

## **Mark 4:1–20 — Parable Of The Soils**

**January 27, 2019**

Open your Bibles to Mark 4. Today we come to an extensive teaching section in the Gospel of Mark. There are only two extensive sections in Mark that cover the teachings of Jesus. One is Mark 4. The other is Mark 13. We get some other teachings of Jesus scattered throughout the rest of Mark but nothing as long or detailed as these two chapters.

In this chapter we will study several of Jesus' parables. Today, we will just look at one parable because it is a big one. It covers 20 verses. It also has some of the most challenging theology in the Bible in it. Many of you know this parable as the parable of the seed. Some of you know it as the parable of the sower. The best name for it is the parable of the soils because it is about different types of soil.

It is a very important parable because it teaches us how the kingdom of God grows from an evangelistic perspective. This parable tells us to expect people will respond in different ways when we share the gospel of Christ with them. Some will have hearts that are rock-hard against the gospel and won't be able to comprehend it. Some will have hearts that are open and eager to hear. We need to expect those types of responses. As the parable will teach us, these responses are not based on how well we share the gospel but the condition of the person's heart when he or she hears the gospel.

This parable also explains that Jesus would go from being surrounded by crowds numbering 10,000-15,000 during the heyday of his ministry, but after his death and resurrection, there being only a few hundred disciples that followed

him. This parable will explain why so many people walked away from Jesus as soon as they knew suffering was involved.

Let's read this parable and dive into our study.

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. And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 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. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 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, so that " 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.' " And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. 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. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 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. 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. 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)

I am sure you can't help but notice that these verses naturally break into three parts. The first part are verses 1-9, which is the parable itself. Next, verses 10-13 break the flow of thought and Jesus explained why he was teaching in parables. Third, in verses 14-20, Mark returned to the parable and Jesus explained what this parable means. With that as our structure, let's dive in.

## The Setting — Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee.

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. Mark 4:1 (ESV)

**Again he began to teach beside the sea...** The sea mentioned in this verse is the Sea of Galilee. This is not a saltwater sea. It is just a large, freshwater lake. At this time, Jesus consistently traveled back and forth between Capernaum, which is a small fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, to the shore of the Sea of Galilee where he taught in an open-air teaching style. Last week, Jesus was teaching at Peter's house in Capernaum. As late afternoon approached, and the crowds in the city that came to see Jesus began to swell, Jesus headed to the shore of the Sea of Galilee to teach.

**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. —** When it says a very large crowd gathered, it could be translated from the Greek *as the largest crowd yet* gathered about him. The Greek doesn't specify if this is a very large crowd or the largest crowd. Either way, this is a crowd of thousands that came to hear Jesus teach and see his miracles.

As we learned in Mark 3:9, large crowds like this were not unusual for Jesus. When large crowds gathered it was customary for Jesus's disciples to have a small boat ready for him. In the past weeks, we saw the crowds were so large and demanding that Jesus was in danger of being physically crushed. Everyone wanted to touch him because everyone who touched him was immediately healed. Last week, we saw the crowds were so demanding that

Jesus and his disciples couldn't even eat. The crowds wouldn't leave them alone long enough to put food in their mouths.

At this point, the demands of the crowd on Jesus were tremendous, as everybody wanted to touch him, so he used the small boat the disciples kept ready. He got in the boat and pushed away from shore. That kept the front row of his audience far enough away that he could finally teach. People can only tread water for so long.

If you are like me, you are left wondering what it would look like for Jesus to teach from a boat. How could someone teach from a boat to a crowd of thousands? I did a little research and found there is a small cove on the Sea of Galilee not far from Capernaum. It is called the Cove of the Sower. This is likely the place where Jesus sat in a small boat to teach the people and tell them the parable we are about to study this morning. The hillside around this cove has a gentle slope that forms it into an amphitheater. The acoustics in this area allow someone speaking in the cove to be heard all the way up the hillside. While this picture doesn't do the Cove of the Sower justice because this is a huge hillside that can hold thousands. Imagine this hillside without a road and trees. They weren't there two thousands years ago. You can picture how teaching from a boat worked for Jesus.



