Soil Searching

Ground Rules for Growth

November 22, 2026

Today we're learning why our *aim* is more important than our *effort!* Cuz we're all *working* toward *something*: a better *marriage*, a healthier *body*, a deeper *faith*, or a nicer *personality* – so we *plan*, *push*, *grind*, and *try harder…* even though all our *efforts* often *produce nothing*. We can change our *habits,* our *speech*, and our *surroundings* – and *somehow*, stay *stuck* in the *same place!* And it's *frustrating* when it feels like we're *doing everything* – and still not *growing anything*. So before we *beat* our head against another *wall*, let's *back up* and *ask:* **Is your work *working?***

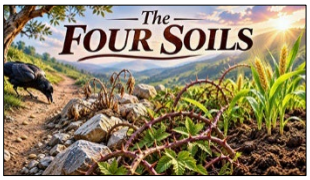
You ever walk up to a *door*, give it a good shove… and *nothing?* So you shove *harder* – until you notice the little *sign* right at eye level: *Pull*. It's kind of a *good* news/*bad* news situation – cuz the door *wasn't* locked and you *weren't* weak – but, you *were* the problem. Cuz *you* were working *against* the way it was *made to work!* Which makes all *your* effort *pointless* cuz **no amount of *push* will open a *pull* door.** And *that's why* a lot of *our lives* have the *same* feel: ***lots of noise; little progress.***

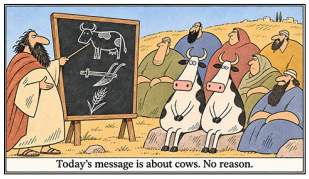


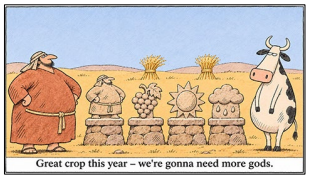
For example, *last* Sunday, right after *service*, I went to a T-Mobile store to help my oldest replace a broken *phone* – so we sat and *waited*. And *while* we *did*, a soft-spoken older man at the counter grew more and more *frustrated* with the clerk – till he finally dropped a couple *F-bombs*, yelled, **"Nevermind! I wouldn't buy anything from you jerks!"** and stormed out. So, the *next* guy steps up and says, **"I ain't much happier than *that* guy!"** Cuz *he'd* been waiting an hour in line *and* on a phone call that had *just got dropped* by customer service – *so* when the poor gal at the *register* had to tell him *she* couldn't solve it either – he also *flipped out*, took her *picture*, dropped *more* F-bombs and stomped out, *leaving* all his gear after she *calmly* asked him to *go* – and *warning* that he'd be *charged* for what he left *behind! Yowza! However* – while my heart *was* breaking for this *poor girl* at the counter – I think *I* might be *more mad* than everyone! Cuz I just filed a legal complaint with the *FCC* and *WA Attorney General* about T-Mobile's breach of *contract!* So, before we went up, I knew I had to get my *heart straight* – so I slipped her *fifty bucks* and *told* her she did a *great job* keeping her *cool*. Now, *don't mishear* me, I *wasn't excited* to give it – *that's* still *a lot* of money to me and I *don't* want *T-Mobile* to have it – *but* I *saw* if I *didn't* check my *aim*, she might've caught *more* F-bomb shrapnel!

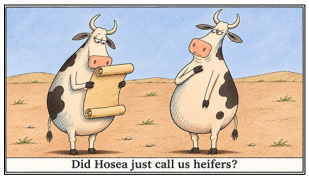
Thankfully, watching the two guys *before* me *reminded* me*:* **work *won't* work to fix our *problems!*** All the *appointments*, *arguments*, *effort*, and *anger* and they *left* with no *phone*, no *fix*, and no *peace!* They *were pushing on a pull door!* Cuz they were aimed at the *situation* instead of *themselves* – and **we can't change the *world* but we *can* change our *heart***. So I changed *my aim* and worked on *myself* instead of *my situation*. Cuz **it's *God's* job to restore the *world* and it's *our job* to *cooperate!***

