

A Plea to Truly Embrace God's Word

Mark 4:1-20

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Introduction

Last time, we did an overview of Mark 4:1-20 which contains the parable of the sower.

- I mentioned that this is perhaps the best known of Jesus' parables.
 - It is significant because it comes, as few others do, with a complete interpretation and a description of Jesus' reasons for using parables.
 - We noted that in v. 13, He highlights the importance of this parable when He says, **Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?**
- And so I told you that since this parable stands out as of special importance, and since it is packed with so much useful material, I would spend two weeks on it.
 - Last time, we looked at an overview of the whole passage, touching on the parable, but also looking at what Jesus says about His reasons for using parables and how it all relates to us...
 - We saw how Jesus explained that His use of parables was a judgment on many of His hearers, leaving them with stories that they did not understand.
 - They had not received the gospel that He had been preaching and confirming with miracles over the previous year in Galilee, so now they would be left in the darkness.
 - We saw how the multitude did not even bother to ask what the parables meant—they didn't really care—they were there to see His miracles and to get in on the immediate benefits of His ministry rather than to seek the kingdom of God—to repent and believe the gospel.
 - Here God had sent His Son to save them from sin, and He had come with gracious words of salvation, but they had little interest;
 - now they would be consigned to more and more darkness.
 - But Jesus assured His disciples, both the twelve and others who were doing the will of God and believing the gospel, that to them it would be given to know the meaning of His parables and His teaching.
 - By saying that it is *given* to them, He is showing us that the reception of the gospel is of God's mercy—it is not of us, but it is because of His grace that we believe and receive the word.
 - That was what we looked at last time...
 - And I told you that my plan for this week was to look more closely at the parable itself and what it has to say to us.
 - So we will do that today, as God enables.

Please listen now as I read the passage to you again... Mark 4:1-20.

- This is the word of God—we should be so thankful that He has given it to us.

Mark 4:1-20: And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat *in it* on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 2

And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ⁷ And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ But other *seed* fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” ⁹ And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” ¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, ¹² so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should

turn, and *their* sins be forgiven them.’ ” 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 by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. ¹⁶ These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. ¹⁸ Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept *it*, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word.

Again, my plan today is focus on how the parable applies to us.

I. Let’s begin with the parable itself.

A. Here is a story drawn from the everyday life of the people to whom Jesus was speaking.

1. Many in their community were either fisherman or farmers, so all of them were quite familiar when Jesus told of a farmer sowing seed in a field.
 - The story is so simple that even city folks like us can easily understand it,
 - especially with a little explanation of the practices and circumstances of the time and place where the story is set.
 - a. In those days, the farmer would move through his field with a bag or basket of seed and scatter the seed by tossing it on the field with his hand.
 - Then, after it was scattered he would plough it to get it into the ground so it could germinate and bring forth a harvest.
 - His goal, of course, was for it to grow and produce a crop.
 - b. But as is always the case, there are certain impediments found in the soil... problems with the soil that prevent the seed from bringing forth a crop.
2. Look at how Jesus describes three kinds of soil that do not produce a crop.
 - a. First, there is the soil by the wayside.

- This refers to the hard pathways that were made by people walking or riding across the fields on animals—sometimes drawing carts.
 - The ground on these paths became very hard and though some seed fell there, it would not be ploughed in by the farmer.
 - Since it was not ploughed in, it was eaten by the birds.
- b. The second kind of problem soil is called the stony ground.
 - One of the characteristics of the fields in Galilee was the presence of a shelf of limestone just below the surface of the soil.
 - Jesus refers to how the seed that fell upon this soil would spring up quickly because of the warmth of the sun in the shallow soil,
 - but would just as quickly become scorched because the roots could not go down far enough into the soil to sustain the plant.
- c. The third kind of problem soil is what He calls the thorny ground.
 - This was the soil that was especially friendly to thorns or weeds.
 - In that country, they were often hidden in seed form because the plants themselves would turn to dust during the dry season and blow away.
 - When the crops began to grow, the weeds would grow up with them, in some places more than others.
 - Jesus tells how these would choke out the plants that grew from the seeds that were sown so that they did not bring forth a crop.
- 3. But there was also the good soil that Jesus describes—soil that brought forth the crop that the seed ought to produce.
 - In verse 8, Jesus says: **“But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”**
 - With these words, it is hard to tell whether Jesus is describing a miraculous harvest or an ordinary harvest... it is hard to know for sure because it depends on how the increase is measured.
 - If Jesus means that for every bushel of seed that was sown, the good soil produced 30 to 100 bushels of crop, He is describing a harvest that at its worst was about twice as much as would be expected (more like 17 bushels would be a very good harvest).
 - But if Jesus means that each plant produced 30 to 100 seeds... and the harvests were often measured in that way—then He is describing an ordinary harvest.
 - I would argue that He is describing the ordinary harvest.
 - If He was describing a miraculous harvest, you would expect there to be some indication of that...
 - that He would have added the words “And behold,” or something like that to indicate how amazing it was.
 - But rather, it seems that He presents it, both in the story and in the explanation of the story, as a harvest that would be expected.

