

Reaching Maximum Potential

“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (Acts 19:20).

This lesson is being written on the first day of a new year. Its only predecessor is a long list of New Year’s Resolutions documenting goals, and dreams expected to be achieved over the year’s fifty-two weeks.

The dawning of a new year is an opportune time to reflect over the past and envision the future. It is encouraging to look back and see the trace of advancement, but depressing if the view is as complicated as walking or driving through heavy fog. No one wants to stroll aimlessly through life. A sense of satisfaction accompanies progress, growth, or improvement.

Our Key Scripture seems to allude to the parable of the Sower found in the Gospels. The church grew like grain—the blade, then the stalk, and was multiplied to the full ear of corn. It was good soil.

Parables – Secrets of the Kingdom

Jesus spoke in parables (earthly stories with eternal implications) so he could reveal the secrets of the kingdom.

Let us look at the growth of some individuals who make up the body of Christ and how we can reach our maximum potential. This will require studying the “Parable of the Sower.” Jesus used this story because His listeners were familiar with planting and harvesting. In each account (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-29; Luke 8:4-15) three components can be found:

- The Sower
- The Seed
- The Soil

The Seed is the Word

“The sower soweth the word” (Mark 4:14). The farmer sows the word but not just any word. Luke explains further, “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11).

God’s Word is designed to produce fruit (Isaiah 55:11). If nothing is being produced it is the fault of the soil and not of the seed.

As Christians we need to become rooted and grounded (Ephesians 3:17). We must be good soil for this to happen.

The soil is our major concern in this lesson.

Plowing Hardened Hearts

An understanding of the soil is necessary for the production of successful crops. The ground contains the nutrients needed by the plants. In order to reach the highest productivity and harvest possible the ground must be prepared. This is done through plowing and cultivating the soil for growing crops. Much of the land in Bible times was covered with thorns. Palestine was plagued with nearly fifty kinds. Farmers prepared the ground by clearing away the weeds and thorns.

Our hearts can be hardened, untilled, and overgrown with weeds and thorns as well. If so, we need to humble ourselves, repent of our sins, and leave the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). This will enable us to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25).

We can cultivate a heart for God. Repentance plows through unproductive and hardened hearts.

“Plow up the hard ground of your hearts! Do not waste your good seed among thorns. Cleanse your minds and hearts before the LORD, or my anger will burn like an unquenchable fire because of all your sins” (Jeremiah 4:3-4, *NLT*).

The Word of God can plow away the thorns and weeds from our heart. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* says that these undesirables can “choke both our endeavours and our expectations.” They can yield us unproductive and of no use to our Master. He expects us to produce “much fruit” (John 15:5-8).

“For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are” (Hebrews 4:12, *NLT*).

Cultivating Hearts for God

Plowed ground is ready to receive seeds. We can become better prepared for the Master’s use through cultivating our hearts in the following ways:

- Prayer (Psalms 66:18; 129:23).
- Fasting (Isaiah 58:6).
- Bible reading (Psalms 119:130).
- Bible study (2 Timothy 2:15).
- Listening to the Word of God (Romans 10:17).
- Obeying the Word (James 1:21-22; 4:17).
- Being faithful to church attendance (Hebrews 10:25).
- Living right (Titus 2:12).

The Field of Life

In the field of life the seed is sown on all kinds of ground. It is the condition of the soil (heart) that determines the potential for productivity.

“However faithful the preacher, and however pure his message, the effect of the preaching of the Word depends upon the state of the hearer’s heart.” (*Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*)

Walk into the field with me. What kinds of soil will we encounter? Four. What we learn from each of them, if applied to our hearts, can make the difference between success and failure in our spiritual growth.

Roadside Soil

This soil (heart) is hard and not prepared for the seed. It does not understand God’s message. The Word cannot get beneath the soil. It will be trodden upon or eaten by birds.

We cannot keep the birds from hovering over our heads but we can stop them from building a nest in our hearts. Drive the birds away!

The devil is like the birds. Resist him. He will run from you (James 4:7). Each person will be held responsible for his own heart.

Rocky Soil

A thin surface of soil covers and hides the rocks. It pretends to be good soil. The shallow heart receives the Word with joy. When persecution, problems, and trials appear, the truth is dried up and withers away. The tiny sprout cannot stand the heat!

The Thorny Soil

The ground has not been cleared of thorns and weeds. It is not prepared for planting. The seed is sown and a tender plant pokes its head through the surface. It struggles to climb between the thorns. The seed starts its journey of growth but the thorns zap its strength, rob it of maturity, and eventually choke it to death.

The thorny soil does not “bring fruit to perfection” (Luke 8:14). It is destroyed because the pleasures and cares of this world attract its attention away.

In Scripture “thorns” are symbolic of:

- Affliction (Numbers 33:55).
- Adversity (2 Corinthians 4:17).
- Choking the Word (Luke 8:14).
- False Prophets (Matthew 7:16).
- Neglect (Proverbs 24:31).

“I walked in the field of a lazy person, the vineyard of one lacking sense. I saw that it was overgrown with thorns. It was covered with weeds, and its walls were broken down” (Proverbs 24:30-31, *NLT*).

Good Soil

This soil understands the Word, keeps it and allows it to take root, and produce. It experiences spiritual growth. There are three levels of productivity.

1. **Thirty-fold:** lowest level.
2. **Sixty-fold:** middle level.
3. **One hundred-fold:** maximum level of productivity (Genesis 26:12). This means that the harvest yields one hundred times more than the seed planted.

Many would like to reach the one hundred-fold level of productivity—maximum potential. But, how many are willing to pay the price?

It is easy to look for greener pastures or better soil in someone else’s field. We need to take personal responsibility for reaching our fullest potential. We cannot blame anyone else for our lack of progress.

Character flaws that are not corrected and/or sin in our lives cause us to fall short of the standard of the good soil.

“Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit” (Matthew 12:33).

It is only that which is planted in the heart, and permitted to grow that will be seen in our lives.

“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34).

May the Word of God grow and prevail in our lives allowing us to reach our maximum potential. Lord, help us to be good soil!

Study Questions

1. What is the beginning of a new year an opportune time to do?

2. What is a parable?

3. Why did Jesus choose to talk about planting and harvesting?

4. What are the three components found in the “Parable of the Sower”?

5. What is the “seed” referred to in this story?

6. What should we do if our hearts are hardened, untilled, and/or overgrown with spiritual weeds and thorns?

7. How can we cultivate our hearts for the Master's use?

8. What did the prophet say in Jeremiah 4:3-4?

9. What can be used to plow through our hardened hearts (Hebrews 4:12)?

10. What are the four kinds of soil in the field of life?

11. Quote the words used from the *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* in this lesson?

12. What are "thorns" symbolic of in Scripture?

13. List the three levels of fruitfulness (productivity) and explain each.

14. What causes the seed planted in rocky soil to be dried up and wither away?

15. Explain what happened to the seed that fell along the roadside.

16. Why is the seed planted in the thorny soil destroyed?

17. What do you see in the field of a lazy person (Proverbs 24:3-31)?

18. Who needs to take responsibility for reaching your maximum potential?
