

## **If I Were Following the Interpretation**

*Matthew 13:1-9*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Years ago, Fred Craddock told this story:

He said he was in the parking lot of a grocery store one day when he got to watch a small drama unfold. The principal characters were two fellows you'd characterize as brothers. "One seemed to be maybe nineteen," he said, "the other about twelve... they looked alike, talked alike, and judging by the way they talked to each other, they had to be brothers.

The younger was at the front of the store trying to get a drink out of the pop machine. He yelled over to his older brother in the parking lot, 'I put my money in and didn't get anything.'

The older brother said, 'Go inside and tell the lady; she'll give you your money.'

But the first brother said, 'I think I can get it out,' and he started beating and banging on the machine.

Finally he grew quiet, and the older brother out in the parking lot said, 'Now what have you done?'

'I put in another dollar.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Well I thought it would push it out.'

The older brother was incredulous. 'You put in another dollar?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, go tell the lady, but she's only going to give you one dollar.'

'Why? I put in two.'

'She won't believe anyone is that stupid. She won't give you but one.'

The younger brother went inside the store, and soon he came out with a pop. 'She wouldn't give me any money, but she gave me a pop.'

Meanwhile, the older brother had troubles of his own. He was out in the parking lot, walking around a small 1994 or 1995 Ford Escort, blue, with a temporary sticker from North Carolina in the back window. He was kicking the tires, banging on the trunk, and

making all kinds of useless motions. [Craddock] got out of [his] vehicle and said, 'Can I help you?'

He said, 'I locked my keys in there. Just bought this today over in Murphy.'

[Craddock] said, 'I don't even have a coat hanger to help you. Sometimes you can get a coat hanger down there.'

'I have a coat hanger,' he said. 'I've tried that. I've already called my buddy. He's coming and we'll get it open.' He kicked the tires, walked around the car a time or two, and beat on it.

[Craddock] said, 'If I had one of those slim-jims, I could help, but I don't have anything. A few years ago I locked my keys in the car, and it cost thirty dollars, but at least I got them out. I'd be glad to call...'

'No, no, I don't want to spend any money on it. My buddy's coming.'

So I got back in my vehicle and watched and listened as people came by to give him advice. The first guy who pulled up was in a truck and said, 'You need to get yourself an extra set of keys.'

The older brother said, 'Well, I plan to, but I just bought this today and I haven't had time.'

The next car came by. 'What's the matter?'

'Locked my keys in there.'

'You need to have one of those things you can push down by the window a then you can —'

'Well, I don't have one. If I did, I would already have it open.' And that person went on.

Someone else stopped and said, 'If that were a Toyota, I could show you how to get it open.' And he went on.

Then someone came by just before I left and said, 'Is that your car?'

He said, 'You think I'm trying to break into a car? Sure it's my car.' And she went on.

What happened to the day? Here's a young man in his late teens, who has just bought himself a car. He picked up his younger brother, went to Blue Ridge, pulled into the shopping center, and was suddenly grounded. He didn't plan it that way.

What happened? *Life happened*" (*The Cherry Log Sermons*, 19-20).

We've all seen this little story play out a hundred times. We've *lived* it more times than we can count. We wake up in the morning, see the sun shining, hear the birds singing, stretch our arms, and, with a twinkle in our eye, say, "Today is going to be a great day!"

Then nothing else goes right the rest of the day...

You start the coffee maker without the pot under it. You can't find the match to your favorite pair of socks. You forget until you're driving to work that you have to lead a presentation this morning. At your teeth cleaning appointment, the dentist finds a cavity and lectures you like you're a child about your "flossing habits" – but to be fair, you don't actually have any flossing habits. The battery in your car dies, so your afternoon is shot waiting on AAA. You're finally on your way home when you get a call from your youngest that the washing machine broke and, in her words, "it may or may not be flooding" the house.

You get home, beat up by a bad case of the "Mondays," and plop into your favorite chair. You think about how great the day started. Such a beautiful morning.

What happened? Life happened.

Friends, if you're going to have any joy, any purpose, any peace, you're going to have to put it together out of fragments, because you are not going to get twenty-four smooth hours in a row. It just doesn't work that way.

But the wonderful thing about it is that the Bible understands that. Jesus himself understood that. The Bible was not written by some relaxed person all lathered up in sunscreen under an umbrella by the beach drinking lemonade. The Bible was written by people who had to put life together with short pieces of string.

Jesus understood that, so he told them this story:

"One day a man went out to sow. Some of the seed fell on the path. It barely hit the ground before the robins swarmed in and devoured it all. Some of the seed fell on shallow soil and sprang up quickly. It looked like it might produce, but the roots couldn't dig deep what with the stones in the way. So, when the sun came up, they withered just as quickly as they sprang up. Still some fell among the weeds, and there just wasn't enough nourishment for both, so the weeds won the day. But some of the seed fell on good soil and produced a hundred, sixty, and thirtyfold. What a bountiful crop!"

You know, in Matthew 13, there's an interpretation of this story. If I were to preach it today, you'd hear me talk about different types of soil and the obstacles that get in the way of those soils from receiving the Word of God.

For instance, *if I were following the interpretation*, there are some people – let's face it – who are like the hard path. They aren't bad people. They're *good* people. They're my family, my friends. They're your family and your friends, but for one reason or another,

the Word hardly gets there and it's gone. It never penetrates. These folk never seem to have the capacity to receive the Word of God. Sunday morning means absolutely nothing to them. The story of God doesn't captivate them. They'd rather sleep in on Sunday or do yard work or go for a good hike.

