

Soil Check

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[0 : 00] Hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweep from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. Thank you so much for tuning in to this radio broadcast today. And I just pray that God will take his word and that he will just have his way in your life and in mine.

Now, I got to tell you, I don't have much of a green thumb and I'm really not much into gardening, but my wife really does like this kind of stuff. So she enjoys digging in the dirt as she nurtures her flowers, as she prunes our landscape and even plants and cares for our garden.

And when we moved to Tennessee back in 2015, one of the perks of the house we bought was that it had a raised garden bed. Nice brick around it with a water spigot right there.

Nothing too large, but big enough where we could grow some fruits and vegetables for our family.

And as Bethany was telling a couple in the church about this, who became kind of like second parents to us, they got excited and had plenty of advice to give.

See, Randall took his gardening very seriously. When I say seriously, this guy was not content with the fruit of his labor. So he sends his soil sample to the University of Tennessee Ag Department, and he has them check pH levels, magnesium, all kinds of stuff.

[1 : 20] And then when he found out the results, he went to work making sure his soil had everything it needed to be top-notch, fertile ground where his plants would thrive.

And when he discovered that Bethany had a green thumb too, man, he was excited, and he made her his gardening disciple and helped us to have a pretty successful garden. But it all came down to the soil.

And today I want to do a different kind of soil check with you. The one that Jesus talks about here in Mark chapter 4 in what's called the parable of the sower. So grab your Bibles for me.

Go about three-quarters of the way through your Bible. Second book of the New Testament to the book of Mark. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. If you hit Luke or John, just hit reverse.

But as you turn into Mark 4, let me kind of fill you in on where we've been so far. As we approach the Gospel of Mark, we're doing so with this main theme of Jesus Christ, the servant-hearted Son of God.

[2 : 21] And we're actually looking at specific passages in this Gospel that talk about what does a disciple of Jesus really look like. See, in the first week we looked at John the Baptist and his just heart of repentance, his heart of service and humility that we're called to model as well.

Last week we gazed at five of the disciples that Jesus said those famous words to. Come, follow me. And we learned that that invitation is absolutely for you and me.

The God of the universe calls me, calls you to be his disciple. We learned also that the commitment to leave the world behind and truly follow Jesus is for me.

And the mission to go fishing for people to tell about Jesus is also for me. And today we're going to jump all the way from chapter 2 to chapter 4 past John the Baptizer's ministry.

We're moving past the call to Jesus' disciples. We're jumping beyond a whole lot of ministry and healing that Jesus was doing. And even some persecution that was coming from the religious leaders with Jesus' own family even questioning him.

[3 : 31] And we land here in John 4 with this parable that has been called the parable of the sower. But honestly, like a lot of scholars like to say, it'd probably be better named the parable of the soils.

So let's start here in Mark 1 and let's read this story. It says, Listen,

Now do you realize that most people Jesus preached to didn't choose to follow him and be his disciple?

You ever thought about that before? That the greatest preacher to ever live had a pretty low conversion rate. And here's why. Because it's all about the heart. And that's where free will comes

in.

Because Jesus doesn't just call us to follow something warm, toasty, and comfortable. But instead the call is to die to self, pick up our cross, and really follow him in his amazing grace.

[5 : 37] And it really is true when we do that, that yes, you have a God that loves you so much that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. And yet, he won't force you to trust and follow him.

And you can't trick him either. And as this story opens, Jesus gets in a little boat, goes just a few feet out into the water, because the crowds are that big, and he needs a little bit of space.

Now, I can relate to this. The joke with the praise team on our stage on Sunday mornings is that I'm kind of like a diva, okay? I'm a diva when it comes to getting my space up there to preach.

I don't like to be crowded. So that's why they always give me that rug, and I make sure all their stuff is off my rug. And this past summer, I had the opportunity to preach one night in Rush County at Mahoning Valley Christian Service Camp.

