

Mark 4:1-20

The Sower, Seed, and Soil

Good morning, church, it is great to be here with you all.

We will be in Mark chapter 4 today, looking at the first 20 verses.

As a father of six, one of the things I liked to do with my kids was plant a garden.

I sectioned off half of my backyard with garden beds.

It has been a couple of years since I had the time to really get back there and work on it.

But I typically would get the kids out there with me in February, and we would start preparing the soil, mixing in all the manure we could get our hands on, checking on the thousands of worms I have grown in that soil over the years, they are key to it all.

You know, buying the seed is the easy part of all of this; the hard part is dealing with that desert soil.

Some garden beds sat on harder ground, and the water did not saturate as it did in other places.

In another garden bed, the problem was large rocks beneath the surface, leaving little soil to work with.

But the seeds would sprout quickly in that soil.

I also learned that while my seedlings were sprouting, other plants were growing, and weeds in certain beds were growing alongside the plants.

Now, I have two trusty beds back there in the prime spot, and I like to plant my tomatoes in them.

I have these handmade tomato cages, because every year those tomatoes grow to the size of a small tree in that soil.

Picture #1...

This is a picture from April, so it's not even in the heat of summer yet. They take off and produce so many tomatoes that the kids and I have to walk up and down the street, handing them to neighbors.

Now, I test it out every year. There is another garden bed behind that with not-so-good soil underneath, and the plants will not do as well.

The seed is not the problem; they come from the same package.

The difference lies in what happens beneath the soil.

The longer I have served the Lord in the ministry, the more I have learned that these principles cross over spiritually.

I have seen people sit in the same pew every week, go to Bible Study during the week, and receive the same invitation to the Gospel, yet experience different effects from the Word of God.

One person's heart receives it, and you wonder if it really took root, but their life is changed forever, and it is not long before fruit begins to come from their life.

Another gets excited for a few weeks and then peters out, and they are gone. Some even repeat that cycle over and over again, each time saying, "This time is it, I am changed."

Another is more distracted by life's worries and ambitions, and that drive for success, and God's Word, never takes root.

But the reason we do this week in and week out is that there are those of you who receive God's Word deeply and bear fruit for years.

The difference is not found in the power of God's Word.

The difference is found in the condition of the heart receiving it.

This is where Jesus takes us this morning in Mark chapter 4, as we look at "Sower, the Seed, and the Soil."

Jesus presents an eye-opening reality to consider: the same seed can yield vastly different results depending on the soil's condition.

And before we examine the four soils, Jesus will ask each of us a deeply personal question: "What kind of soil are you?"

Are you hardened soil where the Word never penetrates?

Are you shallow soil where the Word springs up quickly but never develops roots?

Are you in a crowded soil where the cares of this world choke out spiritual growth?

Or are you good soil that receives God's Word, perseveres, and bears fruit – thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold?

Let's pray, and we will get into the text...

Look at the setting here in verses 1 and 2...

The Parable of the Sower

(Matt 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8)

4:1 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat *in it* on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. **2** Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

Jesus is still attracting great multitudes.

They are once again pushing up toward the water on the shoreline. This time, Jesus needed to get into the boat and get out a little way into the water for safety reasons, I imagine.

The people were pressing in on Him... they needed help, and Jesus was their answer to a life of suffering and unanswered questions in their hearts.

In that day, the rabbi would sit, while the people stood and listened to him teach.

We have reversed it in our day, but for the sake of illustration, this week I will have you all stand for 40 minutes while I sit...

No, I would not do that to you.

Look here, how Jesus is communicating His point, there in verse 2....we are told Jesus taught by parables now...

Parables are stories, illustrations, these pictures that would grab His hearers' imaginations and hearts, to help bring home His point.

The Greek word *Parabole* (*Parabo-ly*), Parable, means "cast alongside"-the word is used 48 times in the Gospels.

To cast something alongside something else... which means it is deeper than just a random story; it has an intended purpose.

It is placed alongside a teaching, cast in front of people to convey something previously unknown to them.

But from what I am learning in the ministry, people connect with a story...

I will be teaching, and I will be giving God's Word, good information, the best information, and I can tell when something needs to happen, I am losing my audience...

You can see a lot from up here... And I don't mind the sleeper or the yawner, because they alert me to something, I really need to throw in a story...

And once I say, "There was a time..." or "That reminds me of a time..." for some reason I see heads perk up.

