

THE FOOTPATH

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This month's sermon series, "Sowing the Seed," is about bringing seekers to Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "The Son of Man (referring to Himself) came to seek and to save those who are lost." He had no other reason to come here. Lost people matter to God. He is not indifferent. He is not bitter. He is compelled by love to seek them until they meet with Him. To find Him is to find everlasting life.

To illustrate how much He loves us, Jesus once told a series of three brief stories (Luke 15:4-24; LB):

⁴ "If you had a hundred sheep and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it?" ⁵ And then you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders. ⁶ When you arrived you would call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you because your lost sheep was found.

⁷ "Well, in the same way heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who haven't strayed away!

⁸ "Or take another illustration: A woman has ten valuable silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and look in every corner of the house and sweep every nook and cranny until she finds it?" ⁹ And then won't she call in her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her? ¹⁰ In the same way there is joy in the presence of the angels of God when one sinner repents."

¹¹ To further illustrate the point, he told them this story: "A man had two sons. ¹² When the younger told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die!' his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there wasted all his money on parties and prostitutes. ¹⁴ About the time his money was gone a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. ¹⁶ The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the swine looked good to him. And no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough and to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger!' ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.'"

²⁰ "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming, and was filled with loving pity and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

²¹ "His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and you, and am not worthy of being called your son—'

²² "But his father [ignoring his son's speech] said to the slaves, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. And a jeweled ring for his finger; and shoes!' ²³ And kill the calf we have in the fattening pen. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has returned to life. He was lost and is found.' So the party began.

No wonder the Bible says (John 3:16-21; NLT):

¹⁶ God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

¹⁸ “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. ²⁰ All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.”

You and I are light-carriers, bringing the God-light to our family, neighbors, and friends. We reveal Him for who He is, and we tell them about what He has done in our lives. This is seed-sowing. This is why we are still here.

To be effective, we must learn to identify people’s Gospel Receptivity Level, because if we try to give them more than they are ready to receive, they will react to the truth like hogs react to pearls — failing to recognize its value, they will disregard it and trample over it, and then turn on you for not feeding them what they want.

To help us measure a person’s Gospel Receptivity Level, Jesus told another story. It is the centerpiece of all His parables, for understanding this parable is the key to understanding all the rest.

Listen carefully to it, as it was recorded by Mark (Mark 4:1-20; NLT):

¹ *Once again Jesus began teaching by the lakeshore. A very large crowd soon gathered around him, so he got into a boat. Then he sat in the boat while all the people remained on the shore. ² He taught them by telling many stories in the form of parables, such as this one:*

³ *“Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. ⁴ As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. ⁵ Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn’t have deep roots, it died. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain. ⁸ Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!”⁹ Then he said, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”*

¹⁰ *Later, when Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples and with the others who were gathered around, they asked him what the parables meant.*

¹³ *Then Jesus said to them, “If you can’t understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables? ¹⁴ The farmer plants seed by taking God’s word to others. ¹⁵ The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away. ¹⁶ The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they don’t have deep roots, they don’t last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God’s word. ¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God’s word, ¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. ²⁰ And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God’s word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!”*

“A farmer went out to plant some seed.” “The farmer plants seeds by taking God’s word to others.” As long as God keeps us here, this is what we also are to do: take God’s Word to others.

Now, you cannot carry to others what you have never picked up for yourself. That’s why we emphasize reading the Bible, especially the New Testament, on a regular basis. If you don’t let God speak to you through His Word, you will have nothing significant to share. That’s how it works. Taking God’s

Word to others is not about merely quoting Scripture verses; it is about taking His Word into your life until it becomes a part of who you are, then sharing *that* with others.

Whether you are a teacher, or a lawyer, or a businessperson, or a student; whether you are a white collar worker or a blue collar worker, or a stay-at-home mom or an unemployed dad. Whatever you are doing to earn your living, this job — the job of that farmer — is your Christian responsibility. And we want to help you to do it, and do it well.

The first thing you must recognize is what you cannot control. You cannot control the life and effectiveness of every seed (every word from God). Therefore, you must scatter them widely, to give them the greatest opportunity. Using every means available to you — whether deeds or words or emails or tweets or cards or gifts — let others know what God has done in your life and what He means to you. Don't hide your light; let it shine!

When you scatter seed in such a manner, you cannot control where every seed lands. Not all soil is the same, as Jesus' story illustrates. Some people are more receptive than others, and all people are more receptive at certain times. How can we know?

