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[0 : 00] Well, we are continuing on with our sermon series on the Gospel of Mark, and we're on Mark 4, chapters 1 through 34.

This is a critical passage. It's a passage of deep encouragement, and I think it's wonderful that we're having this passage of deep encouragement on a day when we are encouraged by the visit of our guests, Father John and Father Francis from Malawi.

They are encouragement to us because in them we see how the kingdom of God is at work throughout the world, that the kingdom that is brought about by a tiny seed that we've been hearing about in this passage bears fruit, and it bears fruit in people's lives around the world, no matter what the culture, no matter what language, no matter what the dangers they are facing in that part of the world.

God's kingdom grows through the seed of God's word. And the extraordinary thing about this passage is that that seed, the kingdom of God that we're learning about in Mark, is being put in the hands, in a sense, of 12 disciples who are pretty unimpressive people.

They don't have any influence, and they don't seem to have a great education, and they certainly have no influence in their country. And not only that, but they have a very hard time grasping who Jesus is.

[1 : 36] And we look at them and we wonder how on earth is God going to build his church through them? How are they going to carry on God's ministry, the ministry of Jesus, bringing the kingdom of God into the world?

And the answer is that Jesus deliberately chooses these people who are insignificant in Israel to be his church, so that God's immense power will be made known.

And the parables that we heard in this marvelous chapter show us the secrets of the kingdom. And very simply, the secret is that the kingdom has come in Jesus.

On the outside, it can be ignored. It appears very plain, ordinary, non-earth changing, even non-existent. But simply by his word, God does a mighty power that is far greater than any earthly power or empire or ruler.

I think Paul, the apostle Paul, really captures that well when he thinks about the mission of God that he is part of, the mission of the kingdom of God. He says this, he says, The foolishness of God is wiser than men.

[2 : 52] The weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers and sisters. He's not going to be flattering here. He says, And you see, that's the nature of the kingdom.

It will often look unimpressive to the world around us. But in our passage today, Jesus says it has the power to utterly transform lives and to bring God's goodness into this world here and now.

Now look at verse 26. Verse 26, we're going to jump down a little bit in the passage. He says, And then he goes down in verse 31 and it says, And what he's telling us is that the kingdom of God is being compared to small, dirty, insignificant seeds that are almost weightless.

They are very much affected by the wind, by birds. It is a picture of the kingdom, of what looks to be very unimpressive. And this is a picture of Jesus himself, the one who is the kingdom.

Because he announces the kingdom, yet he comes to earth in incredibly unimpressive circumstances. Born in a stable to poverty-stricken parents.

[4 : 42] He's a refugee in Egypt. He grows up in a backwater town of Nazareth. And because of his preachings and healings, which seem to be successful in his ministry, he is actually rejected.

Not only by the religious leaders of the time, but by his own family. They want to stop his ministry. And then, as we end the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus dying a death reserved for the worst criminals on a cross.

Where he is utterly humiliated. And so, in the eyes of the world, there is no power here. There is something here that can be ignored.

But the eyes of faith understand something very different about the kingdom. God himself becomes flesh and lives among us. That's the kingdom of God.

And it is in the eyes of faith that we see and believe that Jesus does have authority to forgive sins. That the healings and casting out of demons are a sign of Jesus' authority over all sickness.

[5 : 49] Over all evil. And that he will restore things in creation. It is through eyes of faith that we see that his death reconciles all of humanity to God.

And it is through the eyes of faith that we see with disciples the risen Lord Jesus. Who rises in great power to show that he rules over all things.

Great and small in the universe. And so, you see, in the world's natural eyes, the kingdom of God is really irrelevant unless there is earthly power and immediate change that I want in my life and surroundings.

But through the eyes of faith, we see the power of God to bring salvation, to save and transforms. And Jesus is teaching his disciples, this is the world you're sent into.

