

“The Parable of the Sower” (pt. 2)

Mark 4:1-20

Take your Bible and be finding your place with me in Mark 4 where we will return to a passage that is referred to as the Parable of the Sower. It is a story that Jesus told which illustrates for us the way that the gospel works in the hearts of people. Parables are stories of comparison where Jesus uses the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. As we read the gospel accounts, we find out that Jesus spoke in a parable nearly every time He taught. And the first one that we find recorded is this one in Mark 4. (Read)

Why did Jesus teach in parables? This is a question that His disciples ask Him in verse 10. And notice that He gives them the answer in verses 11-12—“And He said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’” He is quoting from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Which is to show that His use of parables fulfilled prophecy. And He points out that there are two camps of people. On the one hand are those who are His followers, and He says to them has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. That is, those who listen to Jesus and accept Him in faith as their Savior and Shepherd. They’ve been let in on the ‘secret’ of the kingdom. In other words, the inside information on life that only believers are able to understand. When the Bible talks about ‘secrets’ or ‘mysteries’ it is referring to truth that the natural man cannot understand by himself.

1 Corinthians 2:14—“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

Ray Stedman—*“Scientists can give us some insights into the nature of life; philosophers can give us other insights; psychologists and psychiatrists can give us a few others; sociologists still others. But the knowledge and insight they provide is always fragmentary and incomplete, and often it is contradictory and misleading. These thinkers and researches do their best to assemble a picture of reality, but their efforts are doomed to failure. Why? Because, as Jesus declares, there are certain missing pieces of the puzzle that only God can supply. And those missing pieces are the most essential pieces of all.”*

Man through observation can tell us how the world works, but he can't tell you why it works the way it does. At best, he is like a man in a dark room, trying to get his bearings, groping around and describing what he feels, coming to some conclusions. But unless the lights are turned on, he will remain in the dark and totally oblivious. Jesus said:

John 8:12—**“I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”**

And so Jesus spoke in parables for two primary reasons—(1) to reveal truth to His disciples, and (2) to conceal truth from those committed to their unbelief. Even though His parables reveal kingdom truth, Jesus says the response to them reveals the true condition of the human heart. That was true then, and it is still true in mine and your life now. Our response to His Word reveals our spiritual condition which has eternal consequences. And the only way for you and me to have true spiritual understanding in life is to put our faith in Jesus. That's why He said, “Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” He tells us to ‘seek’ first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Jeremiah 29:13—“You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.”

There is a sense in which the truth is hidden in plain sight, but only those who have receptive hearts will be able to see and to understand. Such is the difference between two different people who are looking around at the world. An unbeliever may say, “How can you believe in God?” While a believer says, “How can you not believe in God?” And so Hebrews 11:3 says that it is by faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. The truth is there, it is hidden in plain sight, but can only be seen in the light of Christ. And the parables that Jesus told are an illustration of how this is so.

Crowds of people were coming out to see Jesus wherever He went. Whether in the towns and villages, or out in the open country, or here in Mark 4 by the Sea of Galilee. But he had perfect knowledge of their hearts. There were a lot of them who came for healing, but were not necessarily interested in what Jesus has to say. Also within the same crowds were many of the scribes and Pharisees who had come to investigate and scoff at His claims. And the same situation still applies today to your life and mine. For many, Jesus is nothing more than a means to an end. Some may be interested in Him and want something from Him, but not to the point that they surrender to Him as their Lord.

And so Jesus speaks to them in parables, the first one being this parable we’ve now come to here. Jesus often took examples from nature to illustrate spiritual truth, and that’s what He does here with the sower and the seed. I like to think that as He and the crowds are there beside the Sea of Galilee, maybe He points to a farmer in the distance who is doing this very thing and Jesus uses it as an object lesson. So that these people can watch it happen before their eyes as

Jesus tells the story. They could see the seed being scattered on the various types of soil. They could see the birds landing just behind the farmer and eating some of his seed. And they can feel the heat of the noon day sun beaming down on their necks.

