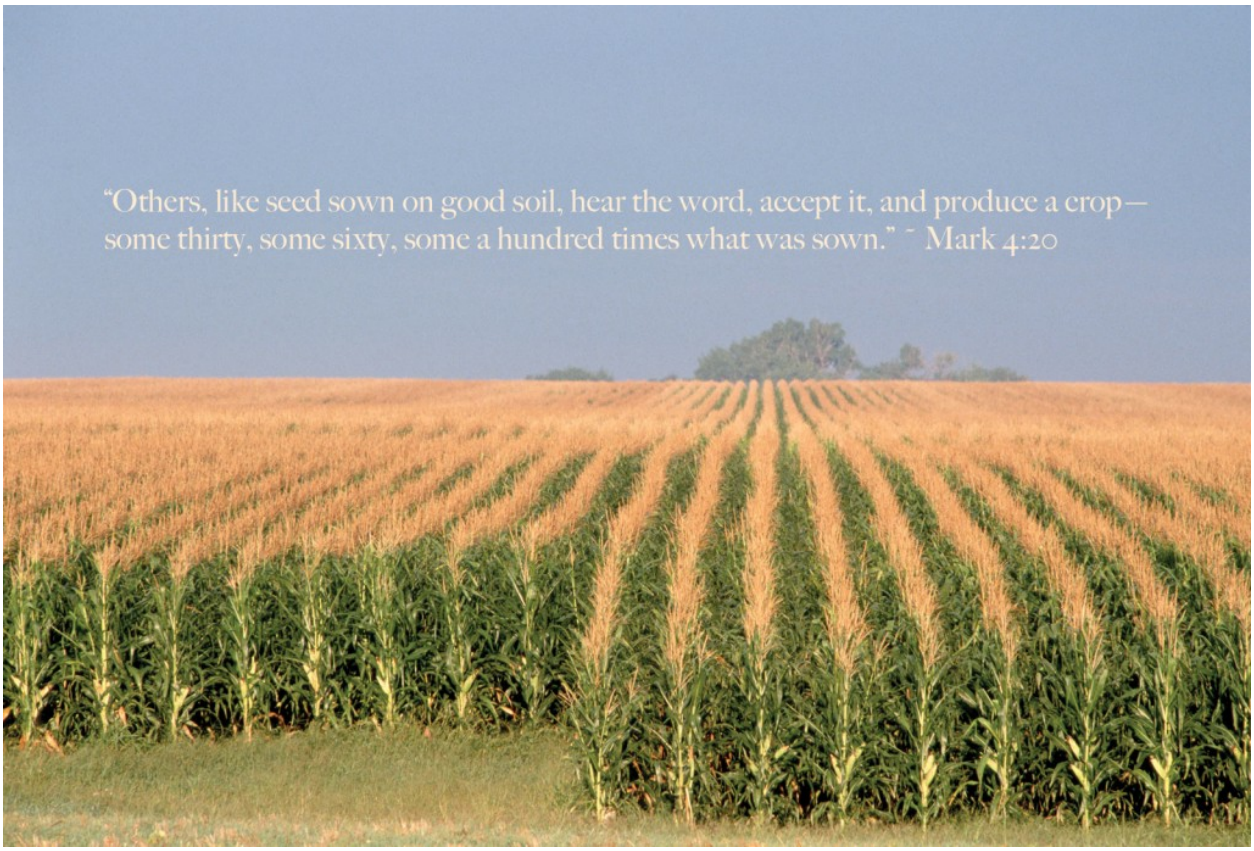


Preparing the Soil

A less painful approach to reaching out.

Crossing The Line

It's hard to share the Gospel. I will not lie to you to try to convince you that it's easy for me. In fact, I don't know very many people at all that find it easy.

It's uncomfortable and awkward.

It feels like we're crossing a line in the relationship with this person that we'll never be able to come back from. Like we're getting ready to go where no man has gone before. We're Christopher Columbus, setting sail for a land that may or may not exist - and we very well may go over the waterfall at the edge of the earth.

I'm right there with you on all of that. And that's one huge motivating factor for this idea of preparing the soil. And here's why:

I think the reason it's uncomfortable and awkward is because we don't do the work of preparing the soil. And if we are strategic about preparing the soil to be ready to receive the see of the gospel, then when it comes time to do so it will feel less daunting. When it comes time to tell someone why Jesus is so important to you or to invite them to church, you'll be ready to do it because you've been preparing the soil.

Which begs the question: "Why is Jesus so important to you?" And perhaps this follow-up: "If He isn't that important, why?" Maybe you're reading this and you've never really taken that step to surrender your life to the King of Grace.

I can tell you why it's so important to me. That's because, even under the guise of being a Christian, I made some bad choices. And just one of those choices, just one sinful decision was enough to separate me from God and send me to an eternity of separation and punishment. But, God has covered me in His grace and now sees me through the eyes of His son. And I don't have to earn my way to Him, He earned it for me.

That's awesome. In fact, awesome is an understatement. There is no word to describe just how unbelievable it is that the God of the Universe would send His one and only son to die an executionary death in my place so I could spend eternity with Him. There are simply no words that will ever suffice.

The most important relationship in your life.

When I first started dating Bekki, I told everyone about her. I told them about what an awesome woman she was and how lucky I was to be dating her. I told people that I didn't deserve to have her and that she should find someone better than me.

