

Don't be a fruitless stalk!

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[0:00] 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 the 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 the 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 who are sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word, and accept it, and bear fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

[1:14] Now, it's pretty clear from this interpretation that Jesus is not talking about four different kinds of dirt. He's talking about four different kinds of people.

Each of whom react to this, the word, differently. Jesus uses the word, the ones, in all three of these parts for the interpretation.

But they have different reactions to the word. Notice, however, in verse twenty, when he talks about this fourth kind of person, he changes his phrasing ever so slightly when he says, But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit.

Now, the purpose of this exercise in reading this is to get some insight, really, into our own hearts. And to make some observations about the people that we see around us and how they react to the word.

Let's go back to the beginning and start with the first kind of soil. In the first telling, in verse three, and in the interpretation, this seed, the word, does not last very long on the soil.

[2:30] These people hear, as Jesus tells us in verse fifteen, but the birds, which are in the first telling, in verse three, or Satan, which is in the interpretation of the birds, as Jesus explains in verse fifteen, immediately, quote, immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

Now, you and I cannot look into the hearts of others and see what God is doing. But we can hear what they say and see their actions.

And I think, in this case, take them on their word. I have some family members who, when they hear the gospel, will immediately say to me, that's a bunch of bunk.

They say it's a fairy tale, which is fine for me, but it's just silliness. And if I want to believe those things, that's fine. But don't bother them with that kind of nonsense.

Actually, I've heard them use far more colorful language than that to dismiss the gospel from some of my family members. There's probably nobody sitting in this church today who are that kind of soil, those kind of people.

[3:46] And the reason is because you wouldn't be around here long enough for us to get to know you if you were. But all of us have seen and heard people who criticize and dismiss the gospel.

And that person is this first kind of soil. Now, people can change, which is why preachers preach sermons and why Jesus tells us to proclaim the gospel to others.

But at least at this stage in their lives, someone like that is this first kind of soil. They want nothing to do with God, and they will not uncommonly clearly tell you that.

Now, the second kind of soil is a little like the first kind, but with a bit of a twist. In the interpretation, I'll read verses 16 and 17 of Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells about the second kind of person.

And these are the ones sown on the 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.

[4:58] Then, when tribulation or persecution arises, on account of the word, immediately they fall away. Go back to verses 5 and 6, where, not the interpretation, but the original telling of it, and he

says it like this, 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.

Kind of the same thing, a little different. So, what is this sort of person who Jesus compares to this second kind of soil? This is a person for whom Jesus in the Gospel is somewhat of a passing fad. He has a stage in their lives, but they've come to move on to something else. Now, I've known several people like this, and I'm sure you do too.

Yeah, they were into God, but that was then, and this is now. They don't really pretend to be a Christian, except maybe they do in May. The term I like to use for them is, they make the claim to identify as a Christian.

Maybe. You know, the folks who, when the Gallup takes a survey, they will answer that they're Christian, or Catholic, or Methodist, or Baptist, or whatever, but this is just sort of a historical identification for them.

[6:29] I can use a personal example to show you this. Many of you know that I was a long-distance runner. I ran for a long time, about 41 years, and I was pretty good.

I ran a lot of races, and I had some pretty good times. I ran 20 to 40 miles a week, and I trained for marathons in my 20s, and I ran 70 miles a week.

I could honestly say in those years that I was a runner, but a few years back, a sorry state of my left ankle and foot brought up with me, and I no longer run.

I had foot and ankle surgery, which was quite successful, but I have not run in some years. I still have the soul of a runner, but to say that I'm a runner today is little more than a historical or autobiographical comment about what I once did and once was.

It may be something that I identify with, and I kind of do, but to say that I'm a runner today is really quite inaccurate. I'm not.

[7:40] I may identify as a runner in my feelings, but if truth be known, I'm just not that. And that's a little like the person in this second kind of soil.

If he says he's a Christian, in all truthfulness, he's pretty much kidding himself, since he does nothing consistent with being a Christian, in the same way that I do nothing at this stage in my life consistent with being a long-distance runner.

It's really just a memory or a personal identification, but there's little fact to back it up. And so it is with a person who is this second kind of soil.

It matters not in your life what you once were, but who you are in the here and now. That's what Jesus is concerned about. A person with a second kind of soil might show up in church on Easter or when a family member vaguely from the coming.

