

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
Senior Pastor Titus Green
June 4, 2023
Be Careful How You Hear
Mark 4:1-20

One of the unique features that sets Mark apart from the other accounts of Christ's life is that Mark doesn't record nearly the amount of Jesus' teaching as Matthew, Luke, and John. For instance, Matthew devotes three entire chapters to just one sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. But there are only two chapters in the entire book of Mark devoted to the teachings of Jesus that way – chapters 4 and 13.

And something that I find interesting about chapter 4 is that Mark is not just recording the message of Jesus' teaching, he is highlighting the method of Jesus' teaching. When Jesus taught during this phase of ministry, He used parables. Notice that's specifically what Mark says.

Mark 4:1-2

1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables...

Skip down toward the end of this chapter in verse 33.

Mark 4:33–34

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. 34 He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

During this phase of Christ's public ministry, He used parables to teach His followers the truths about God's kingdom. The word "parable" literally means "to throw alongside." It's a reference to putting two things alongside each other for the sake of comparing them. That's one of the reasons Jesus often introduces His parables with the phrase "The kingdom of God is like...". He's using everyday things His followers would have been familiar with and showing how they compare to Kingdom dynamics they weren't familiar with.

And there are a couple of reasons Jesus would teach that way.

1. Parables help reveal truth. By using common examples to illustrate Kingdom truths, Jesus allowed His followers to quickly learn about the Kingdom and to retain the word pictures from His lessons. Imagine you were trying to teach your kids what a water buffalo is. Since they originate in Asia, it's unlikely that your kids would know what they are. So, you would probably start by saying a water buffalo is a lot like a cow. In a lot of ways, they are very similar. But, if you wanted to really give them the full picture, you would use the comparison to tell them how they are different. Water buffaloes have horns that grow horizontal along their head before they grow up or out. Cow horns grow immediately up and out from their heads. Water buffaloes are bigger than domestic cows.

Water buffaloes are always black while domestic cows come in all different colors. I think you get the point. The comparison with something you already know helps you more quickly understand truths you have yet to learn. So, parables help reveal truth.

2. Parables help conceal truth. By embedding truth inside a story, it's almost as if Jesus was teaching His disciples in a code. Remember, there was a growing number of people who were opposed to Jesus. They were attempting to twist His words and destroy Him and His ministry. So, Jesus used parables as a way of teaching His disciples without revealing too much to those who had already rejected Him.

Mark 4:10-12

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 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, 12 so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.'"

Jesus says that the parables were part of His strategy for those who were outside of the Kingdom. Verse twelve is quoting a famous passage from Isaiah 6. It's a reference to those who have hardened their hearts to the truth and rejected the Lord. Last week, we saw that people were so hardened against the message of Jesus that they actually accused Him of operating in the power of Satan.

So, when those people listened to Jesus, they didn't actually hear what He was saying because they weren't interested in what He had to say. The only thing they cared about was trapping Jesus in His words. So, Jesus used the parables as a kind of secret code that He could use to relate truths about His Kingdom to His disciples without sharing more than He wanted with those who had already rejected Him.

And that brings us to the first parable in Mark 4 – the parable of the soils.

Mark 4:3-9

3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 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. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

So, here's the first parable Jesus tells. It's a story about a farmer who is sowing seeds. In Jesus' day, farmers would take a bag of seeds and walk through their fields indiscriminately scattering handfuls of seed as they went. The seeds would fall on all different kinds of soil. So, this is a picture that would have been very familiar to the people listening to Jesus. But even though the disciples are familiar with the dynamic, they don't quite understand what the story is about. So, once they were alone with Jesus, He explained it to them and to us in turn. Look down at verse 13:

Mark 4:13-20

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 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. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 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. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 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. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

There are three main components to this story.

1. The sower.
2. The seed.
3. The soils.

Verse 14 says the sower is someone who sows the word. Luke's account of this parable specifically says that the word is the Word of God. So, the seed is the Word of God and a sower is someone who spreads the word of God around their life. And while that is part of the story, it's not the point that Jesus is making. The comparison is really about the different kinds of soils. Jesus says they represent the various heart conditions of those who hear the Word. Every heart has a unique response to the Word and their response is a reflection of their heart.

