

LOVE IS THE AGENDA
Week 1: Sowing Seeds in Your Local Community
Pastor Otis Hall November 11-12, 2023

Good morning, Autumn Ridge Church. My name is Otis Hall. I'm one of the pastors here.

Today, I want to conduct an experiment. It is an experiment that was a large part of my life. You see, before I became a pastor, before I worked in human genetics, I worked as a plant scientist. One of my favorite projects was the study of drought resistance. What I am going to put on the screen now is a gel plate that I used with a weed called Arabidopsis growing on it. What I want you to do is take a moment to look at the seedlings on the plate and then discuss with your neighbor all the differences you observe. (count to 20) How many differences can you spot? Two, five, or ten?

When I look at this image, I notice several things. My training has taught me to observe small variations in a plant's color, root length, the number of branches each root has, or the number of leaves. All these observations helped me determine how a particular seed type would respond to different environments.

The next step is to move the seed to a greenhouse where we can control every aspect of its growth. We give each seed its own pot, and they all receive the same amount of water and nutrients to grow in a perfect environment. We continue to observe the leaves, color, and root length until we identify the seed types that produce the best yield.

We conducted this process thousands of times with different seed types and tens of thousands of plates. We had a dedicated team of hundreds of workers, and we invested billions of dollars to improve the yield from a single seed. All with the goal of creating an impact in the community by introducing the best seed types to our worldwide harvest fields.

By paying close attention to even the smallest of details, I came to the realization that this is the key to making a significant impact. Don't underestimate the power of noticing the little things - they might just be what sets you apart. It is part of what I love about Jesus. When he was with people, he noticed the details in their lives, big or small.

I also love the way Jesus can take small details about life, like planting and harvest, and connect them to aspects of life with him, those things draw us closer to him as they connect with aspects of my life and aspect of your life. That is at the center of our texts for today: Jesus noticing.

Matthew 9:35-38 ³⁵ *Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.* ³⁶ *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.* ³⁷ *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.* ³⁸ *Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*¹

When I read this text, What exactly motivated Jesus

Jesus was motivated by people. Their hurt and pain.. he had compassion for them. He healed their diseases and sicknesses, , and focused on them because they were lost, confused, and helpless.

Why did Jesus ask the disciples to pray?

Jesus asked his disciples to pray: for workers to address a lack of leadership and care. He desired leaders who would serve selflessly, regardless of people's state of being. Jesus wanted us to pray for leaders who would model themselves after him, leaders who would see people as they are, not for what they can get from them. He wanted leaders who would want *for* others, not *from* them. You know, this is the kind of church that we aspire to be - a place that serves others without any ulterior motives, **wants for you, not from you**, and sees you right where you are to help you take your next step in becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus. Jesus showed us that **leadership is a destination of discipleship** - a journey from being a follower to a leader, from being a sheep to a shepherd. This is why we need leaders who are willing to impact the lives of those around them, just like Jesus did.

So, who is it that we should be praying for? **Leaders** who want to serve people. Leaders who have a heart for people like Jesus has.

Let's hold onto this thought as we delve deeper into a story Jesus told. Jesus told many stories, some of them we have, and others I am sure weren't captured but this one was. He told these stories like this one for a reason. He told them so that they would have an impact on our lives. I am sure all of the stories Jesus told were not written down but this one was. It was impactful enough to be written down in the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This parable is one of my favorites. Plant Nerd!!

Some of you may have heard this parable before, especially if you grew up in a church, but the question is, do we simply know it, or do we truly understand it?

Matthew Chapter 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear." ²

So, what do you think is the focus of this story?

It's the seed, right? After all, it is what is scattered; it is on the path, in the rocky places, in the thorns; it is what produces the harvest. It represents the Gospel, so it is the farmer's main concern, right?! Isn't it?

Maybe If you are familiar with this story or have heard it taught before, you might believe that Jesus wants us to understand it as being about our hearts. Maybe you have felt hard-hearted, shallow, or thorny at times, and this parable leads you to question whether you have a heart that is open to

receiving the word. If so, I am glad that you are taking a moment to evaluate yourself in this way. However, I don't think that's the only message of this parable, or at least not a complete understanding of what Jesus intends to teach us.

Let's think about the farmer. As a farmer, the ultimate goal is to have a bountiful harvest, and not just any harvest, but the biggest one possible. However, if your plot of land has areas with hard soil, rocks, or thorns, it becomes a challenge to maximize your harvest. So, what steps would you take to ensure that you can still achieve the best possible yield from your land?

I have some ideas for the farmers:

Perhaps you could try backing up a dump truck full of seeds to overload the land to produce a crop

but I don't think those methods would be successful. What do you think?

