

Mark 4:1-34

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. I'm just looking at the dog that's... Its tail is just visible now, but now it's going into the pew.

Okay, bye, buddy. It's great to have everyone here, including pets. It would be great also if you opened your Bibles with me to Mark chapter 4.

Just have that open in front of you. If you're visiting this morning, if you're new with us, let me get you caught up where we are in the Gospel of Mark, which is the story of Jesus Christ. Mark begins with this opening line, the beginning of the Gospel, or the story, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And in chapter 1, Jesus bursts on the scene with all this fanfare and a dramatic message about the kingdom of God is here, and then the amazing miracles to back up his words.

And then suddenly in chapter 2 and 3, there's this switch. And instead of all this fanfare, we see rising opposition against him, especially from, of all people, the most religious in his culture, the Pharisees and the scribes.

[1 : 10] But Jesus doesn't seem very phased about it. He actually seems to almost invite this confrontation. And in fact, he uses it as an opportunity to declare that his new kingdom welcomes the very types of people that had previously been outcasts on the outside looking in.

They'd been on the margins. But now through forgiveness of sins and a new family identity, they're welcomed into the very center, right? To sit right next to Jesus. And if you think it's surprising that Jesus' ministry is met with so much opposition, then chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel is for you.

Because it answers the question, why are some people falling at Jesus' feet in worship and other people want to kill him? And it does this by introducing Jesus' favorite teaching tool, the parable. So look at verse 2 with me. Jesus was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, listen. And then if you look all the way at the bottom of the passage that we read, in verses 33 and 34, this is how it ends.

With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. So the word parable simply means a comparison or a simile.

[2 : 30] And so Jesus is a storyteller. I don't know if that surprises you. He's a storyteller. And parables use word pictures from daily life to drive home a main point and provoke a response from the listener.

Often they're stories, but they can also be just very short, like the parable that we find in verse 21 of the lamp. It's just one verse long. Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey says this, a parable is an extended metaphor.

And as such, it's not a delivery system for an idea, but a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence. Isn't that a great picture?

You are taking up residence in the house that Jesus is building as you listen to the parable of the sower. And I don't know how many times you've heard this parable, this parable of the sower. It is very famous. You might have heard it a hundred times or you might be hearing it today for the very first time. It doesn't really matter because Jesus, his instruction, his command to you is the same, regardless of how many times you've heard it.

[3 : 42] He says in verse three, listen. He says in verse nine, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. He says in verse 23 and 24, if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

And he said to them, pay attention to what you hear. And every time that I sit on an airplane, I haven't been on an airplane in a long time actually, but I remember it still. Every time I sit on an airplane, the flight attendants teach and reenact the instructions that could save my life in the event, in the unlikely event of an emergency.

Right? Every time. But what do I do every time? I put my headphones on, I close my eyes and I ignore them. I've heard it all before.

I'll be ready. I'll be the first guy to panic. I'll be putting that oxygen mask on someone else, not on myself, right? But Jesus says, no, listen, pay attention.

Don't ignore what Jesus is saying to you here today, in other words. Don't tune him out because it's a life and death matter, just like it is on the airplane. We get the parable of the sower first in verse 3 to 8, and then Jesus explains the meaning of the parable in verses 13 to 21.

[4 : 59] Isn't it great that he explains himself? And this parable is found in all three gospels, synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which whenever you see something that's in all three of those gospels, that's a warning light.

This is very important. In fact, this is the parable. It's a parable about parables. So look at verse 13. Jesus said to them, Do you not understand this parable?

How then will you understand all the parables? In other words, if you want to listen and learn from Jesus' teaching, this parable is the best place to start. This will help you to understand everything that he's saying in parables.

But before we go any further, this also raises an alarming question, which we see in verses 10 to 12. Verses 10 to 12. When Jesus was alone, those around him with the 12 asked him about the parables.

