

**“THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER”**

In chapters 1-3, Mark has shown us that the main features of Jesus’ public ministry were his teaching and his miraculous signs. And while the signs attracted a great deal of interest, their primary purpose was to accredit Jesus as one who speaks for God. The main reason why Jesus came was not to perform miracles, but to preach, as he said in Mark 1:38. In today’s passage, we see Jesus employing and explaining one of his most frequently used teaching methods: the parable. A parable is a way of teaching that makes use of vivid and familiar pictures to convey truth. In his parables, Jesus employed illustrations from a variety of areas of ordinary experience, including family life, agriculture, commerce, politics, weddings, and more.

Most of Jesus’ parables focus upon explaining how God’s kingdom was coming into the world through his life and ministry. In fact, Jesus prefaced many of his parables with the words, “This is what the kingdom of God is like.” While this is not the case in our passage, Jesus’ response to the question that his disciples asked in verse 11 confirms that the kingdom is the main idea of this parable. Jesus said to them: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” When Jesus announced the arrival of God’s kingdom, he was talking about something that God had promised hundreds of years before through the prophets of the Old Testament. He was speaking of the arrival of God’s new world, the time when God would overthrow the rebellious kingdoms of this world and establish his reign forever. One New Testament scholar even suggests that the coming of God’s kingdom should be thought of as a

revolution, because “Jesus was announcing a dramatic and forceful change” in the world.

[David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 23]

This is certainly true. Jesus’ life and ministry brought about the most radical change that the world has ever known. However, as the parable of the sower demonstrates, this revolution is not taking place through force of arms, but through the spreading of a message, a message that is met with differing responses on the part of those who hear it. And this is the key point of this parable. Why does the gospel meet with such a mixed reception? Why is it that some people respond to the gospel with faith, while others do not?

To address this, Jesus employs an analogy from the realm of agriculture, the first of three agricultural parables in Mark 4. In this parable, Jesus compares the proclamation of the kingdom to a farmer who goes out to his field to sow seed. This was an image that would have been very familiar to Jesus’ hearers. Indeed, many of them would have been farmers themselves. And the parable is so effective because a seed is an especially suitable metaphor for the gospel message. Just as a seed has life within it, the Word of God has life-giving power in it. God brought the entire universe into existence by his word. His Word accomplishes what he intends. It does not return to him void. As 1 Peter 1:23 says, it is a “living and abiding” Word, a Word that has the ability to cause us to be born again. Nevertheless, this Word doesn’t always produce fruit in the lives of those who hear it. Not everyone who hears God’s Word responds to it with faith. Many people hear the call of the gospel. Many even enjoy the outward privileges of the gospel

as members of the visible church. But among these people there are many who either reject the gospel altogether or who fail to live lives that are in keeping with the message of the gospel. Why is this the case?

Jesus explains why in our passage. He imagines a farmer who wants to sow to the very edges of his field, which results in some of the seed falling into places where it will be unable to grow. Notice that the factor that determines whether or not the seed will bear fruit is the kind of ground into which it is sown. The nature of the seed itself does not change. It always has the potential to produce life, regardless of where it lands. But that potential will only be realized if the right conditions are present in the ground into which it is sown. The same is true of the proclamation of the gospel. Like the farmer who sows seed to the edge of his field, the gospel is preached far and wide, with the result that it is heard by many who do not respond to it with faith. The nature of the gospel never changes. It always remains the power of God unto salvation. But its power will only take effect when it is received by a certain kind of hearer. Jesus explains this in the parable by describing four different types of ground, which represent four different kinds of hearers of God's Word.

Some people who hear the gospel are like a heavily-trodden path, earth that is so firmly packed that the seed cannot penetrate it. This is describing a person who is completely hardened to the gospel. He has already made up his mind about matters of religion. He is confident, secure and content in what he believes, and he is not going to change his mind. We are seeing this kind of person in our culture with increasing

frequency, as more and more people take offense at the call of the gospel. To such people, sin is nothing to be too worried about, hell is little more than a joke, and heaven is whatever they want it to be. The truth of God's Word cannot penetrate the hardness of their hearts.

Others who hear the gospel are like rocky ground that is covered with a little bit of soil. A seed planted in such ground might show initial signs of growth, but that growth will not continue, because the lack of good soil makes it impossible for the plant to draw enough nourishment to survive. This is describing a person who responds enthusiastically when he hears the gospel, but then fails to press on and endure when he realizes that the life of discipleship requires discipline, self-denial, submission, and a willingness to endure hardship for the sake of Christ. Sadly, we see this kind of person inside the church, and even in our church. Those of you who have been here for any length of time have seen such people come and go. At first, it is so exciting to see them embracing the gospel and participating in the life of the church. But as time passes, they eventually stop coming and you wonder what happened to them. Sometimes it is gradual, and sometimes it is abrupt. And it happens for a variety of reasons. Perhaps as they heard more of God's Word, they concluded that this was not for them after all. Or perhaps they did not like the counsel that they received from the church's elders. Or perhaps they had to be confronted over something unbiblical in their life and took offense at this. Or perhaps they simply grew tired of making the effort of coming to church and

living a Christian life. Whatever the particulars, the fundamental reason why such people do not endure is the same: they have no root.

