

Sermon Wesley Box Hill 12 Jul 2026

BIRDS, THORNS AND SURPRISING RESPONSES – Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are several entry points into this parable: Birds, Thorns, and surprising responses or “Neurons, Roots and Spirit of God”. Why this title? Well, when we look at a plant, and see whether it’s looking healthy or not, it’s appearance will tell us something about how well the roots below the ground are doing. Or, more accurately, how good the *soil* is for those roots. Today’s gospel story about the parable of the sower uses this analogy. It asks us whether the ‘condition’ of our lives is like good soil that allows the seeds of God’s Kingdom to take hold and flourish, so that we can bear good fruit in our lives. I see a parallel between this image and image of the billions of neurons in our brains, which determine how we think, perceive and feel. Are we creating neural pathways in our thinking, like roots in good soil, that grow us into faithful Christians who bear good fruit in the world? And what might the presence of God’s Spirit in our hearts and minds have to do with Neurons and roots?

That is exactly what Jesus wants us to see in today's Gospel.

Jesus begins this parable with a simple picture that everyone in His audience would have recognised.

"A farmer went out to sow his seed."

For us, that sounds ordinary. But the more we think about what the farmer does, the more surprising it becomes.

Notice where the seed falls.

Some falls on the path.

Some falls on rocky ground.

Some falls among thorns.

Some falls on good soil.

If we were farmers today, we would probably think, "What a waste! Why throw good seed onto places where it cannot possibly grow?"

Modern farmers don't do that. They prepare the ground first. They use machinery, GPS mapping, soil testing, fertilisers and irrigation. Every seed is carefully placed because seed is expensive.

But Jesus deliberately tells a different story.

The sower scatters the seed everywhere.

He doesn't ration it.

He doesn't calculate where people deserve it.

He doesn't keep it only for the best soil.

He scatters generously.

That tells us something remarkable about God.

God is far more generous than we often imagine.

His love is not reserved for the people who already have their lives together.

His grace is not limited to the morally successful.

His invitation is not only for those who seem "good enough."

God keeps sowing His Word into every kind of life.

That is exactly what Jesus did throughout His ministry.

He preached to fishermen and tax collectors.

He spoke with religious leaders and Roman soldiers.

He welcomed children.

He ate with sinners.

He offered hope to people society had rejected.

He even continued speaking to those who would eventually reject Him.

God never stops reaching out.

The seed represents God's Word—the message of His Kingdom, His grace and His invitation into a relationship with Him.

Every Sunday, every Bible study, every quiet time, every conversation with another believer is another handful of seed scattered into our lives.

Sometimes we assume that if someone doesn't respond immediately, God has finished with them.

But this parable reminds us that God is incredibly patient.

He continues sowing.

He continues inviting.

He continues calling people home.

Perhaps many of us can look back over our own lives and recognise this.

Maybe someone invited us to church years before we ever came.

Perhaps a grandparent prayed faithfully for decades.

Maybe we heard Bible stories as children but only understood them much later.

God had been sowing seeds long before we realised it.

Looking back, we can see that He never gave up on us.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says:

"The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is today."

The same is true spiritually.

Some people hear God's voice early in life.

Others come to faith much later.

Some spend years wandering before they finally respond.

Yet throughout all those years, God has patiently been planting seeds—through people, circumstances, disappointments, blessings, questions and even suffering.

Many Christians can trace their faith back to countless "small seeds" that God planted over many years.

A Sunday School teacher.

A faithful parent.

A neighbour.

A difficult season that made them ask deeper questions.

A stranger who simply showed kindness.

None of those moments seemed dramatic at the time.

Yet together they became the way God prepared the heart.

That is how God often works.

What does this Means for Us

This is wonderfully encouraging.

First, if you are praying for someone who has drifted away from God, don't give up.

You may not see what God is doing beneath the surface.

A seed can lie hidden underground for a long time before it begins to grow.

God is still at work even when we cannot see it.

Secondly, it reminds us to keep sowing seeds ourselves.

Every act of kindness.

Every conversation about faith.

Every invitation to church.

Every word of encouragement.

Every prayer.

Every example of Christ-like love.

These may seem small, but God often uses ordinary acts of faithfulness to produce extraordinary results.

We are not responsible for making the seed grow.

Our calling is simply to keep sowing faithfully, trusting God with the harvest.

Finally, this part of the parable reminds us of God's incredible heart.

Before Jesus speaks about the different soils, He first introduces us to the generous Sower.

God is not stingy with His grace.

He is not reluctant with His mercy.

He is not looking for reasons to exclude people.

Instead, He keeps extending His invitation over and over again.

The question is not whether God is willing to speak.

The question is whether we are willing to receive what He is saying.

