

The Good Soil

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[0 : 00] Please leave your Bibles open to that Gospel of Mark in Chapter 4, and that's where we're going to resume our look through the Gospels in the lead up to Easter.

Well, I want to start by asking you to perhaps find someone close to you that you can talk to. So, Asaph, Sharon, yeah. And to discuss the following question.

What jobs are there that require you to be an expert in soil? Alright, there's obvious answers, but you know you might have a few more. I want to listen to some answers later on.

So have a chat and then see what you can offer me. And it's both
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- Okay.

Alright. I know there are a lot of smart people out there. Who wants to put up their hands and shout out something? Who said that?

[1 : 42] Someone said that this morning. You might have to explain that word. And what does he do?

Okay. Yep. Alright. We're starting at the, you know, the full marks type answers. Alright. Any others? Farmer.

Yes. Okay. Also full marks, even though it's very simple. He's a carbon teacher. He's a soiled man. Okay. Alright. It's a different kind of soil, but okay.

Get it? Alright. Any more? Cricketers. Crick, what? Cricketers. Why cricketers? So they're testing the school before they play the game. Okay. Okay. Yep.

True. I had to hear the curator of the MCG as they were preparing the test wicket. Yep. Any more? Any more? Why? A bit louder?

[2 : 47] Okay. Yeah, that's right. Understanding the soil condition to work out what types of foundations you need or the approach to excavation or how to prevent soil erosion. Any more?

Archaeological. Okay. Why? Oh, just, you know, as you're picking up things, you need to know about what the soil will be going on in the tree.

Yep. Okay. Very good. So as you can see, there are actually a lot of jobs that require you to understand soil. Not the soil in your pants, but soil in the ground.

And I'm sure there are more examples. But today, we hear from our reading that Jesus also teaches that Christians need to know about soil. Perhaps not an expert, and definitely not on that physical soil, but soil as a metaphor for your spiritual condition or the condition of your heart.

So let's look at the parable itself in chapter 4, verse 1. And I'm pretty sure that this is a familiar parable to many. It's commonly known as the parable of the sower.

[3 : 55] But as you can see from the title of my sermon, I prefer to call it the good soil. Because I think the focus is not really on the sower, but the soil or different types of it.

So as we read the parable, we'll discover that the sower does the same thing. Whatever the soil and the seed is the same in all circumstances. The only variable, as I said, is the soil, of which there are four types.

So let's read it together. Verse 1. Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake. Well, all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

He taught them many things by parables and in his teaching said, Listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on the rocky places where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and they withered because they

had no root.

[4 : 58] Other seed fell among the thorns which grew up and choked the plants so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop.

Some multiplying 30, some 60, some 100 times. Now, if you're new to this parable, you may not know yet the deeper meaning of the story, but it's obvious what's critical here, isn't it?

As I said before, there are four types of soil, but only one matters. Same farmer, same seed, but the only seed that fell on the good soil grew and produced a crop, multiplying many times over.

That was the only type of soil that really mattered in the end. With the first soil, the seed fell along the path and didn't even get to germinate or grow. The seed on a rocky place sprung up, yes, but withered in the sun.

It did not take root. Now, the seed among the thorns, yes, did at least grow, but it did not bear grain. So, with all these three types of soil, the seed did not actually produce what was intended.

[6 : 09] Only in what was called the good soil was the outcome as intended, and the intended outcome was to have a bountiful crop.

So, that's essentially the parable. It's an agricultural illustration, but we know that Jesus is not teaching them how to grow crops, is he? He's talking about something deeper. The seed, the soil, and the crops are simply metaphors for spiritual things, related to what the gospel writers and Jesus call the kingdom of God.

So, the question now is, why is Jesus speaking in this way, instead of plainly just explaining what the kingdom of God means? Well, here's where Jesus goes on to explain next why he speaks like that.

So, in verse 9, he says, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. And that is, in a sense, quite an odd thing to say, isn't it? Because those who have ears, obviously, have heard, isn't it?

