

By the time we're finished next week, we'll have spend nearly 1/3 of 2012 in the garden of Genesis 2-3. That's an enormous amount of time. Our journey began with Lent, on Ash Wednesday. If you were with us, you'll remember that we began with the first sin, Pride. In the garden, God gave humanity two choices, embodied as two trees. [Do you have a graphic you can use for this?]

God wanted us to choose Life in the Garden with him, but instead we chose the experience of Good and Evil. We chose to be our own gods, to set our own rules, to try to run the world on our own, instead of following God. That's **Pride - deciding that we can live better in God's world on OUR terms instead of on God's**. And with that choice, we introduced sin and death into the world.

During Lent, we explored the so-called Seven Deadly Sins. This list was created by early Christians who were seeking to honestly and courageously face their sin. The Seven Deadlies are the most basic categories of Sin. They're the original fruit from which every evil, every hurt, every pain in our lives grows.

From the root, Pride, comes Gluttony. **Gluttony is looking for eternal fulfillment in anything that's not God.**

**Envy grows from comparing ourselves to others because we've placed our self-worth in something other than God.**

**Greed is desiring more money and stuff than we need.**

**Sloth is refusing to meet the demands Love makes of us. Not being lazy, but being lazy about our love.**

**Wrath is an inappropriate response to injustice.**

**And Lust reduces people to objects of our desire. The lustful person ignores the relational aspect of our sexual nature.**

And from those grow everything else. During Lent, we faced our sin seriously. We faced its consequences. We mourned it and confessed.

We came to Good Friday, the day that Jesus was crucified, and we saw the terrible consequences of our Sin, that Jesus took those consequences on himself, and died in our place. We saw that by participating in his death, we could be freed from that tree and its deadly fruit.

Then we came to Easter, to the Sunday of the Resurrection. And we saw that - beyond all hope - Jesus' resurrection from the dead opened up the way back to that first tree. In the book of Revelation, we once again found the Tree of Life.

We learned that through Jesus' death and resurrection, we're not only freed *from* our sin and its deadly consequences, we are freed *for* eternal life. We can once again live life with God, in God's world, on God's terms.

To live in the power of Jesus' resurrection is to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. And when we live in the Spirit, the Scriptures promise that the Tree of Life will bear fruit in our lives. The Spirit will produce these good things in us.

So since Easter, we've been exploring what a fruitful, resurrection life looks like. We saw that it all grows from the root, the self-giving Love that is God's innate nature. **Love is giving of yourself for the good of another person.**

**Joy** is different from happiness. Happiness is an emotion based on circumstance. **Joy is an attitude founded on God's provision and promise.**

**Peace** is more than inaction or a lack of conflict. **Peace is the state when everything is as God created it to be.** Jesus called us to be peace-makers!

**Patience** is a willingness to wait on an outcome, even in the face of opposition or suffering. It's learning to trust God's timing and plan over our own.

**Kindness & Goodness** both refer to living in the world and among people as God created us to. We help other people, and our lives can be described as abundant and fruitful. We are kind and good not to earn from God, but because of God's provision for us.

**Faithfulness** is staying consistent until the end. Even though we're unfaithful, God is always faithful. He has declared us to be holy, and by the Spirit's power is perfecting us. Faithfulness for us is living in that power, rather than trying to do it on our own.

**Gentleness** comes from the conviction that God is ultimately in control. We don't have to fight our own battles because God fights for us. The power we have we can use as God directs, rather than to protect our own interests.

**Self-Control** means taking the next right step to become the person God is calling us to be. Discipline grows not from our own efforts, but the Spirit's power in our lives.

And so today we come to the end of this journey. For the next two weeks, we'll take a look back across the journey we've been on together.

Today, I want to focus on a very real, challenging question this whole journey has raised for us. We touched on it briefly last week when we discussed faithfulness, but it deserves a lot of attention.

Because here's the deal:

First, the seven deadly sins are a *lot* easier to grow than the fruit of the Spirit. Mostly, we didn't need any help with the seven deadlies. It's *easy* to be prideful, gluttonous, envious, greedy, slothful, wrathful and lustful. Not that any of us is getting gold medals in every category or anything, but as a whole, these come naturally to us.

The Fruit of the Spirit, on the other hand, are a lot more difficult. It's not easy to love someone, especially if they don't love you back. Maintaining a joyful outlook on life is tough. Most of us

aren't patient. Our lives aren't very peaceful. We're basically kind and good, but not especially, not exceptionally (again, most of us). Most of us don't even really consider gentleness to be a virtue - it smacks of weakness. We saw last week how faithless our culture is. And who doesn't want a little more self-controlled, in this nation of gluttons?

