

“The Soil, The Seed, & The Sower”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 10

Mark 4:1-20

Introduction: Please take your Bible with me and turn to Mark 4, Mark chapter 4.

The day for liberation had finally come. The excitement was palpable as the Israelites gathered in tribes and started marching out of Egypt. God had miraculously brought His people out from under the powerful hand of Pharaoh of Egypt. God led the people by a cloud by day and by a pillar of fire by night and he took them deep into the wilderness. The absence of the Israelites caused the hard heart of Pharaoh to be hardened all the more and so he raced with his army into the wilderness to re-capture God's people. By Divine Design Pharaoh overtook the Israelites as they encamped near the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army was behind them and the sea was in front of them – there was no way of escape. The people cried out their complaints against God, but God had not brought them to this point to allow them to be slaughtered, but rather to save them in miraculous ways. As the army of Pharaoh approached the cloud that was in front of the Israelites moved to be behind the Israelites and it created a barrier between God's people and God's enemy. Exodus 14:20 tells us that the cloud was darkness to God's enemies and light to God's people so that the two camps did not come near each other all night long.

This cloud that was darkness to God's enemy and light to God's people is similar to the parables that Jesus spoke during his earthly ministry. In Mark 4 we have almost a whole chapter of Jesus' teaching through parables. This is a significant thing in the book of Mark because most of Mark's account of Jesus' life is given to us through the actions, miracles, and his encounters with others, not the content of his teaching. Mark only has two major sections in his Gospel where he records for us the content of Jesus' teaching – here in chapter 4 and again in chapter 13. And so, the content of chapter 4 is significant to help us understand the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And what we see in these first 20 verses is that he teaches the large crowd through parables and then upon request he explains the parable to those who are truly His disciples. In essence what Jesus is doing is what the cloud did in Exodus 14 – he is giving light to His people through the parables and he is clouding His message from those who have already made their rejection of His message known.

In this particular parable Jesus is giving his editorial comments on the situation surrounding his ministry. Remember that Jesus has come to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. But his ministry and message have not resonated with the religious elite of the day because they expected a different type of Messiah who would bring a different type of Kingdom message. But this Gospel has also caused an uproarious response from the majority of the common people. They have flocked to see and hear and be healed by Jesus. This Gospel has also alienated those

who were thought to be close to Jesus, namely his own family, while at the same time drawing close to him those who should have been far from him – people like common fishermen and a tax collector and a politically motivated zealot turned disciple of Jesus – to name a few.

We saw last week in chapter 3 that there were 4 general responses to Jesus' ministry and message. And now in chapter 4 Jesus puts in parable form his explanation of the different responses to the Gospel of the Kingdom. To those who are not true followers of Jesus these parables simply served to further darken their lack of understanding, but to those who were true followers these parables helped them understand more of Jesus and his ministry. And so as we approach the text this morning as a church we want to understand more about Jesus and His ministry. We want to comprehend how he ministered his Gospel and what he expected to happen in response to His ministry and message. We want to gain insight from this then about how we are to properly follow in His footsteps. If this is how Jesus handled his message and what he expected in response to it, then this is how we should handle his message and this is what we should expect in response to it.

Let's read 4:1-20. After the clear rejection of Jesus and his message in chapter 3 by the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus went out to the sea and began to teach. The large crowd gathers to him once again and there were so many that Jesus sat in a boat on the sea to more effectively teach the large crowd gathered on the shore.