Certainly not. Farmers are intentional with how and where they sow their seed. After all, it is precious. That is no different for this farmer he is scattering to maximize its yield. But not all the soil has been prepared.

As a farmer, it's essential to have high-quality soil to yield healthy crops. You would plow and prepare the soil by removing rocks and weeds and uprooting other plants if necessary. In case the land is too vast for you to manage alone, you might hire workers to help you out.

I want to share with you an aha moment in my life.

We invested billions of dollars in developing and producing seeds that can yield better crops and withstand harsh conditions. However, do you know what was the most crucial aspect of a great harvest?

The soil! Our seeds could withstand many things, but if the ground was too hard, had rocks in it, or was full of thorns, it didn't matter how well we knew the seed. The problem wasn't the seed, and the farmers knew this.

They trusted that the seed was going to do its job. What the farmer cared about and paid attention to was the soil. What I had done in the greenhouse was so important. What Ken Dose and the team do in the kingdom garden, that plot of fenced-in land you may have seen driving in this morning is so important. Because of them, it produces tons of food every year. They care for the soil. They do whatever it takes for the Harvest to be as big as it possibly can. They soften it, they water it, they weed it.

Matthew 13:18-23

Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to

someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”³⁵

When I hear this explanation, it breaks my heart. it leaves me with questions. Maybe they are questions that you have as well.

First, should we just focus on the good soil?

Jesus didn't categorize any of the soil as bad soil. Rather he emphasizes that only good soil produces a fruitful crop.

Second, if Jesus is the farmer, the seed is the word, and the soil represents our ability to receive the word. What do we do about those people who can't be fruitful? What about that cringy phrase “those people” that I just used?

For Jesus there are no “those people.” The other soils are identical in nature, but their condition and circumstances affect their ability to produce a harvest.

Third, what do we do with this?

I want us to remember how we started today.

Remember **Matthew 9:35-38**

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”⁴

Jesus always had a compassionate approach towards people. He encouraged us to pray for leaders to share the same values and perspectives as him and see people as he does. It's important that we don't just focus on the “good soil” the easy soil we always focus on the outcome Jesus wants to achieve. The farmer sowed the seed with a specific intention - to harvest everywhere. To make this happen, he requires people who are willing to work hard and get their hands dirty in the messes. To step off the path and into the hard, shallow, and thorny places.

Jesus did that, didn't he? To do that he had to ask the same questions that we should.

What were the immediate concerns that caused people to be hard?

What causes people's faith to shrivel and then walk away?

What is it that chokes out people's ability to let the word take root and produce fruit?

I bet everyone in this room and at home can think of things that cause us to harden our hearts: Feeling ignored, replaced, or forgotten. We all have times when we are so excited about something, and it doesn't happen in this building or in our community, and it causes us to have a little less faith and a little less trust. We all have been in those places where we put a little too much emphasis on personal achievements, positional power, and wealth to make us feel seen and important. Even those things that comfort us can harden our hearts against the gospel.

What is it that you see in the people around you that stops them from being open to the Word taking root?

For Jesus, it was disease, sickness, and hunger. The people all around him had immediate needs. Needs he dealt with first because the people would never see him for who he was or receive what it is he wants to give most, because of their need.

This is why I love that we partner with places like the Landing, whose whole goal is to help provide a soft place to land for people experiencing homelessness.

I know I know I can hear the questions about why we partner with social services organizations. Shouldn't we only focus on those that are Christ-centered? Anything that is Christ-centered is going to be like Jesus. He resolved people's urgent/immediate needs first. Without it, they would not have received the word. Being Christ-centered means partnering with services that remove the rocks, and remove the thorns in people's lives. It means partnering with services that help them move from hardened to soft and receptive.

Our actions are modeled after Jesus because we love people unconditionally, regardless of their state. Our hearts are filled with compassion, and **our desire is for people to receive the word, allowing it to take root in their hearts**. Everything starts with love, and Jesus was driven by compassion, and we should be as well because Compassion = Love + Action

We should be the same way. He told us to pray that workers would be sent. Pray that those workers would see people and respond to their needs. That is the Goal. We already have a perfect seed – the word. We don't need to fix it, augment it or force it into the soil.

We need to get ready to roll up our sleeves, being with, serving, and loving people. We need to invest in others so that they are open, like the good soil is open. So that they can hear and receive the word.

Think about the examples you know about Jesus: he spent time with the woman at the well. She was definitely hard soil, what did he do there? Did he shout louder at her? Did he throw scripture at her? No, he saw her!!! He entered into community with her.

