

Parable of the Soils¹
Mark 4:1-20
ABC 10/30/22

Today we come to a shift in Jesus' teaching ministry as we begin Mk 4. As you remember, his family or friends had come in an attempt to take Him back to Nazareth to protect Him from Himself. Then He'd been accused by the scribes of being in cahoots with Beelzebub, to which He issued a solemn warning against unforgivable blasphemy. Finally, He'd proclaimed the shocking fact that His true mother & brothers weren't His earthly relations, but His true family is **whoever does the will of God** (3:35). It's been a long day for Jesus, & according to Matthew, the day isn't over (13:1). That afternoon He left the house in Capernaum & went back to the shore of the Sea of Galilee to teach. Let's look at the setting in **4:1-2**.

The crowd was so great that Jesus was forced to teach from a boat. The picture we have is of a vast multitude sitting on the rising shore of the sea of Galilee,² facing Jesus, who was sitting in the boat in the traditional rabbinical teaching position, speaking in parables. A parable is a story from a real-life situation from which a spiritual truth is drawn. Up to this point Jesus has been preaching the gospel clearly (Mk 1:14-15). Now He starts using parables for the purpose of withholding truth about Himself & the kingdom of God from some while revealing more truth to others. His explanation of the parables is always given to the disciples & never to the crowds or religious leaders. As Jesus surveyed the multitude, He was aware that a whole range of hearing & understanding were represented. Some were coming to faith, like the disciples. Others were hardened in their unbelief, like the scribes & Pharisees. Jesus wanted all of them to listen with receptive hearts so He begins with, **Listen to this!** (3). This is a strong word, a command, which underscores the importance of what He's about to say. This kind of hearing goes beyond the ear & affects the heart, prompting obedience.³ Jesus was going to give them a parable, which if listened to & understood would result in their opening themselves to life, true life, abundant life. The parable drew upon an agricultural image they were all familiar with: a man with a seed bag, walking

¹ Sermon on this parable from Matthew on 3/1/20 can be found here: <https://www.ashlandbiblechurch.com/parables-of-jesus.html>

² D. Edmond Hiebert, *Mark*, p 98, says the cove between Capernaum & the mouth of the Jordan, where the beach rises rather rapidly from the water which is quite deep within a few yards from shore, may have provided the needed natural amphitheater with acoustics adequate for the occasion.

³ RC Sproul, *Mark*, electronic edition

his field & rhythmically casting the seed. As Jesus tells the story, several things become clear: 1st, nothing is said about the sower & his skill. The sower isn't identified because he represents anyone who distributes the seed, who shares the gospel. The difference between the seed that bears a harvest & the seed that doesn't has nothing to do with the sower or his method of scattering seeds. 2nd, nothing is said about the quality of the seed. The seed that survives & bears fruit is the same kind of seed that doesn't. In Jesus' explanation of the parable He says the seed is **the word** (14), the **message of the kingdom** in Mt (13:19), & Lk says it's **the word of God** (8:11). So if the seed & sower aren't the main point, what is? The soils, which are a picture of the human heart. Jesus highlights 4 kinds of hearts in varying degrees of receptivity to the gospel. The heart is where the seed of God's Word ought to take root. What makes the soils distinct from each other is whether they're in a suitable condition for producing fruit or not. The point? A person's response to the Word of God is dependent on the condition of their heart. Furthermore, fruit is the only evidence a heart has heard the Word rightly.

The story is simple. A farmer is scattering seed in anticipation of a harvest. As he spreads his seed, some falls on the roadside & the birds fly down & steal it away. He hurls again, & it lands on rocky soil, where it quickly sprouts, only to wilt under the sun. He casts in another direction, & it falls among thorns, where it's choked out & can't grow to maturity. Other seed, cast on good soil, marvelously multiplies 30, 60, & 100 times. End of parable (3-8). Then Jesus repeats, **He who has ears to hear, let him hear** (9). Jesus longed for His hearers to understand this parable. But not everyone had ears to hear. Some understood, but many were perplexed. The meaning of the parable would only be revealed to those whose hearts were ready to receive it; for the rest it was an unsolvable riddle. Some of His followers were in the dark themselves. Vs 10 tells us the disciples & other true followers asked Him about the parable. Jesus responded with one of His hard sayings.