My kids, when I ask them what their teacher taught them that week in the other building, if it was a

straight lecture, they can grasp the points, and tell me somewhat, but if that teacher told a part of their testimony or a story to highlight the point, they can't wait to tell me about it excitedly.

Many of you older Calvary people will know that Gayle Irwin was a master at storytelling.

His storytelling was amazing; he would have you rolling, laughing, in tears, then he would bring his point, and it would stab you in the heart...

And there you are laughing, and then tears are coming, but you don't know if they are there from the laughing or the heart-wrenching truth he just cut you open with.

Well, Jesus wanted to teach the people spiritual things, so He did this by showing them physical things, things they could easily create in their minds, or even things they could look at, relevant to their everyday struggle and life, so that they could easily understand His teachings.

He gave parables that have stuck with humanity for two thousand years now; they are woven into our literature, they even come up in popular TV shows, and even in blockbuster hits in theaters.

The stories Jesus used were revolutionary and timeless.

He would tell them, “The Kingdom of God is like this or that...” and if they understood the picture, then they could get a little glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Let’s look at this incredible picture He gave in our text; it is one of the most famous, and I believe, important pictures He gave.

Starting in verse 3...

3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. **4** And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. **5** Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. **6** But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered

away. **7** And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. **8** But other *seed* fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

9 And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Here, Jesus presents this story of the sower sowing his seed in the field.

This is most definitely an illustration that listeners could relate to in their everyday lives, and perhaps even something taking place right in front of them.

Those who know the landscape there know that fields of all kinds of crops are all around.

A man with his seed bag slung over his shoulder, sowing his seed, was a common and necessary image in their way of life.

As he walked up and down the rows laid out in the soil, sowing as he went, repeatedly grabbing handfuls of seed, and throwing it to each side...

There would be different kinds of soil that his seed would fall on... and each one described by Jesus would be so familiar to his listeners.

When planting this way, it was a method for planting vast areas of crops efficiently, but it was impossible to control where the seed fell accurately....

Some of that seed would even spill out on the road or pathway.

Jesus describes this first, these dirt pathways within each working field allowed the farmers to move about when the crops were in full sprout.

The soil there would be untilled, packed down hard from the faithful farmer walking to and fro daily.

The seed that fell there could not get into the soil or penetrate it with any root.

Because these seeds were exposed to the elements and easily accessible, the birds came and had a feast with them.

For the first couple of years here, out in the grass, we would get these big patches of dirt, and I would tell the

fellas we needed to overseed, and they would buy the seed and scatter it out there.

I thought it was common sense that when you overseed the grass, you need to put a layer of topsoil to cover the seed and give it something to grow in.

But what was not communicated was not done, and I would go out to look at my green grass, and then I would see a hundred birds in the lawn eating every seed scattered out there.

I told the fellas, “I know Jesus said to look at the birds of the air, too see that He takes care of them, and to have that speak to our worried lives, because we are of more value than they, but nowhere in the Bible does it talk about using my grass seed to feed them.”

“God will feed them, but please stop using my grass seed to do this.”

Well, they started covering it with that topsoil, and so far it has kept the seed where it needs to be.

Now, in Jesus’s parable, what the birds did not get became trampled underfoot.

Notice the second soil that the seed fell on... Jesus refers to it as the “rocky places,” where there was not much soil to grow in.

In Israel, they knew rocks; they still blanket the landscape there.

They would have to spend a great amount of time and sweat removing stones and rocks before they could even think about planting a crop.

And even with all the effort put forth, once that plow dug down... they would encounter even more boulders.

There is a lot of limestone in Israel, with good soil mixed within, or just barely covering the surface of the rock beds.

The seeds that fell on this type of ground would enjoy that soil on top, and immediately spring up, but there would be no depth of soil.

When the seed began to germinate, and its roots shot downward while its foliage shot upward, the whole

process would stop once the root hit that rock beneath the surface.

The foliage would show up quickly, outpacing the root, but when the sun hit it, it would be scorched because the root was not taking in the necessary water and nutrients.

They would wither quickly.

Jesus then gives the third soil on which the seed would typically fall... the ground that was infested with thorns and weeds.

Now, we know something about weeds up here...

I have been spending the cool of the evening teaching my boys how to handle them.

The other night, Freedom was working on our front yard, and he added his own special touch for his momma, putting straight rake marks through the dirt, making it look so nice to the eyes.

I told him, "Buddy, you are getting so good at this, you and your brothers can start going up and down our street knocking on doors to make some money."

He said, “I’m only ten, Dad, I just stick to making Momma happy, but I will think about it.”