And that brings us to the heart of the parable.

The focus now shifts from the Sower to the condition of the soil.

Jesus now explains that the seed is the Word of God, and the different soils represent the different ways people receive it.

The remarkable thing is this: **the seed never changes.**

The message of God's love is always the same.

The Gospel is always powerful.

The difference is not the seed—it is the condition of the soil.

Jesus is inviting us to examine our own hearts.

This parable is not about pointing the finger at someone else. It is not about asking, "I wonder who the rocky soil is?" or "Who do the thorns represent?"

Instead, Jesus gently asks each one of us, **"What kind of soil are you today?"**

Notice I say **today**, because our hearts can change. There are seasons in our lives when we are open to God, and there are seasons when disappointment, busyness or pain can harden our hearts.

The Path – Represents A Hardened Heart

Jesus says the first seed falls on the path.

The ground is hard. The seed cannot penetrate the surface, and the birds quickly carry it away.

Jesus explains that this represents someone who hears God's Word but never truly understands or receives it.

Their heart has become hard.

How does a heart become hard?

Sometimes through disappointment.

Sometimes through grief.

Sometimes because life has been unfair.

Sometimes because we have heard the Gospel so often that we stop really listening.

We may sit in church every Sunday.

We know the prayers.

We sing the hymns.

We know the Bible stories.

Yet God's Word never moves beyond our ears and into our hearts.

We become familiar with God without becoming transformed by Him.

Perhaps some people carry wounds that make it difficult to trust anyone—even God.

Perhaps they have prayed for healing that never came.

Perhaps they have experienced betrayal, abuse or loss.

Those experiences can build walls around the heart.

If that is you today, hear this good news:

God is patient.

He does not give up on hard hearts.

Just as rain slowly softens dry ground, God's love can soften even the hardest heart.

The Rocky Ground – Represents A Shallow Faith

The second seed falls on rocky ground.

It springs up quickly because there is only a thin layer of soil.

At first everything looks promising.

But when the hot sun comes, the plant withers because it has no deep roots.

Jesus says this represents those who receive God's Word with joy, but when difficulties come, they fall away.

Many people begin the Christian life with great enthusiasm.

They are excited.

They love worship.

They enjoy church.

Everything feels fresh and inspiring.

But then life becomes difficult.

A diagnosis changes everything.

A marriage struggles.

Someone they love dies.

They lose a job.

They are criticised because of their faith.

And suddenly they begin asking, "If God loves me, why is this happening?"

Faith that has no deep roots struggles when storms arrive.

Jesus never promised a life without hardship.

In fact, He promised that we would face trials.

The question is not whether storms will come.

The question is whether our roots go deep enough to hold us when they do.

Think about a great gum tree after a storm.

The branches may bend violently.

Leaves may be torn away.

But the tree remains standing because its roots reach deep beneath the surface.

God wants to develop that kind of faith in us—not a faith that depends on circumstances, but a faith that trusts Him even when life hurts.

The Thorny Ground – Represents A Distracted Heart

The third seed falls among thorns.

It grows for a while, but eventually the thorns choke it.

Jesus says these thorns represent the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things.

Notice something important.

The plant is alive.

It has begun to grow.

The problem is that something else competes for its attention.

How relevant this is today.

We live in a world full of distractions.

Our calendars are full.

Our phones constantly demand our attention.

We are surrounded by endless notifications, social media, emails, streaming services and news updates.

None of these things are necessarily wrong.

But together they can leave little room for God.

Even good things can become thorns if they crowd Jesus out of first place.

Work can become a thorn.

Money can become a thorn.

Success can become a thorn.

Sport, hobbies, entertainment—even church activities—can become thorns if they replace a living relationship with Christ.

Sometimes our greatest distraction is not pleasure but worry.

Many people lie awake at night wondering:

"How will I pay the bills?"

"What if my health gets worse?"

"What will happen to my children or grandchildren?"

Jesus understands those worries.

Yet He gently reminds us that worry can slowly choke our trust in God if we allow it to take control.

The Good Soil – Represents An Open and Faithful Heart

Finally, Jesus speaks about the good soil.

This is the heart that hears God's Word, receives it, and allows it to take deep root.

Notice that good soil is not perfect soil.

Jesus is not describing people who never fail.

He is describing people who remain open to God's work.

They keep listening.

They keep learning.

They keep trusting.

Even after failure.

Even after disappointment.

Even after seasons of doubt.

Good soil is humble soil.

It is willing to let God keep working.

Jesus says this soil produces a harvest—some thirty, some sixty, some one hundred times what was sown.

In Jesus' day, that kind of harvest would have seemed astonishing.

God can do far more through one life surrendered to Him than we could ever imagine.

Perhaps we think our lives are too ordinary.

