

Mark 4:1–20

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[0 : 00] Chapter 4, verses 1-20. Again, he began to teach beside the sea! And a large crowd gathered about him.

! When he sowed, some seed fell along the path.

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, 30-fold and 60-fold and 100-fold.

[1 : 08] 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.

[2 : 16] They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. And the desires of 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. Thirty-fold.

And sixty-fold. And a hundred-fold. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning.

Let me add my word of welcome to Christ Church Chicago this morning. So glad that you are here as we continue our series, the Gospel of Mark.

As we begin this morning, let me start with a confession. Don't look at me that way.

[3 : 14] We all have a past. And so I'm going to ask that you not judge me or report me. But I have a history.

A history of unintentionally killing plants. I'm not proud of it.

I don't mean to do it. I don't wake up saying, what plant can I take out today? But somehow, every plant I touch ends up in plant heaven.

I've tried everything. I've watered them too much, killed it. Didn't water them enough, killed it. Put it in the sun, dead. Took it out of the sun, still dead.

Somebody told me to talk to them. They didn't respond. At one point, I just started blaming the plant. These are just some bad plants.

[4 : 24] After enough frustration, I said, all right, I need professional help. So I went down to the Home Depot, walked into the garden section, pretending like I belong there.

And I finally found one of the workers and said, listen, I'm doing everything I know how to do, but nothing I plant survives. What can I do? What can I do?

He started asking me questions. How often are you watering it? What kind of light is it getting? Walk me through the kind of dirt you're putting the seeds into. And after I told him everything I was doing, he just kind of looked at me, shook his head a little, and said, yeah, I see the problem.

So I leaned in like he was about to give me some life-changing secret. And he said, it's not the seed, it's the soil.

I never forgot that because what he was really telling me was that there's nothing wrong with what you're planting. The issue is the environment you're planting it in.

[5 : 41] And I can tell you that that's exactly what Jesus is teaching in this passage this morning. The problem is not the word, which is the seed here in our text.

The problem is not the message. The problem is the ground of the heart it's falling on. It's not the seed. It's the soil.

When we arrive at Mark chapter 4, the timing of this particular text is incredibly intentional. Jesus has been preaching the word of God throughout Mark chapters 1, 2, and 3.

And the responses of his ministry have been drastically different. Some people are amazed and transformed while others question him, resist him, and outright reject him.

By the end of chapter 3, the religious leaders are accusing Jesus of operating by the power of Satan. And even members of his own family think he should be committed because he's lost his mind and gone crazy.

[6 : 50] Everywhere Jesus goes, the ministry of the word is creating a reaction. Some are leaning in. Some are walking away.

Some are confused. Some are changed. And the question becomes then, as it does today, why do people respond so differently to the exact same message?

Why does the same word soften one heart while hardening another? In response to that very tension, Jesus gives this parable here in chapter 4 to remind us of something we often forget. It's not the seed. It's the soil. Here for the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus begins teaching extensively through parables.

A parable in simplest terms is an earthly story with an heavenly meaning. The word parable itself carries the idea of laying two things side by side.

[8 : 01] Placing a familiar story next to a spiritual truth so that the story becomes the illustration of the truth being revealed. Jesus takes ordinary images. Jesus takes ordinary images people understood and uses them to uncover deeper realities about the kingdom of God.

Parables are not merely clever sermon illustrations. They demanded spiritual hearing. They become almost a filter of sorts.

Because while, yes, they revealed truth, they also exposed the listener. In other words, you could hear the story and still miss the meaning.

This particular parable becomes especially important because it really serves as a key to understanding all the other parables. In many ways, this is the parable about parables.

Jesus is teaching us not only how people respond to the word, but why some hearts receive spiritual truth and others reject it. If you understand this parable, Jesus says in verse 13, the rest of the parables begin to open up to you with greater clarity.

[9 : 24] The text itself is beautifully arranged with Jesus in the opening verses in front of a large crowd by the sea telling the story of a farmer scattering seed across different kinds of ground and what happens to the seed.

Then later in the passage, Jesus does something somewhat rare in that he explains, interprets his own parable.

Now, before he even begins telling the story, notice how he opens in verse 3. Listen, listen, hear this. This is no slow, boring introduction.