Growing up here in the desert, I have a lifetime of fighting those cursed weeds... I spent my summers working my parents' acreage in Phelan because my dad was too cheap to hire the neighbor’s tractor service.

“God gave me a son! Who needs a tractor?”

I fight them in my yard now, but God gave me three sons!

They come up in my garden, and choke the life out of my good plants, and I cannot stand when my tomatoes are messed with.

Weeds are a nuisance, a product of Adam’s sin... every time I see one choke out one of my garden plants... I tell Adam, “I cannot wait to meet you in heaven.”

But, look at the fourth soil that Jesus talks about the seed falling onto... He calls it the “Good Soil.”

It was far enough away from the path, in a spot with no rocks, and the weeds were not impacting it at all.

It was soft, tilled, and prepared to receive the seed.

There was enough depth to support a healthy root system, and it would yield a crop up to a hundredfold.

So, here is the given picture. Jesus is looking out at that crowd that pressed Him into the boat.

Jesus saw in that crowd different types of people...

Just like this group gathered here this morning, we are not all receiving the message the same way.

Not every heart is receiving what is being spoken in the same manner.

Some are openhearted; some are very skeptical and hard toward the message; some may be trying to outsmart the truth of God's Word by intellect, and their minds are closed to it.

Some people hear God's Word and marginalize it.

The Pharisees that day were too prideful to hear.

Others were thinking it was a good message, but for someone else...

Others might be thinking about how they have to go to the grocery store, and they are going over their list.

Others might be thinking about the upcoming sports match or even checking scores while the teaching is going on.

They won't let the truth penetrate them...

But others have prepared their heart to hear from the Lord, and when the Word of God goes forth, the truth hits them, changes them, refreshes them, and fruit will come from it, growth and life.

Here, Jesus brings forth this story, a relatable one, a picture where sense can be made of His point.

Because this really is a heavy point... a serious heavenly truth.

He is laying this story alongside His point... so their imaginations, which are connected to their hearts, can take in the truth beyond just an academic exercise, and He brings it into a heart-transforming reality.

Look at verse 10 now...

The Purpose of Parables
(Matt 13:10-17; Luke 8:9,10)

10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. **11** And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, **12** so that
*'Seeing they may see and not perceive,
And hearing they may hear and not understand;
Lest they should turn,
And their sins be forgiven them.'*"

Jesus would answer the disciples' question about the meaning of the parable, but first He lets them know the purpose of the parables.

The disciples, who came really ready to hear, wanted the things of God, and they were given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom.

Things could be plainly given to them.

But others did not come to this understanding so easily.

Understanding would come only if they knew the key to the parable.

Jesus will tell them in verse 14 that the seed that is being sown is the Word of God.

I was listening to David Guzik teach this portion of scripture when I was at the gym on Friday, and I really liked his explanation of this:

If you do not understand the key to the parable, you don't understand it at all. We can imagine what different people in Jesus's audience might have thought when Jesus taught this parable with no explanation.

- The farmer thought, "He's telling me that I have to be more careful in the way I cast my seed. I guess I have been wasting an awful lot."
- The politician thought, "He's telling me that I need to begin a farm education program to help farmers

more efficiently cast their seed. This will be a big boost in my reelection campaign.”

- The newspaper reporter thought, “He is telling me that there is a big story here about the bird problem and how it affects the farming community. That is a great idea for a series in the paper.
- The salesmen thought, “He is encouraging me to increase my fertilizer sales. Why, I could help that farmer more than he knows if he only used my product.”

If you miss the key, you miss the whole parable. If you think the seed represents money, you miss the parable. If you think the seed represents love, you miss the parable. If you think the seed represents hard work, you miss the parable. You can only understand it by understanding the key: The sower sows the Word.¹

¹ <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/mark-4/>

Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9 here to show how people can close up their hearts and ears to the Lord, even though He is giving them such a simple illustration.

In verse 13, Jesus asks His disciples....

The Parable of the Sower Explained

(Matt 13:18-23; Luke 8:11-15)

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

Jesus is showing them the importance of this particular parable.

It is all about the heart being prepared to receive the teaching of God's Word.

Think about the three prominent pieces to this parable.

The sower, the seed, and the soil.

In the original setting, Jesus, who was on the boat, teaching God's Word, would be the Sower.

Later on, Jesus will commission the disciples, and you and I, to go into all the world.

At that point, in this picture, the person who is dispensing God's Truth, the Gospel message, who is casting out and spreading the Word, is the Sower.