11-12

What did Jesus mean by this? Mt's account sheds some light: **whoever has, to him more shall be given, & he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, & while**

hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand (13:12-13). Jesus was saying the condition of one's heart determines its receptivity to truth. The scribes had originally been given straightforward teaching, which they rejected, & thus they could ultimately lose the possibility of hearing & understanding the truth. Those who reject truth will ultimately lose what they have. The parables were full of wonderful truth, but for those who wouldn't listen, it was meaningless.

We can imagine what different people in Jesus' audience might have thought when He taught this parable with no explanation. The farmer thought, *He's telling me I have to be more careful in the way I cast my seed. I guess I've been wasting an awful lot.* The politician thought, *He's telling me I need to begin an education program to help farmers more efficiently cast their seed. This will be a big boost in my reelection campaign.* The reporter thought, *He's telling me that there is a big story here about the bird problem and how it affects the farming community. That's a great idea for a series in the paper.* The salesman thought, *He's encouraging me in my fertilizer sales. Why, I could help that farmer more than he knows if he only used my product.* Without ears to hear, it was just a story. The followers of Jesus possessed the ears to hear, & Jesus willingly explained the meaning to them. Jesus asked His followers, **Do you not understand this parable?** Clearly they didn't. He continued, **How will you understand all the parables?** (13). By asking that 2nd question, Jesus motivated them to listen carefully as He explained its meaning. As Jesus' indicates, understanding this parable was important to understand His other parables. If they couldn't comprehend these basic truths, they wouldn't be able to grasp later truths that built on this foundation. It was also critical for Jesus' disciples to understand why His message was being rejected by so many. They, too, would be sowers of the gospel & would experience similar responses. Yet, their evangelistic efforts wouldn't be in vain. Though not all would listen, some would, & those who responded in faith would bear abundant fruit.⁴ Alone with His followers, Jesus graciously explained the parable to them.

1. The Seed on the Road: Hard Hearts Jesus began with the seed cast on the pathway. **15**

⁴ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, pp 198-199

The farmers' fields there & then were often long, narrow, winding strips divided by paths which became as hard as bricks by those who used them.³ The seeds just bounced on these paths which represent the hardened hearts of those who hear God's Word & ignore it. They've so hardened themselves that nothing of God's truth moves them. Life for them may be no more than their job, hobbies, & entertainments. They may be morally upright, but there's no interest in God whatsoever. Life is crowded with other things. The gospel will lie there & be trampled or eaten by birds. It doesn't sink in & the birds (which Jesus compares to the devil or his workers) soon eat it. This is the most hopeless of all the conditions Jesus portrays. Unbelief & a love of sin have made this heart a rock-like environment where truth can't penetrate, much less take root. The hearer is oblivious, hopeless, & spiritually dead. In Luke's account we read, **Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes & takes away the word from their heart, so they will not believe & be saved** (8:12). That explains the goal of the sower. He wants people to **believe & be saved**.

What is it that makes the human heart hard? Sin. Sin hardens the heart & the heart that's hardened sins even more. This type of person is described in Rom 1. It's a determined opposition to the nature of God Himself, which Paul describes as **ungodliness & unrighteousness** (18). What's interesting is that Jesus isn't describing atheists. He's speaking to people in a highly religious society, & the hardest hearts in His audience are the religious elite, the scribes & Pharisees, those who'd blasphemed the Holy Spirit, cutting themselves off from God's grace. Their sin shows the ultimate in hard-heartedness. How does the devil snatch the Word of God away from a heart? He has many devices & we shouldn't be ignorant of them (2 Cor 2:11).

As the truth bounces around on the surface of these lives, Satan comes with a fluttering, chirping interest, some exciting entertainment perhaps, & flies away with the life-giving seed. This ground needs to be broken up. Often the plowing that's needed is some pain, stress, or trial to soften that hardened surface to the importance of God's truth. This is how God's grace came to some of our lives, isn't it? Life's hardships made you ready to trust God. Difficulties made you quit your

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, pp 91-92

busyness & the Word of God fell powerfully into the plowed ground of your lives. Let us pray this for ourselves & for our hardened friends.