I. The Parable – vs. 1-9

- a. Verse 2 tells us that he was teaching them many things in parables and so what Mark gives us here is just one of those many parables Jesus spoke on that day. Before Jesus speaks the content of the parable to the crowd he says – “Listen!” Then after he finishes the parable he says again – “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” In other words, lots of people heard him talking that day, but Jesus was not simply interested in having a large crowd listen to him talk. He was not concerned about the event of his teaching as much as he was about the comprehension of his teaching and the changed lives that would result. And so those who heard the parable that day were to listen beyond letting the words hit their ears. This sandwich technique by Mark draws attention to the fact that this listening ear is central to the point of the parable. He calls them before and after to listen to what he says, and yet the parable itself is about those who will listen and those who will not. The listening ear is central to the point of the parable.
- b. In the parable itself Jesus tells of a sower who liberally broadcasts his seed upon the ground. Notice that the sower does not discriminate as to where the seed goes. He is spreading the seed on every type of ground. And so some of the seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it. Some of the seed fell on rocky ground and because there was no depth of soil there the seed sprang up but produced no fruit and eventually withered from the heat of the scorching sun because it had no deep roots to sustain its life. Some of the seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it so that it yielded no grain. And still other

seeds fell into good soil where they then produced fruit – some thirty times, some sixty, and some 100 times.

- c. Notice with me that in verse 4, verse 5, and verse 7 the description of the seed is singular – so Jesus said – other *seed* fell along the path, other *seed* fell on the rocky ground, and other *seed* fell among the thorns. And then notice that in verse 8 the subject switches to plural. So Jesus says, “and other *seeds* fell into good soil.” I think the purpose for the change from singular seed to plural seeds is to point to the great harvest that will take place. The singular seed that fell on each of the bad soils did not bear fruit, but the seeds that fell on the good soil produced an abundant and overwhelming crop. So, this liberal broadcasting of the seed may appear to be a failed plan when you look at where some of the seed fell, but overall the liberal broadcasting of the seed is eventually going to be met with great success because there will be a great harvest.
 - d. Notice also that there is a progression in the seeds. The first seed doesn't even get into the ground but is snatched up by birds and eaten. The second seed begins to grow but then dies for lack of deep roots. The third seed grows among the thorns, but the plant doesn't die, it simply doesn't produce fruit. The seeds that fell on good soil produced plants that lived and produced fruit. And so we see this progression from not even getting into the ground all the way to a great harvest. But while there is this progression from complete loss to complete gain, the first three seeds are of no value at all to the sower because they produce no fruit. But the sower is not a failure because though some seed is lost there is still a great harvest.
 - e. Notice also that there is nothing wrong with the seed. The seed is able to produce fruit in and of itself. It needs the right soil to do so, but that is not a problem within itself, that is a problem with the soil. And remember, that is striking at the point of the parable. Jesus instructed them to listen, and yet, his message and ministry would not be received by all.
- II. The Purpose – vs. 10-13**
- a. This parable then caused some angst among his disciples who truly did want to listen and learn from him, and yet they couldn't make sense of it. They were sure there was more meaning to it than what they saw at first glance. They knew Jesus wasn't just telling a factual story about a common place sower and his seed. They knew he had a deeper intent, but they couldn't figure it out. And so they asked Him when they were alone with him, what he meant by the parable. And so in verses 11-13 we have the middle of the sandwich in which we see into the heart of the purpose for the parable. So verses 11-13 are surrounded on the front end by the parable and on the back end by the explanation of the parable. But here in the middle of the passage Jesus gets to the heart of the purpose of the parable. Before he gives the meaning he is sure to give the purpose in these 3 verses.
 - b. He tells them in verse 11 that they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables. Notice the divine passive here. God has given them something. They have not earned it or secured it

through some intense effort – it has been given to them. They have been given a secret or a mystery. This Greek word “mysterion” points to something that God knows and then shares with mankind through revelation. In other words, it is not something we can search out and find – like a divine game of hide and seek – but rather it is something God gives through revelation. Before Jesus is going to make known to them the point of the parable he wants them to know that they get to know the point because they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God. In other words, by an act of God’s sovereign discretion he has chosen to give them this secret of the kingdom of God. This is not some secret knowledge that you have to be initiated into like the Gnostics taught and believed, but this was revelation about God and about His kingdom that God gave to His disciples. Jesus himself proves to be the central part of this mystery of the kingdom. He was not in any way what most expected the Messiah to be. He was not there to break in upon the political scene and establish a physical kingdom. He came first to bring the Kingdom of God near and then as the King of the Kingdom to lay down His life and pay the sin debt of those who would eventually be in His Eternal Kingdom. The secret of this Kingdom revolved around this Jesus – this very Jesus who had proven to be so polarizing. And yet, to these disciples God had given to them the secret of the Kingdom.