I loved spending time with her and buying her things when I had money to do it. Even if I didn't have the money, I'd still buy her stuff. You're stupid like that when you're in love. To this day, I'd buy her something we couldn't afford if she really wanted it. Not because she's able to get me to, but because I want to.

I still feel like I don't deserve her, and that she really could have wound up with someone a lot better than me. I don't say it enough, but I love her with all my heart.

And in the same way, we allow ourselves to stop talking about how amazing God is and how amazing His grace is.

We're super excited at the beginning and we can't believe all that we have received. But, over time, we slip back into religion and trying to earn God's favor and start to see God as this person that demands things of us that we don't want to give. The excitement wears down. The passion dies off. And we don't talk about it anymore.

But, if it's the most important relationship in our lives - not just this life, but our eternal lives - why don't we talk about it more? Why aren't we more excited to tell others about it? If we really believe it, and we believe what this relationship is saving us from and sending us to, don't we want everyone in the world to know about it?

I do. And that's why I do what I do.

And I hope the ideas in here will help you start doing the same. I'm not trying to get you to be a Bible thumper or a sign holder. I just want us all to do what Jesus did - care for people in a real way. And through that caring, prepare the soil so when they encounter Jesus Christ, they are ready to receive Him.

Introduction

As you may have heard, we have a goal in front of us. As I write this post, there are 79 days left until that day is upon us. What is that day? April 20th.

What is so important about that day? Of utmost importance is – that day is Easter. And Easter is a huge day for us a followers of Jesus Christ. If it weren't for Easter, we wouldn't be following Him. In fact, we wouldn't even be here today as a church. Easter is the sole reason our faith exists. And that's because it was on Easter that Jesus rose from the dead. On Easter, Jesus conquered death, hell and the grave.

And it's because of easter that we have new life. This is precisely what we celebrate when we people get baptized – new life. We have new life because Jesus now holds the keys of life. When we start to follow Jesus Christ, when we turn from our sins and put our faith in Him as our Savior, He gives us a new life. And we get to spend the rest of our lives learning what it means to walk in this new life.

And yes, I meant to say "get to." As frustrating as it may be at times, walking in life is much more rewarding than walking in death. As hard as it may be to let the old way of living go, this new life is a real blessing. (Maybe that's you right now. Maybe you're feeling as though you're not able to let the old life go. Let me encourage you that the struggle is good. If you no longer struggle with it, you're either dead or you've arrived as a perfect Christ-follower. And if you've arrived as a perfect Christ-follower, you're dead.)

So, this year Easter is on 4/20. And we have a dream of reaching 420 people on our Easter Services that day. However, it's not just a dream of having a bunch of people show up for one Sunday and then going home to go about their lives. The only thing that would accomplish is to see if our floor joists of our building can hold that many people.

And I'm not all that worried about that.

That brings me to my point. Our aim for this time of year is 420 on 4/20 by 4:20. The last 4:20 is super important. It's the only way we will have a day that changes people's lives. This 4:20 refers to Mark 4:20 which is the end of the parable of the sower in Mark's telling of the Gospel.

> *“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”*

That’s the end of the story though, the beginning goes something like this (This is the Ohio-boy paraphrase):

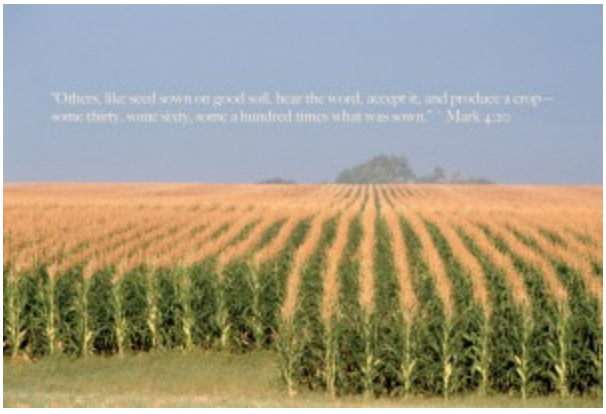
> There was a farmer who was going out to plant some corn. The sack of seed he had was overflowing. As he was headed out to the field to plant the corn, some of the seeds fell out. Some of it fell on the path. Some more of the corn seed fell alongside the path in the gravel. A little further down the path just by the creek were some blackberry bushes. Some of the seed fell in there too. Finally, the Ohio boy got to the field where he was going to plant the corn, where the soil had been tilled and fertilized. And there he planted the seeds of corn. So, the Ohio boy went home, and on the way home he noticed that the corn that had fallen on the path had already been eaten by the birds or some other animal.
>
> A few days later, the Ohio boy went back to check on his corn. He knew it was too early for the corn to start coming up, but wanted to check anyway, just in case the birds started trying to dig it up. As he was walking down the path, he noticed that the corn seed that had fallen in the rocks had already sprouted and was starting to grow. When he got to the blackberry bushes, he noticed nothing. When he got to the field – there was still nothing. So, he went home.
>
> A couple of weeks passed and the Ohio boy knew it was time to check on the corn. As he walked down the path, he noticed the corn that had sprouted up in the rocks had already wilted, withered and died. “Good thing I didn’t plant seed there on purpose!” He thought to himself. When he got to blackberry bushes, he noticed the corn had come up right in the middle of all those thorns. “It’ll be hard to pick that corn” he said. Finally, he came to the field and noticed row after row after row of corn sprouting and growing. Just as he had planned all along.
>
> Throughout the course of the growing season, the Ohio-boy watered the corn and pulled up the weeds that tried to grow in the rows. And by the time the growing season came to a close, the Ohio-boy was going to have a nice full crop of corn. He noticed that some of the corn that had sprouted up in the blackberries had died off because the blackberry bushes had sucked up all the nutrients. And the plants that were left looked pretty sad and pathetic.

