

At the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer. At the heart of the Lord's Prayer is the petition: **Thy kingdom come.** That petition is a longing for the "one far off, divine event toward which the whole creation moves," when God will **bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.** (Ephesians 1:10) It is a longing for the relationships of heaven to be replicated in the relationships of earth. The community that gathers around Jesus (That's us!) prays for that day to come

Jesus said startlingly, as was His habit, "**The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.**" He was inviting His community not only to pray for the kingdom to come but also to look for evidence that the kingdom is close. He did that when He said: "**Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.**" (Matthew 6:33)

Seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness means that you try to make His priorities your priorities. The Sermon on the Mount presents the God's priorities in clear, piercing, and breath-taking ways. But we can't take our efforts too seriously. There is something ludicrous in the notion that our efforts will bring the kingdom of God to the earth. The petition, **Thy Kingdom come,** is more about God's initiative than about our efforts. The coming of the kingdom depends on Him, not on us.

That's why seeking God's kingdom and righteousness also means looking for evidence of God's presence in the world. He is at work in a neighborhood near you. Can we recognize it when we see it? Jesus told us what to look for. He gave the parables.

A parable is a word picture that teaches us to spot God's presence in the world. A child can follow the story a parable tells, and a person of great intelligence can easily miss the meaning of the parable. We will consider 11 of His parables by Thanksgiving. It's time we looked at the first one, the parable of the soils.

### **Footpath, Rock, and Thorn**

The parable starts with the fate of seed on a footpath. "**A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.**" (Matthew 13:3-4) Jesus interprets the parable. "**When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed that was sown along the path.**" (Matthew 13:19)

In the Gospel of Matthew the word **understand** means *submit to*. The issue with the parables is not whether you are clever enough to figure them out. The issue is whether you submit to their truth. The person in peril in this parable doesn't submit.

The parable tells us one reason why a person doesn't submit. The seed falls on a path, a footpath. Think of places where people ignore the sidewalk and take a shortcut across the grass. Soon there is no grass.

The person Jesus had in mind is a person whose soul has become a footpath where the knowledge of God cannot grow. Do you ever feel like a footpath where anything or anybody tramples on your soul? You have no time for yourself, much less for God. We usually think this soil refers to non-Christians, and it does. It can also refer to people in church. Maybe they have leftover religious training from childhood. Maybe a spouse dragged them to church. Maybe they like the speaker. But their souls are footpaths, worn bare by everything else in life, and the seed just lies there inert on their barren souls, easy pickings for the evil one.

Jesus identified a second soil. **“Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.”** (Matthew 13:5-6) Jesus interprets the parable. **“What was sown on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.”** (Matthew 13:20-21)

Do you ever think about the Christians in Iraq, who are being presented with the choice on converting to Islam or being killed? The Muslim Jihadists whom we know as ISIS have driven Christians out of their homes. They have crucified some of them in a cruel mockery of our Christian faith. That is **persecution ... because of the word**. We know next to nothing else about those Iraqi Christians, but we have to say they have roots. They have chosen to be hounded out of hearth and home rather than deny the faith.

It has not been granted to us, as it has been granted to them, **on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him**. (Philippians 1:29) 2100 Christians worldwide died as martyrs last year. Not one died in this country. It has been granted to Christians here to live out our faith in a culture that bombards us every day with the seductive message: "It's okay to do anything you can get away with."

That message is relentless. It wears us down. The Internet detaches us from accountable relationships, which would help us to resist. Friends and co-workers look at us in disbelief when we don't join them in their trendy indulgences. And so the devil finds us vulnerable when he whispers in a thousand different ways, “It’s pointless, you know. You’ve lost. Why are you wasting your time?” (Ibid, Reno) That message can kill your faith as surely as an ISIS bullet can kill your body.

I tell you: I look on this congregation year in and year out, and I see a congregation with roots. You are resisting this relentless, seductive message. If you are new to the Christian faith, or if you are new to BVBC, you need to know that we offer real help and real hope in putting down roots into the soil of Christian faith. I’ll come back to this later and tell you how you can find out more about how we remove rocks from your soul so that faith in Jesus Christ can put down roots.

Jesus identified a third soil **“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”** (Matthew 13:7) Jesus interprets the third soil. **“What was sown among thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.”** (Matthew 13:22)

**The worries of this life** will destroy your spiritual life. Have you ever heard someone say that a dog worried a bone? It means he was chewing it. But suppose you are a rancher, and it is a coyote worrying your sheep. It means the coyote is chewing on your sheep’s throat; he is choking him. The meaning of worry in Old English was to strangle or choke. In Jesus’ parable **the worries of this life** “chew” on us. They choke us.

What are your worries: money, status, health, children, parents, marriage, your boss, your car, your leaky basement, your promotion or lack of promotion at work, schoolwork, bad performance review? How long do you want this list to go on? Jesus said they could choke the word of God in your soul.