This is the world that will not accept your ministry necessarily or your preaching. The kingdom of God will not matter to people. It can be ignored. I think a way that this was really brought home to me was last weekend during Thanksgiving, we had our turkey dinner with our Jewish neighbors.

[7 : 05] And I have the most wonderful neighbor in the world. He teaches in the local synagogue and we have wonderful conversations. And last week we talked about the Messiah, which is a wonderful conversation to have.

And yes, we had disagreement in it. But there's a lot of overlap that we had. He said, but what it came down to was he said, you know, when the true Messiah comes, the world will acknowledge God.

They will acknowledge that Messiah. And all the relationships in the world will be changed. And blessing will come into the world. And everyone will know who the true God is.

And I said, yes, that's exactly what we believe about the second coming as well. But you see, we live, this highlights what it is for him. This hasn't happened yet.

There is a time in this time where we are living, in the time that Jesus come, where people will not accept the Messiah, where they can ignore and say the kingdom of God is irrelevant.

[8 : 14] And that's why Jesus told this parable of the sowers, to show people the secret of the kingdom, that it will come and people will reject it. He is telling the crowd and the disciples that God's word has come in Jesus and he himself will be rejected and ignored.

We live in this time until Jesus comes in glory. And so Jesus commands the crowd to pay very close attention. You know, and this is what my conversations with my friend next door involves.

He is teaching something that needs to go into our hearts and our minds because we do not receive it naturally. And he says, listen, in verse three. In fact, he tells us to listen four times very strongly in this chapter.

And the way that he is talking to us is in parables. He gives us a very familiar picture to them in verses four through eight. Listen to this. He says, there's seeds that a farmer throws out.

Some falls on hard grounds, birds eat it. Some fall on ground that is very thin because there's a rock layer underneath it. And when the seed springs up, it grows quickly, but it withers away when the sun comes out.

[9 : 33] And then some falls among thorns which soon choke out the plant so that it doesn't produce any grain. But others fall into good soil and produce grain yielding 30, 60, even 100 times.

And then when he finishes talking, look in verse nine. He says again, listen. Listen. Listen. Listen. And let him who hears is the same word as listen. And anyone with small children knows that there's a very big difference between hearing and listening.

Children are hearing all the time. In fact, they hear everything you say, especially the things you don't want them to hear. But they actually only listen to a small portion of what you say.

And as parents of young children, it sometimes seems that portion is very small indeed. And listen means pay attention and take to heart what is said.

Jesus is saying that to the crowd. Don't just hear that story. Pay attention. Let it come deep into your heart. And there is puzzlement when people do that.

[10 : 36] They have to wrestle with it. They have to think through, what does this mean for us? And it is a critical parable that all the other parables depend on because it tells how on earth God's kingdom will grow through this motley crew of 12 disciples.

And if you look at verse 14, Jesus is away from the crowd. He's with the 12 disciples along with a number of other people. And he explains to them the key to understanding.

He says, The sower sows the word. And that word that Jesus is talking about is the good news of the kingdom that Jesus has been preaching. And he's telling them, That word that I am giving to you, that you will pass on, is the way in which the strong man Satan, from the last chapter, is bound. And it is the way that Satan is plundered, that God plunders his wealth and frees people to a new life in Jesus. Very simply, he is saying that you disciples will speak that truth and through that word, God's kingdom will come.

And his will be done on this broken, hurting earth. He will rule in the hearts of individual people. And there is incredible power that is eternal coming into people's lives.

[12 : 01] So Jesus opens their eyes and he tells them, he tells them the unvarnished truth. This is what your ministry is going to look like. He's telling them, Satan is going to do the best he can to stop that word from getting through to people's hearts.

And you can see how Satan does that in verses 15 through 19. And I want to look at this for a moment because I think that these dangers apply to those that don't know Christ.

It also applies to those who are new to believing. And it applies to those who have believed for a long time. So if you look at verse 15, it tells us that this is a seed that is on the packed down path. And it describes people who hear the word but Satan immediately snatches away that word. And that is a widespread danger for us in 2012.