But the corn in the field, was full of life. Some of the plants only produced one ear of corn. Others two, and a few had three or four. For some reason, there was still corn that never sprouted. There were seeds that never grew. He didn't understand this, but was thankful for the rest that did.

As the Ohio-boy thought about it, he realized the obvious – the seeds planted in the soil that was prepared to receive the seed were the plants that grew up to produce the most corn. The seeds planted in the blackberries, produced a minimal amount of corn. And the others just died.

And since the Ohio-boy is also a pastor, he realized that the seed of the Word that God is planting in people's hearts are just like that seed. The seeds dropped along the path, the ground least prepared to receive the seed, do nothing but feed the predators. The shallow soil mixed among the gravel, grew a plant, but since the soil was shallow, the plant died very quickly. Just like someone who responds quickly to the word of the gospel, but has no one around them to help them prepare the soil to truly receive the seed.

He also realized that when seeds are planted among those who aren't ready to choose between the ways of the world and the ways of the Kingdom of God, the world chokes out the amount of life that seed was capable of producing – if it makes it at all. But the seed that was planted in the soil that was tilled and fertilized was the seed the grew and produced fruit. And so it is with people. When people's lives are prepared to receive the seed of the word of God, they are much more likely to grow and produce more fruit. 30, 60 or even a 100 times as much as was planted.



If 4/20 is going to be a date that God uses to plant a lot of seeds that can grow into fully devoted followers of Christ, we have to do the work of preparing the soil in people's lives before that day arrives.

It will not be enough for us to simply invite our 8 to 15 (See 8 to 15 section at the end if you don't know what 8 to 15 means.) to that service. The likely result of that will be one of the first three kinds of soil.

What we must do, is intentionally invest in our relationships with our 8 to 15. We must live our lives of grace in front of and alongside those 8 to 15 people God has put in our lives. And as they see Jesus in us, as they see God at work in us, as they experience grace from us, we will be preparing the soil for them to receive the word of God.

We do this through genuinely caring for them as people made in the image of God. We do this by meeting their physical and tangible needs, by befriending them, by loving them unconditionally. We do this by serving them and caring for them and being there for them. And as we do this, as we love them as Christ loves them and gave His life for them, we will be tilling the soil and fertilizing the soil and getting it ready to receive the seed of God's word that will be planted in them on 4/20.

Can you imagine what would happen if we all did this? And if we were all able to get 3-4 members of our 8 to 15 to show up that Sunday, we would have over 420 people there that Sunday to hear about Jesus. Wouldn't that be awesome?!

Recently, we celebrated 5 people being baptized and witnessed as they let the world know that they are fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. On that day we also had 109 people in attendance. 109 multiplied by 4 is 436. That's more than 420.

Will you focus on investing in a relationship with 4 people for the next several weeks, and then inviting them to come on Easter?

You might be the very person God has had in mind for all of time to reach them for His Kingdom. Why not join Him in this mission? You won't regret it!

Practical Tips:

- List them by name (we have 8 to 15 cards at church to help you do this)
- Pray for them daily by name.
- As you pray, expect God to create opportunities for you to invest in your relationship with them.
- As you invest in that relationship and continue to pray for them, expect God to create opportunities for you to invite them to church.

"Heavenly Father, would you send your Spirit to open the eyes of _____'s heart. Help them to be able to see You! Use me to draw them to your Son, Jesus and make them Kingdom Warriors.."

Soil Type #1 – The Path

So, let's really look into the passage of Mark 4:20. It's the idea that really brought the whole 420 thing together for us as a church. Up until that point, 420 was just a goal, but adding Mark 4:20 to the mix made this a core value for us.

That's why we're talking about it so much and pushing it so hard. Not because we want to attain a goal, but because we want to develop a culture where we are intentional about preparing the soil so the seed of the gospel can be planted with the highest probability of success.

As we looked at the story in the Ohioboy Paraphrase, we saw that it was more about the soil the seed was planted into than the seed itself that determined whether or not the seed grew and produced fruit. Where the seed was able to germinate, it did. The long-term success had to do with the soil and not the seed.

So, I want to point out some of the differences of the soil. And that's where we start with the first type of soil - The Path.

"But that's not soil!" you may say. Well, in those days, it may have been stone or soil. But, for our purposes, let's just assume that it was a dirt path that had been packed down after years and years of walking.

I don't know how much you know about gardening, but packed soil isn't very conducive to growing and sustaining plant-life. Like the birds came along and ate the seed that fell on the path, packed soil doesn't receive the seed. The seed just sits on the surface of the soil. It will not germinate.

How does this translate to people?

Well, you may have members of your 8 to 15 who are very hardened against the ideas of church and Jesus and anything related to them. Maybe they've been wounded by the church or Christians or they were raised in a different faith or there was something that slammed the door shut to the idea.

So, how do you work the soil in these kinds of relationships? What do we do when we have people in our lives who have very hard hearts toward Jesus?

First, we must recognize the difficulty of the situation.

