

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 N.T. 13 (NRSV)

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.
²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow.
⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.
⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

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“Die or Multiply”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. God of Wonders, we come into your presence today in awe of your majesty and power. As we humbly bow before you, we ask that you speak your Holy Word into our hearts and minds. Lift up your lowly creatures. We ask this in Jesus’ Name, **Amen.**

Introduction:

When asked, nine out of ten Americans will say that they believe in God. They believe there’s a higher power, a supreme consciousness, a being that’s above all other beings. But who exactly is this God that so many people claim to believe in? Let’s take a moment to watch a brief clip of some people on the street answering the question *“Who is God?”*

{Play video “Who is God Short?.mp4” [0:33]}

There you have three different answers that span the range of American opinion about God. **The first man** expressed a very typical opinion. God is some sort of a vague higher energy, which everybody has to define for themselves. Defining God is very subjective and highly personal. God is whoever you say God is. **Next**, we have a young man who’s clearly a skeptic. He’s not so sure God exists. He’s one of those one out of ten Americans who are either agnostics or atheists. He’s never experienced God personally, so he not at all sure God exists. **And finally**, we have the white-haired grandmother. Now, grandma may not be the most eloquent speaker, but she does manage to give the traditional Judeo-Christian view of God as being the Supreme Being who created everything. So, while most Americans do believe in God, many American’s don’t agree on who God is.

PAUSE

Move I.

Yes, most people believe in God. Believing in God may not be scientific or rationally defensible, but most people do have an inner sense of a power greater than themselves, which they believe is God. **Here in America** we pride ourselves in guaranteeing religious liberty for everyone. Every individual is free to believe in God or not to believe in God, as his or her own conscience determines. The Government promises not to interfere with this right of religious liberty.

Our country's founders considered religious liberty to be so important that they spelled out that right at the very beginning of the first amendment in the "*Bill of Rights*" "**Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.**" This statement protects the religious liberty of individuals by restricting the power of the government. Rather than saying what individual citizens may do, the statement specifies what the government may not do. "**Congress shall make no law...**" After that opening phrase come two clauses, "the establishment" clause, and the "free exercise" clause. The **establishment clause** says that the government cannot impose any particular religious beliefs on anyone, and the **free exercise clause** goes further to say that, the government may not do anything to restrict people from following their religious beliefs. That constitutional protection is why you can walk up to people on the street and receive such differing answers to the question, "**Who is God?**"

I have to admit, I'm not much of a fan of person on the street interviews. When reporters can't find anyone else to interview, they resort to interviewing random people on the street. The person has no special experience, position, or education that makes their opinion any more worthy than anyone else's. They just happen to be walking by and are willing to throw in their two cents. They love exercising another one of their constitutional rights, the freedom of speech.

While most people believe in God, they have a terrible time putting into words who this God is that they believe in. The answer of the **first person** on the street is all too typical. His answer is a hodgepodge of new age philosophy, far eastern mysticism, and individual relativism. The first man answered, “*God for me is this higher energy kind of thing that we’re all a part of. I don’t think that there is just one right way to be about God. I think everybody has a right to define whatever that is for them, and how it works for them.*”

Terms like, “Higher energy” makes me think of the crystals and pyramids of new age philosophy. God’s an energy, perhaps like electricity or magnetism—an invisible force. This all sounds a lot like **Obi-Wan-Kenobi** bidding farewell to Luke Skywalker, by saying, “may the force be with you.” **Now** comes the far eastern mysticism. The man says that God is a “thing that we’re all a part of.” That’s pantheism, Hinduism, and Buddhism all rolled into one. You’re god and god is you, the problem is that you don’t yet realize it. **Finally**, we have the individual relativism. Everyone has to “define whatever [God] is for them, and how it works for them.” There’s no objective God—God is purely subjective. You have your god and I have my god, and your god and my god don’t have to have anything to do with one another. **I’ve no doubt** of the man’s sincerity, I just get lost in his jumbled presentation.

Nonetheless, the first man does believe in God. **Only the agnostics** and atheists don’t believe in God. **So, the first man** believes in God, **as does** the white-haired grandmother, as do you and me. **Yes, most people do believe in God.**

End I.

Move II.

