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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**The Parable of the Soils**

**Matthew 13:1-9**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again thank you for the precious lamb and the blood of the lamb who enables us to come before you cleansed, to come before you perfect in Christ, acceptable to you by the blood of the lamb. Father, we thank you for that gift. We thank you for the gift that you've given us of your word, Lord, that you could again give us a gift that guides us as we walk through this life and that you again give us the presence of your Holy Spirit. And once again, Lord, we're going to be looking at some difficult passages from that book and so we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, pray you would guide us and guard our hearts, guard our minds, open our ears and open our eyes as we look into this and that we pray that it would be of permanent value, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we've been looking at Jesus's use of parables in Matthew 13, and we've seen thus far that parables can be a truth-revealing teaching aid or a truth-hiding riddle depending on the eyes and the ears of those who receive them. We saw that the ability to see or

hear spiritual truth is actually fluid. If we respond to truth, our capacity for truth grows. Jesus said: *"For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance."* If we reject truth, our capacity for truth diminishes. *"But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."* Jesus spoke in parables to grow those with hearts to hear and to judge those who had hearts of stone, and it caught his disciples unawares. I mean they were shocked, they were dismayed by Jesus's new teaching. And so they asked him, why do you teach the people in parables?

Well, we're going to be looking this morning at Jesus's explanation of one such parable and that is the sower and the seed. Now Jesus introduces his explanation by first reiterating the privilege that had been given to the disciples. In *Matthew 13* Jesus tells the disciples who are again dismayed and confused by this new teaching, he says to them: *"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."* So we ask why, why would Jesus say blessed are your eyes, because they see and your ears because they hear if they don't get it at all, they don't understand? Well, God is revealing a crucial principle here and not knowing this principle is the source of most heresies and false teaching today and the principle is this: God reveals truth

not by reason alone but by revelation. God reveals truth not by reason alone but by revelation. And there are two different types of revelation that God reveals himself through. There is general and there is special revelation.

General revelation is simply God revealing himself through his creation. *Psalm 19* says: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.* What it's saying is God verily shouts in his creative work. Reason and general revelation is going to reveal to every single person on the planet that there's a God, such an extent that no one has any excuse for denying him. *Romans 1:20* says: *For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.* Well, they're without excuse because every person on earth is just surrounded by proof of God's existence. Just step outside and you're going to experience his air, his grass, his trees, his birds, his insects, his creation and all of it has to lead to a reasoned conclusion that this didn't happen by accident. Only for the last hundred or so years have we looked on the abundance of evidence that God has supplied of his existence and said, nope, none of that is proof of God's existence. That's what we now say. As R.C. Sproul put it, all of it came

about through what we now call a different god that much of the world now acknowledges and that god has its own name, that god is known as "chance." That's his official name. Virtually everything that we used to ascribe to the creative power of God is now given over to this nameless, faceless, mathematical god known as "chance." By chance everything has come into existence, science says. By chance, primordial ooze eventually becomes you and me. Well God's answer to that faceless, empty, nonexistent god is that you have no excuse when you deny the real God. And that God will hold every one of us accountable for denying God as revealed in nature. And you know, folks say, well, how can God hold an innocent native from some primitive tribe guilty for not knowing Jesus when he never had the opportunity to ever even hear of who Jesus is? Well, the fact is God will not hold him responsible for knowing Jesus, but he will hold him responsible for not knowing or giving God himself the honor that he is due through revealed creation. Again, *Romans 1* says: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. See, human reason alone is sufficient to tell every single one of us that we are creatures and that we are responsible to a creator. But reason alone, it can only go so far. You know, general revelation can tell you that there is a god but only special*

revelation will tell you who that god is. And special revelation is only found in the pages of scripture.

