
Hey, just want to say hello to our Traders Point family, all of our locations, those of you joining us online. We're so glad that you are with us today. And if you have a Bible or a device with a Bible on it, I encourage you to find Luke, chapter 8. Luke, chapter 8 is where we are going to be camped out today in a few minutes.

As you're turning there, I'd like to pray for us. Obviously, we had a significant event that happened right here in our own city this past Thursday night, which made national and international news headlines. And even if you're just aware of the shooting that took place at the Fed X facility right here in our city—this is just one more reminder that we live in a really broken, hurting, fallen world.

There are a lot of solutions that people are trying to throw at scenarios like that. What I'd like to do is just center our attention right now upon God. Let's just go to our Father today.

Father, man, we come to you today with hearts that are already hurting and exhausted, only to wake up to more bad news. So, God, I want to just lift up the people who were directly involved, family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors—that you would comfort those who lost loved ones, whose lives have been impacted by this.

And, God, I just pray that you would bring some healing to our city, that you could turn this in some way for good, that you'd remind us of where our true hope lies. So we just want to start off today just lifting this up to you and surrendering it over to you. We don't have the solutions to these problems, these are God-sized problems that need God-sized solutions. So, we give this to you now. In Jesus' name. And everybody said: Amen.

Well, if you joined us last week, whether in person or online, you were here as our teaching pastor, Ryan Bramlett, kicked off a series of messages that I've been looking forward to for months now called *Dirt*. And I know that's kind of an unusual name for a title of a message series, but what we're doing is we're talking about the way that things grow, personally and spiritually as well as identifying some of the things that can hinder that growth and make it challenging.

And to do that we're spending four weeks unpacking one story that Jesus told that had such an impact that three of the gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, and Luke all included it in their narratives. And the title of the story has traditionally come to be known as the Parable of the Seed or the Parable of the Sower.

Now, what you need to know is that Jesus—the original context in which he told this story would have been within an agrarian society. So, as he talks about the soil and the seed in the

soil, it would have meant something unique to them, because many of them worked with it every day.

For most of us, many of us, not all, but many of us don't work with soil every day. Now some of you grew up on a farm. I know that we're in central Indiana and there is farmland all around us. Some of you are gardeners. But for many of us when we think about dirt—what comes to my mind is I think about it's a mess. Right? It's dirty.

I loved playing in the dirt when I was a kid. My mom was constantly telling me to get in the bathtub. So, when I think about dirt, I think about something that is messy. But what we need to understand, our attention is drawn toward the fact that:

Dirt is where the growth happens.

And oftentimes, ironically, growth can be kind of messy. And if you want to grow anything in the soil, you've got to prepare the soil, you've got to pay attention to the nutrients in the soil, and you've got to prepare it and aerate it and fertilize it.

One of my favorite memories growing up was going over to my grandparents' house. They had the largest garden in my home town, Joplin, Missouri. And that's not me just like exaggerating. That's a fact. The newspaper did a story on their garden every year. Not a whole lot going on in our hometown.

It took up their whole back yard. I remember going over there in the summers as a kid and one of my favorite things to do was my grandpa would hand me a bucket and a shovel and he said, "Let's dig up some potatoes." So we'd go to this part of the garden where there was greenery coming up out of the surface, but there wasn't anything growing on it. It's not like a tomato plant where you see it growing off of the vines. There wasn't anything there until you would stick the shovel in the dirt and then bring it up. And all of these potatoes would rise to the surface. And you would see that there were some things growing underneath the surface of the soil.

And my grandfather would just take it as a teaching opportunity. He would tell me how gardening was a year-long process. He would prepare the soil. He would aerate it. And he would fertilize it so that way it had enough nutrients to grow the vegetables underneath the surface.

And I learned this important principle. The kind of dirt you have will determine the kind of growth that you see. In other words, if you and I want to see results in our lives, what we might call fruit, or we want to see different results from the ones that we are getting, pay attention to the soil of your heart.

I don't know about you, but I almost exclusively have a tendency to focus on what's going on above the surface. But there's nothing you'll see above the surface that didn't start below. You and I won't experience changes at the top until we get to the root.

Jesus understood this better than anybody. So, instead of just telling us that in the form of a propositional statement, which he could have, he tells a story to help us understand this.

Now, many of you know that Jesus could have easily taught a master class in storytelling. It was his favorite method when it came to teaching. In fact, throughout his entire teaching ministry he used over 100 metaphors and 36 different stories.

And it's easy to understand why. He knew what you and I likely know as well, story is the language of the heart. Our minds are intellectually stimulated with facts and contents, but we aren't likely to apply those contents or to be moved by those contents until we hear a story. So Jesus would tell stories, not just to draw us in, or to entertain us, or to keep our attention. He had a different goal.

