that seem to bind them, serve only to remind them, they drop powerless behind them...”

Is your Christianity shallow or deep? Are the troubles of life knocking you out or making you stronger? Let me share with you a secret: You cannot go too deep. No matter how much you have grown in the faith you still have more growing to do. There is no such thing as having arrived spiritually. Let me share with you a few practical ways to put your roots down deep. First, go to church every Sunday. The Bible actually commands us to not skip church. “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...” (Hebrews 10:25) We are not to skip church because God knows that we can’t grow alone. We need each others love, encouragement, and support. We need to follow in the footsteps of more mature believers as they follow Christ. We need to experience corporate worship and hear the Word of God proclaimed. Second, read the Bible and pray every single day. God is a person and you can’t grow in a relationship to a person without spending quality time with that person. Prayer and Bible study is having a conversation with God. God speaks to you through the Bible and you speak to Him through prayer. There has probably never been a divorce in history in which one of the key problems wasn’t communication. When communication is cut off there can be no meaningful relationship. We must communicate with God every single day. And by the way, don’t forget to do what God tells you to do. There is no quicker way to stunt your spiritual growth than through a lack of obedience. Remember, disobedience isn’t only doing something wrong; it is also not doing what you know you are supposed to do. If you have not been growing spiritually and God’s word has not been producing fruit in your life then you need to plow the soil and put down roots. But there is also one more thing you need to do.

### **3. YOU NEED TO PULL THE WEEDS. (13:7, 22)**

The third type of soil that Jesus spoke of was thorny or weedy soil. The thorns grow up quickly and they choke out the plants. The weeds consume the water and nutrients that should be used for the plants nourishment and so they die. These thorns represent the cares of life and the desire for wealth which choke the Word of God out of the lives of many people. The pursuit of worldly wealth consumes the energy that should be used in the pursuit of spiritual wealth and we die spiritually.

An interesting article appeared in the Wall Street Journal. It was an interview of six top executives, all of them making six-figure salaries. That means that they made somewhere between \$100,000 and \$1 million a year.

Now you are probably thinking, “If I made even \$100,000 a year, I’d be in great shape. No worries and no problems.”

But in the interview each was asked, "What is your greatest fear?" Each answered pretty much the same, using different words. Their greatest fear was that they would not have enough. When they were asked, "How much is enough?" they always answered, "a little more."

It seems that the world's goods never completely satisfy. You find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and the price of gold falls. You strike oil, and the oil market deteriorates. Your ship comes in, and it sinks in the harbor.

There was an article in the Wednesday, June 26, 2002 issue of the Colorado Springs Gazette on page six of the Business section by Michelle Singletary titled "How much is enough in the pursuit of money?" She began by writing about Karen Hughes, counselor to President Bush, who decided to leave the White House so that she could return home to Texas and spend more time with her husband and teenage son. Turning down the pursuit of fame and fortune for family is a radical concept these days. Ms. Singletary quotes workplace consultant Pamela York Klainer from her book "How Much Is Enough? Harness the Power of Your Money Story -- And Change Your Life" in which she writes: "In our American culture money has moved to the center stage." "Money, Klainer points out, 'has gone well beyond its literal function as a way to provide for our essential needs and has become, in itself, an essential need. We're working harder and earning more, yet we continue to be driven, restless, unsatisfied.'" Ms. Singletary also writes, "Klainer warns that for too many men and women vigorously pursuing money and success, work has become the center of their lives around which most other things -- friendship, volunteer service, spirituality and family needs -- revolve." As I study the Bible I realize that a life structured in this way is actually inside out. Our Christianity should be the center of our lives around which friendship, ministry, family needs, and work revolve.

