

Three Reasons Your Faith May Not Be Growing Matthew 13:1-23

Today I want to talk to you about "Three Reasons Your Faith May Not Be Growing." So how can I tell if my faith is growing or not? 1. Does God seem bigger to you than He seemed a year ago? 2. Are you more patient and less irritable or fearful than you were a year ago because you believe God is in control and is working everything for your good? Is Christ more satisfying to you than He was a year ago? Have you discovered that He is better than shopping or sports or the internet or the things you used to look to for entertainment and relief? 4. Are you more consistent in praying, reading the Bible, and serving God's interests in the world than you were a year ago? If you answer yes to most of these questions, your faith is probably growing – and if so, you are the exception and not the rule in the American church. Most professing believers in this country are not growing in their faith. They're either stuck or going backwards. According to a lot of studies, there is no real difference between the way non-believers live and the way most professing Christians live. We spend our money the same way, we value the same things and we have the same rate of divorce as people who don't claim to know Christ. Many church-going folks are members of the Christian culture but not necessarily true believers with an intimate relationship with Jesus. What makes the difference? Jesus explains why some people's faith grows and others don't in His first parable in the gospel of Matthew. A parable is a simple story taken from everyday life in Israel designed to communicate deeper truths; and today we're going to look at the first parable Jesus told. Jesus told His disciples that if they couldn't understand this one, they wouldn't be able to understand any of the others, so we're going to spend our time this morning looking at it. In vs. 1-9 Jesus tells the parable; then in vs. 10-17, He explains to His disciples why He speaks in parables; and then in vs. 18-23 He explains what the parable means. We'll look at the parable and at Jesus' explanation of it; and then we'll go back and look at why Jesus taught in parables because His explanation illustrates the point of the parable so powerfully. Let's look at Jesus' first parable.

*"That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow ..." Unlike farmers today who plough and then plant, farmers in Jesus' day first scattered the seed and then plowed. "...and as he sowed, some fell beside the road, and it was trampled underfoot and the birds of the air ate it up. Some of that scattered seed falls on the paths which crisscrossed the field and it was stepped on or eaten by birds. This soil was too hard to grow anything. "Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away." (Matt. 13:5-6) Some seed falls on the thin layer of topsoil covering the limestone common in the hill country. Even though a little plant would pop up, because of the rock underneath, its roots were unable to find water and it quickly died. This soil was too shallow to grow anything. "Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out." (Matthew 13:7) Some of the seed falls into the weeds which use up all the nutrients in the soil and prevent the seeds from growing to maturity and producing grain. This soil was too crowded to grow anything. "And others fell on the good soil and *yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matt. 13:8) Some of the seed falls on cultivated ground and reproduces itself. One grain of wheat will grow into one plant which will produce between 35 and 100 additional seeds. So this is the soil that keeps the farmer in business. That's the parable and Jesus adds, "He who has ears, let him hear." (Matt. 13:9) And if you were part of that crowd, you would be asking yourself, "Hear what?" You're familiar with farming. Jesus hasn't said anything you don't already know. And you've probably traveled a long way to hear Him. If Jesus was preaching today, He might say, "It's rush hour on the freeway. Some cars get off at the first exit. Other cars get off at the second and others at the third. He who has ears, let him hear." Huh? What's He talking about? That's why Jesus disciples ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables? Why don't You just say what You want to say? We'll come back to Jesus' answer to their question in a minute because I think it will make more sense if we first look at His explanation of this parable.*

In Luke's version of His explanation Jesus says, *"Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God."* (Luke 8:11) And the different soils are the different ways people respond to what they hear. Have you ever thought about the power which resides in a single seed? A seed contains life. If you take that packet of seeds sitting on a dusty shelf in your garage and plant one, it explodes into life reproducing the plant that produced it. And that is exactly what the Word of God is. The Bible is more than an old book. It is alive because the Spirit of God uses it to reproduce the life and character of Christ in us. Paul writes in 1 Thess. 2:13, *For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.* Both Peter and James say we are born again of the Word and that we grow by the word. It is the seed which produces and nourishes new life in us. Our mind is renewed by the word, our character is transformed by the Word and our will is strengthened by the word. Paul calls the Word "the sword of the Spirit" because everything the Bible says the Spirit of God does in our lives, it also says the Word of God does in our lives; the word is the tool God uses to communicate with us and to change us. That's why Jesus uses the picture of seed to illustrate the powerful way the Word works in us. The purpose of seed is reproduction and the purpose of the Word is reproducing the life of Jesus in those who respond by faith to the Scriptures. The Bible is more than a history book. It is living and active because it is the tool the Spirit of God uses to supernaturally reproduce the life and character of Christ in us - if we'll allow it to. And how we respond to the word determines whether we have faith and whether that faith is growing; which brings us to the three reasons your faith may not be growing which are revealed in this parable: no interest, no convictions, and no priorities.

