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The Parable of the Soils - The Distracted Heart
Matthew 13:1-23
January 29, 2017, Jeff Germo

This is number four in our series on *The Parable of the Soils*. In this parable Jesus used a metaphor from agriculture, as he often did, to shake up the preconceived notions of some of the people in his audience. The crowd was diverse. There were some, such as his family, who thought he was crazy. They, of course, changed their tune later when Jesus rose from the dead and they finally realized that he truly was the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

Also, in the crowd were some of the hard-hearted religious leaders who had a habit of following Jesus around trying to trap him up. And there was a mix of other regular folk like you and me, people who might have been involved in business, or some who would have worked for someone else for a living, and who may have, perhaps been struggling to make ends meet. There would have been housewives trying to juggle family life with everything else that was going on around them. The crowd that followed him was huge, so you can imagine how diverse it would have been.

His goal in telling this parable was to help his listeners, wherever they were at in their spiritual journey, get unstuck and live fruitful lives. With that in mind, I am going to paraphrase the parable for us and then focus in on the part we are looking at today.

So, responding to what was happening around him and who was in the crowd, Jesus says there was a farmer who sowed some seed in his field. As he was scattering the seed it fell on various soil types. Some fell on hard packed soil and the birds came along and ate the seeds. Others fell on shallow rocky soil. Those seeds quickly sprang to life but then died because the soil was too shallow for the roots to grow deep.

Other seeds fell on ground that was infested with weeds which sucked the life out of the soil and choked out the life of the plant. Still other seeds fell on good soil that had the rocks picked, the weeds plucked and ground tilled. That seed matured and produced a bountiful crop.

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Today we are just going to look at one of the soil types. This time it is the soil that was infested with weeds. Listen closely to this. And remember, at any given time in our lives this could be me or you, so as always, when we read Scripture we should be asking ourselves honestly, "Is this me right now?" Resist the temptation to judge the condition of someone else's heart.

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Matthew 13:22 (NLT)

22 The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced.

So, what is Jesus saying here? The seed, Jesus says, represents God's Word, or the Gospel. The seed falls on soil that is infested with weeds. The weeds take over the space where the seed was planted and suck the life out of the soil so there is no room for it to grow. Notice, Jesus didn't say that it died. He said it didn't produce any fruit. There was no growth.

Jesus says the weeds represent two things that distract those who initially receive God's Word, causing them to stop growing, ***"...the worries of this life and the lure of wealth."***

I could tell you story after story of people who might fall into one of these two categories, people who happily received the truth of Jesus and then life took over and distracted them from their initial call to follow him, and consequently, their maturity was stunted.

I could do that, but I'm not going to. Let me, instead, tell you about how this has happened to me in my past.

I felt the call of God on my life as a young man. Let me rewind to a time before that call, though. I got kicked out of school, I think when I was sixteen or seventeen. I left home for the first time then and headed to northern BC to work in the oil field. I can still remember vividly standing on the doorstep before heading out. My dad stood there and we had a short conversation. I was the prodigal son and he the loving father. He told me that he had felt the call of God to enter the ministry when he was a young man, but felt like he had let the busyness of life distract him from pursuing that call.

My dad recounted the story of God's promise to Abraham that he would make him into a great nation, but the only son he had from Sarah was Isaac. And it was through Isaac that the promise was fulfilled. He said, "Son, maybe it's the same with me. I missed that call. I believe, perhaps, one day God will call you. Listen for that call. Don't miss it."

I rolled my eyes and shrugged my shoulders and said, "Yeah, whatever," and caught the Greyhound bus and started my long journey north. That was in about 1977.

To make a very long complicated story sound simple and short, seven years later, I answered Jesus' call to follow him. I also felt the Holy Spirit nudging me to go to Bible College and pursue full-time ministry. Fast forward again through a very windy circuitous route, I sensed another call from God. This time it wasn't a call *into* ministry, but a call *out* of ministry. As strong and loud as the call I first felt from God to enter ministry was, this was volumes louder. It was almost deafening. That was 1991, seven years later.

What I sensed from the Lord, loud and clear, was that I was not ready for ministry. It was devastating for me to hear that because "ready for ministry" was my middle name. *I was the* minister. I was the guy who could minister to everyone else, but nobody could minister to me because I was strong. I was independent. I was capable.

In my eyes, there weren't many things I couldn't do, a very dangerous mindset for someone entering into ministry. I didn't realize it at the time, but Jesus was putting me in school. Not the institutional brick and mortar kind, but simply walking with him through some hard stuff. It would be seven more years studying with him before I would get to the place where I realized I wasn't the answer to everyone's problems.