2. The Seed on Rocky Places: Shallow Hearts Next, Jesus explained about the seed sown in rocky places. **16-17**

In Israel, some of the land is a thin 2 or 3-inch veneer of soil over a bedrock of limestone. When the seed falls here & it sprouts with new growth. But then the sun beats down, the plant's roots meet the bedrock, & it withers & dies. The roots can't get past the rock. For a while, the crop might look healthy & full of potential, but when the sun comes out & the water is gone, it quickly dies. This illustrates a shallow-hearted person who responds immediately to the gospel, but only superficially. Many people fit this description. Their shallow hearts are attracted to the benefits of the gospel. They hear the gospel & make a profession of faith. But then some difficulty arises & just as suddenly they fall away. Jesus says this person **receives the gospel with joy** (Mt 13:20). But all that enthusiasm hides the fact that there is no root. Their belief is temporary. This isn't true faith because it's superficial & doesn't persevere through difficulties. Jesus said, **If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine** (Jn 8:31). Heb 3:14 says, **we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end**. Paul said you can know you're truly reconciled to God **if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established & steadfast, & not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard** (Col 1:23). Those whose faith is temporary hear the gospel & respond quickly but superficially. Maybe they have some selfish motive, thinking Jesus will fix their problems or make life easy. There can even be lots of activity at 1st. Which leads others to think it's a true conversion. But an outburst of joy isn't the distinguishing feature of true conversion. Joy is a good & appropriate response, but, as Jesus makes clear, joy can accompany false conversion. It doesn't ultimately matter how much enthusiasm the shallow hearer shows in their initial response to God's Word. If it's a shallow conviction with no real roots, that person will eventually fall away. & when that happens, it proves, that in spite of their joy, they never truly believed. As John says, **they went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would**

be shown that they all are not of us (1 Jn 2:19). We've all seen this tragically happen. A German theologian aptly says:

There is nothing more cheering than transformed Christian people & there is nothing more disintegrating than people who have been merely "brushed" by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth & no rootage. Therefore, they fall when the 1st whirlwind comes along. It is the half-Christians who always flop in the face of the 1st catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality & their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test. So even that which they think they have is taken away from them.

This is the wood from which the anti-Christians too are cut. They are almost always former half-Christians. A person who lets Jesus only halfway into his heart is far poorer than a 100% worldling. He does not get the peace that passes all understanding & he also loses the world's peace, because his naivete has been taken from him.⁶

Certainly, authentic faith involves great emotion. But true faith is also a matter of the mind & will. True belief involves all of the person, who weathers affliction & even persecution.

3. The Seed on Thorny Soil: Divided Heart Next Jesus explained the image of the sower casting his seed among the thorns. **18-19**

Here the thorns aren't visible because they've been burned or scraped off the surface, but their roots are intact. When the seed is sown on this soil, the thorns also sprout & grow quickly, choking out the grain before it can produce any fruit. The thorns, Jesus explained, represent **the worries of the world, & the deceitfulness of riches, & the desires for other things** (19). This portrays a divided heart, one with mixed loyalties. This heart makes some gesture toward Jesus, but *the distractions of this age*, draw it back. It's pulled in other directions, leaving no room for spiritual concerns. **The deceitfulness of riches** draws them away. Those who fit this category (like the shallow-soil hearers) may seem to respond positively at 1st. The analogy suggests there will likely be some initial sign of receptivity. Seed sown among weeds does sprout. This isn't a hard-hearted unbeliever or a shallow, emotional person. This time the soil itself is OK. But there are impurities in it. I'm not a gardener but I've noticed that weeds always grow faster than what it is I planted. The Word of God is a foreigner in such a heart. Weeds & thorns own that ground. The values of this world choke the truth of God's Word. The stress in Matthew is on the worldly hearer's love of money: **The**

⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father*, p 57

deceitfulness of wealth choke the word & it becomes unfruitful (13:22). Writing to Timothy, Paul said,

those who want to get rich fall into temptation & a snare & many foolish & harmful desires which plunge men into ruin & destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, & some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith & pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Tim 6:9–10).