**And he was teaching them many things in parables... Mark 4:2 (ESV)**

Speaking in parables was not a new thing for Jesus. He spoke in a parable last week when he rebuked the religious leaders after they claimed he

was demon-possessed in Mark 3:23. From this point forward, we will see that parables become his primary way of teaching. We will look at why he taught in parables from this point forward in a few minutes when we get to verses 10 to 13, but for now, let me introduce you to parables and how they work.

The word parable comes from the Greek words *para* and *bole*. The prefix *para* means to lay something alongside something else. A parable is to illustrate one thing by laying something else next to it to show the parallels between them. This is typically laying a common physical truth next to a harder-to-understand spiritual truth to help explain it. For example, in this parable, Jesus used a few of the basics truth about farm plants to show show us what to expect when we share the good news of Jesus with our friends and neighbors.

Parables can be simple or they can be complex. Last week, when Jesus gave us his first small parable, he reminded us that nobody can enter a strong man's house and steal his stuff until the criminal binds up the strong man. Jesus used that to describe what he was doing to Satan when he was setting those beset by sickness and demon possession free. That was a tiny parable. In Luke 15, which is the parable of the prodigal son, we have a long and extensive parable. In Greek, a parable is any kind of analogy, illustration or comparison used to explain a spiritual truth.

Jesus didn't invent parables. They were used frequently in the Old Testament. In the Bible there are more than 60 of Jesus' parables recorded in the gospels. Most are found in Matthew and Luke; a few are in Mark; none are in the Gospel of John. Let's look at our first parable.

## The Parable Of The Soils

Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. Mark 4:3 (ESV)

In Greek, they can't underline. They don't have italics. They don't have bold font. If they want to show something is important, they repeat it, and that is what Jesus did in this chapter with the word *listen*. The Greek form of the word listen is used 10 times in Mark 4. Jesus was pleading with us to listen to this parable. In the Greek, Jesus used the present imperative tense, which makes the word to listen a command to listen. Immediately after this, Jesus also said "Behold." I am not in favor of the word behold. It is an awkward word that we don't use today. It simply means to look. Jesus commanded us to listen and to look at this parable and to understand the truth he was giving us in it.

**Some seed fell on hard soil.**

Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Mark 4:3–4 (ESV)

As we learned in the fall, when we studied the topography of the Sea of Galilee, this lake was surrounded by fields. The Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains in the distance with gentle sloping lands which channel the rainwater from the mountains into the Sea of Galilee. This provides amazing ground water which makes this part of the world excellent farm country. Farmers in this part of the world sowed their crop in rows, just like we farm today. They would plow the ground by hand or with an animal. The farmer would go into the field with a bag of seed over his shoulder, and he would swing his hand in a semi-circle to throw the seed out a long distance. This was called broadcasting the seed. The farther the seed was thrown, the greater the dispersion of the seed.

Fields in that day were not fenced. The property lines between neighbors' fields were walking paths. All travel in the fields was on these walking paths. The paths were about 3 feet wide. The constant walking on that dirt combined with the hot sun packed that dirt so it was like concrete. Nothing grew on the packed path so it was easy to recognize. This is similar to walking trails or two-tracks in the woods today. Since the dirt is so hard and compacted, it is not receptive to seed and nothing penetrates the surface. Farmers that were broadcast spreading the seed and throwing it a distance to spread it couldn't help but have some of their seed land on these hard-packed paths.

In addition to the hardness of the packed ground being unreceptive to seed, birds were also a constant problem. If seed was exposed on the surface of the hard-packed dirt, birds waited until the farmer turned his back. They landed on the ground and ate the seed for lunch. I understand problem this firsthand. Last fall, I over-seeded my lawn. There were no birds around when I seeded but when I awoke the next morning many birds were in my yard eating my costly seed, especially seed that was still on the surface. Let's just say I was frustrated. I don't want to feed the birds. I want to grow a lawn.