In those seven years the distractions came. I didn't know what to do with my life, so I started a construction business. I did pretty good. The business grew. I hired more and more employees. The lure of wealth called to me and distracted me from the life Jesus wanted for me. I was building my empire in an attempt to justify my existence and fill the void and longing I felt in my heart. I needed something to help me feel important.

During this time I did not grow. To tell you the truth, I don't think I even knew what growth was. Ruthie and I would go to church every Sunday. Sunday morning I would pick up my dusty Bible from the end table in our living room and religiously attend church. I even led one of our worship teams. I was on the board of the church. I was seen as a leader. But, I wasn't growing. After church I would bring my Bible home with me again and put it back in its place on the end table to collect more dust.

Fast forward again to near the end of that seven year period. I'll spare you the details, but through one of the many typical Calgary boom and bust cycles I lost most of my business and ended up a broken man. That was one of the hardest times in my life.

Ruthie and I were on our way to church one morning. My business was whittled down to me and one other faithful employee. I said, "Maybe I should just forget about ministry altogether and be happy with this little business and stop trying to build my empire." We prayed about that on the way to church and felt God's peace come over us.

The next week, seven years after I felt like God had called me out of ministry, I got four calls from different ministries asking if I would like to apply for positions. I hadn't sought them out. In the previous seven years there had been no offers.

I felt like God was telling me that I had finally graduated from kindergarten and I was ready to start growing. I was done being distracted. I was starting to learn through a very painful process that the things I was trying to build my life on were on very shaky ground. It was time to really follow Jesus no matter what and allow him to change me. More school. I'm still in school with Jesus to this day.

In this *Parable of the Soils*, Jesus told his apprentices that there are two main things that will distract someone from fruitful growth,

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"...the worries of this life and the lure of wealth." I had been distracted by both. When that happens, God's Word, the Gospel becomes very small and worries of life and the lure of wealth becomes large.

How about you? What has your life been like since you received Jesus? Have you been growing? Can you and those around you see that you are becoming more loving, as you courageously and humbly allow Jesus to change you? Are you practicing being more joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, and all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, as you learn from Jesus?

Maybe you haven't been distracted by the lure of wealth, or building your empire, or making a name for yourself like I was. Maybe for you, it's the other things Jesus says squeeze his life out of us. Maybe it's just trying to survive. You feel like you have no time to think about growing because, there are bills to pay, and kids to worry about, and relationships that are difficult, and just so many things to worry about that you have no time to think about how you reacted to this or that person and hurt them with your words or behaviour or whatever. You are so busy filling up all the margins in your life that you have no time to think or let the Holy Spirit speak to you from the Word.

Jesus said in this parable that there are two basic things that distract us from the life Jesus has called us to, **"...the worries of this life and the lure of wealth."** I am guessing that most of us here can relate to at least one of these distractions and many, or most of us can relate both.

In Matthew 6, in his famous *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus taught his disciples about the futility of worrying. He actually linked the pursuit of wealth with worrying, just like he does in *The Parable of the Soils*.

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Matthew 6:19–34 (NLT)

¹⁹ "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Down a couple verses he continues by saying if you have wealth as your life goal, you make money your god.

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24 “No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

It's one or the other, money, or God, not both. Then he links the pursuit of wealth with worry.

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25 “That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?

He continues by telling his listeners to look at the birds and the flowers and how God cares for them and they aren't filled with anxiety.

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30 And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? 31 “So don't worry about these things, saying, ‘What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?’

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32 These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs.

It used to be, when I read this last verse where Jesus says, ***“These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers...”***, I assumed Jesus was speaking about those who didn't believe in God, or who hadn't received him. I see it differently now. He is actually referring to me at times. There are times when I live like I don't believe that my Heavenly Father is can be trusted.

What God wants to do in our hearts through all our lessons in life is for us to learn that he is indeed trustworthy - no matter what we are going through.

We often know intellectually that we can trust God, but when it comes right down to it, when we are facing whatever hard thing we are facing, that intellectual belief hasn't filtered down to our heart yet. So, in actuality we don't truly believe that God is trustworthy. We may know it through what we have read in the Bible or heard from other people, but we haven't learned it experientially, so it has not become a true heart belief yet. That is God's goal for us, that we would know, not just in our heads, but in our hearts, and then live based on that reality. When that truly happens anxiety will leave.