I get it, though! If you are here, and you grew up in a church, you were taught that our primary role was to share our faith by giving people scripture, this may feel uncomfortable. It may feel like I am asking you to put aside everything that you know. You may feel like we talk too much about loving people and not enough about scripture. *It might feel like we are asking you to stop believing that giving people the Gospel over and over again until they say "yes to Jesus" is the answer.*

It is not that the intent of that is bad. It is good intent. Good intentions don't equal impact. And that is not exactly what Jesus is asking us to do. What Jesus is saying in this parable is workers shouldn't only

look at the seed but at the condition of the soil. More simply put, Jesus says yes, share your faith, but he wants his workers, his followers, his disciples to pull up the thorns, move the rocks, and soften the soil. To do whatever it takes short of sin to help open people's hearts to the gospel. He wants us to not just talk about it but go do it.

When you have a friend or a family member going through loss or sickness, church hurt, or depression, is quoting Bible verses at them the answer? No. If they have things in their lives that make it hard or choke out their ability to hear, will our good intentions have an impact on their lives? We don't have to shout louder; we don't have to force-feed them Scripture or what we believe thump bibles. We need to join Jesus in seeing them, in becoming a servant and becoming the workers he prayed for.

We should be asking: how can I help? Where do I go? If you are hearing this in a pedantic way, stop, stop, stop. It is not that at all.

Here it is: if you are a nurse, this is why you are a nurse: because you care about people; if you are a social worker, you do that because you care about people. If you are a doctor, you do that because you care about people. If you are a teacher, you do this because you care for people. Moms, dad, grandparents, play aunt and uncles, you do this all the time. If there is someone you care about and you recognize there's something in their life that is keeping them from progressing, you want to serve that. Go do that.... *If there is a group of people that you feel called to serve because of broken homes, or a cycle of incarceration, or a broken family structure in Honduras, go do that... Jesus, put that on your heart.* That is the word taking root in you.

Do you want to know how we close the gap between intent and impact? It is when we focus on seeing people. We spent billions of dollars on the seed only to find out all that we knew could be undermined by the condition of the soil... Focus on the soil...

What is it? What pressing needs do you have in your life that are choking out your ability to let Jesus in your heart? Whatever it is, we want to be a place to help soften the soil. Help you break up and remove the obstacles and the thorns that are stopping you from being all that God called you to be.

We want to be a church that you would say I am so grateful we're here for you. It is why we do things like small groups; it is why we give away things like financial peace for free; it is why we do things like big boxes, Angel Tree, student retreats, marriage retreats, Celebrate Recovery, and on and on because **we see you.**

If you are here and you feel like you've been walked or trampled on. Like you have been hurt. We want to be a church where you can come and heal, where you know we are not looking for anything from you. We only want to be there with you and for you. Whatever your situation, we want this place to be a place where you would discover what it is like to be soft again, to be open again, to find joy again. It would mean the world to us, to me, if you would find a place here where you feel known, connected, provided for, and protected.

I know what it is like to feel like the hard soil. To have it feel like people are judging you, pounding on you, questioning you. I know what it feels like to want to have joy and peace, but it feels like things and people continue to stomp you down. You know, what softens me is how God uses people. There are people in this church like Allan and Elann Wright, like Jann and Scott Wright, the Hendersons, the

Smiths, the Burdens, the Merrys, the Quinns, the McDonalds, the Ollilas, the Dillions, the Gauthiers, the Carlsons, the Baxters and on and on who have seen me and my family in the hard times and didn't give us just scripture but rolled up their sleeves and waded into the mess with us. This helps us continue to be open to the gospel open to the work.

I know this is true because they saw me in my hurt and pain.

That is what we want to be. The kind of people that being around or interacting with us helps other people be soft-hearted people too. This is what we are called to be.

It is what Jesus asked us to pray for: workers who will see, engage, love, and lead other people. It is so important today. If you look around at our country today, we are a thorny, rocky, hard soil kind of country right now. Depression, mental illness, drug addiction, food insecurity, sexism, racism, tribalism, fear, distrust, and misinformation all have a stranglehold on us. Who are the people who are ready to roll up their sleeves and say, "I am willing to do the work of preparing the soil so that others will be open to the truth"?

Maybe that is you today. If that resonates with you, start today. In our lobby and café are ways we have identified that you can help. We can help. We can make a difference.

In a moment, I am going to pray, and then I want you to walk out those doors into our lobby and café and engage in helping with immediate needs in our community and world.

You could help families in our community with food insecurity by helping with our 100 big boxes, you can engage with families that are struggling with wants and needs for their children by engaging with our 440+ angel tree tags. In our café, you will find missionaries and organizations that we already breaking ground, pulling up thorns, or removing rocks. You can engage with them or our new mission store, where you can support global and local partner by helping to fund items of immediate need in their ministries.

Pray with me.