

Lessons from the Farm

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Mark 4:1-20

The University of Missouri Extension in Jackson has an office that conducts soil tests. You can dig up a few handfuls of dirt from your yard and send it to them. For a minimal fee, they will analyze it under their microscope to see what it contains. In a couple weeks, they will send you a report of how good your soil is for growing things. Every farmer or gardener wants a fruitful harvest. However, as every farmer and gardener knows, sometimes you are disappointed. Not everything you plant grows. Jesus teaches us about this problem in Mark 4:1-20. Of all the parables spoken by Jesus, perhaps none is more well known than the Parable of the Sower. In this parable, Jesus will outline four kinds of soils that correspond to four types of hearts. As you look into the mirror of God's Word this morning, ask yourself which heart is reflective of your own. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following Words:

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 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. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 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." And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. 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. 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. 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. 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.” Mark 4:1–20

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers, and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

JESUS’ TEACHING SETTING WAS THE SEA (v.1)

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

The sea was an often-used classroom for Jesus. He has moved away from the synagogues and has continued His teaching ministry outside of town. Here, the masses flocked to Him from every corner of Palestine. Mark tells us that a “very large crowd gathered about Him.” There is a grammatical emphasis on the size of the crowd. It’s literally a “mighty” or “immense multitude.” The crowd was so large that Jesus had to retreat onto “the boat” (cf. 3:9). It’s probable that Jesus got in the boat for several reasons: First, the crowd was pressing in upon Him such that there was a literal concern that He and His disciples might be crushed. Second, the terrain that surrounded the Sea of Galilee sloped down to the water’s edge and made a natural amphitheater for carrying Jesus’ voice. Israeli scientists have verified that the “Bay of Parables” can effectively transmit a human voice effortlessly to several thousand people on shore.¹ Lastly, Jesus would have been able to be seen by more of the crowd by pushing out into the water. A small floating boat would be Jesus’ pulpit for the message before us this morning. There is a neat picture here. The text literally says, “Jesus entered the boat and sat *on* the sea.” While we shouldn’t be dogmatic about it, it’s possible that Mark is alluding to Psalm 29:10, “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;” and is highlighting the deity of Christ.

JESUS’ TEACHING METHOD WAS PARABLES (v.2)

And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

Mark tells us that Jesus was “teaching” the crowd. The word teaching here is in the imperfect meaning it was a continual activity; Jesus was continually teaching. Jesus taught the crowd by way of a Parable. This was His preferred method of teaching in public. A parable is a spiritual illustration that teaches truth by comparison. The Greek word παραβολή literally means, “to cast alongside.” Some are long stories, but others are short similes, metaphors, analogies, or proverbial sayings. A parable is essentially an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus often used illustrations from everyday life, such as fishing, farming, housekeeping, family life, royalty, and banquets to communicate spiritual truths (often concerning the Kingdom of God). Many of Jesus’ parables are confounding. They knock the hearer off balance so that they are forced to see things in a new light.

¹ James R. Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 126.

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Vol. 1 Matthew - Galatians* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook,

A parable begins innocently as a *picture* that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as we study the picture, it becomes a *mirror* in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look by faith, the mirror becomes a *window* through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us.² The landscape around the Sea of Galilee was covered with farms. It's very possible that as the boat Jesus was in pushed out into the water, His eye caught a farmer who became the object lesson as He as the taught the Parable of the Sower. Jesus' intention wasn't just to tell a story, it was to capture the hearts of those gathered around Him and force them to apply His teaching to their lives.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLES (v.10-13)

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 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." And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

Verse 10-13 are perhaps some of the most difficult verses in Mark's gospel to interpret. Mark quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. Isaiah wrote, "And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Why did Jesus teach in parables? Parables do two things: They *conceal* and *reveal*. There are two audiences in view here. Jesus said, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God." But he then said, "but for those outside everything is in parables..." It concealed truth from those whose hearts were hard and it revealed truth to those who were prepared to receive it. There is a tension here between the *sovereignty* of God and the *responsibility* of man. God must supernaturally open a man's heart to hear, receive, and respond to the truth of the gospel. At the same time, all men are without excuse for their hardness of heart and rejection of the gospel (cf. Romans 1:18-20). All of the soils are responsible to receive the seed but God must make it germinate. Parables conceal truth from the hard-hearted and reveal truth to the humble-hearted. What is the application here? Pray for a soft, receptive heart to the Word of God.