Because when you and I walk away from this sermon, there will be a thousand things to grab our attention. We live in an age of email and texting and Facebook.

[13 : 08] We get information that assaults us, that is an avalanche on us. Our work responsibilities, entertainment, information from other people and from the world are instantly available to us.

And they can immediately take us away from the truth of God that we have just heard. We live in a time where there is much to crowd out God's word.

It crowds out our time to really take it in to our hearts and reflect on it. That information that's on our avalanche or that avalanche of information at our fingertips takes the place of the time that we have to reflect on God's truth.

And we must be vigilant not to let the many words we hear in the world harden our heart to this only word that can give us life. We must be vigilant that Satan does not snatch it away immediately.

And in verse 16, Jesus tells us of rocky ground, of that soil that's on top of a hard level of limestone, which is in Palestine. Jesus says it's a picture of people who receive the word with joy.

[14 : 18] And it's wonderful for a preacher or somebody in a Bible study to see that happen. But the danger is that there was not spiritual root. The seed did not go deep into the heart.

And Jesus says there is endurance in the faith, but in verse 17, when tribulation or persecution come on account of the word, and remember, Jesus is assuming that this will happen.

It necessarily will happen to anyone committed to Jesus. He says, immediately they fall away. And if you are a believer, at some point you will experience trouble because of God's word, because you stand for it, because there will be times in your life where the world does not stand for it.

And certainly we experience this in our own church, in losing our building, because we held fast to God's truth, to his word. But also in our personal lives, when God's word comes into us at times it will contradict us.

It will contradict the way we are living or relating or doing business. It may also make things uncomfortable to us if we live in obedience to what God is saying.

[15 : 32] And that is contrary to the expectation of people around us. There is turmoil within us when this happens. It can be a real temptation for us to say, I didn't sign up for this. I didn't sign up for trouble and persecution.

I didn't sign up for times of discomfort. And it can be a temptation to dismiss God's word and perhaps even leave a Christian community when life becomes inconvenient as we follow that word. We're vulnerable to this when we are not rooted in our faith, when we are not in Bible studies, when we are not involved in serving Jesus in practical ways. Jesus says, beware of that danger.

This is part of what it means to receive God's word. word. And then in verse 18, there is the third danger. And they are people who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and as he puts it, the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. This is something that all of us experience today. We experience the cares of the world. And you come to church on Sunday morning with those cares in your mind and in your heart.

[16:46] Many of us have big worries. We have insecurity of employment. We have sickness in our families. There may be financial worries. We may have friends going through hard times or we have children who are making bad choices.

There may be some very difficult things that you are going through this morning. These are things that can choke out God's word and they can make us lose a vision for who he is for us.

But the other thing that can happen by God's grace is that they may in fact drive you to Jesus to know him and to pray him and to hear his truth. This is what a warning like this does for us.

It says there is another way rather than to allow those thorns to crowd out your life in Christ to actually draw near to him. And then Jesus also describes the thorns as the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things.

Well that describes our culture in Vancouver. It describes where spiritually we are surrounded by in our city. It is a deception that comes when you live in a city that has a great deal of wealth in it.

[18:03] And so we are constantly taught in advertising and conversations that money is the way to a better relationship with my children or my spouse. Wealth is the way that I can be respected.

That's how I can receive real security and it can bring real happiness and fulfillment and freedom. Freedom to be able to do what I want.

And all of these Jesus says are thorns in our life because they so easily crowd out our vision of God and his glory. we are prevented from seeing that ultimately God is the source of all freedom.

He is the source of our security happiness and fulfillment and he is the one alone that can bring blessing to the relationships that we have in our lives and that he brings its true significance to us.

And so you see there's a grim picture that Jesus is painting here about what his disciples are up against. Three out of the four soils do not bear fruit.

[19:06] Many people's hearts are hard or shallow or crowded. And so the preacher might say well why bother I better just pack it in and not waste my time.

