

The Sower, the Soil and the Seed

Mark 4:1-20

Introduction

Today, as we continue our study in the Gospel of Mark, we will begin by reading Mark 4:1-20.

He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land.

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching,

“Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow;

“as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up.

“Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil.

“And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

“Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

“Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.

And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,

“so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven.”

And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?

“The sower sows the word.

“These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.

“In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy;

“and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.

“And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word,

“but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for

other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

“And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Everyone loves a story. Russell Conwell proved that to be true when he told one particular story over 5,000 times. In the process, he made for himself, eight million dollars. It was a story that you may have heard, entitled, “Acres of Diamonds”.

It is the story of a farmer in Africa, who had heard that other African settlers had discovered diamond mines. So, he sold his little flea-bitten farm and took off looking for a mine. He ended his life tragically one day, by killing himself. The result was, he never found a diamond.

However, the man who bought his little farm was out at the stream that ran through his property one day, and discovered a stone. That stone turned out to be an extremely valuable diamond. After further searching, he found that his farm was literally, sitting on one of the richest diamond mines in all of Africa.

It is fascinating to hear a story. Everyone seems to lean forward a little more when you tell a story.

In Mark, chapter 4, Jesus takes a dramatic turn in His ministry. He will now begin teaching by using stories. We call these stories “parables”.

The word “parable” is a simple transliteration of the original word “parabole,” which means to “cast alongside”. The best definition that I have heard of “parable” is that it is nothing more than an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. In other words, you tell a story of something natural and, by that story, teach something eternal.

Jesus will, from this point on, teach by using parables.

Jesus Teaches the Parable of the Sower

Notice Mark 4:1, as the story opens. Jesus will teach a crowd by using a parable.

He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land.

It is fascinating to think that the podium that Jesus used was a ship. Perhaps it was a little fishing boat that, because the crowd was so great, was pushed offshore a few feet. Jesus was sitting in that boat at the front and from that, He taught the multitude.

Jesus used the parabolic method. Notice verse 2.

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching,

Why did Jesus teach by parables?

Let me suggest a couple of reasons why the Lord would begin teaching by parables.

1. One of the clearest reasons, I think, that Jesus began teaching in parables is because He is teaching in the open air.

Jesus is no longer teaching in the synagogue. When you teach in the synagogue, those listening cannot easily get up and leave. However, when you teach in the open air, anyone can leave whenever they feel like it. I think Jesus wanted to captivate the hearts of those who were listening. So, He used a method that you and I enjoy very much – a story.

2. Secondly, we will learn, later in this passage, that Jesus would teach in parables to hide the mystery of the kingdom.

We need to understand, dispensationally, the Jewish leaders had rejected the kingdom offer. As a result of that rejection, the truth of the kingdom would now, become a mystery to them.

For those who would receive the kingdom offer, the truth was not a mystery. The mystery was something that was closed to those who had not followed Christ. The disciples were following Him, so to them, He explained the mystery.

The parable of the sower and soils

Now, I think, Jesus Christ’s most popular method of teaching, which you may know if you have studied the life of Christ, was not necessarily giving answers, but giving another question.

People would come up to Jesus and ask a question. He was so irritating because He would turn right around and ask another question. He wanted people to think. He did not want to give out truth in such a way that people could be mental dwarfs. He wanted them to wake up and listen!

That, in fact, is the way Jesus begins in Mark 4:3,

Listen to this! Behold . . .

In other words, “Listen! Look! I want you to wake up!”

Jesus never wanted to take away from people the mental sweat of thinking. He says, “Listen and look!”

Perhaps, as He was sitting there, He saw, in the distance, a farmer sowing seed. He says, in Mark 4:3b.

. . . the sower went out to sow;

1. The first kind of soil the sower sows seed in is in Mark 4:4.

as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road and the birds came and ate it up.

The “road” is nothing more than a hardened pathway.

There were a couple of ways that seed could be sown in that region. One way was to carry a bag of seed at the hip, reach in to get a handful of seed, and throw it out. Wheat and barley, as it was sown by hand, did not grow in straight rows. It does today, because we use machinery to plant the seed in straight rows. At that time, since they did not have our more modern technology, they simply cast the seed, and the wheat and barley would grow wherever it landed.

If a farmer wanted to be a little quicker, he would put a bag of seed on the back of his donkey, cut a small hole in the bottom of the bag, and drive the donkey all over the field. As the donkey moved and jostled, the seed would fall.