**The deceitfulness of wealth** will do it too. Maybe the first deception of wealth is that money is an unmixed blessing. Why are you so sure you would not lose your soul if you won the Powerball Lottery? Wealth can steal your heart away from God. **Where**

**your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** Tell me what you love and tell me how much you love it, and I can tell you where your heart is. Overflowing garages, basements and attics bear silent witness to our true love. Cluttered houses signal cluttered hearts where it is hard for Christ to find a place to sit. “Prosperity destroys the word in the heart as much as persecution does; and more dangerously, because more silently.” (Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook*, loc. 698, Kindle e-book)

### Good Soil

Jesus identified a fourth soil. **“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”** (Matthew 13:8) Jesus interpreted this parable. **“But what was sown on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”** (Matthew 13:23)

Jesus does not say that this good ground could never become a footpath. “Jesus ‘does not say that this good ground has no stones in it or no thorns; but there are none that . . . hinder its fruitfulness.’” (Bruner, loc. 747) The person **who hears the word and understands it** and **produces a crop** is no stranger to the sheer pressure of living, to persecution, trouble, worries, and wealth. Footpath, rock, and thorn will always dog the steps of the faithful. But they don’t define the faithful.

How do you know good soil when you see it? Jesus answered that question in the Sermon on the Mount. He said you find good soil in **“everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice.”** (Matthew 7:24) You know your soul is good soil, when you hear the word of Christ, and you respond to it. You obey it. You allow it to influence the way you think and choose and act; and you respond like that year after year.

When you see people responding like that to the word of God, you are seeing the kingdom of God at work in human affairs. The power that will put the whole world right some day is already present in that person's life and circumstances. When you see churches responding to the word of God like that over a period of time, you know that God is present there in a large way.

### Take-away

If you have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the Church. Now, let’s take stock. Are you responding to the word of God that you hear? Does that word influence the way you think and choose and act? Can you identify changes in your life and say, “That is happening because of Christ, because I am putting into practice His words”? If not, you are not condemned to be a footpath or rocky ground or thorn-infested forever. Seek to be good soil. **“Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness.”** Do everything you can to place yourself under God’s authority and learn to make His priorities your priorities. You might ask yourself “what sin or resentment or cherished conceit are you clutching so tightly that you cannot open your hand to God’s grace?” (J. Budziszewski, “Evangelizing Christians,” *First Things*, October 2014, 19-20)

Now, let’s be realistic. There are limits on what I or anyone else can do to cause people to respond positively to the word of God. When I plant a seed of any kind, the power of growth is in the seed. I can prevent the seed from growing, or I can take care of the soil and give the seed the change to grow.

The Church's ministries plant the seed and take care of the soil. During August, you heard our staff talk about five ways we take care of soil: worship, discipleship, teaching, evangelism, and serving. If you want to encourage the word of God to grow in your soul, submit yourself to what those five ways have to offer. You can find a directory of classes, small groups, and opportunities to serve.

I want to highlight a specific strategy that can help the soil of your soul to be receptive to the word of God. It is a Growth Path. It is one of what we hope will be many growth paths that are designed to grow people in their faith in Jesus. The Growth Path I want you to know about offers four Basic Training courses: Basic Training in Bible, Basic Training in Believing, Basic Training in Behaving, and Basic Training in Body Life (how a community of Christians live together. Let me tell you why this Growth Path matters, and then I'll tell you how you can take advantage of them.

We had occasion to rejoice last summer that our Summer Sampler of Christian education classes consistently had 200 adults. They were enthusiastic, rightly enthusiastic, about the classes they participated in. 1200 adults say that BVBC is their church home. We rejoice in the 200. Where were the other 1000?

I would like to ask the 200, including their teachers to consider seriously some questions. Do you know how hard it is for people, who have never done it, to come to a Sunday class, especially if they have not received a personal invitation to come? Do you know how daunting it is for people who are crazy busy to come to a class that never ends? Do you know how intimidating it is for people to come to an established Bible class, when they are not familiar with the Bible and Christian words?

Now, I would like to ask the 1000: do you feel awkward, when the pastor or teacher or small group leader says, "Let's turn to Ephesians 4:1?" You would like to turn to Ephesians 4:1, but you have no idea where to find Ephesians in the Bible. Wouldn't you like to be able to find your way around the Bible like a pro? Basic Training in Bible will help you do exactly that. You will be able to find any verse in the Bible in 30 seconds or less.

Basic Training in Believing is designed to help people understand and experience what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. A lot of people attend church for non-doctrinal reasons. They have a friend who goes there. They like the music. They think people there are friendly. In a major study of previously unchurched people who started going to church and stayed, researchers found that those people were drawn to churches that "are unambiguous in their beliefs and clear on their teachings of them." (Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, Kindle eBook, loc 1482)

None of these Basic Training course is a lecture. It is a place where people learn together, and the less you know the more powerful the course will be. Each of these Basic Training courses is six weeks long. You finish it, and you can stop for a while, until you're ready for the next Basic Training course and until you want to try out a BVBC Sunday class or small group.

If you would like to be part of Basic Training in Bible, just tick the special box on your Connection Card today. We will let you know when the next course begins, and we will give you a personal invitation to come.