*If I were following the interpretation, some seed falls on shallow soil. There is just not much depth, and underneath that half-inch of topsoil is a layer of rock. The seed springs up and everybody's excited, "Oh! So-and-so has joined; so-and-so is going to be part of us!" It's all very exciting. And then what happens? They're gone as quickly as they came.*

*If I were following the interpretation, sometimes the seed falls among weeds. These are good people, but they have too many irons in the fire. They have said yes to too many things. Their priorities are all jumbled. They can't choose any one thing as of ultimate value, because in their life ALL things are of equal value, and – ultimately – that means they are enslaved to any request that comes a long.*

*And then, if I were following the interpretation, there is the good soil. It produces a bumper crop – and it makes it look so easy in the process. It's still amazing to me how this happens – how some can receive the Word of God and become genuine, truly humble, serving Christians.*

Where do they get that?

They are a *mystery*. They live in the same world as the rest of us, have the same friends as the rest of us, work at the same places, but there is something different about them. They love, they care, they go, they do, they give – and if you recited all the good things they have done, they would be embarrassed.

Where do they get that? They are a *mystery*.

This is what I would say to you *if I were following the interpretation of the parable*.

But the problem with that interpretation is that I always start worrying about what kind of ground I am on with God.

I start worrying about how many birds are in my field. I start looking over my shoulder for circling vultures. I get overwhelmed by the number of rocks in my soil – and how will I ever get free of these brambles that ensnare me?

"Maybe if I work hard enough," I think, "I can break up that soil that's been packed hard by the treading of life."

"Maybe I can dig up some of those rocks," I think, "so I won't be so shallow. Maybe I can get some spiritual Round-Up and fight off those weeds that keep choking out God's presence in my life."

Maybe I... Maybe I... Maybe I... As if I can work my way to God.

And what's worse — is how *if I were following the interpretation*, it tempts me look at you! If I can be this hard on myself, just imagine how hard I am on you! "You're all a bunch of hardheaded, shallow, overly distracted Christians. You'll never bear fruit."

*If I am following the interpretation*, then I can't help but read it as a call to improve *myself* and a call for you to get busy improving *yourself*.

But does it work that way? Can we work our way to God?

You know, the thing is, *if I am following the interpretation*, Jesus doesn't call it the parable of *the soils*. He calls it "the parable of the *sower*" (Matt. 13:18).

Maybe this parable isn't about how faulty the "soil" is — but about how generous the sower is; maybe this parable is about the sower who throws seed on good and bad soil alike; on fertile soil and packed soil and rocky soil and weed-ridden soil and every kind of soil he can, because it is in the nature of our Sower to withhold nothing and hope for the best.

When Christen and I lived on Platte Avenue just a few blocks from the church, to no credit of our own we had an amazing backyard. It was just wonderful. It had a high canopy of shade trees. The grass was lush and green. The garden beds were filled with columbines and easter lilies, peonies and primroses. We even had a raspberry bush that our dogs loved to go steal the raspberries from. And it was like that when we moved in. We often joked that we could have lived in a tool shed, if it were attached to that backyard.

So it has become a point of some frustration for us that at our new home our backyard is mostly barren — just sandy soil and weeds. Sure there are a couple of trees. But other than that, it's dry dirt, dandelions, and a smattering of green weeds not worth learning the names of.

And — we're not sure if our house was built on what was once a junkyard or if the previous tenants just had an overzealous child who liked to bury things, but "stuff" just floats up out of the ground every time it rains: Coke bottle lids, wire hangers, pieces of cable coaxial, shards of glass, tin cans, Lego blocks, several hot wheels cars, an entire toy knight in shining armor, and a single GI Joe leg.

I never understood how entire caskets could float to the surface when cemeteries in New Orleans flooded, until I lived at this house.

Christen and I have had too many conversations to count about how we want to sod the yard; how we want to install a sprinkler system; how we want to treat the soil with

compost and other healthier soils to try and get grass to grow in our back yard, but how all of that will require too much money right now.

We were lamenting all of this with some friends, complaining about our junkyard of a backyard, full of thistle and rock and sand – how broken glass grows out of the ground but how grass could never make a go of it as it is.

One of our friends said, “You know, our last house had the same problem, and we had the same debate. Do we spend the money tilling up the weeds and treating the soil and sodding the yard or not?”

We decided not to. Instead, we decided that the grass was already there – the seed was already in the ground – and that what we needed to do was to water the soil, to fertilize the soil, and to treat it like it wasn’t a yard full of weeds, but a yard full of grass – and to trust that the grass would come back.

So that’s what we did. And in time – not suddenly, not all at once – the grass came back and reclaimed the yard.”

Since then, Christen has taken up watering the weeds and the sandy soil each and every night. She’s chosen to withhold nothing from this patch of dirt, and to instead hope that the seed will eventually take.

And the thing is, *that’s* what the Sower is like. He doesn’t give up on the soil. Instead, he keeps on sowing, keeps on withholding nothing, keeps on hoping that if he just treats it like good soil long enough, it will become so.

That is how the Sower feels about the soil, and that is how God feels about you.

“Let those with ears to hear, listen” (Matthew 13:9).

Amen.