And I was preaching to middle school kids, and they were right up in my grill. I mean, that's just how it was set up. And I was preaching, and they're like right there on top of me. And I really didn't have a choice, so I just had to do it.

[6 : 40] But I would have been much happier if they'd had about 10 feet of space between us, so I could kind of back up and look them in the eyes a little bit. But here's the thing about those large crowds of 10, 15, 20,000 that rushed to hear Jesus.

He was very aware that there were all different kind of hearts that were represented in that crowd. The curious, the nosy that just wanted to see what this guy was all about. The emotional ones who ran to everyone who was new and exciting and always looking for that next emotional high. The hypocritical religious leaders looking for ammunition so they could come against him. The selfish who thought, hey, I can benefit from this Jesus guy. And even the sincere who were searching for the truth.

And in this parable, Jesus tells a story about unseen spiritual things told with common life illustrations of things that they understood and saw every day.

And Jesus speaks about a farmer who goes out to spread seed. And by the way, there was a farm ground that was all along the Sea of Galilee. So this world was very familiar to them.

[7 : 49] And that farmer represents the Lord whose greatest desire is to seek and save the lost. That he loves his creation so much that his gospel is always going out to meet us along the way.

That's the good news of Jesus Christ. The message of salvation in Christ that we have the privilege to walk in every day. That's the seed that was being sown in the story.

And guess where we come in? We're the soil. Our hearts, how receptive they are to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our hearts are the soil. So as hard as this can be, let's kind of look in the mirror today and do a soil check.

And although this may seem a touch strong maybe to you, I don't know. But I'm convinced that just like the crowd before Jesus that day, that there's probably all four of these soil types, these hearts represented, that are listening to my voice today.

But what I love about the gospel of Jesus Christ is exactly what it says in Hebrews chapter 4. It says,

[9 : 52] We will have hearts that are receptive for you. So, Father, have your way. Do your will in our hearts. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. All right.

So if you'd like to grab your outline for me, you can go to the YouVersion Bible app. Click on events. Down the bottom right-hand corner, you'll see those three lines. Hit events. Tap on our church, First Christian Church of Greensburg, Indiana.

And then you can get to the outline. But here's the question for today. Which heart is mine? Which heart is mine in this story? So let's start by talking about the first one, the unresponsive hard heart.

See, the good thing is that Jesus later explains exactly what this parable means to his disciples. So we really don't have to try to guess at all. So let's look at verse 4 that we already read.

And then we'll jump down to his explanation in verses 14 and 15 here in Mark 4. Verse 4. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

[10 : 56] Now here's the explanation. Verse 14. The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

Now, growing up in the country, we lived on five acres. It was a great way for my childhood because I got to run around and just awesome to live on that five-acre plot of land.

But all around us, most of the farmland was owned by the Fruitnick family. And they had these little paths. I mean, great family. Great family. They had these little paths that ran alongside their fields where they would drive their four-wheelers and their equipment to check on things.

And because they had probably driven over these paths thousands of times, they were hard and a lot like a road. So no seed, if it was planted there, would have penetrated that path.

And this hard type of path is what Jesus is talking about comparing this to a hard heart. Now here's the thing. Just because someone has a hard heart towards the things of God does not mean that they are just this despicable person that you'd want nothing to do with.

[12:06] It doesn't mean they're evil, mean-spirited person. In fact, I've met quite a few people who want nothing to do with God, and that breaks my heart, of course, but they're still a likable enough person.

I can think of two or three close family members right now that are like this. While some are kind of hostile towards Christianity, others are not. They're just not receptive. And at first glance, you hear the birds came and ate up the seed that was sown, and then we find out those birds represent Satan's deception that leads them away from the word.

And we can easily think, how is that their fault that Satan snatched the word away? But in the words of Pastor Jack Abilene, the word of God will do what the condition of the heart will allow.

Let me say it again. The word of God will do what the condition of the heart will allow. And there are just people whose hearts have no place for the Lord. Sometimes they're the husband, the wife, the teenager that's drugged to church, right?

