

Mark 4:1-34 (PM)

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[0 : 00] So before coming to Canada, some of you may know this, I had a job as a sexual health educator in New Zealand. And I worked in high schools and I'd travel around and I'd speak to teenagers, I'd give sex talks and mental health talks from a Christian perspective all over the country.

I think I spoke to sort of something like 20 to 30,000 youth a year. And whenever I turned up to a school, you never quite knew what sort of response you'd get.

It was mostly really positive, but not always. Sometimes you would get students who were really rude, who'd sit in the front row and just make rude comments to me.

And often, I did this for seven years and towards the end of it, I just stopped being nice and I just would kick people out of the assembly. And I'd just point to somebody and be like, Andrew, or just point to a kid and go, I do not want you to be here anymore.

Teacher, escort this young man out of the room, please. He said mostly it was good. But every now and then, every now and then, people were rude. I've had things thrown at me.

[1 : 08] I've been shouted down. You just never knew. Rich schools, poor schools, rural schools, city schools. There were no predictors on how the message would be responded to.

In our passage today, Jesus is helping us understand why people respond to him differently. Because think about it. We're only three chapters into Mark.

Three chapters in and already Jesus has some followers. People are just into it. But he also has a group of people who want to kill him. He's got his family who think he's a bit crazy.

And then he's got these huge crowds who are sort of, you know, enthusiastic, but sort of superficially enthusiastic. Mostly they just want a healer. So it's interesting to me that they all hear the same message of Jesus.

They all hear the good stuff. But such a wide range of responses. How do we understand this? Well, Jesus tells us in the first parable here.

[2 : 15] So let's get into it. It's verses 1 to 20. Jesus tells the parable. And then really helpfully, he explains the parable. So we're going to start looking at the really long parable, this one here.

And then I'm going to talk about the smaller parables and talk about how they relate to this big one. Okay, so the parable of the sower. A lot of you folks will be familiar with this.

Farmers scatters seed on the ground. Familiar sight back in the days. Some seed's eaten by birds. Some seed goes into a place that's kind of got some soil, but it's really thin. There's bedrock underneath it.

So it grows a little, then it dies. Some seed just grows up in between thorns and never really matures. And finally, some seeds find good soil, grow and produce a huge harvest.

How does Jesus explain all this? He says this. The sower is someone explaining the gospel. That's me explaining, you know, preaching each week. That's you folks explaining to your friends, explaining it to people on the bus, explaining it to people in your family.

[3 : 16] The gospel is presented. The word is sown. And these first seeds, where do they fall? They fall on hard packed ground, like the pathways around the garden.

Verse three. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it. The seeds just sit there. They never take root. They can't take root.

There's no soil. They're completely exposed. The birds come and pick them. The birds, Jesus say, that represents Satan, who immediately just, before the seed even gets a chance of growing, just picks them, takes them.

Folks, Satan is real. He's powerful. He's a malignant force. And he whispers lies to us. Lots of different lies. One of them could be this, something like this.

Here's a good one. All this talk about God that your friend just said to you, all this stuff about Jesus this person said to you, it's all just primitive nonsense. We're moderns.

[4 : 21] We outgrew that stuff hundreds of years ago. Something like that. And that kind of whispering hardens the heart to Jesus. So the message of Jesus doesn't take root in these hearts.

These folks don't even know what they've lost. They don't even begin to experience the wonder of joy of knowing God. They don't even begin to contemplate that this is a possibility that there is a God who became a human to save us.

There is just an immediate rejection of what is said. Now, I am not trying to present these people as awful people. But when it comes to Jesus, their hearts have become hard packed.

But the ground some seeds fell on. So not awful people can be great community people. They might have a, we just had our election. It's on Saturday, right?

They might have a real fervor for local politics. They might care a lot about the community. Johnny Cash sings a song called The Wanderer. And he's got this line.

[5 : 19] Here it is from the song. They say they want the kingdom, but they don't want God in it. Great line. They want the kingdom, but they don't want God in it. They hope and strive for kingdom values, perhaps.

Justice and inclusion. Really good stuff. They want the kingdom values, but they don't want the king who can make it all happen. So the word, in summary, the word comes to some people, but there is just an immediate rejection.

No roots. That's the first seed. That's the first seed he talks about. The second seed, verse 16, tells us. The word came to some folks. It doesn't land on hard packed path.

It lands on rocky ground. There's a bit of dirt around, maybe a thin layer of dirt. Roots grow down just a little bit. There's a response. A bit of a response. Joyful one, it says.

They believe Jesus died for them. They're into it. Maybe they come to church a few times. But problems arise in their life, and they abandon Jesus. That's the roots hitting the bedrock.

[6 : 25] So it's not so much hard hearts. It's shallow hearts. The seed just doesn't go down deep enough. The roots don't go down deep enough. And this can look like a lot of different things in somebody.

So it's kind of like the half Christian who's, it can look like a Christian whose faith is based on like an emotional experience they might have at church. It can look like dry intellectualism.

But it's not a faith that's going to hold up when real life smacks them in the face. As I was thinking about this week and thinking about this particular example here, I was thinking, I have known many people who have drifted from faith when something went wrong in their life.

