

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

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

**July 5, 2020**

**The Sower and the Soils**

**Mark 4:3-9**

**Prayer:** *Father, I just want to thank you again for the blessing that this church is, to thank you for raising us up, for empowering us and for keeping us going and for the blessing of your word, Lord, what an incredible blessing that is. And Lord, today we are again looking into your word and we are focused on your cross and what you've done for us at the cross. And so Father, I just again pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would guide us as we again open up your book, as we learn from it and give us the presence of your Spirit to make it of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, once again it is the first Sunday of the month, again the day that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples for one last Passover supper as described in *Matthew 26*, which says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it*

to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." So Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. He then asked them to remember this sacrifice on a regular basis. It's what we call "the Lord's table," we do it once a month, and the way that we do it is we meditate on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, we then examine our consciences, we ask God's Holy Spirit to enlighten us, to point out areas that he's convicting us of sin, we confess the sins, and then we participate in the elements. *John 6:53* says: *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

Now we've been doing a study, we do this each month. We're studying the life of Christ. We're in the book of Mark. And if you remember where we last left Jesus, he had been battling on three different fronts. One front was with Satan and his minions who he had defeated in the desert but who now were dogging him through confrontations with demon-possessed people. The second

front was Jesus's own family who had become convinced that the pressures of fame and all of the crowds were driving Jesus insane. It was obvious that members of his own family at this stage did not accept Jesus as Messiah. And the third front was the religious leaders. These were the folks who adamantly refused to believe anything about Jesus as Messiah. And Jesus' confrontation with them led to his declaration about the unforgivable sin. The sin ostensibly was attributing Jesus' ability to cast out demons not to his obvious divinity, but to in their minds his intimate connection with Satan himself. Well this was the final straw for Jesus. Immediately following that confrontation with these religious leaders he changed his teaching style and he changed it dramatically. He chose to speak through parables. And these parables are really truths about the kingdom of God, they're accessible only to those to whom God had given eyes and ears to hear and see. To everyone else they were a complete mystery.

And so we're beginning at the fourth chapter of Mark's gospel to look at Jesus' parable, and this one is of the sower and of the seeds. It's a parable that he gave while he was at the height of his popularity. We pick it up at *Mark 4* starting at verse 1. It says: *Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at*

*the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: Now, you first have to picture this parable as it's unfolding. Picture this Jesus is in a boat, he's on a lake because the crowds are so huge they would crush him otherwise. And so he's approaching this huge and crushing crowd and he starts off by arresting everyone's attention. This is what he says. He says: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." "Listen!" Is what Jesus says at the very beginning of this, it's the equivalent of he's saying "behold," "pay attention." I mean he's clearly trying to get the attention of this huge group of people and then having done so he launches into a story about four different kinds of soil and a farmer sowing seeds. There's pathway soil, there's rocky soil, there's weedy soil, and then there's good soil. The farmer's making no distinction, he's just sowing his seed. We find it's the soil itself that determines what happens to the seed.*

Jesus' parable it's going out to three different groups of people: There's the crowd itself, there's his own sheep who are within the crowd, and there are his disciples who have basically organized and produced the crowd. And Jesus has something very different to say to each one. First off is the crowd itself and Jesus is absolutely mystifying to the crowd. I mean again you have to actually picture this as it's happening. There's this huge crowd assembled and they're anticipating these great words of wisdom from this great teacher whose reputation has exploded throughout all of Israel. And then you have the disciples who have organized this huge gathering. People are anticipating either a miraculous feeding, something he's done before, or perhaps maybe a series of astounding miracles as has been reported at many, many places beforehand. I mean at the very least there's going to be some great wisdom to impart. Jesus proves incredibly disappointing to the crowd, and he's disappointing at every level because what he said plainly makes no sense at all. I've mentioned before we hear this parable of the soils and we've got 2,000 years of Bible study, 2,000 years of teaching that supplies for us all of the missing parts. And in fact we're going to see that Jesus himself supplies the missing parts to his disciples right afterwards, but the parable itself makes no sense in its context. I mean Jesus calls the crowd to attention by saying, "Listen!" But then he goes to deliver a five-minute lecture on farming to an agrarian society made up of farmers