When you're working up very hard soil, it takes a lot of work to get it to the point that it can even be tilled up. The farmer in Jesus' day would use a plow being pulled by Oxen to break up the soil. A backyard gardener would spade up the soil to break it up. The hardness of the soil has to be broken before the the soil can be worked up. Don't miss that. Before the soil can be prepared, the hardness of the soil has to be broken.

It would be foolish to think that we can just step into the hard soil, share the Gospel and expect anything to happen. It's going to be more challenging than that, and we need to plan accordingly.

Second, we must recognize the longer time frame.

When you're working very hard soil, it's going to take longer to prepare the soil. It may take several steps to get the soil soft enough to plant anything. And even then, it may require more work after the fact through things like fertilizer and aeration.

The same is true for a heart that has been hardened, in all likelihood it will be a longer process. Sometimes, life will have done the breaking, and you will just be able to come in and till the soil. But, chances are there will be some hard work to be done.

Third, commit to the relationship in spite of the setbacks.

When you "spade up" hard-packed soil, it doesn't take much for that hard work to be undone. All it takes is for someone to come by, stomp the soil down – follow that with a little rain and then dry it out with some sun, and you'll hardly be able to tell the soil was ever broken.

One of the only ways we will be able to break up the hard-packed soil is through a genuine relationship. People must know that we are committed to them and that we care about them deeply. There will be challenges to this. There will be times when the relationship gets strained and we will be tempted to run. But, we have to stay in and be committed for the long haul – otherwise, we will have just made the soil all the more firm, we will have stomped the broken soil back to the ground.

This takes time (per the second step) to build an actual, trusting relationship. So, not only do we stick with them through the setbacks, we stick with them through the long course of time needed to build the relationship. I've heard of people working in this situation taking 10+ years to finally get to the point of planting the seed of the gospel.

Other times, God has been at work behind the scenes and all we have to do is dig a little to find the soil is pretty loose underneath.

Fourth, ask questions that cause the person to think about what they believe.

This is a pretty specific one, but it's a great tactic. People often hold strong points of view without knowing why they hold them. And this doesn't just go for people who aren't Christ Followers. There are a lot of Christ Followers who hold beliefs and have no idea why. Asking questions is a great way to dig up those false beliefs. You may be surprised to find that what looked like a mighty oak, was only a tree branch packed in hard soil.

What I would suggest would be two things I shared from Ravi Zacharias a few weeks ago. Ravi is an apologist, which means he is often working in the soil of very hardened hearts. He go to Universities and shares the Gospel with students who are very far from God, seeking to defend the Gospel.

He says:
"So many times we will see that Jesus questions the questioner so that the questioner will be forced to open up within his or her assumptions."

Then he says this:
"Intent is before Content. Because to give truth to him who loves it not is to only give him more multiplied reasons for misinterpretation."

If the soil hasn't been broken and tilled, it's the equivalent of spreading seed along the path. If the person isn't ready to hear the truth, all you're doing is giving them more things to misinterpret, more reasons not to believe. It isn't until the soil of the heart has been tilled and they are ready to really receive the truth that the seed of the gospel will be able to grow.

But, when the heart recognizes Jesus and allows Him in, everything changes…literally.

Practical Tips:

- Spend time building the relationship with person. And don't allow the status of the relationship to be based on their progress. Be committed to loving them unconditionally, just as God loved us before we deserved it. (Romans 5:8)
- Don't break up too much soil at one time. When you're digging in the soil of the

heart, you must be careful not to go overboard with your digging. When you sense you have struck a nerve and they are starting to respond defensively, back down. Give them time to think about whatever it was. Talk about something else.

- Care for them in ways they're not used to being cared for. Often, those who have the hardest hearts are those who have been the most neglected. Their hardness is for their own protection. By caring for them in ways they've never been cared for, you will be building a true and trusting relationship with them.
- Stand up for them, and fight for them. Just like the soil of the path is packed down because of people walking on it, the soil of a hardened heart can be packed down because they have been walked on. Stand up for them, fight for them. Keep people from walking on them and help them to see how that has happened.
- Be vulnerable with them. Share with them from your own journey of being broken to be ready to receive Christ. Don't pretend to have it all together. Be real.

Soil Type #2 – The Rocks

Now, let's take a look at the second soil mentioned in that parable, the rocky soil.

"Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root." (Mark 4:5-6)

"Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 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." (Mark 4:16-17)

There are parts of the world that have very rocky soil. Where we live, the soil has some rocks in it, mostly river rock, but it is still pretty workable. But there are other places, like in the high desert on the east side of the Cascade Mountains where the soil is full of rocks. It makes for very difficult farming – which is why you see a lot of livestock farming and not a lot of produce farming.

But there are places where farmers have been careful to dig up as many rocks as they come across. They stack them in piles and make fences out of them. They put them in boxes and pretty much anywhere they can to get them out of the way of the farming they hope to accomplish.

The point is, they have to do the work of removing the rocks in order to be able to work the ground there. I don't know if you've ever tilled a garden and hit a rock, but even a small rock can rock and rattle the tiller. Add if you're in a lot of rocks, and you're going to have a hard time. You have to get rid of the rocks.

How is this important in terms of sharing the gospel? As we've mentioned, we want to do the necessary work to prepare the soil to receive the seed of the gospel. We want to give that seed the best opportunity to grow into a fruit-producing plant. Rocky soil is another hindrance to a seed growing into a fruit producing plant.