And certainly Satan wants to discourage preachers he wants to discourage you if you're leading a Bible study or you're sharing your faith be discouraged by the lack of an immediate response to God's word.

But Jesus' words of incredible encouragement break through all of this. And this is how we leave this passage. Jesus promises that there will be a good soil for God's word.

He promises that people will hear the word accept it and bear fruit. And that's what Jesus means by listen to hear and accept and bear fruit as you hear that word.

And Jesus says there is a 30-fold 60-fold even 100-fold harvest from that. It is an incredible harvest far beyond the best agricultural harvest that we can expect even today.

[20:17] Jesus is saying God tills the soils of people's hearts so that this happens. And the seed does infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. there is an eternal change in your life.

And God is changing you practically day by day renewing you inwardly day by day and it will bear fruit in your life. Jesus reveals that what God has to say is the most important thing in the world.

And I think it's very important for us to pray for this kind of listening for one another. Pray that those around you listen to God's word in this way by accepting and by bearing fruit.

And I want to close by saying that there is a marvelous encouragement in verses 26 and 29. It says Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed and the earth produces all by itself first the blade then the ear then the full grain in the ear until it is ready to sickle.

And what he's saying is the farmer doesn't do anything to make it happen. He just scatters the seed. And Jesus is saying the word of God is a living seed that God grows a new life in us through his word.

[21:35] Like the farmer we don't know how that happens. We may even wonder well is that seed doing anything in my life? But Jesus' promise is that God is doing a work in you.

That life develops and grows. It is a life that is different from our life before. Jesus himself is preparing us for the day of his coming and this is God's immense power working in those who accept God's word.

And so in these parables Jesus is searching people's hearts. And what I mean by that is the parables are designed so that a person can hear and not understand as he said. They can see and not perceive. But they can also see with the eyes of faith that God himself is speaking and that he has words of eternal life.

Words that bear real fruit. Words that cause people to act in love and faith and righteousness. Words that grant forgiveness and the giving of that forgiveness.

[22 : 42] And it allows people to worship the one true God. Glorify him. And to find our true purpose in life. So as we leave this passage God calls you today to listen.

You can't mistake that in this chapter and accept his words so that you will bear fruit. And Jesus uses a lamp and a measure so that we remember. He says in verses 21 through 23 a lamp's not meant to be put under a basket or under a bed.

It's meant to be on a stand. And that lamp is Jesus and his word. It's not meant to be hidden. He is calling you and he is calling me to live out the word that was planted in you.

The challenge of the Christian life is not so much having more knowledge of the Bible but it is in living out what you know. What little or much that you know.

To live that out so that with God's help you let his light shine shine in your home. Shine out in the way you spend time with your kids or with your family.

[23 : 50] To shine out in your workplace or in your time off. And then Jesus uses that verse 24 the measure the picture of the measure. He says pay attention to what you hear with the measure you use it will be a measure to you and still more will be added to you.

And Jesus is saying here drink in God's word as fully as you possibly can. Come to God's word wanting to be filled by it.

Be like people who are in a famine situation and a relief truck comes in with huge pallets of grain and you bring the biggest container you possibly have to fill it up and receive.

Jesus is saying be as open as you can to being filled by God's freeing and life giving word. Look for opportunities to hear to sing to read the Bible with others and on your own.

Look for ways that you can obey and live out what God gives you in his word. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring you understanding and joy to you in your reading. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

[24 : 59] Rejoice in what he gives us in his word. So let's close our eyes let's pray for God to bring that word into our hearts now.

Heavenly Father we do pray for that good soil in our life. We pray that you will produce great fruits in our life because of that very insignificant looking word.

Help us to let the light of Jesus that powerful light the eternal light of Jesus to shine in our homes and in our lives. Give us a hunger and thirst for your word.

May we delight in your truth that saves us and frees us to serve you so that the joy of your salvation will permeate our lives. And we ask that through that word that seed in our life that your kingdom will come and your will be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.