**SPENDING TIME WITH GOD** Sermon for July 16 (Matthew 13: 1-9)

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 [Isaiah 55:10-13](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=150#hebrew_oth_reading)

[Psalm 119:105-112](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=150#psalm_reading)

 [Romans 8:1-11](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=150#epistle_reading)

 [Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=150#gospel_reading)

What are the benefits of spending time with God?

When I say ‘spending time with God,’ I’m not talking about prayer, although prayer in the sense of petitioning or asking God for this or that is certainly one of the things we can and are invited to do while we are spending time with God. I’m talking about spending time with God the same way we spend time with our husband or wife or children or friends, or with our golf game or with our quilting, or watching football or watching our favorite television shows.

For the fact is that most of us who are fortunate enough to be living in twenty-first century America have many hours every day in which we don’t really **have** to be doing anything in particular, and we get to spend those hours doing whatever we choose.

So my question is really, Out of all that time we have every day when necessity doesn’t demand our attention, why would we choose to spend time with God?

The question arises in the context of thinking about our gospel passage for today, the great parable of the sower and the seed and the various kinds of soil, perhaps the most well known of all the parables. And the question arises particularly because of what Jesus says in explanation of the parable. He says that the parable is really about the way various people are affected by hearing what He calls ‘the Word.”

In the Jewish way of thinking, “The Word’ refers to the revelation of God’s character and purposes, and the record of that revelation are the books of the Hebrew Scriptures, what today we call the Old Testament. To Christ’s special students, His disciples, **His** use of the idea of ‘the Word’ would also have meant the particular interpretation of those Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus had been teaching them during His ministry, summarized in the Gospel of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount.

But after the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, “the Word” came to mean something else to Christ’s followers, and continues to mean something else to us today. The events of the Passion led Christ’s disciples to regard Christ Himself as the Word, as the revelation of the nature and purposes of God. So the Gospel of John begins by putting it very succinctly: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God….And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

So when we read the parable today, the Word it refers to has a much deeper meaning than it would have had to those who were in Christ’s audience at the time, either the general people or his disciples. What we now realize Christ was talking about was what we have come to call the Gospel, the Good news, and as we have mentioned before the Gospel is very simple: it is the news that we are in Christ, that we are in the body of Christ, and that Christ is in us, that the spirit of the living Christ dwells in each one of us. That is the sum and entirety of the Word that Jesus is talking about in this most important of all parables. And it is the nonresponsiveness to **that** news that Jesus is warning us about in His parable.

For this morning, I want to focus on only the first part of the Gospel, of the Word, that we are in Christ. Why? Because it is being in Christ that enables us to spend time with God.

The Bible is very clear about the fact that God cannot abide the presence of sin. Sin is darkness and God is pure light, and darkness cannot survive the presence of light. So sin and those who are sinful in any degree cannot survive in the presence of God.

And the Bible is equally clear about the fact that we are all of us to some degree sinners. And if the word ‘sinners’ sound a little outdated and Bible thumping to many modern ears, just put it this way. All of us most of the time fail to act and think and feel in perfect accordance with the perfect will of God, because that’s all it really means to be a sinner. And so none of us could survive on our own in the presence of the all-Holy and All-Mighty God.

That is, of course, one of the problems Christ came to solve. And His solution was simple and elegant: He incorporated us into Himself, the perfectly sinless one. So since we are in Christ, we are able to approach God, to communicate with God, to spend time with God.

So by the grace of God, in Christ we are able to spend time with God. But that brings us back to the beginning. Granted that thanks to Christ we can spend time with God, why should we?

This morning, I’m going to give you three reasons.

The First is that spending time with God helps us to see ourselves as God sees us.

If you’ve paid any attention to human nature, one thing you’ll have noticed is that almost everybody – whether you live in a posh suburb or a rundown boardinghouse, whether you’re a church-going do-gooder or you defraud elderly folks over the phone for a living – everybody is pretty much satisfied with who they are. Not necessarily with their physical condition or with their living conditions, but with who they are as people, with their personality, with the general shape of their spirit.

Spending time with God changes that.