#### **Some seed fell on rocky soil.**

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. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Mark 4:5–6 (ESV)

The first seed landed on hard-packed soil and was taken away by birds. This seed fell on rocky ground that didn't have much soil. This is not soil with pebbles or soil with rounds rocks, like we have in Iowa. The farmer would have removed those rocks. This is talking about the limestone bedrock that for many

places in Israel lies just below the plow. Israel is filled with rock. One rabbi used to say that when God dumped rocks on the earth, he made a mistake and dumped too many on Israel. Israel is very rocky, and much of that rock is limestone bedrock just below the surface of the soil.

The seed goes into this soil. It looks like good soil. The seed germinates. It starts to grow and put down roots but the roots don't go far because they hit rock. One scholar who studied this said you can actually tell seed is growing in this type of soil because at the beginning of the growing season, when there is good moisture and moderate sun, these plants are taller than others. They are not putting their energy into their root systems. They are putting their energy into their above-ground growth because the soil won't let them put down roots.

The problem is the cool spring rains don't last. Soon, the hot summer sun begins to bake the plants. Since these plants have no depth to their roots, they wither and die. What started out looking healthy and even stronger than other plants came to a crashing halt in the heat of the summer sun because just below the surface was rock and these plants had no depth to their roots.

#### **Some seed fell on thorny soil.**

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Mark 4:7 (ESV)

The third kind of soil also looked good. It wasn't hard-packed like the path. It also wasn't shallow soil with hard bedrock just below the surface. It was good soil, but it held a hidden secret. It was filled with weeds. As the farmer's crop grew, the weeds also grew. They choked the crop out, making it unfruitful. We all know the pain of weeds. We have them in our gardens. In the summer, I walk



around my house almost every day with a bottle of Roundup, spraying weeds. Even today, I buy my 2,4-D from the farmers co-op instead of the hardware store because I need so much of it to keep my weeds under control. Weeds suck the nutrients out of the soil so what you want to grow will barely grow.

Before we go further, I want you to notice there is a progression. We went from seed that never sprouted, to seed that sprouted but quickly died, now we have seed that sprouted and grew through the entire season but never grew enough to have a harvest. All three of these soils, from a farmer's perspective, were a complete failure. The goal of the farm is not to sprout seed, it is to produce a harvest. It doesn't matter if seeds grow; if they don't produce a harvest, it is useless. Of all these soils, only one was a success, and that is the last one: The good soil.

#### **Some seed fell on good soil.**

And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Mark 4:8 (ESV)

The final soil is the good soil. It grew and yielded a crop of thirty-, sixty- and even a hundredfold. There is a shocking element in this story. That is the size of the harvest. In the ancient world, a farmer was grateful for a field that yielded six-eight times what was planted. A ten-fold yield was incredible. Here we have thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was planted. That was a harvest beyond belief. That is a harvest only possible through the hand of God providing supernatural growth.

What made the difference between these soils? The sower didn't do anything different. The seed wasn't different. The only difference was the

receptivity of the soil. Every farmer knows some soil is more productive than others. Better soil produces a larger crop. This is why you fertilize according to what the soil needs. Jesus concluded his parable with these words.

**And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Mark 4:9 (ESV)**

The problem is, when Jesus closed his sermon, everybody was left scratching their heads. They understood he was teaching about farming, but nobody knew how this related to God and his kingdom. That brings us to our second point: Mark broke the flow to tell us the purpose of parables. He told us why Jesus taught almost everything in parables from this point forward in his ministry.

### **What is the purpose of parables?**

**And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. Mark 4:10 (ESV)**

We don't know how much time transpired between Jesus telling this parable and his followers asking him in private about this parable. I assume this took place later that same evening at dinner or after dinner.

Jesus explained to them why he was going to teach in parables from this point forward. He taught in parables for two reason. Parables reveal and conceal. Parables have one purpose for those who are insiders in God's kingdom and a different purpose for those who are outsiders to God's kingdom.