[Cuz] Unless the *LORD* builds the house, the builders labor *in vain*. – Psalm 127:1 NIV









And last week, Bruce reminded us that in Jesus' parable of the four soils, ***we're not the plant – we're the dirt!*** And our *heart* is designed to be the cooperative *soil* where *God* grows *goodness!* So, to get *that growth* in *our lives*, we gotta get our hands *dirty* to *ask*, **"What do we *do* with our dirt?"** And what *shouldn't* we do? And in the spirit of *Thanksgiving*, we're gonna let Hosea weigh in – cuz *he* used a whole bunch of *harvest* imagery to illustrate how *Israel's efforts* needed *better aim* for their work to *work*. And we can *see* how *their slip* started in *their thanksgiving:*

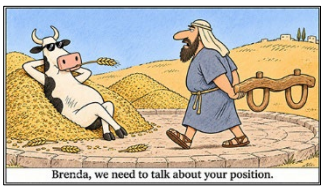
> Israel was a *spreading* vine; he brought forth fruit for himself. [But] As his fruit *increased*, he built more *altars* [to more *gods!*] – Hosea 10:1 NIV

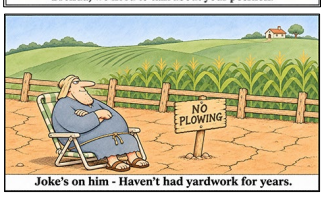
Now, as God's *special* project, Israel's *aim* was *always* getting corrected; and when they *cooperated* – all their *efforts* made them *good* soil – and God grew *good stuff!* But, when they aimed their efforts at *thanking* everybody *but Him* for the harvest – *their* work *stopped working*. Cuz **growing *closer* to our *idols* means growing *apart* from *God*** – and *that heart* makes us *uncooperative* builders and *unworkable* soil! So Hosea sets each side of Israel *straight* by calling them cows to *call out* their *soil:*

> [God says] "Ephraim [the northern kingdom] is a trained heifer that loves to *thresh*; [but] I will put a yoke on *her fair neck*. [And now,] I will drive Ephraim, Judah [the southern kingdom] must *plow*, and Jacob [all y'all] must break up the ground." – Hosea 10:11 NIV

Remember, *threshing* was the *cushy* job for a cow – a *yoke* is optional, you *walk* around all day, and you're allowed to *eat while you work!* But God's saying, **"Well, *that's* over! Having it *easy* made you *cocky* – and I only work with *humble* hearts. So strap on a yoke, we're changing aim!"** These cows needed to work on their *hearts* before God could work on their *crop!* Cuz **blessings are *helpful* if they grow *gratitude* but *harmful* if they produce *pride*.** So, we're gonna unpack the *three ground rules* Hosea gives next – to keep *our* spiritual soil *cooperative* with *God's growth:*

> Sow *righteousness* for yourselves, [plant the *right* seeds, to] reap the fruit of unfailing *love*, and break up your unplowed ground [create a *cooperative* heart]; for it is time to *seek* the LORD, until He comes and *showers* His righteousness on you. [Trust God to grow!] – Hosea 10:12 NIV