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33 Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. 34 “So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Don't worry about anything. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and keep doing the next right thing. Keep walking with Jesus. Keep learning from him. Let him change your heart as you go through whatever hard thing you are going through. Allow him to rule your heart. That is what it means to seek the Kingdom of God.

Let me ask you something. For those of you who would call yourselves, “Christian” (and I am assuming that in a crowd this large there are some here who would not be in that camp yet. You may be here just investigating what this church stuff is all about), but for those of you who would call yourselves “Christian,” when you received the forgiveness of God through Jesus who paid the penalty for your sins by his death on the cross, did you say “Yes” to following Jesus, or to agreeing with certain creeds and doctrines?

The reason I am asking that is because there is no power in following creeds and doctrines. There is power in Jesus. Jesus is the one who saves, not the idea of him. Jesus is the one who defeated sin and death by rising from the dead, not a theological or doctrinal idea *about* him. Jesus is the one who will change us. It is his power in us that both saves and changes us. He changes us as we follow him in his kingdom kind of life.

When I was thinking and praying through this parable on the part we are focusing on today, the weeds that distract from growth, another story from the Gospels came to mind. The Gospel writers tell us that the main thrust of Jesus' ministry was to go around to all the towns and villages preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand and to follow him in it. Everywhere Jesus went he beckoned people to follow him in the Kingdom.

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Luke 9:57–62 (NLT)

⁵⁷ As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”

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⁵⁹ He said to another person, “Come, follow me.” The man agreed, but he said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ But Jesus told him, “Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God.”

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⁶¹ Another said, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.” ⁶² But Jesus told him, “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Now, before we take too close a look at this passage we need to fill in some of the context. Luke says that as Jesus was walking along with his disciples someone made an audacious promise to Jesus that he would follow him wherever he goes. Luke gives no information about who this man is.

Matthew, in chapter 8:19, the parallel account of this story, gives us some detail that puts another twist on the context. Matthew tells us who it was that said they would follow Jesus wherever he went.

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Matthew 8:19–20 (NLT)

¹⁹ Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” ²⁰ But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”

It was one of the teachers of religious law. That puts a new spin on this doesn't it?

Jesus knew his heart. His answer to the man seems a bit obtuse. The man claims he will follow Jesus anywhere. Jesus answers, ***“Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.”*** Huh? What does that have to do with anything? What was Jesus saying?

What he was saying was, “Will you really follow me? Do you know where I am going to lead you? I am not calling you to just believe certain things about me. I am not calling you to simply agree with certain creeds and doctrines.”

Notice that Jesus calls all three people, who say they will follow him, to let the Kingdom of God rule their hearts. What does the kingdom of God mean?

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The Kingdom of God is the rule, or the reign of God. The Kingdom of God is where what God wants done gets done. When you think of the Kingdom of God, do not think of a place. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he taught them to pray to God, the Father, that his Kingdom would come, that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven (those are synonymous), is wherever God's will is done.

So, you gotta ask yourself, "Is the Kingdom of God ruling my heart?" Meaning, is your heart attitude to do what God would have you do? Are you truly following Jesus? Are you allowing him to change your heart so you are becoming more like him everyday as you learn to love the people around you? If that is not true of you, the Kingdom of God is not in your heart. You are not allowing Jesus to reign there. You have dethroned him and put yourself in his place.

For those of you who would call yourselves by the name "Christian," has life distracted you from your initial call to follow Jesus? Did you, in fact, know that when Jesus called you he was calling you to change? Or did you think he was just calling you to agree to believe certain things about him?

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Matthew 16:24–26 (NLT)

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. 25 If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.

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26 And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?

Jesus is calling us to take up our cross and follow him - wherever.

If you are more interested in protecting your domain, your stuff, your image, or even your particular brand of church, more than you are in really following Jesus, I'm sorry, but the Kingdom of God is not ruling your heart. You are. That is not okay. We lull ourselves into thinking the things we are seeking will satisfy us, but they don't. Trust me. I know. I spent a good portion of my life pushing Jesus off the throne thinking I could somehow justify my existence.

Jesus gave us, as a church, a job to do. That job is to love our community and make disciples who will follow Jesus anywhere he takes us. The way he calls us is full of twists and turns and will seem risky, and scary at times. It will not be the way that seems safe. Jesus calls us to leave our preconceived ideas about what we think "the life" is and join him on an exciting journey towards the heart of God.

In *The Parable of the Soils*, Jesus continually asks us to check our hearts. He sticks his probe in to find out the condition of our heart.

