

Parable of the Sower (8.9.1986)

by Nigel Lee

Nigel Lee's sermon explores the significance of humanity's creation from the ground and our call to cultivate spiritual fruit through God's Word.

Duration: 1:01:35

Scripture: Matthew 13:4-6, Matthew 13:19-23

Topics: "Parable"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal experience of witnessing a young man giving his testimony for the first time in front of a large audience. The speaker emphasizes the importance of reacting positively to the challenges and trials in life, as God is working to cultivate and produce a fruitful life in us. The speaker then refers to Psalm 1, which describes the blessedness of a person who delights in God's word and remains steadfast. The sermon also discusses Jesus' parable of the sower, highlighting the four different reactions to the word of God: the unconverted, the backsliders, the immature, and the fruitful.

Transcript

I want to read to you two passages of scripture with a common thread. And the first is found in the book of Genesis, chapter 2, and the second in one of the Gospels, but turn first to Genesis. Genesis chapter 2 and verse 4. And I'm going to read first of all in English from verse 4 to verse 17.

And then I'm going to ask Bernd to read the second of our two passages tonight in German, and you follow then again in your own version. Genesis 2.4. This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprung up.

The Lord God had not sent rain on the earth, and there was no man to work the ground. But streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden, and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasant to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden, and from there it divided, it had four head streams. The name of the first is Pachon, it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good. Aromatic resin and onyx are also there.

The name of the second river is the Gihon, it winds through the entire land of Kush. The name of the third river is the Tigris, it runs along the east side of Ashur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die. And then Luke's Gospel, chapter 8. And we'll read together from the middle of verse 8 until the end of verse 15.

When he said this, he said, without listening, he said, to give you the secrets of the kingdom, which are all the same to you, but on the way are those who hear it, who are on the field, which are among the thorns, which are on the good land. We'll come back to that passage in Luke later. But you will have noticed that in both passages, men and women are pictured as being made out of the ground.

Or pictured as a piece of ground. And we ask ourselves therefore right at the beginning, why is this stress in Genesis that mankind is made out of the ground? I'm going to ask you to think tonight. Take notes if you will.

We read in verse 7 that the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground. And then over in chapter 3 of Genesis, verse 19. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken, for dust you are, and to dust you will return.

In verse 23 of the same chapter. So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. And how God did it.

And God came to a particular place of his choosing. And he did the kind of thing that many of us have done as children. Scoop out a hole and start to mould the earth into man.

He scooped up a bit of Eden in order to turn it into Adam. Now we make sometimes uncomplimentary remarks about people. From a clod of earth, no better than a piece of dung.

But God took this piece of ground off the surface of the planet. And then he breathed into it. God breathed into this earth and he became a living being.

Earth plus the breath of God. So that we would have a wholly different dimension that we might know God. God enabled us as mere dust and earth to know him and to fellowship and have communion with him.

He put a value on that piece of ground by breathing into it. Knowing everything that was coming in the future. Knowing how these little pieces of ground these little bits of puny clay would one day raise their fists against the Almighty.

God still wanted fellowship with a creature whom he had made. Think of the context of this. We have read that God made the earth but there were no shrubs and plants to start with.

There was no rain. But a mist began to go up. And then things began to grow.

And eventually like a garden run wild there was a profusion of weeds and growth and trees and plants all over the place. And God wanted a gardener. And so he made Adam to be a gardener.

And he put him in a beautiful garden of his own creation. He was to walk around alone and we read in verse 15 that he was to work the garden and to take care of it. He is to make the ground bring forth fruit produce something for God and he is to take care of it so that it is pleasing to God.

As Adam walked around that garden he must have been very conscious that he was made out of the same stuff as the garden itself. There is a bit of that garden now walking around on two legs. There is a scooped out hole in the ground that has become him.

And God's charge to him to work the land and to make it bring forth fruit for God applies also to the bit that is now mobile around the land. Now we are all made of dust you are and to dust you will one day return. Do a little experiment with yourself.

Did anybody's hand fall off? If your hand did not fall off that is at least one sign that you are still alive. If your hand did not fall off you disintegrate and become ground again. God has made us out of the ground and we are to be like little farmers over our own nature.

They are all landowners. We are each a little field in one sense. Producing a different crop it all depends what is planted in us.

