

- We are working our way between now and Christmas through the book of Mark.
- Mark wrote his biography of Jesus as God who lived as a servant, bringing God's kingdom on the behalf of people.
- Our homework each week was to read the next chapter of Mark and ask two questions. "What do I learn about God from the life of Jesus?" and "So what?"
- I remember a time when I was in a small group meeting years ago. I do not even remember the discussion topic, whether it was formal or just informal time. What I do remember is watching a husband talk with his wife in the room. He was on a roll and was sharing a joke or story. That was fine. What was not fine was that it was at the expense of his wife.
- As he got fully engaged in his story and got laughs from the group, I could see the wife shrinking into herself. It was clear that she wished she could be anywhere but there and you could see her spirit being crushed in real time. It was heartbreaking. It was not the first time.
- The saddest part to me was that he was completely unaware of what he was doing. He had no clue.
- There is an icebreaker game that most of us have played or some variant of it.
- "What animal do you most closely resemble?" (or fruit, or car, etc.)
- How would you answer?
- Some do it by what they look like – an animal that you physically resemble, such as a giraffe if you have a long neck, a leopard if you consider yourself sleek, or a hippopotamus if you think you have the spiritual gift of leverage.
- Sometimes we answer based on a character trait that we share in common with an animal: an elephant is able to remember, a fox is clever, a bird enjoys freedom and resists structure, a bear loves sleep, a cat is aloof, a donkey stubborn – you get the idea.
- What's interesting about this game is that if you do it where someone else gets to decide what animal you are like, they will probably be different from yours because they see what you do not.
- We often have trouble with self-diagnosis.
- We are good at diagnosing (or we think we are) the issues and problems of other people. We point the finger yet miss it altogether for us.
- When we think of our relationship with God, how do we know where we are at?
- If we rely on our emotions alone, we get steered by what makes us feel good.
- If we rely only on our circumstances, we will act in ways that make us feel the best about ourselves.
- How can I know if I am responding to the kingdom? How do I know if I am missing completely what God is doing and saying?
- Jesus story about the sower and the soils is really helpful.
- In Mark chapter 4, Jesus told a story called a parable.
- A parable is not to be confused with an allegory like Pilgrims Progress where every name and every circumstance meant something. Jesus is telling a story that expresses a big idea and it is best understood by reading it in its entirety, then looking for observations that we find.
- This parable is not a prescriptive parable – ie. telling people what to do. Rather, this parable is a descriptive parable, showing what people are like. It is a diagnostic parable.
- How I receive God's kingdom is all about the condition of my heart, and **It's what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.**
- Before we move towards what we might be our response, we must do a diagnostic.

- Do as you listen to the story told by Jesus, ask yourself, “What is the condition of my heart?”
- **It’s what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.**

Mark 4:1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge.

- This was not the first time Jesus had to teach this way. Remember, we said that Mark repeatedly talks about the religious leaders, the crowds and the disciples.

2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” 9 Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

- Let’s pause. We have the luxury of the next 10 verses, but the crowd did not.
- What would your response be?
- “Good story Jesus – are you teaching better farming practices?”
- “Entertaining, but I don’t get it.”
- They weren’t alone. The disciples didn’t get it either.

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

- They didn’t understand it. “Uh, Jesus, we didn’t want to ask in front of everyone because we didn’t want to look stupid, but could you, like, shed a little more light on that story. It sounded like it was important, but we’re not sure.”

11 He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

- It’s not that Jesus didn’t want people to understand. He used parables because many were predisposed to see their lives and their own hearts their way. Jesus didn’t use parables to blind people, but because they were blind. They had no intention of leaning in to hear and change. They had already decided that they knew what was right.
- Through the first three chapters of Mark, we have encountered Pharisees who did not listen to Jesus, family who were embarrassed by him and wanted him to stop, thrill seeking crowds and disciples who were trying to figure out if they are following Jesus.
- We are beginning to see a thread that runs through Mark’s entire account – people hearing Jesus but not really getting what he was saying.
- This story is all about the condition of the hearts of his hearers.
- **It’s what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.**

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word.

- Let’s define a couple of terms. The seed is the word of God. This is not restricted to bible verses. It is any teaching about the kingdom. About God’s ways.
- The sower is anyone who is communicating these truths.
- The difference is not the sower
- The difference is not the seed.
- The difference is in the soil.