And if you were to ask, well, hey, what did the preacher talk about today? No idea. Something about a guy who sent a soil off to be tested at the University of Tennessee. And we all know people like that, right?

[13:18] You talk to them and they're like, hey, you know, I'm just not interested. I don't want to talk politics or religion. That's great for you. That's great that you're into it. But I'm just not interested.

I'm not looking to be crazy about this stuff. But here's the cool thing about the first three hearts that we're going to talk about. No one, no matter how wicked their lifestyle, no matter how deep the addiction, no matter how cold towards the things of God they seem, no matter how backslidden, no one is too far gone and too hardened that God can't soften and change that soil.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of God's salvation, the God-breathed words of life, can transform any heart that is receptive. So don't give up.

I think of someone like C.S. Lewis, one of the greatest theological minds to ever live. And he started off as an atheist.

Did you know that? C.S. Lewis was an atheist with a hard heart. But as he studied and as God began to work, he came to this reality that Jesus Christ was God and Savior.

[14:26] And man, what an impact this guy made for the kingdom of God during his life. And even after his life, his books had continued to speak truth into lives. So keep praying for that child, that parent, that whoever you want to see come to know the amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

So that's the hard heart. Next, let's talk about the superficial, shallow heart. You know, one thing about soil in Israel is that there's a lot of bedrock.

And farmers spend a lot of time getting rid of that stone. Okay. It may look like a great layer of soil, but sometimes it's just three, four, five, six inches deep.

And underneath that soil is a whole layer of rock. The plants have great conditions to spring up because, you know, there's a few inches of soil and it's very, you know, moist.

And so they'll spring up quickly, but just as quick as they spring up, they'll wither away because there's no way for the roots to go down into that rock.

[15:28] Now, look at me here at verses five and six. We'll read this story one more time, just this section, and then we'll get an explanation in 16 and 17. Verse five, Now let's see the explanation.

Verse 16. So unlike the heart that doesn't even respond, this heart at least appears to show some life.

There's a response to the gospel. There's joy and appearance of salvation as they respond to the message of Jesus. And yet as quick as this change happens, it often goes away just as quick.

A couple of weeks ago, we took a minute to celebrate the 45 people who either place their membership at FCC in 2022, or who were baptized into Christ in 2022.

And while I would love to tell you that all 45 are walking with Jesus, bearing fruit of their salvation, the reality is that some fit this superficial, shallow heart, and their heart was not willing.

[16:57] Their heart was rocky. And so they received the message. And for a few, they fell away just as quick. See, I sit down with each person that I baptized into Christ.

And we talk about the commitment that you are making to the Lord and to the church and to the word and to growing every day. We talk about this being more than just emotions, more than hell insurance, and more than just my life has fallen apart, so I probably ought to do something like this. No, you study the scriptures, and then you baptize them in the water. And there's this excitement, and then promises are made, and you see them at church for a couple weeks or Wednesday nights, and they got their I Love Jesus bumper sticker on their car, and their big Bible in their hands. And then it's like you look up three or four weeks later, and they're nowhere to be seen. Huh, that's odd. Maybe they had another commitment. Maybe they were sick. No big deal. Then you look up two months later, and they're still not there.

And you reach out, and they're right back into that old lifestyle. As excited as they were, that excitement vanished quickly. Why? Because there was no true commitment.

[18:07] It was impulsive. It was shallow. It was emotional. And there wasn't a true repentance or a true commitment to turn away from that old lifestyle and follow Jesus. These are the same folks that change churches to always go to the latest and greatest church.

Or someone hurt my feelings, or they didn't say hi to me, or there was actually accountability for my actions, which is biblical, and I was called out for something I did wrong, and how can anybody ever do that to me?

Or, I just don't like the preacher's red hair. It makes me angry. Whatever it is. Everything's about emotions. And when it comes time to count the cost and stand firm for your faith, they're just not prepared to do so.

