

**Sustaining
a Lifetime
of Ministry**

**Session #1: Expectations
with Pastor Colin Smith**

Welcome to Open for the Bible for Leaders. In this module we're going to look at sustaining a lifetime of ministry. We're going to look at the expectations you should have, the limitations you will experience, and the progress you can hope to make in serving the Lord.

Jesus said, "*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples*" (John 15:8). How is that possible? How can you bear fruit in your ministry? How can you sustain a lifetime of service? How can you overcome the discouragements you will face in serving the Lord? In this module we're going to look at some parables of Jesus from Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:3-8 says,

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty..."

Often this parable is approached from the perspective of the soil. There are four kinds of soil. Which one are you? But today I want to look at this story from the perspective of the sower. Verse 3, *A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed...*

Four Responses to the Word of God

As a leader, you are a sower of the Word of God. You want to plant the Word of God in the lives of children, young people, friends, family, the unchurched, and the unreached. This story is about what happens when the Word of God is sown. Jesus is telling us what to expect when we engage in the ministry of the Word. He is telling us that we must not be surprised or discouraged when people respond in different ways to the Word of God. This issue of 'expectations' is crucial to sustaining a lifetime of service.

Some years ago, I saw a survey of pastors who had left the ministry. The number one reason that they gave was, "It wasn't what I had expected." Here are people who have invested money and time to train for a vocation and they entered that vocation with an expectation and what they experienced was something very different.

Picture a young pastor, committed to the word of God. He is fired up about preaching and about discipling. He has a plan for ministry. A vision of a church on fire for the Lord and a community transformed by the Gospel. A congregation calls him to serve as their pastor and he gives himself to the work. He does this for 10 years. What is the result? The result is mixed! Some people have flourished. But in others there has hardly been any change at all. Some of the people are simply

older versions of what they were before. After a while this gets to him, and the pastor begins to wonder, “Is this really worth it?” Maybe you’ve felt a similar way in your ministry.

You step up to lead a Bible study. You commit to teaching children, or to leading a group of young people. You have a vision for a group of people who will share openly hold each other accountable and thrive through immersion in the Word of God. But some are more committed than others. A few are always engaged: one or two seem disconnected. You begin to wonder, “What am I doing wrong?”

You may have this experience as a parent. You bring children into the world. Their arrival brings you great joy, and you have great expectations. You determine that you will sow the Word of God in their lives. Early on, you establish a pattern of prayer and reading the Bible and as the family grows, you discover that all of your children are equally responsive, right? Wrong! They are not equally responsive. While one child drinks it in, another has very little interest. As a parent you become concerned. “My son seems disconnected from the Word of God. He does not relate to it. He has no interest in it. What am I to do?”

These are the real issues of life and ministry and I want you to see today that they are precisely what our Lord speaks about in the Parable of the Sower. Here is what will happen when you sow the Word of God. It will have different effects in the lives of different people. Notice from this story that Jesus tells that some people who hear the Word will be unresponsive.

a. Unresponsive

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. (Matthew 13:19)

If you are a sower, you know how hard and discouraging this can be. You are trying to teach the Word of God. You break it down to make it as simple as you possibly can, but your son or daughter, or someone you minister to just doesn’t get it. Nothing about the Word really interests them. He or she hears it with a yawn. Doesn’t really see how what you are saying connects with his or her life. When this happens, you need to remember that this happened in the ministry of Jesus too. This is the whole point of the parable. Jesus is telling us not to be surprised or unduly discouraged when people we love and pray for hear the Word, but really have no interest in it or understanding of it.

Remember you can’t be a better teacher than Jesus. No one has ever taught more simply, more clearly or in a way that is more compelling. Look at his masterful teaching in John 10, where Jesus paints the picture of the shepherd and the sheep. He said, “*I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.*” John records, “*This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying*” (John 10:6). If that was the experience of Jesus, it will certainly be yours too. So here is what you should expect as a sower of the Word. Some people will be unresponsive.

b. Enthusiastic

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. (Matthew 13:20–21)

Here is a person who hears the Word and receives it. Notice that this person makes an early response. ‘Immediately’ he or she receives it with joy! So this person could hardly be more different from the unresponsive person. But this joyful receiving of the Word does not last. Trouble comes, and the person who once professed faith so brightly falls away. This second response is perhaps the most discouraging of all for the sower of the Word. Your son made a profession of faith when he was a little boy. But when he reached high school, things began to change. He no longer received the Word with joy. He seemed to lose interest. It was hard to get him to come to church.