The first reason your faith may not be growing is because you're just not interested in God. You don't need Him, you're not curious about Him; and He's not even on your radar. Look at how Jesus explains the parable to His disciples in Matthew 13. *"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil {one} comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road."* (Matt. 13:18-19) Just as some of the seed fell on the road and was trampled on by travelers or eaten by birds but never penetrated the soil or germinated, so some people hear the Word and it never penetrates. They'll sit through a sermon but their mind is somewhere else. The Bible doesn't make sense or seem relevant and they've forgotten everything they heard before they get out the door. I had a friend who visited Creekside a couple of times; and because I knew he was coming, I tried extra hard to be as simple and as clear as possible when I spoke that day. But his response was "It was just God talk to me." That's the first response to the Word. No interest. The seed doesn't penetrate. There's no understanding of what we hear or read. It's just so much religious talk. And there's lots of hard soil in churches; people who come to keep family members happy or to see their friends or to make business contacts or for a thousand other reasons than to learn about Jesus. You would be amazed by the number of people in churches who have no interest in Christ. That's why their faith isn't growing. They never had faith to begin with. Here are some questions you can ask to see if you are the first kind of soil. 1. Do I feel like I need God? 2. Am I curious at all about the Bible? 3. Is there anything in my life that I really want to change and but am unable? If your answer is no and you have no interest in Jesus right now, then you're very likely the kind of person Jesus describes as the soil on the road. You may attend church regularly, you may have a lot of Christian friends and family members, but if you have no interest in or need for God, you have not been born again. The seed hasn't penetrated yet. Fortunately, this condition doesn't have to be permanent. Life has a way of breaking up hard ground and God can change our hearts; He certainly changed mine. For years, I had no interest in Christ until God in His mercy opened my eyes and my heart to the truth about Jesus. The impenetrable soil of the path illustrates one way people respond when they hear the word of God and if that's where you are today and that concerns you, pray this simple prayer. "Jesus, if You're there, show me how much I need you." Then fasten your seat belt.

Here is a second way people respond to the Scriptures, no convictions. *"The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no {firm} root in himself, but is {only} temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away."* (Matt. 13:20-21) These folks are interested in the Scriptures. They get excited - even emotional - about what they hear. *"They receive (welcome) the word with joy,"* "This is fantastic! I never understood the Bible before! I feel so good when I come to church!" There's an emotional response to the Word - but that's as deep as it goes. Just as the seed which falls on the shallow soil covering the rocks springs up for a little while and then

withers away, so these folks are excited about the Scriptures and about the Lord until temptation or suffering comes. Then they disappear. They come on strong at the beginning - "I love this church! God has changed my life! I want to help anyway I can! I want to join a Community Group, I want to sing on the worship team, I want to teach SS. This is what I've been looking for." But as soon as following Jesus becomes inconvenient or costs them something, they're gone. Their mind has never been converted. It was all feelings and once the feelings disappear, they disappear. A conviction is a belief we hold so strongly that it affects the way we live; something we believe is true whether we feel like it's true or not. And because I believe it's true, it changes the way I live. What are you so sure of that it affects the way you behave? I believe that the quality of my life is determined by the daily choices I make and that if I want to be happy, I need to make good choices. I believe that God has forgiven all of my sins because of Christ and that He calls me to forgive others just like He's forgiven me. I believe that putting God first is always to my benefit. I believe that God has joined me to Laurie permanently and death alone can separate us. Those are convictions. They are true when I feel like they are true and they are just as true when I don't; and those convictions shape the decisions I make each day. That's walking by faith rather than by sight. But in the rocky soil, no convictions are formed; just a temporary emotional response. Rocky soil folks never really believe. Enjoying being with Christians doesn't make me a Christian. Feeling emotional when we sing worship songs doesn't make me a Christian. Continuing to believe the word of God when my circumstances, my feelings and my reason argue against it is what makes me a Christian because real faith is tested faith. So here are some questions to ask to see if you might be rocky soil. 1. How has my faith been tested? Have I continued to trust God through doubts and the absence of feelings? 2. What do I refuse myself because of my faith in Jesus? 3. When have I trusted in the Lord with all my heart and not relied upon my own insight? 4. What has my faith cost me? Emotion is temporary; real faith endures. What do I do if I think I'm rocky soil? First I need to realize that my feelings don't always match what is true. We know that in everyday life. We go to work even when we don't feel like it. We're nice to our boss even when we've had it with her. Life teaches us that our emotions are real but what they tell us isn't always true. But when it comes to our spiritual life, it's easy to think that if I don't feel it, it's not real. If I don't feel God's presence, He obviously left. If I don't feel forgiven, I must not be. But faith believes the promises of God regardless of how I feel. So to develop convictions, you need to know God's promises and then when you're tempted by your circumstances not to believe a promise, you remind yourself that I walk by faith and not by sight and so this test is normal and I need to act like I believe the promise regardless of how I feel. As you do that, God will do exactly as He promised and a new conviction will be formed. This is true because God said it is true and God always keeps His promises. First believe and then you'll see. The rocky soil person needs to disentangle his emotions from his beliefs. I don't believe because I feel like it's true today. I believe because I trust what God says regardless of my emotions.