who clearly know everything that he's already saying. I mean what farmer doesn't know that hard-packed soil on a pathway is going to not receive a seed, that rocky soil will produce a short-lived crop that will quickly wither, that thorns and weeds will always choke off any growth of any crop and that good fertile soil is going to produce a bountiful harvest. "Tell me something I don't know" is probably what the crowd is thinking. Jesus delivers a bafflingly short little lecture and then he ends it with an equally baffling challenge in verse 9 he says: *Then Jesus says, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."*

I mean we hear Jesus and it makes perfect sense to us because he's speaking to the third group, he's speaking to the sheep. We know what Jesus said in *John 10*, he 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."* See we sheep have been given ears to hear, but at this point even his own disciples are missing those ears. I mean his disciples are just like the crowd, they're completely baffled with what Jesus is saying. Verse 10 says: *When he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.* And you know once again, Mark's gospel has just given us the bear bone facts. If you look at Matthew's gospel it kind of fills in the differences a little bit. He's describing the same incident in

*Matthew 13, and it says: The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Well, Mark's gospel is describing the disciples' problems in terms of their own ignorance and their curiosity but Matthew's gospel is describing the disciples as frustrated, as bewildered and both are true. But I can tell you it certainly seems that Matthew's account describes what the crowd is feeling like as well. And the disciples are responsible for organizing the crowd, and so prior to Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders, they'd seen him work miracles and feed huge crowds and teach brilliantly and now for arguably the largest gathering of all, he's making no sense at all. See the disciples are not yet aware of the privilege that they've been given. They have no more insight at this point than the crowds who are bewildered and so they're asking Jesus to explain himself and why he's speaking in riddles, and this is what Jesus tells them. This is verse 11: He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"*

You know the first time I ever heard those words they were shattering to my image of who Jesus was. I mean I always thought Jesus was desperately trying to break through to anyone and

everyone who would listen to him and that somehow or other he just didn't find the right words. He wasn't able to convince people that he was indeed the Messiah, and for all his efforts he wound up getting crucified. I had this image in my head of Jesus constantly knocking, knocking, knocking on the door of people's hearts, hoping that we would open the door and let him in. How stunningly backwards was my understanding of Jesus. He came to this planet as a king and he came as someone who had the task of bringing the kingdom to earth. And you know, one of the first thing that he did was he chose his disciples and if you follow how he chose them, you'll notice he just walked up to each person and he said, "You, follow me." He didn't ask permission. He didn't stand outside the door of their hearts knocking, knocking, knocking, hoping that they would open. He just said, "You come with me" and that settled it. But even those chosen ones had a hard time understanding. They couldn't figure out what kind of king or kingdom Jesus was talking about. And one thing that we have to understand, one thing that is very important as a take away from this parable is that no one outside of a movement of God's Holy Spirit is going to understand Jesus or his kingdom.

Last week we spoke about a confrontation that Jesus had with Nicodemus in John 3. We're all familiar with it. Jesus tells Nicodemus he needs to be born again and we've heard this phrase



spoken so many times we automatically connect it with spiritual rebirth. But put yourself in Nicodemus's shoes. He had no background like that. He had no idea of what being "born again" means. I mean he comes to Jesus because he's troubled by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit's been touching his heart and so he goes to him at night and he goes to him at night because he's afraid, I mean, he's Israel's premiere teacher. What's going to happen if he gets seen speaking to this ignorant rebel Jesus? The conversation with Jesus does very little to encourage him. I mean Jesus tells him something that on the surface is patently absurd. He says, Nicodemus, you need to be born again. I mean you can tell how bewildering this sounds to Nicodemus by his response. He says: *"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* And so we have this man Nicodemus, Israel's greatest teacher, he's profoundly as bewildered as the disciples. I mean this Jesus makes no sense at all to him. Well Jesus went on to tell him something that is absolutely critical for us to understand if we're ever going to accurately present the gospel, and it's something that Jesus's parable is all about. You see, Nicodemus thought that you could use reason and intellect and insight to figure out God and his kingdom, and so he's caught completely off guard when Jesus says to him, hey, Nicodemus, you need to be born again. And Jesus goes on to explain. He says this in verse 5:

*"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."*

And so what Jesus is telling Nicodemus is that flesh can only give birth to flesh, but Spirit alone can give birth to spirit. And that is to say that all the earthly things that flesh can provide like reason, like intellect, like insight, they're going to give you no help whatsoever, Nicodemus. You're not going to get it that way. You can only understand this miraculously through the intervention of God's Holy Spirit. And not only is Jesus telling Nicodemus that human reasoning will fail him utterly in trying to understand the kingdom, but he also tells him that the Spirit, just like the wind, it moves wherever it wishes. In other words God alone decides to whom all of this spirit talk is going to make sense. If he opens up your eyes and your ears, it will make perfect sense as it eventually did to Nicodemus, who wound up being one of the men who took Jesus' body from the cross. If God does not open your eyes and your ears, all the persuasion, all the insight, all the intellect, all the reasoning, all the arguments in the world will not do a thing to change your mind.

So Jesus didn't much care that he didn't make much sense to the crowd in his garden talk about soils and seeds. And the same way that he didn't much care that he didn't make much sense to Nicodemus in talking about being born again because he knew that it was God and God's gift of spiritual insight alone that would one day make his words make sense. Paul summed this up by saying on numerous occasions in *1 Corinthians 1:18*, he said: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Then in verse 23 he says: *But we preach Christ crucified: A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.* You see the cross is foolishness to Gentiles, it's a stumbling block to Jews and it's the sweet savor of life to those who've been given the privilege of soil that's been cultivated and prepared to receive the seed. The disciples were chosen but they were still extremely raw. And Jesus himself told them that his words are not going to really make sense until after he left and the Holy Spirit came down to make them make sense. In *John 14* he tells the disciples: *"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."*

So to go back to our parable, the disciples are sitting there as thoroughly bewildered as Nicodemus was. They're also probably

deeply embarrassed at Jesus' performance before the crowd. And so they're approaching Jesus and Jesus himself is astounded at their ignorance. In verse 13 he says: *And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."*

So Jesus is in the back room with the disciples and he gives them three very critical pieces of information about the story. Number one, he identifies the sower as someone who brings the word of God; secondly, he describes the seed as the word of God; and thirdly, the soils, well they're the hearts of the people who receive the

word. And he goes on to describe them, he says the pathway soil is that hard-packed heavily traveled soil that everybody has stomped on, it's rock hard. It's the heart of the cynic, it's the heart of the mocker. And the seed of the word lands on that hard-packed soil and it gets gobbled up by Satan almost immediately. The rocky soil is a heart that hears the gospel and it responds positively, but as soon as the heat of persecution and tribulation comes through, it shrinks and it withers away.

A story is told of a time way back in the Soviet Union when Christianity was an extremely dangerous faith to believe in. There was one day a small church was disrupted by three soldiers who burst into the service with guns drawn saying, "anyone who wants to reject Christianity and save themselves, do it right now and get up and leave." When over half the church stood up and left, the three soldiers revealed themselves as believers. They said, "Before we joined you, we wanted to see who's real and who's not." Well those folks who got up, those folks are what we would call rocky soil believers, and that is to say most of them were not believers at all. There may have been some like Peter in that crowd, I mean, Peter after all denied Christ and repented, so there may have been some, but by and large these were the rocky soil believers, folks who as soon as the going gets tough, they get going. And we're not anywhere near where the Soviet Union was but I wouldn't be the

