

“Transformation by the Dynamic of the Word”
Or, “The Key to Living Faithfully”
Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Intro.: I find a question that focuses our attention helpful, and the focus question of the morning is this: “what *is* the Christian’s key to living faithfully?” That’s the question I pose for you to focus your thought for the morning, but it’s also a way to look at the next several Sunday mornings.

Series. This morning we begin a series on Jesus’ parables of the kingdom as they are recorded in Matt. 13. In the insert in your bulletin, the series is entitled “The Knowledge of the Secrets of the Kingdom,” which is taken directly from Mt. 13:11.

Before we dig in, let me give you a couple of “handles” on things by describing some concepts we will be using. First, what is the Kingdom? A kingdom is where the authority or the reign of the king is honored. So if God’s authority as king is honored in your life, then the kingdom is there. We are likely to think of a kingdom in terms of politics and geography—a country ruled by a king. But the crucial issue is the authority of the king. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God will be established when Jesus returns at the end of the age, and all will acknowledge him king. But you will notice in the parables in this chapter that the term kingdom is used in both ways. The context determines which meaning of the word is intended where you find it.

Note also that the terms “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven” are equivalent. Matthew honors the Jewish tradition that the name of God is too holy to be spoken, so he uses the term “Kingdom of Heaven,” but in the rest of the NT, the term is “Kingdom of God.” They mean the same.

One more handle: what’s a parable? The English word “parable” comes from Greek words which means “to lay alongside.” A little story is laid alongside a more complicated truth to explain it. C. H. Dodd has given us a helpful description of a parable which is reproduced on the front of the bulletin. According to him, a parable is *“a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought.”* A parable draws you in. It whets your appetite to understand it better. If you haven’t done so, let me urge you to take the insert home, and read chapter 13 as it suggests. I think you’ll find that you will be both teased and enriched.

Text. Our text this morning is Matt. 13:1-9, which is the parable, and 18-23, which is the explanation. This is one of two parables Jesus told for which he gives explanations.

Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

(1)That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. (2)Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. (3)And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. (4)And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. (5)Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. (6)But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. (7)Other

seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. (8)Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (9)Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

(18)“Hear then the parable of the sower. (19)When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what is sown in the path. (20)As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; (21)yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. (22)As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. (23)But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Remember our focus question: what *is* the Christian’s key to living faithfully?

I suspect we’ve all heard this story before. First, there’s the setting: the crowd is large enough that Jesus gets in a boat to give himself a little space, and addresses them from the boat. Then there’s the story: the sower broadcasts the seed. It falls in all sorts of places. Several of those places frustrate its potential, but when it lands in the right place, the results are truly breathtaking. The little seeds produce a huge crop—as much as 100 to one!

Jesus highlights this parable. At the beginning he quiets the crowd with “Listen!” and at the end with the words, “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!” Listen, says Jesus, pay attention, there’s something important in this little story.

#1. Soon after telling the parable, Jesus volunteers an explanation. The first soil, the hard-packed path, is described as a person who hears the message about the kingdom but he doesn’t get it. The way Jesus puts it is telling. He says the message is “sown in his heart”—but this person never really comes to grips with the kingdom message. It’s like an idea you have but you don’t act on... Pretty soon you forget it, and it’s gone. And Jesus has a more sinister explanation: the evil one snatched it away.

We’re told that the word that was snatched was “the message of the kingdom”. What’s that? At the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, he gives us a skeleton outline of Jesus’ proclamation. Simply put, it was, “Repent (change your life) for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt. 4:17). The first part of the summary, “repent,” literally means, “turn around;” reorient your life so you’re going God’s direction. You were going your way; turn around and go in the direction God tells you.

“The kingdom of heaven has come near” is Jesus’ understated way of talking about himself. The kingdom has come near because the king, Jesus, is here. The God of Heaven is making a personal visit to your town; he’s making a personal appeal to you. Jesus says, “Turn around and follow me.”

#2. The first person—represented by the path—didn’t “get” the message. The second person, represented by the soil in rocky places, apparently did. I’m told that in Palestine it’s common to find a thin layer of soil over a layer of limestone, so if a seed lands there,

there's no place for its roots to go. It sprouts quickly, then the sun scorches it. Jesus' hearers would have known examples of that. This person not only "got it," he "received the message with joy!" It's like he went to a Billy Graham crusade and not only went forward, he pushed his way to the very front.

But this person apparently didn't think deeply about the commitments he was being asked to make, or what would happen if his choice were resisted. If this were a young woman, perhaps her boyfriend didn't like the changes she had begun to make as a result of hearing the word, and instead of risking losing him, she fell away. Or perhaps this person was a student majoring in Philosophy in a very secular school. When he was criticized for his change in world-view, he didn't want to take the heat, so he fell away.

#3. Jesus now turns to the third type of soil. The second and third types of soil seem somewhat alike. In the third soil, it's thorns which put the squeeze on the young plants, not underlying rock. The thorns represent the "cares of this world and the lure of wealth." The situation may seem similar, but the results are different. In this case they don't fall away, but the plant is kept from developing—it is unfruitful. The word is heard, but apparently not effectively acted upon for fear that it would interfere with the bottom line or some other treasured goal.