When Jesus says what He does there in verse 9, “He who has ear to hear, let him hear,” He made it evident that this is so much more than just a story. This isn’t something He tells them simply to entertain. Rather, He is urging them to stop and think about what He is saying. In the Parable of the Sower, there is a sower who goes out to sow, there is the seed which he sows, and there are four different types of soils upon which the seed is scattered. Each of these types of soils illustrate the various responses that people have to the gospel. You fall into one of these categories. And so this is a lesson in hearing and responding to the Word of God. How we hear is a matter of the heart. Let’s look at each of these:

1—Hearts that are HARDENED by unbelief (4:4; 15)

“And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it...And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.”

Notice in verse 4 that Jesus says some of the seed fell along the path. Because it was well traveled by foot traffic, the ground was hardened so that the seed was unable to penetrate the surface. And as a result, the birds came and devoured it. Then down in verse 15, Jesus explains to His disciples that this is a picture of those who have hearts that are hardened to the gospel. The seed is scattered on the beaten pathway that is as hard and impenetrable as US 601. It pictures those whose hearts are closed off to God due to lives that are self-centered and

full of unbelief. They may hear with their ears, but not with their hearts, so that the Word does not become implanted. Like the birds that swoop down and devour the seed, Satan comes and takes away the Word that is sown in them.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis illustrates this when he describes a man who opens up the Bible to read and meditate. Confronted with his standing before God, he starts thinking about his soul and matters of eternity. But as Lewis says, there are demons assigned to him. They make it their task to keep him from discovering God's truth. So they call attention to the fact that it is lunchtime, that he is hungry, that he has a pile of other things waiting for him. So he leaves to go and grab a bite to eat, but as he steps out into the street, his mind is directed to all the noises and distractions of the world so that thoughts of God disappear from his head. And he returns to his same old worldview.

Even now as I am preaching, Satan's birds are circling and looking to devour the seed to prevent it from taking root in your mind and heart. I wonder maybe how many times the Lord has had something to say to us, but instead of hearts eager and ready to receive His Word, we're hardened and our interests are on other things? The Bible presents a hard heart as a spiritual condition in which a person has become resistant to God's voice, insensitive to conviction, and unwilling to respond in faith and obedience. The heart that has become so compacted that the seed of God's Word cannot penetrate. The problem is not with the seed, but with the soil.

What are some of the causes of a hard heart? Here are a few of them:

- **Persistent sin in our lives**

Every time a person knowingly resists God's commands, their heart becomes less sensitive to His voice. Sin has a hardening effect. Hebrews 3:13 warns

believers not to be “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” And the danger of sin is such that before it destroys us, it deceives us. It not only leads us into wrongdoing, but it persuades us that we are doing fine while we are drifting farther and farther from God. A hardened heart is rarely formed overnight. Instead, it is usually the result of many small acts of resistance to God’s voice until your conscience becomes calloused and dull to spiritual realities.

- **Repeated rejection of God’s Word**

Just like a path becomes hardened by constant foot traffic, your heart becomes hardened when you repeatedly hear truth without responding to it. And Pharaoh is the classic example. Despite all of the warnings and miracles that he witnessed, he continually resisted God until his heart was firmly set against Him.

- **Pride and a self-sufficient attitude**

Your pride will convince you that you don’t need God’s correction, forgiveness, or guidance. A proud heart is often a hard heart because it refuses to humble itself before the Lord.

- **Worldliness**

An excessive love for the things of this world can gradually dull spiritual sensitivity. When earthly concerns dominate the mind, spiritual truth will lose its urgency.

- **Unforgiveness and bitterness**

Think about how a bitter spirit can create resistance toward God’s work in your heart. Resentment often becomes a wall that prevents you from responding freely to the Lord. Maybe the bitterness of something that has happened to you

in the past, or the bitterness that comes from not being where you want to be in life, and so on. Let it fester, and it will only harden your heart.