When troubles come, the roots just aren't there. They can't hold on. And this is why I beat this horse of repentance and commitment so much, is because it's tiring to see this same routine of people crying and going to the altar over and over when there's really no fruit of salvation to show from it. That's the shallow, superficial, impulsive, and emotional heart. And I think we all can lean this way if we're not daily in the truth and putting ourselves with like-minded believers growing deeper in our walk with Jesus.

[19:23] Let me show you the third heart. That's the crowded, worldly heart. Look back to Mark 4, 7 with me if you would. And then we'll look and see what exactly it means in verses 18 and 19.

It says, Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so they did not bear grain. Verse 18. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word, but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

You know, I'll never forget a commercial that was on TV probably back around, I don't know, 2012-ish. And it was this guy. He was in a big high-rise office and he's applying for a, what looks like a very important job.

And they offer it to him and the boss slides him a pretty good pay package. And you would think the guy would be satisfied, but he's not. And the guy looks at the boss and says, And?

And then the boss offers him like a greater pay package and even a corner office on top of it. And then it fades back in time to when he was a kid. And he went into the ice cream shop and the old-fashioned ice cream guy hands him this big ice cream with two scoops and any other kid would have been satisfied.

[20:44] But he says, And? And the guy adds sprinkles and a cherry on top. And I think it was like a bank commercial where they were saying, Hey, we can give you all this great stuff and more than every other bank.

But that commercial has always stuck with me because I think we live in a culture that is very much an and type of culture. I want Jesus and all these other things on the throne of my heart.

And I don't know if you know this or have studied God's word enough to know, but we have a jealous God who will not share our hearts with anything or anyone. And the thing about this soil and this heart is that it's not as obvious and quick of a fade as the rocky soil that fades as quick as it

comes.

This one grows up for a while. The thorns eventually, over time, choke it out and this soil bears no fruit. There's no evidence that a follower of Jesus actually inhabits this body.

But we know where the Holy Spirit is, which is in the life of every believer, that's a seal showing you belong to Jesus, where the Holy Spirit is, there's always going to be fruit.

[21 : 55] That doesn't mean rough days don't come, okay? That doesn't mean you have to be perfect because you won't. It just means that when the Holy Spirit is living inside of you, which means you are a believer, then that means there's going to be fruit and there's going to be growth in Christ.

So, what are the things that are climbing up on the throne of this heart? Well, first, Jesus says the worries of this life. And I think for a lot of us, that worry, that anxiety is the busyness, the craziness of life.

Anyone listening to this just feel overwhelmed with the million places that you always have to be? Yeah, I can relate completely. Bethany and I have kind of been on this unique journey probably the last six to nine months.

Still there, still are on this journey to reprioritize our lives, to put Christ first first, and not feel like we just can't even breathe. And one thing I'm realizing is that busyness is often our own fault.

Let me say it again because I may have just shocked you with that. Busyness is often our own fault. And before you get mad at me, think about it. We have been conditioned, whether we realize it or not, now I'm going to point it out to you if you've never thought about it.

[23 : 05] We've been conditioned that we have to be involved in all these different things. And our kids have to be in everything sports or band or dance or whatever and every single one that's ever offered.

And at the root, it often goes down to this idea that those things are how I define success in life. And yet, if you're a follower of Christ, success has to look different.

It has to be biblical. Success is you and your family actually following Jesus, growing in your walk in Him every day, using your gifts to serve the Lord and see Him move through your life and even someday when this life is over, spending eternity worshiping Him in heaven.

That's what true success looks like. And I know this may sound crazy to some people, but I'd rather my child know Jesus than pitch for the Cincinnati Reds. I'd rather my child know Jesus than sacrifice church and everything else where they can get into Juilliard for dance or for music.

And please don't mishear me. There's nothing wrong with sports or dance or music or activities for kids. Those things can be healthy. I played a lot of sports myself and learned a lot of discipline that way.

[24 : 18] But listen, what it comes down to is the motivation of my heart and making this commitment to Christ before anything else. And sometimes we have to learn to say no.