The patches of ground in that day, were criss-crossed with tiny pathways so that the farmer could walk along the pathway and throw seed on his tiny plot; his little garden. As he threw a handful of seed, of course, some of it would fall on the beaten pathway. It would have been beaten hard by the feet of passing people and become like cement. The seed was sown, but never got in; it landed on the soil, but did not go in.

2. There is a second kind of soil. Notice Mark 4:5.

Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil.

This is the kind of soil that receives the seed. It does get in, but because there is no depth, it is not able to go down; it is sown, but not able to go down.

In a moment, we are going to look at the interpretation of this parable, as Jesus gives it to the disciples. However, in Galilee, understand that most of the land was nothing more than a thin layer or thin covering of soil; it was a thin skin of soil on limestone rock. The farmer could either try to find a place where he could hack into that rock and clear a tiny plot or, as they usually did, he could add soil to deepen it enough for roots to grow.

The problem with the hardened soil was that it had to be plowed. The problem with the stony soil was that it had to be deepened.

3. Notice the third soil, in Mark 4:7.

Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

The word “choke,” means to literally, “strangle”. If a farmer was lazy in Galilee, he would not handle the multitude of weeds properly.

I do not know whether you have ever had a garden, but for some reason, you never have to sow weeds – they will grow! You never have to fertilize them; you do not have to talk to them and nurture them or water them – they will come up anyway!

If the Galilean farmer wanted to do a lazy, quick job, he would simply burn off his field. It would then, look clean. Perhaps he wanted to sell it and was deceitful. The problem, of course, was that the roots of the weeds were still under the ground surface. When seed was sown on that soil and went into the soil, it was not able to grow because the roots of the weeds would strangle it.

This has the idea of a compressed, almost claustrophobic type of situation. The seed is strangled; it is choked. Picture yourself standing in the middle of an elevator when the Washington Redskins getting on. You could not even ask for an autograph because you would be so squished! It is the idea of crowding that seed so much that it cannot come up.

4. Now notice the fourth soil in Mark 4:8.

Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

The words “grew up,” “increased,” and “yielded” are present tense, which means the seeds continually grow; continually bear fruit – this is a constant process. The good soil produces the kind of fruit that is constant; that is flourishing.

The fascinating thing that you and I need to understand, before we go any further, is that no ground in Galilee was naturally good. There was no soil that was naturally rich and fertile. It had to be worked by the husbandman or the farmer.

Now we will come to the applications later in this passage, but it is so obvious that you and I are the soil. There is no way, apart from the work of the Farmer, or the person of Christ, that we will ever become good, fertile soil. It takes a diligent man to keep the field so that it can produce fruit.

Now, in case you and I might miss the point, He goes on to explain. Look at Mark 4:14.

The sower sows the word.

Obviously, the seed is the word of God.

Four Responses to the Sowing of the Word

There are four different kinds of responses to the sowing of the word. I debated, in my study, if this is four individuals who respond, but I think it is probably one individual with four potential responses. The reason I have come to that conclusion is simply because you and I can respond as hardened soil, as rocky soil, as thorny soil, or as good soil. Perhaps He is speaking to an individual who has sown the seed. We can respond in four different ways. Let us look at what they are.

1. One potential response to the sowing of the word is with an unresponsive heart. There is no penetration.

Notice Mark 4:15.

These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.

This is the heart that is unresponsive. It is hard as rock or cement and there is no penetration of the word.

I have to ask myself the question, what are the factors in your life and in my life that create an unresponsive heart? What is it in your life and in my life that when the seed of the word is sown, you and I fail to respond?

I am going to give three factors, although we could make it a dozen.

- First, an influence that can harden the soil of our hearts is ungodly friends and associates.

By this, I am referring to close friends and associates. The closeness of friends impacts us. They can either harden or soften our hearts. This is just as Solomon wrote in Proverbs 27:17,

Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

Your friends, your associates, those whom you allow to beat a path through your life can harden the soil. This is especially true of younger people. We need to take stock of who we allow to invade our lives as close associates.

- A second influence that can harden our hearts is entertainments.

Close friends impact us. Entertainments condition us.

Let me illustrate with my own life and my own failure. I can remember attending college, especially leaving home for the first semester. I went to a Christian college where it was kind of like a little womb in that it was somewhat protected from outside influence. I do not think there was a television on the campus. If there was, it was probably against the rules. So, I went for four months without even seeing a commercial. Of course, I was so busy, who cared?

I went home during the Christmas break and will never forget turning on the television and being totally embarrassed; in fact, shocked by what I saw. I could not believe what was on television. Why? Because for four months, I had been weaned off the thing and I had, in that process, become sensitive once again, to things that I believe are wrong.