- His emphasis is not on the abundance of the harvest, but on the soil in the field that although it had the same seed, did not produce fruit because there was something wrong with it.
 - That is where the emphasis of the story is found.
- So we conclude that this story describes a very normal outcome from sowing a field.
- B. But Jesus begins His story with the word “Listen,” as you can see in verse 3, and ends it with “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” in verse 9.
1. He is indicating that this story has significance well beyond itself and is to be pondered.
 - a. As a parable, it calls for more than a superficial hearing.
 - It is given to illustrate something else.
 - b. When I was a new believer, a man told me of a preacher whose recorded sermons he liked to listen to.
 - He told me a wonderful story that this preacher had included in a recent sermon (and it was a great story),
 - but I was a little taken aback when I asked this man what the story was illustrating and the man wrinkled up his brow and said he could not remember.
 - c. As we saw in my previous sermon on this passage, there were many who heard the parable of the sower and that was all they got—just a nice story.
 - But Jesus calls for more than that.
 - The parable of the sower is meant to illustrate how people receive (or don’t receive as the case may be) the word of God.
 2. The parable of the sower is an example of the kind of parable in which the hearer is enticed to make a judgment and then apply it to himself.
 - a. In this case, you are drawn into agreement with Jesus that the soil that receives the good seed and does not produce is bad soil.
 - Problems with the soil prevent the seed from doing what it is supposed to do—that is, to bring forth a crop.
 - It is hard to hear the story without agreeing with Jesus about that!
 - b. But, as this is a parable about those who hear the word of God, you are to take that judgment and apply it to your hearing of the word.
 - The word is the seed sown, (as Jesus clearly tells us in verse 14).
 - As the word of God proclaimed, it is meant to come to us and produce the fruits of repentance and faith and new life in Christ.
 - But as with the field that was sown with seed, there are those who hear the word and no repentance, no faith, no new life in Christ is produced.
 - There is something wrong with the soil—
 - We are to apply that judgment to ourselves and conclude that if we hear God’s word and there is not fruit in our lives, there is something wrong with us as hearers.
- The parable is designed to make us ponder what we are like by considering the effect that God’s word has upon our lives.

- c. When the parable is rightly heard, it is a searching plea to us all that we ought to truly embrace God's word.
 - It confronts us with three impediments in us that keep us from truly embracing the word even when we have heard it...
 - And it shows us that when we do embrace it, we bring forth fruit.

TRANS> So this morning it is my desire not merely to analyse this parable, but rather to urge all of you with this parable to embrace the word of God so that you may live.

II. Therefore, I urge you, do not receive the word in the way that the first three kinds of soil received the seed.

- A. See to it that you are not hardened so that the word is unable to enter you.
 - 1. The seed by the wayside never even got into the soil at all because the path was so hard. It sat on the surface until the birds came and gobbled it up.
 - a. This is what happens to you when you go to church and hear the word or hear it in family worship and remember nothing.
 - Maybe you remember a story or an illustration, but you don't remember the real message because you never really took it in.
 - There is no change in you from hearing the word—no enrichment of your love for Christ,
 - no conviction of sin that sticks so as to bother you enough to lead you to repentance.
 - no sense of how you need Christ to save you from your sin.
 - no grasping of the greatness, majesty, holiness, power, mercy, justice, wisdom, and beauty of God.
 - b. Often you did not get much of anything even while you were there.
 - You sit in church, but you daydream—
 - you thinking about something you were doing last week or about a trip you are planning.
 - Maybe you come sleep deprived or with a hangover and you are wiped out the whole time.
 - Maybe you even allow yourself to start texting or looking on the internet... there are a thousand ways to divert yourself.
 - c. But even if you did have a little conviction and little stirring of your heart, Satan always make sure that the word does not remain with you for long.
 - If you it should happen that you should think of what you heard and perhaps conclude that you need to go and pray and seek the Lord, Satan immediately diverts you—brings something else to mind...
 - something that you need to do, something that you want to do, some temptation, a phone call, a friend's interruption... it is easy when you are hardened like the beaten path...
 - 2. Remember that Satan is as eager to snatch the word away from you as birds are to eat the seed on the hard ground.