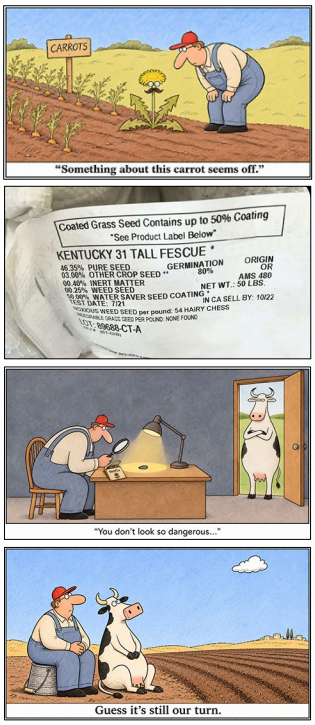




Ground Rule #1: soften your soil – aim at *yourself*, not your *situation*. Cuz *cooperation can't contain opposition* – and "unplowed ground" is a field that *resists* the farmer's seeds. So *for us*, it's a hard *heart* that refuses *God's work*. It's the *bad habit* we keep *defending;* the *hurt feelings* we refuse to *forgive;* or the *triggering topic* we won't *allow* anyone to address. Well, that's your *No Plowing* sign! And like we learned from the T-Mobile twins, **all efforts are ultimately fruitless until they aim at the root.** We gotta *let God* get *under* the surface to *receive* the seeds of goodness – cuz **God's plow isn't *punishment* – it's *preparation!*** And our *heart* has to *welcome* God's plow if *we want* what *He's planting!*

And that leads to **Ground Rule #2: inspect your seeds – aim at *input*, not outcomes.** Cuz softening our heart may *allow God* to grow – *but* **it makes us *susceptible* to the *seeds of* weeds *too!*** And for *Israel*, the *effort* of farming *wasn't* the problem – it was the *seeds themselves!*

> You have *planted wickedness*, [so] you have *reaped evil*, [and therefore] you have *eaten* the fruit of deception. Because you have depended on your own strength – Hosea 10:13 NIV



What you *plant* is what you *reap* and what you *eat!* And just like *physical* health – ***spiritual* health hinges on what we're fed!** So, we gotta focus on what *goes* in *our heart* to guide what *grows* in *our life.* And *farmers* have known that *forever!* In fact, since 1939, *federal* law *requires* every bag of seed shipped across state lines to carry a seed tag – to tell you what *percent* of the bag is *weed seed*, and exactly which *noxious* weeds are hiding inside! *Smart!* Wouldn't it be *nice* if everything *we* put in our *heart* came with a tag *like that?* ***"This movie contains 3% plot and 97% temptation."*** Or, ***"This group chat may contain traces of gossip."***

Well, unfortunately *our* input *isn't* labeled – so ***we* gotta aim *our efforts* at identifying *each* seed *we allow* to be sown.** Cuz we may *hunger* for a harvest of God's *peace* – but *still* let *politics* plant seeds of *outrage*; we may *want* to feel *true love* – but *still* let the *internet* plant noxious *lust*; and we may *desire* a deeper *faith* – but *still* let the *weeds of worldly worry* spread *before* giving *God* a *place* to plant. Cuz **when *seeds* promise *quick produce* it's easy to *ignore* their *integrity!*** But even good *soil* needs good *seed* to produce good *food!* So before you let anything take *root*, ask: *What will this grow?* Cuz **all input is *seed* and all seed *grows something!***

And *we* can see the *weed* seed *Hosea* saw in *Israel's* bag: *"*you have depended on your own strength.*"* *That's* the seed of *self-sufficiency* and unfortunately, it grows *best* when we're *blessed!* Cuz, when life gets *easy*, we start thinking like a *cocky cow*, and begin to *believe*, ***"I got this."*** But, the most dangerous *weed seed* in the bag is ***"I got this."*** Cuz even if we *soften* our soil and *pick* perfect seeds – *we don't got this!* Cuz in the end – *we* can't *make anything grow*.

Which brings us to **Ground Rule #3: *wait* for rain – aim at the *Giver*, not the *gifts*.** Cuz no *farmer* can make it *rain!* Look at Hosea's verbs: *we* sow, *we* break up, *we* seek… and *then* the verbs switch sides: *He* comes to us and *He* showers with righteousness. Cuz ***we* can *prepare* the field – but only *God* can bring the *rain!*** *That's* cooperation: we do our part – and *trust* God to do *His*. And Hosea puts two time stamps on our job description: *"*it is time*"* means *now;* and *"*until He comes*"* means *keep going*. Cuz we're just supposed take the next faithful step *today* – and leave *tomorrow's outcome* to Him! Remember? It's *God's* job to *restore* – and *our* job to *cooperate*.