Nothing is more hostile to the truth of the gospel than love for the riches & pleasures of this world. To those whose goal is to spend their life on worldly pleasures, Js 4:4 says, **do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.** John condemned worldliness with equal severity. He wrote, **Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 Jn 2:15).** Did he mean it's a sin to enjoy the outdoors or possessions or good food or friends? Of course not. He's talking about the values & vices of this world, everything in the world's hatred toward God: **all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, & the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world (16).** That's what the weeds & thorns in the parable represent: selfishness, sinful desires, & the unholy belief system that dominates this world. Values like this suffocate the truth of God's Word in these hearts. This is a divided heart. It's like the heart of the girl to which a young man once proposed.

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 a Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart. She thought for a minute & then replied, I love you with all my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown.⁷

A heart which is overcome with a love for riches & the things of this world is not a believing heart. **No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one & love the other, or he will be devoted to one & despise the other. You cannot serve God & wealth (Mt 6:24).** Many began well & often looked like believers, but the love of the world strangles all remnants of Christianity from their lives.

⁷ Walter Underwood, *The Contemporary 12*, pp 86-87

Here's what the roadside hearer, shallow hearer, & worldly hearer all have in common: They **bring no fruit to maturity** (Lk 8:14). The whole purpose of farming is to produce a crop. Soil that fails to produce a harvest is of no value.

4. The Seed in the Good Soil: Fruitful Heart Finally, there's the good soil in which the seed brings forth fruit. Jesus said, 20.

This is the heart that **hears the word & understands it** (Mt 13:23). This soil is a symbol of those who **hear the word & accept it & bear fruit**. He's describing someone with a heart so well prepared that when they hear the gospel, they receive it with understanding & true faith. The truth of God's Word takes deep root in them. Neither Satan nor the world can thwart the saving effect of the gospel when it's deposited in a heart prepared by God to receive it. The phrase Luke uses, they **hold it fast, & bear fruit with perseverance** (8:15), suggests a tenacious hold on the truth & perseverance in the faith. Perseverance with fruit is a sign of genuine, saving faith in Jesus. This is one of the key lessons of the whole parable: the mark of true faith is fruitful endurance. How much fruit will they produce? Matthew & Mark both say, although in reverse order, some 100 fold, some 60, & some 30 (Mt 13:23; Mk 4:20). While Jesus is clearly teaching what we know from experience, that Christians are not all equally fruitful, He's suggesting that an abundance of fruit is the result of faith. The spiritual fruit in our lives should be obvious & not so scarce that it's hard to find. After all, we're **created in Christ Jesus for good works** (Eph 2:10). Fruitfulness is the expected outcome of saving faith. The seed of God's Word doesn't bounce off the surface of this heart. It doesn't momentarily flourish only to shrivel under adversity. It isn't divided by its competing desires & strangled. It's a heart that allows God's Word to take deep root in it. It produces a harvest of supernatural fruit & good works (Gal 5:22-23; Eph 2:10).

The hearing & reception of God's Word is a mystery, & in this parable Jesus has given us insight into what's going on. He's given us this truth to straighten out the confusion about what true hearing really is & to stress its importance. He Himself is the Word, & as such He's the ultimate communication from God. **The Word became flesh, & dwelt among us...** (Jn 1:14). Jesus conveys to us the love of the triune God. He, by His death, tells us that we aren't only loved, but in need of

His atoning blood because we are sinners. Is He communicating with you? Are you listening? Right now, the most important thing is that we listen to Him & receive His Word. It's each of our duties to have a prepared heart, ready to **in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save our souls** (Js 1:21) & then nurture that seed to full fruitfulness.

John Piper suggests 3 ways to resist Satan's efforts to defeat the Word of God as you hear it.

1. Prepare the Soil of Your Heart Vs 20 says that good soil is the key to a fruitful hearing of the Word. Therefore, we must devote some time Saturday night & Sunday morning to prepare your heart for hearing the Word of God. The more you take time to humble yourself & purify your heart in prayer & tune the receiver of your mind into the wavelength of Jesus, the more powerfully you'll hear the Word & the more deeply you'll worship. Don't play into the hands of Satan by staying up so late Saturday night that you can't stay awake on Sunday. He constantly lies to you telling you that what you're doing Saturday night is more important than being rested to give your best ear to God's Word on Sunday morning. Don't play into his hands by letting sports or hobbies set the agenda for your Sunday. Read a Psalm or the passage going to be preached & pray that God would speak to you. I believe that if we as a church formed the habit of conscientiously preparing our hearts for hearing God's Word, He would speak with such power that amazing changes would come into our lives for God's glory & for our joy. Resolve to take time for meditation & prayer & solitude so that the soil of your heart is prepared for the Word of God.