This person makes me sad. They have heard the word, and they know what it says, but they're afraid to act on it. They're frustrated. If this were a businessman, perhaps his business partner didn't like the changes he wanted to make to their business, so he, didn't implement them. But he himself was uncomfortable using the old, perhaps ethically questionable practices, so his own productivity declined, but he hadn't reformed the company according to kingdom values either, so he was frustrated both ways. In him, the word is unfruitful.

Or perhaps this is a couple who wants to get ahead, and to give their children every opportunity, so they schedule the kids for every type of class or activity imaginable. With that, and two careers, their lives are pretty strung out. The more they hear the word, the more they think this frantic lifestyle is not what God has called them to, but they're afraid to cut back for fear of losing something. In them, the word is unfruitful.

#4. The fourth soil, and the contrast to the first three soils, is the good soil. The good soil is the one which produces an abundant crop—a crop that's 30, 60, or even 100 times as large as what was sown. The good soil represents the one who both hears the word and understands. It's important to be clear that when Jesus uses the word understand, it's a little stronger than the way we use it. When we use the word "understand," we're saying we grasp the meaning. We are not saying that we "stand under" something in the sense that it has any authority over us. When we say that we understand something, we're saying that we grasp it, not necessarily that it has grasped us. If we want to grasp Jesus' intent here, we perhaps need to say that the man both heard the word, and that he "stood under" it—he did what it said. We are reminded here of Jesus' words in the great commission, part of which is, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*" The person represented by the fourth soil hears and acts on what he hears. That is the reason for the crop he produces.

What *is* the Christian's key to living faithfully?

The first part is listening and “standing under” the word. That word, in the right soil, has huge potential. It has great power. But therein, of course, lies the warning: the word, like a seed is fragile. It can be ignored or twisted in any number of ways. If we treat it like the first three soils, two things will happen. The first is that we will forfeit the life-transforming opportunity to live life in relationship with our God and King. The second is that we forfeit the potential to bless others which is part and parcel of life as part of God's kingdom.

How would you illustrate a “good soil” person? People like Mother Theresa or Billy Graham come to mind—Christians who are celebrity status in their impact on the world. There's no doubt in my mind that they are “good soil” people, but I'd like to introduce you to some more accessible people.

I'd like to introduce you to Pete and Shirley Hammond, who heard Jesus' word when they were in High School, and who listened and have done their best to stand under it since that time. Pete has invested most of his life in ministry to college students in the several different roles he has held as he served with the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. (At one point, Pete was my boss, and that's how our relationship began.) Over his lifetime, he has touched thousands. Shirley is a teacher, and is currently coordinator of the mentoring program for at-risk students in the Madison, WI public schools. She renders an invaluable service.

Pete and Shirley recently attended their 50th H. S. reunion, and in connection with that, wrote a book about their generation called *It was the Fifties, and....* In an appendix, they share a little of their spiritual journey, and I'd like to read a couple of paragraphs to you. (InterVarsity Marketplace, Madison, 2005; pp. 66-67)

“Religion had never been a factor in our Hammond family. Both Mom and Dad had been burned by preachers or churches in their difficult formative years. They lost no love for the church stuff. And, as a horseshow/rodeo family, the best prize money was always to be won on Sunday. So I had no involvement with faith,...

“But in the summer of 1952, between our sophomore and junior years, Shirley was invited to join classmate Donna Lee at a Christian teen camp at Delta Lake near Rome, NY. At the end of that week, she returned to inform me that Jesus understood our problems and He could help us. Basically the first true love of my life said, ‘Pete, I'm a mess. You're a mess. Jesus can help.’ Boy, this was really off my map—but I loved and trusted Shirley. Something registered as I wrestled with this new and challenging information. I knew I was a mess because I kept hurting the girl I loved. That night I accepted Shirley's invitation to consider following Jesus Christ (See I John 1:9 in the Bible). My life began to change as we entered our Junior year at school.

“I experienced forgiveness, and I loved its refreshing effect amid my personal pain and family chaos. My new faith also opened a new way of seeing life as a whole, connecting body, mind and spirit. Another long lasting result was that Shirley and I gained an extended and diverse family in church. As we became members of various congregations in our travels over the next fifty years, we enjoyed many very important friends. And, our three children have had the benefit of many spiritual aunts and uncles who gave themselves to them. Our faith has given us soul-mates for life's challenges in

jobs, sickness (like Shirley's battle with breast cancer in 1998), and our professional moves to new communities (Boston, MA; Norfolk, VA; New Orleans, LA; Atlanta, GA; Manilla, Philippines; and Madison, WI). We have the treasure of an extended family of faith that surfaces wherever we live. And years later, my mom, my sister Gayle and several of Shirley's family became serious Christians too. Shirley and I found true love and an extended family because of our faith beginning during high school..."

What *is* the Christian's key to living faithfully? Listen to the word; take your stand under it. It will transform your life.