And when the rain *shows up* – just be sure to *thank* the *right God!* Israel went to *idols* cuz *man-made* gods gave them a sense of *control* – but ***taking* control means *breaking* cooperation!** And we do it every time we take *credit* for everything *God gives!* You grew a 20 pound zucchini? No you didn't – *thank God! You* got good *grades?* No you didn't – *thank God! You good looking?* Really? *Thank God!*

Before you go thinking *you* get *credit* for *anything*, look at everything – God gives us *all the seeds, sun, and rain* for *every good thing* in existence! You and I just bring the *dirt* for *Him* to do it! And *yet* – He wants *you* to *have it!* He wants *you* to be a *blessed cow* who *enjoys* everything *He grew* – way *more* than *you* ever *worked for* – as long as His gifts makes you *grateful* instead of *cocky!* And all that takes – *is thanksgiving!* Cuz **pride hardens our heart but gratitude softens that soil.**









And when we get that *straight* – God can get to *work!* Cuz **there's *no limit* to the *blessing* once *we're fully cooperating*** – and *Jesus proved that!* Remember what *happened* in Gods very first Garden? *We* had the *original* cushy job – just *tend* the garden while *eating* anything… *almost*. But having it *easy* made *us* cocky, so God said, **"Well, *that's* over! I only work with *humble* hearts. So strap on a yoke, we're changing aim!"** And *our* work got cursed with *thorns*, *sweat*, and a destiny in *dust. Cuz* just like a *cocky cow* – we needed *hard work* for God to do *heart work*. But Hosea said to seek the Lord *until He comes* – and *He* came*!* Jesus lived as the *first human* to *fully cooperate* with God; and His cooperation didn't *skip* the curse – it *carried* it. Which means, it took *sweat:*

> Being in anguish, [Jesus*] prayed more earnestly*, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. [And it took *thorns:*] – Luke 22:44 NIV

> [They] twisted together a *crown* of thorns and set it on Him. – Mark 15:17 NIV

> [And it led to the dust] Where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb… they laid Jesus there. – John 19:41-42 NIV

> [He let God to plant Him like a seed cuz] Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. – John 12:24 NIV

And three days later – that Seed *came up!* **Jesus *carried* the curse we *couldn't*** – to *show* what *one* fully cooperative Seed can *grow:* a harvest that's *still coming in* two thousand years later – including *you and me*! **Jesus took the *curse* on our work – so our work can finally *work*.** So now,

> [Paul can flip Psalm 127 and say:]*Your labor* in the Lord is not in vain. – 1 Corinthians 15:58 NIV

So, ***is your work working?*** If *not*, maybe you're *pushing* on a *pull* door! Maybe you're *sweating* cuz you're *aiming* your efforts at a *situation* when it should be *your heart.* Maybe things feel *thorny* cuz you're letting some *weed* seeds *crowd out* what *God* wants to grow. Or maybe you feel *buried* by a *dead end* cuz you're telling God, ***"I got this"*** – when you *really* need *Him* to *bring the rain!* Well, *whatever* it is, the *Thanksgiving* table is a great place to start putting *God's ground rules* into *practice!*

Cuz every *conversation* is an opportunity to *soften your soil* and let people *past* a **"No Plowing"** sign, every *activity* is an exercise in *inspecting your seeds* by *asking* yourself, **"What will this grow?"** and every *savory smell* is a reminder to *wait for God's rain* – as you patiently watch what *you've prepared*, slowly *be perfected!* So be sure to say, **"Thanks Lord!"** out loud – cuz that keeps you cooperative and He's always *searching* hearts for suitable *soil* to *plant* the *good stuff*, *plan* a *harvest,* and *let us eat!*

Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.