So we come in here, we talk about the seven deadlies and these Fruit that seem impossible to grow on our own. When we talk about becoming more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, any of them, it's easy to come away with "just try harder!" The problem is most of us *have* tried before. When our lives aren't as fruitful as we want them to be (and that's most of us in here), it's not for a lack of effort on our parts.

The Good News this morning is that a lack of fruit in your life doesn't mean you don't have what it takes. Actually, the biggest problem I've encountered with those of us who follow Jesus is that we're putting all our effort into the wrong thing. The truth is, we're created to be fruitful. In that same story of those two trees, we find this statement about our purpose:

**The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. -- Genesis 2:15 (NLT)**

When God created the Garden, and the Two Trees and humanity, we were put in the garden to cultivate it. We're designed by nature to grow and to be fruitful.

A good question to ask yourself is, Which tree am I cultivating?

That's a weird question. It's weird because as little as 150 years ago, nearly every human on the planet farmed. But that's not the case anymore, especially in this country and especially for us children of Suburbia. How many of us grew up on a farm where we were actually involved in growing crops?

Because so few of us understand how farming, how cultivating works, we miss a really important aspect of this discussion. We think the fruit is our responsibility to produce. So if there's not fruit, we need to try harder. If I don't think my life is very peaceful, I need to try to be more peaceful. [GRAMMAP: maybe a map? Fruit vs. soil, then the different kinds of soil?]

But these fruit are the fruit of the *Spirit*. Just like in planting, we have no control over the plant itself. We can't make it grow. We can't force the seed to sprout, the flowers to bloom or the fruit to grow. But that's what we try to do. If I'm lacking peace, I try to be more peaceful. Most of us are trying to produce the Spirit's fruit. We're trying to do the Spirit's job. Our efforts are misdirected.

Which begs the question: what's the *right* way to work? What *is* our job? Where *should* we be directing our efforts?

So glad you asked! In farming and gardening, if the plant is unhealthy, the best we can do is tend to the *soil* in which the plant grows.

So today, let's take a look at the soil of our lives. Let's consider whether we are cultivating lives that are ready to receive the Gospel seed and grow the Spirit's fruit.

In Mark 4, Jesus tells a story about a farmer sowing seeds. It turns out to be a parable about the Gospel, and about the condition of our hearts. Let's listen together, beginning in v3:

"Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some of the seed fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seed sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plant soon wilted under the hot sun, and since it didn't have deep roots, it died. Other seed fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants so they produced no grain. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they sprouted, grew, and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" Then he said, "Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand." -- Mark 4:3-9 (NLT)

Now, if this story were all we had, it'd be pretty tough to figure out what Jesus was talking about. There's a farmer scattering seed and it falls on four different kinds of soil - a hard, tread footpath, shallow soil, weedy soil and good soil. And the seed that fell on good soil grew a miraculous crop - the most a really good farmer with a really good harvest could hope for in those days was about 30x. So 60 or 100x is a miracle. [let's do images of each of the soils here]

But still... what? What does that have to do with the Gospel? Fortunately, the disciples were just as confused as we are and they asked him to explain. So Jesus explains, beginning in v14:

The farmer plants seed by taking God's word to others.

The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away.

The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.

The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced.

And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!" -- Mark 4:14-20 (NLT)

So: the seed is the Gospel and we are the soils. But Jesus points out that there are four different kinds of soils that receive the Gospel to varying degrees. The condition of the soils directly determines how well the Gospel grows in their lives. So let's look more closely at these four soils:

First, the footpath: [Now use the picture from earlier with each description]

The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away.

This soil, these lives, are so hard that the Gospel can't even be planted. Instead, Satan snatches it away.

Most people who hear this get creeped out by the idea of Satan lurking around individual people waiting to harm them. But that's not how the New Testament usually talks about Satan - he's mostly portrayed as the ruler of nations, as the power behind thrones and kingdoms. Satan's working big-picture, not making stoplights turn red so we're late to work and question how there could even be a God in a world with red stoplights.

So how could this Satan - the 30,000 ft Satan who's behind presidents and prime ministers and kings and dictators - how could he snatch away Gospel seed from hard hearts?

Have you ever met someone who just can't believe in God because of all the ugly, evil things done in God's name? They might point to the crusades or slavery. They might highlight all the Christians who opposed Civil Rights and equal rights for women. They might even point to how many Christians today treat Muslims or Gay and Lesbian persons.

If you're in a war, the best thing you can do is get your enemy fighting for you. And that's what Satan does very well with the Church. We get so caught up in the ways of our culture (whatever culture we're a part of) that we lose the Way of Jesus. We fight our national wars in the name of the Prince of Peace. We love our neighbors and hate our enemies, when Jesus said that's what the world does! He said my followers love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them!