So we have to do the hard work of digging up the rocks and moving them aside so we can work the soil.

A couple notes for us as believers:

The Importance of a Root System.

The reason the plant in the parable withered and died was because the roots didn't go deep into the soil where they could draw out water and nutrients. So when the heat of life came along, when trials and tribulation come along, the root system isn't deep enough to sustain the plant.

The Importance of Water.

Just as the roots need to be deep to be able to pull nutrients out of the water, they need to go deep to be able to pull water out of the soil as well. This is one reason many farmers grow Alfalfa. The roots of an alfalfa plant can go as deep as 50 feet into the ground. So, when the weather is hot and it hasn't rained in weeks, the alfalfa can still pull water up from the ground to sustain life.

If our roots don't go deep we won't receive the proper nutrients or water to sustain the life we've been called to. This is why it's important to be near the water source – Jesus himself – our living water. (John 4)

We also need to immerse ourselves in nourishment from God and His word. If we don't have the nutrients we need, our roots won't go very deep.

Back to the idea of preparing the soil...

As you build relationships with members of your 8 to 15, look for rocks in the soil. Look for those things that are going to keep them from being able to put down deep roots.

That could be anything from bad relationships to bad habits. They could have an unhealthy relationship with a "friend" who is going to serve as a rock in their soil. That rock could be the thing that keeps them growing to a life-sustaining depth. Maybe they have an addiction they struggle with. And no matter how deeply they desire to follow Christ, unless they also work at overcoming the addiction (with the added power of the Holy Spirit) that will be a rock that threatens the longevity of their life.

There are many other rocks that get in the way too: Commercialism and the desire to keep up with the world around them can serve as a rock. Pride and ego and the faulty belief that they are able to be all they need to be in and of themselves can be a rock. A misunderstanding of truth and believing the myth that truth is relative and you can't

truly know anything for sure – this is a big rock.
How do you deal with these? Often times, you have to deal with them one at a time. As they come up and you uncover the rocks, you have to start to dig it up. The bigger the rock, the more work it takes to dig around the rock to get it out of the soil. And when you get the rock out of the ground it leaves a big hole that the person can often misinterpret as emptiness and loss. It isn't until you work the hard soil around and underneath that rock, and plant the seed of the gospel and they start to see that new growth that they will really be able to see a better future for themselves. So it is imperative that you continue on through the whole process.

One Last Thought...

Should we not scatter the seed of the gospel in places that aren't ready for it? The parable doesn't teach that. The parable says, as he (the farmer) was scattering his seed, some fell on the path, in the rocky places and among the thorns. The farmer was seeding a field, but some of the seed went beyond where the soil was ready to be planted. He threw the seed anyway.

To me, this brings up the idea that the farmer had so much to share, that he inadvertently spread the seed outside the boundaries of where he had planned on doing it. I think this will happen with us as we really begin to go down this road individually. As we are living the life God has called us to live, as we are living the light of God's love in a dark world, there will be more and more crossover that people in our lives experience from us.

Practical Tips:

- When you discover a rock, take your time in digging it up. Rocks, just like icebergs can be deceiving. From the surface they don't look that big, but there's a lot buried that we can't see.
- Try not to plant the seed of the gospel until you're fairly certain it's being planted into dirt. That doesn't mean to not be the living gospel, it just means don't cram it down their throats if they're not ready yet. Be patient.
- Use the same process to unearth assumptions about their rocks. They may be clinging to a rock and not know why. So ask questions.
- If the rock is bigger than you can deal with, help them find resources to deal with it. For example, if there is an addiction that will keep the seed of the gospel from being planted, help them deal with the addiction. Not that they need to get perfect first. Not at all. Just that they need to be in a place to really hear the message of Jesus Christ.

Soil Type #3– The Thorns

The first soil was the path, and we talked about the amount of work it takes to work that soil up. Then we talked about the rocky soil, and what needs to be done to that soil. Now we're looking at the thorny, weedy soil.

"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain." – Mark 4:7

When we bought our house, there was a fenced off section in the corner that I think used to be a dog run. I think that based on the holes that had been dug under parts of the fence. But, when we moved in, that area was overgrown with blackberry vines. There were some dandelions in there as well, but it was mostly blackberries. It was an unusable part of the yard for us, because it was so covered in blackberry vines that you couldn't even get in there.

So, I had to go through the work of pulling the vines up by hand. I spent hours pulling up vines. And got pricked quite a few times. It was hard work. But, now we have use of that part of the yard.

During the process, I also discovered a little oak tree that was struggling to survive within the blackberries. It was only about 5 inches tall. It was most likely planted there by a squirrel – who dug up the soil and buried the acorn there – tilling the small section of soil where he planted the seed.

Since I come from the land of Oak trees, (the town our church was in was called Oak Hill), I decided it would be nice to leave the tree. And, now after a couple of years, it is actually starting to look like a tree. It probably wouldn't have amounted to much if I hadn't pulled out the blackberries. But now, it has a chance to survive.

"Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful." Mark 4:18-19

The more I read this passage, the more principles I pull from it for us as a church. While this is a parable about the soil in which the Gospel is planted, it's also about the work that is done in the life of the believer as the seed of the gospel grows into a plant in us.

From what I can tell, that's what this part of the parable is talking about. Jesus is talking about the seed that falls among the thorns. They hear the word, but worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other worldly things (the thorns) choke the work so the plant doesn't produce any fruit. The seed of the gospel does take root and grows into a plant, but it doesn't produce fruit.