First, consider your own experience, which is the greatest lesson-book available to you. When have you been *hungry* or *thirsty* for God's words? When have you *desperately longed* to hear His voice? When have you been *most receptive* to the words He gave you?

If you recognize the life-situations that have prompted your greatest interest in what God has to say, be on the lookout for similar circumstances in the lives of others.

Isn't this why God has said (2 Corinthians 1:3-5; NLT):

³ *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. ⁴ He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. ⁵ For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.*

2 Corinthians 1:4; MSG

⁴ *God comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us.*

2 Corinthians 1:4; LB

⁴ *When others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us.*

So, let's be alert to the signals God is sending us. He prompts us to act on His behalf, to sow good seed for a fruitful harvest.

Not every seed will be received and produce a harvest, so you must keep on sowing.

Jesus said, "As [the farmer] scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it."

The footpath is a hardened surface, tamped down by the feet of many people over time. Little to nothing grows there. Water runs off its hardened surface, leaving it parched, dusty. It is impenetrable. Seeds bounce from its surface and lie on top of it, to be crushed by the feet of passersby, or snatched up by hungry birds.

The footpath is unreceptive. It represents people who are closed, unfriendly, inaccessible, unapproachable, even hostile. This is not because they have no need of God, but because their life has become encrusted with a hard shell. The relentless traffic of unresolved pain in their lives has hardened their hearts. They cannot see. They cannot hear. They feel no need. They have grown accustomed to their grief, and eventually, despair has given way to faithlessness.

Jesus explained, *The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away.*

Satan — that perpetual liar — tells them their persistent pain is just their lot in life, that life is against them, that people don't care about them, and God doesn't even know they exist. He crushes every flicker of hope; he snatches away every promise of God before it can reach their hearts.

Is there no hope for such people? Are they lost without the possibility of salvation? Only so long as the Word of God is not permitted entry.

What can make a beaten path receptive to the scattered seed again? What will it take to break up the hardened surface and create entry points for the good seed of God's Word?

Usually, the point of a plow.

God said through Jeremiah, *"Plow up the hard ground of your hearts!"*

And through Hosea, *"Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you."*

Specifically, he wrote: *"I will put Ephraim to the yoke; Judah must plow; Jacob must harrow for himself."*

These names, representing the nation of Israel (God's chosen people), signify what must be done to transform a hardened path into a fruitful garden.

Ephraim means *fruitful*, or *one to whom fruitfulness is promised*. He was the younger son of Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was lost for many years because of the jealousy of his brothers. The significance here is that the one who has been promised fruitfulness must wear the yoke.

Matthew 11:28-30; NLT

²⁸ *Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."*

It is not enough to simply have received a promise, you must still surrender to wear the yoke of Christ and engage in the work of Christ. Carrying a promise is no substitute for faithful work.

Jacob means *usurper*, one who takes what another has deserved. The (former) usurper must now harrow for himself. There is no second-hand blessing from God. You cannot get to heaven on the coattails of someone else.

John 3:7; NLT

Don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.'

You must give up relying on another's faith and find faith in God for yourself.

Judah means *praise (with uplifted hands)*. He pulls this plow, signifying that praise is the energy that breaks up hardened soil. Praise softens a hardened heart. Is it an effort? When the heart is hardened, yes. But it is the only work that penetrates the surface and pulverizes the shell.

The psalmist sang (Psalm 22:26; NLT):

All who seek the LORD will praise him.

And also (Psalm 40:1-3; NLT):

¹ *I waited patiently for the LORD to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.*

² *He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.*

*He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.*

³ *He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.*

Many will see what he has done and be amazed.

They will put their trust in the LORD.

In summary, then, to turn a hardened path into good soil for planting, you yourself must put your trust in God, get in the yoke with Christ, and pull the plow with praises.

For your own life, the exercise of praising the Lord aloud will soften your own heart. Regularly praising Him keeps the heart soft and receptive to God's Word.

For those you are trying to reach, your expressions of what God has done for you and your gratitude for His grace, appropriately offered in natural and simple conversation, are the kinds of praise that soften even the hardest of hearts.

Is your heart hard or tender toward the Lord? Does His Word find a ready resting place in your heart?

Have you committed yourself to learning to praise God more and better? Are you willing to get in the yoke with Jesus and work at it?

Turn that hardened footpath into a field ripe for sowing. Break up the fallow ground with earnest praise and worship. When you work with God, God works through you.