You guys have ears, don't you? You've heard what I just said, yes? But, of course, Jesus is talking about something else, isn't he? He's offering them, or he's putting out a challenge to them.

[7 : 22] Now, it probably only happens to old people, but sometimes, you know, you might be hunting high and low at home for something, and then desperately asking around others to help you find it, right?

Where is this? Where is that? You know, I thought I'd put it here. Where is it? Only to discover, after being all panicky, that it was right in front of you, sitting prominently on the table.

You know, and that's when someone in the house might pipe up to say, were you really looking? Which, of course you were. I mean, how dare they accuse you? But somehow, you had missed it. And that sort of makes you think, was I really looking? No, how could I have missed it otherwise? And that's what I think Jesus is trying to say here in the parables, to sort out those who really hear from those who merely hear.

Those who understand versus those who simply have sound waves bouncing into their ears. Thus, Jesus continues in verse 10, when he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

[8 : 37] Now, you need to notice that the people gathered are not just the twelve that were with Jesus. There were others as well. And these others were those who continued to engage with Jesus.

They didn't understand the parable, but they wanted to know more. They were curious. They didn't just give up. They kept following Jesus. And so, Jesus now explains, not just the parable itself, not yet, but about parables in general.

And so, this is what he told them. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that they be ever seeing, but never perceiving, ever hearing, but never understanding.

Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. And then Jesus said to them, don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

In other words, Jesus is saying that this parable is about parables, more generally, or even about how to respond to Jesus' teaching in all its forms.

[9 : 45] But when we truly understand this parable, and have years to hear it properly, we will then be able to hear all parables, and understand Jesus' teaching rightly.

So, why does Jesus tell parables then? Well, as he says, it's to distinguish those to whom the secret of the kingdom is given, versus those who are outside.

But Jesus doesn't achieve this by simply telling those to whom the secret has been given. No. Everyone gets to hear, but only some will really hear and understand.

So, if you think about it, did Jesus choose the twelve and the others to hear? Yes. But it's also true that they themselves, those who did come to Jesus, they were responsible for being given the secret to the parable.

Why? Because they kept following Jesus. They took ownership and decided to keep finding out more. So, teaching and parables allows Jesus to make the secrets of the kingdom available to all.

[11 : 03] There's no discrimination there. While at the same time, having it understood only by the chosen few. And you notice at the start of the parable, didn't you, how large the crowds were at the start, that Jesus had to teach in a boat from the lake.

In other words, there were hordes of people that were drawn to Jesus. Probably because of his miracles, they could tell that he was special. And yet, as they heard the parable, only those who continued with the right attitude heard the secrets of the kingdom.

Now, we had that other reading in Isaiah as well, in the Old Testament, where it was said that, as the rain and the snow on the slide come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth, making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Now, you may read that and you go, hang on, doesn't what Jesus said mean that some who hear that for them, the word returns to God void because they ignore it?

And how does it square with this prophecy that God says that his word will not return to him empty? Well, it's because I think that even though people reject God's word, it still accomplishes what God desires.

[12 : 34] And that is to separate those who truly hear from those who don't. And it's by this method that those who are given the secret are separated from those who are outside.

Not because they don't receive the word at all, but because of their response. By so responding, they confirm that they are those who are ever seeing but never perceiving, ever hearing but never understanding.

So that they can't blame God, they can't blame anyone because they had the opportunity. It was right in front of them. And yet, they miss out when it really matters.

Friends, there is a real possibility that we can come to church, we can read the Bible time and time again, and yet, be hearing without understanding.

that the true secrets of the kingdom are withheld from us. And that may sound shocking, but this parable, Jesus tells us, in order to help us to avoid that fate.

[13 : 42] And in a sense, we are already much better off than the people that were by the lake, aren't we? Because at least, we get to hear the second part of the parable, or the passage.

You may not have kept following Jesus if you were in the lake, but today, you at least get to hear the explanation of the parable, and hopefully, be able to respond rightly to it.