2. Listen with All Your Might to the Word of God Remember, the Word is in the fellowship, in the hymns, & in the prayers, not just in the sermon. Focusing attention on the Word of God is hard work for us sinners. Add to that Satan's opposition to our paying attention. If we come with no resolve to work at listening & fight against Satan, we'll be fair game for the birds along the path. They will pluck up the seed & we'll leave week after week with no power to bear fruit. Focus on the content of what's played during the prelude. Focus on the words of the call to worship & the prayers & the hymns. Focus on God during the praise & worship. Pray to God whenever there is a non-directed moment. Go hard after God. Don't coast in worship. As Jesus said, **He who has ears to**

hear, let him hear (9). Strive to have those ears & not to be among those who hearing do not hear & seeing do not see.

3. In the Act of Hearing, Welcome the Word of God All the attention in the world will be of no avail if the message heard from God is rejected. Set your mind to be open to the Word of God, even if it's demanding. This doesn't mean listening uncritically. Jesus didn't want mindless assent. Neither do I. The admonition is this: when the word of Scripture stands forth plainly, welcome it. Have a receptive attitude, not a resistant one. Love the Word of God. Be like a miser in search of gold & silver. Snatch up the Word of God as precious pearls. Be like rich black farmland, deeply plowed, free of thorns, free of rocks, moist from the rains of the Spirit, & then receive the power-packed seed of the Word of God. As we do so, our church will overflow with fruit. May God destroy the work of the devil & make us a fruitful people by his Word.⁵

Here's the problem: We can't accomplish this by ourselves. We're already hopelessly sinful. We're fallen, guilty reprobates with shallow, weedy, rebellious hearts. Left to ourselves we'd just grow harder. Every exposure to the light would bake the hardness in even more, until we became as impervious to God's Word as a sidewalk is to grass seed (Rom 8:7-8). Only God Himself can plow & prepare a heart to receive the Word. He does it through the regenerating & sanctifying work of His Holy Spirit, who convicts **the world concerning sin, & concerning righteousness, & concerning judgment** (Jn 16:8). For those who believe, He awakens them spiritually (Rom 8:11) & enlightens their minds to the truth (1 Cor 2:10). He washes them clean, removes the stony heart & gives them a new heart. He indwells His people & motivates them into righteousness (Ezek 36:25-27). He engraves the truth of God on their hearts (Jer 31:33; 2 Cor 3:3), & pours the love of God into their hearts (Rom 5:5). We who believe in Jesus are totally dependent on the indwelling Spirit's work in our hearts to keep us tender, receptive, & ultimately fruitful. It's only the open heart that receives the gospel message & is saved. Not the hard heart. Not the shallow heart. Not the strangled heart. Which leads to this most important question: Do you have an open heart? Are you receptive to God's truth? Have you allowed God's Word to grow into your life so that you've turned from sin,

⁵ Piper, *ibid*

placed your faith in Jesus, & allowed the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in your life? Like David, pray, **Create in me a clean heart, O God, & renew a steadfast spirit within me** (Ps 51:10). Approach God with faith & submission, allowing Him to do the necessary work in your heart that you can't do. What is the soil of your heart? In all probability, there are some here that one of the 1st 3 soils represent. If that's you, let the Holy Spirit work within your heart right now. Just because you may have a hard, rocky, or thorny heart, it doesn't mean it has to stay that way. Let the seed of His gospel take root in your heart & life. Study His claims in His Word with an open heart & see what He has done for you.

Jesus clearly said, **unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God...** (Jn 3:3). He also told His disciples, **No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him** (Jn 6:44). Paul says, **you were dead in your trespasses and sins.... by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God** (Eph 2:1, 8). The good soil is good because of the supernatural work on the soul by God the Holy Spirit. The only people who embrace the Word of God are those who have 1st been changed by the Holy Spirit, making them able to receive the Word of God. The Holy Spirit has to change a person's heart before he'll ever say yes to Jesus. That's the power of the Sower. He prepares the soil to receive the seed of His Word. For this reason, we say salvation is of the Lord, & to Him alone belongs the glory.⁶

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, pp 78–79