But throughout Scripture, God delights in using ordinary people to produce extraordinary fruit.

A quiet prayer.

A simple act of kindness.

An encouraging word.

A faithful life lived for Christ.

These may seem small, but in God's hands they can change families, communities and even generations.

As we listen to Jesus, perhaps we recognise a little of each soil within ourselves.

At times our hearts have been hard.

At times our faith has been shallow.

At times we have allowed worries or distractions to choke our spiritual growth.

The beautiful truth is that this parable is not meant to condemn us.

It is meant to invite us.

The God who scatters the seed so generously is also the God who prepares the soil.

He can soften what has become hard.

He can deepen what is shallow.

He can remove the thorns that are choking our faith.

He can cultivate a heart that bears lasting fruit.

The question is not whether God is still speaking.

The question is whether we will allow Him to continue His work within us.

And that leads us to the final challenge of this parable: **How do we become good soil?**

So, after hearing about the four different soils, perhaps the question many of us are asking is this:

"How do I become good soil?"

The wonderful news of this parable is that Jesus is not asking us to change ourselves by our own strength.

Think about a farmer.

A farmer cannot make a seed grow. Only God can give life. But the farmer can prepare the ground. He can remove the rocks. He can pull out the weeds. He can water the soil. He can make room for new growth.

In the same way, we cannot transform our own hearts, but we can invite God to do His work within us.

How Do We Cultivate Good Soil?

The first step is **to keep listening to God's Word.**

Notice that every person in the parable heard the seed.

The difference was not hearing—it was receiving.

We live in a world filled with noise.

From the moment we wake up, our minds are bombarded with news headlines, social media, emails, text messages and endless opinions.

There is so much competing for our attention that God's voice can easily become just another sound in the background.

That is why we need to make intentional space to hear Him.

Sometimes that means reading a few verses of Scripture each day. (song read your Bible pray....

"Lord, what are You saying to me today?"

The more we listen, the more our hearts become receptive to His voice.

Secondly, we need to allow God to remove the rocks.

Many of us carry hidden burdens.

Old hurts.

Disappointments.

Unforgiveness.

Fear.

Regret.

Sometimes we bury them so deeply that we hardly notice they are there, yet they continue to affect our relationship with God and with others.

God lovingly invites us to bring those things into His presence.

Healing often begins with honesty.

Thirdly, we need to pull out the weeds.

Weeds rarely appear overnight.

They grow slowly.

Almost unnoticed.

The same is true in our spiritual lives.

A little resentment.

A little pride.

A little greed.

A little compromise.

A little neglect of prayer.

None of these seem significant at first, but left unchecked, they slowly choke our relationship with Christ.

The good news is that God never asks us to face those weeds alone.

His Holy Spirit helps us recognise them, confess them and replace them with lives marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

There is a beautiful story about the Chinese bamboo tree.

When it is planted, the gardener waters and cares for it faithfully.

After the first year, nothing appears above the ground.

The second year—still nothing.

The third year—nothing.

The fourth year—still no visible growth.

Many people would assume the tree had died.

But beneath the surface, something extraordinary is happening.

The roots are growing deeper and stronger.

Then, in the fifth year, the bamboo suddenly shoots upward, sometimes growing many metres in just a few weeks.

Did it really grow only in those few weeks?

No.

It had been growing all along where no one could see.

Faith can be like that.

Growth in God's Kingdom is often slow, hidden and patient before it becomes visible.

Jesus finishes the parable by speaking about a harvest.

Some thirtyfold.

Some sixtyfold.

Some one hundredfold.

The harvest is different for each person.

God does not compare us with one another.

He simply calls us to be faithful.

The size of the harvest is God's responsibility.

Faithfulness is ours.

As we finish today, perhaps we realise that we have been each of these soils at different times in our lives.

There have been seasons when our hearts were hard.

Seasons when our faith was shallow.

Seasons when worries and distractions crowded out God's voice.

But thanks be to God—that is not the end of the story.

The Sower has not stopped sowing.

Every day God continues to scatter His grace.

The invitation is the same for every one of us.

ConclusionI would like to finish with these words from the prophet Isaiah:

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will

not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10–11)

That is God's promise.

His Word never returns empty.

So, as we leave this place today, let us not simply admire the seed.

Let us receive it.

Let us allow God to cultivate our hearts.

Let us trust Him to remove the rocks, clear away the thorns and soften the hard places.

And then, in His time and by His grace, may our lives bear fruit—not for our own glory, but for the glory of Christ, who is the generous Sower, the faithful Gardener and the Lord of the Harvest.

May we leave today with open hearts, ready to receive God's Word, willing to be changed by it, and eager to bear fruit for His Kingdom Amen.