

Mark 4:1-20
Four Soils

This parable has special meaning for me because it was the first real individual follow up input I had after becoming a Christian in late May 1974.

A grad student sat down with me and went over this parable with me.

The ONLY parable to appear in all three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is so important that Jesus says v. 13 **“Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?”** There is something about this parable that makes it the key to all the others.

Mark 1:1-20

1 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. 2 And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching,

3 “Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. 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. 6 And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 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.” 9 And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

10 As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. 11 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,

12 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.”

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

14 The sower sows the word. 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. 16 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; 17 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. 18 And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, 19 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. 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.”

Friends, DIRT MATTERS

If you've ever had a garden or done farming, you know that the dirt matters in the fruitful growth of your seeds.

I did a parallel passage last July in which I focused on some broader aspects of the parable. There is a mystery or secret in this, as Jesus describes in v 11. This odd reference to Isa 6:9-10 is placed in the middle of this passage, so it is worth another look.

Why the cryptic introduction and passage from Isa? 6:9-10
HARD SAYINGS OF THE BIBLE – Dr. Walter Kaiser et al

Is God intending to make it hard for the people to believe and repent?

No indeed; **if that impression is given, it is simply due to the Hebrew tendency to express a consequence as though it were a purpose.** Isaiah volunteers to be God's messenger to his people, and God takes him at his word, but says to him in effect, **Go and deliver my message, but don't expect them to pay any attention to it. The effect of your preaching will be their persistent refusal to accept what you say, to the point where they will have rendered themselves incapable of accepting it.**

From a certain spiritual perspective, it is a mystery that those who hear the word of the kingdom of God would be so opposed or indifferent to it. YET, we all know that experience because that is how we are at birth. We come into this world bent toward wanting to be God, to be in control.... Just do nursery duty or teach children's church to see that on display. And then hang out with teens and adults to have it confirmed.

It seems odd to believers that someone wouldn't want to embrace Christ just as it seems odd to unbelievers that anyone would. Thus, the mystery. How could the message of a man who was doing so much good – healing and delivering from bondage- get such a variety of responses?

The reality that we need a savior, not just an example, is disturbing to our self-salvation strategies.

The experience of Isaiah is repeated by Jesus. There was an initial excitement that gave way to unbelief. The same Isa 6 passage is repeated in Jn 12 and Acts 28 to reinforce the sense of the OT original text that despite all that God does, many will remain obstinate and hard-hearted.

According to Dr.Kaiser et al the Hebrew and Aramaic word for 'parable' might also mean 'riddle'.

Among those who heard Jesus teach were those who were receptive, and there were those who were hard of hearing. A parable or a riddle may have served to catch their attention so they might hear and believe. But for many, the words continued to fall on obstinate hearts.

Today I want to look more closely at the Four soils, i.e. the DIRT.

In some respects, it is easy to understand because we see these four responses in everyday life. If you've been around the church at all you've probably encountered all 4 soils.

Apparently, it wasn't so clear to the original audience because they asked for an interpretation.

Jesus and the disciples just came from a very contentious issue between Jesus and the scribes, i.e. the unforgiveable sin. Jesus goes back to teach again by the sea, so they might be expecting a bold message and instead, Jesus talks about sowing seed.

It's as if He were illustrating the hardened hearts of the scribes by describing the various soils.

v. 3 "Listen, behold" – He is serious about them getting what He is saying.

The sower is God and the seed is the Word. It is God who sends the Word out into the world.

It may seem a bit hap hazard and inefficient, but God knows what He is doing.

The Word of Christ, the Gospel, is spread indiscriminately in the world. God does sow the Word to the broad audience of humanity.

At that time and place, farming was not as regimented as we know it today. The common way to sow seed was to spread the seed first, then plow. Plowing wasn't with a John Deere tractor, but maybe with a strong stick to loosen the soil a bit.

In the ancient world, a good harvest produced a tenfold crop. God sows his seed and the harvest of thirty, sixty or a hundredfold is greater than the seed lost on the path, the rocky soil, or the thorns.

SEED ON THE PATH IS SNATCHED AWAY

Jesus tells of how some of the seed on the path is snatched away before it can try to plant itself. The birds represent Satan who snatches the word from many before it even gets to them.

What we saw in Ch 3 is that Jesus binds the strong man, Satan, and defeats him so that NOW the gospel goes forth to the nations. Satan still opposes the gospel to some degree, but he no longer holds the people in darkness.

This serves as a warning and a call to those who heard Jesus speak....and to us.

V. 15 about Satan does not cancel v. 9 about having 'ears to hear'. It amplifies the call to give heed to God's Word. If you are present week in and week out but are taking the Word of God lightly, then you are basically cooperating with the Prince of Darkness.

Being made aware of how Satan will seek to snatch away the Word, we should be all the more diligent to hear it and guard it in our hearts.

EX: VBS SONG "The Word of God"...."I love your Word" There is no greater prayer for our kids and for us as adults than "Give me a heart that loves your Word." One way to cultivate that love is to read it, meditate on it, and memorize it.

SEEDS ON STONY GROUND

Listen to what Jesus says about seed that falls on the stony ground: the seed sown on stony ground are those who, when they hear the Word, immediately receive it with gladness, but they have no root and endure only for a time. What I see here theologically is a vivid description of a false conversion.

The soil in their hearts is shallow. I dare say that we live in a shallow culture where we have cultivated a short attention span and little deep thought. In 2005 Neil Postman wrote a well known book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business"

Things have only gotten worse.

This shallow response is all too common as people are moved emotionally at one moment and even indicate some sort of decision for Christ, but it quickly fades because of affliction or persecution.