The stories he told were called parables and one great description of a parable is that they are:
earthy stories with heavenly meanings

See, Jesus' intent by telling these stories was trying to help us visualize what the kingdom of God is like and how it works and how it manifests itself on earth.

In the case of the parable of seeds, he wants to help us understand the way that personal and spiritual growth happens. And maybe even more importantly why it sometimes doesn't happen.

Now, if you've been listening to me preach and teach for any length of time at all, you probably have picked up on the fact that one of my favorite ways of teaching is to read a little bit of the passage and then explain it—read and explain. I just call it unpacking the text.

But what I'd like to do today is just read the parable in one sitting. Just let it stand on its own two feet the way that Jesus taught it. And then we'll go back and make some observations and some application. So it says, starting off in Luke, chapter 8, verse 4:

"One day Jesus told a story in the form of a parable to a large crowd that had gathered from many towns to hear him: 'A farmer went out to plant his seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on a footpath, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it. Other seed fell among rocks. It began to grow, but the plant soon wilted and died for lack of moisture.

"Other seed fell among thorns that grew up with it and choked out the tender plants. Still other seed fell on fertile soil. This seed grew and produced a crop that was a hundred times as much as had been planted!" When he had said this, he called out, 'Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.'"

"His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He replied, 'You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables to teach the others so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:'"

And he's quoting Isaiah out of the Old Testament.

"When they look, they won't really see. When they hear, they won't understand."

"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is God's word. The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved. The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation.

"The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity. And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest."

I suppose one of the first things that I want to point out is that it says that Jesus is addressing a large crowd. And what that means is that there would have been a variety of perspectives from the people who were listening to him teach.

There would have been some who had grown up in a Jewish household and others who grew up in a Greek home. Some had a different perspective. Some who maybe adopted their parents' faith and some who walked away from it. And maybe some who were open to it. I just found it fascinating that Jesus understood that he was addressing a large crowd.

I kind of know what that is like. Relatively speaking, every weekend there is a decent size crowd that will listen to the message that I'm going to speak that particular morning. And can I just tell you that it's overwhelming at times? I can't think about it too long.

As near as I can tell, I don't know, there will be something like 20 or 30 thousand people both in person, online, or later in the week who will listen to this message. And as I prepare it, I sit and I think to myself, "Okay, who's going to listen to this?"

And it's sort of like preparing a meal for a big group of people. Any of you ever had to do that? It's like, "I don't like that." Or, "I don't eat vegetables." Or, "I don't eat meat." And you're trying to produce this meal for people with a variety of perspectives.

And oftentimes I think to myself, "Are there soft enough foods so people can take it and digest it, and is there going to be meatier substance for those of you who are a little more mature in your faith—you've been following Jesus longer. And it's overwhelming at times.

Jesus addresses a large crowd. What does he do? He tells a story, and it hits every single one of them. And there are only a handful of times, out of all of the parables that Jesus told, that he

would explain the parable after. Most of the time he didn't do that. Often, he would just tell it, drop the mic, and walk away. He's like, "You figure it out."

But in this instance the disciples, wisely, asked him what it meant. And the fact that Jesus takes the time to tell them tells us something. It tells us that he wants this to be crystal clear in all of our lives. And so he says it very clearly.

He says that the seed represents God's word. Now, I want to get a little bit more descriptive than that. The seed represents the content of God's word. If I just say God's word in the Bible, some of you have already written it off. And I want to talk about the content of God's word. What's the content of God's word? What is the overarching thing that the Bible is trying to say?

I can give you the Cliff notes version of that. I would say that the Bible is trying to say that there is a God, that you are not him, and he created you and this entire world and the whole universe. Then things went horribly wrong. And we are all fallen and broken, and we know it. And we're reminded every time we look at the news and look in the mirror.

But God is faithful. And he's just. And I had a debt that I could never pay. So God sent Jesus to pay the debt that I owed that only he could pay. So I am saved by grace through faith through the finished work of Jesus on my behalf. I don't bring anything to the table. I can't pay it off. I respond to it.

And then he promises, "One day I'm going to return and I'm keeping a record of everything that has caused you to cry. And I'm going to wipe those tears from your cheeks. And I'm going to come and I'm going to heal, and I'm going to restore, and I'm going to make right all of the things that have gone terribly wrong in this broken, jacked-up world. So please don't lose heart."

And God doesn't want anything from you, he want's everything for you. That's the message of God's word. That's the content of it. And Jesus says, "It's like seed." And that's not the only time that that metaphor is used.