We all know that lots of Christians don't actually look much like Christ. And we get caught up in all sorts of causes that have nothing to do with the Gospel.

And as a result, all these people have been walked on by the Church, trampled down because they're not like all of us. Can we really be surprised that

**The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away.**

If you're one of those people and you're actually here today, could I offer an honest and sincere apology? Not on behalf of the Church - that's too big for me. I'll apologize on behalf of myself. I've been that person. I've said those hateful things. I've been guilty of trampling people like you. I'm sorry. That's not God. That's not Jesus. That's not the Gospel.

To the rest of us, the only way to fix this, the only way to overcome Satan, is to cling to the Way Jesus shows us. We must live lives that are so saturated in the Gospel, that are so fruitful that we show by our lives that Satan's lies are just that: false.

Let's move on to the next soil:

**The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.**

Many of us are content to let someone else live our faith for us. Maybe it's our parents' religion or

a friend. In our professional culture, it's way too easy to let us professional pastors be your faith. We'll interpret the Bible for you, pray for you, tell you how you should be following Jesus. How many of us settle for bumper-sticker theology and pithy Christianisms as the sum-total of our faith?

But Jesus warns that that kind of shallow faith is dangerous. The Gospel fruit that will grow there is weak, unhealthy. It can't survive the trials that come in our lives. "God is my copilot" won't help when you feel like your whole life just smashed into a bridge embankment.

If we want to be healthy, good soil, we have to cultivate a deep faith. That means doing the hard work of learning how to pray, to read and interpret Scripture on our own. Learning to share our lives with other believers.

The third soil:

The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced.

We've talked about this soil often together. It's so easy to be distracted by other things these days. There're so many good things that want to take priority in our lives over the Gospel. Maybe it's our work, our family, our kids. It could be pursuing a certain lifestyle, it could be an addiction. Maybe it's a relationship or money (including debt!).

The very real danger is that any of these can become weeds that choke out the Gospel in your life. If you're not paying attention, you won't even notice it happens. One day you'll look at your life, you won't see God anywhere. If you dig around, through all the other stuff you've filled your life with, you'll find a withered, choked off Gospel plant much smaller and less effective than everything else in your life. And you might wonder why. You might wonder where God went.

This is why Sabbath is so important. Sabbath creates space for the Gospel to grow. It clears away the weeds that are constantly growing in our lives. This is why Giving is so important to practice. When we're giving cheerfully, sacrificially and gratefully, we're recentering ourselves on God, on the Gospel. We're pulling those weeds of materialism and self-sufficiency that threaten to choke out the Gospel.

If we do not tend our lives, if we're not intentional about where we're investing our time, energy, money, affections - our *lives*, then we will trample on other people instead of loving them. We will have a shallow faith that can't withstand those times when life gets hard. We won't see the weeds that grow up to choke out the Spirit's fruit in our lives.

If you're so wrapped up in the ways of our culture that you've lost the way of Jesus, you're trampling people underfoot. You're hardening their hearts (and your own) to the Gospel seed. You're a tool of Satan.

If you're content to let someone else believe for you, your faith is shallow. When life gets hard - and it always gets hard eventually - your shallow faith won't be able to sustain you.

And if you're so busy you don't have time for God, those other things you're filling your life with – no matter how good they are – are choking out the Gospel.

If any of these soils describe the condition of your soul, then don't be surprised that you're producing sickly fruit that doesn't nourish anyone.

But.

Thank God there's always a "But."

Those soils don't have to continue to describe us. We can choose to be attentive to the condition of our hearts. If we intentionally cultivate the soil of our lives, if we are careful to keep our hearts open and ready instead of hard, if we pursue a deep faith, if we keep our lives clear of weeds, then God promises us something amazing:

**And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!**

If we are faithful to do our part, if we take responsibility for our lives, then God will produce a spiritual harvest in our lives beyond anything we could ever accomplish on our own. The Spiritual Fruit our lives bear will exceed anything we could hope for or imagine.

Your only job is to cultivate the soil of your life. Chase after God. Make the Way of Jesus the Way of your life. It means making some hard choices. Saying no to some good things. Maybe eating some crow and offering some apologies.

But the Fruit the Spirit will grow in your life is nothing short of world-changing miraculous.

**[Examine]**

1. Which of the Seven Deadly Sins is the biggest hindrance for me?
2. Over which Sin have I had the most victory and seen the most growth?
3. Which Fruit of the Spirit is most lacking in my life?
4. Which Fruit of the Spirit is most present?
5. Which soil best describes my life during this past couple of months?
6. What steps can I take to cultivate a healthy, Gospel-ready life during this next week?