- c. The opposite entity is the group that is outside. Instead of being given the secret to the Kingdom they have been given parables. These parables cloaked the deep truths of God in illustrations that were related to everyday life. And the effect of these parables was to decrease the measure of knowledge to those who were rejecting the knowledge they already had, and to increase the knowledge of those who were responding to the knowledge they had. Jesus then speaks words from the prophet Isaiah to make even clearer the purpose of the parables. So for those outside of Jesus’ disciples everything is spoken in parable so that they in seeing they might see, but yet don’t perceive, and in hearing they might hear, but they don’t understand, lest they might turn and find forgiveness. If they could hear and understand and see and actually perceive what Jesus was saying then there was hope for their repentance and forgiveness. But they were not receiving and they were not understanding and so Jesus teaches them in parables. The Scribes had solidified their rejection of him and the crowds had made known that they were just after what Jesus could do for them in the moment, and so Jesus teaches them in parables because they were not understanding or receiving Him and His teaching. In other words, they were not true hearers, so he cloaks his teaching in parables which will have the effect of giving them what they really want – teaching that proves to be just words to listen to but that they won’t really understand.
- d. So in effect, through parables Jesus is guarding his message from those who don’t care to hear it anyways, but he is also teaching deep truths to those who want to hear it. It really is a brilliant and obviously divine mechanism that only the God-man could use this effectively. Only Jesus could do this!

- e. Notice also the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God must give them the secret of the kingdom, but they are responsible to listen and to hear Jesus' words. This is a tension that Mark simply presents without any attempt to resolve, which I think we would be wise to follow suit. God must open their hearts and their ears to understand, but they must also hear and receive and believe the words of this Jesus. In this sense they are both responsible and this creates a tension from our perspective that is only answered fully in the mind and plans of God.
- f. So, Jesus is giving his teaching through parables and in so doing he is putting a cloud between his enemies and his followers. This cloud is darkness to his enemies and light to his followers. Before Jesus goes on to expound the light of the parable to his followers he chides them for their slowness of understanding in verse 13. His expectations were routinely higher than his disciple's performance. He here laments their lack of seeing the deeper truth of the parable. But though his expectations are higher than their performance he does not let that produce a frustration in his heart that would have then prevented him from telling them the deeper meaning of the parable. Rather, in light of their weakness he goes on in verses 14-20 to make known to them the point of this parable.

III. The Point – vs. 14-20

- a. The point of the parable is simply that the spreading of the Word of God is going to be met with different responses. The sower is sowing the word. In other words, the sower is the one spreading the message of the Gospel. In the immediate context of Mark's book this is Jesus. He has come to the Earth and is ministering among the Jews for this very reason – to sow the Word of the Gospel of the Kingdom. And the sowing of that word will find itself cast upon four different soils.
- b. The seed that fell along the path are like those who will hear the word as it is sown by the sower, but then Satan – like a bird snatching seed off the road – will swoop in and take the seed away lest it take root and bear fruit. So, the first danger to the reception of the word that will bear fruit is the arch enemy of God. He is in the business of thwarting God's message by taking the seed out of the heart as soon as it is spoken into a life. Jesus doesn't elaborate further on what this looks like – so he doesn't tell us how Satan does this, but he simply lets us know that Satan is on the hunt – like a bird looking for food – he is on the hunt to take away the seed of the Gospel from the hearts of people. Again, I don't know how Satan does this, but I have certainly experienced this first hand.
 - i. One of my great joys, and also my great sorrows in pastoral ministry is the preaching of funerals for those in the community. Occasionally I will get a call from one of the funeral homes in town requesting me to officiate a funeral service for a family who doesn't have a pastor, or sometimes through our benevolence fund we will help needy families and when crisis hits their home in the form of death they will sometimes call us to see if we will conduct the funeral service. These opportunities are among my greatest joys in ministry because I get the wonderful privilege of