I'm reminded that it is used in Isaiah 55. It says that the word of God, when it goes out, won't return empty or void. And can I tell you that sometimes at the end of preaching a message, that's the only thing I have to cling to? I'll walk off of the stage and go, "Well, I tried. Bombed that one." And I'm reminded by Isaiah 55, "Hey, as long as God's word was in it, it will produce something."

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 3 Paul says, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God was the one who made it grow."

See, the metaphor is brilliant because it reminds us that God's word functions more like a seed rather than just a faith propositional statement that somebody either believes or doesn't

believe, rejects, or accepts. There is a whole lot more going on under the surface.

See, conversion—when somebody give his life to Christ—that usually isn't something that just happens all of a sudden, even if it appears that way. If somebody gives his life to Christ, it seems like a dramatic conversion right there on the spot, but chances are that the Holy Spirit has been doing something in the soil of his heart for a while.

And the day that you gave your life to Christ likely was not the first day that you contemplated doing so. See, the Holy Spirit has been working on you whether you're aware of it or not. He's wooing you. He's chasing you down. He's speaking, if you'll listen. He's speaking through nature, he's speaking through other people, he's speaking in your own conscience, he's speaking through God's word. He's cultivating the soil of your heart.

And the picture of a seed helps us to think of a farmer who, just like my grandpa in his garden, prepares the soil, sows the seed, fertilizes, waters, and then waits for a crop. And producing the crop isn't one event that just suddenly happens, it's a process that occurs over time.

Part of the truth that Jesus is communicating through this parable is that God's word may take a little bit of time to bear fruit in your life, but it will if you cling to it and you're patient and you wait.

See, there are a wide range of responses to God's word. Maybe you've noticed that. Maybe in your own life, maybe in your spouse's life, somebody you know. Some people believe it to be God's word and some people don't think that it is. A lot of responses to God's word.

The difference isn't the seed but the soil that the seed falls into. God's word is consistent. My heart is not. And oftentimes when you feel like, "This isn't working." Or, "I don't understand it." The problem isn't the seed, I need to take a look at the soil of my heart.

I don't know if any of you have seen the documentary called *The Biggest Little Farm*. We really enjoy watching that as a family. If you haven't seen it, without giving too much away, the story is about this couple, John and Molly Chester. And they buy a run-down farm north of Los Angeles.

And they had this dream to have this farm, but the dream was threatened when they realized that the soil was so compacted and devoid of organic matter that they could hardly break it with a shovel. At one point in the documentary John says, "The soil is dead, and we have no idea how to bring it back to life."

Well they hire a soil consultant. I didn't even know that there was such a thing. And the soil consultant recommends that they build a state-of-the-art compost tea system utilizing the waste of earthworms. Sounds kind of gross. And this waste of the earthworms, they kind of throw that out. They put it into their irrigation system that they spray it out across the land. They added all kinds of animals for manure.

They planted multiple kinds of crops. And slowly this farm came back to life because the soil came back to life.

And at one point the soil consultant said this in the documentary, and I wrote it down. He said this, "Plants build soil." And where do plants come from? They come from seeds. And Jesus says that the seed is God's word. So the seed produces plants, plants build the soil.

And that is so important for us to understand, because oftentimes when we're not getting the results that we want in life, the fruit, the vegetables, the stuff that comes from the soil we think, "Well, the problem must be the seed. So I'll go find some different seed. I'll find a different self-help book. I'll follow a new belief system. I'll travel down a new path of enlightenment. "Maybe we need to go to a different church, maybe that's where it is." I don't know.

Maybe that is the case, but oftentimes we don't necessarily stop to examine the soil of our heart. If the soil is dead, then it doesn't matter what kind of seed you put on it. Nothing is going to grow.

And so in the parable Jesus says that there are four places where the seed lands.

He says it lands:
on a PATH
on some ROCKS
among some THORNS
in GOOD SOIL.

And this is the metaphor for life. See, in Palestine there would have been these well-worn paths that would have gone through the cultivated lands. That's where the sower would have walked as he or she was scattering seed.

So, inevitably, as they reach into the bag and scatter the seed, some of that seed would have fallen onto the hardened path and it was so hard that the seed couldn't germinate beneath the surface of the soil so it would be blown away by the wind or eaten by a small animal or a bird.

There would have been other places in the field where the seed made it into the soil, but it was a thin layer of soil and just underneath it it was filled with rocks. And Jesus is saying that the gospel message might fall into a person's heart, but it doesn't penetrate very deep, it doesn't take root. There's an initial response.

Maybe you adopted the faith of your parents but as soon as you graduated and got out on your own, you just walked away. And trials and challenges and temptations and hurt kept the seed from getting rooted in the soil. So when life got hard, when things didn't go as planned, when people hurt you—especially other Christians—you walked away.