God has taken the ground and he wants fruit out of your life and your character. Sometimes you'll get a clever kid in a Sunday school who'll put his hand up and he'll want to ask a question. Please sir, please sir, please sir, did Adam have a navel? My children had an answer for that one.

Of course Adam had a navel. What do you think, do you think Adam did not have a navel? When God took the ground and he rolled the body and he rolled the head and he put that on the top and he rolled the arms and stuck them on and eventually he made Adam and he put him up on the shelf and then he said, there, you're done. God has done more than just poke us.

He has made us unique and eternal. He has breathed into us a whole new dimension of existence and understanding. The Lord Jesus breathed on his disciples in John chapter 20.

We had read of him earlier in that gospel that he is the life-giving one. He has life in himself. And you have been breathed into by the Spirit of God.

You are eternal. And yet you are ground still. Eventually, as you know, Adam lost his job as a gardener.

His son Cain was made unemployable. And he was made unemployed because the thorns and the thistles of sin had begun to grow in him far quicker than they grew outside the garden. Adam had been given a responsibility to watch over the ground and to produce the right fruit for God, including himself.

But he began to doubt God, decided to disobey God. And he was eventually sent out of the garden and then the ground outside Eden, cursed as it was, began to produce thorns and thistles in his face. You and I are being trained to reign with Christ.

The Word of God promises that we will one day reign with him over the whole earth. How do you imagine that? How will you get on? What experience will you have had of government, of reign? Since the moment you became a Christian, you have started to have experience. As God has put his Spirit in you, he has

breathed again into you in order that you might be a farmer over this little bit of territory to start with.

And what is growing in your life? In your character. You see, we Christians, we live at two levels at once. As Adam had to, as Abel did.

There is the physical, material level. Playing with the thorns, trying to produce something to eat. But God is also watching over the character of Adam and the character of Abel and Cain.

He watches both. Now, you go out on a team. And maybe you battle with a difficult vehicle or a difficult team.

You live in tough surroundings in this coming year. And you may be concerned about the fruit of your evangelism. And it is right that you should be so.

But God is also watching over how you are working, how you are producing as a farmer over your own little bit of land, yourself. And you are going to see in a few minutes how the parable of the sower fits in exactly with what God is saying about the nature of man. You sometimes feel that God is plowing and plowing in your life.

Some of you are facing crises in these days. You don't know where to go yet. You may find that you have been rejected by a field.

There may be real questions in your life as to whether you are up to what lies ahead of you. Your expectations at this conference have been turned upside down. It is as if God is plowing up your life again.

You feel as if you are being turned over. You feel through the preaching of the word as if things under the surface are being brought to light. The challenge and the conviction that comes to your heart sometimes is difficult to take.

There was a great Scottish preacher of many years ago, Samuel Rutherford, some of you may have heard of him. And he wrote once to someone who felt just like this. He said simply, let him plow because he is purposing a crop.

God only plows so that he may have a greater harvest. Isaiah chapter 28, verse 23. Isaiah 28, the prophet says, listen and hear my voice, verse 23.

Pay attention and hear what I say. When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin.

Caraway is beaten out with a rod and coming with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread. So one does not go on threshing it forever.

Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it. All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom. I want to say that God knows what he is doing in plowing in our lives.

And this does not go on forever. God himself says he is going to stop one day. The difficulties, the challenges, the painful parts of life, they will stop.

Because no farmer would ever produce a crop if he plowed the same field every week, 52 weeks of the year. And we have read that the farmer knows how to treat each crop. They thresh them in different ways.

And the crops are planted in different places. And they are harvested in the right way. So that there is no damage done to the harvest.

God will not allow you to be damaged. God wants you to produce a great harvest of godliness for himself. You remember how John chapter 15 speaks of the pruning? He prunes so that you will bear more fruit.

I remember being astonished watching the farmers in France pruning their vines. They seem to leave so little on the vine. They strip it right down to just two little strands coming out of the main stalk.

They seem to cut off far more than they leave. And in the area I watch they push little carts down between the lines of vines in which they burn all the bits they cut off. He doesn't cut in a way that's going to damage the fruit bearing capacity of that plant.

And when God cuts through his word or when he turns things over in our life he knows precisely what he's doing. Let him plow in your life because he purposes a crop. And then we read in scripture that the seed that produces real growth is the word of God.