And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables. Why? So that they may indeed see, but not perceive, may indeed hear, but not receive, not understand, sorry, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

[6 : 13] Did anyone find those verses kind of confusing? Yeah, a little bit? Why did you find it confusing? Probably because it sounds like Jesus is saying that he deliberately teaches in a confusing way so that some people won't understand and can't possibly be saved.

That's kind of alarming. That's not what he's saying, though. So verse 12, Jesus quotes from Isaiah in the Old Testament, chapter 6, verses 9 and 10. And the context in Isaiah is from a specific moment in Israel's history when the Lord God commissioned the prophet Isaiah to preach judgment on his people, even as he was inviting them to repent and turn back to him.

So he's telling them, you're going to preach judgment, but that judgment, I want you to preach it so that they'll turn back to me in repentance. But ironically, in Isaiah, that invitation to repent that he keeps giving them, it only actually ends up further hardening their hearts.

And this is what Jesus is predicting will happen to some people who hear about the kingdom of God. The good news actually only further hardens their hearts.

It's not because of the message, it's because that is just how the heart receives the parables. And furthermore, the secret that Jesus is talking about, the secret of the kingdom of God, it's not like a Sherlock Holmes mystery where you have to kind of wait to the last page to find out who done it.

[7 : 44] It's... In the New Testament, secret, it means something that actually can never be discovered by human ingenuity. Not something you can figure out on your own.

It has to be revealed by God. That's what a secret is in the Bible. And that's why it's so important for us to listen. Because you see, your ears are the organ of faith.

Faith comes from hearing, Romans 10, verse 17. And what we hear is the very word of God. So as we listen to Jesus, I'm going to guide us to the heart of the parable under two headings.

First of all, receiving the word. And that's good soil. And secondly, sharing the word. And that's good sowing. So let's have a look at receiving the word.

Good soil. And there are three S's in the parable, right? The sower, the seed, and the soil. And Jesus doesn't tell us who the sower is, actually, but we can infer that first of all, it must be Jesus himself.

[8 : 55] But then also later, it becomes anyone who shares the good news. First of all, the apostles, and then you and I even can be sowers. And then verse 14 tells us that the seed is the word of God.

So we know that's clear. And finally, the soil has to be the human heart. So seed, sower, and soil. And Jesus describes, then, four types of soil that receive the word in four different ways. And before we go any further, let me say, if you haven't been listening yet, pay attention now.

This is really important, actually. Jesus is not describing four different people. Okay? Four types of soil are not four different people.

What do I mean? If you're a follower of Jesus, you might be tempted to tune this out because you identify with soil number four, the fruitful soil.

[9 : 54] But everyone is actually all four types of soil. everyone is tempted by distractions, persecutions, anxieties, wealth, in the way Jesus describes here, even Christians.

And every time we hear the word of God, even today, we must pray and prepare to receive it humbly into good soil. So, we take a look closely now at each of the soils in turn, and we consider how we are receiving Jesus personally.

Have a look at soil number one. This is the seed that falls along the path, and the birds devour it. So, look at Jesus' explanation in verse 15. 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. So, you notice that Satan immediately snatches up the word. Immediately.

This is the key word here. Because the strategy here, which prevents Jesus' words from ever being understood internalized or even remembered. I mean, when words go from Jesus' lips and before they even reach your ears, they're snatched up, there's no chance of remembering them.

[11 : 06] The question is, how does Satan do this? What are some possible ways? Well, John Piper suggests two. There's lots of them, but here's two. Distraction and distaste. So, what's distraction?

Well, let me ask you, what happens when you're sitting in church and your phone buzzes? Yeah, it's embarrassing. But also, it could be something really important.

I better have a look. I can multitask, right? I can listen with this ear to Jeremy and I'll just check my messages over here. What about when you're listening to a sermon and you begin to daydream about maybe a school assignment you have or a work meeting that's on Monday tomorrow?

What's in the fridge? Because I'm getting kind of hungry, right? All of these are distractions that happen to us. So, first, Satan's strategy is to distract us from God's word. And his second strategy is to make it appear distasteful.

