

*Preparing the Soil*  
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A friend of mine recently messaged me on Facebook. Her name is Marietta, and she was a very instrumental person in Heather's life and faith when she was in college. She's a feisty, highly opinionated Italian lady—and she would readily agree to that description, I'm sure. We love her and her husband Michael a lot.

I'm not sure what she thinks of me, to be honest. During the 2016 elections she expressed her disgust over the choices, and I said something on FB to her, jokingly, like "Well, I'm thinking of running. You can vote for me."

And she said "Actually, I'm not sure about you, either Jay." Ouch!

But I replied, "Well, you can be my vice president and we can balance each other out." She seemed to think that would be an ok option.

But she messaged me a while back and said in her typical blunt way, "What's wrong with you?" Surprised, I replied "What do you mean?" She said "Whenever I post something on Facebook on my beliefs from a Christian perspective, I get 100 likes, and several comments supporting what I said. Things on controversial topics like abortion, or marriage, or who is qualified to lead our country, etc., etc. And it's true—her posts are not always tame and free of controversy.

"But you!" she said. Whenever you post something even remotely controversial (one of my recent posts was about how God didn't create all cultures to be the same), you get a few likes, several frowny faces, a lot of angry faces, and lots and lots of comments telling you how you are wrong!"

*"What kind of friends do you have?"*

And it's that comment of Marietta's that brings me to our text this week. It's Luke 8:4-15

*"And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, <sup>5</sup>"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. <sup>6</sup>And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. <sup>7</sup>And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup>And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a*

*hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

*<sup>9</sup>And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, <sup>10</sup>he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'<sup>11</sup> Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup>The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. <sup>13</sup>And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. <sup>14</sup>And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. <sup>15</sup>As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.*

We're mostly going to look at verses 4-8 today, but I thought since Jesus explains this parable I should probably include that in the text. Whenever Jesus explains something it's good to take a look at it, even if it's only to include it in the text! But there are several things of interest in verses 4-8 that I want to take a look at that speaks to the issue of "What kind of friends do you have?" that Marietta posed to me.

I used to be a 6<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher. This is a picture of me back in the day. One of the things I taught my students is how to analyze a story: finding the main points, the main characters—just the basic elements. And as we look at this parable, it's important to note the key elements of it.

We have the sower. We have the seed. We have the dry path, the rocks, the thistles. We have the good soil. All these are important elements of this parable, and there are things that can be drawn out of each element.

But there is something that each of these elements have in common—in fact it is so common that we might be tempted to overlook it. And that's the soil. In fact, I would say that the soil demonstrates the main point of this parable.

I grew up in Bucyrus. I lived right on the east edge of the city, and the school districts changed just a few streets west of us. I fell into the country school district, so I didn't go to Bucyrus City Schools, but I went to Colonel Crawford. Most of my friends lived on farms.

My Dad grew up on a farm, and would point things out to me often, like what wheat looked like, oats, soy beans etc. My uncles farmed, and I learned a few things from my cousins. But I did not learn to farm—I just rubbed shoulders with people who farmed. So I really don't know much about it, and I know a lot of people listening to me today do.

But even with my limited knowledge, I know a couple of things. One is that it is hard work, and the other is that it costs money. I don't think anyone would dispute that a farmer needs to know his/her business well, and to manage costs and expenses well. Probably more than the typical business because the variables are so extensive and unpredictable.

So with this in mind, I take a look at this sower in this parable, and I wonder why he's casting his expensive seed into places it won't grow. Places where the birds can eat it, it can't put down roots, it is choked out by thistles...3/4 of his seed is being cast into places it can't grow.

I think that's crazy. I'm sure the farmers here and out in Zoom-land think that's insane. Because it kind of is. Jesus tells many parables that show he has good business sense. The parable of the talents, for example, shows that Jesus understands how business works. So why does he use this crazy example of a sower casting his seed into places it won't grow?

Some might say it is because God is so generous and his resources are unending. I mean, if he's willing to leave 99 of his sheep to go get the one that has gone astray, he is probably willing to generously sow seed. This parable tells us that the seed represents the Word of God—which is Jesus himself. So it is expensive seed—it cost Jesus his life, and Jesus did come very generously to us while we were yet sinners. And the soil of my life still isn't free from rocks, thorns and thistles. So I don't disagree--I like the idea of a generous God.

But I want to look at it from another angle today. Wouldn't it be better if all the soil that the sower casts his seed upon was prepared? What if it were all good soil?

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3: 6-7, Paul says:

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

Growth is important, and you just don't plant valuable seed in places it won't grow.