In the parable we read it says precisely that the seed, says Jesus, is the word of God. We read in 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 23 You have been born again not of imperishable seed but of imperishable through the living and enduring word of God. For all men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of the Lord stands forever. I believe that the things that you remember from this conference will be certain messages from the word of God. You may go through many experiences and hear many challenges but that which will last in your memory that which you can feed off in the months to come will be that which you see in God's word.

Do you ever ask yourself why you have no lasting fruit in your life? Why such problems with discipline? Why so little motivation? Why so little fresh vision sometimes? It seems as if sometimes it's only weeds growing in your nature. Can I ask you a question? What have you been planting? Do you expect anything different from what you plant? Take care what you plant. The word of God says in Galatians 6 that we reap what we sow.

If we sow to the flesh we reap what we sow. If we sow to the flesh we shall from the flesh reap corruption. And if we sow to the spirit we shall reap from the spirit eternal life.

What are you planting in your nature? In your memory, in your thinking, in your conversation? Jesus came. He came and took flesh like Adam. He walked again on earth as he had done in Genesis 3. And he did the job of a farmer.

We see him planting seed in people. He will plant seed in Galileans in Jerusalem because they've come up for a feast. And then he will go off to Samaria in chapter 4 of John's Gospel.

And he'll do a bit of reaping. And after two days he leaves them and goes to Galilee in order to do some reaping for what he planted in Jerusalem. The Lord understands the harvest that he's walking amongst.

You remember how in John's Gospel, chapter 4, he says these words. Look, he says to the disciples, don't say there are still four months to the harvest. Open your eyes.

The fields are ripening all around us even now for a harvest. You and I are to live like small farmers. Maybe our outward work may be hard.

I remember talking to a man called Lionel Gurney who founded the Red Sea Mission Team. He described to me how he'd walked the length of South Yemen, North Yemen over a period of a number of years. And he saw, I think, hardly a person trust Christ.

They left behind a lot of scripture. They saw very little fruit. But you know, the harvest that grew in his nature, the trust, the gentleness, the wisdom that grew in him during that period was the working of God in his nature.

Now you may work this year amongst people whom you think are stony and awkward kind of people. God may put you amongst such. Sometimes the contrast between the conference and the team can be unbearable.

But what happens to you is really never as important as how you react to it. Because God is doing some farming in your life with your cooperation. And He wants to plough and He wants to plant and He wants you to produce a crop for Him.

Now when you come to Luke's Gospel you find the Lord Jesus building on this understanding of people's nature. The Lord is training His evangelists. He says, I'm going to give the explanation of the parable only to you disciples.

In fact, in Mark's Gospel, in the same story in chapter 4, verse 13, Jesus said, if you don't understand the parable of the sower, you won't be able to understand any other parable. This parable is the key to understanding all the others. Jesus said there are four different types of reaction to the Word of God.

There are the unconverted and then secondly there are those who soon backslide. They get a little bit of excitement and then they forget everything. And then thirdly there are the immature.

They start to grow but they never really go on. And then fourthly there are the fruitful. Let's look at those in more detail.

The farmer scatters the seed and Jesus says some falls on the pathway. Hard ground that's unplowed. In modern day terms you would imagine the joggers going around it.

It's just hard flat ground and the plow never goes through it. It's watched over by the birds. Satan sees good seed landing on the surface of some people's lives.

You've seen birds following a tractor or following a machine sowing seed in a field. They fly down and they pick off what they want and they fly away again. And the Word of God never actually gets below the surface of those lives.

It never reaches their hearts. It never does any good. It lands on their ears and then it's gone in a moment.

And Satan is watching over that kind of seed and he feeds off it. I remember preaching in a university once in England. It was in the course of an evangelistic mission for a week.

And there was a godless chaplain in that university. A man who was a wicked and evil opponent of the Gospel of God. And every night as people were gathering for the meeting this man would get a large pint of beer and he would come and he would sit by the door entrance to this big meeting room where we were having our mission.

And as people were coming in he would mock them. You're coming to hear this stuff are you? You're going to listen to this evangelical rubbish are you? Cheers! Let's drink to the people who have blown their brains out and following Jesus. And then he would go away during the preaching.

And then he would come back at the end. And as people were coming forward to see me after the meeting he would take down their names as he stood at the back and next morning go and see them. And warn them to have one of Satan's birds.