- a. Satan's goal is to keep your heart away from God's word as much as possible.
 - He does all he can to keep preachers and potential hearers apart so that the word will never be sown at all.
 - He uses whatever he can to keep the word away from people—
 - He uses sickness, distraction, misunderstanding, irrational fears, scandals...
 - He leads preachers into false doctrine so that they no longer preach the word...
 - But once a person is exposed to the word, he labours to snatch it away so that it will never have a chance to bear fruit.
 - And if you are hardened like the trampled ground, he has great success.
- b. I never cease to be amazed at how quickly people will forget what they have heard.
 - I am not talking about the details of sermons, but the overall principles and doctrines that they have heard over and over.
 - Satan is very good at snatching away the word that was sown.
- c. You need to be mindful of this about Satan and you need to labour against it and to pray against it.
 - Pray for yourself and pray for others that the word will find lodging.
 - It is probably a waste of time to listen to a sermon if you are not seeking to embrace the word and praying for God to bring that about.
 - Do not give in to all the distractions and don't let those stirrings of heart after God be snuffed out—fan them into a full flame.
 - And do what you can to remind each other to reflect on the word that you have heard or read—discuss it, stir each other up to consider how it applies and hold each other accountable.
 - How we need each other!
 - Don't go away from a sermon without talking about it.
 - Don't end your day without praying about what you have heard or what you have read in God's word.

TRANS> See that you are not like the wayside—hardened so that the word never finds lodging and never takes root... that is the first kind of bad soil.

B. Second, see that you have a true root of faith in you so that you will not stumble when trials come.

- Jesus says: **(Mk 4:16-17): “These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.”**
- 1. The danger here is that you have come to Christ for various reasons but not for the one reason required—you never develop a root of true saving faith.
 - a. Perhaps you came to Him...

- because you believed that true happiness and prosperity could only be found in Him—which it true, but it is not the root you need...
 - maybe you heard of the promise of heaven where there will be no more sickness or sorrow or death, and you said, “I want that,” so you came to Christ for that... that is indeed something that He has promised, but it is not the root of saving faith that you need...
 - or perhaps because you wanted to be part of a great movement that was led by God and by His Son—you saw that He would have dominion over all... that is also true, but that is not the right root either...
 - maybe it was that you realised that you could be a better person by coming to Him—perhaps you wanted help in keeping your family together... the Lord does help you to be a better person for sure, but that is not the root...
 - maybe you came because you saw the love that is in the body of Christ and you wanted to be a part of that—to love and be loved in a community that was committed to each other... good for you... but that is not the root of faith that is required and that will sustain you...
 - maybe you came because you heard rightly that Jesus will destroy the works of Satan... and you found yourself enslaved to drunkenness or lust or bound by fear and you came to be set free... that is good, but it is still not the root...
 - maybe you came because you knew that God ought to be worshipped and you saw the church worshipping and you wanted to do that... it is true that God should be worshipped, but that is still not *the* essential reason for coming to Christ... it is *a* reason indeed... all of these are... but it is not the right reason.
- b. The right reason for coming to Christ is to be saved from your sins.
- The Holy Spirit has convicted you of your sin and you have seen that you deserve to be cursed and rejected by the Lord of glory.
 - By the work of God’s Spirit, you have also seen that Christ is the only one who can save you from your sins...
 - That He is the Son of God and the One that God sent from heaven to be our priest and offer the only sacrifice that can secure pardon for sinners.
 - You understand that that sacrifice is nothing else but the sacrifice of Himself—that He went to the cross to suffer for His people’s sins—to be punished in our place.
 - And you have heard God’s gracious call to come and believe in Him for the remission of sins, and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.
 - And you have come to Him that you might have forgiveness and eternal life—not just forgiveness, but forgiveness that restores you to God so that you can dwell with Him forever.
 - You look to Him to transform you by His Spirit, and you seek to grow in grace and knowledge of Him and in all wisdom and discernment that you might do His will.
 - You may rejoice in many things about Christ, but unless you have a root of rejoicing in the gospel of Christ who has saved you from your sins and from the wrath to come, you are missing the root that you need.