And folks, I just want to warn you that in most cases I could remember it was a relationship breakout. So just hold that in the back of your mind.

So the first seed doesn't grow because of a hard heart. The second seed doesn't grow because it's a shallow heart. But moving on, the next seed Jesus talks about, verses 18 to 19. Let me read these verses to you.

[7 : 33] And others were sown among the thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and desires for other things enter and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

So what's different about this hearer is it's not like they hear about Jesus and some big crisis comes and so they abandon their faith. It's like they hear the word.

It takes root. They're excited about Jesus. But good things happen to them. Like really great things happen in their life.

And they're distracted. I read a story this week about a guy proposing to his girlfriend. It's great. It's a great example of this, of a distracted heart. This is the distracted heart, I think, right?

Guy kneels down at a restaurant and he says, darling, I love you. I love you more than anything else in the world. I want to marry you. And I don't have a yacht or Ferrari like my neighbor, Johnny, but I love you with all my heart.

[8 : 36] She thinks for a moment and says, I love you too. But tell me more about this neighbor of yours, Johnny. The distracted heart, right?

The seed goes down, puts its roots down, but distracted by the good things of the world. A great job, a fantastic career, a fantastic relationship. None of this stuff's bad.

But they just, it's like these things become weightier in our hearts than they should be. And as these things grow and become bigger and bigger in our hearts, our view of Christ becomes smaller and smaller.

And eventually it's kind of snuffed out completely. And the plant dies. The last seed now that Jesus talks about.

After hearing about the hard heart and the shallow heart and the distracted heart in verse 20, we hear, but those that were sown on the good soil are the ones that hear the word and accept it and bear fruit.

[9 : 40] Thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. The seed is planted. It produces trust. A trust that goes beyond just intellectualism. It goes beyond emotionalism.

It's like you hear the message. You accept it. It grabs a hold of you. Jesus becomes the great treasure of your life. And you believe it.

You really believe it. And it's wonderful. The parable finishes with this astonishing harvest. A typical harvest I read this week from sowing seeds back in the days was about eight to ten times what was sown.

The seed in this parable takes root. The roots go deep and it produces a harvest that's like thirty to a hundredfold what was sown. It's amazing. Let me tell you what this can look like in real life.

Tim Challies is a pastor in Ontario who writes a blog I like about Christian, fancy Christian books. And I like reading him, reading his blog.

[10 : 42] When the Regent College professor Don Lewis died, remember Don Lewis? When he died, Tim wrote, I didn't know he knew him, but Tim wrote a blog post called, I Owe Everything to Don Lewis.

And it's a long post, but I've edited down just a couple of paragraphs. Let me read these few paragraphs to you. Tim starts by talking about his own dad who's not Don, okay? Tim talks about his own father who had a bit of a troubled upbringing, but went to university.

And he says, in the final year of Dad's undergraduate studies, he and Don Lewis became fast friends. Soon they were spending hours together discussing life, faith, God, and everything in between.

As they talked, Don found opportunities to explain the gospel of grace and to call Dad to it. And I love this line. And eventually Dad realized he had found ideas that were big enough to fill his mind and great enough to satisfy his heart.

Isn't that great? Meanwhile, Tim keeps going, talking about his mom now. Meanwhile, mom had also become a student at bishops. And though she succeeded academically, found herself doing poorly otherwise.

[11 : 55] She determined that life was meaningless. She couldn't find hope and joy. There's no solution. Sitting alone on campus one day, Dad came bounding up to her. They had met a couple of times, had even gone on one date.

And she knew him well enough to know that something about him was different. In a zeal, Dad began to tell her all about his newfound faith. He begged her to go out to dinner with him so he could tell her more about it.

She went against her will. And on that very evening, she too came to faith. After her dad led her to some Christians Don had introduced him to, mom and dad were married a few months later.

Mom and dad had five children. They all know the Lord. We have 16 children between us. They all know the Lord, at least those who are old enough to express it. But there's more.

Dad told his mom about Jesus. She believed. He told his older sister, and she too believed. Mom told her sister, and she believed. And those families too now boast three generations of believers.

[12 : 52] If we trace the Christian faith to all these people, perhaps 40 or 50 of us now, they all eventually converge on Don Lewis. They all converge on a young man who simply and faithfully shared the gospel.

Goes on. One more short paragraph. Tim Shelley says this. Jesus told a parable about a farmer who went into a field to sow seed. He scattered it far and wide.

Some fell along the path where it was quickly gobbled up by birds. Some fell on rocky soil where it sprang up, but its roots had no depth. It was scorched by the sun. Some fell among weeds where it was choked out by thorns.

But some fell onto good soil where it put down deep roots, grew well, and produced a crop of 30, 60, and 100 times more plentiful than itself. And this is exactly how the Lord does his work. Through ordinary people like Don.

When they share the extraordinarily good news of the gospel. Don told dad. Dad told mom. They told me. I told Olin. We told our children.

[13 : 54] They will tell theirs. And so it will go until the full harvest is gathered in until the Lord returns until we are all reunited for him. Isn't that just wonderful, right?