And they may still identify as a Christian, but they really are in name only. Their Christian faith is an identity for them, an identifying badge, but it's nothing which has any real deep significance.

[8:57] Now, we want to be careful not to be too hard or judgmental on somebody in this position. The best we can do is pray for them and perhaps on the right occasions ask them some tough questions from time to time.

I might say to somebody who says he's a Christian but appears not to practice it in the least some pithy question like, Sam, in what sense are you a Christian? How are you different from someone who's not a Christian?

Often we'll say, we might hear something like, well, I need a good life, and then we can talk about, this could lead to a discussion about it not being, being a Christian isn't about being a good person, but about a commitment to Jesus that saves us from our sins rather than our own acts, and so on. You can encourage them by faith and pray for them. But that's where, that's the person in the second kind. Jesus then goes on verses 18 and 19 of Mark 4 with the following words about the third kind of soil.

And others, he says, are the ones sown among the 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.

[10:22] Now, Jesus does not tell us what sort of seed or crop he's talking about here in this parable, or it is never. He may have said that when he was by the Sea of Galilee, but Mark and the other gospel writers didn't record it.

It could be weed or corn or something else, it doesn't really matter. But look at his words carefully and compare what this third kind of soil produces compared to the first two. Here, there might be a full-grown stock or plant, or perhaps a stunted half-grown one, but there's no fruit in the stock.

Maybe it's a corn stock, but with no ears of corn, just the plant, or a wheat stock, the stock with no wheat. I'm no farmer, but it doesn't take a farmer to tell you that a stock of a plant without an ear of corn, or a wheat stock without a sheaf of wheat, is absolutely useless to anybody.

Why does this happen? We get a stock, but no grain or corn. Well, Mark 18.19 says that this seed was sown among thorns, that they are those who fear 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.

[11:47] Now, I'll tell you the truth. This one scares me a lot. Because there was a great deceitfulness in this sort of person as a Christian.

If you stand off from a distance and you look at a fully grown stock of corn, you might think that it's healthy and just fine. Until you go up close and then you see there's no ear there, there's no crop. It's just the stock of a plant. Instead, it's just full of leafy uselessness. I guess somebody might call it corn, but they're sort of kidding themselves to call it corn.

It's corn, but without corn. This is what Jesus said about the people who are this third kind of soil. We see the shape and form of a Christian, but no substance.

Unfruitful is the word that he uses in Mark 4.19. I coined the term affiliate for that kind of a Christian.

[12:50] You know what an affiliate is. Somebody who identifies with something and has some of the external trappings of it, but not really the substance.

I'll take another example from my own life. Since ceasing to be a long-distance runner, I'm now a cyclist. But in order to be a real bicyclist, I must ride my bike.

I must do it on a pretty regular basis. It's not enough that I have a nice bike with all the gear, and I have it chained into the garage, and it's oiled and ready, and all the biking clothes that look real cool or not, depending on what you think of that.

I've got to ride it, or my being a bicyclist is a little more than an affiliation. I'm sort of kidding myself. I sometimes call myself an amateur photographer, and I was going to bring it up here.

It's right there next to him. I've got a lot of camera... No, that's okay. I've got a lot of camera equipment with a lot of high-end stuff. You guys have seen it. I've taken pictures. But if I don't get out with that gear and use it and produce pictures, I'm a guy who affiliates with being a photographer, but I'm not really one.

[14:09] I've got all the gear and even the cool clothes. I've got a shooting vest. I've put all the stuff in. But that doesn't make me a photographer. You've got to get out and use it to call yourself a photographer.

Imagine two guys standing over here. See, if we had one of those video things in this church, I'd toss a picture out, but you're going to use your imagination. We've got two guys standing right here. And both of them are decked out with cameras around their necks and extra lenses and filters and wearing a camera vest. One guy is named Ansel Adams, and the other guy is named Joe Shutterbug.

The first guy knows what he's doing. The second guy has never even taken a picture. He's just got the gear. He just looks like it. Well, you get what I'm saying.

That, according to Jesus, is the sort of person that this third kind of soil is. He may look like the fourth kind, but as Jesus says in verse 19, the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word.

[15:23] Now, it's pretty easy, I'm going to speak autobiographically, to let stuff get in the way of being a really fruitful Christian.