You see, we need God himself to reveal truth to us because general revelation can only go so far and reason is limited by our status as creatures. I mean we can't reason our way up to God any more than a monkey can reason his way up to us. I mean ask a monkey what it means to be human if you could. I mean even if he could answer you, he would never get it right because a monkey has never had a human frame of reference. I mean our human ways are not his monkey ways. And art and music, literature and drama, these are all qualities that are known to humans but they're complete mysteries to monkeys. Well, perfection and holiness and omniscience and omnipotence, these are all qualities that are known to God alone and they're mysteries to us, and yet somehow we almost feel qualified to reason out who God is and how he operates on our own, and this in spite of what God says in *Isaiah 55*, he says: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

See, the disciples are now about to sit down with Jesus and they're going to receive truth but they're not going to receive it by

reason. They're going to receive it by revelation. Jesus is going to sit down with them and he is going to reveal truth. And what he says might seem shocking. I mean Jesus tells them that it's not just those who reject truth who struggle to understand God but also that there were many prophets and many righteous people again who had no idea. Again he says in *Matthew 13*: *"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."* See, it wasn't rejection or wickedness that made these righteous folks blind and deaf, it was the natural condition of fallen man. I mean it was simply because our ways are not his ways. And since Adam's rebellion, we no longer have the ability to perceive spiritual truth on our own, and so we need God to reveal it to us. And even so, sometimes we still don't get it. *1 Peter 1:10* points out that even his prophets were ignorant of what they were writing when they prophesied about Christ. It says: *"Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you -- that's us -- in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to*

*you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."*

What he's saying is that we believers now have the stuff that prophets and angels longed to get. I mean they had types and figures and pictures but we have the real thing. I mean we seldom think of how different we have it compared to the Old Testament saints, I mean, if I was to ask you how do you get to heaven, I'm hopeful you would say by faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, if I can go back in time and let's say I met Abraham and Moses and David and I was to ask them about Jesus of Nazareth, they'd look at me like the disciples looked at Jesus. They'd have no idea who I was talking about. I mean they literally and obviously never knew Jesus from Adam. Well, so how did the Old Testament saints get saved? Well the answer is the same way that we get saved. They have get saved by faith. I mean our righteousness comes from our faith in Jesus Christ, and *Romans 3* tells us: *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it -- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.* That's how we get saved. But Abraham never knew Jesus Christ. Neither did Moses or David. But the scripture says in *Romans 4:3*: *For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* You see,

Abraham, Moses and David all put their faith in God and in God's provision for their sin. Now in their cases, that provision was the shed blood of an innocent animal. And all throughout the Old Testament hundreds of thousands of lambs had their blood shed and that was a picture of Jesus's coming sacrifice for sin. It wasn't until the New Testament that that picture became a reality when John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and he says exactly what that lamb, all of those lambs in the past were picturing. This is *John 1:29*, it says: *The next day he -- that's John the Baptist -- the next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* That moment that picture of that lamb had become a reality. Jesus was the ultimate lamb come to make the ultimate sacrifice. But that wasn't revealed to the Old Testament saints, and it has been revealed to us. You see, the things that the righteous and the prophets and even angels longed to see we've had revealed to us in scripture. Jesus became the new source of special revelation as he unfolded God's plan to the disciples. The disciples are hearing Jesus speaking in parables and these truths are still unfolding and they're just completely mystified and they're as mystified as the next person about what Jesus is saying.

So we pick up on this mysterious statement that Jesus is making in *Matthew 13*. It says: *That same day Jesus went out of the house*



*and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."*

This is a mystery to everybody. Nobody gets what he's saying. He doesn't give any other explanation than this. And as I've said the last time, it's only the disciples who are going to receive a special revelation about this, I mean, the crowd is completely clueless, they're completely mystified. Folks have come from far and wide to hear something something everybody knows. News flash: Birds eat seed. You know, good soil yields good crops, shallow weedy soil yields bad crops. You think this crowd didn't know this already? I mean what in the world was Jesus talking about? I mean it wasn't just the crowd that was mystified, it was the disciples as well. It says in verse 10: *Then the disciples came and said to*

him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Well, the disciples had no idea what Jesus was talking about when he personally begins to explain to them this parable. And likewise, we would have no idea at all except now we simply open our bibles to Matthew 13 and right there we have Jesus and he's carefully explaining what the parable means. And this is what he says in Matthew 13. He says: *"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 what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