I am sure you, like me, had many people sowing the Word of God in your life before it ever took root, and you came to Christ as your Lord and Savior.

There is this reality, too: when we gather here in this place, the man behind the pulpit is sowing the Word of God weekly.

About five years ago, a woman came into my office to tell me she was leaving our Church, because we did not have enough of the Holy Spirit...

She handed me a picture of a hand sowing seed in the field, and she said, "You are just a sower of God's Word, but I need more of the Spirit..."

I am not sure whether the picture was meant to be derogatory, but I took it as the biggest compliment to our ministry.

I hung the picture up, and it hangs right by my door, so when I come out, I can hit it, like the “Play like a champion” sign that the Notre Dame football players hit running out of their locker room.

What a thing to be reminded of as I come out to teach the Word.

In **Leviticus 19:19**, God reminds the sower, “**Don’t sow mixed seed in your field.**”

I believe that is a good reminder for anyone who is endeavoring to take the pulpit.

Don’t sow mixed seed... don’t mix the Scriptures with psychology, or worldly philosophical ideas.

Make sure you are sowing truth, and not man’s fixes and programs.

So, next, Jesus breaks the parable down for them to give the disciples a clear understanding.

And this is where we, the listeners, the receivers of God’s Word, need to listen up, turn our hearts on, and really do that introspection that is needed.

What type of soil are you this morning?

Verse 14 now...

14 The sower sows the word. **15** And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.

Jesus now explains the hard soil of the wayside, or pathway.

Immediately, birds, representing Satan, snatch the truth away from them.

This is a calloused heart – it is the walking path between the rows of foliage.

The hardness of the heart prevents any truth from penetrating it.

This person will come here, listen to the message, and leave mocking the Word and God's Ways... They have such a hardness toward Jesus and the Church.

The truth of God's Word has no impact... and, believe it or not, people can sit in church for decades under such conditions.

They convince themselves they are church-hurt, and the wounds that people gave them in the past sometimes create hardness toward Jesus.

They start to come in angry and closed off... when the pastor preaches a point they don't like, they stand up, make a scene, and walk out so that people can see their disapproval.

They cannot get over their hurts, forgiveness seems never to be an option... and they take out all their anger and rejection on the very Savior who wants to free them and help them thrive in life.

This hardness of heart is easy for Satan to work with... The truth can be snatched up easily because all the devil needs to do is point out the wrongs in everyone else but the person who wants to hold a grudge or hurt.

Look now, verse 16...

16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; **17** and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.

The stony ground is one of the most heartbreaking to be around.

The hardness is there; it is just below the surface, and we even get some immediate growth, but it never lasts. The heat from life's trials kills it off as quickly as it grows.

These are the ones who form an emotional connection to the message...

They hear it, it might produce a tingly feeling, and they convince themselves that if they join this club, life can get better.

They jump in with a lot of steam, excitement, and happiness...

But when the troubles and trials come, that really define a person's faith, the same emotion that led them here, leads them out...

They will claim things like, "I tried Christianity, and it did not work..."

You cannot try this out; it is a life commitment, through whatever comes our way.

But the emotionally led person will treat Christ like their marriage, when that initial flame burns out. All the magic is gone, they really prince charming actually has morning breath... the belly area has gotten softer and bigger, the six pack is long gone, and then, because things are not as happy as they used to be, they chase after another lover, and leave the marriage, not realizing just sticking it out through all the hard times, is how you mature into true love.

The emotionally led person will live to please themselves... They will convince themselves that the Spirit is telling them to do all kinds of things against the Word.

Emotionally connected people can show a lot of zeal and early commitment as long as things go well for them, but, like that toddler screaming in the toy section, if their happiness meter gets affected, they will throw a tantrum and leave it all behind.

Emotions are part of our being, but if truth is not ruling your life above your emotions, your life will be as unstable as a boat in the middle of a storm at sea.

Emotions are fickle and unpredictable... You can be having the best day, and stub your toe, and start cursing the day you were born...

Be led by the Word of God, and your emotions will not carry you all over the place.

Look at verse 18...

18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, **19** and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

You all know this, living up here, but no one has to sow weeds in the earth...

They grow up fierce in even little cracks in my driveway.

They are so lush, with no need to propagate the soil or even water it.

There are plenty, and it is as if they thrive in any condition.

They choke out the life of our potted plants, our roses, and even in our veggie beds.

Jesus describes the weeds of life as being the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, or any other worldly desire choking out the Word from your life.

