

April 20, 2025

BE CAREFUL HOW YOU HEAR

Mark 4:1-20

(6 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

I've noted before that the reason believers revolve our lives around gathering with the saints on Sunday and praising the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ is because we recognize that there's nothing more important in all the world than the Jesus walked out of the tomb alive on that Easter Sunday morning. But Jesus' resurrection is not the end of the story. The second Jesus stepped out of that tomb, he was enthroned as God's promised king—the one God promised David would reign over his kingdom forever and be given the nations as his inheritance (2 Sam 7:12-13; Psalm 2:7). And it is as God's eternal king, who has authority over all nations, that he gave a commission to his church, telling us to go make disciples of all the nations. That is, as the risen and reigning king, Jesus commissioned us to go forth and proclaim the gospel to all peoples on the earth so that they might hear, believe, and be transformed into faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

But this raises a question, namely, how will people respond to our preaching? How will people respond to our proclamation that Jesus lived, died, was buried, was raised, is returning again, and demands that all people everywhere repent and believe in him? Well, in Mark 4:1-20, Jesus tells us a parable that answers that question, showing us that there will be varied responses to our gospel proclamation. We'd already seen that reality illustrated in the text we last looked at in Mark's gospel as we saw the varied responses of the crowds, the twelve, his family, the Pharisees, and others. But just to let us know we're on the right track in recognizing what Mark wants us to see in his gospel, right after reading about those varied responses to Jesus' teaching, Mark includes a parable that spells this point out even more clearly.

I noted at the beginning of our study in the gospel of Mark that this gospel includes less of Jesus' teaching than the other gospels. But if you want to find it, this chapter is one place to look. In fact, this chapter and chapter 13 provide for us the longest two sections of Jesus' teaching in Mark's gospel, though it's not a lot. Additionally, Jesus' teaching in this chapter isn't straightforward. It's given to his hearers in parables.

Parables were stories that Jesus told where the content revolved around everyday, relatable issues. In the parable we'll see this morning, for example, he tells a story about a farmer sowing seed, something most everyone in this first-century agricultural setting could relate to. In others, he'll tell stories involving the growth of large plants from small seeds, the way yeast spreads throughout a lump of dough and causes it to expand, and the like. No doubt these stories led to the crowds who gathered around Jesus recognizing him not only as one who worked miracles but also as one who was a good storyteller. Perhaps discussions of Jesus in the first century not only revolved around the latest amazing feat he'd performed but also included lines like, "And he can tell a good story, too."

But actually that's part of the problem. You see, Jesus didn't tell parables because he wanted to tell a story that everyone could relate to. He told parables because he wanted to make a point about a spiritual and eternal matter. Most of them related to the nature of God's kingdom that he'd announced the arrival of when he stepped onto the scene and began his public ministry (Mark 1:15). But for most of Jesus' hearers, all they heard was a good story. They never recognized that the story also told a much deeper truth, a truth that often related to them. And so parables became a way, as Jesus notes in verse 11, of teaching, while keeping the crowds ignorant of the truths he was proclaiming, truths that he would unfold only to those whom he knew would be his followers. This shouldn't surprise us when Jesus will tell us later that the only ones who know the Father are those to whom Jesus chooses to reveal him (Matt 11:27).

So I want us to walk through this first parable Jesus tells in the gospel of Mark and see what it is he's showing us about the varied responses the proclamation of his Word will receive. And what we'll see is that most of the ways the gospel is heard and received serves as a warning to us. In essence, the gist of this parable is, "Be careful how you hear God's Word." So, let's look at the parable.

The story told in the parable itself is straightforward enough to understand. Jesus tells a story about a man who has a bag of seed, and he goes out to scatter it in hopes that it will germinate and grow into a nice crop. However, as he throws the seed, he scatters it indiscriminately. That is, he's not careful about where he's throwing it. He throws some on the hardened path, others on very shallow soil with a rocky base, others among thorns, and others on good and fertile soil. But what Jesus tells his disciples is that this parable is about much more than the experience of a farmer scattering seed. It's a story meant to communicate a truth about how people hear the Word of God and respond when it is proclaimed to them. We can see one obvious truth from the outset. Like the farmer scattering the seed everywhere, we are meant to preach the gospel indiscriminately. That is, we don't try to anticipate who might be most receptive to the gospel and preach only to them. After all, in the first century one might have thought that would be the Pharisees, but you'd be dead wrong. Rather, we preach to everyone we can. But what Jesus' teaches us is that the responses to the gospel will be varied, and the parable teaches us that people will fall into one of four categories in how they respond to the Word of God. And, perhaps surprisingly, three of these responses end in the person not being saved but condemned on that last day. Therefore, we should listen up and make sure this morning that we're hearing and responding to God's Word in the one appropriate way outlined in this parable. Let me then, show you these four responses. First, we see is the hardened soil.

The hardened soil

As Jesus tells the parable, the first place seed is scattered is along the path. This would be the area where people walk so that the dirt is pressed down and hardened. Any seed thrown on this area would not be able to penetrate the hardened ground, and therefore birds come along and are able to snatch up the seed. As Jesus explains this parable, he says that this hardened soil of the pathway represents those who hear the Word, but immediately Satan comes and takes away the Word that was sown before it has any chance of taking root.