That's just a few of the ways that our hearts can become hardened to the seed of God's Word. The alternative to this is to keep the soil of your heart 'tilled up' and broken through humility, gratitude, and daily repentance. One of the most dangerous things about a hard heart is that you often don't recognize it. Just as calloused skin will lose sensitivity, a calloused heart loses spiritual sensitivity.

This is why the Bible tells us:

Hebrews 3:15—“Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”

The good news is that God specializes in softening hard hearts! Through His Word, His Spirit, and His grace, He can do what none of our human effort could accomplish. He makes the promise in:

Ezekiel 36:26—“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

And so that's what the first type of soil mentioned by Jesus in this parable represents. Hearts that are hardened. And then there is a second type of soil He mentions:

2—Hearts that are SHALLOW and superficial (4:5-6; 16-17)

“Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away...And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure

for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.”

Notice in verse 5 how some of the seed fell on rocky soil, or the type of ground where there was a thin layer of soil that was on top of bedrock. Because the ground here is shallow, the seed will immediately spring up, but it withers away for lack of depth. So that the seed can never truly become rooted. In verse 6, Jesus says that it is scorched by the heat of the sun and withered away because it has no root. (Right now, at the end of my driveway there is a place where the grass is brown and dead. There is a ditch with a concrete culvert. And the little bit of soil with grass above this concrete is so shallow that when it gets hot and dry, it is the first to wither away. That’s the idea here.)

Down in verses 16-17, Jesus explains how this soil pictures the heart that is shallow. There is this initial enthusiastic response to the Word that is sown, but there is no depth so that the Word never takes root. And when it exposed to the heat of adversity on account of the Word, these people fall away. They can’t stand the heat because there is no root system beneath the surface.

Not all who are enthusiastic about the gospel have truly embraced the gospel!

Enthusiasm isn’t the same thing as conversion. These that Jesus is describing have an initial response that may be emotional and energetic, but it is not real and won’t endure testing. They love the benefits of the gospel, but they have not fully surrendered to the demands of the gospel. They are attracted to forgiveness, or by the excitement of spiritual experiences, but they have not truly repented of sin and entrusted themselves to Christ. When the cost of discipleship arises, a shallow profession fades because it was not rooted in genuine faith to begin with. Jesus said:

Matthew 7:21 — “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”

Scripture repeatedly warns us that a positive response to spiritual truth is not, by itself, evidence of salvation. Many people followed Jesus enthusiastically when He fed the crowds and healed the sick, but also abandoned Him when His teaching became difficult (John 6:66). As long as the excitement was there, these folks showed up. But when Jesus began teaching about the true nature of discipleship, they walked away, thereby revealing the condition of their heart.

There is an example of this in Acts 8 where Philip is in the city of Samaria preaching the gospel. And the Bible says that crowds paid attention to what was being said when they saw the signs that he did, and there was much joy in the city. But then we’re introduced to a man named Simon who had practiced sorcery in the city so that he amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was somebody great. And when people began to get saved, his following began to dwindle until he himself ‘believed’ and after being baptized he continued with Philip. When Peter and John come to town and the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the apostles’ hands, Simon tries to offer them money— “Give me this power too!” But Peter says to him:

Acts 8:20-23— “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

Simon was baptized for all the wrong reasons. Genuine faith isn't simply a momentary burst of excitement. Instead, it's a Spirit-produced trust in Christ that perseveres over time. That is not to say that it is perfect, but real faith is persevering. The ultimate evidence of saving faith is not the enthusiasm of one's initial response, but the endurance of one's commitment. Enthusiasm for the gospel is a good thing, but it must always be accompanied by repentance, faith, obedience, and perseverance if it is to be considered genuine. And so the seed that fell on rocky ground is a picture of shallow and superficial hearts. Then, let's notice a third type of soil:

3—Hearts that are CROWDED by other things (4:7; 18-19)

“Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain...And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

The third type of soil is mentioned in verse 7 where Jesus says some of the seed fell among the thorns. The thorns grew up and choked it so that it produced no grain. Those of you who keep a garden know that you have to work hard to keep the weeds out. If you didn't, the weeds would drain the soil of its nutrients and prevent your tomato plants or whatever else from being fruitful. The weeds would crowd out your crops and reduce their yield. In verse 18, Jesus explains how this illustrates the heart of the person that is so crowded by other things that the Word is 'choked' and proves unfruitful.

He mentions three specific things that crowd out the Word in this person's heart:

- **Cares of the world**

These are the cares, worries, and frustrations of life. Some people are always fretting about what might or might not happen just around the corner. They are anxious and can't leave control of their lives in God's hands. So that when the seed of the Word falls upon the crowded soil of their heart, they're too wrapped up by their anxieties to receive it. We can become so fixed on things that are beyond our control that we serve them as functional idols.

Matthew 6:25—“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life.”

He then goes on to use this word six times in the following verses, illustrating that there's a noticeable difference in the way that His followers live compared to their neighbors who do not know the Lord. The cares of the world are the main preoccupation of the people of the world. But as those who know Jesus, our citizenship is in Heaven! Now, that does not mean we live like an ostrich with our head buried in the sand. But it does mean that we see the 'stuff' of this life in its proper light.

- **Deceitfulness of riches**

This is the relentless pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and status in life. And some folks get caught up in that just like a fly in a spider's web. It is interesting that Jesus describes wealth as being 'deceitful.' In other words, it draws in your heart so that you think it will satisfy your desires, only to frustrate and disappoint them in the end. It is a vicious cycle—the more we have, the more we want—so that our itches are never fully scratched, our wants are never truly satisfied.

- **Desires for other things**

This describes the restlessness of the human heart in its search for something to fill up the void within. Such people are never content, but they are always

seeking some new experience, some new emotional high, some new way of thinking about reality, some new relationship. They are spiritual and emotional drifters in whom the Word cannot truly take root in their lives because they can't commit to it. There is always something else to crowd it out.

We live in such a crowded and distracting culture that we better pay close attention to the point that Jesus is making with this third type of soil. The 'thorns' of American culture are protruding everywhere into our lives. We live in an age of constant distraction, endless entertainment, relentless busyness, consumerism, and digital overload. I think of how some people are not necessarily hostile to Christianity—they simply have no room for it. Their lives are filled with career advancement, financial goals, travel here and there, sports, hobbies, social media, streaming content, and the pursuit of comfort. And these things may not be sinful in themselves, but when they become ultimate concerns, they choke spiritual life. The tragedy of the crowded ground is that the seed is not destroyed by bad things, but by good things that become god-things!

And then finally, notice the fourth category of ground:

4—Hearts that are RECEPTIVE and fruitful (4:8; 20)

“And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold...But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

The last type of soil in the parable is described by Jesus as good soil. The seed that is sown is able to take root and to develop and grow, eventually producing grain. And Jesus explains to His disciples that this is an illustration of the one who hears the Word and 'accepts' it, which is to say that it is welcomed into their

heart for the life-giving truth that it is. This is a receptive heart that is ready to act upon the Word. It responds in faith. They bear fruit in various degrees—some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some a hundredfold.

What is the ‘fruit’ produced in the life of a Christian? I think the fruit of the Spirit comes to mind here—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It is the fruit of Christlike character that is being reproduced in the believer’s life. This is the fruit of obedience produced from within, the kind of faith which the book of James says will be accompanied by works. Not the useless kind which is dead and in word only. And yet at the same time, it is the Spirit who produces the fruit within our lives. The fruit isn’t manufactured by us, it is produced by Him. The fruit is evident of the life and health of the seed! And it isn’t something that can be faked.