And that's the Big Idea for this parable: Our response to God's Word reveals the condition of our hearts.

This parable is about what's going on in you this very minute. You are hearing the Word of God in a unique way. Something is happening in your heart. Every time you hear the Word of God, something is happening in your heart. Your heart is like soil and God's Word is like seed. And how you respond to God's word reveals the condition of your heart. And, in this parable, Jesus reveals 4 different conditions of the soil of our hearts.

1. Hard Heart

15 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.

In the fields of Galilee, there were paths that people would use to walk through the field. Those paths were like ancient sidewalks. The dirt would get packed down and become as hard as a rock. When seed fell there, it would lay on the surface until the birds would come and eat it. And Jesus says some of our hearts are like that. They are hard to the Word of God.

And Jesus says there are two noticeable things that this kind of person does. They hear the Word and then proceed to do nothing with it. They basically disregard it entirely until Satan comes and steals the seed so that it's forever gone from their heart.

And there's a growing number of people in our world who respond to God's word like that. When they hear that the Bible says something, their response is basically, "Who cares what the Bible says?" And, as we get closer to the return of Jesus, the world will become more hardened to God's word. 2 Timothy 3 says that terrible times will come when evil men will grow from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. Hearts will grow hard and cold to God's Word.

And before you automatically dismiss this, let me ask you something: what did you do with the last word you heard from the Bible? If you were here last week, what did you do in response to God's word? You may have listened. You may have heard. But, beyond hearing, what did you do?

Jesus is saying, "Beware of having a hard heart."

2. Shallow Heart

16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 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.

This person doesn't disregard the word like hard-hearted people. This person hears the word of God and they like what they hear. Jesus says they receive it with joy. These people might attend Bible studies and listen to sermons on their drive to work. They hear about God's love, and they don't reject that truth, they like it. They hear about Jesus living a perfect life or dying in our place and they don't reject that, they like it. They receive the truth with joy.

But then something else happens. They encounter something that is challenging or difficult and as soon as it gets hard, they fall away.

I took piano lessons when I was a kid. That's not exactly true. I took **A** piano lesson when I was a kid. My brother had been taking them for a while and I think my mom was paying month by month. Well, for some reason my brother had to drop out of lessons. And my mom let me take one of the final lessons he was scheduled to take that month. When I heard about playing the piano, I envisioned myself sitting at a grand piano holding a concert hall breathless while I played. So, when mom asked if I wanted to take that lesson, I gladly received it.

Then, I took the lesson. It was nothing like I imagined. It was hard. I had to hold my hands in a weird way. You might say I fell away. I quit. And there are people who are similar to that in connection with the word of God. When they hear it, they don't deny it, they receive it joyfully. But their hearts are shallow. They sit in a room like this and envision the Christian life as an easy-going, carefree solution to all of life's problems. But, when they walk out the door, life hits them in the face. Challenges and trials and temptations are all around them. And, since their belief in God's word was

superficial, they forget what they said they believed, and they bail before they experience true, lasting fruit.

And even now, some of you might feel dangerously close to this. Life has gotten tough. Your joy has begun to fade. Your faith has become less firm, and you are tempted to give up on the truth you've heard.

Jesus is saying, "Beware of having a shallow heart."

3. Distracted Heart

18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 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.

I think this type of heart is the one that is the greatest threat to people like us. Most of us come here every week. And, if you are here regularly, then you know you are going to hear the Word of God being taught. We like learning about the Bible. But, like verse 19 says, something dangerous can happen. The cares of this world and the desires for other things come in and choke out the word before it bears fruit in our lives.

- We turn on our favorite football team...
- We see that it's a nice day to go to the beach...
- We remember a television show we want to watch...
- We get on Amazon and see some things we'd like to have...
- We get up for work and head off to earn some money...

The cares of this life distract us from the truth of God's word, and we give greater care and attention to the stuff of this world than we do the Word of God.