Can I just tell you that I hear that story a lot? “Well, I believed for a while, but I got hurt in the church,” or, “I had a bad experience,” or, “These Christians hurt me in some way, and I walked away.” Can I just say that my heart goes out to that because I get it?

Can I just tell you that prior to becoming a pastor, some of the people who had hurt me the most in life had been other Christians? Some of the people who have hurt me the most are those within the church. And then I became a pastor and that just became more intensified.

Here’s what I mean. Yesterday was my birthday and I had a number of you on social media reach out and say all kinds of really, really nice things. But I had two or three people DM me and say, “Boy, it must be nice to have all of these people loving on you. Must be nice to be you, Aaron.” And I was like, “Well, yes it is. But can I show you some of the other things people say that aren’t so nice?”

Can I just tell you I never thought I would do this? I thought God was calling me to teach and preach the word... I never wanted to be in a big church. I never wanted to have this platform. I just wanted to teach and preach God’s word.

Everything gets intensified—when everybody knows you, but you don’t necessarily know them, everything gets intensified. So the good things that people say—oh, my gosh. It embarrasses me so much. I don’t deserve it. And then the bad things that people say, well, I probably deserve a little of it, but everything is intensified.

Some of the people who have hurt me the most have been Christians. But I’m not going to walk away from Jesus just because of it. See, listen. I said this maybe 10 years ago and I try to come back to it occasionally. Just because somebody follows Jesus poorly, doesn’t mean that he isn’t worth following.

“Well, the church is full of hypocrites.”

Yeah, that’s what it means to be fallen and broken and all in process. We’re going to be hurt regardless if somebody says they are a Christian or not. And so many of us, many of you—I know that I’m speaking to somebody right now—you hear the message. Maybe you’ve been coming so long that you can explain the message.

In fact, can I just say this? Some of you are really smart cookies. And you know it. And you enjoy running intellectual circles around your believing friends. In fact, you know your Bible better than most Christians that you know, but your heart is as hard as the path and the rocks in the soil that’s described. And if that’s the case, then where is that getting you?

This is where all of us have to do a real gut check when it comes to our motives for believing in God. What are you looking for Jesus to do for you anyway? And are you coming to him on your terms or are you coming to him on his terms?

And what happens when, after you’ve given your life to Jesus you get cancer.

Because that happens. What do you do when you give your life to Jesus and your spouse walks out on you? Because that happens. What do you do when you give your life to Jesus and somebody you love passes away? Because that is going to happen. You've got to ask yourself, "Is the seed going to take root and bear fruit or the first time I hit some rocks, I walk away."

See, we've got to remember this important principles right here:

We can focus on God's promise or our circumstance

You can't do both. Our circumstances are the rocks. They are hard and they are painful. In that moment you can focus almost exclusively on your circumstances, or you come back to God's promise and you remember what he has told you. See:

One leads to fruitfulness and the other barrenness

It reminds me of something that God said in the Old Testament to Ezekiel in chapter 33, verse 32. He said:

"You are to them like one who sings a lustful song with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it."

Does that describe anybody that you know? Is that descriptive of you? It's descriptive of me. There are a lot of times when I hear God's voice—doesn't mean that I'm going to do it. And every time I hear God's voice and I don't do it, my heart gets a little bit harder.

And maybe, I don't know, maybe you come, or you tune in and you listen—maybe you bring your spouse and he's not really into it. He just comes because he's tired of hearing you gripe about it. And he sits right next to you and he hears the same message that you hear, and your heart is melted but his is unphased. He just sort of sits there calloused and unresponsive. The gospel is heard but it doesn't take root.

You ever wonder why? Why is it that somebody is moved, and somebody isn't?

In his best-selling book *Into Thin Air* the author, Jon Krakauer describes some of the challenges that the climbers experience as they attempted to peak Mount Everest.

One of the men he mentions in the book is a guy by the name of Andy Harris who was one of the expedition leaders. And one day he stayed up at the peak a little but too long. And the rest of the climbers had already descended when he began the descent all by himself, which is not wise.

About half way down he became in dire need of oxygen. He was oxygen deprived and so he radioed to base camp because he knows that he's not going to make it without some additional oxygen.

And the climbers said, "Andy, we left you with two full oxygen tanks. Do you see them?" And he said, "Yes, they are right in front of me, but they are empty." And they said, "Andy, did you check

them?” And he goes, “No, but they are empty.” And they knew that they were full, they left them with him full, but the realized that because he was so oxygen deprived, he wasn’t thinking straight. He thought they were empty when they were full. And because he thought that they were empty he didn’t take the oxygen.

In other words, he was missing what was right in front of him, the oxygen, because of what was missing within him, the oxygen. And because it was missing within him, he didn’t see what was right in front of him.