When I was studying this parable and this approach to it came to mind, I groaned inside. Because, while I still don't know much about farming, I do know that preparing a field with extremely fallow ground is tough work. A field that's hard and dry, with lots of rocks, and overgrown with thistles and briars, is not easy to prepare for growing crops. Especially back in

Biblical days when they didn't have the equipment we have today. It's labor intensive, it takes a while, and it's expensive. Most importantly, you're getting it ready to receive something else.

My colleague in West Bengal, India is working with the local community to improve their agriculture. One of the things he's trying to do is to get the local farmers to quit using copious amounts of herbicides and pesticides. These chemicals are actually reducing crop yield, and they are destroying the water supply, and people are getting sick. But the solutions he's proposing, that are proven techniques in other places, are going to take at least 3 seasons to show results—maybe even longer. Nobody wants to wait that long and few farmers are adopting the new technique.

In the same way, I think as believers we over emphasize the part about reaping souls, not preparing the ground. The tedious job of preparing soil in a place that has been hard and rocky for generations is not that exciting. What most people don't realize is that when someone leads a person to Jesus, it is because someone faithfully prepared the soil of that new Christian's heart way before this last person got to him or her.

But I'm not aware of any books being written about the faithful soldiers who *prepare the ground* of people's hearts to hear the gospel.

But it's necessary, and I want to encourage those of you here, many of you here, who have been called *to prepare the fallow ground of human hearts* to hear the message of Jesus. I've come across too many people who are ashamed that they have never really lead anyone to Jesus in their Christian life. My message to you is "Yes you have." Maybe you weren't around to see the fruit of your influence, but you have participated in preparing many hearts to hear the gospel.

It could be that you've never considered this—that your part in the Great Commission is that you prepare soil. Then I want to do two things today—make you aware of it, and help you get better at it. I've already done the first part, so let's spend a little time on the second part.

There are three things I want to communicate to you this morning that will help you be a better preparer of the soil. Now—just because your chief calling is not reaping souls, that doesn't mean that you can't reap souls. You still can—and maybe will. But it's important to recognize how to position yourself as a soil preparer.

1. *Just be there.*

One of the things I do is help cross-cultural workers start businesses overseas. We use a technique called *The Lean Startup*—which means we encourage starting businesses on a shoestring budget. But the overarching mantra of how to discover if a

business idea will work is this: *Get out of the building*. That's what every business guru will tell you: *Get out of your office, from behind your computer, and talk to people*. And I like this approach because it's what Christians need to do.

Matt Lewis and I have lunch a couple times a month, and we usually go to O'Bryans on Clairmont. One time we were sitting there, and we were talking about middle eastern food. And we talked about babaganoush.

This is a middle eastern dish made of roasted eggplant. It's tasty and we both talked about how we loved it.

A couple weeks later, we went back to Obryan's for lunch, and the waitress came up to us and said "Oh—you are the guys who were talking about babaganoush. That word just stuck in my mind—and I heard you talking about it so I looked it up." And that led to a conversation with her about what we did for a living, and she opened up about her life and what was going on, and her challenges etc etc. Matt and I just listened, and we both could tell she was so blessed just to be able to talk with us about her life. We didn't tell her that she needed Jesus—but I'm confident if we never get that chance someone will. We were just there.

*Get out and engage*—and most of you have a built in way to do *that through your jobs*. People in ministry are usually surrounded by those who've heard and understand the gospel. Even Pastor Keith, who does one of the best jobs I know of getting himself out among the community will often lament that he doesn't have enough contact with non-Christians. But if you are out there working, you are in contact with people who need Jesus. I don't think I need to argue that point at all—for some of you that is painfully obvious.

But let's remember—I'm not saying you need pass a tract out to your coworkers, or ask them if they know Jesus. I'm saying you just need to be there. That's the first step, and it's a hugely important one. You have access to people others don't—and often that connection comes through your job.

2. The second way to prepare the soil is to *seek out spiritual conversations*.

Now, again, I'm not saying for you to confront your coworkers with "Do you know Jesus?" My guess would be that that's seeds scattered on bad soil. Instead, just talk about spiritual things. Real things.

Here's an example. Heather's side of the family has some people who are antagonistic toward the gospel. A few years ago, at New Year's, we all met together for

a reunion. I was sitting with two of Heather's relatives who, at the time, were not on board with this Jesus stuff—but one had recently gone through a divorce and was really hurting. We got into a discussion and it led to me asking him "What do you think you learned through this painful experience?" And he was very open with me, but quickly became uncomfortable, and he turned it back to me.

He said "You've been living in India for years. What have you learned by living there?"

Now, that was an interesting question. At that particular time I had become somewhat weary of some parts of Indian culture. Things like the crowds, the heat, the inefficiency—and that weariness was showing itself as some internal anger. I was walking around with this tight ball of anger ever present in the middle of my stomach. Right here.