### **Parables reveal the message of the kingdom to those seek it.**

**And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God...” Mark 4:11a (ESV)**

Jesus used parables to explain to his disciples the way things work in the kingdom of God. This parable explains the way people will respond to the good

news of Jesus when we share it. Jesus said to his disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” What is the secret of the kingdom of God? Some of your translations will call this the mystery of the kingdom of God. This is the Greek word *musterion*, from which we get the English word mystery. When we hear the word mystery, we think of television shows like “Unsolved Mysteries” or of mystery novels. That is not what the word mystery means in the Bible. In the Bible, a secret or mystery is truth that was not revealed by God in the Old Testament but was revealed by God in the New Testament. It was unknown truth that God kept to himself that he then revealed. In this particular parable, Jesus revealed the way God’s kingdom will spread when we share the gospel. This parable tells us what to expect when we share the truth of Jesus.

We wonder how do these parables reveal hidden truths about God’s kingdom? They are hard to understand. It is important to realize what it says in Mark 4:34.

He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. Mark 4:34 (ESV)

After Jesus taught parables publicly, he always took his disciples aside privately and explained the meaning of the parables so they would understand the new truth he was teaching about God and his kingdom. This is how parables revealed the secrets of the kingdom of God to his disciples.

**Parables conceal the message of the kingdom from those who reject it.**

...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 (ESV)

Last week, we saw the scribes were given straightforward teaching by Jesus and they saw countless miracles by Jesus. Rather than embracing Jesus' teaching and the miracles which authenticated everything Jesus was saying, they completely rejected Jesus. In fact, they claimed Jesus' message and miracles were powered by Satan. Jesus even warned the scribes that because they were rejecting the abundant evidence of his message and miracles, they were on the threshold of committing the unforgivable sin by blaspheming the Holy Spirit. From that moment forward, Jesus began teaching in parables.

To those who rejected Jesus, his parables were nothing more than meaningless riddles. Since he didn't explain his parables publicly, his parables to them would be nothing more than meaningless riddles. Jesus taught publicly in parables as an act of divine judgment on those who rejected him. Mark quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 to explain that Jesus was teaching in parables so the religious leaders would no longer see, no longer understand, and no longer have the chance to be forgiven.

This verse is considered one of the most challenging ideas in the New Testament. It tells us God sometimes shuts down the opportunity for repentance for some people.

This quote from Isaiah was written 700 years before Jesus, but these words provide a apt description of what happened to the unbelieving Israelites of Jesus' day.

During Isaiah's ministry, the people repeatedly ignored the prophet's warning until their consciences became so hard against God's truth that they no

longer had the ability to understand and respond to God's truth. God allowed them to harden their hearts beyond the point of repenting. That is why God told Isaiah he would certainly execute judgment on his people through Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army. They hardened their hearts to the point that they were beyond repenting. This is why God told Isaiah that he should preach to the people but be prepared that nobody would respond to his preaching because they were beyond the point of repenting.

Jesus' parables represent a similar form of judgment on the consistent unbelief he encountered in his day. Jesus was about two years into his ministry at this point. He had taught with clarity and simplicity. He had performed thousands of miracles. He cast out thousands of demons. The response of the Pharisees and scribes to the overwhelming evidence of his identity was to say he was demon-possessed. Since they had consistently hardened their hearts, the religious leaders were beyond the point of repenting. Jesus spoke to them in parables so they would hear truth but no longer have the ability to respond to God's truth. The opportunity for the religious leaders in Jesus' day, just like the opportunity for hard-hearted Jews in Isaiah's day, was gone.

Jesus said they have been given enough time. They were given enough truth. They passed a point of no return. They only got parables, which to them were nothing more than pointless riddles.