D.L. Moody was a wonderfully wise evangelist. He realized that invitations to respond at his meetings would often draw people who ‘immediately receive the word with joy,’ but who had no root in them. So, this is what he said to his counsellors:

Urge immediate decision, but never tell a man he is converted. Never tell him he is saved. Let the Holy Spirit reveal that to him. You cannot see when a man receives eternal life. You can’t afford to deceive anyone about this great question.

Jesus makes it clear that, if you are a sower of the seed, you will know the disappointment of professions of faith that prove not to be genuine because they do not last. Don’t be surprised or unduly discouraged by this. It happened in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus did not affirm every profession of faith. In John, chapter 2 we’re told that many “*believed in his name*” at Cana of Galilee after that first miracle when Jesus turned water into wine. But “*Jesus... did not entrust himself to them, because He knew all people...He himself knew what was in man*” (John 2:23–25).

We don’t know all people. We cannot finally tell who is genuinely converted from the one and who is merely manifesting a passing enthusiasm. But this teaching of Jesus surely reminds us that as leaders and as parents we should be careful before affirming that a person is a Christian. Telling a person that they are Christians when they do not love, trust, or serve Jesus Christ is one of the most spiritually damaging things we could do.

There will be people whose joyful receiving of the Word is a passing phase. Someone who seemed to show so much promise and then disappoints you by going back. You plead with her. You remind her of the joy she once knew, the profession she once made, but she has ‘moved on.’ Her heart is in another place and she does not hear you. She had no root in her. She went out as quickly and easily as she came in.

When you sow the Word, some people will be unresponsive, others will be enthusiastic, but it will simply be a passing phase. Then Jesus tells us a third thing that we will experience. When you sow the Word some people will be distracted.

c. Distracted

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.
(Matthew 13:22)

Here is a person who hears and receives the Word. The seed gets into the soil, and it begins to grow. The thorns were not obvious at the beginning and we know this because in verse 7, our

Lord says ‘*the thorns grew up.*’ Thorns were not visible when the seed was sown. The problem was that under the soil there were root systems from old thorn bushes that had never been dug from the ground. And when the seed began to grow the thorns outgrew it and choked it. Jesus does not say that this person “falls away.” The distracted person remains in the church and would say that he is a Christian. But he is unfruitful. His life is crowded, so there is no room for his faith to grow. This person is Christian in name only.

Here’s what we often experience as sowers of the Word. There are many people who receive the Word. They profess faith in Christ, but the root system of the surrounding culture’s convictions and dreams have already filled the soil of their lives. Instead of digging them out, they merely add faith to what is already there. People see Jesus as a means of helping them achieve their own dream. The ground of their life is crammed with the root system of another plant and there is no room for the Word of God to grow. The rich young ruler is a perfect example of this third response. (See Matthew 19:16–29.)

There is something else that you can expect as a sower of the Word. Jesus makes it very clear that when you sow the word, some people will be receptive.

d. Receptive

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty (Matthew 13:23).

Here are people who hear the Word and understand it. They see that it speaks to them, and that God lays claim to their lives. The Word of God goes into their lives and it bears fruit in them! The harvest that the Word brings in these people’s lives is abundant: *In one case a hundredfold; in another sixty, and in another thirty.*

The Word of God will be more fruitful in some believers than in others. The *degree* of fruitfulness will vary among believers, but the distinguishing mark of every true believer is that the Word of God bears fruit in your life. It bears the fruit of repentance, faith, hope, love, obedience, service, and perseverance.

Here is the great encouragement for sowers of the seed. The living seed of the Word of God will produce an abundant harvest. Give yourself to the ministry of the Word and you will see fruit. You will not see it in an equal degree in each person’s life, you may not see it immediately. The seed grows over time, and the most immediate results often turn out to be disappointing. There will be frustrations, there will be setbacks, but God’s Word, faithfully sown, will raise a harvest in the lives of other people who hear it.