Jesus lists three things in Mark. The cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things. And I'll tell you, I can feel all three of those talking pretty hard on my soul.

I might not be the only one there, but... If a person doesn't, isn't in this church every Sunday to worship God, that's something that can stop you from being a fruitful Christian.

Now, there are plenty of good reasons not to be here. You know, illness, lack of a way to get there, the roads are too icy. You know, those are good reasons.

But, you know, there's a lot of crummy reasons too. Sporting events, birthday parties, being on vacation, and just the distractions that we have, something else good to do.

[16:34] You know, those are crummy reasons. That pulls us away from being a fruitful Christian. When one of these things gets in the way of your going to church, you are screaming at yourself, and those around you, your children, your parents, whoever sees you, that those other things are more important than what we're doing here.

If a person is too busy or distracted, or you've got other activities that squeeze out daily prayer or scripture reading, that is something which can stop you from being a fruitful Christian.

If a person doesn't give to the church in a meaningful way, it's a matter of the deceitfulness of riches. You know, I can spend my money on another camera lens or a bicycle.

I love to do that. But that can stop me from being a fruitful Christian. Jesus said in another part, I'm going to flip to it, where your treasure is, your heart is.

Your heart will follow where you put your money. The failure to get together with other Christians, say in small groups or in other contexts, that can stop you from being a fruitful Christian.

[17:58] Now, just being distracted or more interested in the other things in your life, no matter what they may be, are things which can definitely stop you from being a fruitful Christian.

These are things that God wants us to put behind Him. Now, this is not to say that if you do all this stuff, and quite frankly, the Pharisees were great at doing all this stuff.

They did all the right things. It's not a matter of doing the stuff on the list or another list that makes you to be a Christian. But unless your identification and your affiliation as a Christian is followed up by something of significant and consistent actions, you're pretty much just somebody who affiliates with Christ, but not really a follower of Jesus who produces the fruit.

fruit. Now, the second reading today out of Revelation is a pretty tough reading. It's a great warning to those of us who are only affiliated with Jesus, and there's a little piece of everybody, a little piece of me that's like that, and are merely born.

Listen to what John writes in Revelation 3, 16, and then a couple of verses afterwards. So, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

[19:34] For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Those whom I love I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. That's a tough one. From a worldly perspective, Jesus is a feel-good, deistic, moralistic therapist who tries to help us to be better.

But if you look at the Jesus of the Gospels, this Gospel, you don't have to look very far. Starting with the parable of the four soils, he is nothing of that sort of God.

He is interested in fruit in his disciples, not our identifying with him or affiliating with him. So, what sort of fruit does he want to see from us?

Well, let's go back to the parable just for a second. What is the sower throwing in the air which lands on the four different kinds of soil? Yeah, it's seed.

[21:04] Corn, wheat, whatever. It doesn't much matter what it is. It's the same stuff that the harvester on the fourth kind of soil reaps thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

You see what Jesus wants from us here? He wants us to do that which he is doing, to scatter the seeds of the gospel on the ground, not on the ground, in people, so that it too can fall on this fourth kind of soil.

It isn't our job to lead somebody to Christ. Christ. It's our job to do something so that we proclaim the gospel so that when it falls on a person of that fourth kind, it has this particular effect.

He is leading disciples to himself so that others, so that they can lead disciples to him. So when the sower sows, the first soil, it never gets off the ground, it never gets started.

The second soil identifies with Jesus and falls away, and that's as far as it goes. The third soil looks like a Christian, but there's really nothing to show for it.

[22:21] Only the fourth kind of soil is a disciple, a person, a follower of Jesus, who himself or herself does the same thing that Jesus does, bring others to him.

So, what do we do with this? Well, pray to God both today in the service, in the prayer time, that each of us would be delivered from being these first three kinds of soil.

In my own life, I don't worry about one and two, I think about number three quite a bit. And ask that we be the fourth kind, a real disciple of Jesus who can lead others to Christ so that they can lead

others to Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, we know that we are sinners, and we know that we cannot change our hearts.

but Lord, we ask that you would work in our hearts and our souls, that you would make us to be like you, one who spreads your word and leads people to you.

[23 : 39] Help us, Lord, to be fruitful, help us to be open, help us to be the kind of soil where your gospel will prosper deeply in us. Help us to avoid the temptations of the first three.

with us and all that we say and do, so it is pleasing in your sight. All these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.