THE PARABLE STATED (v.3-9)

THE PARABLE EXPLAINED (v.13-20)

² Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Vol. 1 Matthew - Galatians* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1989), 121.

I. THE SOWER (v.3, 14)

Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

Jesus' parable begins and ends with a summons to "hear" or "listen." This is the Greek word ἀκούω, from which we get our word acoustic. This is an imperative (command) that highlights urgency and importance. The sower is to be heard! The sower in this specific parable is Jesus, but Jesus also intended that His immediate disciples as well as all of His followers would be engaged in sowing. Let me pause right there for a moment. Are you sowing? Are we sowing the seed of the gospel? Everywhere we go, like a broadcast spreader, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

II. THE SEED (v.3)

Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

The seed represents God's Word (cf. Luke 8:11). Like seed, the Word of God is alive and able to produce spiritual fruit. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" Hebrews 4:12. In every one of those seeds lies the power of God to bring salvation to whoever receives it. There is nothing wrong with the seed we've been given. Sometimes we think if our "seed" was a little easier to receive, more people would come to Christ. If we just alter it a bit, make it more palatable, soften or smooth off the harder edges, retool it to fit our 21st century culture, it would be more effective. Friends, this is not an option. The Word is the same message for the last 2,000 years and we have no business tampering with it. It's God's message, not ours, and He has entrusted it to us. The problem isn't with the sower or the seed. The problem, Jesus says, is with the soils!

III. THE SOILS (v.3-9, 13-20)

Though the parable is called the Parable of the Sower, the main emphasis of Jesus' parable is not the sower. Neither is it the seed. The main point of Jesus' parable is the condition of the soil that the seed falls on. For that reason, a better name of the parable would be *The Parable of the Soils*. The soil represents the varying condition of human hearts on which the seed was scattered. There are four types of soils, or four types of hearts, that Jesus speaks about in verses 3-9, and 13-20. Let's look at them individually.

A. IS THE SOIL OF YOUR HEART HARD? (v.4, 15)

And as He sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Jesus interprets this first soil in verse 15, "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."

The crop fields in Palestine were often long, narrow strips that were divided by paths for foot-travel. The constant compacting by feet, hooves, and wheels on these paths made the soil almost impenetrable. Inevitably, as a farmer sowed his seed, some of the seed fell along the path. These seeds were unable to penetrate the dense surface. Mark tells us that birds quickly gobble up these seeds. Jesus interprets the birds as Satan and his cohort. Satan is actively trying to scoop up seeds as we sow them. Satan is crafty. This swooping in and stealing the seed of the Word may come in the form of disinterest or distraction, but rest assured that wherever seed is sown, Satan is quick to ensure that it stays on the surface if it stays at all.

The dense paths represent the hardened hearts of those who hear God's Word, but because of their own busy comings and goings and the frenetic traffic of life have so hardened them that God's truth fails to stir them. This hard soil represents a hard heart that doesn't permit the Word of God to penetrate its surface. These individuals are in control of their own lives; they have all the answers. They are unteachable, unable to be stirred, and the Word of God falls upon their deaf ears. J.C. Ryle notes, "There is hardly a church or chapel where scores of them are not to be found." These people can at times be hostile, but often we seem them as simply uninterested. They don't see God's truth as being relevant to them. They are too busy to be interested in or bothered by spiritual things. This heart needs to be broken by the plow. Often the plowing that is needed is some pain or stress or trial to soften that hardened surface to the relevancy of God's truth. In God's wisdom, the hardships of life often make us ready for and receptive to truth.

B. IS THE SOIL OF YOUR HEART SHALLOW? (v.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.

Again, Jesus interprets this soil for us in verses 16-17, "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."

In Palestine, much of the land is covered by 2-3 inches of soil over a limestone bedrock. The shallow heart is like thin layer of soil over a bed of dense rock. The hearing of the Word for these individuals produces a temporary impression, but no deep, lasting, or abiding effect. The shallow heart is representative of the "emotional hearer." This person quickly and eagerly accepts the Word of God. They seem to spring up quickly, look vibrant, and are marked by enthusiasm, but when trials, tribulation, persecution, and suffering come, the enthusiasm vanishes and the joy disappears. It is the tendency of our fallen human nature to counterfeit religious feelings. These individuals fade as fast as they grow. Their spiritual vitality has no

more life in it than a cut flower. Because it has no root, it quickly withers away. I saw this often as I ministered to college students. Students would get on an emotional and spiritual high only to come crashing down when things got tough. Jesus reminds us, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” Matthew 24:13.