But the problem with the crowded worldly heart is they say no to everything of God that they should be saying yes to. And they say yes to chasing after the things of this world thinking somehow it's going to satisfy when it never does.

And listen, there's always good excuses to be found when Jesus is crowded out by the things of this world. If you want to find excuses, you'll always find them.

But what happens when we truly prioritize our life around the things of God and growing in Him first? There's also this conditioning that happens in our culture that we always got to have more and more.

Have you felt that pull from our culture? You got to have more. You got to have the nicest. You got to have the best of everything. The bigger home, the newer car, the latest phone. And the thing about this deceitfulness of wealth that Jesus talks about here is that we don't even see that we're going down this path.

[25 : 25] But Jesus makes it clear here when He talks about how this will choke out the Word of God so easily and make any of us so unfruitful. So, there's this heart check where I have to look in the mirror and that can be painful.

And I have to see if the things of this world are crowding up on my heart by my actions. And am I making sure that Jesus really is number one? Am I living in such a way that I realize those things will never satisfy?

That's the crowded worldly heart that says, listen, I want Jesus and the world. But, the Word of God makes it clear.

Jesus wants all of you and He won't share. And when He's in His rightful place, here's the thing that makes us crazy for chasing after these worldly things. When Jesus is in His rightful place, everything else will fall into place and the things that don't matter, they will fade out of this picture because they don't fill you up anyways.

So that is the crowded worldly heart. Now let's talk about the last heart, the one that every one of us should strive for, the receptive fruitful heart.

[26 : 37] You know, about the time I got to this point as I was preparing this message, I realized that I probably should have made this message last for two Sundays, okay? Because here I am going to squeeze this one in and make it way quicker than it probably should be.

So let me share a quote with you by John MacArthur. Where he explains the receptive fruitful heart. Here's what he says and by the way, if you don't have the outline that you can look at at the YouVersion Bible app, we got all kinds of scripture references here that show how biblical this quote is from John MacArthur.

He says, true believers, those characterized by the good soil do not merely accept the gospel mentally, they are transformed by it through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus' words indicate, fruit bearing is the ultimate mark of those who genuinely believe. Having been made alive by the Spirit of God, they produce fruit in keeping with repentance, the fruit of righteousness, and the fruit of the Spirit.

though believers are not saved by doing good works, those who are truly saved will give evidence of their new life in Christ through the fruit of obedience.

[27 : 51] Man, that is good stuff there. And here's the thing. If we're honest with ourselves, I bet every one of us can see tendencies in our soil to just make superficial, emotional, and shallow efforts towards the Lord.

It's so easy to get caught up in that moment. I bet a lot of us could relate to how easy it is to live a Jesus and lifestyle where He is just one of many things on the throne of my heart.

It's so easy to fall into the world's ways of doing things and sometimes not even realize it. But here's my prayer for all of us, for you and for me. I pray that we can be this soil that is good because it's been transformed, it's been tilled up by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I pray that our number one goal is to always love and honor and be obedient to the Lord with every part of who we are. I pray that God's word and the unceasing prayers that we offer are disciplines that we seek as we put our roots down deeper every day.

And I can honestly say that I'm thankful that as I look around our church family and we're just like any other group, we're far from perfect. But as I look around our growing church, where this body of believers, I'm so thankful that we are bearing fruit 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

[29 : 14] Why? Because that's what Jesus does when our soil, our hearts are all in. Pray with me. Father, we are just so thankful for your word today.

Thank you for speaking it into our hearts. May we truly be this receptive, fruitful soil that you've called us to be. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hey, let me give you this invitation real quick. If you have any questions about following Jesus, about your faith, reach out. My name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor here at First Christian Church of Greensburg, Indiana.

You can email me at ray at FCC Greensburg dot com or you can call at 812-663-8488 and we would love to walk alongside you on this journey of your faith.

Hey, God bless you and have a great week.