The climbers pleaded with him from base camp. They were like, “It’s right there, Andy. It’s immediately available.” But he wouldn’t listen. He wouldn’t take it.

And you know what? I see that all of the time. If the seed is God’s word, then you and I are the soil. And we can spend a lot of time scrutinizing the quality of the seed, aka, can God’s word really be trusted, which I’m not saying that we shouldn’t ask thoughtful questions about it (and there are good answers to them) but we do that almost exclusively and we never examine the condition of the soil. So I want to do that today with this question. Can I just ask you, both in person and online? At the end of a really tough year:

How’s your heart?

When was the last time that you asked yourself that question? Or are you too distracted with social media and things going on around the world and the anger and the blame and the fear? It’s constantly drawing our attention from the only thing you can do anything about anyway. How is your heart?

This has happened for hundreds and hundreds of years, but we see it more readily now because of the instant access to news information. But I’ve been reading more and more here lately of well-known Christians, maybe artists or authors or pastors, who are publicly announcing on twitter that they are no longer Christians—no longer following Jesus. It gets all kinds of different responses.

I can think back to my Bible college days when I was training with other young men and women for full-time ministry—people so excited and on fire for the Lord. I look at their Facebook profiles today and under beliefs they say agnostic. And I stop and I think, “What happened? How does that happen?”

Here’s the thing. That can happen to any one of us. The seed doesn’t change. God’s word is unchanging. What does change? The soil. The soil of our hearts change. How does it change? When you neglect it. You don’t just walk out—if you’re a gardener, you don’t just walk out to your garden when it’s time to start that process and just throw seed on the soil after neglecting it all year long. If you neglect the soil in the garden, it just hardens. It’s not ready for the seed.

So what you've got to do is that you have to constantly be paying attention to the condition of your heart and till the soil of your heart. In Matthew 13 Jesus speaks of those who close their ears, shut their eyes, and harden their hearts. I think that's why Proverbs says to us:

"Guard your heart above all else..." Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)

Above everything else guard your heart. So I'm going to ask you, how's your heart right now? And just be honest.

Some of you might say, "Well, it's kind of hard." Good. Just be honest. Are you paying attention to it? I'll tell you this. One of the challenges of having a hard heart is that a hard heart makes it difficult to recognize a hard heart. Thank you.

Now, listen. If you have physical heart problems—I'm talking about your physical heart now—it's not wise to self-diagnose. You go to a doctor, right? And you utilize his expertise, and he utilizes his tools to get underneath the surface to see if there is a blockage going on.

I don't just go, "Oh, it kind of feels like I've got a blockage, but I think everything is okay." You don't self-diagnose. You need something else outside of you to diagnose your heart. That's why God's word says that it penetrates. It's a double-edged sword, it divides, it gets down beneath the surface.

Can I just briefly mention a few indications of a hard or a hardening heart? I'll just kind of go through these. I think the biggest one is:

Cynicism

When I see cynicism—cynicism is different than skepticism. I'm naturally a skeptical person. So if you come in with a little bit of skepticism, man, you are my people. I get it. Cynicism is a different animal.

I was reading an article in the *New York Times* this last week about how the media almost exclusively focuses on fear and bad news. And at the very end of the article it made this statement, and I wrote it down: "Sometimes healthy skepticism can turn into reflexive cynicism." So if your response to almost everything is cynical, that's an indication of a hardening heart.

Another one would be:

Short fuse

You're just so short with people.

Bitterness

This would be an indication.

Unforgiving spirit

"I'm not going to even entertain the idea of forgiving that person who hurt me."

Closed/Shut down

Not teachable

Expert on everything. I've kind of noticed this lately. Because we all have instant access to all kinds of information—we have access to more information than any other generation of people in the history of the world and it's not doing us any good.

Part of the problem is that we all think that we are experts. Have you noticed that? I have not met anybody who isn't an expert in the vaccines. It's amazing. I've not met anybody who isn't an expert in politics. You say, "Why?"

"Well, if I've got a question then I'm just going to open it up on my magical black box here and I get information and if you disagree with me then I cancel you, because it's offensive for you to disagree with me. It's threatening when you disagree with me."

No, it could just be thoughtful. Just trying to get to better answers, alright? Not teachable, "I'm not going to ask any questions. I already know."

How about this one?

Assume the worst

Man, I know what that feels like. When everybody knows you and you don't really know everybody as many people who know you—they'll assume the worst about your motives. I guarantee you I'm going to get emails about why I have holes in my jeans this weekend. I guarantee it. "Aaron, you're a 45-year-old man." I know. I get it. They are comfortable, alright?

Resentment

That's one.