It’s important to note that Jesus isn’t talking about some category of “carnal Christians” who just don’t reach full maturity. Superficial Christianity has no roots and no persevering endurance; they never understood the costs of discipleship. Friends, don’t use emotion to try to *manipulate* folks into a decision for Christ – you must understand this parable of the soils. Likewise, don’t just assume that every profession of faith is authentic; don’t be surprised when you see people falling away who previously professed faith. If your concept of the gospel is that Jesus came to take away all of your problems and give you smooth sailing through life, you will fall away when trials or hardship or persecution impact you.

C. IS THE SOIL OF YOUR HEART THORNY? (v. 7, 18-19)

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

Jesus interprets the third soil type in verses 18-19, “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 thorn bushes that Jesus is speaking of here wouldn't have been visible on the surface. Palestinian farmers would burn the thorn bushes, but often leave the roots intact in the ground. When seed was sown on this patch of ground it would germinate, but the entrenched thorns would also sprout and choke out the seed before it produced any fruit. The thorny heart pictures the person who receives the Word of God but wants to hold onto the world at the same time. This person wants to walk the “broad way” and the “narrow way” at the same time (cf. Matthew 7:13-14). A.W. Tozer once said, “If your Christian conversion did not reverse the direction of your life, if it did not transform it then you are not converted at all. You have simply bought into the “accept Jesus” heresy.” This is a double minded person (cf. James 1:8) who wants salvation, wants Christ, wants the Kingdom but wants the world and wants riches and wants things. Jesus notes three sets of thorns that we need to be on guard against.

1. CARES OF THE WORLD: THORNS OF WORRY

A literal translation here is the μέριμνα του αἰῶν “distractions of the age.” We are so full of worries, anxieties, concerns, and obsessions with our physical well-being. The word worry means all divided up, double minded. We are so consumed with making a living, about what’s coming, and fear of the future that we don’t have time to be in God’s Word. These thorny worries just shoot up and strangle the Word right out of our hearts! Do you see

yourself in this mirror? Jesus tells us, “Seek first His kingdom and righteousness, and all this stuff will take care of itself (cf. Matthew 6:33).

2. DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES: THORNS OF WEALTH

Keeping up with the Joneses. This involves buying things you don't need to impress people you don't like with money you don't have. The story was once told of a young man who proposed to a young girl with a divided heart. He said, “Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I'm not rich. I don't have a yacht or Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart. She thought for a minute and then replied, “I love you with all my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown.” Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” Matthew 6:24. Likewise, Paul told Timothy, “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” 1 Timothy 6:10.

3. DESIRE FOR THINGS: THORNS OF WANTS

We are often so discontent and dissatisfied. We seem to have an insatiable want for more, bigger, and better. Jesus told another parable in Luke 12. He said, “And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” Luke 12:16–21.

D. IS THE SOIL OF YOUR HEART FERTILE? (v.8-9, 20)

And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Jesus interprets the last soil in verse 20, “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.”

This heart is representative of a genuine believer. The seed of God's Word doesn't bounce off this heart. It doesn't momentarily flourish and then wither away. It isn't divided by competing desires and strangled. It's a heart that allows God's word to take deep root in it. When God's word takes root in a heart, fruitfulness is the result. Fruit is always the evidence of true

salvation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17). A heart that has received the implanted Word (cf. James 1:21) produces a harvest of character. Paul said, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” Galatians 5:22–24.

Notice the ongoing activity of those who have fertile hearts in verse 20. Mark says, “But those who were sown on the good soil were the ones who:

1. Hear the Word
2. Receive (accept) the Word
3. Put the Word into action (bear fruit)

John MacArthur notes, “Good soil is not natural. Hard soil is natural. Just leave the ground and that’s what it will be. Rocky soil, that’s natural, leaving it the way it is. Weedy soil, that’s natural that’s the way it is. Something has to happen to this soil. To make it good soil, the stone has to be broken up. The hard ground has to be broken up. The weeds have to be taken out. Who can do that? Only God can do that.” Has God don't that in your heart? Which hearer of the word are you? What kind of heart do you have in your chest this morning?

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear this benediction: May the Lord bless you and keep you; may His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; May He lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. And all God’s people said, “Amen!” Go in peace!