The idea of people hardening their hearts to the point that God says they have passed a point of no return is a new and challenging concept for most of us. This truth is clearly taught in Isaiah 6:9-10, and those verses are quoted

numerous times in the New Testament to refer to the unbelieving Jews in Jesus' day, just like they originally referred to the unbelieving Jews in Isaiah's day. I have given you additional verses to study about this concept in your Life Group questions at the end of your outline and on the Leaders' Guide for this sermon found at [www.crosswinds.tv](http://www.crosswinds.tv) and [www.christ2rculture.com](http://www.christ2rculture.com), so I refer you to those verses for deeper study. For now, let me simply show you a few verses that teach this concept. First, let me show you what Paul said about God hardening his own people.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." Romans 11:7–8 (ESV)

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. Romans 9:18 (ESV)

I remind you about the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness. After witnessing the plagues on Egypt, after crossing the Red Sea on dry ground with walls of water on their left and right, after experiencing water come out of a rock twice, after receiving manna from heaven every morning, and a host of other miracles, when it came time to go into the Promised Land, they didn't believe God would take care of them. Finally God said, "Enough is enough." They passed the point of no return. They wandered in the desert until everyone of their generation died and their children entered the Promised Land, because with their hard hearts they repeatedly ignored the abundant evidence of God's provision and care.

I remind you of the time God sent Moses to Pharaoh saying, "Let my people go." At first, the Bible tells us Pharaoh hardened his own heart by

rejecting God's command. Then Pharaoh experienced plague after plague where God supernaturally stood behind Moses and his people. Just as the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day had more than enough supernatural evidence about the true identity of Jesus, Pharaoh had more than enough supernatural evidence that he was fighting God himself by not letting the Israelites people go.

Interestingly, while it says Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let God's people go, after a while the biblical text begins to tell us that God began hardening Pharaoh's heart. When Pharaoh consistently rejected Moses and God's many miracles, Pharaoh went from hardening his own heart to God hardening his heart and closing off the possibility of his repentance.

But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Exodus 8:15 (ESV)

But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses. Exodus 9:12 (ESV)

This is the same pattern we saw with the hard-hearted Israelites in Isaiah's day and with the hard-hearted Jewish leader's in Jesus' day.

Then we see God accomplishing his purposes not in spite of their rejection but *by means of their rejection*. The hard-heartedness of the religious leaders in Jesus' day became the very means by which God fulfilled his plan to have Jesus die for our sin.

I realize there is tension here between God's sovereignty in these things and man's responsibility in these things. Mark did not relax this tension so it would be inappropriate for me to relax this tension.

What I can say about this is the process in these things always appears to be that people end up in this state when they begin consistently rejecting the

overwhelming evidence God puts right in front of them for a long period of time. They eventually move from hardening their own hearts to having their hearts permanently hardened by God so they cannot respond to God's truth. Since they refuse to believe, God removes the opportunity to believe.

Mark then returned to the parable of the soils.

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” Mark 4:13 (ESV)

Jesus said that if you don't understand the parable of the soils, you won't be able to understand the other parables. In other words, this parable is foundational for understanding all the other parables Jesus taught. If you are going to understand other parables, you need to begin by understanding this parable about the way the kingdom works.

**Jesus explained the meaning of this parable.**

The sower sows the word. Mark 4:14 (ESV)

In this parable, Jesus is the sower. Soon, the apostles would also be sowers of the word of God. Today, we sow the word of God when we tell people about Jesus. The word is the good news about Jesus and what God has done for us through him.

**Some hearts are hard and unresponsive to the gospel.**

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. Mark 4:15 (ESV)

The hard soil of the walking paths between the fields in Galilee is a perfect picture of the hard and unreceptive hearts of some people who hear the good news of Jesus. At this time, the scribes had hard-soil hearts. They had all the



evidence in front of them, but their hearts were so hard against God they would not receive the seed of the word, because the seed could not penetrate their hard hearts. The reason the seed did not germinate was not because the sower was bad. It was not because the seed was bad. It was because their hearts were hard. Some people have hard hearts that will continually resist the truth of Jesus. This means you can present the gospel as clearly and as simply as you want all day long and the gospel will be like a bullet off a rock. The gospel won't penetrate. It is not because you did something wrong. The problem is with the hardness of the person's heart. Jesus said when we share the gospel, we need to accept that response.