Jesus steps forward and says, lean in, wake up, give me your undivided attention, because what I'm about to say has eternal significance. Here's the big idea.

I said the issue is not the seed. The seed, the word of God, is good, powerful, and life-giving. The determining factor for all growth is the soil, the condition of the human heart.

[10 : 36] Wherever the word is preached, taught, sung, shared, or read, there will always be these different kinds of responses.

Some will receive it emotionally but shallowly. Some will become distracted and choked by the cares of life. But some hearts, by the grace of God, will receive the word and bear fruit.

As we look deeper, for the sake of time and clarity this morning, rather than separating the story from the explanation, I want us to walk through both together, looking at each soil and then hearing Christ's explanation a few verses later of what each soil represents.

As we do, don't just think about somebody else's heart. Ask yourself honestly, what condition is my heart in when the word of God is sown into my life?

Because before Jesus ever talks about being fruitful, he talks about the ground. Because it's not the seed, it's the soil.

[11 : 55] First, Jesus says, the sower sowed seed and some of the seed fell on the path. The path, the hard, compacted ground.

Trails that had been hardened over the years from people walking on it. The seed never even got into the soil. Birds came and snatched it up.

But Jesus says, this is the person who hears the word and it just sits on the surface. Nothing gets in. It represents those people who treat the word like a spam call.

Anybody ever answered the phone and immediately regretted it? Hello? Yes? Hello? Hello? Can we talk about your car warranty?

And if you're like me, no, we can't. Click. You don't write it down. You don't reflect on it.

[12 : 59] You don't talk about it later. You just say, that was nothing and you move on. That's how some people treat the word of God. It's not that the word wasn't clearly spoken.

It's not that it wasn't powerful. It's just that it never got in. Why? Because the heart is hard.

Sometimes it's indifference. Sometimes it's skepticism. Sometimes it's just, I'm not interested. Or maybe it's the person that's kind of interested and is just what we'll call a consumer of the pulpit.

Meaning Sunday after Sunday, they study the seed, analyze the seed, take notes about the seed, sing about the seed, admire the seed. But the seed never penetrates the soil.

It never gets down into the heart. You hear the word, but you don't really hear the word. And Jesus says, for that person, the enemy comes immediately, not next week, not next month, immediately, and snatches it away.

[14 : 09] It can happen to us all. Well, I remember attending an executive pastor conference some years ago where a speaker was giving a big keynote address.

Everybody was clapping. They were taking notes, acting like their lives had been changed. I was with it. So afterward, I walked up to the speaker to encourage him.

And I said, man, I really enjoyed your talk. Powerful stuff. He smiled and said, thank you so much. What part of the talk stood out to you?

And I immediately realized that I had not been listening to a word this guy was saying. I had spent half the session checking emails and wondering why these conference chairs were so hard.

But now I'm trapped. I started throwing out random conference words. Well, the way you connected leadership with vision and strategy was just powerful.

[15 : 18] And he looked confused and said, that's interesting because my session was about church insurance policies. And I said, exactly.

And tried to get out of there as fast as I could. The truth is, I wanted credit for hearing a message I never actually listened to. Never really received.

That's one kind of soil. Nothing gets in. But Jesus then says, there's another kind. There's a kind where something does get in, but it just doesn't last.

It's the shallow soil. This seed hits rocky ground and can probably readily be seen in the crowds that were following Jesus.

Like Instagram followers, they see that he's trending and they jump on the bandwagon chasing the hot thing. They love him for his miracles, but won't follow him for his message.

[16 : 25] In this soil, the seed springs up fast, quick growth, quick excitement, but no depth. The sun comes out and it withers away.

This is the person who hears the word and says, yes, that's my sermon. Preach, Pastor Pace. You all could say that every now and then.

Okay. That changed my life. I'm all in. Until life gets hard.

Until obedience costs something. Until pressure shows up. Until following Jesus isn't convenient or comfortable anymore.

And suddenly, what looked like growth disappears. They get excited about a word. When it gets tested with heat, it shows their real trust lies elsewhere.

[17 : 28] They get criticized and the word about God's love and forgiveness withers. Their prayer doesn't get answered the way they want it to. And trust wilts, saying, what's the use?