So, let's get to that explanation, which is in verse 14. And so, Jesus explains the parable. He says, 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. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time.

When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word. But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires of other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

[14 : 49] Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it and produce a crop. Some 30, some 60, some 100 times what was sown. So, right at the very start of the parable, Jesus already gives the key to understanding, isn't it?

He says that the seed is the word, God's word. And the farmer, he could be Jesus, could be God, could even be human teachers. It's not really important because what's important, as I've already said, is that the seed is sown in the same way and that the only difference is the soil, the four types. The first type of soil has the word snatched away by Satan before it can even take root. That is, God's word has no impact on their lives. And of course, Jesus is describing exactly how many had responded, right, by the lake, who heard and then walked away because Satan had snatched away

the seed.

Exactly what Jesus is teaching in the parable. They reject God's word. They reject Jesus' teaching. The second type of soil is not much better.

They receive God's word but they don't persevere in it. Now, Jesus even goes so far as to say that they receive it with joy, right? That is a powerful and positive response, isn't it?

[16:14] Except, it doesn't last. And in particular, they fall away with the testing of trials and persecution. Now, friends, you might be here today and you might be a new Christian and you may be hearing this as the second type of soil and you might be wondering, but let me encourage you that trouble and persecution when they come to you as a new Christian and they come to you as a Christian all the time, that is normal.

Don't be discouraged by that because when testing of your faith comes, it allows your response to God's word to be tested so that you're shown not to be the second type of soil.

and notice that Jesus says the trouble comes because of the word. Right? Not because God's word is the source of the trouble, but because when we are faced with the truth of God's word, it challenges us to change.

It tests us. It prompts us to look at the things that are wrong in our lives and to say, yes, I will make that sacrifice in order to obey God. And that is when, whenever we're tested, that is when it's important instead of walking away to dig deeper into God's word, to be more rooted and to allow that then to bear fruit in your life even when it's hard.

If not, then you will become the second type of soil and your plant or the seed that was planted in you will wither. And according to Jesus, that is a bad type of soil.

[17:58] Now, some of us are slightly older in faith. If that's you, then I want to encourage you to actually be an encouragement and be a support to those whose faith is young.

Have you seen sapling trees? Sometimes they plant in the parks and stuff. When it's a small little sapling, they put a lot of supports around it and stakes and stuff like that and shelter it, don't they? Well, that's a bit like a picture of our younger brothers and sisters, isn't it?

Our job really is to pray with them, encourage them, support them and tell them to keep going as they wrestle with their faith. Then comes the third type of soil where the seed does take root and the plant does grow but we don't see any fruit.

Why? Because they allow the thorns to choke the plant. Now, what are these in our spiritual life? What are these thorns? Well, Jesus says them plainly in verse 19.

They are the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things. And that's a pretty broad description that captures many things. And again, you can be here today a regular church attender, regular church member, serving on the band, serving at Kish Church, you might even be a pastor.

[19:19] and yet, not be fruitful with God's word at all. Why? Because of the thorns. Because your life is preoccupied with pursuing wealth or with the worries in this life.

The heart is entangled with these things. And your mind, you're constantly fretting over it, worrying about these things. And so you may hear and you may read the word of God but it doesn't change your life.

The schedule or the things in your life are so fixed and your mind is so locked in to these things, whether it's wealth, pleasures, status, security, that there is no chance for God's word to change you and bear fruit.

And sadly, even though we may comfort ourselves to think, you know, at least I'm not like the other two types of soil. At least I've got a little plant in my life. the reality is that Jesus actually classifies this as a bad soil.

He's not putting it as the third and least second best option or whatever, just slightly worse than the fourth type. No, all three are the same. Now friends, my observation over life and over time is that there are many key milestones in our lives and some of you have gone through some of them but they are the ones that I think make us most susceptible to thorns and weeds.