We also see that the birds in this parable represent Satan. He comes and takes away the seed of the gospel that we share so there is no chance for it to germinate. This keeps people locked in slavery to Satan.

Satan uses a number of ways to take away the good news of the gospel when we share it with people. In Jesus' day, Satan was using the Pharisees and scribes who undermined everything Jesus said and did. Today, Satan uses false teachers, busy schedules, and constant distractions to take away gospel truth.

Years ago, I traveled with Athletes in Action wrestling to South America. Our team would wrestle the national team of the country, and at halftime, we would have one of our wrestlers share his testimony. Then we would give a simple explanation of the gospel message. We noticed things were relatively quiet for most of the program until we started talking about Jesus. At that point, something always happened to produce a distraction. A baby would begin to cry,

and everybody would be distracted. Somebody would drop something in the back row, and everybody would be distracted. A bird would fly in the window, and everybody in the room was looking at the bird, not listening to the gospel. There were constant distractions whenever we talked about Jesus. I think somehow Satan gets involved in those things to take away the seed of the gospel before it has a chance to germinate in someone's heart. That is what happens when you try to spread the seed of God's word. Jesus said we are in a spiritual battle. Expect Satan will distract people in order to take away the seed of the gospel.

**Some hearts respond superficially to the gospel.**

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 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 (ESV)

The seed on stony soil sprouts quickly but also dies quickly. It looks good on the surface but it is hard rock just below the surface. The stony soil represents people that receives the gospel of Jesus with excitement but as soon as they realize following Jesus costs them something, they walk away.

They are like the crowds that followed Jesus. They wanted to be around Jesus when he was healing them and when he was giving away free lunches at the feeding of the 5,000, but as soon as he said following him had a cost, as soon as he said, "Take up your cross and follow me," they walked away. The Gospel of John tells us how his disciples responded when he talked about the cost of following him.

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. John 6:66 (ESV)

The Bible tells us that all of us will pay a price for following Jesus.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... 2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

This reminds me of something I heard about this past week in Arizona. Two young women in that state have an artwork and calligraphy studio called Brush and Nib. They create custom artwork for weddings. According to Arizona law, they must make their artwork for the LGBTQ community. Every day they do not comply by making custom art for a gay wedding is a \$2,500 fine plus six months in jail. The two Christian women who run this are in the courts trying to challenge this law because they believe in the biblical definition of marriage. They don't want their names attached to their artwork that is used to promote a homosexual wedding. In the interview I heard, one woman was asked what they would do if they lost their legal challenge and they faced jail time and thousands of dollars in fines. I loved her answer. She said that if they need to go to jail and lose thousands of dollars, they will go to jail. Then she said, "We will not turn our backs on Jesus." If her heart was stony soil, her faith would have been compromised as soon as she realized following Jesus cost her something. A genuine heart that has received the gospel won't turn away from Jesus in tough times.

Afflictions and suffering in the Christian life are actually a good thing. When there is suffering in the church, it reveals the dead branches in the church. God uses suffering to prune his church. For those who truly love him, their faith always grows deeper and stronger in times of suffering. The largest steps of spiritual growth in your life will always happen in the toughest times of your life. I know some of you are in difficult times right now. You will either fall away from

Jesus and your faith will be revealed as a fraud or you will grow to become more like Jesus, and one day you will look back on the difficult times in your life, thanking God for how he changed you to be more like Christ during them.

**Some hearts are let worldly desires choke out the gospel.**

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 (ESV)

This is soil that looks good on the surface but is filled with thorns and weeds. When the seeds begin to grow, the weeds begin to grow. The weeds slowly choke out the farmer's seeds, making them unfruitful. The weed-infested soil represents a heart that is preoccupied with the worries of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. While these people want Jesus, over time it is revealed they are truly preoccupied with stuff and status in this world more than they want Jesus. They are more interested in developing their financial portfolios than in developing the portfolios of their Christian character. If they had to make a choice to have riches with a half-hearted love for Christ or to have a modest life with stellar Christian character, they would choose riches over Christ-like character every time. They would rather be known for the brand of clothes they wear than the character of Christ they display. Jesus said this:

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

Every one of us needs to decide what is more important, loving our money or loving our Jesus.

