

The Garden of the Heart

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February 24-25

Introduction

Aloha Church Ohana, it is so great to be in the house of the Lord today. Last weekend my family and I were camping out at Malaekahana and it was an amazing time. We were out in nature, no devices, good food, good friends, and late-night talks around the campfire. At one point I thought to myself, "This must be pretty close to life as God intended." Every where you looked there were families playing, laughing, eating, and enjoying God's creation. I thought of Jesus' promise in John 10:10,

¹⁰ "The thief comes only in order to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance [to the full, till it overflows]," (John 10:10 AMP).

Last week Pastor Mike kicked off our series on abiding in the Word. And he referenced a potentially controversial insight, that more Bible study will not necessarily equate to a transformed life. Remember that? He showed us how the Pharisees, who could recite large portions of the Torah (the written Word), failed to recognize Jesus (the Living Word) who was standing right in front of them. So more Bible information does not always equate to Christ-like transformation. Make no mistake, your life will not transform apart from the Word of God, but Bible learning alone will not transform you without a response on your part.

Take this passage for example. Many of us probably have John 10:10 memorized. We *know* that Jesus came to give us the abundant life — a life overflowing with joy. But how many Christians *actually* experience the abundant life Jesus is talking about? So there is a disconnect between what we *know* and our felt experience. Where's the disconnect?

Ancient Seed

In 1991, German hikers accidentally stumbled upon the remains of an ancient mummy frozen in ice while they were trekking through the Italian Alps. Ötzi, named after the discovery site where he was found, is believed to have lived during the Copper Age (3,300 BCE) and was discovered with an arrow protruding from his left shoulder indicating that he had been shot in the back.

But that wasn't the only discovery researchers made. Because of the freezing temperatures in which he was found, an autopsy also revealed Ötzi's diet consisting of seeds and fruit fragments found preserved in his stomach. In several instances, scientists are even able to germinate these ancient seeds and have them produce life thousands of years later.

Scientists have found seeds preserved for thousands of years in the permafrost in Norway, others tens of thousands of years old in Siberia, others in ancient Egyptian tombs, and these seeds still carry the potential for life today. What's the difference? They need to be cultivated in the right environment. Frozen in the Italian Alps or the deserts of Egypt these seeds don't stand a chance. But given the right conditions these seeds will produce a harvest even after thousands of years.

Jesus says the same thing is true for His Word. Given the right environment, these ancient seeds still have the potential to produce the abundant life today. The question is not, "Are the seeds still good?" There's nothing wrong with the seed. The question is, "Are our lives fertile ground for growth?" Ask yourself, "Is my life fertile ground for the Word of God to grow?"

The Garden of Your Heart

You see every one of us will produce fruit of some kind — good or bad. Why? Because every one of us is a garden. A garden? That's right. In the creation account, when it came time for God to create mankind, what was that super-special material He used? That's right, dirt.

7 “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into His nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being,” (Genesis 2:7 NIV).

You and I are essentially dirt! But we are dirt that is animated by God's Spirit! So we're special dirt.

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,” (Genesis 3:19 NIV).*

9

*“Remember that you molded me like clay.
Will you now turn me to dust again?” (Job 10:9 NIV).*

14

*“for He knows how we are formed,
He remembers that we are dust,” (Psalm 103:14 NIV).*

It was the philosopher Joni Mitchell who said,
*“We are stardust / Billion year old carbon / We are golden / Caught in the devil's bargain /
And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden”*

And it is actually very helpful to remind ourselves that we are living dirt because what does dirt do? It grows things. You and I will naturally produce fruit of some kind. It's in our nature. So your heart is a garden and it will grow things intentionally or unintentionally. The question is, what is the state of your garden? How does your garden grow?

[Overgrown Garden, Cultivated Garden]

The Parable of the Soils

Jesus gives us a word-picture describing the kind of heart that produces a bountiful harvest. Many of us know it as the parable of the soils. Pop quiz, how many types of soil does Jesus describe? Four types of soil representing four types of hearts. Of the four types of soil, how many are conducive for bearing fruit? So the overwhelming majority of hearts will be *un-*conducive to bearing fruit. This is so important to catch. Jesus is saying that most people have underlying heart conditions that make it impossible to bear life-giving fruit. How many of you have ever tried to grow a garden? How many of you just woke up one morning to find a beautiful, cultivated garden full of fruit and beautiful flowers? Of course not. Gardens take incredible amounts of cultivation and intentionality. The same is true with the kind of heart that produces life-giving fruit.

⁴ While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, He told this parable: ⁵ “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. ⁶ Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown,” (Luke 8:4-8).

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a farmer sowing seed. And the seed lands on four different types of ground — a path, rocky ground, thorny ground, and good soil. Each of these four types of ground could be a sermon of their own but today I’m going to focus primarily on the thorny ground because I think it will be especially helpful for the times we are living in.

The Seed

First, what does the seed represent?

¹¹ “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the Word of God,” (Luke 8:11).