What's the solution?

There are two that I see. The **first** is to pull the weeds before we plant anything in the soil. If you till up a dandelion root, do you know what happens? All the chunks that you broke up while tilling grow into new dandelions. If you pull up the dandelion, that doesn't happen. Which is easier, pulling up one dandelion or a hundred?

Since I was the weird kid who liked to garden, I was also the weird kid that observed other people's gardens in town. There were some that amazed me. The ones that were perfectly kept with perfect rows and big plants - and lots of fruit. The others that amazed me were the ones that people would work up the soil, plant the seeds and then just let the weeds grow in the plants. The crops would never do well. All that work was for nothing. What was the point?!

Don't get me wrong, I absolutely hated weeding as a kid. I still don't like it all that much. But, if you're going to the work to plant a garden, don't you want the fruit of the garden to eat?

This is the **second** thing I see. If we are going to go to the trouble of working the soil and planting the garden, once the seed of the gospel is planted in someone and we see it take root, we have to keep the weeds out so they can grow into a fruit producing plant. We have to protect and fight for the life of the new plant. They're not ready to do that on their own.

There are so many ideas and philosophies floating around the world today. It doesn't take much to find weeds of the world growing up around you. This is true for all believers, and especially for new believers. We need to be involved in discipling new believers so we can help them identify the weeds as they start to grow and then to pull them up while they're easy to get out of the ground. There are many deceitful weeds that can come along and choke out the seed of the gospel. We have to be diligent at removing the weeds as they come along, or the seed that grew up will never produce fruit.

What about your weeds?
This is also a good reminder to check for weeds we've let grow into our own lives. Are there things of this world that are choking out the Gospel in our us? Perhaps the biggest weed of all is ourselves. Are we letting our selfishness and selfish agendas trump the Gospel? Our own self could be the thing that is keeping the Gospel from producing fruit. And until we get out of our own way, we'll never see God do much in our lives. The Gospel is about submission and humility. Until we submit to it and walk humbly with our God, the Gospel will never really take root in our lives.

Start by pulling up the weeds. Maintain the plant by keeping the garden free of weeds so it can produce fruit.

Practical Tips:

- Before you plant, it's better to get rid of as many weeds as possible. Observe their life to look for things that might be in their life that could keep them from seeing the goodness of God. When you see something, do some research or ask someone for godly insight into that weed so you have input. As you observe, be careful not to speak into their lives about that topic if they haven't given you permission. But, if they ask what you think about it, then give them your Christ-minded answer.
- Often, the roots of weeds go deep. Take dandelions for example. In the summer, when the grass turns brown because of lack of water, they stay green and reproduce. So, it may take time to really dig to the bottom of the matter.
- Weeds also exist in peoples lives (including our own) because they are enticing. Which makes it more difficult to remove them. We have weeds in our own lives that we still haven't gotten rid of. It's because we like the weed. Chances are, they like theirs too. Proceed with caution.
- Point out your own weeds. Look for chances to point out that you have this thing that you know you shouldn't do, but you just can't seem to beat it or give it up. This will give you credibility. Especially if they have the same weed.
- When the seed is planted, you will still have to stay on top of keeping the weeds out. If you don't keep the weeds under control, the plant that grows up can still be choked out by the world. So, stay involved in their life and help them grow and establish their new life in Christ.

Soil Type #4- The Good Soil

This is the fun part to write about! In fact, this is the section that contains the dream for 420. This is what I'm hoping for our church. This is what I am dreaming will happen at SixEight church in just a few short weeks. In fact, from when I'm writing this post, it's only 53 days away. It will be here before you know it!

But more than for now. I really desire this to become the way we do things. I hope this method of preparing the soil will become a part of our DNA as a church. I see this as something that has potential to change our effectiveness in reaching the world. This has to be a part of our culture as a church.

Here we have the ideal conditions. These aren't conditions that we have stumbled upon by accident. These are conditions that have been intentionally prepared. There have been many hours of work and labor that have gone into getting the soil to this point.

I don't know how familiar you are with gardening and what it entails, but as you know, I am a fan of it and have spent a fair amount of time doing it. By far, the hardest part of gardening is getting the soil ready. You see, there is this thing called gravity, and over time it compresses the soil down into a hard and packed state. The only way to get the soil ready to grow something is to do the work of breaking up and working up the soil.

It's a lot easier today than it was in Jesus' day, but even with all our advances in technology, it is still work. It still requires time and intentionality. A farmer must still think about what needs to be done, and then spend time implementing the plan.

> *"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." (Mark 4:8)*

This is absolutely true for us as well. If we're going to see something grow, we have to make sure the soil is ready to receive the seed. Listen to how Jesus explains the reward of prepared soil.

> *"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown." (Mark*

4:20)

30, 60 or even 100 times what was sown. That's some pretty good math right there! That's an amazing return on investment.
Imagine I tell you that if you give me one dollar, in a few months time you'll have 30, 60 or 100 dollars. Wouldn't you give me your one dollar? Sure you would.

The amazing thing is, this isn't a scheme. I'm not trying to get a dime from you. Instead, what I'm trying to get us all to do is to be intentional about preparing the soil of our 8 to 15 so they are ready to hear from God when He wants to plant to seed of the gospel in their heart.

Exactly how do we do that?
Well, I think it's much in the same way as preparing the soil. Time and intentionality.