2. The problem with the stony ground hearer is not that you do not rejoice in the word—in many of God’s promises—but that you are missing the root.
 - a. Jesus tells us that this person rejoices in the word initially—
 - in some of the promises that are closely related to the gospel and even some that are a part of the gospel.
 - He has great joy at first, and he is full of zeal and thanksgiving.
 - b. He may also have a solid profession of faith.
 - He professes the gospel and speaks of Christ as the only saviour.
 - God may use him to lead others to Christ. He may even go into the ministry.
 - c. But the fact is that he is not rejoicing in the gospel itself—that he is a sinner who deserves to perish, but that God has had mercy on him and redeemed him in Christ—is the problem.
3. Jesus tells us that the stony ground hearer is exposed by suffering—by tribulation and persecution. It is seen that he does not really love the gospel.
 - a. Let me illustrate.
 - 1) Perhaps one of the main reasons you came to Christ was because of the promise of heaven... the promise of no more sorrow or suffering...
 - You rejoiced at first, but now you are sick and in pain... and worse than that, one of your children has died and your husband is disabled.
 - Right here your faith is being tested...
 - Did you come to Christ to be saved from your sin? Are you rejoicing in His saving work?
 - If you are, you will grow stronger through this trial... you will come to the Lord more than ever, clinging to the gospel and your roots will actually deepen and grow stronger.
 - But if you have not yet come as a sinner to be saved by His grace, you will become angry with Lord...you did not come to Him for this trouble!
 - Your zeal will grow cold and soon you will no longer walk with Him.
 - 2) Or maybe you came to Christ initially that you might be part of a great movement... maybe you wanted to achieve great things and this seemed to be place to do it—eternal matters!
 - At first, you were very zealous and motivated and things seemed to go quite well—you even entered into the ministry,
 - but despite your prayers, there are few who are responding to the gospel in your ministry—or maybe you don’t even pass your ordination exams...
 - Your dreams of greatness have failed.
 - It is right here that your faith is put to the test.

- It is a day of discovery. Will you now follow Christ because He has saved you from your sins, or will you reject Him because He did not make you great?
 - Have you come to truly know Him as Saviour, or will you come to know Him now, or will you prove that you never really knew Him?
 - If you turn to Him now, this trial will deepen your love for Him and your commitment to Him.
 - If you do not, you will reject Him.
- 3) Maybe you came because you saw the love in the body of Christ—you came to be a part of that and to bring your family into that love...
- At first it was great, and you were zealously witnessing to your family, but it turned out that the gospel made them even more hostile toward you...
 - And then the worst happened—division arose in the church.
 - Let's say that a group rose up in the church that wanted to support gay pride, but others said, no, we need to love them and try to win them, but we cannot encourage sex outside of biblical marriage.
 - You thought the church was supposed to be a place of love—but now there is division and strife...
 - This is not what you want from Christ, so you reject Him and join with the party that is rejecting His word.
 - The root of the gospel is not in you, so you are offended and walk no more with Him when this trial comes.
- b. In each of these three situations, your faith is tested.
- When we come to Christ, our love for the gospel itself may be small and undeveloped.
 - That is why you can't tell who the stony ground hearers are until testing comes.
 - The true believer may reel under the testing, but in the end he will emerge with an even greater love for Christ and the gospel.
 - The sun (the tribulation and persecution) makes seeds grow unless they are in the stony ground where they have no root.
 - The same sun that makes true believers grow, scorches those who have no root and causes them to dry up.
 - So when trials come, rejoice in the gospel of Christ—as Romans 5 teaches you, rejoice that even while you were a sinner Christ died for you.
- C. Third, see that you are not indifferent to the word because of a love for the world—because of a friendship with the thorns.
- Unlike the stony ground, you don't get offended with Christ, but just never take enough interest in Christ and His word to come to true faith.
1. You hear the word, perhaps you even grew up in the church... and it seems okay... it is something you are happy enough to go along with...

- a. But here again, you don't really get the importance of salvation by Christ or come to cherish your relationship with God through His Son.
 - It is a part of your life, but it is never really your life—just a nice add-on to everything else you have going on...
 - sports, success in your career, hobbies, entertainment, relationships, prosperity, decorating your house.
 - The way you see it, you have a very full life and you have God too.
 - b. You may fudge a little, but there are no big scandals in your life...
 - You don't tithe—but you do give more generously than most people—and you are just getting started—or you have children—or you are on a fixed income... whatever.
 - You try to pray—but often you are too busy, and when you do pray, you often have a hard time focusing.
 - And you usually go to church, except when the playoffs are going on.
 - And maybe you go a little further than you ought to with a girl or guy, or maybe you make a few suggestive comments—but nothing major—at least, not as *you* see it.
 - And let me add that there is another version of the thorny ground hearer.
 - c. We might call him *the anxious lover of thorns*.
 - This is the one who is anxious about the things of the world.
 - The one who is always afraid of losing his estate, or his reputation, or his friends, or his comforts or something in this world.
 - Instead of putting your life in God's hands and giving thanks, you are always trying to protect yourself and your things.
 - Instead of seeking to grow in your walk with Christ and to grow in your love for God, you are seeking to be secure in the world.
2. The problem with the thorny hearer is that instead of learning of God and of the riches of grace, the Lord is on the side.
- Jesus describes it for us: **“Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”**
 - Understand that if you are in this condition, you are not bearing any more fruit than the one who was offended and who rejected the Lord.
 - You are one of the ones to whom Jesus will say, “Depart from me, for I never knew you,” on the Day of Judgment.
 - Christ will not be a mere add on to our lives—He is the Lord of all.
 - When you truly come to Him, He is your life, not an enhancement, but the One you live for because He has given Himself for you.