Blame

Major loss

Earth shattering loss. If you don't deal with that in a healthy way, it will eventually lead to a hard heart.

Defensiveness

Unmet expectations

I'll give you one more:

Bad or weird church experiences

That will harden a lot of hearts. And it grieves me every time I hear about that.

I wrote this message on a plane on Thursday flying back from southern California. The guy sitting next to me, he was probably in his late 50s or early 60s and we struck up a conversation.

He lives in Boston. He's in finance. And we're talking. And I said, "Hey, man. How are things going in Boston?" And he was kind of talking to me about it, kind of giving me his perspectives and opinions on some different things.

And then he asked me the question that I've shared with you before that I always fear when I'm on a plane. He said, "So, what do you do for a living?" And I've always been a little bit apprehensive to answer that question because I just never know what kind of response I'm going to get.

And I've shared that with you before, right? I've been very confessional with you. I've said, "Whenever people ask me that question I'm so tempted to lie. Oh, I'm in sales." I want to weenie out of it. And many of you have chastised me and you've said, "Aaron, you should not be ashamed that you are a pastor. You should say it confidently. Tell them."

So I remembered that. So he said, "What do you do for a living?" And I looked right at him, behind my mask, and I said, "I'm a pastor." And I just locked eyes with him. I'm not looking away from him. And here was his response. He goes, "Oh, I'll mind my Ps and Qs."

I didn't even know what that meant. I had to google it later. But I looked at him and I said, "Hey, man. There's no need. You're not on trial here." And he goes, "No, let me tell you what I mean." And I was like, "Oh, please do."

And he began to share with me how growing up his mom was very religious, but he wasn't, and it really bothered her. And he said, "When I was 18, right before I was getting ready to go off to college, in her last-ditch effort to get me religious she knew I liked golf. So she set up a golf game with three of her male friends who could kind of mentor me or give me some good advice before I headed off to college."

And he goes, "Because she was paying for the golf game, I went." And he goes, "I showed up at the first tee box and these three guys were there and they were all three priests." And he goes, "My mom was trying to get me religious within 18 holes."

That wasn't a very effective strategy. Hey, listen. That just hardened his heart. So how are our hearts most commonly hardened?

Here's the thing. I never want to stand up here and preach to you without first preaching to me. So when I study a passage, when I look at it, I don't sit there and go, "Well, what can I say to you to convict you." First of all I go, "God, what are you saying to me?" So I thought to myself, "How is my heart most commonly hardened?"

And here are the three things that I came up with. Maybe you can identify.

When I'm misunderstood

I'll tell you what, man. When I'm misunderstood over and over again and I mean well and my intentions are good and somebody misunderstands me, it hardens my heart. Here's another one:

When I've been hurt in some way

Just the hurts of life. I then I wrote down this next one:

When I repeatedly feel like I'm not enough

Repeatedly. "Man, I'm trying so hard at work and I just can't please my boss." You know, after a while you'll just stop trying. And you just get hardened.

“I’m trying so hard to connect with my husband, and it’s not working. I feel like I’m not enough.” And after a while you’ll get hardened.

Man, you just repeatedly feel like you are not enough it leads to a hardened heart. And there isn’t a single one of us who came into this life with a hard heart. You are not born into this world with a hard heart. No. You were born into this world with a fallen sin nature, but not a hard heart. That’s developed over time, by having your heart broken repeatedly.

See, here’s a tough truth that’s so important for us to acknowledge:

Over time life will harden your heart

There is no way around it. That’s why Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble.” He was giving us that heads up. And so, left untended, soil will harden over time. And left untended, your heart will as well.

Unmet expectations, crushing losses, piercing betrayals, excruciating pain—there is a lot going on in the soil of our hearts. And it’s really, really complicated, which is why I don’t treat people like projects. I don’t get bent out of shape when somebody I meet finds out I’m a pastor and they don’t believe, or is even hostile toward belief. I don’t lose sleep over it because I’m not trying to win a debate and I’m not keeping score. I’m not taking scalps for Jesus.

No, the farmer doesn’t make the seed grow. A good farmer tends to the soil and trusts the seed to do what only it can underneath the surface.

So here’s an observation. We’ve been through an extremely tough year and it ain’t quite over yet. It’s still punching us in the mouth. And everything with the pandemic, political division, social and racial tension, microaggressions, mass shootings, mental health, crumbling families, and marriages, that’s the real pandemic going on right now.

Everything feels so personal and so weighty. And we’re offended by everything. That’s an indication of a hardening heart. Can I say this? We’ve got more angry Christians than I think I’ve ever seen. And when you go to social media with your anger, all it does is harden more hearts to the seed of God’s word.