And so many people today, they hear the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, but they actually receive it as bad news, don't they? For example, the gospel invites us to find our identity in Christ.

[12 : 13] That ought to be good news. But instead, people hear it this way. So, you say, the gospel invites you to find your identity in Christ rather than in your sexual identity.

But many ears hear that message and they hear this instead. Christians don't care about love. And God doesn't want me to be happy. Maybe even something even more extreme, like God hates gay people.

That's how they hear it. And of course, anybody who would hear that false gospel would find the gospel immediately distasteful. And they therefore reject the messenger. The seed is immediately snatched up.

So distraction or distaste or any other strategy, all of us are susceptible to Satan's strategies that immediately prevent us from hearing God's word. What about soil number two?

This is the seed that falls on rocky soil. And Jesus explains it in verse 16 and 17 if you look at the page. These are the ones sown on rocky soil, the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.

[13 : 16] They have no root in themselves. And endure for a while. And then, when tribulation or persecution arise on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And here we discover that an emotional response is just not enough.

Because when our faith is based on how we feel, that initial joy perhaps that Jesus describes, it just can't last. Because as soon as there's suffering or sickness or sadness, that plant, that little fragile plant, will wither up and die.

Because it has no roots. In fact, many of the most aggressive opponents of Christianity are those who were once baby believers of this type.

Helmut Tillichay warns us, a person who lets Jesus only halfway into his heart is far poorer than a 100% worldling.

That's very provocative. Of course, the protection against this temptation to fall away is to help one another grow deeper roots.

[14 : 21] The best way to do this is to find it, first of all, in Christ, and second of all, in Christian community. If you're a new believer, or if you're somebody who's feeling scorched by life's trials

right now, let me really, let me just encourage you to prioritize brothers and sisters in Christ who can walk with you and help you and help you to put down roots into deep soil.

So we turn to soil number three, the seed that fell among thorns, and you can look at verse 18 and 19 here. And others are the ones sown among thorns, and they are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches, the desires of other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Two examples of thorns are given. First, anxiety, anxiety, literally, the cares of the world are anxieties of the age. That seems relevant, doesn't it? Anxieties of the age, and wealth is the second one, these thorns that choke the word.

And what Jesus is warning us of here is a divided heart, a heart that's split in two with two competing loves. So the question becomes, what is your first love?

Or maybe better, who is your first love? Preacher Kent Hughes tells this joke about a young man proposing marriage. Darling, I never say darling to my wife, I should say that more.

[15:42] Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I'm not rich, I don't have a yacht or a Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.

She thought for a minute and then replied, I love you with all my heart too. But tell me more about Johnny Brown. Don't let your heart be divided between Christ and the world.

Nothing guards our heart better against this temptation than prioritizing Sunday worship. Gathering regularly as the church to see the glory of God and praise him alone as our first love.

And that brings us finally to soil number four, the good soil which bears much fruit. Verse 20, those that were sown on good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

J.C. Ryle wrote that the good soil is the person in whom sin will be truly hated, mourned over, resisted and renounced. Christ will be truly loved, trusted in, followed and obeyed.

[16:48] Holiness will show itself in all their life in humility, spiritual mindedness, patience, meekness and charity. There will be something that can be seen. The true work of the Holy Spirit cannot be hidden.

Now, of course, we all want to hear Jesus' six hot tips for cultivating good soil. He doesn't tell us that, does he? The story deliberately leaves out all the prerequisites like irrigation and fertilizers and weeding, any other farming practices that could be allegorized into spiritual practices.

Instead, Jesus gives us only two hints. About how we might cultivate this kind of soil and it's actually in the grammar of all places. I know, that's terrible. Both the verbs of hearing and bearing fruit are action words here that actually are given in particular tenses that tell us how to cultivate good soil. So I won't get into the grammar details, but the point that Jesus is making, first of all, is that good soil is found in those who hear the word continually. It can't be just a one-time thing.