Now, what's interesting about this, is that even those represented by this hardened path hear the Word proclaimed. In fact, hearing is a key element throughout this parable. Jesus will start the parable, saying to the crowds, "Listen" (v. 3). Then, he'll end the parable saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (v. 9). So, those represented by the hardened pathway aren't necessarily those who never hear God's Word. They are those perhaps like some in this room right now, hearing the very words I'm saying. But maybe like this hardened path, the words aren't being heard.

Maybe you're the person who is here because you feel the need to be at a church service on Easter Sunday, but you've checked out in light of the fact that we've gotten to that point in the service where one man stands up and talks for a while. Maybe you're a young person who is sitting here, but you don't care about anything being said from the pulpit. You're more interested in that dating prospect or how you can be more impressive to your friends. Listen, if this is you, it may feel like this is a small deal, but there's a spiritual battle going on. You're not the only player acting on your soul right now. The more you harden your heart and close your ears to the Word of God, you give the enemy an opportunity to snatch it away before it has any impact. He wants to make sure you don't hear your need to bow the knee to Jesus right now or even contemplate it later, and your hardened and unreceptive heart is giving him license to take this word right away and remove it from your thoughts, lest you contemplate it later and respond in faith. So, please, don't be like this soil on the pathway. Let today be the day that you finally wake up and become alert to the reality that you need Jesus—who died for our sins and rose from the grave—to save you. Trust in him today. But this isn't the only poor way to hear God's Word. Next, we see the response of the rocky ground.

The rocky soil

In Jesus' parable, some of the seed falls on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. Instead of thinking of soil with some rocks in it, you should think of it as a layer of rocky ground with a shallow layer of soil over it. That'll help you make better sense of what Jesus is saying. Now, what happens when you sow seed in areas like that is that a plant actually springs up pretty quickly. Because the soil is so shallow, it is warmed up quickly, and the seed springs to life quickly. The problem, of course, is that this plant isn't able to root itself in the soil as the rocky bed prevents this. Therefore, as Jesus mentions in the parable, this can be exciting at first as the seed springs to life, but once the sun begins to beat down on it, the plant quickly is scorched and withers under the heat as it's not able to tap down into the soil and access moisture.

Now, as Jesus explains, what this soil on the rocky ground represents are those who "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 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" (vv. 16-17).

This represents someone who hears the preaching of the Word, Jesus says, and receives it with joy. And, I'll note, that's the kind of response that we love to see. When someone hears the

gospel and receives it with joy, professing faith in Christ, we rejoice, we baptize them, and it's a glorious day. But Jesus says that some of these people who express joy at receiving the gospel don't actually have roots in themselves. And the way that they show it is that when tribulation and persecution come to them on account of following and obeying Jesus, they fall away.

Now, it may be that many of us have received the Word with joy. Again, that's good. So, what is the sign that we're not like this rocky soil that's ready to wilt because we have no root? Well, one of the signs that we're not this kind of soil is that we don't shrink away when tribulation or persecution comes at us for following Jesus. So, perhaps it's worth asking a question. Do you feel the desire to have the approval of pleasures of this world to such an extent that you want to shrink away from Jesus' teaching?

You see, Jesus pulls no punches when he tells us what he demands of his followers. He tells us we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. He tells us that if the world hated and persecuted him, they'll hate and persecute us as well.

Perhaps an illustration is helpful for what it can be like to follow Jesus in this world. The Philadelphia Eagles football fans have earned a reputation for being pretty rough. One time they booed Santa Claus and threw snowballs at him during a halftime event. So, you don't want to find yourself in the midst of a bunch of Eagle's fans, rooting for another team. Now, imagine you and a friend step onto an elevator full of huge men decked out in Eagles' gear, and once the elevator door closes, your friend rips open his jacket to show that he's wearing a New York Giants jersey and yells, "The Eagles stink. My friend and I are Giants' fans, and they're going to kill you guys when we play." What do you do in that moment?

My guess is that you quickly do anything you can to create distance between yourself and your friend. Perhaps you physically step away from him, while saying, "I actually love the Eagles and hope they win." Obviously, it's going to be impossible to align with your friend and survive that elevator ride.

Well, following Jesus in this world can be like that. Jesus said all kinds of things that are condemning to people in this world who hate him, and so confessing his truth in this world will produce all kinds of vitriol from others. I noted this a few weeks ago, but I think in our day, most of those claims of Jesus that are condemning to those in the world revolve about sexual immorality and all the LGBTQ+ issues. Jesus outright condemns sexual immorality, saying that those who are sexually immoral will not inherit his kingdom (1 Cor 6:9). He condemns homosexuality as sin and even a sign of divine judgment (Rom 1:18-32). He upholds gender as a good gift from God and even draws distinctions between roles that men and women carry out in the home and church (Eph 5, 1 Tim 2). Now, all of those things sound to this world like someone yelling, "The Eagles' stink" to a bunch of Philadelphia football fans. Again, that's why Jesus used imagery like, "I'm sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves."

