

Growing Disciples

Top Secret Insights from the Parable of the Sower

Although it isn't the kind of thing we typically talk about at youth ministry conferences and events, secretly, we all struggle with the blaring truth: So few of our students are actually living fruitful, Christian lives. Day after day we pour our guts into trying to make disciples of individuals who are (more often than not) unwilling, ungrateful and unmotivated. And don't even get me started on the number of times the "good ones" have broken our hearts with stupid choices that seem to have no logical source! On more than one occasion I've found myself privately crying out to God, "Lord, are these kids brain dead!? What's *wrong* with them? They *knew* better! I just preached about this last Wednesday..."

No wonder we spend so much time and energy talking about games, ideas and numbers. At least those things are measurable, concrete, tangible. But spiritual formation... we might as well be trying to solve the mysteries of black holes, stock market forecasts and why some things become fashionable. The level of logical explanation seems about the same for all four.

Thankfully, Jesus didn't leave us groping for elusive truths like scientists and Wall Street analysts. As a matter of fact, He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:10). A-ha! Top secret information. Now that's good news!

In Luke 8:4–15, Jesus tells a parable about a sower, which I believe is a primer on spiritual formation because it answers a lot of the questions that haunt youth pastors on a daily basis. Let's take a look.

The seed is the Word of God: Few people would argue that games, ideas and numbers are irrelevant in youth ministry. Experience tells us that these things all have their place. But I think we sometimes get so caught up in trying to develop the next big idea that we forget this simple truth: *God's Word is the only thing that can set people free from sin and death.*

Without the power of the Living Word, there is no life...no growth.

If you are a sower (i.e., a Christian), remember that your first priority is to plant God's Word in people's hearts. Use any method or gimmick you want, so long as it accomplishes the goal in an unpolluted manner.

Results may vary: Jesus mentions four different types of soil; path, rock, thorns and good soil. Each soil represents a different "type" of person to whom we can preach the gospel. Now, here's the only true "unknown" in this parable. Should a sower spend time sowing in areas that he *knows* are not conducive to eternal life and growth? Jesus never says that the sower was right or wrong in his indiscriminant sowing methods, He simply gives us a logical explanation for what happened when he did. Personally, I'm encouraged by this because I realize that the results are not always within my power to control. In other words, I stop beating myself up for anything and everything that goes wrong. However, I also believe that the truly *wise* sower eventually learns to be more discriminating in the way he or she scatters seed. Let me illustrate while looking at the four types of soil.

You can't force-feed the uninterested: The path represents those whose lives are cold and hard. Let's face it, we come across people every day who simply aren't interested in the truth. For these types of people, the Bible is either irrelevant or impotent. Either way, it gets tossed aside. But if you were to "peak under the hood" of their lives, you would most likely find that they have spent a lifetime being trampled on by others. And chances are, there are a few sowers in the list of trampers. You can throw seed at these types all day long, but it will NOT yield results. However, if you are a wise sower, you concentrate first on breaking up the "fallow ground" before you try to plant any seed (see Jer 4:3). The last thing any Christian should want is to attract the devil by throwing out food for him and his demons.

There is no fruit without roots: The rock represents those who get excited about the truth of God's Word, but they are either unwilling or unable to apply it to their lives. Essentially, the word is in their head, but not in their heart. For some reason, there is a disconnect between the head and the heart. You see, the heart is where the real "juice" of life flows (Proverbs 4:23). In order for the word to take root in the life of the individual, it has to get into the heart where the moisture is. Without the roots of God's word going deep into a person's soul, a strong wind of testing or trial will destroy this person's walk. People who have not been rooted and grounded in their faith will not produce the kind of results that is in keeping with that of a true disciple of Christ.

So what does the *wise* sower do? He starts removing the rocks. One by one if need be, the wise sower prepares the soil by taking away all of the barriers to change. The prophet Isaiah said it best: "Build up, build up, prepare

the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way" (Is 57:14).

Misplaced priorities are deadly: Thorns represent distractions. Personally, I think that there are many in our churches today that fall into this category. These are typically good people, regular attenders and members. But for some reason, it seems that their priorities are always slightly left of center. Maybe it's a sick relative, a demanding job or class, a struggling relationship, or an urgent desire for "things." Whatever the distractions, there are too many things going on around this person. Before they realize it, a day, a week, a month, or maybe a year has passed and they haven't been nurtured in their faith. I talked with someone just the other day who said, "Our family hasn't been to church in four months." The reason: Sunday morning is the only time to sleep in. Meanwhile, this family is struggling terribly with rebellious kids, disintegrating family relationships, job dissatisfaction, loneliness and much more. So while they while they work and sleep and wrestle with issues, faith is slowly and surely being choked out of their lives. A *wise* sower needs to figure out ways to help these people identify the life-choking weeds and pluck them up before they choke out the faith altogether.

If you've been like me, you've probably been a fairly indiscriminate sower. I figure, "Hey...I did my part, I gave them the word. It's in their hands now." But that is not the mark of a *wise* sower. Personally, I want to get to a place where my success rate is much higher than 25%! Sure, it will take a lot more effort, but the fruit should be well worth the labor. Thorns, rocky ground, paths with birds—all of these things can be overcome by the person who takes time to thoroughly and properly prepare the place where he will plant God's Word.

May the Lord grant us all a green thumb for growing disciples.