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Is your heart **hard**? Are you set in your ways? Do you, like the religious teachers of the law and Pharisees, have all the answers already? Do you think you can see and hear, but are really blind and deaf? Do you see no need to change?

Do you have a **shallow** view of the Gospel and think it's for everyone else but you? It's for those outside the church. "I did that already. I don't need the Gospel anymore. I have my ticket to heaven. That's all that matters." Have you given up on Jesus because your life didn't turn out the way you envisioned it should?

Or, have you become so **distracted** by the things of this life on earth that you have forgotten why Jesus called you? Has your growth been stunted because you have your focus on building your life on earth, or because of your desperate need to survive or justify your existence, or keep your image in tact?

Jesus calls us to follow him wherever he goes. He never once said it would be easy. As a matter of fact, he said the opposite. It will be difficult. But he also said that it is the way to *the life*. The abundant, full, complete, satisfied life. Following him is the way to find the life you are searching for. What we need, friends, is a fresh vision of Jesus so our roots grow down deep into his love and keep us strong.

In my quiet time Friday morning, before I read from my Bible I read from the devotional book by Oswald Chambers called *My Utmost for His Highest*. Now, I had already finished preparing my sermon for today, and this devotional said the exact same thing I had said, so I thought it would be great to read it for you in closing.

January 27th
Look again and think
Take no thought for your life. Matthew 6:25.

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A warning which needs to be reiterated is that the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things entering in, will choke all that God puts in. We are never free from the recurring tides of this encroachment.

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If it does not come on the line of clothes and food, it will come on the line of money or lack of money; of friends or lack of friends; or on the line of difficult circumstances. It is one steady encroachment all the time, and unless we allow the Spirit of God to raise up the standard against it, these things will come in like a flood.

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“Take no thought for your life.” ‘Be careful about one thing only,’ says our Lord—‘your relationship to Me.’ Common sense shouts loud and says—‘That is absurd, I must consider how I am going to live, I must consider what I am going to eat and drink.’ Jesus says you must not.

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Beware of allowing the thought that this statement is made by One Who does not understand our particular circumstances. Jesus Christ knows our circumstances better than we do, and He says we must not think about these things so as to make them the one concern of our life. Whenever there is competition, be sure that you put your relationship to God first.

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“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” How much evil has begun to threaten you to-day? What kind of mean little imps have been looking in and saying—‘Now what are you going to do next month—this summer?’ ‘Be anxious for nothing,’ Jesus says. Look again and think. Keep your mind on the ‘much more’ of your Heavenly Father.

When you are tempted to let anxiety or any other thing distract you from your relationship to Jesus, as we all have the proclivity to do, practice trusting Jesus by doing the next right thing and watch him work. Do the next right thing and then trust God. Trust God and do the next right thing.

[Read for benediction]

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Psalm 34:1–8 (NLT)

¹ I will praise the Lord at all times. I will constantly speak his praises. ² I will boast only in the Lord; let all who are helpless take heart. ³ Come, let us tell of the Lord's greatness; let us exalt his name together. ⁴ I prayed to the Lord, and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears.

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⁵ Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces. ⁶ In my desperation I prayed, and the Lord listened; he saved me from all my troubles. ⁷ For the angel of the Lord is a guard; he surrounds and defends all who fear him. ⁸ Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!



Parable of the Soils IV
The Distracted Heart
Matthew 13:1-23
Week of January 29, 2017

Objective of this study: To check our hearts for distractions and to move towards God's heart for us.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 34:1-8** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.

Welcome

Loud chewing, or the person ahead of you digging for coupons?

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word (30-45 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read the following passages and discuss what each have to say about distractions. What are the people distracted **towards** and what are they distracted **from**? Matthew 13:7, 22; Matthew 6:19-34; Read Luke 9:57-62; (cf. Matthew 8:19-20); Matthew 16:24-26

Work (30-45 minutes)

(Be careful not apply this next part to someone else)

3. What does it mean to let the Kingdom of God rule your heart? (Think of the Lord's Prayer)
4. What things typically distract **you** from following Jesus and letting him change your heart?
5. What are some things **you** can get distracted **from** doing?

Sermon Quote: "So, you gotta ask yourself, "Is the Kingdom of God ruling my heart?" Meaning, is your heart attitude to do what God would have you do? Are you truly following Jesus? Are you allowing him to change your heart so you are becoming more like him everyday as you learn to love the people around you?"

6. Take the rest of the time to pray for each other about the things you shared.