But believing in God isn't the same as knowing God. Believing leaves room for an element of doubt, while knowing anchors itself in certainty. While nine out of ten Americans say that they believe in God, not everyone who believes in God knows God. Some people never reach beyond the "*idea of God*" to touch the "*reality of God*." For these people God remains an invisible impersonal force. God is a "thing" rather than a "being." **Let's look back** again at the first man-on-the-street's answer to the question "Who is God?" The first man said God is "*a higher energy kind of thing*." His answer misses the sense of the question.

If I were asking about **magnetism**, how should I phrase the question? Should I ask, "*Who is magnetism?*" or should I ask, "*What is magnetism?*" To ask, "*who is magnetism*," sounds funny because we all know that magnetism isn't a person, magnetism is a thing. So, if God were truly "*a higher energy kind of thing*," the right way to phrase the question would be "What is God?" On the other hand, the **white-haired grandmother** answered, "The Supreme Being, he invented us, he made us." For her, God is a being, a person; she caught to sense of the reporter's question, "Who is God?"

So, is God a thing or a person? Well, with our Judeo-Christian perspective we believe that God is a person, but what about all of those other people who believe in God. People like the first man-on-the-street. This is where you can use **Google** as tool to gage public perception. I phrased the question for **magnetism** and for God using both "*what*" and "*who*." Here're the results. When I ask, "*What is magnetism?*" Google returns about 43,000 hits with the question phrased that way. But when I ask, "*Who is magnetism?*" Google yields 12,500 returns. I'll admit that's more than I expected but it's still obvious way more people think of magnetism as a thing rather than a person.

Ok, now let's do the same thing for God. When I ask the question, "***What is God?***" Google returns about 23,300,000 hits. That's a very popular question; in fact, asking about God is hundreds of times more popular than asking about magnetism. Now let's ask, "***Who is God?***" Google return 32,400,000 hits, or about 40% more than asking the question the other way. As you see, whether God is a person, or a thing is a question that divides the general public. Some of those who believe in God believe God is a thing while others of those who believe in God believe God is a person.

When we think of knowing something, we tend to think of an intellectual kind of knowing. To know magnetism is to understand it with your mind. But when we think of knowing a person, we think of a relational kind of knowing—**a knowing with your heart**. To know a person is to spend time with the person. To talk with the person about their likes, dislikes, and interests that you share in common—to go places and do things together. That's the kind of knowing the Bible talks about when it speaks of **knowing God**. A kind of knowing that **isn't so much with your head as it is with your heart**. A knowing that's at a gut sense—a spiritual kind of knowing. The Bible never tells people to believe in God, rather what the Bible says is that people need to know God and believe what God says. Believing in God is a beginning. **But believing in God really isn't the same as knowing God.**

End II.

Move III.

And trying to live without knowing God is a dead end. It's not enough simply to believe in God. You need to spend time developing a relationship with God. You need to know God as more than just a higher energy, but as a person—a relational being. The longing of God's heart is that the creatures he created will want to get to know him and spend time with him. God wants to love people who freely want to love God.

Our Bible lesson today is “***The Parable of the Sower.***” Now a parable is a story where the storyteller uses common everyday events to illustrate the uncommon realities of the kingdom of God. In “*The Parable of the Sower,*” the common every day event is a farmer scattering seed along the ground. The story tells of four different types of ground the seeds falls on and identifies the fate of the seed that falls on each of these types of ground. The four types of ground are: (1) **pathway**, (2) **rocky**, (3) **thorny**, and (4) **good**. When the seed falls on the pathway, birds immediately come and eat it. The fate of the seed is **death**. Next, when the seed fall on the rocky shallow soil, it sprouts, but because it doesn't have deep roots, when the sun comes up the plant withers. Again, the fate of the seed is **death**. Then we have the seed that feel among the thorns. Again, the seed sprouts but the thorns quickly choke out the young plants. So yet again, the fate of the seed is **death**. Finally, we have the seed that falls on the good ground. This time not only does the seed sport and grow, it goes onto to **produce a crop**. So, three types of soil yield death while only one type of spoil yields life. Clearly good soil is good.

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Now I have to tell you if this were all that there were to this story it would be a real yawner. Farmer throws seed on bad soil and the crop fails, but when farmer throws seed on good soil the crop succeeds. So what, any farmer knows that. It's a story so mundane that no one would pay any attention to it. But there's another element to most parables that we need to be careful not to overlook. While parables are stories based around common everyday events, typically the parables' version of the event contains some **unexpected twist**.