preaching the Gospel in a moment when people are more prone to listen, and I get to do this to a crowd of people who most certainly don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. However, these opportunities are among my greatest sorrows because I still cannot get my mind around the lack of response to the Gospel that is preached. In the face of the death of their friend or family member they sit there and quietly receive the bad news about sin, death, and eternal damnation that we all face. They then quietly receive the good news about Jesus suffering in our place on the cross, paying our sin debt, and offering us forgiveness and eternal life. And yet, there is often no response of repentance and faith. What sorrow fills my heart as people, lost in their sin and on their way to a Christ-less eternity file past me in the funeral home and cordially thank me for the nice service. Most certainly Satan has been at work in some of those hearts to snatch away the seed of the Word. And this is a heartbreaking reality. This is a great danger to the reception of the Word – Satan snatching away the seed.

- c. The second danger to the reception of the word is illustrated by the seed sown on the rocky soil which is withered up by the scorching sun because it has no root. These are those who gladly receive the word initially, spring up in response, but then when trial and trouble come on account of the word they fall away. This would be the one who in hearing the word of the Gospel would respond with what appears to be genuine faith, but as he starts to take that faith to the rest of his life he meets resistance from family and friends who scorch his new faith with their unbelief and he eventually falls away. Notice that it is an assumed fact by Jesus that just like the sun will burn hot on a plant, so adversity will burn down on the professed believer of Jesus. The nature of following Jesus means that we will face persecution and testing, and if our faith is not genuine we will not survive. Only the plants that have deep roots in Christ will survive the tribulation that comes when following Christ.
- d. The third danger to the reception of the Gospel is illustrated by the seed that falls among the thorns. They are those who hear the word and receive it, but then the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for things other than God and the Gospel overtake the word and choke it out. Notice that the plant is still alive but that it produces no fruit. True followers of Jesus produce fruit. This plant looks like a follower of Jesus, but it doesn't produce fruit because the word is choked out by the concerns of this world. This makes known to us that the concerns and cares of this world are great threats to the word taking root and producing fruit in a life. We live in a physical world and we have physical needs, and God designed it that way. It is not the physical stuff that poses the threat to receiving the word, rather it is our sinful hearts that crave after the stuff because we see in the stuff some hope of fulfillment and lasting pleasure. And yet we all know it to be true that our yearnings are always greater than our earnings. And so it becomes so easy, even for the professing Christian to be enraptured with the consumer orientation of our culture that we crave constantly for the

next thing. And so when we hear the words of Jesus describe a faith in him that will produce the fruit of self-sacrifice for others, it sounds odd and difficult to pursue, and the word gets choked out by the weeds. As one commentator put it – “Those who are satisfied with their level of devotion to God but never satisfied with the abundance of what they already have will never bear a harvest worth taking away.”¹ These are those who are like the seed among the thorns. The word is overcome by the thorns and no fruit is produced.