The soil lands on fertile ground. And there is a great harvest. This is the big theme of these parables. God intends to grow his kingdom.

That's the big theme. God wants to grow it in size. He wants to grow it in value. Despite the fact that many will reject it. Either immediately. Or at some point later.

Despite that, God intends that his kingdom grows. And to help us understand this more, Jesus gives us these two other mini parables.

About seeds. And they're really encouraging. Let me just quickly explain them to you. Verses 26 to 29. The farmer scatters seeds. And then he just goes home.

[14 : 58] And 27 says, he sleeps and raises night and day. And the seeds sprout and grow. He knows not how. I love this.

It's just a freeing message. We learn here that the kingdom, it grows gradually. It grows incrementally. It grows in ways which are hidden from us. He just scatters some seeds. And then he goes to sleep.

And he gets up and it's like, oh my goodness. It's like, plants. Fantastic. He doesn't know how it works. He's got no idea. It's not like planting and then digging it up every couple of minutes to see what it's doing.

He's just, he's planting and he's trusting. I've told you this before. I was the only Christian in my family for a really long time. For decades. And I've been praying for my family for decades.

Then out of the blue, like three, maybe three years ago I think, my brother texts me. Actually, I should have brought my phone up with me. My brother messages me and says, hey, I've started to go to the local Anglican church.

[16 : 00] Just out of nowhere this comes. I really like it. I'm starting Alpha. Right? And like he is all in now.

I just got a message from him yesterday that said, hey, I'm on the, I'm one of the trustees. He's asking me about how they do, actually, I need to talk to you about this.

He's asking me how he wants to grow the children's ministry in his church. I have no explanation for this. Except God. Isn't that brilliant.

Isn't that brilliant? Isn't that brilliant? I hope this is encouraging to you. Martin Luther, who was the 16th century theologian, he wanted the church of his day to be restored. It was the, papacy was really corrupt.

Bishops really, really corrupt. The gospel had been lost. Mostly had been lost. Martin Luther had a strategy for the Reformation to come about.

[17 : 03] He had a strategy. Let me read the strategy. It's my favorite Luther quote. Let me read his strategy for reforming the church. He says this.

I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's word. Otherwise, I did nothing. It's better. And whilst I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it.

The word of God did it all. Isn't that great? The kingdom of God grows while we sleep. Folks, it's a mystery. So I really want to encourage you in this. Keep praying for your friends.

Keep praying. Keep sowing. Our job is sowing, reaping, just entrust the rest to God. The last little parable, the one about the mustard seed.

It's just a couple of verses. Let me remind you of it. But Jesus says, with what can we compare the kingdom of God? Or what parable shall we use for it? It's like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth.

[18 : 22] Yet when it was sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. It's great. So it's a really simple picture.

It's a picture of contrast. Something small and insignificant can become huge and fruitful and helpful. That's the point. Easy point. The message is not the seed is scattered and God waits nervously for hoping something will happen.

No, it will happen in a way that makes sense to God and His choosing. Something small can become something big.

You know, in 33 AD, Jesus was crucified. He was alone. At that point, not looking great. This whole thing, this whole Jesus Christian thing wasn't looking pretty, wasn't looking good, right?

The main guy's dead. Everyone else has taken off. This team of 11 becomes about 120 people in the upper room. Still not very impressive. A few sermons later, we've got a couple of thousand.

[19 : 24] Fast forward, 350 AD, 50% of the Roman Empire is Christian. That's about 30 million people. Today, it's about 2 million. Just to give you a more recent example, because you might say, you know, give me something newer than, you know, 1,650 years ago.

On the way back, so on sabbatical, I went to Thailand with my family. On the way back, we went to Korea for three days, to Seoul. Fantastic city. You should go to Seoul. And I've been doing some reading on Korea recently.

At the end of the 19th century, there was 0.1% of Christians in Korea. So that's one Christian for every 1,000 people.

That's the end of the 19th century. By 1970, that number is 18%. Today, it's 30%. Korea sends out more missionaries than any other country in the world except for America.

There are more megachurches in Seoul than there are in any other city in the world apart from Houston, I think. But here's the thing, though.

[20 : 32] Seoul measures a megachurch by 5,000 people. In Dallas, it's 3,000 people. So the message of Christ, who lived and died and rose again, went to Korea.

God broke into that country, and everything changed. It's an astonishing harvest. Now, why did it happen in Korea, and why hasn't it happened in Japan? I don't know. But we must let God have his secrets.

We should pray for it, though. So, folks, just to finish up here. Look, I know the word of God, these words we might say to our friends, even this act here.

It can feel small. It can feel insignificant. That our words about Jesus, that things like this could impact Vancouver, that just seems like crazy talk. The tiniest things, you know.

Your friends say, what did you do on the weekend? I went to church. It was great. I love it. These are the tiniest things God can do. God can do things with that. He can do something with those seeds.

[21 : 39] So keep speaking. Keep praying. We can have great confidence that God will bring a harvest, despite the opposition, and a harvest beyond our expectations.

Folks, don't let hope die in your hearts about this. Jesus is very clear, I think. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.