Time
We need to understand that it takes time to prepare people to receive something from God. As Paul reminds us: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Cor. 4:4) And he goes on to talk about how we are souls living in fragile, human vessels. And as we experience hardships in this life, we have the opportunity to let the light of the gospel shine through us. Creating in us something far greater than the package of our bodies implies.

As we build relationships with those who need Jesus, we need to let them see Jesus shine through the hardships of this life. As they see us respond with the mind of Christ, they will be drawn in to want to know if Christ can do the same thing through their trials.

Don't begrudge the trials of this life. God uses them to mold us and shape us into who He wants us to be. Are they fun? No. But God definitely uses them to help us put down deep roots in our own lives.

Over time, God will also prune things out of our lives so that we can produce more fruit. This usually isn't a fun process. And it feels painful and even spiteful at the time. But the goal is to produce fruit. As God prunes us in the presence of unbelievers and they see the resulting fruit, that will be something that testifies to the gospel in us.

Intentionality

This doesn't happen haphazardly. We have to intentionally spend time with those who need Christ and build a legitimate friendship with them. We need to genuinely care for and love them. We need to walk with them through their trials and be a support for them. And we need to let the light of the gospel shine through us into their lives. All this takes time. But not just time, intentional time together.

Notice I didn't say to learn the four spiritual laws and beat them in the face with the Bible. Doing the simplest things can be powerfully evangelistic. Helping your neighbor take out the trash, or dig a ditch. Help them build a deck or tell them their garage door is open late at night and you don't want anything to get stolen. Help them rake their leaves or mow their lawn. If they offer, help them with plumbing or electrical work – or pay for someone to come do it for them. Care for them in the most practical ways. If you work with them at your job, help them with their projects. Stay late to help them finish something up. Find out what kind of coffee they drink and buy it for them. Take them out for lunch. (If you want more advice on how to reach out at work,read this article.)

The Dream

Corn is a fun thing to grow. Because it grows so fast and produces a good crop. I've even heard it said that you can hear corn grow, because it's growing so fast. Going to college in Indiana, I spent a lot of time driving through farm country. And I loved looking down the rows from the road and watching them pass by. But looking at the fields of corn, there is a large and plentiful crop just waiting to be harvested. For each seed planted, there are at least 100 seeds on each ear of corn.

Wouldn't it be amazing if our church could produce fruit of people coming to Jesus in the same quantities as a field of corn? How about even just one row of corn? If there were 1,000 corn plants in a row and each plant had two ears of corn that produced 100 seeds, that would be 200,000 seeds.

What about us? We're running about 100 right now as a church. What if each of us produced 100 times what was planted into us? That would be 10,000. If we produced 30 times, that would be 3,000. If 60 times, that would be 6,000. Wouldn't that be an awesome thing to be a part of?!?!

But How?
"That's such a huge number! How could we ever achieve something like that?" First off – we wouldn't – it would be God through us that would accomplish this. But, seriously, how would this happen? Do you want the answer? Do you really want it?
One Seed At A Time.
Just like when I plant corn, or beans, or cucumbers – I plant them one seed at a time. Can you imagine if we all just started working on preparing the soil for one seed right now?

What if we spent the next 7 weeks focusing on preparing the soil for one seed? If we all did that faithfully, that's the potential of 100 people coming to Christ! That's a stinkin' miracle! And it's something I want to be a part of! Desperately. It has been a passion of mine to be a part of something like that my whole life – to be a part of a church that is growing the same way the early church did. And that's a goal of ours, to see people added to our number daily.

Don't you want to be a part of something like that too? Don't you want to be a part of something that is bigger than yourself? I think you do. And that's exactly what this is – we are joining forces with the creator of the universe and literally doing something much bigger than any of us.

I want to be a part of that. I long to see our church be that church that is reaching people in that way.

But it doesn't come as a result of one person reaching hundreds of people. It comes as a result of hundreds of people reaching their one or two or 8 to 15.
Will you join us in this? Will you begin working now, this day, to prepare the soil so that when the seed of the gospel is planted in their hearts – it takes root and grows deep enough to produce 30, 60 or 100 times what was planted.

I have my list. Do you have yours?

Practical Tips:

- Identify your 8 to 15 people God has already put in your life. (For more information see the section - 8 to 15)
- Pray for them by name and expect God to create opportunities for you to invest your relationship with them. Then when the time is right, invite them to church, or share your story with them.
- Be real and as vulnerable you can. Show them your weakness and how Christ covers

them in grace.

- Do practical things like mentioned in the intentionality section. Help them live their lives better and be there for them when they need help.
- Care for them as people, love them as they are. Don’t see them as a target.

The Ultimate Soil Preparation

Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly.

One of the reasons we want to be making disciples who Do Justice, Love Mercy and Walk Humbly is because we think that's one of the best ways to prepare the soil is to do these things.

This is why we do things as a church like the Food Pantry and Laundry Love. We want to care for people and meet their needs in any way we can. Our hope in doing this is that we will be Christ to them and they will see Christ in us. And that they will be drawn to Christ through us.

This is also a lifestyle we need to adapt on a personal level. We need to develop a life of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly. At home, at work in our neighborhoods - everywhere.

Why do we do what we do?

It's not just because this verse and others in the Bible tell us to do this. Though, that is a part of it.