Now none of us here are first century farmers, so the unexpected twist in "*The Parable of the Sower*," tends to slip past us unnoticed. In this parable, the unexpected twist is at the very end. It's at the end of **Matthew 13:8b (NRSV)**, "**Other seed fell on good soil, and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.**" Now if you were a first century farmer that last bit of information would be downright **astonishing**. You see normal crop yields for first century farmers were 10 to 1. **Plant one** bushel of seed and you **get ten** bushels of wheat. But in this parable the farmer gets **100:1** (pause) or **60:1** and at worst **30:1**. This isn't just a crop, it's an overabundant super bumper crop. This isn't life that's just eking by; **this is life that's full**, abundant, and even overflowing.

That's what happens when you devote yourself not just to believing in God, but also to fully knowing God. Tragically, a lot of people are going through life without developing a relationship with God. They're so busy eking out a living that they don't give God a second's-thought. **And trying to live without ever getting to know God is a dead end.**

End III.

Move IV.

So, know God and embrace God's ways. Believing that God exists just isn't enough. You have to believe what God says. You have to do what God wants. You have to live as God lives. To live in God's way, is to act as God acts, to think as God thinks, and to love as God loves. That's what it's like to live in the **kingdom of God**. In the kingdom of God, seeds don't just yield a normal crop; seeds yield a bumper crop. A hundred, sixty, and thirty times, not just a measly ten times. In the kingdom of God, there's a bumper crop of joy. In the kingdom of God, there's a bumper crop of peace. In the kingdom of God, there's a bumper crop of love. That's what parables do, they tell us about the radical way life in the kingdom of God. A parable lifts you from your mundane existence in the earthly realm and carries you to the very brink of the kingdom of God.

Our Bible lesson today has two parts. First in Matthew 13:1-9 Jesus tells the "*Parable of the Sower*." Then later in the second part in Matthew 13:18-23, Jesus interprets the "*Parable of the Sower*." The verses in between the parable and its interpretation explain that not everyone who hears a parable understands it. Most people will tell you that a **parable** is a story with a moral lesson. The **American Heritage Dictionary** defines the word parable as **a simple story illustrating a moral lesson**. If that's what you think a parable is, then the lesson that you'd probably take from the "*Parable of the Sower*" is that **you need to sow a lot of seed** to be able to overcome expected losses. That's a moral lesson, a bit of folk wisdom. But Jesus' interpretation of his own parable makes no mention of that lesson. In Jesus' interpretation, the seed is "**word or news of the kingdom of God**," and the kinds of soil represent the ways people react to that news.

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Although there are four ways people react to receiving news of the kingdom of God, the first three of those four ways yield the same result, **death**. Only the fourth reaction results in **life**. If people hear the good news of the kingdom of God and understand it, then they benefit from God's bumper crop. That's why I titled today's message "***Die or Multiply***." Those are the only outcomes. There's no middle ground, no status quo, no mediocrity. Either you hear and understand or you don't. Either you **die** or you **multiply**. In **Psalm 24:1** (NRSV) the psalmist writes, "**The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.**" To understand news of the kingdom of God is to acknowledge God's power and rule. To understand is to embrace God's way of living as your way of living too. When you do that, you will multiply. But to do anything less, is to die. **So, please, get to know God and embrace God's way.**

End IV.

Conclusion: Ask the typical person on the street, and they'll give you their opinion about God. **Yes, most people believe in God.** Perhaps they'll even tell you that God is "*a higher energy kind of thing.*" **But believing in God isn't the same as knowing God.** Some people who believe in God think that God is energy, a force—a thing. But people who actually know God, know God as a person—a knowable being. **And trying to live without knowing God is a dead end.** It's not enough simply to believe in God. You need to spend time developing a relationship with God. **So please, get to know God and embrace God's ways.** To live in God's way, is to act as God acts, to think as God thinks, and to love as God loves. The choice is yours: "***Die or Multiply.***" Know God and live!

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Father God, thank you for making yourself known to us through your Son. Because of Jesus, you know each of us by name. May your kingdom be multiplied through us today. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: "Open My Eyes, That I May See" Hymnal No. 454

Sending Forth: Does God have a place in your life? Or is God just one more thing sitting on the shelf collecting dust? It's not enough simply to believe there is a god, you need to actually know God, and grow to love God too. Go forth living and multiplying in the light of Christ forever. **And all of God's People said...Amen!**