Two reasons your faith may not be growing: no interest and no convictions; here's a third, no priorities. Let's look at the third way Jesus tells us that people respond to the word. *"And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."* (Matt. 13:22) Just as the weeds choke the plant growing in the thorny soil and prevent it from getting the nutrients it needs to mature and to reproduce itself, so the distractions of worries and riches prevent these folks from getting the nutrients from the word which are essential for growth and fruitfulness; and this is the case for the majority of those who identify themselves as Christians in America. The Barna Group surveyed Americans to discover what area of their faith where they saw the most need for improvement. Nine out of ten adults say their faith is very important to them, and the majority felt pretty good about the way they worshiped, the way they treated people and the way they lived out their faith. However, the one thing people were most likely to admit they struggle with and were dissatisfied with was "knowledge of the Bible." Here, the number who described themselves as "above average" plummeted, and the number describing themselves as "average or below average" swelled. The sad fact is, most Christians in America are mal-nourished. Only 16% of born again Christians read their Bible daily. Only 32% say they read it at least once a week. Only 37% say the Bible has made a significant difference in their life. Why is Biblical illiteracy so prevalent in the American church where there are more Bibles, more technology and more information about the Bible available than anywhere else in the world or at any other time in history - worries, riches, and the pleasures of life. We don't have the time or the energy for the Bible. Our crammed schedules, our worries, our jobs, our hobbies, our recreations and technology is choking the word out. Christians through the ages have discovered that we cannot grow spiritually without space in our lives for contemplation, study and prayer; but American Christians are always looking for a quick fix to our

problems in the newest book or seminar instead of in the ancient paths of the Word of God because walking those paths takes time and effort. The American church is afflicted with Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. We are too distracted by bright, shiny things to spend the kind of time in the Scriptures require for Jesus to reproduce Himself in us and that's why most Christians in America remain stunted and unfruitful. How can I tell if I'm thorny soil? 1. What fills your thoughts? Where does your mind automatically go when you can think about whatever you want; weeds or the Word? 2. How consistent are you in reading and studying the Bible? Have you been telling yourself for years that you'll get into the Bible once you have a little more time? You can't grow a garden if you don't weed it regularly, and it is the weeds in our lives which prevent most of us from becoming the mature, powerful, effective child of God Jesus has called us to become. It's not the sin in our life that's holding us back, it's the distractions.