It's not occasional. It needs to be continual. That's what the grammar reveals. And secondly, that bearing fruit happens gradually over time through a process, not all at once.

[18:01] And this is just simple gardening, right? So Jesus gives us a parable with four soils to teach us and warn us about how our hearts receive the word of God.

And this parable also doesn't try to solve the mystery of why each person receives the word differently. I know that's what you want it to tell you. Why is it that some people in my family receive Jesus by faith and others reject the good news?

Jesus doesn't answer that question here, but above all else, he does tell us that it's the ears, our ears, that are the soil of our lives. That's Frederick Bruner's line.

The ears are the soil of your life. Our ears are the organ of faith, and for there to be any hope of good soil or bearing fruit, we must begin by listening to Jesus. So then first, we receive the word and then secondly, this parable teaches us about sharing the word, which is good sowing.

And I know what you're thinking. Jeremy, your second point better not be as long as your first point. But I can tell you this is really more of a conclusion. A very long conclusion.

[19:15] No, I want us, before we wrap up here, I want us to apply this. And so we need to look at how we share the word as well, not just how we receive it. If you're a follower of Jesus, I want you to see how Jesus' parable leads you to share the word just like he does.

And remember that he is the sower first, but also he's saying that I'm creating a new family here, the church, and we imitate Christ in sharing the good news. That means we're all sowers, not just

pastors or academics or elders of the church.

Everyone who follows Jesus is a sower. So here's two encouragements for us as we go out to share the word that come from this parable. First of all, brothers and sisters, sow extravagantly, so lavishly.

Many readers of the gospel have complained that the sower wastes a lot of seed, tossing it around on the ground into places that are not realistically going to bear fruit, like the path and, you know, the thorns.

But that's totally, that's beside the point. The sower doesn't prejudge the soil. The sower doesn't do market testing or focus groups before evangelism. In Mark 2 and 3, we see these Pharisees, they have taken this approach, this miserly, Scrooge-like approach to sowing.

[20 : 32] And they've decided ahead of time that people like lepers and tax collectors and other sinners are barren soil not worthy of wasting seed on. How many of you here today were at some point in your life could have been seen by some other Christian as barren soil not worth wasting seed on?

What a tragedy that is. So, sow extravagantly, friends. Don't worry about how the word is received because God promises in Isaiah 55 that his word never returns to him empty but it always accomplishes his purposes.

And then secondly, sow by faith and not by sight. And Mark finishes this section of parables with the parable of the mustard seed in verse 30 and 32 and that's where I want us to finish as well.

Verse 30, and Jesus said, 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 seeds on earth.

Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. And the point of this parable is to contrast the smallness of the seed, that seed that Jordan held up, the tiny little seed, with the largeness of the tree, right?

[21 : 55] In other words, the smallness of the way the kingdom of God starts versus the greatness of the way that it ends. Ever since the day of Pentecost this has been Jesus' strategy for sowing his word through the bold witness of the church.

Mustard seed sized women and men like Mary and Peter proclaiming Christ crucified and resurrected and mustard seed sized missionaries bringing the good news to every continent with little fanfare or funding.

If you sow by sight you will quickly despair especially when you see something like Christianity losing the culture wars. But as we sow by faith we discover that the kingdom of God is far grander than anything we could ever imagine or engineer.

We need to actually have our imaginations expanded. That's what the parables do for us. Jesus tells us that the kingdom is like a tree with birds of every species in its branches which is just a picture for the great multitudes of people professing Jesus as Lord on the day of Christ's return.

Men and women and children from every nation and ethnicity and language. And here's commentator David Garland as we close. It takes faith to see how God exalts the lowly tree of the cross so that persons from every nation can find protection and an everlasting home under the outstretched arms of the one hanging upon it.

[23 : 26] We are those brothers and sisters who receive the word by faith and we share it by faith. So he who has ears to hear let him hear.

Amen.