If "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth" are choking out your spiritual development, you need to restructure your life. Stop making the pursuit of worldly wealth your highest objective and make the pursuit of spiritual riches your grandest goal. Jesus said, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31,33). Let me give you some practical steps to putting God first in your life. First, start tithing. If God doesn't have your pocketbook, He doesn't have your heart either. If you're not giving God the first part of your income you're only fooling yourself if you think you're giving Him first place in your life. Tithing is the Biblical command to give God the first ten percent of your income. That means before you pay Uncle Sam and before you pay the bills you give ten percent to God and He promises that the remaining 90% will be sufficient to meet your needs, not your greed's. Second, start giving offerings above and beyond your tithe. Start supporting a missionary like Dan. Give to the special denominational offerings that we take up throughout the year. Start giving sacrificially above your tithe. This is totally the opposite of the behavior of the typical American. When you start giving in these ways you are saying to God: "I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords

today.” Third, start serving others. Get involved in a ministry and get your focus off of your needs and start focusing on the needs of others for a change. It will totally revolutionize your life to stop worrying about yourself and start caring others. There’s an old fable about a miserable rich man who went to visit a rabbi. The rabbi took the rich man by the hand and led him to a window. "Look out there," he said. The rich man looked into the street. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. "I see men, women, and children," answered the rich man. Again the rabbi took him by the hand and this time led him to a mirror. "Now what do you see?" "Now I see myself," the rich man replied. Then the rabbi said, "Behold, in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver representing wealth, and no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others, but you see only yourself.

***While in Canada, a Pastor visited one believer who operated a large grain farm. His spread included some twenty-five hundred acres. I asked him how he planted the seed. He reached in a bin and pulled out an ear of corn. Then he proceeded to pop out the kernels one by one as he walked along, demonstrating the planting process. Do you believe that? No, sir! That's not what he said nor is it what he did. He showed me a distributor that was some thirty feet wide. "We take that double tandem truck, fill it with certified seed, back it up to the distributor, open the slots, and pour in the seed." He went on to say, "If you're ever going to be cheap, don't be cheap with the seed." One bushel of seed invested yields thirty bushels of grain harvested in a good year. Thirty to one—not a bad return, if you are ready to believe and willing to invest. God says, "Believe Me, trust Me, try My plan, prove My ways, and see the kind of harvest I will give." So Paul guarantees this principle of truth in the Scripture with the promise, "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). All grace, all ways, all sufficiency, all things! There are four promises in one breath. Knowing it is one thing, believing it is quite another.***

**CONCLUSION:** In conclusion, if you really want to have a spiritually productive life, you can have it. One day a student came to Plato and asked him how he could come to have true knowledge and wisdom. The teacher told the student to follow him and he led him to the river. The teacher waded out into the river and called for his student to join him. When he did, the teacher told the student to dunk himself under the water. The student thought that this was a bizarre request, but he did as the great teacher told him. As soon as his head was under the water the teacher put his hands on his student's head and held him under the water. The student fought desperately, but he was unable to break his teacher's hold. The teacher held his student under water until the student began to weaken and lose his strength. Then he released him and the student shot up and began to gasp for air desperately. The teacher said, "When you desire knowledge as desperately as you desired to breathe the air you just breathed -- then you shall find it." Jesus said something similar: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

If you truly want to live a spiritually productive life then plow the soil and prepare your heart to receive God's word, put down roots and persevere through the trials of life, and pull the weeds of worldly wealth and pursue spiritual riches instead. If you do these things then you will have good soil and the seed of God's word will produce a bountiful harvest in your life. Jesus said that the harvest would yield "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown". You need to understand that at that time a sevenfold harvest was considered to be a good harvest so a harvest of even thirty fold would have been miraculous not to mention sixty or a hundredfold. When you make your life match God's model the results are miraculous.

## **A Church Garden**

### Three Rows of Squash

1. Squash indifference.
2. Squash criticism.
3. Squash gossip.

### Four Rows of Turnips

1. Turn up for meetings.
2. Turn up with a smile.
3. Turn up with a visitor.
4. Turn up with a Bible.

### Five Rows of Lettuce

1. Let us love one another.
2. Let us welcome strangers.
3. Let us be faithful in duty.
4. Let us truly worship God.
5. Let us give liberally.