slightest bit surprised if active persecution becomes the lot of believers in the next few years. I mean anyone who's paying attention at all has just got to see that along with our deteriorating culture is a growing antipathy towards the gospel itself. I mean I've never let that bother me in the past because I think that's just the natural state of every non-believer. I say this all the time I even say it to non-believers when we get into a conversation, I said, look, if you're not a believer you have a gut-level hatred for the things of God that you don't even know that you have. People are astounded at that. But I just quote Jesus. Jesus described that. He very clearly said this in *John 15*. He said: *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."* And you know if you doubt what Jesus is saying, I have a practical little test to prove this theory. Just speak the name of Jesus out loud. I mean you can say the name of Jesus in public and nobody will bat an eye as long as you say it disrespectfully. You can say "Jesus!" You can say "Jesus Christ" and you can say, "Christ" and as long as you say it with some measure of anger and disgust, nobody's going to bat an eye, despite the fact that God, saying God's name in vain is such an offensive thing to God, it's got one of his own commandments. *Exodus 20* says: *You shall not take the name of the*

*LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.* Mock that commandment out loud and you will get a complete pass from everyone. If, however, you say "the Lord Jesus Christ" or "My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" which is something that Franklin Graham says all the time, which is why I love him in spite of the fact that lots of people hate him, he's quick to say, "My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," you'll find out that if you say that, folks are put off by something they can't even identify. And more and more today folks are identifying with and growing far more comfortable with their hatred for Christ and his kingdom. And so rocky soil believers are those who are just finding the cost of believing in Christ, it's just too high.

The thorny soil believer is a person who hears and understands the gospel, but he's got a divided heart. He really does love the kingdom and he tries to maintain his love for his kingdom along with his love for the world, and as it inevitably happens, the world wins. Thorny soil believers are folks who start out passionately embracing the kingdom but then they find they now have to make a series of choices between the world and the kingdom and so they find themselves trying to bridge the gap between these two kingdoms with one foot in God's kingdom and one foot in the world. And as the distance separating the kingdoms becomes more and more apparent, they either jump to one side or the other or they just

fall through the middle. They're like the guy with one foot in the boat and one foot on the dock and the boat keeps drifting away. And pretty soon the guy knows he's going to have to make a choice between the boat and the dock or he's going to wind up in the water. Well the thorny soil heart is a heart that makes the leap into the wrong kingdom. Jesus himself described the dilemma of being between two choices. He said this in *Matthew 6*: "*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.*"

And finally we have the seed of the word that lands on good soil. Now again you have to understand, the soil isn't good in and of itself because God makes it very clear in *Romans 3:10*: *As it is written, "None is righteous, no, not one;"* that all of us are fallen rebels, all of us are sinners. No, this soil is good only because God has prepared and nurtured the soil, plowing it, making it ready for the seed. This is a heart that responds to the king and his kingdom. This is a heart that wants to extend the kingdom sometimes thirtyfold, sometimes sixtyfold, sometimes a hundredfold.

Well, so what are we to make of this parable? Well there's good news in the parable and there's bad news. I mean the bad news is that three of the four soils represent people who are not citizens



of the kingdom, but only one of those three makes it obvious right from the start. And it's the pathway soil is a heart that's so hardened that it resents the sower, it resents the seed and rejects it in a very clear and obvious way. What is truly frightening is that two out of three of the other soils, for a time they give ample evidence that they might be kingdom citizens when they are not. I mean, the rocky and thorny soil believers are people who for a time seem like the genuine item and what it takes is either persecution or worldliness to show that their conversion was never genuine. And what is truly bad news and is altogether sobering is the fact that according to Jesus, his church is filled with rocky and thorny Christians. Jesus referred to them in another parable as "tares." See, Jesus wanted us to know that his church was going to be made up of a mixture of genuine believers and false believers. The genuine believers Jesus referred to as wheat, the false believers were called tares. Jesus said the church is like a field, a field of wheat in which an enemy sowed tares along with the wheat. And a tare is the perfect weed for an enemy to sow because it looks just like a wheat plant until it gets to the time where it's supposed to bear fruit and then it reveals itself as an imposter. Jesus tells us the story in *Matthew 13*. He says: "*So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.'* The servants said to him,