And so, what we can be tempted to do is to want to distance ourselves from Jesus, just like we'd want to distance ourselves from our friend in the elevator. We don't want the world to

disapprove of us or harm us in any way. We're excited and joyful about following Jesus when we consider all the blessings, but when we consider the cost, we want to start distancing ourselves. We want to say to the world, "I'm actually with you guys and not with him on these things." To use the picture given in the parable, that's a sign we have no root in Jesus.

When we see our hearts doing that, we're revealing that we're like that shallow soil on rocky ground that looked like it was receiving Jesus' words, but when tribulation and persecution come, they have no root in Jesus and turn away. Beware of that. Commit in your soul today to bear the cost of aligning with Jesus in a world that hates him. Following Jesus in this world requires nothing less.

Now, I'll acknowledge, it is indeed the case, that if you will turn away from following Jesus and his claims in this world, you probably can avoid the wrath that this culture is eager to pour out on all who disagree with them. But you'll face the wrath of the Lamb on the day of judgment, which is far worse. So, count the cost, and follow our Lord, whatever the result in this age, and you'll have no regrets in the age to come. Next, we see the soil among thorns.

The soil among thorns

The third place Jesus mentions seed falling in the parable is in soil among thorns. In this case, the soil seemed fine. It wasn't hardened, and there was no layer of rock under it. However, the problem is that there were thorns. Therefore, as the thorns grew around it, any life that came was choked out.

As Jesus explains this element of his parable, he tells us that this soil among thorns represents those who hear the Word, but "the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word" so that "it proves unfruitful" (vv. 18-19).

This is the person who is simply too drawn to the things of this world to become a faithful follower of Jesus. If you've ever read Augustine's *Confessions*, he says that this was him prior to his conversion. He didn't want to give up the pleasures of immorality to follow Christ. Tom and I spoke to a young man several years ago, encouraging him toward obedience to the Lord, and he told us that he wanted greater riches than he perceived were available in following Christ as we'd outlined. I've watched several ladies over the years walk out of terrible lifestyles, profess faith in Christ, and seemingly do well for a bit only to walk away from Jesus into a life of sin after some guy came along and showed interest in them.

These stories aren't unique to what I've witnessed. You know them as well. Nor is this some new phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Paul mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10 that Demas deserted him because he was "in love with this present world." So, brothers and sisters, beware of a love for the world and the things it offers. Pornography, prestige, sexual immorality, an obsession with body image that leads to eating disorders, a love of riches are just a small sample of things that are trying to pull you away from Jesus. They are thorns, trying to choke out the life that the gospel gives. So, beware and turn away. Give yourself to delighting in the Lord. And those of

you who don't want to give your life to following Christ in faith because of your love for the world, recognize that these things you're chasing are like thorns choking off the very thing that can give you life. Don't chase after this world but after Jesus in repentance and faith. But the responses to the gospel Jesus outlines aren't all bad. Finally, we see the good soil.

The good soil

Finally, Jesus says in the parable that some of the seed fell among good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Now, that is a serious harvest. It's like sowing grass seed that is a variety that spreads. You may throw down twenty seeds, but it doesn't produce just twenty blades of grass in turn. It does that, but then it takes root and starts to spread, underground, on top of the ground, and the result of a thick, lush area of grass that far outnumbers the seed you've sown. That's what Jesus is picturing here.

Now, as Jesus explains what this good soil represents, he says, "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" (v. 20).

In other words, Jesus says that those who truly belong to Christ not only hear the Word and accept it, but they begin to bear fruit and grow. In other words, we're not just those who profess Jesus as Lord, but we seek to believe and obey his Word. And then we don't stop there. We keep growing in our obedience to Jesus, seeking to obey him more and more. When sin is exposed in our lives, we're not content to say, "Oh well," but fight to put it to death, asking what we need to do not to go down that path again. We recognize, as Jesus says in verses 11-12, that to us has been shown great grace to understand that the Bible addresses us, and that we've been shown grace to understand and believe—a grace others haven't. And so we want to understand his Word more and obey him more.

What I'm describing isn't super-Christianity. In other words, among the four categories here, it's not that the middle two represent acceptable Christians, and this last category of the seed growing up and increasing represents really amazing Christians. Only the last soil represents Christians at all. In other words, Christians are necessarily those who hear the Word, accept it, and then obey the Lord and grow in obedience to him. That's the fruit of our faith. We're saved by faith in the finished work of Christ alone, and then that faith so thoroughly transforms us that we want to fight sin, obey Jesus, and grow more in that. That's the only appropriate response to hearing God's Word.

So, what soil represents you? Are you giving evidence of being one of the first three soils? If so, repent. The Lord receives the repentant with open arms. Are you the good soil? If so, thank the Lord today because it is only by his grace we have ears to hear, as Jesus says in this parable. And as those blessed to hear, let's be faithful to obey our risen and reigning Lord, taking his Word to others so that they might hear and have life as well. Let's thank our Lord now as we come to the table. Amen.