

## ***How Open is Your Heart to Hear God's Word?***

### **The Parable of the Four Soils**

Mark 4:1-20

August 26, 2018

#### **Scripture Reading:**

*Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.<sup>2</sup> And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:<sup>3</sup> “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.<sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.<sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.<sup>6</sup> And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.<sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.<sup>8</sup> And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

*<sup>10</sup> And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.<sup>11</sup> And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables,<sup>12</sup> so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”*

*<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?<sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word.<sup>15</sup> And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.<sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.<sup>17</sup> And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.<sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word,<sup>19</sup> but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.<sup>20</sup> But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”*

Mark 4:1-20 (ESV)

This morning we are beginning a new series entitled *Discovering the Heart of God through Jesus' Parables*. Jesus' primary teaching method, perhaps apart from direct teaching, was through the use of parables. In fact, just a little further ahead in Mark 4:33-34, the writer of the gospel of Mark tells us, *With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.*

We know that is the use of hyperbole, an exaggeration, by the gospel writer, because we find recorded both in his gospel and in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, a vast amount of direct teaching by Jesus. But teaching in parables was one of Jesus' primary teaching methods. From one person's count, there are 46 parables found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Six of them found in all three, including our one for today, and at least three found in two. I say at least three because it appears that several might be partial ones from some of the others or perhaps remembered slightly differently by the different gospel writers.

So, what really is a parable?

Parable – “a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson; especially one of the stories told by Jesus Christ and recorded in the Bible.” Merriam -Webster Dictionary

Parable – a story made up and told by Jesus to illustrate a biblical truth.

“Jesus’ parables had a clear twofold purpose: They hid the truth from self-righteous or self-satisfied people who fancied themselves too sophisticated to learn from Him, while the same parable revealed truth to eager souls with childlike faith – those who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness.” John MacArthur

*Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed through the Stories of Jesus*

Jesus’ parables were not given to us to interpret them however way we want to, they were given to us to convey an important biblical truths. And in almost all of his parables he is trying to convey just one important truth. It is the responsibility of his followers to discern what that truth is and apply it to our lives.

There is no doubt that Jesus was a master story teller. But in a day like today when there is so much emphasis on story-telling, or what some refer to as narrative preaching, we need to be careful. One reason being, none of us are Jesus. Jesus could take familiar features of the day – easily recognizable scenes, many featuring agricultural and pastoral metaphors, or household items, or common types of people in that day and he could present them in a way that a spiritually enlightened person could correctly discern the biblical truth he was trying to convey. We, as human beings are not as good at that.

Some in the church today even suggest that because Jesus did so, speaking in parables and story-telling, that story-telling and using parables is a better method for teaching spiritual truth than the more traditional, straight forward teaching methods or sermon preaching. One rather contemporary preaching professor who many seminaries have had their students read his book, went so far to say, “story telling should be every pastor’s preferred method – if not the only style of preaching we ever use.”

Speaking as someone who is not such a good story-teller and as much as traditional straight forward teaching and sermon exhortation is difficult to keep peoples’ attention today, I would contend that a bad story or a bad illustration is much more dangerous than boring straight forward teaching and preaching.

Let me give an illustration to highlight the danger of bad story telling. Recently I heard of a preacher telling the story to children of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish. That which traditionally has been seen as a biblical story that represents a very specific act which occurred in history that highlights the miracles that God can provide, especially through the person of Jesus, which helped to demonstrate the divinity of Jesus. Well the story was presented in such a way that took away from it being a historical event (especially if we can add or subtract anything from the story we would like), which subsequently took away from the miracle of the event. No need for Jesus if we can accomplish such an act on our own.

God gave us his Word so that His people can come to a saving and living relationship with His Son, Jesus, and that we would share His Word with others. Can we use stories, illustrations, video clips, poems, songs, other people's quotes, etc. to support the truths found in the Bible? Yes, but we need to be careful.

It is God's Word that has the power to convict us of our sin, cause us to repent, put our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, transform our lives, help us live our lives in the way God intended for us to live, not our own stories and illustrations.

God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah said, *My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* Isaiah 55:11 (ESV)

Jesus himself said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

The apostle Paul commended God's word to his young protégé Timothy, *Guard the good deposit entrusted to you.* 2 Timothy 1:14 (ESV)

What was the good deposit that was entrusted to Timothy? God's word. A little bit later in Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy he writes, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.* 2 Timothy 2:15

All of this which is a good lead in to our parable this morning. One of Jesus' first parables as recorded in the gospels. It is the second one recorded in the Gospel of Mark. It is also one of the six parables found in all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is often referred to as the parable of the sower, or the parable of the sower and the seed, but it is probably best titled *The Parable of the Four Soils* because it is the different soils which is the main point of this parable. Again, almost all of Jesus' parables contain one main point that he wanted to convey to his followers.

It says that Jesus taught this parable beside the sea. That would be the Sea of Galilee. In that day no one standing beside the Sea of Galilee would have been confused about what Jesus was talking about. For people living in and around the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' day agriculture was the primary way of life.