Ex Two college men converted to Christ. These best friends and roommates were converted together, and before they went to bed later that night, they both sat down and wrote to their girlfriends about their conversion. When they woke up in the morning, one friend had completely repudiated what he embraced with joy the night before, whereas the life of the other changed forever. R.C. Sproul

It is easy to ride the emotions of some sort of religious experience UNTIL you encounter affliction or persecution. Many who shouted "Hosanna" on Palm Sunday were probably shouting "crucify Him" by Friday because they saw that embracing Jesus wasn't the popular thing to do.

Affliction and persecution will expose the real foundation of our faith and hope.

One might say, "Wait, if God is real then He wouldn't let this happen to me." REALLY?? Look what happened to Jesus.

A confession of faith that has no roots will not hold up under suffering and trials. There won't be the self-denial, surrender, and self-sacrifice needed to hold fast to Christ.

The Third Soil among the THORNS

It's not PROFESSION of faith but POSSESSION of faith that indicates a saving relationship with Christ.

(R.C. Sproul)

Anyone can give lip service to some sort of faith in Jesus, depending on how he/she defines Jesus. Islam has a high view of Jesus, but it isn't the right view. Churches like the one I grew up in have a high view of Jesus, but not the biblical view.

It is all too easy to be moved in some way by an emotional appeal to a certain view of Jesus, but when the

real world hits you, it is easy to let Jesus slip away.

James 2:19

¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

Those in this situation are simply qualified to be a demon.

As the parable explains, the seed that falls among the thorns gets choked out.

The heart that is pre-occupied with worries, riches, and other desires has no room for love for Christ. There is no room in one's heart or schedule to contemplate the riches that are ours in Christ.

The 'worries' = 'cares' of this world or 'age' i.e. constant anxiety about the affairs of this worldly culture, matters that pertain to the here and now with little regard for eternal things. It can be characterized by an "If Only" mindset... "If only I had this or that I'd be happy; that house, that care, that relationship, that job, those clothes, etc. If I just had what the world says is cool, I'd be happy."

The "deceitfulness of riches" – Not matter where we are in our income level there is a great tendency to think, "If I only had a little bit more", I'd be happy. . Money is like the Turkish delight in Narnia – once you get a taste of it you always want more.

Money is not the problem per se; it is the love of money and the deceitfulness of riches.

What is the deceitfulness of riches?

- 1) **A sense of security.** The frailty of this life shows us how quickly our riches can disappear. We are living on the 3rd rock from the sun and are moving through space at 67,000 miles / hour and we're spinning at 1,037 mph at the equator. One day it will all come to an end and we'll stand before God and we think that having a solid wealth portfolio will give us security.
- 2) **A sense of our own righteousness – even as we fight against the idea, we tend to believe that if we have riches then we must be better, not just better off, than the person who is poor.**

THE GOOD SOIL

You don't know the good soil until you see the fruit. Hearing, receiving and bearing fruit distinguish the true disciple as good soil.

Jesus doesn't say, identify the good soil and ONLY sow the Word there. NO, the hearing of the Word is for all, and the response exposes their hearts.

How do we know where the good soil is??

I wish I could give you a set of guidelines for becoming the good soil that receives the seed of the Word, but that is a work of God.

The only people who embrace the Word are those who have first been changed by the work of the Holy Spirit to receive it.

This regenerating work of God comes first so that we can embrace Christ.

While Jesus interprets the parable, he doesn't unpack the implications of the interpretation other than "He who has ears, let him hear." One valid response would be for each of us to ask ourselves, "Do I have ears to hear? Am I listening? Which soil describes my life?" (2 COR 13:5)

Christianity is a religion of the ear, i.e. the hearing of the Word of God. In talking about the importance of hearing through preaching, Paul says, "So faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." Rom 10:17

We know that the Spirit works through the Word to bring us to faith, and the Spirit works through the Word to keep us walking by faith. In John 17:17 Jesus prays, "Sanctify them through Their truth; The word is truth."

SO, don't be ashamed of the Word. Sow widely. God opens ears, but we must spread the Word. Don't be afraid of offending someone with the Good News of a Savior. Just don't be offensive when you share it. Some will respond and embrace Christ; others will reject the seed. Don't be surprised when the gospel softens some hearts but exposes the hardness of others.

The audience is not sovereign so we don't tailor our message so that people will like it. Don't put up fences or unnecessary barriers, but be aware that the gospel itself will be offensive to some. Don't give up or change the message. Some have ears to hear the secret, and some don't. God gives the ears; we share the secret.

As we close, I want to sow a seed, an idea, about how anyone here, no matter where you are spiritually, can grow in your understanding of Jesus. Here it is: LISTEN UP: (One to One Bible Reading- David Helm)

Meet weekly, for an agreed upon length of time, with one or more people with the prime intention of reading and discussing a book or part of a book of the Bible.

MEN, you can do that each Wednesday night next door in the office building – 6:30-8. Or find men from work or other areas of connection.

Ladies, you are usually better at creating relational connection, but the invitation is set the focus on reading the word together.

If you are interested in some format ideas for a group or one on one, I'll put some helps on REALM.

David Helm suggests four key benefits to doing this:

Salvation – invite a curious friend to meet one on one or with a group for a set length of time. Exposure to God's word and God's people over time is the best outreach program available.

Spiritual Growth – 'sanctification' – Jn 17:17 2 Tim 3:15 the scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." Reading the Bible together is a great way to encourage and sharpen one another on the path toward spiritual maturity.

Training – Titus 2:11 ff It is "the grace of God that disciplines/trains us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age" We come to understand God's grace through His Word.

Relationship – reading and discussing the bible together lends itself to cultivating deeper personal friendships.

The best reason to read the Bible, together and in private, is that **JESUS IS THE ULTIMATE WORD SOWN IN THE WORLD.**

He is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us.

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