Four Applications

1. Stick with the Proper Seed

The seed that bears the fruit of bringing people under the blessing of God’s rule is the Word of God. This is clearly stated in Luke 8:11, “*The seed is the Word of God.*” This is the only seed that will bear the fruit of Godward change in people’s lives. One of the greatest responsibilities of any ministry leader is to make sure that the Word of God is at the heart of your ministry.

Would a person need a Bible in the ministry that you lead? Would your friend need a Bible at the mentoring sessions you have with her? Are you leading a ministry of the Word, or are you using some other kind of seed?

Here's how a church can lose a faithful and fruitful ministry. Some well-meaning Christians observe that the seed of the Word does not produce an abundant harvest in every life. They say, "there are some people in whom this seed is not producing a harvest so let's consider them and try some other seed. They are not responding to this, so let's give them something else."

But here's the problem. Different seed will produce a different harvest. Different seed may keep people together, it may create a helpful group experience, but it will not bring people under the rule of God. The goal of Jesus was never to keep the crowd. It was to draw out of the crowd people who would live under the blessing of God's rule. That harvest can only be raised through the Word of God. So, stick with the proper seed.

2. Guard Your Heart

As a ministry leader, you are a sower, but remember that your heart is also soil. Your work as a sower can affect the soil of your heart. Here's what happens. You love the Lord, and you give yourself to ministry. You take responsibility and you become a sower of the Word in the lives of other people. As you do this, three things will happen.

a. You will get trodden on!

When that happens, watch your heart. When you get trodden on, your heart can become hard like the path. Do not become a sower whose heart is getting harder.

b. As you give yourself to ministry, you will face difficulties.

Trouble will come on account of the Word (v21), and when it does you may be tempted to give up. When that happens, watch your heart!

c. As you give yourself to ministry, your life will become more crowded.

As God gives you greater responsibility, it will be harder for you to manage your life. The cares of the world will press in on you. When that happens, watch your heart! Don't let your life become so crowded with what you are doing for Jesus that there no longer is room for Jesus in you!

3. Exercise Patience

Exercise patience because seed grows slowly. Remember Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the Bomber! He does not say, a bomber went out to bomb, and as he bombed, he changed the whole landscape overnight. Maybe there are times when you wish that God would drop a few bombs. The structures of evil seem at times to be so strong in the world. But God works by sowing seeds not by dropping bombs. Jesus is telling us that God's work gets done not by earth shattering explosions, but by the faithful sowing of the Word of God. God's Word is living seed, and it can bear fruit long after it was sown.

John Flavel (1627-1691) was a minister in the 17th century in Dartmouth in the Southwest of England. One day Flavel was preaching a sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:22, "*If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ let him be accursed.*" It is a solemn verse and it made for a solemn sermon.

In the congregation was a lad named Luke Short, about fifteen years old, a native of Dartmouth. Shortly after this event, he went to sea and sailed to America, where he lived the rest of his life. 85 years later, Luke Short was sitting, now 100 years old, in his field reflecting on his past life. As he thought about his youth, he remembered the sermon he had heard by his pastor, John Flavel.

He knew that he had not loved Jesus, and at the age of 100 he began to fear that he might be under the curse. He was convicted of sin and put his faith in Christ. The living seed of the Word of God remained hidden in this man's life for 85 years and then it produced a harvest! So, exercise patience.

4. Trust the Outcome of Your Ministry to God

God can change the hardest heart. William Lane, who has an excellent commentary on Mark's Gospel, points out that in the time of Jesus, farmers plowed after they had sown the seed. That is a marvelous encouragement. The seed is scattered. It falls often on hard paths, often on stony ground. But when the plough comes, the hard path gets broken up.

We serve a God whose plough can break up the rocks and root out the thorn bushes. God's Holy Spirit is the plough and when the plough comes, the seed gets tipped into the opened ground and everything is changed.

There will be times when you wonder what has come of all your work in sowing the seed. You may sow the Word of God and as far as you are concerned it fell on hard ground. But you never know where God will be plowing next week. And when the plough comes, you will be so glad you sowed the seed.

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