I. The wayside. (v15)

15 *Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.*

- A path is that part of the ground between fields that people used as a walkway. It got beat down and packed into a super hard ground. Almost like our sidewalks. The seed just sat on top and the birds come and snatch it away and eat it.
- Some people hear truths of the kingdom. They hear about God's ways. It never sinks in. They aren't all that interested, and it doesn't even land.
- There is actually no room in their hearts for Jesus. It never makes it past the front door.
- People like the wayside are hard to the word of God, and they allow no room for the seed of the word in their lives – it never enters.
- These individuals are in control of their own lives; they have all of the answers.
- The key word for these people is **unteachable**.
- Their hearts are hard. Many things can make our hearts this way.
- Hurt – by others, circumstances, life.
- Pride – I know better. I am in control of my life.
- Unforgiveness – we refuse to engage in this process.
- Sin – actions and behaviors that we engage in regularly that we know are wrong.
- *“Hard hearts must be ‘plowed up’ before they can receive the seed, and this can be a painful experience.”* (Warren Wiersbe)
- **It's what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.** When Jesus was talking about the hard soil, was he talking about your heart?

II. The rocky soil. (v16-17)

16 *Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.*

- Some people are like the ground that is rocky but covered with a thin layer of topsoil.
- People with this kind of heart condition have no problem hearing about the kingdom. They love it. They have never heard anything like it. They love the church service, the loving atmosphere, even some of these new relationships. But their roots do not go deep.
- Perhaps their roots are in their parents or in their friends.
- *“There are many more, whose religion must be sustained by enthusiastic surroundings. They seem to have been baptized in boiling water; and unless the temperature around them is kept up to that point, they wither away... the religion that is born of mere excitement will die when the excitement is over.”* (Charles Spurgeon)
- The key word for these people is **self-focused**.
- Their faith is about them. As long as things are good, their needs are being met and the train is on the tracks, they are good. But when their life as a Christ follower gets difficult, they give it up quickly.
- When your faith is challenged, when you have to trust when things are not as you expect, what happens?
- **It's what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.** When Jesus was talking about the rocky soil, was he talking about your heart?

III. The thorny soil. (v18-19)

18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

- This seed falls on fertile ground. I mean, stuff grows here. The problem is that everything grows here. The seed sprouts, but so do thorns, thistles, weeds and any other green thing. They all grow up in the same place. Eventually, the thorns suck all the nourishment, water and necessary things and what is growing from the seeds is stunted. It may not die, but it is never what it should be and it is never fruitful.
- This heart is fertile ground.
- The problem is not that nothing grows – too much grows.
- Jesus mentions three things that characterize a heart that is like this.
- “Worries of this life” – job, kids, hobbies, travel, music, family situations, and the like.
- “Deceitfulness of riches” – distraction of material things. Getting more. Paying off debt. Trying to attain to a life that never delivers what we think it will.
- Deceitfulness of riches – 1990’s study with results in book “The Day America told the Truth” 1/3 of people would abandon their family for 10 million dollars.
- “Desire for other things” – the pursuit of anything that will make me feel better about myself. It’s all about what I want and what I enjoy.
- The key word for these people is **distracted**.
- Many people in ministry believe that this is the most common obstacle to spiritual growth to Americans.
- What interesting is that with the first two soils, the seeds either don’t root or don’t last. With this kind of heart, the growth is there but it is choked out. It doesn’t necessarily kill the plants but it makes them unfruitful. Frustrated. Staying in the same place. Not growing.
- **It’s what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.** When Jesus was talking about the thorny soil, was he talking about your heart?

IV. The good soil. (v20)

20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

- This is seed that fell on good soil. It bore fruit. What is the difference. Jesus says they heard the word and accepted it. The point is that these hearts are receptive. They are receiving the word and listening with the intent to respond.
- They are willing to adjust their life to what they hear. They are not just doing life and adding Jesus and his words to it. They are willing to be shaping everything they think and do around the kingdom.
- The key word for these people is **willing**.
- Willing to hear. Willing to change. Willing to obey.
- When we receive the words of Jesus as we should, something happens. We will produce fruit. Our attitudes will change. We will relate differently. Forgiveness becomes possible. Contentment blossoms. We begin to be kind and patient. We experience peace and we love others the way God loves them. There is joy. We reflect the heart and priorities of God.
- **It’s what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.** When Jesus was talking about the good soil, was he talking about your heart?
- The final emphasis of the parable is positive, not negative. There is a promise of a life that listens, hears and obeys brings fruit. It leads to life.
- Let’s come full circle. What does the diagnosis tell us?

- **It's what you do with what you hear that makes all the difference.**
- Jesus was not saying that if one of these soils describes you, that is not you. You are not set as one soil or another. It does not describe a permanent state.
- It is pointing to the hearts of the hearers.
- In the end, the hearts of the crowds, the Pharisees and the disciples were very different. Some of them changed over time. Others did not. Some changed for the better. Some for the worse.
- The crowds mostly walked away when the call to commitment was raised to a higher level.
- Others left when what Jesus was providing was not what they wanted.
- Some actually devoted their lives to destroying Jesus.
- And some internalized the word, adjusted to Jesus, and produced hundred fold. Their lives led to hundreds which led to thousands which led to millions of people changed for Jesus.
- **It's what they did with what they heard that made all the difference.**
- That will be true for you as well.