The seed represents the Word of God (Biblical truth) going out into the world. Some seed fell along the path. What does the path represent?

The Path

¹⁵ “Some people are like seed along the path, where the Word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the Word that was sown in them,” (Mark 4:15).

¹² “Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved,” (Luke 8:12).

Jesus is saying some people who hear the Word are like a path. Picture a sidewalk or really packed down earth. Before the truth of God’s Word can even penetrate their hearts, Satan comes and snatches it away before it can have any effect.

There are several underlying heart conditions that can lead to severe cases of H.H.S. or (Hardened Heart Syndrome).

- **Sin:** Sin and a life of rebellion against God hardens our hearts against His truth. Continuous rejection of God’s truth can result in a calloused heart that is resistant to the message of the Gospel. In Matthew 13, Jesus said the people’s hearts were calloused and that they could neither hear nor see. Isaiah talks about how our sin cuts us off from God.
- **Lack of Understanding:** For others, the Word of God is not able to effectively penetrate their hearts and bear fruit because they lack any knowledge and understanding of God’s Word. This is why it is so important to continue to grow in our learning and understanding of God’s truth. Paul says that people can’t believe unless they have heard. Someone needs to tell them the truth.
- **Spiritual Indifference:** Some people are simply indifferent or apathetic towards spiritual matters. They may have heard the Gospel message throughout their life but remain unconcerned or uninterested in its message, leading to a heart that is unreceptive to the Word. Paul warns us of a time when people won’t put up with sound doctrine.
- **Pride and Stubbornness:** Pride and stubbornness can lead to a heart that is resistant to the Word of God. Some people think they have all the answers or are unwilling to acknowledge their need for God, preventing the seed of the Word from penetrating their hearts.

Maybe you're here today and you're believing for someone in your life who has a hardened heart to the Gospel. It is so important to remember that God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit can soften even the hardest of hearts. No one is beyond redemption and the good news is that there is hope for every type of soil in this story. So the path represents people whose hearts are hardened against the gospel. The next two represent people who are open but are ultimately not fruitful. Next, Jesus talks about the rocky soil.

The Rocky Soil

⁶ *"Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture," (Luke 8:6).*

¹³ *"Those on the rocky ground are the ones 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,"*
(Luke 8:13).

What is going on here? Well, unlike the path, the seed that falls on the rocky soil actually penetrates the heart and produces a small shoot. But Jesus' audience, who were mostly farmers and those living in an agrarian society would have understood the challenges that come with trying to grow crops in rocky soil.

Poor Water Retention:

The presence of rocks in the soil creates gaps and spaces in the soil structure allowing water to drain quickly. This makes it challenging for plants to access a consistent water supply. Jesus said the plants withered because they had no moisture.

Restricted Root Growth:

The presence of rocks in soil can also impede the downward growth of plant roots. In rocky soil, roots may struggle to penetrate the soil deeply to access water and nutrients. These shallow root systems make plants more vulnerable to environmental stresses, and they may struggle to anchor themselves securely. Jesus said they had no roots and could not survive.

The point is that there are obstacles hidden beneath the surface of the heart that are impeding spiritual growth and creating a double-mindedness in the believer. Sound like anything we've covered? What I believe the Lord said to me is, "Mark, these are strongholds."

A spiritual stronghold is a destructive thought pattern or belief that has a strong and persistent hold on an individual's life. Spiritual strongholds prevent us from going deep in our faith. They create a double-mindedness between what we see in God's Word and what we actually do. My Mom gave an amazing message on strongholds so I won't cover it again today but here is the link to that message if you want to review it. What is the solution for rocky soil? God has to uproot those things that are buried beneath the surface. So we need to contend with internal matters of the heart but, as we'll see next, we also need to contend with external factors.

Thorny Soil

⁷ *"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants," (Luke 8:7).*

²² *"The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the Word, making it unfruitful," (Matthew 13:22).*

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

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," (Luke 8:14).

Jesus describes the Word of God coming to another kind of person. And the Word of God penetrates their heart and begins to produce a crop but there are other seeds being deposited as well. And these other seeds begin to produce thorns, which grow up with the plant and choke it out.

The thorns in Jesus' parable represent life's worries, riches and pleasures. Life's worries is the Greek Word - merimna (μέριμνα), which means cares, anxiety, to be drawn in different directions, distraction.

And Jesus says there are people in this world who receive the Word of God, and it begins to bear fruit, but that fruit is ultimately choked out by the cares, worries, anxieties, and distractions of this world.

[Word of God Being Choked out by Thorns]

And again, Jesus' listeners would have understood the challenges of trying to grow your crop amongst thorns.

Competition for Resources: Thorns and weeds compete with crops for essential resources such as water, nutrients, and sunlight. This competition can lead to stunted growth and reduced crops.

Do you ever feel like you don't have the energy, the margins, the time, to do the things that matter most? I can recall a time when I just didn't have any emotional bandwidth for my kids, my wife or people at Church. All that time and energy was being diverted and devoured by things that didn't really matter.