*'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'* Like I said, there's a lot of bad news in this story that Jesus is telling us but he's telling us the parable for a reason. See he wants us aware as kingdom citizens of what is real and what is not real. And again along with the bad news comes some really wonderful news. Verse 20: *"But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."*

So the question that I want to ask us this morning is do you realize, do you realize the gift that you have been given? I mean we're the seeds that have been sown on good soil despite the fact that every one of us was bitterly opposed to the kingdom of God from birth. For reasons known to God and God alone, the very same thing that mystified and bewildered Nicodemus applies to us. Jesus said, *"The wind blows where it wishes."* And he was referring to the Holy Spirit choosing to go in whatever direction it wanted and for some unknown but unbelievably fantastic reason, the Spirit of God has chosen to land on you and me, that is if you're someone who's been given good soil for the seed to land in. God's very

clear in telling us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We have no false notions that somehow or other we were able to make our soil acceptable for the seed, I mean, it's all an incredible gift of God.

I want you to think for a second. Just picture being in the room when Jesus is speaking to his disciples who are bewildered. They just heard this presentation, they don't get it. They're saying, "Jesus, why'd you do that?" Listen to the words that Jesus says to them and think about that as applying to you. *He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything has been said in parables so that, 'They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding: Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"* You see, for some fantastic reason he chose the stony ground of our hearts to turn into good soil for that seed. And so as we're approaching communion, I just want us to consider the grace that has been showered on you and me. I mean I think of people who go all over the world pursuing whatever they think is truth. We spend millions and millions in false religions whose whole lives is consumed with something that God says I've given it to you. Consider that.

Consider also God's warning about taking communion. This is from 1

Corinthians 11. It says: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* And I say this every month, I warn every one of us. I say communion is an extremely serious undertaking and to enter into it in an unworthy manner is to court disaster. God has killed people in the past who did that. If you're not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King, if you haven't by faith trusted in Christ as your Savior, if you first need to be reconciled to your brother or sister before you bring the sacrifice of your life to the altar, then don't participate. Instead use the time to ask God to open your eyes and bring you fully into the kingdom. I mean if you don't feel right about participating, then err on the side of caution and get right with God first.

And as I always say, I mean the devil is right there looking at the details and he's got a playbook for everybody and so you could also make the mistake of thinking that you have to be absolutely flawless or you're rejected and that too is a mistake. If you're a child of the King, it doesn't mean that you never fail, it means

that you have a gift, an incredible gift that no one is ever capable of earning by being good. And I quote this quote from Dane Ortlund every month. I hope each of you have it memorized because it so sums up the attitude of kingdom citizens. It says: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." And it also means that when we fail, we are aware that we have sinned because we have the Spirit of God that's now inside us, he's the one convicting us. That's where the grief comes from and we grieve as children who know that we have a Father who longs to forgive us, who says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* It also means that we understand that when we do sin, we have an advocate in heaven, somebody speaking on our behalf. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* And this is the whole point, this is the point: Because we have Jesus' righteousness, it was purchased for us at the cross and all we have to do to access it is put our faith in Jesus Christ. We do that and his righteousness becomes our righteousness. We stand before God not clothed in our filth but in his righteousness. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus has purchased for you. I mean he lived the life we were supposed

to live and he died the death we all deserved to die so that we could be made worthy of heaven. And so consider the gift of the good soil, that cultivated soil just ready for the seed that God has already done in you.