Do you know what happens, ladies and gentlemen, as a result of the things that we read; the things that we see; the places that we go? They have a conditioning effect in our lives. We are not neutral, and neither are the influences. They either affect us positively; that is, in producing fertile soil, or they impact us negatively; that is, in hardening us.

Wake up to the things that you are allowing to beat a hard path into your life.

- A third influence that can harden our hearts to hearing the word is a private thought life.

It is so true that I am what I think when I am alone, not what I pretend to be in public. There are, in

my life perhaps, the old persistent thought patterns of ungodliness. There are hard clods of cement-like dirt created by bitterness or animosity or unforgiven sin or resentment. And, because I dwell, in my private thought life, on those things, that ground is so hard that it would take the dynamite of the Holy Spirit to break it up so that seed could actually penetrate.

The unresponsive heart has the seed sown on the soil but it never gets inside.

2. A second potential response to the sowing of the word is with an impulsive heart. There is no depth.

Notice Mark 4:16-17.

In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.

The Greek word for “fall away” is “skandalizo,” or scandalize. They are immediately tripped up as soon as the sun rises.

These are the believers, I think, who look at Christianity as a comfortable, enjoyable thing. They might say, “Oh, it’s wonderful to be a Christian. Man, I’ve never had more fun in my life.”

I can just hear them, as they come up to you and say, “I just finished reading the latest best seller, ‘The Thirty Second Devotional Guide’. You won’t believe what you can fit into thirty seconds. I can have devotions and commune with the Almighty while I shave. Man, Christianity is easy. I never knew growing up could be so simple. Our Sunday school class is doing a series entitled, ‘Ten Steps to Becoming a Spiritual Giant’. Think about it – one day next month, I’ll be as mature as the apostle Paul!”

This is the kind of individual who is going to join something like the Baptist Bowling Brigade. Every week, for a Bible study, they meet at the bowling alley. They roll a ball and read a verse; they roll another ball and read another verse. “We’re going to read through the entire Gospel of John in three years. Wow! I just joined the Food, Fun, and Fellowship Independent Baptist Church. We have a pot luck dinner every Sunday night. Imagine that – you can gain weight and give God all the glory.”

There are believers who look at Christianity as if it were intended to be comfortable. Ladies and gentlemen, I think we are feeding a younger generation the lie that Christianity is intended to be comfortable. It is not! It is intended to be revolutionary. That means, the breaking up of hard soil; the yielding of cluttered corners where there are weeds, so that He is allowed to take them away. That is difficult. It may even be painful.

The problem with the impulsive person is that there is no depth. “Holy Bible” is simply a term.

I recently read a book by Gary Inrig, who pastors in Canada. He told a story of his son, who I think has the perception of so many of us concerning the word of God, which is that it is just a term.

Gary was driving down the street with his son, Stephen, in the back seat. Stephen would see something interesting and say, “Holy cow, Dad, look at that!”

Every time Stephen saw something, he would say this. I dread the day my boys get to that point, they will say, right in the middle of a church service, “Holy cow, Dad!”

Gary was driving along and decided that was enough of that expression. So, he stopped the car, turned around to face his son, and said, “Son, you need to understand that we don’t use the word ‘Holy’ before anything that’s not related to God.”

His little pre-school aged son said, “Oh, Dad, you mean like the Bible because that’s God’s word?”

His father kind of swelled up with pride. Gary thought, “My son is so perceptive!” He said, “Yes, son, that’s right!”

So, Gary started driving down the street again. In a couple of minutes, he heard from the back of the car, “Holy Bible, Dad, look at that!”

It was just a term and he did not know how it fit in. I think that is the way we are – we hear the word and we do not know how it correlates because it never goes down and takes root. There is no depth.

3. There is a third potential response to the sowing of the word, and that is with a preoccupied heart. There is no growth.

I think this is the area that most of us, as believers, get tripped up. Look at Mark 4:18-19.

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of

the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

There are three things that cloud our hearts, as this text makes clear. They are:

- the worries of the world;
- the attraction of affluence;
- the magnetism of materialism.

You may be thinking, “Well, wait a second! I have cares; I have difficulties and worries. And there are things that I need.”

Yes, there are. However, I think the key thought is the word “preoccupation”. In other words, if you sum up the net worth of your entire living, it is for things of the world. So, you cannot hear the word because you are preoccupied by the world.