Increased Pest Habitat: Thorns and weeds can create hiding places and habitats for pests, such as rodents and insects. These pests may not only damage the crops directly but can also spread diseases that affect the cultivated plants.

Amidst all of the binge-watching, doom scrolling, and impulse shopping, I wonder how many open doors we're creating for the enemy to come in. How many dark spiritual forces are hiding in the shadows of the shows we watch, the games that we play, and the things that we consume and that consume us.

Harvesting Challenges: Thorns and dense weed growth can make it difficult and labor-intensive for farmers to harvest crops.

Do you ever feel distant from God? Could it be possible that there are too many distractions and worries growing in the way for the Good Farmer to tend to you?

Weed Seed Bank: Many weeds produce a large number of seeds, creating a seed bank in the soil. This seed bank can persist for years, leading to ongoing weed infestations even after initial efforts to control them. It requires persistent and effective weed management strategies to reduce the weed seed bank.

The thing about worries, distractions, and anxieties is that they can continue to produce seeds in our lives that perpetuate negative fruit long after they've been removed. Ever notice that good plants like fruits or herbs take a lot of intentionality and care to grow but destructive plants like weeds and thorns don't need any help at all? These things just spring up overnight.

Digital Diet

Please don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not contending that we go back to a pre-internet age where we communicate via snail-mail and carrier pigeons. Modern technology has solved many of the challenges we face when it comes to sharing information.

1. It is high-speed and efficient (almost instantaneous)
2. It is highly accessible to large parts of the population

But there is a third criteria that is missing: How to make it harmless

For the first time in human history, we no longer face the challenge of getting information to most people on the planet. The problem we face today is an overabundance of information. Not everything we consume digitally is good for us. In fact we will naturally gravitate toward the unhealthy.

According to the USDA, the leading source of calories Americans consume is a category called, "Grain-based deserts", which includes pies, cakes, and cookies.

If this is true for the food we physically consume I wonder how much more could be said for the digital calories we consume. I'll be the first to admit that I am on a digital weight-loss journey. I was digitally obese. I would gorge myself for hours on video games, binge shows on multiple streaming platforms, and consume mindless hours of social media scrolling. And I had the numbers to prove it. My average daily screen-time use was 5-6 hours of mostly games, YouTube, and social media. I felt spiritually apathetic, relationally lethargic, and emotionally drained. Trying to fill up on recreational media is like being stranded at sea and trying to quench your thirst with sea water.

That's why the Spiritual Practices are so important. Practices like fasting, silence, simplicity, solitude and sabbath help to eliminate unwanted overgrowth from our lives and cultivate a fertile spiritual environment. Two books I highly recommend everyone read are *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* and *Practicing the Way*, both by Author John Mark Comer.

The first time Jalee and I did the 40-day recreational media fast it was pure torture. I felt like someone trying to give up caffeine, sugar, and carbs all at once. I had withdrawals, I was agitated, and I tried to fill that time with other mindless activities.

It's hard work trying to rewire your brain. Jalee likens it to a beach access to your favorite spot. But one day you get there and realize that erosion has wiped the beach away and now it is just dangerous rocks. So you need to find a safer spot. But the trail to that new beach is overgrown.

So you tread down the tall grass and make your way there. You do this day after day until a new pathway begins to form.

Every time we think a thought or do an action it becomes easier to think that thought or do that action and more difficult to not think that thought or do that action. After years of doing the same 40-day fast it became easier and we started to notice we were better people during that time. The change was so notable that we started doing the 40-day recreational media fast twice a year. This past 40-day fast we had a serious sit down. "Why would we ever go back?" I asked her. "Oh no" she said, "We have this conversation every year and every year we go back." "Yea but we are literally better people, better parents, better spouses, I'm a better Pastor when I'm on the fast. I can't justify going back." So this year, we decided to never go back. On the 41st day she said, "We can just keep the fast going all year." I told her, "No, the fast is over. This is the first day of the rest of our lives."

It took years, but I finally switched my palette for the things that fill me. I no longer feel the hunger pangs for recreational media. I check my IG one day a week to make sure I'm not ghosting people. I parent my smartphone, which means I put it to bed an hour before I sleep in a separate room and I don't wake it up until after my morning routine. It used to sleep next to me and be the first thing I reached for every morning. Here are my new numbers from after the fast.

[Screen time Usage]

But the biggest change has been in my emotional and spiritual energy. When people quit sugar or carbs I think they're crazy. But they always talk about the energy they feel, I get that now. I no longer view my kids and my wife as something I need to put up with so I can get to the main event of vegging out later. There is no later now. My family is the main event. There is nothing to compete with that time. And something has happened that I never thought possible. I'm actually filled after being with them. I used to need long periods of alone time just to recuperate from people. I realized now I wasn't really resting. Life has become so much more rich. We play legos, or board games, or go for hikes. Jalee and I have more conversations and spend more time together. And I thank Jesus because I really feel like I a living the abundant life that He promised. So I pray that you would tend to the garden of your heart because from it everything grows and all life flows.

Conclusion