The soil represents someone's heart who is divided toward Jesus.

They hear the Word, and it starts to grow in their lives, but they get distracted by their selfish pursuits and justify it all by saying, "God wants me to be blessed and happy." No, actually, as we will see, He doesn't want you to be happy, but fruitful.

1 John 2:15-17 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. **16** For all that *is* in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world. **17** And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

The Bible teaches us very clearly that if we love the things of this world, we don't love God.

That is a soul-searching reality... the prosperity people hate this, and they hide it in their preaching...

Chasing after the things of this world is a lost pursuit...

Some wreck every relationship they have in this existence over this chase for more; they neglect the love to their kids, they neglect the health of their marriage, they use the people around them...

,

They pretend to be so caring and concerned about your life, but only to make the sale on whatever they are selling.

But the relationship that is neglected most is the one they can have with the Lord Jesus, who said,

John 12:25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

No, Jesus wants me to be healthy, wealthy, and to enjoy everything richly that He gives me.

You have to take out of the bulk of Scripture to come up with that idea.

We have to decide whether to be with Him or against Him; remember, there are no grey areas in this.

The things we do for Christ, whatever they may be, the sacrifice in this life, these are the things that go with us in eternity.

The weeds in this world are a distraction from our heavenly mission, strategically placed there by our enemy... be on guard.

That person who is struggling between two kingdoms is the soil among the weeds.

This really is a hard place to live... because the person becomes miserable over time.

They stay close enough to the world to keep them miserable as a Christian... because they never have enough money or success...

But they have enough of the church culture to make them miserable living in the world.

They are just better off if they totally go to one side, but they try to keep this balancing act between the two.

This makes Jesus sick... He told the Church of Laodicea, **Revelation 3:15-16, "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth."**

I had a brother give me an illustration not too long ago...

He said there was a man in this fight, between hearing the voice of truth, and coming to one side of the fence, and another voice calling him to the other side of the

fence, it was the devil, deceiving him with riches and worldly delights.

The man could not choose which side to go, knowing the cost of each, so he decided to stay on that fence.

He thought he could choose both... then his world grew dark, and the fires of hell were before him, Lucifer the fallen angel smirking over it all.

The man had questions, "I chose both, I did not want the result of a full worldly compromise, so I rode the fence..."

Lucifer told him, "What you didn't know is the fence is mine as well, you have to choose the other side fully... anyone touching the fence made their choice... He who is not with Jesus is with me."

A divided heart will not cut it in the end... get off that fence and choose Jesus...

So your life can be like the fourth soil.

Verse 20

20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept *it*, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

The good soil is the one who is prepared to receive and obey the Word.

James 1:22 "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves..."

Now, this is how you get to fruitful living... different amounts are mentioned here, but the production of fruit is all that matters.

You understand that the fruit carries the seed as well... the fruitful life effectively spreads more seed through our impact on those around us.

There is fruit from our lives when we are obedient to the Word of God, when we deny ourselves and follow after Jesus.

The person who comes to church ready to hear from God.

Making your heart ready is the key...

This person will stand in the midst of trial and minister faithfully, no matter what condition they are in, because their roots are deep; they cannot be moved.

On Friday, we held the memorial for our dear brother Jorge, and this was the testimony of his life.

Even with a fatal cancer diagnosis, he shone brightly for Jesus until the end.

Pastor Josh talked about the hospital room the night of his passing... we saw a man whose roots were deep, and his life was bearing fruit until the end...

He went into His full reward... You see the fruit still, in his teenage sons, who, the weekend after their father's death, were here serving Jesus.

His wife Suzie, through it all, preached the hope of Jesus, even at times to me...

How does this happen? The Word of God had landed on good soil! This family knew how to respond to crisis...

They did not allow their broken heart to lead them in their response; they allowed the truth of God's Word to guide their life.

Some people, if the wind is not favorable to their hair, start cursing their lives and think God's promises are no good.

They can't handle much when it comes to trials... selfishness and self-regard are the barometers they use for their faith.

Lord, help us all to have this good soil, where the Word of God can put its roots deep, so that even if death comes and tries to wreak havoc on our lives, we can cling to His truth!

Church, only you know the type of soil you are...

Is there hardness there that truth cannot penetrate?

Are you led by your emotional faith, with no root system to keep you grounded?

Are the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, keeping you on the fence?

Or is your heart receptive to the Lord and to His Word?

Psalm 1:1-2 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

May we understand how important it is to set our hearts right before God.

Let's pray...