Now you have to understand, Jesus is explaining all of this to the disciples privately. I mean he's gathered them in a room and he's telling them this stuff after the crowds have already left. And what Jesus has to say is addressed first and foremost to these new

mediators of the kingdom that Jesus is now grooming, that is the disciples. And he's speaking to them about the kingdom and his church and what he has to say is so disturbing that only those who have eyes to see and ears to hear are going to be able to even hear it. And what was disturbing then is disturbing now. See, Jesus is explaining to the disciples who the kingdom is made up of and again, what he says, it's shocking. He says one out of four is going to reject the kingdom out of hand. But then he goes on to say that three out of four are going to embrace the kingdom in some way, but two out of three of those are going to be false conversions. And what he tells his disciples is that only one out of three conversions is real, is lasting. And so he divides the hearers of the gospel into four types of soil: He has wayside and rocky and thorny and good soils. And so he begins to explain to them beginning with the wayside soil. This is the hard-packed soil on the pathway. This is the soil that the birds immediately come and pluck the seed away and that's Satan snatching the truth away immediately. These are the folks that reject the truth out of hand. I've had this experience, many of you probably have, is where you start to explain, start to get near the gospel, nope, nope, nope, don't want to hear it, don't want to hear a thing about it. Kill it right there. That's those kind of folks. They just reject the gospel out of hand.

But next he begins to explain rocky soil. Now this is hard pan soil. The soil is shallow and it is warm, and so it's warmth causes the seeds to sprout quickly. These are believers, Jesus says, who initially respond with great joy. He goes on to say that because these plants have no root, the heat then causes them to shrivel. And he explains that the heat in this case is hard times, it's persecution, it's trouble. You got to understand, Jesus is talking primarily here about religious persecution. He says when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. Well, this category of persecution is not so obvious to us as it is to others in other parts of the world, because in this country we do not yet know what real persecution is like. I mean we bask in so much freedom in this country we almost can't relate. You see, in Jesus's day, faith was costly. You know Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy and he said: *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* And Jesus himself said: *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* Peter's epistle said: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* See, they're all emphasizing the fact that struggle and pain and adversity should be

no surprise for Christians. I mean Jesus said: *"In this world you will have tribulation."* For some, that tribulation was persecution. But you know in our culture, persecution is really seldom the source of that trouble. Rather it's the difficulties of life that get us in our culture. And in the time and place where Christ was teaching and preaching and even now, false believers, these are folks who looked, spoke and acted like true believers. False believers were folks who responded to tribulation and trial by bailing out. Jesus says of the rocky soil believer: *"When trouble comes, he quickly falls away."* And you notice what Jesus is saying, it's not if, it's when. And I know what that's all about, I mean, I've personally mentored people who sprang up with incredible enthusiasm until troubles came and then they faded away. I mean I know some of these people and I actually know one person who kind of looks back and laughs at that time in his life when he was in his "Christian" phase. He's since grown out of that. There's actually quite a few websites where "ex-Christians" can give their testimonies about how they left the faith. Well, the fact is though there's no such thing as an "ex-Christian." There's no such thing as somebody who leaves the faith, because Jesus made it quite clear that he loses none of his sheep. In *John 10:27* Jesus said: *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has*