[20:46] You know, when we have our first child or we first start going to school or they start going to school or when we finish high school or when we start work full time when we change jobs when we move cities or when we lose our jobs those are the milestones that make us susceptible to thorns and that's because at a practical level there is a change in our routines and our patterns in life which can suddenly distract or take our focus away from hearing and then practicing God's word or else there might be new temptations arise like I don't know how it felt for you when you first for

those of you who have started working full time you got that first paycheck which was I don't know five or six times more than you ever got with your part time job and not knowing what to do with all that money you guys looking at me strangely never had that there's a lot of temptation that goes with that isn't it and you know sometimes you might think you know

I've just started a new job so you know what I'm going to do I'm just going to you know sort out my new job first you know maybe take a break from church for a while and then you know when I've got my job started my full time job you know important you know a lot of demands on it then I might see how God might fit into that now can you can you just think what you've unwittingly done you've actually said let me see how the thorns are growing and then I might put my plant in there afterwards isn't it now I'm not saying that you know when you start your full time you don't reassess and you know you don't sort of take some time out to sort of work out exactly what is sustainable that's not what I'm saying we need to do that but I'm talking about psychologically if we think that the job is so important that needs to be sorted first and then God put back into it then what you're doing is putting the thorns in place and then hoping that the plant would thrive and if you do like that don't be surprised actually because the thorns don't leave a lot of room for God in our lives do they when there are worries they're all consuming aren't they when you're chasing after wealth or temptations it takes up all your energy doesn't it now conversely there are also times when milestones sometimes negative events in your life can actually be the impetus for allowing you to respond as the good soil and so you might think losing a job is such a bad thing yes it is but perhaps what God might be doing is removing some of those thorns so that you then allow his word to grow in your life for you to reassess and think what is

God trying to teach me here that I may then grow in my faith and grow in my obedience and dependence on him and so with that we get to our final type of soil which is the good soil that Jesus wants for all his hearers now how is this good soil different to the rest well as Jesus says it not only hears the words the word and accepts it but most importantly it produces a beautiful crop a hundred times or more the initial seed I've got a picture here of a head of wheat on the next slide and it's sort of you can see that it has many kernels isn't it and each one in each kernel has a grain in it and I think when Jesus was describing this that's the picture he had in mind that one grain of seed the word just that one grain when it germinates and it produces what it produces is not just another seed but many heads and within that each head many kernels can you see how powerful of an image that is that just one seed that one single word

God's word can have that prolific effect in your life and then from there in the life of others so to produce like the fourth soil the word of God in our lives has to take that effect and then in turn produce more so that it can be sown that is so that more opportunities are given for others to hear the word through your life and so I want to pause right now for you to just think about your own life and particularly if you follow Jesus ask yourself how you are playing your part in doing that for instance in supporting gospel workers like we've prayed for just prayed for Chris and Julie Dean to spread the word or how you yourself are doing it whether it's at work or study where you live or how you serve how is as you hearing God's word so transformed that you too are using that word to help others to be transformed by God's word as well and of course it's not just all words with the mouth it's also how we live our lives isn't it in a way that reflects

God's word things like godliness or humility or Christ likeness to show the impact of God's word in our lives that when we have faith and trust in Jesus we are living according to the gospel so friends what type of soil are you today you might be here today and you heard about the gospel for the first time or Jesus words will you stick around and find out more or maybe you've believed and you're at the moment really joyful but when troubles come as you try to obey God will you stick at it or do you have lots of troubles and anxiety in your life well perhaps you need to try and root out and weed out those thorns so that you can be then the fourth type of soil that hears God's word puts it into practice and that's the amazing thing this is also a promise from

[27 : 14] Jesus isn't it that when we accept it and obey it God will produce that bountiful crop in us it's not us doing it it's his word that will be sprouting and spreading because we the soil we are willing to submit to God's word and obey so let me ask you and let me urge you to be that false soil and let's pray and ask God to help us do that let's pray Father thank you that your word to us is now made plain through the teaching and spirit of your son help us to hear it to accept it obediently and please produce it in us a bountiful crop so that others may hear your word through us and through it come to have faith in the Lord Jesus in his name we pray!

Amen! Amen