Let me just give you something to consider: The average American spends between 3 and 4 hours on their phone every day. Less than 20% of people who regularly attend church read the Bible every day. Consider that in a personal way. You aren't a statistic. You are a real person. So, how much time do you spend on your phone? How much time do you spend in front of a television? How about sports, or hobbies, or finances, or pleasure...are they choking out the word of God in your life?

Jesus says, "Beware of having a distracted heart."

4. Fruitful Heart

20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

The final type of heart is the one that encounters the word of God and accepts it. They believe it and receive it. That word "accept" means to acknowledge something to be right, or true. It's a word that was sometimes used to describe a spouse who left their husband or wife and was unfaithful.

Sometimes they would want to come home and their spouse would either reject them or embrace

them. If they embraced them, it was that word “accept.” They would receive them and commit to live with them for the rest of their lives.

And that’s how Jesus says a fertile heart responds to the word of God. It accepts it through faith and commits to live in that truth for the rest of your life. It’s the heart that says, “For the rest of my life, my desire is to live according to God’s word.”

And when that happens, Jesus says something amazing takes place. He says the word bears fruit. And notice how He describes the fruit – thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold. That would have gotten the attention of those who heard Him. In the First Century, there weren’t any of our modern farming methods, so a good yield would be 7 or 8 times what you sowed. Ten times would be almost unheard of. So, if you sowed 100 corn seeds and harvested 700 or 800 kernels of corn, that would have been great. 1000 would have been amazing. But Jesus says something exponentially greater. Thirty, Sixty, or a hundredfold would have been miraculous. And that’s the point. The word of God produces miraculous fruit in the lives of those who truly receive it by faith and live in it.

And some of us know we need a miraculous work in our lives.

- We need miraculous work to become the husband or wife God is calling us to be.
- We need miraculous work to resist the sin that easily entangles us.
- We need miraculous work to love God and others.
- We need miraculous work to forgive those who have sinned against us.

We need fruit that we can’t produce on our own. We need Jesus and His miracle-working power. And that kind of life comes through faith in Jesus that is stirred and implanted by the Word of God. So, what is the condition of your heart today? Our response to God’s word reveals the condition of our hearts.

So, before we close, let me give you two quick points of application in response to this word from Christ.

1. Sow the Word

Sow the word in your life and the lives of others. Get in the Bible each day. Look for truths to believe and commands to obey. And, for some of us that will require a substantial change to our way of life.

Just think about what you are sowing into your life. What are you listening to? What are you reading? What are you giving your attention to? Set down your phone. Get off social media. Turn off the news. And open the Word of God. There is no spiritual fruit apart from a steady diet of God’s word.

2. Pray for healthy soil and fruitful lives

Ask God to do what you can’t do. Ask Him to give you a new heart. And you aren’t asking for something He hasn’t already promised to give. Ezekiel 36:26 says, *“I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”*

Paul prayed for the Ephesians in chapter 1: *17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you,*

You need God to do something in you that you can't do for yourself. So, pray for God to do for you what you can't do for yourself.

And that brings us to the Lord's Supper. The main message of the Bible is the gospel of Jesus. The Word of God is the story of God's grace to us in Jesus. Christ is the scarlet thread that runs from beginning to end in the Bible.

Though we all have sinned and deserve to be separated from God forever in hell, God has chosen to love us and provide a way to be saved. Jesus, the Son of God, came into this world to live the life we have all failed to live, a life of perfect obedience to God the Father. Jesus came to die the death we deserved to die, as our substitute and sacrifice for sins at the cross. And, though He died, Jesus didn't stay dead. He rose again three days later and promises to raise up any and all who will receive Him through faith as their Lord and Savior.

And the Lord's Supper is a declaration of our faith that we receive the Word of God in the Gospel. We take the bread and the juice into us as a way of showing that we have embraced the Word of Christ through faith and are trusting Him to bear miraculous fruit in our lives.

So, as we prepare our hearts to receive communion, what's the condition of your heart toward the Gospel of Jesus?

- Are you hard-hearted toward Jesus?
- Are you shallow-hearted toward Jesus?
- Are you distracted in your heart toward Jesus?
- Or is your heart fertile soil that embraces Jesus as your Lord and Savior?