TRANS> Be sure that you are not a thorny ground hearer.

- They often remain in the church their whole lives, but their hearts are deceived.

III. But how glad we should be that there is also the good soil.

- A. This is the soil where the seed simply does what it is supposed to do.
1. It brings forth plants that bring forth fruit for the harvest.
 - The seed of the gospel is a marvellous thing because it is designed to do this with sinners.
 - That is what the gospel is for—to save sinners and bring them to God.
 - It is impossible for the soil to bring forth anything by itself—without the seed of the word sown—without the gospel implanted.
 - When the word is planted into the soil of our lives, it is that which brings forth much fruit.
 - This is a very marvellous thing—even a miraculous thing... that dirt can bring forth a harvest of fruit.
 - We should be very glad and give thanks.
 2. What is the fruit that is brought forth?
 - It is the new life that comes through union with Christ—
 - It is the fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.
 - We learn to love as Christ loved us and to serve as He served us.
 - And the sun that scorched the stony hearers—the trials and persecutions—makes the plants in the good soil grow and bear even more fruit.
 - There is an ever deepening commitment because we turn to Christ in the trials and consider what we have in His saving grace.
 - The word has connected us to Him so that we are rooted in Him as a branch is rooted in a vine.
 - Nothing can break that bond of faith once it is established.
 - We grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ and come to understand more and more of His love and grace and wisdom and beauty and holiness...
 - And we come to delight more and more in our heavenly Father and to praise Him with our whole heart.

TRANS> There is much fruit.

- B. But what of these volumes?... some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundredfold?
1. Well you know, I already told you that I do not believe this is referring to a miraculous harvest.
 - That there is any fruit is a miracle, but when the seed of the word is once received in the soil, fruit like this is the normal and expected thing.
 - But it is not the same for everyone.
 2. This is not something to ignore!
 - a. We tend to ignore it, but Jesus never did.
 - He was always urging us to consider our reward in heaven and telling us that those who suffer for Him will have a great reward, that those who give alms and pray earnestly for His kingdom will have a great reward...

- He even encouraged us to do things like giving a cup of cold water in His name to increase our reward.
 - And He said that if we abide in Him, we will bear much fruit and that our reward will be great in heaven.
- b. How is it that we can trivialise this!
- We are talking about treasure in heaven for all eternity.
 - Don't be proud and say, "I would not want to serve for a reward."
 - Of course you do—if someone offered you a million dollars to work in their store for a week, most of you would arrange to do it, would you not?
 - Well think of this—the fruit you bring forth by abiding in Christ and continuing in His word will bring forth treasure that is much greater than that—and it will be treasure for all eternity.
 - None of us should be content to bring forth a small harvest of fruit for Christ whether there is a reward or not...
 - But we have all the more reason to be zealous in His service when we know that there is a reward.
 - We have a seed in us that is able to bring forth a hundredfold.
- c. And what is of even more importance, when we are bringing forth much fruit, it makes our calling and election sure.
- You don't want it to be an uncertain thing as to whether you really are in Christ or not, do you?
 - Then abide in Him, and bring forth much fruit by His powerful grace.

Conclusion: So all of you are urged by this parable to abide in Christ and to have His word abide in you.

The way forward is to look to Him and to His word for grace and strength.

- When trials and persecutions come, it is time to hold fast to Him even more that you might grow more than ever...
- And when the world entices you, it is an opportunity for you to consider how much better Christ and His eternal reward is—
 - It is a time to lay up a great reward in heaven by serving Him.
- When you turn to His word in those times of temptation, you will see how much more He has to offer you and how much better He is than all that this world has to offer.
 - You will come away from the temptation knowing His excellence and loving Him more than ever and with a greater desire to do His will.