But, the bottom line is this - we are all messed up people who have made more mistakes than we can count. And if we were dependent on our own goodness to save us, we would be sunk. We cannot fulfill the demands of righteousness that God would expect of us if it were up to our abilities. There is not one of us who could live a perfect life.

And since God has shown us such great mercy, we do justice. Not to earn something, but because we realize that if there wasn't someone fighting for us, we would have nothing to fight for. We do justice because Christ died for us on the cross and justified us. And the greatest injustice of all is having a Savior, but not knowing He exists. We do justice to make His great name known. We do justice because all people are made in God's image, and being an image bearer of God, they have dignity - no matter the wrongs they've done, the mistakes they've made, the sins they've

committed or how they've been treated.

Because God is rich in His mercy toward us, and does not punish us as our sins deserve. Because of his compassion, we love mercy. Not just for ourselves, but for everyone made in God's image. We are so full of mercy, that we seek to be merciful in all opportunities.

As we read in Psalm 103:8:

> *8 The Lord is compassionate and gracious,*
>
> *slow to anger, abounding in love.*
>
> *9 He will not always accuse,*
>
> *nor will he harbor his anger forever;*
>
> *10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve*
>
> *or repay us according to our iniquities.*
>
> *11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,*
>
> *so great is his love for those who fear him;*
>
> *12 as far as the east is from the west,*
>
> *so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

Because we have made too many mistakes to count and have done nothing on our own to deserve the grace in which we walk, we walk humbly. There is no one among us who hasn't made mistakes. There is no one who is proud of every decision they've made. I have made many mistakes in my life. And I, like you, would love to go back and fix them. But, God doesn't see me as the one who has made too many mistakes to count. Because I have put my faith in Jesus Christ, and I believe that He

paid the price for my sins, God sees me through the life of his perfect, blameless son. And it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me (Gal. 2:20). So, I know I have nothing to be proud of in terms of my own accomplishments, but for the Grace of God I am a sinner condemned to death - but in Jesus Christ I have everything I need.

I hope you remember just how amazing this grace is that we experience. I hope when you see this verse you don't see a list of things to be done, but you see a lifestyle to be lived. Not one of external motivations, but one of a deep *internal* motivation to Do Justice, Love Mercy and Walk Humbly.

Matthew 20:25-28

> *25 Jesus called them together and said,“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

8 to 15

If you've been coming to church for very long at SixEight, then you've heard a couple of other numbers thrown around that you may not understand either.

As you probably do know, SixEight comes from Micah 6:8: "He has shown you O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

That's our aim as a church. We want to be a church full of disciples who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly.

But that's not our only goal. Our #1 goal is to lift the name of Jesus higher. We want to exalt Jesus to the highest possible place in Hazel Dell and Vancouver. When we do that, Jesus will draw all people in to himself. And that's where our #2 goal comes into play. We want to reach people far from God.

And that's where this other set of numbers comes in. 8 to 15 represents the 8 to 15 people you already have in your life whom you can be the light of God's love to. There are already 8 to 15 people that you know. They're your family, your neighbors, your friends, co-workers, mailman, grocery man or pizza man. Whoever they are, they're already in your life. And there are 8 to 15 of them. They're already in your life and God has them there for a purpose.

Do you want to know what that purpose is? They're there for you to reach for God's kingdom. They're there because God wants you to reach out to them, to shine His light through you into their darkness and live in such a way that they see God in you.

You might be asking: "How exactly do I do 8 to 15?" Well, there are four simple things

to do.

1. Make the list
2. Pray & Expect
3. Invest & Invite.
4. Celebrate!!!

1. Make The List

Think through all the circles of your life that you run in, and think through all the people who are most closely connected to your life already. Think through your family and write down their name. Think through your friends and write down their names. Then do the same for your neighbors, coworkers, mailman, grocery man, pizza man and mechanic.

2. Pray & Expect

Once you have the list, start praying for them by name. Pray for them regularly, every day if you can. You can pray this simple prayer: "God, send your Holy Spirit to open the eyes of _____'s heart. Draw them to Jesus and make them Kingdom warriors."

Once you start praying for them, then expect God to create opportunities for you to do invest and invite.

3. Invest & Invite

One thing you need to know is that God wants to draw as many people as possible to himself. So, when you start praying for your 8 to 15, God will give you opportunities to reach out to them. So, you should expect it.

When you see the opportunity arise, take it. When one of your 8 to 15 asks to have coffee or lunch, to come over and hang out, to help them move a fridge or mow the lawn, to vent about their boss or whatever else the case may be, invest in that relationship. Invest in whatever way you can. Invest your time and your money. Invest whatever you have to. Invest in that relationship and then invite them.

Invite them to church or invite them to receive Christ when you feel the time is right. If you want a guide to help you understand how to lead someone to Christ, just read this article. But, if it's too much to do it yourself, then simply invite them to church. Invite them to church where they can hear the gospel and see the gospel right in front of them.

4. Celebrate!

When they come to church with you, celebrate! When they ask questions about God, celebrate! When they accept Christ, celebrate! When they get baptized, celebrate! Party it up! Make a big deal out of it! It's a big deal. The angels in heaven celebrate...So Should We!!!

We celebrate because that's what we want to do as a church - reach people far from God. And then we start to help them become disciples who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly.

That's it. That's all there is to it. To some of you it may seem like a lot. To others it might seem like little. Regardless, it will be one of the most rewarding things you do in your life.

Guaranteed.