So, when you see people behaving and acting in ways that are ungodly, and you look at their hard hearts, many times for us we just take a bunch of seed and we’re just like, “I’m going to start throwing it at you harder.” And all that is going to do is the seed is going to bounce off of the hard soil and make it even harder.

No, as Christ followers we recognize who is really in control. And we relax and we take a deep breath, and we say, “God is going to one day come to make things right and restore all things and I take confidence in that. Therefore, I can have a sweet spirit toward people who don’t see things the way that I see them, and I can allow the soil... You don’t debate anybody into the kingdom of God. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, I’m just going to be confessional to you. I’ve felt my own heart hardening over the last year. And that’s been scary. There have been some really dark moments in my life over the last year where I just felt myself growing numb. I’ve wanted to quit so many times this last year, more than ever. I’ve just been dreaming of retirement.

I've been in leadership ministry for over 20 years. This has been the hardest year, hands down, because it didn't matter what decision we made or didn't make, what we said or didn't say—it was going to garner intense criticism that got personal.

And I didn't know the answers. Part of my responsibility as your lead pastor is to anticipate problems and then try to come up with solutions. I never saw a pandemic coming. I never saw the political division that we saw to the intensity that we saw. All of the racial and social tensions of this last year were at a fever pitch.

So what do we do? Do we stay closed? Do we open? We're going to garner criticism from both. Do we ask you to wear a mask or are we cool if you don't? We're going to garner criticism from both. Do I say something about racism or do I not? If I say something I'm going to take shots, if I don't say something I'm going to take shots.

And there were some moments when I felt my heart hardening toward you. And I just didn't want to do it anymore. And I realized that if I stayed on that path, it was going to lead to mass destruction in my life.

You see, when Christians react that way, it reveals that we've lost our trust in the seed of God's word. He's going to restore all of the broken things. We can put our trust in him and spend less time getting worked up over—you fill in the blank—and more time cultivating the soil of our hearts.

As a church, our mission is to remove unnecessary barriers that keep people from Jesus, not adding new ones.

And so, when dirt hardens, when the soil gets hard there is no way for the seed to get in. And when it comes to getting people to Jesus the thing that many of us as Christ followers overlook is examining the condition of somebody's heart. You don't just throw more seed at it.

Can I just say this? If you're here joining us for the first time or listening online and you say, "This is all interesting stuff. I don't know that I buy any of it. I don't know if I believe. I've got so many questions about Jesus, the Bible, science, politics, culture." I get it.

And I am not a salesman trying to sell you on something, I'm a farmer trying to compel you toward something, maybe more specifically someone. And his name is Jesus. And he loves you. And he believes in you, whether you believe in him or not. And he came to reconcile you back to God.

And by the way, can I just say this? Jesus doesn't fit in any of our boxes. One of his favorite things to do... "Well, Jesus. You're on our team."

"No, I'm not."

"Jesus, you're on our team over here."

"No, I'm not."

It's still the same thing today. We have a tendency to recreate Jesus in our own image. Some of us thought that Jesus had blond hair and blue eyes. He did not. He grew up in the Middle East, he would have been darker complected.

Some of us think that Jesus was a republican. Some of think he was a democrat. He ain't either.

Jesus came to reconcile you back to God and he is more gracious than you think. And he is for you, not against you. And he is patiently calling out to you. The question is, can you hear him? Can you hear him? Because there's a lot of noise right now.

So, both of my great-grandfathers on both sides of my family blew their families apart when they were middle aged. They left their wives, my great-grandmothers, and ran off with other women. My grandfathers were sort of the products of that environment, and it wounded them both in unique ways. And both of them talked to me about it. One of them has passed away, one is still alive.

But one of them, when I was in college, sat me down and he was telling me about a conversation he had, the very last conversation that he had with his dad, my great-grandfather, before he went off to the army. And he said, "You know, Aaron, your great-granddad left our family, but he still lived in town with his new family. So I would see him every now and then. And we knew of each other, we just didn't have much of a relationship."

He said, "But before I went off to the army he asked if we could have coffee. And we sat down in this coffee shop and he looked across at me and he said, 'Son, why don't you call me dad?'" He said, "Aaron, I looked right across the table and him and I said, 'Because you're not.'"

I could feel the wounding in his words as he shared that story with me. And he said, "That was the last time I ever talked to that man while he was alive." And I could see how that had hurt him and hardened him in some way.

And I was immediately reminded of the sentiment in the Old Testament: The sins of the father affect the upcoming generations. And I thought, "I'm a product of that." And you know what? I can sense that.

