

PRIORITIES PT 2

Last week I began talking about the 5 priorities that we have. Today we are looking at Cultivate authentic faith. There a lot of metaphors and parables in both the Old Testament and New Testament that use gardening or farming analogies. As people lived in an agricultural subsistence society they could relate to them as everyday life. **Read Matthew 13:1-23**

This is a well known simple story about farming. There were No automatic machines; you sowed seed by hand. Throwing it out. Maybe some of you have planted lawns like this. The seed is the word of God or in a wider sense the activity of God. The soil is the human heart. We see 3 external things impacting the fruitfulness of the seed. 1. Pathways. Jesus said this is like the Enemy working to destroy and stop understanding before it takes root. 2. Rocky soil which Jesus said is the problems of life and persecution. These are inevitable. These will derail us unless we have deep roots. 3. The worries of life and the lure of wealth can choke out God's work. This third factor we have control over.

But here is my key question. Who is responsible for the soil? Quality of the soil? Us. We are responsible.

What causes the growth? God. The Bible quite clear on this. **Read 1 Cor 3:5-7** Our growth is a work of the Spirit of God within us. John makes clear that God also prunes. John 15:1-3 Jesus is described as the vine that we are to remain in. while the Father is gardener who prunes, disciplines us, to produced more fruit.

All soil is found within a wider context. If in Mildura Central Victoria, Australia, it is Hot and dry and the underlying condition is red sandy soil, But grow lots there because they irrigate off the Murray River. If live in Invercargill the climate cool, wet, windy, frosts at times with lot of different underlying condition of soil. If in Taupo, conditions temperate and the soil is volcanic and acidic. Roses and trees are very happy; flowers and grass are not and need a lot of fertilizer.

But if are a gardener, regardless of where the soil is, and the underlying conditions and climate, you are responsible for the soil. You have to cultivate it. How you do that will depend on the underlying conditions. This is the same for the soil of our hearts. We are not in isolation but our hearts reside in a wider context.

Factors like ethnic, upbringing, culture and society are all factors. We all carry wounding from our childhoods that have profound influence on the condition of our hearts. We don't have control over these things but they are significant.

The goal in gardening, farming is for growth, a harvest, flowers, flourishing. Again the Bible makes this really clear. The goal is that we become more and more like Christ – that we bear fruit.

That our character and our behaviors more and more reflect the character and behavior of Christ.

Read 2 Peter 2:18 Ephesians 4:11-16, 3:17 The aim is to become more and more like Christ, attitudes, character and behavior. This is work of God but we are responsible for the soil of our hearts. Is it good soil? Is it soil that will allow roots to go down deep and withstand the problems of life and the work of the enemy. Is it soil that is not full of other stuff that chokes out God's work?

During the first part of my Sabbatical,. I did some reflection on what the underlying conditions were that we were operating in. What is the current environment like. What are the trends in society and within church. I have listed a few of them (not a complete list) in the grow pamphlet

- Increasing hostility towards faith, church and Christianity.
- Polarization of views rise of disinformation lack of tolerance
- Online connectedness but relational poverty and growing loneliness.
- Time poor. Both parents working and pressure on kids re after school activities.
- Increasing divide socio economically.
- Deteriorating Infrastructure, health. education, transport, environment.

NZ Church. (this is obviously influenced by the first list)

- Decreasing Sunday attendance
- Biblical illiteracy.
- Consumer Christianity. Low commitment, high mobility
- Loss of confidence in the gospel
- Aging congregations. Huge drop of youth young adults.

In the second part of my sabbatical last year, I took these trends in both society and the church and combined then into one list and then developed a 3 year plan that speaks into these things.

Called GROW. Based on the idea that we are responsible for the condition of the soil of our hearts. That authentic faith does not happen without us cultivating as it were the soil of our hearts. Typically at church we have done different things on a more

While each of us are responsible for the soil of our hearts, as a church we have some influence. So we the plan has different elements. Preaching topics and study notes, Church wide series, Courses, Life group modules and Opportunities for discipleship.



The plan directly relates to these environmental factors. There is an Obscure Passage in 1 Chron 12. 32 In the middle of one of those very boring lists. "From the tribe of Issachar there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and know the best course for Israel to take." My point. We have to understand the times we live in, in order to know the best direction to take. And times have changed rapidly over the last years. Life is not the same as 20 years ago, and we can't go back to there, however much we might want to.

For instance his year the Church Wide series is "Finding our true Identity." This is foundational and can bring profound healing to our brokenness as we soak deeply in this truth.

In the Preaching there is a 9 week series on the Old Testament to help address Biblical illiteracy by unpacking a part of the Bible many find difficult. Later there is a series on anxiety, one of the growing issues in society. The series on Social justice speaks into the growing gulf between those who have and those who don't and how we respond.

In the courses we are offering, the marriage course speaks into the pressure on marriages. The Spiritual parenting course addresses how we can spiritual parent our children. The Valiant man course addresses the hidden epidemic of porn as it has become normalized. The Half day retreat is an antidote to our business and hurry sickness. The Treaty from Christian perspective speaks into one of the most polarizing issues in society.

We want to encourage every small group to do one of the 4 Core each year. Spiritual gifts, Spiritual disciples, Evangelism and Apologetics, Emotional health. We want everyone to be using their spiritual gifts, using spiritual disciplines to resist the pressures of society, to have confidence to have spiritual conversation and to be emotionally healthy.

Now these are a work in progress. Have the plan but we don't have all of these modules in place. At least one, hopefully two by the beginning of term 2.

We also would love to see more one on one mentoring.

The idea of putting out this plan now is that you can start to be strategic about what you do. We don't expect you to do everything. We know people are busy. People are at all different stages on their spiritual journey.

But equally, you have a responsibility for the state of the soil in your heart. This outline means you can begin to take steps to grow. You might say grapple with Anxiety and so can choose to make it a priority to listen to series in the 3rd term on that. Guys you might be struggling with temptation. With all this stuff online. Prioritize the Valiant Man course in the third term. You might not feel confident in talking about your faith. Make sure we do this as a homegroup. You might feel really confused about treaty. Take the course where it is a safe place to explore these issues.

Take responsibility to grow. You do your part and as you do, God will take it and bring growth so that you more and more reflect him, and your life will produce a harvest.

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REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

Brian storm the 10 biggest changes in NZ society over the last 15 years and the 10 biggest changes in church life over the same time. Then look and see if they are linked in any way.

How have these changes impacted the "soil of your heart" for the work of God?

What are the "worries of this life and the lure of wealth" that choke God's work in us? (Matthew 13:22)

What can we do to counter these "weeds"?

Discuss as a group how you might engage with the Grow plan for this year?

What are some key factors that influence spiritual growth? Reflect on your own growth.

How do the stages of life we are in impact spiritual growth? How can we ensure we don't "stall" in our ongoing growth as we age?

What elements do you think might be missing from the plan? Are there issues you need to address or the church?

Pray for your groups and each other.

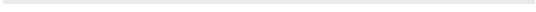
An accountability challenge:

Come back next week and share your personal growth plan for the year. Then once a term ask each other how it is going, thus creating accountability one to another.



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