Take a moment. Take the elements. I know some of our younger people were saying this tastes like Styrofoam. It's not the point. It's the symbol. I certainly wouldn't want to be walking around eating this for nutrients. That's not what Jesus was asking the disciples to do. He was asking them to participate symbolically and that's what we're doing right now, we are symbolically taking of this element. *1 Corinthians 11:23* says: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* So take, and eat.

Well, I said there was bad news and good news in what Jesus was telling us in the parable of the sower and the soils. Of course the bad news is that two of the three false believers can easily give every appearance that they were at one time members of the kingdom. I mean that alone should give each of us pause as we try to examine ourselves to see if Christ is really within us. The good news is that we have been privileged to have God grant us good

soil that receives the seed. The secrets of the kingdom have been given to you. That's mind boggling to me. And along with the seed comes the illuminating and convicting power of the Holy Spirit. I mean if you're one of the sheep, God's Holy Spirit is in you and he will give you no peace until you get right with him. And you know, if you're not one of his sheep, you're not going to care. I mean it's really that simple. The Spirit's not there. But there's other good news in this parable and it has to do with the very practical side of presenting the gospel. You see, Jesus was profoundly bewildering in the way he presented the good news of the kingdom to the crowd and to his disciples. And he could afford to be. I mean he was knowing the Holy Spirit would make his words understandable because it's the Holy Spirit who plows up the previously hard soil that each of us is born with. And it's God's Spirit alone who takes the gospel from foolishness and brings it to wonderful. And here's where this becomes good news for you and for me. Here's a take away from this parable. You see, God does not expect us to convert anybody because that's an impossible task. That's the Holy Spirit's job. And what he does expect from us is a willingness to sow the seed of his word. I mean, I know for myself the first ten years of my Christian life I thought the person I was sharing the gospel with was either going to heaven or hell depending how effective I was at sowing that seed. I thought my presentation of the gospel was a miniature version of Jesus kind of

standing there and I was knocking, knocking, knocking desperately on the door of their hearts pleading for them to open that door. And it led to a desperation that I had no idea was completely uncalled for. You see, all God wants from us is an honest sharing of the good news because he knows the hearts of every single person we speak to. He knows the pathway soil, he knows the rocky soil, he knows the thorny soil, and he knows the soil that he's done the cultivating in already. And the good news is that God is capable of turning any soil into a soil that is ready, willing and able to welcome the seed of the word and let it grow.

The apostle Paul made it crystally clear that our task is not harvesting, it's sowing. In *2 Corinthians 2* he said: *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?* This is Paul telling you very clearly what your job is. Your job is to be the aroma of Christ, and he says for some, that aroma will have the stench of death and no amount of pleading or reasoning or cajoling or threatening will ever be able to make that soil take on the seed of the word. But to others, to others the aroma of Christ is going to



be a fragrance from life to life. He says, "*and who is sufficient for these things*" because none of us are. That's God's job. All you have to do is be willing to open your mouth and share what Christ has done for you and God can do the rest.

I mean occasionally you and I may get the privilege of harvesting. But even there Paul tells us it's the Holy Spirit at work and not human effort. You know when the Corinthian Church started picking sides declaring who they were most loyal to, Paul put them down immediately and he put them down by saying this, he said: *What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. See, you and I can plant, you and I can water but only God can make it grow. And now is the season for sowing seed. I mean I don't personally remember in my entire life when there's been a time filled with more fear, doubt, and uncertainty than there is today. Never before has there been such an opportunity for us to preach the good news. I mean now is the time to realize that our task is actually our privilege and that the fields are surely ripe but the laborers are incredibly few.*

So as you take the cup, I want us to take a moment to just ask, Lord, who do you want me to sow the word to? I want you to ask God that very specifically and I want you to ask God to put somebody in your life that you can bring that good news to. As we take the cup, *1 Corinthians 11* says: *In the same manner he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."* So take, and drink.