I've got a boy of my own. He's 18. He's getting ready to graduate high school and head off to college. I asked his permission to share this with you, by the way. I used to not have to do that. When he was little, I could just use him as an illustration, and he was oblivious. He was in the nursery pooping his diaper. But now he listens, alright? So I don't want to embarrass him. So I asked him if I could use this, and he gave me permission.

He's so much like me, which helps us because we really connect on some things, but it's also like we're two parts of a magnet that repel each other. So sometimes it's hard for us to really connect because of that. And he's getting ready to head off to college. I'm real emotional and sentimental about this.

So recently I just shared that story with him. The one I just shared with you. And I said, "Son, that's in our family. And I can feel that at times" And I said, "I never want our hearts to grow hard toward each other. And as you venture off and you get busy with life, we might end up missing each other if we're not intentional enough about communicating with each other, so both of us are going to have to work hard at this."

And in that moment, he said, "Dad, being a part of our family is one of my favorite things."

See, this doesn't happen by accident. You've got to cultivate the soil of your heart.

When I was in seminary, I took a class called preaching through the parables where I learned to preach the parables. And one of the assignments was that we had to pick a parable, study it, write a sermon, and deliver it in 30 minutes. It was terrifying. But it gave me practice for this one because that's pretty much what I did this week.

And I remember in that class I learned this. When it came to the parables, the story was the invitation. Jesus was shaking things up and he used this story and others to till the soil of our hearts so that something new could grow.

This past year of pandemic and political division and racial tension and all of this stuff—all of the mass shootings—stuff is piling onto us. I believe God is trying to till the soil of our hearts. He's trying to reawaken us so that something new can grow.

And I'm emerging out of this season of the dark night of the soul to go, "God, what is on the other side of this for us?" Some stuff that we are going to experience that we never would of without the difficult times.

So where do we go from here? Let me leave you with these two things:

Stop trying and start tilling

Some of you are trying to believe. Some of you are trying harder at work. Some of you are trying to go the distance. And I would say that there is nothing wrong with trying, but if you just continually stay in that perpetual place of trying to follow Jesus, eventually it will lead to hardening because you won't ever be enough. Start tilling. Focus on tilling the soil of your heart and see what happens.

If you are not in a group, get in a group. If you've not signed up for Daily Bible Reading, sign up for Daily Bible Reading. If you're not serving and you've been attending here for more than three months, I guarantee you, after a while, like, there are only so many things we can do to vary the service. After a while you'll get bored. After a while you'll start to grow hard. And if you find yourself in that spot you jump in and you start serving and God will begin to bring new growth to your spiritual life.

Here's the last thing:

Stay curious and open, not conclusive and shut down

Be teachable. Start asking lots of questions. Trying to prove that God is real or that the Bible can be trusted is an exercise in futility. You can't do it either way.

Here's the thing. God refuses to come to you on your terms. Jesus let people walk away. The rich young ruler didn't like what Jesus had to say. He said, "Sell everything you have. Give it to the poor and follow me." And he was like, "I don't think I want to do that." Jesus was like, "Okay. See you." He didn't come back to him and say, "Let's renegotiate."

See, God isn't on trial. You and I are. But he's a gracious judge. And this is a safe place for you to belong even before you believe. Just come as you are. That's all I want you to do. Just come

as you are. Just come every week. Tune in every week and just pray this prayer, “God, would you please help till the soil of my heart. I’m open. And if you’re real and if any of this is true, would you just show yourself to me?”

Here’s the thing. Give it six months. Give it a year. And see what God might do. On my way over here today I got a text message from a pastor friend of mine. He actually pastors right across the street from our broadcast campus, Eagle Church.

His name is Eric Simpson. He pastors that church. He’s a great guy and we are friends. He texted me this morning and he said, “Hey, praying for you this morning. Grateful for your life and leadership.”

And then he left me Deuteronomy 32:2. He had no idea what I was preaching today.

It says:

“Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.”

And I just pray that these words, hopefully, will begin to soften the soil of your heart again.

Father, we come to you today and we’re so grateful that you are such a Master Teacher, that you use parables to communicate deep kingdom truths that we need to be reminded of. So, God, as a people we just want to consecrate our hearts. We just want to refocus our attention away from all of the things that have been distracting us over the last year, to really hear from you.

God, our hearts, mine included, have grown hard over this past year of bad news. So we come to you and ask that your Spirit would soften our hearts so that the seed of your word would do something new, bring about new growth.

God, we need healing. We need hope. We need to push out fear and cling to joy. We need to keep our eyes focused upon you and we need to be reminded that you are still on your throne.

COVID did not knock you off. You are still on your throne. Political division did not throw you a curve ball. You are still in control. We acknowledge that and we want to stay on mission with you because you are the only hope of the world.

So, God, meet us in this place right now. We ask this in Jesus’ name. And everybody says: Amen.