When thinking about this particular point, an old memory kept coming back to many years ago to a time when I was a young boy, and we were visiting my grandfather’s farm in the spring of the year. One of the spring jobs on the farm was spring plowing, and I can remember going out with my grandpa to tackle that chore. Grandpa would of course drive the tractor, and I would sit cross saddle on the front of the tractor, riding it like a horse. (An activity, btw, that would today probably get my grandfather arrested for child endangerment, but which nobody seemed to care about back then, including my parents. Of course, maybe they were hoping for the worst.)

Anyway, my ‘job’ was to scan the ground ahead of the tractor, checking for large stones or boulders the earth might have thrown up during the course of the winter. If we saw any, my grandpa would have to remove it or go around it before we continued plowing.

Looking back on it, of course I realize my grandfather didn’t really need me up there on the front of the tractor, but at the time I took my responsibility very seriously, peering intently ahead of the tractor like a sailor in a crow’s nest, the weight of the world on my shoulders, and whooping and pointing if I happened to spot something.

That’s a pretty good image, I think, for what God does, when we spend time alone with Him. Driving by that same unplowed field in a car, a little boy would pay no attention whatsoever to those protruding rocks in the field. But working slowly through that field on the top of a tractor, steered along by my Grandfather, seeing the same things in the same way, my Grandfather saw them….that’s one of the great benefits of spending time with God.

The very things we love the most about ourselves may be the things God hates. The character traits that serve us so well in our lives may be the ones that will serve us least in heaven. God is always interested in the big picture and the long term. But He will never force changes on you. They must always be a result of your coming to see things as He sees them. And the best way of coming to see things as God sees them is by spending time with Him

The second reason for spending time with God is that it familiarizes you with the way God works.

And when we begin to spend time with God, what we learn is how subtle His workings are. What we learn is that, from the opening moments of your life, God has been interested in you, and has been dealing with you, and guiding you towards your own best self.

When you spend time with Him, God will open up your recollection to amazing things that have happened, to coincidences that seem impossible, to memories that lodged themselves forever in your mind. He will bring to mind passages from books you’ve read or scenes in movies you’ve seen or snippets of conversation you once overheard. And He will give all of them a certain glow, so that you’ll know they are from Him and not just stuff from the overstuffed storage space you call your mind. But that will only happen when you spend time with Him, quiet time, patient time, leisurely time.

And the third benefit – and by far the greatest benefit – of spending time with God is that it is a preparation for heaven.

Christ always emphasizes that the rewards of heaven are very, very different from the rewards of the world.

Because we haven’t listened to what Christ was teaching us, we are accustomed to thinking of Christianity as if it were like all other religions, as if it were at bottom a system of delayed gratification; of putting off present for future gratification: follow certain rules now, and your reward will be some sort of endless paradise of pleasures later. That is, after all, what all other religions promise.

But that’s not what Christ promises. Christ doesn't promise us an abundance of what we currently enjoy; He doesn’t promise an endless satisfaction of what you currently desire, whatever it is.

Christ promises a new you. Or rather, Christ promises that you will become someone who most deeply welcomes and enjoys what heaven has to offer.

And what will heaven have to offer? People enjoy this sort of speculation, but it has to remain speculation, although we can say for certain it will not be chubby little cherubs playing harps or *brand new cars!* or Cheetos for breakfast or an endless supply of young virgins.

Really there are only a couple of things we can say with certainty about what heaven will offer. The first is that, whatever they are, they will be characterized by elements of mercy and humility and forgiving and poverty of spirit, because Christ teaches us that heaven itself is made up of people who find their happiness in such things.

And the second thing we can say with absolute certainty is that if we don’t find happiness in spending time with God, we will never find happiness in what heaven has to offer.

The things of heaven are already among us, if we open our eyes to them. Every act of forgiveness is a heavenly thing. It is not a foretaste of what heaven will be like; it is heaven, here and now. In the same way, spending time with God is a heavenly activity, which we can engage in here and now. If we find it dull, or difficult, or unrewarding or pointless, then I’m afraid that’s how heaven will seem to us as well.

And so, Father of us all, our prayer for this morning and for this message is that You begin the work of turning us into Your friends as well as Your children. Help us to be patient and steady, as we begin to experience the simple satisfaction of spending time with You, of talking about this and that, of listening for Your voice, of remembering the many small ways you communicated to us through the events of our lives, of beginning to see the world the way You see it. Help us acquire the heart and the mind of Jesus, Your loving companion in eternity, for it is in His name we pray.