Trying to pick the seed out before it started to germinate. The amazing thing was I was to preach in the chapel in that university on the Sunday. And the passage they gave me to preach on was I really felt fired up and preached about the birds I tell you.

I've sat, stood, been in many evangelistic meetings and watched the seed of God's Gospel just landing on the surface. Jesus said it would happen. The people would get up from the meeting and shrug their shoulders and walk out.

And you've seen it happen. And isn't it true there are few things that reduce a person to tears more than that? To begin to respond to the love of Christ. To begin to understand what God is saying to them.

And they just walk away as if they couldn't care. It happens at OM conferences too. It isn't just among the unconverted.

There are people who can sit in these meetings and God's Word can land on the surface of their lives and by the time they go to bed they've forgotten everything they've heard. Isn't it possible for our own lives to become so hardened that God's Word can never get under the surface of our skin? We never say Lord are you trying to say something to me? You know your life can be so trodden down by the people around you that God's Word can never get in. And Satan will pick off whatever he can.

And then there are those that are like rocky ground. Jesus said those on the rock are the ones, verse 13, who receive the Word with joy when they hear it but they have no root. They believe for a while but in the time of testing they fall away.

They are the ones that get very excited and thrilled in a meeting like this. Maybe they enjoy the worship. Maybe they love the atmosphere in a conference.

Or they are people who get converted and seem to take an enormous great kangaroo leap into the kingdom of God. Jesus looks at them and says just two words. Nothing under the surface.

They're not drawing up anything themselves in the secret place. They don't have very much of the life of God in their own souls. There's very little scripture that they're feeding on in their own hearts that they've dug in private.

Won't be able to stand the heat, said Jesus. The sort of folk who survive well at an O.M. conference. Because someone else is doing the feeding all the time.

Someone else is giving you something from scripture to think about. What's it going to be like out on those teams? How are you going to be surviving in February? When the conference is just a distant memory. What's your root like? Do you know how to draw up into your own soul all that you need to survive? Jesus said when the heat is on, those people will wither.

They will become brown and fruitless. To see a young Christian, born again of the spirit of God, beginning to feed himself. A few months ago.

And there was on the Monday night of this week-long mission, a debate between the Christians and the atheists. And the chief atheist really spoke powerfully against the gospel. And then on the Tuesday night he came to one of the main mission meetings, sat right in the front row.

With his arms folded, I'm not going to believe any of this nonsense. And gradually his arms unfolded, his face dropped open and he began to listen. And he came up to argue.

And we argued after that meeting for probably an hour. And he listened and didn't argue. And then he came back the next night and got converted.

And I took him in a car home. And there were two Roman Catholics in the car, who wanted to talk about assurance of salvation. And this atheist said, of course you can have assurance of salvation.

He said, I've had it for 20 minutes now. And about two months later, I happened to be in the same city, in a mission in the city of Jerusalem. And this young chap volunteered to give his testimony.

It was the first time he'd ever spoken in public. To give his testimony like this. And he picked the city hall in Hull with 1,500 people in that night.

And he went on and on and on and on. And I just sat waiting. Telling me that he was going to give his testimony.

And he was telling people with an enormous smile on his face, the things he was discovering in God. I think he's going to be a preacher one day. But there is a fellow who'd come from darkness into light.

And he'd begun to get a root into the things of God. You remember what Psalm 1 says? It talks about the man who is truly happy and blessed. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither, whatever he does prospers.

That man's leaf never withers. He's always green. And he produces fruit regularly from time to time.

What is his secret? Verse 2. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on this law he meditates day and night. Jesus said there are some people that are just carried along by the crowd. And then he said there's a third group of people.

He speaks of them in verse 14. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. Where the first doesn't survive, the second doesn't mature.

I remember trying to grow tomatoes some years ago. I got a hold of some earth and I stuck it in a pot and I planted these tomatoes. Eventually, at the end of the summer, my plants had produced half a dozen small green bullets that I could have sold to the British Army.

I didn't really look after them. Jesus says there are some people in whose lives there's too much else growing. The effect of crowding out the seed of the word of God.

Now I'm concerned about some of you as you go home on Friday. Do you know what Satan wants to do? He wants to plant a whole bunch of tomatoes and a whole bunch of extra things in your life in the two weeks that you may be at home. I'm concerned about those of you that are not going home.