This kind of soil wants the blessing and not the blesser. It is shallowly open to Jesus as long as his word gives what it's really after.

And that's blessing and a comfortable life. Let me say it like this. Some people love the feeling of faith, but not the formation of faith.

They want the highlight reel, but not the daily discipline. They want the mountaintop, but not the roots. Church, I'm here to tell you that it's the roots that keep you when life gets hot.

So the first soil, nothing gets in. The second soil, something gets in, but it doesn't last. Now Jesus gets even closer to home. It's the third soil.

[18 : 33] It's the crowded soil. In this third soil, which may be the most dangerous threat of all, the seed grows, but it gets choked out. Not by opposition.

Not by persecution. But by other stuff. Jesus names it in verse 19. The cares of life, the deceitfulness of riches.

The busyness of life and the preoccupation and desire for other things. In other words, life gets crowded. This is the person who says, I believe.

I really believe. Yes, I do believe. But there's so much going on. Bills, schedules, stress, emails, deadlines, responsibilities.

And before you know it, the word is still there, but it's not producing anything. Listen carefully, church. Listen to me.

[19 : 34] The enemy doesn't always need to destroy you. Sometimes he just needs to distract you. You're busy, but not fruitful.

Active, but not growing. There's just no time. You sit down in the morning. If you're lucky, try to read the Bible, and your mind is spinning, and you're thinking about everything else you've got to do, and you can't even remember what you just read.

And just that quickly, you're on to the next thing, thinking about surviving this week, and did I remember to pack the kids' lunches? You're not thinking, oh, this is going to be a joyous week of growth and communion with the Lord.

Some of us are so busy, we need a calendar reminder to pray. 3.15 p.m., talk to God for five minutes before the next meeting.

But I'm telling you, life is not going to slow down. If you don't set aside quiet moments, moments where you can slowly digest the word, moments of lingering conversations with other Christians, moments for quality time in prayer, Jesus says those thorns will choke the word right out of your life.

[21 : 00] Quickly, Jesus mentions one more thorn. He calls it the deceitfulness of riches. Now, for those of you that have been here, we just came out of Ecclesiastes, and you know what the Bible says about the vanity of riches.

Riches deceive because they promise security and satisfaction they can never truly give. They take your eyes off Christ.

Now your thoughts are of how do I get more money? How do I keep this money? How do I pay off these debts? How do I get a little more than he has?

These desires for other things crowd out the word so that you are no longer seeking first Christ and his kingdom. Hear me. It's not the thing as much as it is the preoccupation with trying to get the thing and then all the energy and mental space it takes to keep the thing once you have the thing. What time is left for the word to sink deep into your heart? It's being choked out by the cares of life and the deceitfulness of riches.

[22 : 14] But finally, after three unproductive soils, Jesus shows us what happens when the soil is right.

The seed falls into good soil. This soil represents the ones who don't just hear the word casually. They receive it. They welcome it. They embrace it. They allow it to sink deep into their hearts and take ownership of their lives. They're not constantly trying to negotiate with God, edit his commands, or explain away his truth.

No, when the word speaks, they submit to it. There is a steady, ongoing, positive posture of surrender to whatever God says.

They continually hunger for the word, continually lean into the word, continually build their lives upon the word. And Jesus says the result is that they bear fruit.

[23 : 19] In other words, the evidence that the seed truly took root is not merely an emotional moment or a temporary burst of excitement. It is a transformed life that keeps producing fruit over time.

Here to church, I would say it this way. Write it down. Good seed sown into good soil will grow into a good tree bearing good fruit.

Notice the fruitfulness Jesus describes. 30-fold, 60-fold, even 100-fold. This is not a tiny sprout barely hanging on.

This is visible, undeniable, God-produced growth. This is noticeable change. There is spiritual maturity. There is obedience, discipleship, faithfulness, perseverance, good works flowing out of their lives for the glory of God.

Unlike the shallow soil, when hardship comes, the fruit remains. Unlike the thorny soil, when pressure and distractions arise, the fruit continues to grow.

[24 : 36] In fact, trials often deepen and strengthen the roots even more. The evidence of genuine salvation is not simply that somebody once responded emotionally to a sermon.

The evidence is that years later, through joy and sorrow, through blessings and battles, the word is still alive in them and fruit is still growing from them.