given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." In John 6:39 he says: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." See, it's Jesus who captures our hearts and he doesn't make mistakes. He doesn't lose those that God has given him. But what he does say, though, is that many who were never chosen of God, who were never part of the kingdom, they may give initial evidence that they seem to be Christians, I mean they receive the gospel with joy, but Jesus says they're not real. Folks get terrified that they might not have been chosen of God and they think, well, if I have trouble and I fall away, is God just going to abandon me? Well, let me assure you, there's one real sign that you've actually fallen away and that sign is actually a perfect expression of God's mercy and justice. The sign that you have fallen away is you genuinely no longer care. It means nothing to you. I mean like the ex-Christians who gleefully mocked their ex-faith, rocky soil Christians simply cease to care about God, Christ and kingdom. There is no such thing as a rocky soil soul pining away that he wasn't chosen of God. He or she simply reverts back to man's natural state, one of hatred or fear or indifference towards God. And so if you truly care about Christ, if you truly care about your relationship with God, it's a sign you're still alive in Christ. I mean, the proof that it is God who has chosen you is that you

endure, you persevere through trouble because God says in *Philippians 1:6*: *I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* You see, it was God who perseveres us and not ourselves. And if trouble is able to separate you permanently from God, it's only because, sad to say, you were never really attached to him in the first place. And the apostle John made that clear in *1 John 2:19*, he said this, he said: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.* See, those whom God saves he preserves.

Now a far more difficult case is the next soil that Jesus speaks about. This is the thorny or the weedy soil. Now, if you grow things like I do, you know how weeds work, again you understand that weeds have this big advantage over garden plants, they're usually native to the area, they're tough, they're usually well adapted to the area, they're aggressive. Well, the problem with weeds is that they compete with my plants for sunlight, water and minerals. And the fact is is my plants can't compete very well, I mean, they're not native, they're not tough and their goal is not just survival, their goal is fruitfulness. The goal of a dandelion is just to make more dandelions. The goal of a tomato plant is tasty tomatoes. If I want fruitful tomatoes, I got to get rid of

the dandelions. Well, Jesus understood that. Jesus used weeds and thorns as metaphors for the world. And he says in verse 17:

*"Other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked the plants."*

And then he goes on to explain that in verse 22, he says: *"As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."* Now there's a problem with the way Jesus's explanation here is interpreted. But it lies not with Jesus, rather it lies with us. See, Jesus is telling us that a soil that produces a choked off life, that has no fruit, when he describes that, he is describing a non-believer. The problem is many evangelicals have so dumbed down the kingdom that they think being unfruitful is just a minor problem. But Jesus isn't speaking about carnal Christians here. He is speaking about self-deceived unbelievers who think that "unfruitful Christian" is still a sub category of Christian when it is not. Fruit-bearing is the sine qua non of kingdom citizens. I'm sure you've heard me use that fancy phrase before and I use it because it fits perfectly. Sine qua non is just a fancy Latin term for saying "without which not." What it means is essential. And what God is saying is without fruit bearing, there is no such thing as Christian. Listen to how Jesus puts this in *John 15*. He says: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does*



*not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."* What Jesus is saying is that he is the cause and fruit is the effect. He says if there's no fruit, it's because there's no Jesus. And he goes on to say that fruitless branches are cut down and burned. I mean, it's really frighteningly simple. Folks say, well, that's legalism. I mean, the gospel is faith alone and isn't fruit-bearing adding up requirement to faith? Well, let me answer that question with a question. Let me ask you, is breathing a requirement for living? I mean, if I tell you as mammals you have no choice, you have to breathe. Not only that, you have to do it a thousand times an hour, almost 24,000 times a day. Have I made that a requirement to your being alive or is it proof that you're not dead? I mean if I tell you as a living mammal you are required to have a pulse as well. Have I added that requirement to living also? I'm not making this optional, I'm telling you this is mandatory. I'm insisting that all living mammals must breathe and they must have a pulse. Now the question is are these requirements for living or are they signs that I'm alive? Jesus says: *"He who abides in me, bears much fruit."* So here's the question: Is fruit a requirement of faith or simply a sign that I have it? I mean, if