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. For all that is in the world—the desires of the

flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. 1 John 2:15–17 (ESV)

You cannot love this world and love Jesus at the same time. In the weed-infested heart, the love for stuff and status will choke out fruitfulness for Christ every time.

**Some hearts receive the gospel and produce abundant fruit.**

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 (ESV)

Jesus contrasted the three poor soils with the good soil of true belief. The way you recognize a heart with good soil that has genuinely received Jesus is it always bears fruit. In all the other soils, there was no fruit. The goal of farmers is not to just grow a plant. It is to reap a harvest. It is only the soil that produces a harvest that is considered a success.

The soil of the heart is what makes the difference every time. This heart has soil prepared by God to receive the seed of the word in such a way that it grows and produces abundant fruit.

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44 (ESV)

There is one primary application of this parable, but I will give you a few additional ways we can apply it to our lives.

### **Applications.**

1. **There are four ways people will respond to the gospel when we share it.**

**Their responses are not based on the skill of our sowing or the vitality of the gospel seed but on the condition of their hearts.** This is the primary

purpose of this parable. We must understand that when we share the good news of Jesus Christ, some will be very hard against the gospel. That is not because of anything we did. It is because of the hardness of their hearts. Others will have the soil of their hearts soft to the gospel and will receive it joyfully and their lives will produce an abundance harvest for Christ and his kingdom. The difference is in the condition of the heart, not in the seed or the sower. Knowing this takes the pressure off us. Our job is simply to share the gospel message. We cannot control how people will respond. The good news is we know there are some hearts around us that God has plowed soft. He has taken out the rocks. He has pulled out the weeds. All we need to do is share the good news of Jesus and they will respond. When people reject Jesus and the good news or they fall away from Jesus and the good news, that is not because of our sowing or because of God's gospel, it is because of the condition of their hearts.

2. **A heart that truly knows Jesus will always produce fruit.** As we discussed a few times in this message, the goal of the farmer is not to grow a plant. It is to produce a harvest. God's desire is not just that we would live for him but that we would produce fruit and lead others to know him. That is a fruitful Christian life.
3. **This parable is not just about how others respond to the gospel. I should examine how I am responding to the gospel.** This parable is bracketed by the command to listen. While the primary purpose of this parable is to teach us what we should expect when we tell others about

Jesus, I think it is still appropriate to let this parable challenge us in our own lives. When we go through times of suffering for Jesus, we must remind ourselves to expect this suffering and know God has a good purpose in our suffering to mature us to be more like Jesus. When we find ourselves loving this world too much so we are not being fruitful for Jesus and using our time and talents to lead others to Jesus and help them mature in him, it is an appropriate challenge for us to ask ourselves if we have fallen more in love with this world than with Jesus and to repent if that is the case.

4. **There comes a time, after people consistently reject abundant truth about Jesus, that God hardens their hearts so they can no longer repent.** That is hard to hear, but it is in the Bible. We see it with Pharaoh. We see it with the hard-hearted Israelites in Isaiah's day. We see it with the hard-hearted Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. It is a reminder to us to never be hard-hearted to Jesus, to always be soft toward him and zealous to repent of sin and follow him.

This week, let us remember we are sowers that scatter the seed. Our job is to simply keep telling people the good news of Jesus. Expect hard-hearted rejection. Expect people to be interested and fall away. Expect people to be distracted by busyness and ultimately prove unfruitful. Also expect some hearts will hear the gospel message and the soil of those hearts will have been prepared by God to receive the gospel seed. When we share the gospel with them, they will take it in, the gospel will grow and their lives will produce a supernatural harvest for Christ and his kingdom.



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