So, that's the difference good soil makes. And that's the power of this parable.

Because it's not just a story to hear. It's a story that's supposed to work on us while we hear it. In fact, there's this strange irony here.

Even when Jesus first told this parable, some people probably still didn't get it. Jesus is describing hard hearts, shallow hearts, distracted hearts.

[25 : 36] And some people listening, maybe like some of you here, even this morning, were like, that's an interesting story, nice sermon, Pastor Joe. But it's getting kind of late. And Pastor Bing said, we have lunch down in the Commons.

And it's time to get to it. Completely missing the point. But there are others that heard something deeper.

Something started happening inside of them. Conviction began to rise. Hunger began to grow. They thought, Lord, I want to be good soil. I want your word to grow in me.

Forgive me for the thorns I've allowed to crowd my heart. Forgive me for the shallow places and the hardness. And church, this is the moment that this parable is aiming for in all of us.

The word of God is still powerful. The gospel is still life-changing. The problem has never been the seed. It's the soil. If we're honest this morning, all of us have been every kind of soil at different moments in our lives.

[26 : 49] There have been seasons where our hearts were hard. Seasons where our faith was shallow. Seasons where we allow worries, distractions, money, fear, ambition, and anxiety to choke out what God was trying to grow in us.

But here's the good news of the gospel. I've been waiting all sermon to get to this point. Jesus doesn't just describe the soil.

Jesus has the power to transform the soil. Lord Jesus. Through his death and resurrection, he softens hard hearts. He deepens shallow roots.

He clears away thorns. He changes the condition of the ground so that the word can grow and flourish in us. All we have to do is acknowledge that we have some rough dirt patches that need tending.

Let him in and let him do the spade work. Now before you do your typical Sunday sermon critique, let me challenge you with this.

[28 : 09] The question from this text this morning is not, was the sermon good? I pray that it was. It's not that the message makes sense.

I pray that it did. The real question is, what kind of soil am I? What has my attention more than God?

What fills my thoughts before his word does? What do I run to when life gets heavy? Maybe today the Holy Spirit is lovingly pointing out to some of us some weeds that need to be pulled up.

Maybe there are distractions to remove, worries to surrender, habits to break, priorities to rearrange. Here's the beautiful thing, church.

Let me let you in on this little secret. Transformation often starts with small acts of surrender. Open the Bible before you open your phone, or at least open the Bible on your phone.

[29 : 19] Worship while you drive to work. Thank God for what he's already done before you panic over what hasn't happened yet. Little by little, the Spirit begins clearing the ground.

The soil softens, and over time you start noticing peace where fear used to live. Patience where anger used to grow.

Joy where emptiness used to reign. Let me say just one last thing as I close about this parable. It is about soils and seed, but it's also about the sower.

Jesus himself, the perfect sower. And he teaches us that even when some seed falls on hard ground, there's always good soil somewhere.

That means we don't stop sowing. That means we keep following his example and keep scattering the seed, and we keep sharing the gospel.

[30 : 30] Parents, keep sowing into your children. Believers, keep sowing at work, in your neighborhood, at school, on the bus, in everyday conversations, in faithful moments of witness.

We're not responsible for changing hearts. That's God's work. Our assignment is simply to keep scattering the seed. Some people will walk away unchanged.

Some will respond emotionally for a moment and disappear. Some will let the worries of life choke out the word. But some, by the grace of God, will be transformed.

And when they do, fruit will grow. Lives will change. Christ will save sinners. Christ will build his church.

And Christ will be glorified. The seed has the power to produce all of that. Is your heart ready to receive all of that?

[31 : 38] Break up the hard places. Go deeper than shallow faith. Pull out the thorns of distraction. Make room for the word. Because when the seed finds good soil, it grows into something beautiful that only God can create.

Because it's never about the seed. It's always about the soil. Where is your soil today?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your goodness. And patient love. Keep your word living in us. Soften the places we've hardened.

Deepen the places that are shallow. And root out the thorns that would choke your truth. Fill us with your spirit so that what you plant will bear lasting fruit for your glory.

And for the good of those around us. Help us to listen. Help us to obey. And help us to trust you. Day by day.

[32 : 52] In your son's name, we do pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.