- e. The contrasting positive to these three negatives is the seed that falls on the good ground. These are like the ones who receive the word and accept it and bear fruit, some thirty fold, some sixty, some one hundred fold. The reception of the word into the good soil is met with a great harvest. The word produces fruit. It is a fruit bearing word. And so, when this fruit bearing word meets the good soil of a listening heart the result is always fruit. Obviously these are those who are true disciples of Jesus. These are those who as Jesus speaks this parable are part of the inside circle – his true disciples. Their reception of the Gospel will prove true by the fruit that the seed of the Gospel produces.
- f. Notice again the nature of the seed and the soil. In Jesus’ explanation of the point of the parable he draws attention to the fruit bearing nature of the seed and the determining nature of the soil. If the heart is receptive – if the ear listens so as to understand – then the seed of the Gospel of the Kingdom will find good soil that will produce an abundant harvest.
- g. And so the ministry of sowing the Gospel of the Kingdom will be met with these four different responses. And most certainly we can look at those around Jesus as he speaks these very words and we can see these four responses put on display. The Scribes had hard, unbelieving hearts like a path and when the seed of the Gospel hit their hearts Satan quickly snatched it away. The large crowd sprang up quickly with great excitement about Jesus and his ministry but because there was not real belief, no deep roots, the scorching sun of the religious leader’s opposition to Jesus squelched the word. Others within his own inner circle – namely Judas – will look like a true plant, but will then produce no fruit as the word is squelched out by the concerns of this world. And yet others within Jesus’ inner circle will go on to prove over the long haul that their hearts were good soil as the word will produce an abundant harvest through them.

IV. The Profit

- a. And so we must ask – what is the profit of this parable to the follower of Christ? Certainly it helped them better understand Jesus and better diagnose the different responses they were seeing to their Lord and His Gospel, but is that all that was intended? Most certainly Jesus was intending to direct his disciples in how they should handle the seed. In fact, in the very next parable which we will look at next week, this mystery is not to be hidden, but to be shared. Soon these very disciples will be commissioned with one thing – make disciples of every nation. They will make disciples by sowing the seed of the word in the world.

¹ David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, pg. 172.

And so this parable makes known to them, and to us how we are to sow and what we are to expect from our sowing. So, how does this parable inform your life as a follower of Jesus Christ today? What should change or be evaluated in your life because of this text?

b. Sow Liberally

i. Well, the first thing that we can learn from this parable is that we must sow liberally. Our tendency when it comes to the Gospel and to sharing it with others is to try to pick our moments just right. We would prefer to market the Gospel rather than sow the seed. We would rather run logistics on the community around us and identify our target market so that we then strategically craft church programs to draw in those types of people we deem most likely to respond to the message. This is not what Jesus did. He sowed the word liberally, and he expects the same of us. Evangelism is not about hitting the target market at the right time and in the right way. The Church is not Wal-Mart trying to sell TV's and make a profit. The church has been given a message that is to be thrown on the hearts of all those around us. We must be less like marketing strategists, and more like Jesus when it comes to our evangelism. Who among us hasn't seen someone and thought – wow there is no way they would ever respond to the Gospel? Listen – this is not for us to decide. It is not our responsibility to figure out who will best receive the message. It is our responsibility to put it out there so that they can receive the message. Sow the seed liberally.

c. Have Informed Expectations

i. In sowing the seed liberally we must also have informed expectations. The reality is – not everyone is going to receive the seed and bear fruit. There are four types of soil here and so we must know that the seed we sow will fall on all four types. Our hope is that it always falls on the good soil and that God then produces fruit through this fruit bearing word. But this doesn't always happen. Sometimes the seed is snatched up by Satan. Sometimes it is scorched by trial and trouble, and sometimes it is crowded out by the cares and concerns of life. The response to the Gospel is not our concern. We have not been given the responsibility of the soil, but the responsibility of the seed. So we must broadcast the seed widely and constantly, and we must leave the results to God.

ii. For indeed is this not what the Scriptures say?

1. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor. 3:6-7 ESV)

iii. We do not cause the growth. It is not our well-crafted presentation of the Gospel that will win the soul. It is not our unbelievable display of self-sacrificial love that will finally convince our neighbor of their need for Christ. It is not our well-timed words or our bold witness that will bring our co-worker to faith. It is not our persistent life of faith that will finally

yield fruit in the life of our family member. It is not even our prayers for these people that will ultimately be responsible for their faith. It is God who gives the increase. We are nothing, just like Paul and Apollos and Peter and John and James were nothing. We are simply the broadcasters of the seed – the farmers seeking a harvest. But if God doesn't work to change the soil of the heart then the blind will never see, the lost will never be found, and the seed will never produce a harvest.