Stuart Briscoe—*“A friend often used an old fruit tree to escape from his second-story bedroom window, especially when his father was about to punish him. One day his father announced that he was going to cut down the old tree because it had not borne fruit in many years. That night the boy and his friends purchased a bushel of apples and in the cover of darkness tied fruit to the unproductive branches. The next morning the father shouted to his wife, ‘Mary, I can’t believe my eyes. The old fruit tree that was barren for years is covered with apples. It’s a miracle because it’s a pear tree!”*

Try as hard as you may, but you can’t fake the fruit. Fruit is the result on the outside of your life of what is on the inside. People who have responded to the Word are fruitful where it counts. The word ‘fruit’ is used in several different ways in the Bible to describe the various expressions of the Christian’s life. For instance:

Giving is described as fruit:

Philippians 4:16—“Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”

Praise to God is an example of fruit:

Hebrews 13:15—“Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.”

People won to Christ are pictured as fruit:

Romans 1:13—“I often planned to come to you but was hindered until now, that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles.”

What is the ‘fruit’ of a Christian? Ultimately, should it not be another Christian? Fruit-bearing in the Christian life is that which results in a life that is lived in a direction that is going to reach lost people. Living with the Great Commission in mind is fruitful living. Fruitfulness is the outward proof of an inward life, and that life is to be always working its way out in our relationships and in our disposition. The fruit is produced by the seed, not the soil! It is the life-giving power of the Spirit, but don’t think that this means we have no responsibility as far as our character is concerned. We’re commanded to love one another, to be patient, to rejoice always, and to be faithful. When we forgive like Jesus, that’s fruit. When we love our neighbor as Jesus taught us to love, that’s fruit. When we give to meet some need, that’s fruit.

Which ‘soil’ best represents where you are right now? That is the question you need to stop and consider. For most of my Christian life, I have approached this

story as though the various types of soils represent four different kinds of people, or four static personalities who remained the same throughout their lifetimes. Some are permanently hard-hearted, some are permanently shallow, and so on. It may very well be true of some. Obviously, there's an application here for the person who has never trusted in Christ, and has never welcomed His gospel into their heart and life.

However, I have also come to understand that what Jesus is describing is not so much permanent personality types but conditions of the heart at the moment the Word is being sown. Not just before I was saved, but even now as a Christian. So that there is an application for all of us, no matter where we are in life. How am I responding to God?

Ray Stedman — *“I don't know of anyone who exists in one unchanging condition throughout life. We go through cycles and phases. Whenever the Word is being sown in our lives, we are in one or another of the cycle or phases that Jesus describes. We have all been callous at times when we have heard the Word; at other times we have been impulsive and emotionally shallow; still at other times we have been overly concerned about mundane matters. And by the grace of God, we have all experienced times of being open and responsive to the Word.”*

The Parable of the Sower is fundamentally about different responses to the Word of God. The seed is the same in every case, but the soils are different. The problem is not with the seed, but with the soil. Some hearts are hard like the path, some are shallow like rocky ground, some are crowded like thorn-infested soil, and some are receptive like good soil. I think the appropriate question to ask is this one: “What is your heart like right now?” Go back through this parable and ask yourself these very important questions:

Is my heart hardened by my unbelief? Has my heart been closed off to the Word of God for whatever reason?

Is my heart shallow and without depth? Has my enthusiasm resulted in real repentance, or is it surface only?

Is my heart crowded by other things? Have the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things choked out the Word in my life so that I've been unfruitful?

Is my heart receptive and fruitful? Have I welcomed God's Word into my life with a receptive heart, eager to bear fruit for the glory of Christ?

I can't answer these questions for you. Only you can fill in the blank. But my friend, it is never too late to plow up the hard ground of your heart, to pull up the weeds and thorns, and receive the saving gospel of the person and work of Jesus Christ! He died for you and rose again, and by faith you can receive a brand new heart and eternal life today.