Others who hear the gospel are like ground in which thorns grow up alongside the plant and make it weak and unfruitful. This is the person who professes faith in Christ but is still consumed by his desire for earthly security and worldly pleasures. He is a person who is seeking to serve two masters, a person who wants some of the benefits that Christ offers but who is unwilling to completely let go of the world. Notice how Jesus describes this person as being ensnared by “the deceitfulness of riches.” The desire for worldly wealth and earthly pleasures is deceitful because it is full of empty promises. This is Satan’s strategy when he tempts us. We are lured into thinking that something will fulfill our desires and bring us happiness, but in the end we remain unfulfilled. In such people, the thorns of worldliness prevent the seed of the Word from producing its intended fruit.

The last hearer is likened to good soil, soil in which the seed of God’s Word is able to take root, grow, and produce fruit. Listen to Joel Beeke’s description of this person:

“As a plant springs up, growing deep roots and showing healthy leaves, the Word of God is deeply integrated into this listener’s life, family, business, relationships, and conduct. With the help of the Holy Spirit, this listener applies the gospel teaching he hears on Sunday to his life throughout the week. He believes with his heart that if Jesus Christ

sacrificed everything for him, nothing is too difficult to surrender in grateful obedience to Christ.” [*The Family at Church*, 18]

That is a good picture of the kind of listener Jesus is talking about when he speaks of the seed that is sown on the good soil. And that is the kind of listener that we should all desire to be.

What is it that makes this last hearer different? What enables this person to receive God’s Word and produce its fruit? What makes you any different than your non-Christian neighbors? Are you any better than them? Are you smarter than them? Why do you trust in Christ and live by faith while they do not? Jesus gives the answer in our passage: we believe God’s Word because God has given us the ability to do so. Or, in Jesus’ words, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” Only the Lord can grant us spiritual hearing, because our fallen nature makes every one of us deaf to God.

And this is taken even further in verse 12, where Jesus cites a passage from Isaiah to show that God actually hardens people in their unbelief. How does God do this? How does he conceal his truth from those whom he has not elected to salvation? Sometimes he does it by stating his truth in a veiled manner, as when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom in parables. Other times, he strikes people’s senses with dullness, so that they will not be able to see. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4, the Lord can even use Satan in order to accomplish this: “[T]he god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to

keep them from seeing the light of the gospel.” But for us, for those who respond to the gospel with faith, Paul says that “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” [2 Cor. 4:6] That is what makes the difference between the different kind of hearers in Jesus’ parable. God shines his light into the darkness of our wretched souls. As we sang earlier, God “gave us ears and gave us eyes.”

At the end of verse 12, we are given a good definition of what conversion looks like. Even though this is said in a context in which it describes those who will not repent, it is still very helpful in understanding the nature of Christian conversion. Jesus says that he preaches in parables “lest [those who are outside] should turn and be forgiven.” This shows us that true conversion involves turning away from our wretchedness and seeking the deliverance that only God can provide. This is the one thing that is absolutely required of everyone who wants to receive God’s forgiveness: we must be so dissatisfied with ourselves that our only hope is to turn to God.

Jesus taught this parable to show that the kingdom of God is breaking into this world through the proclamation of the gospel, and to explain why this gospel is met with such a mixed response. The gospel only has a saving effect upon those whom God gives the ability to hear and receive it. Think of what a great comfort this is to those of us who believe the gospel. It assures us that God really is at work in us. God is the one who made our hearts receptive to his Word. We would not be able to believe the gospel were it not for the fact that God gave us the ability to do so.

At the same time, we all need to keep being faithful hearers of God's Word. For we still have the remnants of our old nature within us, the same nature that the parable describes as hardened, rocky, and thorny. And thus John Calvin writes,

“Each of us ought to endeavor to tear the thorns out of his heart, if we do not choose that the word of God should be choked; for there is not one of us whose heart is not filled with a vast quantity, and, as I may say, a thick forest, of thorns...[T]he very number of the thorns, which is so prodigious that it ought to shake off our sloth, is the reason why most people give themselves no trouble about them.” [*Commentaries*]

Those of us who trust in Christ have been made receptive to the gospel. But we still have a lot of thorns in our hearts. And if we are not careful, those thorns will cause God's Word to be unfruitful in our lives. If you don't want your garden to be overrun with weeds, if you want it to produce a good crop, then you need to weed it regularly. The same is true of our hearts.