- iv. But – praise be to God – he does work to change hearts and so we can be confident that He will give the increase. God is the Lord of the Harvest and Jesus has promised to build His Church through this fruit bearing seed of the Gospel. This harvest doesn't always come like we expect, nor does it happen in our time frame. But it will come. The seed we cast upon the hearts of men is a fruit bearing seed. The Lord will bring the increase!
- v. The harvest is not dependent on us. We are not called to be successful – only faithful. The seed will be successful. Some workers in the field will have to labor longer and harder than others, but the seed of the Gospel will bear fruit. As we evaluate our own lives here I think we probably see our lack of broadcasting the seed. When was the last time we shared the Gospel, or even some of the key concepts of the Gospel with someone who needed to hear? Why don't we share more? Why don't we sow the seed liberally? Isn't it because, at least in part, we don't have informed expectations? We expect results the first time or right away and when that doesn't happen we lose interest and put effort into things that yield immediate profit. Doesn't this put on display our lack of faith in the seed and in the Lord of the harvest? Isn't the crux of the issue really that we don't believe the Lord of the harvest will take this fruit bearing seed and bring forth fruit in the hearts of men and women and children in our life? If we have informed expectations – realizing that there will be all kinds of responses to the Gospel – realizing that the seed we bear will bring forth fruit in the lives of some – realizing that our job is not success but faithfulness – will we not then be rightly motivated to liberally broadcast the seed into all kinds of hearts and put our faith in the Lord of the harvest to bring forth fruit? We must so liberally with informed expectations.

d. Evaluate Your Soil

- i. We must also evaluate our soil. We have to be careful here because the parable itself doesn't call people to evaluate their soil – at least not directly. But the context of the book of Mark and the ministry of Jesus does. The reality of actual soil – the dirt that our farmers work – that soil cannot change itself. If it is rocky – it will remain rocky unless someone removes the rocks. If it is full of thorns it will remain thorny unless someone sprays herbicide. If it is a well-worn path it will not change unless someone plows it under. Soil cannot change itself. The human heart cannot change itself either, but the Lord of the harvest is at work to

change human hearts. And so do not read this parable and hear in it a unchangeable sentence. If a person responds to the Gospel in one of the first three ways, that does not mean that they will then never respond the fourth way. Just think within Jesus' own ministry for proof of this. Members of the Pharisees eventually had hearts that were turned from bad soil to good – namely Nicodemus. Members of Jesus' own family eventually had hearts that were turned from bad soil to good as his half-brother James became a leader in the Early Church that bore incalculable fruit.

- ii. And so, do not give up on those who respond one way or the other to the Gospel – for God may still be working on them to bring forth fruit at some point. But also, we must evaluate our own soil. For within the inner group each of them struggled with having their faith snuffed out by the cares and concerns of this world. On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested all eleven of his disciples scattered because they were concerned for their own skin. Judas himself denied Jesus and proved his faith was not real, though it had looked real from the outside.
- iii. What type of soil has the seed of the Gospel found in your heart? Are you in danger of falling away because your roots of faith don't run deep and the pressures brought into your life because of this Gospel are about to scorch your faith? Are you in danger of being snuffed out by the weeds around you so that your plant produces no fruit? Are you so comfortable with your devotion to God and yet constantly restless with the current level of your physical possessions? This is surely a sign that the soil of your heart is full of thorns. Please do not misunderstand me here – I am not saying that you must persevere and bear fruit so as to guarantee your salvation – but I am saying that perseverance and bearing fruit are hallmarks of true faith. What does the soil of your heart look like? Let's pray!

Benediction: 1 Peter 1:23