Well at this time I typically have a section that I call heart, hands and feet where we have a practical remembrance of just what it means to remember the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want to use this time to speak about what's going on right here, right now in our church today. And over the past few months our elders have had some very, very spirited discussions about how the church should be responding to the lockdown and the gradual reopening. And Tom Brozycki made a point that really resounded with me. And what he said is that all of the elders see as the gravest of dangers here, he said this, he said, the government is never going to say, "We forbid you from worshiping Christ, we forbid you from going to church." That's not going to happen, at least not in our near future. They're just not going to do that because they don't have the power to do that and the people are not going to accept that. But what Tom said and what is absolutely true is what they will do

is they will put enough hoops in the way in terms of rules and regulations so that the sheep don't wind up deserting like those rocky soil sheep in Russia, they just wind up wandering away.

I thought of two very different people that we've spoken of here at Grace. One many of you knew personally, one we only know as somebody who's famous. The one that we all knew personally was Rosie Zahorski. The one who's famous was Joshua Harris. First let me tell you a little bit about Rosie. I said it before and I believe it, I said when we get to heaven, we're going to find out she's a big shot. I really believe that. Because down here she was an extremely simple person, she lived by herself, she worked in a factory, later in life she became a janitor, just always upbeat, always just the love of the Lord just bubbled out of her. She died of a horrible genetic disease called Huntington's chorea. But the one incident that stands out in my mind with Rosie, I've mentioned it before was one of those days in winter when the church had closed down because of a snowstorm and somehow or other, Rosie had just slipped through the cracks. We had forgotten to get in touch with her because she had no access to the internet or anything like that. So unbeknownst she trudged through the snow, came to the church and found it locked and closed. And later on she was telling me this, actually she was chewing me out which deservedly so, and I said, "So, Rosie, what did you do?" And she looked at me

and she said, "Well, I went looking for another church." I kind of like that and she looked at me and said, "I have to worship." And I thought to myself, you get it. You really get it. And Rosie's exactly what we're talking about when we're describing seed landing on good soil.

On the other hand we have Joshua Harris. Now we know Joshua Harris because we used his book extensively. He wrote a book called *Why Church Matters*, one of the best introductions to what church is all about that I've ever read. We give it out to all of the new members. Joshua's a mega church pastor who's a conference speaker, who was an author who announced a while back that he was renouncing his Christian faith while simultaneously divorcing his wife. And at this moment in time he is the perfect example of what a thorny soil believer is. Now mercifully that status could change at any moment and the possibility's always there as long as Josh Harris is alive. But right now he has left the faith, he's left the gospel, he's left his wife, and he's starting a consulting business.

So you might ask, okay, what does that have to do with us? What does that have to do with the lockdown? What does that have to do with COVID-19 and sheep simply wandering off? Well, it has to do with the enemy's primary weapon, and that weapon is incrementalism. You see, Joshua Harris didn't just decide one day that he was going

to abandon his family and his faith. He did it over a long period of time in tiny steps, the way all thorny soil believers do. And it's a grave mistake to think that can't happen to me. You know when the church first shut down, was it 14, 15 weeks ago, we were broadcasting live at 9:30 on Sunday mornings, people were gathering in their homes as community. You know, one thing that we get with You Tube, and thanks to Matt and all the hard work that he does on that is that it gives you all kinds of metrics, shows you what's going on. And what we've seen is this slow drift from meeting at 9:30 to collectively worship in individual houses, to watching the service at a more convenient time, to forgetting to watch the service, to essentially becoming sheep in the process of just wandering away. And believe me, I understand how easy it is to move in that direction. But let me tell you I also see the enemy's incremental hands slowly and ever so gently pushing the sheep out of the fold. I mean we find it incredibly convenient to just flip on the TV and not have to pile in the car, not have to deal with people and eventually we're going to find it incredibly convenient not to turn on the TV and just go about our business turning Sunday into any other day of the week. And so when I look at the difference between Rosie and Josh, I see a difference in trajectories. Now Rosie's was toward the kingdom and Josh's was away and all it took was time. That's precisely how incrementalism works. And what concerns myself and the elders greatly is the

trajectory of the sheep.