I have no fruit, isn't it reasonable to conclude I have no Jesus? You have to understand what Jesus is driving at here. The new mediators of God's rule is the church, and Jesus is saying the church is always going to be a mixture of true and false believers. The rocky soil believers are not a problem because they identify themselves eventually and they just fall away. Thorny believers don't. They spend their lives vacillating between two masters, and Jesus said nobody can do that. *Matthew 6* says: *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."* Oh, how we wish we could, but we can't. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the plant and make it unfruitful. A Christian without fruit is a mammal without a pulse or respiration. They're both dead. A dumbed down evangelical culture has plenty of room for fruitless Christians, but I have to tell you, the kingdom has none. That's why Jesus says in verse 19: *"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."*

So clearly we all need to ask ourselves this question: Am I, am I a fruitful Christian? I mean, the consequences of this are huge. And the need to recognize what real fruit really is is literally a matter of life and death. I mean, it's what separates true

believers from false ones, the rocky and the thorny soils from the good soil. Jesus says this in verse 23: *"As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."* Okay. The good soil is good. Why? Why is the good soil good? Because it produces fruit, a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Now I've heard some folks say, well, that fruit is just people that you bring to Christ. But that would have Jesus claiming that a fruitful believer is only someone who leads a hundred, sixty or thirty people to Christ. None of the most God-glorifying fruit-filled Christians I've ever known have ever led that many people to Christ. I mean, some have never once had that privilege. Does that mean they're unfruitful? I mean it is God alone who saves. Our understanding of what fruit is has to go back to our understanding of what our primary purpose as Christians is, and it isn't just to expand the kingdom, it is to glorify God. Jesus said in *John 15: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."* So we ask, okay, what kind of fruit glorifies the Father? Well, that fruit has to be love itself. It's a function of the gospel itself. You see, the gospel itself is that God's creatures rebelled in Adam and became fallen, imperfect creatures, no longer capable of fellowship with God, and so God himself became one of us, lived out his life perfectly and

then applied the perfection of his life to our account so that we could once again, by placing our faith in Jesus's death and resurrection, be perfect before God. And we who have received that privilege are what God calls "good soil." And he calls it "good" because we have God himself who is the essence of good living inside of us, shaping and molding us into the very image of God's son so that we might bring glory to God just as his Son did. And we do that by bearing fruit. And the fruit that we bear is love. And who better to tell us this than Jesus. Listen to what he said in *John 15*. He said: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."* Romans 8:28 tells us that God's definition of "good" is that we be conformed to the image of his Son, and love is how we do that. *"These things I command you so that you will love one another."*

Now a few years back we looked at the fruit of the Spirit. And again someone pointed out the fruit of the Spirit is really, it's like a grapefruit or an orange that's hanging from the tree. It's a singular fruit, you look at that grapefruit, you say that's a grapefruit, but inside that grapefruit are nine different wedges that make up the grapefruit. So it is with love. The fruit itself is love hanging there, but the wedges inside it are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That's what the fruit of the Spirit is. Now what Jesus is saying is that good soil grows a crop one hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown, and the crop is love. Simply put, the loveliest people on earth are supposed to be Christians because love is what God is growing in us from the moment we are saved, but we're not.

Mahatma Gandhi had this to say about Christians, he said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Maybe it's because two out of three conversion experiences are false. I mean I wish I could know who's a true believer and who's a false believer, but I can't. I mean every genuine member of God's kingdom is like a fruit tree in good soil watered by the Holy Spirit. And like any tree, those roots, that's where the watering actually takes place, those roots are obviously underground, they're unseen. So I can never definitively

say who's a Christian and who's not because I can't see who is rooted in what. I have no ability or right to say definitively whose roots genuinely tap into God's Holy Spirit. That's only known to two people, that's known to God and that's known to you. But I can make an educated guess. I mean there's a part of the tree that is visible and it displays exactly what it is the roots are taking in and it's the fruit. You see hanging from the lives of redeemed children of God is fruit that brings glory to God. And that fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, defines the essence of who Jesus was. He was love, he was joy, he was peace, he was patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Those are the very things that God says that all things in our lives are working together to produce that fruit. And we don't grow that fruit by any other way than the way God said it would grow and that is by struggle and strife and trial. Where do you think patience comes from? Or peace or kindness or gentleness or self-control or any of the fruits of the Spirit? I mean they don't grow out of redeemed lives by magic. They are forged in the furnace of struggle. Just listen to a sampling of New Testament scriptures. This is *1 Peter 1:6*, he says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials. 1 Peter 4:12: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. James 1:2: Count it all*

*joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*

Why should I be joyful? Because God is at work in you, shaping and molding you through these trials into the image of his Son, so you can glorify God by bearing fruit just like his Son did. If you ever wonder why life is so full of trials for believers, it's because God's primary purpose for our lives is not success or health or wealth or prosperity, it's fruit bearing. *John 15:8: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."* And the more fruit we bear, the more God's going to shape us for even more fruit. And he says so in verse 2, he says: *"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so it may bear more fruit."* I mean it's a lifelong process that Jesus is describing in this parable, and pruning is painful, and it's only good soil that produces fruitful vines.

As Jesus points out, three of the four soils are fruitless, because they're not genuine. The wayside soil rejects the gospel out of hand, the rocky soil encounters troubles and falls away, the thorny soil wants the kingdom but it also wants the world, and so it winds up getting neither, because the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke off the fruit. You see he's as lost as the wayside soil but he's infinitely worse off because he's lost

and he has no idea that he is. He comes to church, he fills the pews, he even contributes, he may even be in leadership. But the fruit is missing in his life. Jesus says something very frightening about this in *Matthew 7*. Let me read it to you. He says: *"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."* Not everyone who says to me, *'Lord, Lord'* will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, *'Lord Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'* And then I will declare to them, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."* Let me tell you what's the most disturbing word in that entire passage. It is that little four-letter word "many." *"On that day, many will say to me."* Many will hear from Jesus the worst words human ears can ever hear: *"I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."*

You know, if you ever had any possibility of being a thorny soil believer, I've got great news for you today and as you can guess there has not been a lot of good news in this message. Here's the good news. The good news is you are not standing in front of the Lord Jesus Christ right now giving an account for yourself. You're in a church service in Port Jervis. You're still alive. You have



a pulse and you're breathing. That means there's still time. See, none of us can see what kind of soil each of us is rooted in but God can, and he assures us that each of us will stand before him one day and each of us will either hear, *"Well done, good and faithful servant"* or *"Depart from me, I never knew you."* And the criterion is going to be fruitfulness, and the criterion of fruit is love.

So here's the ultimate question we have to ask ourselves this morning. It's a simple one. Have you become a lovelier person since you met Jesus? Is that fruit hanging from your life? You see, it's our job as elders to make sure none of you in this church will ever be shocked by Jesus's words. And to do that we have to ask the hard questions now, not when you're standing before the throne. We have to ask questions about what soil we are, are we rocky soil, thorny soil or good soil? Are we good time, emotion-driven believers who will fall away when trouble comes? Are we deceived, world-loving believers who don't even know that we don't know Christ, or are we kingdom-loving, God-glorifying believers? God's test is simple. He says, *"By their fruit, you shall know them."* Let's pray.

*Father, I want to come before you this day for on behalf of this entire congregation, I know this is a hard message and I know these*

are difficult words to hear. I want to pray for each and every one of us, Lord, that you would be speaking into our hearts, speaking into our lives, speaking into what it is we think we have in you. Lord, if we are fooling ourselves, if we are just going along and thinking that we're doing fine and thinking that our lack of fruitfulness is okay because the culture, the Christian culture around us doesn't think it's a big deal, I pray you would convict us. And I pray if there's anyone in this building right now that is feeling that conviction and you need to talk to somebody, you need to get it squared away, this is the good news. While there is still time, God is saying you need to get this right. You need to be good soil, the soil that grows the good fruit and that good fruit is love. And so I pray for each and every person, Lord, that we would ask ourselves that question, am I lovelier today than the day that I met Jesus? And I pray your Holy Spirit would give them the exact answer you would have them have. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.