Those of you that are going to go to different ONs. What kind of bad attitudes and bad habits are you going to pick up? Maybe your life has been plowed by the word of God during these weeks of conference. And Satan will want to plant all sorts of weeds and bad attitudes in you.

Jesus says there are some who have worries, some who have too many riches, some who are too committed to their own pleasure. Do you have worries? Are you carrying things that you're scared about? Why don't you just, tonight, give them over to the Lord Jesus completely? Don't allow worry and panic about your future, about anything that's to come, to crowd out the effect of God's word. I had a beautiful illustration this evening as I was thinking about this message.

Someone arrived at the conference, and they were coming in carrying heavy bags. She'd been home to see her parents over the weekend. They live not far away.

And a fellow came up to her and said, you've got heavy bags, can I... He comes to you and says, you're carrying something that's a bit heavy. Can I carry it for you? Will you just hand it right over to me now? Don't you carry it any longer. Because if these kind of things stay in your life, they will crowd out the word of God.

And you won't mature. And we want to grow up to be like Christ. We want to be fruitful.

Jesus is saying the problems in people's Christian lives are basically either below the surface, or it's either a problem with your root in the secret place with God, or it's too many other things crowding you out the busyness of life. The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart who hear the word of God, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. The three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, all have this parable.

And they end it in three slightly different ways. Matthew speaks of the man who hears the word of God and understands it. That's in Matthew 13, verse 23.

And then Mark speaks of the one who hears the word of God and accepts it. That's in chapter 4, verse 20. And Luke here speaks of one who hears the word of God and retains it.

All three are necessary for real fruitfulness. Not just to understand what God is saying, but to accept it into your own being and your own soul, and then to retain it there. You know, a farmer's life is built around change.

He's expecting change. He's counting on change. He's looking forward to change.

He's planting so that there may be change. He plows so that there may be change and growth. General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, says, if you want to improve the future, you must start by disturbing the present.

Sometimes God does disturb us so that we may change inside. 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. Just the last couple of verses and then we'll end.

1 Corinthians 15, verse 20. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive, but each in his own turn. Christ the firstfruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him. Let me end with this one thought of Christ as the firstfruits.

A farmer plants a field. He waits and he watches. He deals with the weeds.

He scares away the birds. He watches his crop grow. And then when it's getting ready towards harvest time, he'll walk into the middle of the field.

He'll pull off a few of the heads of the grain that may be growing. And he'll run them through his hand to see what quality they're made of. Because they will be like the rest of the grain that's going to come.

He will examine the quality of the harvest that is coming. And what he pulls off first is termed the firstfruits. Now we read in scripture that Jesus has gone into heaven.

And God has looked at the quality of Jesus. He's seen what he has been like. And friends, you and I are to be like him.

When we are finally gathered in, in our thinking, in our behavior, in our living, in our language, we are to be like Jesus. Verse 49 of that chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

That is what God is doing. And he's drawing you into cooperation with him as a farmer over your own bit of land. But there is no harvest without plowing.

Not just plowing, there must be planting as well. And then persevering, says scripture. God will eventually see growing in our lives likeness to himself.

You know, men and women come to know God in a variety of ways. The Bible says that men know God through what God has done, the creation. They also know God through what God has said, the Bible.

But you know, men may also know God through what men have done in obedience to what God has said. All through scripture we see men and women coming to know God as a fruit of the obedience of God. Are you going to allow God to work in your mind, in your heart, in order that people may have a further evidence of the reality of God? It is a deeply thrilling thing to see people being changed by the word of God.

And a team where God is working through his word is a beautiful thing. It is a demonstration of the power of God. It is an evidence of the reality of God himself.

A marriage where God is working is an evidence of the reality of God himself. A life in which God is working by his word is an evidence of the reality of God himself. Cooperate with him in that planting of good seed in order that we might live lives that demonstrate the reality of our God.

Grant, Lord, protection for our own hearts in response to your word. Help us to consider how to respond to the things that you say to us day by day. Lord, you deal with the birds that circle around seeking to pick off the good seed.

Change us in our understanding, we pray. Give us a vision of what a privilege it is to be the planting of the Lord. Lord, give us things in your word that we can feed on here in this conference that we may be made strong in the weeks ahead.

For the glory and the pleasure of Jesus our Saviour.

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