So this parable suggests three reasons your faith may not be growing; no interest, no convictions or no priorities: However Jesus says there is fourth response to the Word. *"And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."* (Matt 13:23) In Luke's record of this parable, Jesus describes the good soil in Luke 8:15, *"These are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance."* What makes a person good soil? First, they hear the Word in an honest and good heart. They don't just read and forget. They listen to what the Word tells them. They take it seriously. They believe it and apply it to their lives. They're not just going through the motions or mechanically reading their chapter a day and immediately forgetting what they read as soon as they close their Bible. They honestly want to know what God has to say to them. Just knowing what the Bible says won't automatically change anybody's life. Most Jewish men in Jesus' day had the entire OT memorized by the time they were 12; but that obviously didn't make them all good soil. We've all met people who could spout Bible verses and were some of the most obnoxious people we've ever met. It's the condition of the heart that makes the difference. Good soil has integrity. She believes and applies what God says. Second, good soil is persistent. She holds fast to the word. Her nose is in the Bible every day never content with what she already knows but always looking for new truths to apply, new insights to gain and new information to gather in order to know Jesus better and walk with Him more closely. Daily Bible study is as vital to our spiritual life as food, water and air is to our physical well-being. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God." You cannot be a disciple of Jesus without regular intake of the Scriptures. The Word is the sword of the Spirit. Jesus said, "The words I speak to you are spirit and life." If I divorce myself from the Word, I divorce myself from God because the word is how God speaks to me and changes me. Let me suggest one simple way you can hear the word in an honest and good heart and hold it fast. At Creekside, we encourage people to let Jesus speak to them from the Scriptures daily and then to do what He says by using the SOAP method. SOAP stands for Scripture, Observation, Application and Prayer. Scripture; choose a passage you're going to read today, usually not more than a chapter. As you read it, ask Jesus to speak to you and then notice when a particular verse, verses or paragraph gets your attention. You may not understand it. It may cause you to question something. It may just be something you really like. That's the first step. Next, observe that verse or verses. Write out why it got your attention and what you see there. Ask Jesus to give you insight and then write out an explanation of what you think the passage means. That's the observation step. Next apply what you learned. Bible study that doesn't result in obedience is a waste of time because we'll forget what we learned. So ask yourself, "If this is true, how should I live? Where do I fall short? What will I do?" Finally, write out a prayer for what you need God to do to help you put this passage into practice. The whole thing usually takes me 15-20 minutes but if you'll make this your daily practice, I guarantee you will see your faith grow and your experience of Christ and His power increase because the Bible is the way Christ speaks to us and transforms us and if I'm not making room for the Bible in my life, I'm not making room for Jesus. If my faith isn't growing, it's because I'm not in the word because Paul writes in Romans 10:17, *"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ."* Faith is our response to Christ speaking to us from the Bible which is the greatest blessing we can know in this life.

Let's go back to the part of this passage we skipped because it contains a tremendous incentive to become good soil which I had never understood before this week. Jesus just told the parable of the soils. *"And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?'"* Why don't You just say what you mean?" *Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has*

not been granted.” Did Jesus tell parables to reveal the truth or to hide the truth? Notice that neither His disciples nor the crowds understand what this parable means until Jesus explains what it means to His disciples because they were the only ones curious enough to ask Jesus for an explanation. That’s why Jesus continues, *“For whoever has, to him {more} shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”* Why did Jesus tell parables? To see what kind of soil people are. The disciples were good soil because they kept asking for more information, never content with what they knew but always wanting more. The crowds didn’t understand the parables and didn’t care. How people responded to the parables indicated what kind of soil they were. *“Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.’ But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see {it,} and to hear what you hear, and did not hear {it.}”* (Matt. 13:10-17) The parables are a form of judgment. As we saw back in chapter 12, opposition to Jesus is growing. Even though people have seen His miracles and heard His teaching, they refuse to repent; and so Jesus teaches in parables to highlight the division He’s creating within the nation of Israel. Those who follow Jesus understand the parables – because He explains them to them; those who don’t follow Him don’t care to understand. Christ reveals Himself to those who want to know Him; who keep asking questions, keep seeking and keep learning. Why are they good soil? Jesus tells His disciples, *“To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”* If you want to understand the Scriptures and have questions that you must get answered; it’s because God has granted that to you. If you can understand the bible, it’s not because you’re not smarter or more spiritual than others; it’s because God is working in you. And the fact that God enables you to understand His word is the greatest blessing He could give to you. That’s why Jesus tells His disciples *“For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see {it,} and to hear what you hear, and did not hear {it.}”* (Matt. 13:10-17) Imagine getting to heaven and meeting the Old Testament greats; sitting down with Moses and asking him questions. *“Man, I’d love to have seen what saw; the plagues on Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the glory of God leading Israel around the wilderness; I really envy you.”* But Moses would say, *“No, I envy you. You have the full revelation of God in the Scriptures. You know Jesus, God in human flesh. He actually lives inside of you. And you have access to the whole plan of God, something we did not. I wish I could have experienced what you experience.”* That’s what Jesus means here. God has blessed us with the ability to understand His word and there is no greater blessing because the word is the fountain from which all other blessings flow. That’s why being distracted from the Scriptures by the noise and pace of our culture is such a tragedy. We’re not taking advantage of the greatest gift God has given us. We’re in a position that millions of believers throughout history would give both arms to have. We have our own copy of the Scriptures in our own language with the time to read and study it. To not take advantage of this incredible gift is the height of ingratitude and short-sightedness.