The fields in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel were long, narrow strips marked off by footpaths, not fences or hedge rows. The sower used a broadcasting method, taking one handful of seed at a time out of a seed bag on his side and flinging the seed over a wide swath. A skilled sower would try to waste as little seed as possible. The goal was to cover the whole plowed field, with as little spill over as possible on the margins.

But even with the most careful of sowers, some seed was bound to fall into areas where it just couldn't take root, where there was no soft soil whatsoever, or the soil was mixed with rocks, or it was sown among the weeds. Only the seed that found its way into good soil would ever yield produce worth harvesting, *yielding a harvest thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.*

Thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and especially a hundred fold in the Bible refers to a very significant, extraordinary blessing from God. Genesis 26 describes an incident where Isaac and Rebekah were forced by famine to dwell in the land of the Philistines for a time. It says that “Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the LORD blessed him” (Genesis 26:12).

The main lesson in this parable is not the sower or the seed, Jesus’ main teaching lesson in this parable is all about the soil. Nothing is really said about the skill of the sower. Yes, there were some farmers who could cast the seed pretty accurately but that really isn’t the point of the story. Yes, the sower could be God, or Jesus, but most likely it is all those who sow the Word of God, the good news of Jesus Christ. The prototypical sower is an evangelist. He or she is hoping for a harvest of souls. It is the Word of God, the Good News of Jesus Christ which is the seed. The true and unadulterated Word of God is the only true and legitimate seed.

Again, Jesus said to his closest disciples, “to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand lest they should turn and be forgiven’” (Mark 4:11-12). What a staggering privilege for a group composed of stinky fisherman, castaways, sinners living on the margins of society. Although Jesus was presenting the parables in a way that would obscure the truth from the unbelieving, no one was excluded against his or her own will.

It tells us that although Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds, often when his disciples were present, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained the meaning of the parables to them. Jesus’ explanation of some of the parables is found in the Bible, this being one of them, in verses 14-20.

Here is the lesson of our first parable, the biblical truth that Jesus is trying to convey:  
**A person’s response to the Word of God is dependent on the condition of that person’s heart, and fruit is the only evidence that one has heard the Word rightly.**

In his book, *Parables: The Mysteries of God’s Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told*, John MacArthur describes the four types of soil as being synonymous with four types of hearers today: 1) The Wayside Hearer, 2) The Shallow Hearer; 3) The Worldly Hearer; and 4) The Fruitful Hearer.

1. The Wayside Hearer – Represents one whose heart has become impervious to biblical truth. In the Bible he or she is often referred to as “hard of heart.”

*Jesus said these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. Mark 4:15*

The truth is Satan doesn’t even have to work very hard with this type of hearers. Unbelief and a love of sin make the heart a dense, hard, rocklike environment where God’s truth just can’t penetrate. There is no need for roots because the seed can’t even get in. Most of you probably know someone (or someones) who appear to be in that condition.

2. The Shallow Hearer – is symbolized by a soil spread thinly over a layer of rock and represents a person who responds immediately but often superficially. He or she falls away rather quickly when troubles or tribulation come.

*<sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.*  
Mark 4:16-17

Again, most of us probably have witnessed some that seemed to have been so on fire for the Lord, but then within a rather quick period of time were gone and/or back to their old ways and who they were. I get suspicious of quick conversion experiences. Yes, many do stay faithful, but they seem to be more the exception than the norm.

3. The Worldly Hearer – The third type of soil, the weedy soil, represents a heart too enthralled or too preoccupied with worldly matters.

Jesus explains, “*And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*” Mark 4:18-19

This is the one which we need to be most aware of today. John MacArthur writes:

“This person is too in love with this world – too obsessed with the ‘cares, riches, and pleasures of life’ – this life. The values of the temporal world (sinful pleasures, earthly ambitions, money, prestige, and a host of trivial diversions) deluge the heart and muffle the truth of God’s Word.”

The disciple John condemned worldliness:

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*  
1 John 2:15

The disciple James the same thing:

*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God. Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* James 4:4

4. The Fruitful Hearer – Finally, the fourth and final soil, the fruitful hearer, which is well cultivated and produces the desired crop. This represents the truly prepared heart.

*“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”* Mark 4:20

The fruit spoken of in this parable includes the fruit of the Spirit – “love, joy, peace, patience (or longsuffering), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). It includes the “fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:11). It includes the fruit of worship – “the fruit of . . . lips, giving thanks to God” (Hebrews 13:15) and the fruit of the spiritual gifts used for ministry and mission.

Jesus says, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear.” The one who has ears to hear is the one whose soil, heart, is prepared to receive the Word of God, the seed. And just like the farmer needs to prepare his soil each and every year for a new crop and harvest, so do we.

But here is the problem: We cannot accomplish this for ourselves. At one point in our lives we were all hopelessly unclean. Without the work of God in our lives we are all fallen, guilty sinners with shallow, weedy, rebellious hearts. Left to ourselves we would just grow harder and harder. Only God Himself can plow and prepare a heart to receive His Word.

Like David, who prayed, “Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10), we must approach God with trust and obedience, allowing Him to do the necessary work in our hearts that we cannot do ourselves.