I think one of the most disconcerting things to us as elders is the fact that we've reopened and a number of the sheep are very unhappy about how we've gone about it. We understand that. Listen trust me, we get it. I mean we're still not going to see things alike as we're not going to agree as what is the wisest way to do church. I also know that there's plenty of people who have serious health concerns that are keeping them from attending, and believe me, I understand. That's totally legitimate. But what concerns me and the elders are the folk who have decided they're not coming for reasons not related to health or safety but over unhappiness over how we've decided to reopen. Believe me, I've heard it. We've heard the folks who are unhappy about mask wearing and temperature taking and waiver signing and singing restrictions or anything else. And we know a number of you are not coming to worship not because of safety issues but over the sheer annoyance of all the hoops that we put in front of you to jump through. Can I say it again? I get it. I mean we really get it. But let me say something about someone else who gets it. It's the enemy of our souls. He's not stupid and he's anxious to use any and all means to help the sheep simply wander away.

Now I'm a big fan of those wildlife shows, I watch Nat Geo all the

time and I'm always looking at scenes in Africa where you see this huge flock or herd or whatever it is and you see the lions attacking, and they attack at all different sides and the goal is to peel one away from the flock, get it away. It's the herd but it's a flock. Once you've got it away you can devour it at your leisure. But don't think for a second that that is not what the enemy is up to. I mean Peter said the devil is a roaring lion seeking to devour souls. And what he has found is a stumbling block called COVID-19. I mean it's not that different from the problem that the apostle Paul had in the Corinthian Church over meat that was offered to idols. Back then there was meat that was sold in the marketplace that had previously been part of some temple's idol worship and there's people who have said we want nothing to do it, and others said, hey, it's meat offered to idols, it's meat offered to nothing, we can eat that. Paul stepped into the middle of the argument and he said people are free to disagree about whether or not they should eat the meat but where they are not free is about whether or not eating that meat causes somebody else to stumble. And this is what Paul said about meat. He said: *For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it*

*is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

You see, Paul was extremely careful that we not use the freedom we have to make someone else sin against their conscience, and we need to be just as careful. I mean you can have all kinds of reasons why you don't see eye to eye with how we as elders have decided to go forward. And once again, we get it. And you are free to decide whether or not you are joining us physically, whether it's wise health wise and safety wise, but you are not free to decide that the elders didn't do it the way I want, therefore I am not coming. You are far too important to this body for that. And what I'm asking for is each of us look at the big picture. You may be able to handle the freedom of doing what you're doing without it being a problem but you also may be stumbling someone who does not yet have that freedom. And I'd be asking if you'd be willing to ask yourselves, am I willing to put up with these restrictions? Am I willing to put up with the same restrictions that I find in Wal-Mart or Shop Rite? I mean is the gathering of God's people as important? More important? Of supreme and eternal importance? I mean I think we all know the answer. I conclude with *Hebrews 10:24: And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of*



*some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Let's pray.*

*Father, again, I, myself, the elders, we just sense the enemy's just licking his chops, enjoying these moments sowing up discord. I don't know of a single church that doesn't have all kinds of discord. It's all the same, every church. I just see the enemy's hand at work. And, Lord, we know the ultimate goal of the enemy is to peel the flock, peel the individual away from the flock, and he does that incrementally. And so Lord, I'm praying first of all that each and every one of us would recognize how critically important it is to make every effort to be here, and if you are compromised in any way, we understand. Please, this is not trying to make you feel guilty. We're speaking about folks to whom that is not an issue at all. And so, Lord, I just want to pray for each and every one of us in this body. I pray that you would give us loud and clear instruction as to what you want from us, how you want us as elders to go forward, how you want us as congregants to go forward, and I pray that in the end you would be the one who is glorified in all this. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*