That is the problem with this individual who hears the word. It gets into the soil, and it goes down and takes root, but it can never come up because it is choked by the cares of the world.

4. The fourth potential response to the sowing of the word is with a responsive heart. That is the good soil.

Notice Mark 4:20.

And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

You should underline the words “hear,” “accept it,” and “bear fruit”. In bold contrast to the other soils is this fertile stuff. This is the kind of soil that will hear the word as it is sown on it. It allows it to penetrate. It allows it to take root. And, it allows it to come up and bear fruit.

Let me give several suggestions as to why this occurs; why these individuals bear fruit. These are from the text and you underlined the words.

- First, these are people who hear the word.
- Secondly, these are people who receive the word.

Now, you and I speak very glibly about receiving. We receive Christ. We receive a parking ticket. We receive a half a pound of hamburger at the grocery store. We receive forgiveness.

However, the word in the Greek is “dechomai,” which means that we receive with a warm reception.

It is almost as if we say, “Oh, here you are, I’ve been waiting for you.” It is the idea of a warm reception, “I can’t wait to receive.”

So, we hear the word and it is as if we cannot wait to take it in. There is a sense of anticipation.

I fear that many times we perhaps, lead our younger ones astray by glibly talking about receiving Christ into our hearts. Sometimes they do not understand. I, in fact, just finished reading Dr. James Dobson’s latest book, *Parenting Isn’t For Cowards*, and it is fascinating. You should read it, if you have children.

The book tells a fascinating story of a mother who was teaching her little daughter the truth about receiving Christ. She was trying to get into all the doctrinal content and hoping that her little child would understand. I think her daughter was four years of age. So, finally, she said, “You see, Honey, when I accepted Christ, I received Him into my heart. He came to live inside of me.”

At this, the little girl put her ear to her mother’s stomach and became very quiet. The Mom asked, “Honey, what are you doing?”

She said, “I’m listening for Jesus.”

The mother thought, “Now, isn’t that great. She’s perceptive. She’s picking it up.”

So, she allowed her daughter to listen for about two or three minutes. Finally, she asked, “Well, what do you hear?”

The young daughter replied, “It sounds like He’s making a pot of coffee.”

That is fascinating. When we think in terms of receiving Christ, who comes to live inside, it is much more than opening a little red box and allowing a little Christ to come to live inside and we are safe. No. This is an experience that is to revolutionize us from the inside out. We receive the word warmly.

- Thirdly, these are people who practice the word; who bring forth fruit.

They hear the word, they receive the word, and they practice the word. That is the kind of net result that will come from having good soil. That is the spiritual aspect of a productive person.

Application

Now, by way of application, how can the garden of my life produce fruit? Let me give three ways.

1. First, and I think this has been obvious from this passage of scripture, we must be open.

The gate to the garden of my life cannot be locked. Jesus Christ will not get on some bulldozer and crash through and say, "Okay, I'm planting seed. Take it or leave it."

Jesus will never do that. He wants to walk through a gate that has already been swung open.

So, you and I have to be open.

2. Secondly, we need to be eager.

I believe the Spirit of God can sense hesitation. I think that He senses in your heart and in my heart, at different times, a reluctance to receive the word.

You might say, "This must not be for me. This is a little too threatening."

He senses that and because He will not force you, He backs off.

So we have to be eager, "dechomai", we need to receive warmly. As we would receive our best friend into our home, we need to receive the word into our lives.

We need to be open. We need to be eager.

3. Thirdly, we need to be available.

I think, as any good farmer, Jesus Christ wants to invade every square inch of the garden in your life and my life. Every odd corner, every piece of ground, every piece of dirt, He wants to turn over, He wants to fertilize, He wants to water. Jesus wants to produce fertility in you and me, so that we can bear spiritual fruit. But, we have to be available.

I also think Christ has to have free management. He needs to be able to plant whatever He wants to plant. If He says, "Listen, I want to produce the fruit of patience in you."

"Okay, Lord. I know what that means – difficulty."

"I want to produce the character of holiness in you."

"Okay. I know what that means."

We need to allow Jesus, if we are going to give Him the garden of our lives, to have full management; to have it all. That means that He can plant whatever He wants to plant. That also means, when He sees a weed, He can yank it out.

"Hey, that's going to hurt."

You bet it will. In fact, Hebrews 12:11 says it perfectly.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The point of this parable is simply, "Are you allowing the word of God to be sown on the soil of your life?"

If so, are you allowing the word of God to penetrate; to get inside? Are you allowing it to go down and take root? Are you allowing it to grow up and produce spiritual fruit?

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