So I was real with him, and shared that. I shared about how I was experiencing that for really the first time in my life. I shared that I had never been an angry person, so I was disturbed. Where did that anger come from? How was I going to get rid of it?

That answer was not what he was expecting. Both those people I was sitting with sat up and took notice! And you should have seen both their faces—they were really interested! We had a very good discussion.

Because the truth is, the things we had in common were sin and an impoverished heart— without the grace of God of course. But neither of them were ready to hear the grace of God part—so we just talked about our struggles. Neither of them came to Jesus that night, nor did I challenge them in that direction, but eventually, who knows?

A tool we can use in the contexts we are in is something called "Salty Statements." They are just things you can say to get a spiritual conversation going. The conversation doesn't, and probably shouldn't, lead to "Do you know Jesus?" The purpose is just to make people think. Here are a few salty statements I have used to get some spiritual conversations going:

*I wonder what God looks like.* I mean—who hasn't thought of that, yeah? I had one person tell me they thought God was a woman. It's something to talk about!

If you want to go a little deeper, how about something like this: *Suffering in this world is a hard thing for me to understand.* Usually people who are hurting want to talk about it.

Or: *Do you believe in ghosts?* That's one of my favorites.

Or: *Have you ever had a dream that seemed like it was from God?* You'd be surprised at how many people have.

And then you let the conversation go where it goes. You can come up with your own--But the idea is to just plough up some of that unprepared ground.

### 3. *Listen*

This probably should be number two. But it fit better here, I thought. When you aren't concerned about what to say to someone, it enables you to listen well. And preparing the soil often has to do with listening.

I told a story a while back at dinner church about going to a bar in the airport, and the bartender just confiding in me with family details that were very personal. Just briefly—so you don't get the wrong idea-- I was on a business trip and had a couple hour layover in Chicago and I was trying to find a place to eat. I walked by this little bar and I heard God tell me to go in there. Despite being uncomfortable with that—I don't spend a lot of time in bars-- I did it, and the bartender started asking me questions. When she found out I had worked overseas in lower income areas, she just started talking—how when growing up her mother was the neighborhood meth dealer she hadn't talked to her in years. When I left, she thanked me for my input—and told me that because of our talk she was going to call her mother.

But all I had done is eat a club sandwich and listen to her.

And I'm telling you that that sort of thing happens to me all the time. All the time. But it only started happening when I decided to be a listener rather than feeling the need to spit out an invitation to follow Jesus with every encounter.

My work context for years was in India. I listened to Muslims for years. I listened to them tell me what I believed, and I listened to how great Islam is, I listened to how bad Christianity is, and I listened to how the Bible is a corrupted book. I remember one Muslim girl who eventually came to faith in Jesus. She said to me just a few months ago that I was so patient, so kind, so unruffled, when she and others attacked my faith in Jesus.

Let me say for the record, I may have looked that way on the outside, but I was dying on the inside! But it's my commitment to purposeful listening that kept my mouth closed and stirred up the soil in her heart.

What's an example from your work context? Are there ways you can prepare the hearts of your co-workers by just listening?

Let's be clear about something. We live in a broken, fallen world full of lonely, lost people. People are dying—sometimes literally dying—for someone to listen to their stories. For someone to just care. And no matter how inarticulate we think we are, one thing we can do is to just listen to them. You don't need the answers. You don't need to have it all together. You don't need to have a gospel presentation prepared. You just need to listen.

So—to wrap this up let's go back to Marietta and her statement. “What kind of friends do you have?” I am glad I have people as real friends and FB friends, who don't know Jesus and challenge me. I want to put myself out there so people get mad at me and challenge me and tell me I'm wrong. It means I'm ploughing up the bad soil and participating in the task of making God known. There are three types of people out there—those who think they know the answers to life's questions, those who have given up trying to find answers to life's questions, and then people like us—who don't know the answers but understand that God does. What kinds of friends do you have?

Be aware—God has put people in your life, too, to help prepare them to hear the Word of God when the time comes.

But the key is to be available, talk about spiritual things, and listen—not defend or be intent on telling your side.

God has a plan and a path for everyone, and sometimes that plan includes an encounter with you. Something to stir up the soil of their heart and get them thinking in a certain way. Your part could be just to get the soil ready for the seed grow once it is cast upon it. Somewhere down the line, a Christian you don't know might give that invitation to follow Jesus because the soil became good, and you helped make it that way.

Because I don't know if you've noticed, but our world is imploding. People do need what Jesus has to offer them, and people are thinking about their purpose more now than they were a year ago. A friend of mine once said something really simple yet so profound—“*We don't need to bring people to church, we just need to give them Jesus.*” Bringing them to church—that's number 4-5 on the list. Being out there? Discussing important, spiritual things? Listening? Those are at the top of the list—those are what are important. Let's pray.