

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Mark 4:1-20

Key Verse: 4:20

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

In today's passage, Jesus teaches us how we can bear the fruit of the word of God. He says that only those who have the good heart soil can produce a crop that is many times what is sown. May God help us to cultivate our heart soil as we hear the word of God so that we can bear much fruit in him!

I. “HE WHO HAS EARS TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR” (1-2, 9-13)

Look at verse 1. *“Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.”* Our Mark's gospel study this semester has taught us that the focal point of Jesus' ministry was the word of God. Jesus taught the word of God whenever and wherever people came to him. Jesus gave them the word of God even when they came to him to see his miracles. Why? It was because he knew that only the word of God could give them eternal life in the kingdom of God. Only the word of God can make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says: *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* The word of God can help us to come to know God and his love. The word of God can help us to know about ourselves and why we need the forgiveness of sins. The word of God is the key to the kingdom of God. This is the reason why Jesus taught the word of God in season and out of season. He said, *“That is why I have come”* (Mk 1:38).

As Jesus was teaching the word by the lake this time, a huge crowd gathered around him. The crowd was so large that he got into a boat on the lake. The crowd along the shore was like those gathered at a rock concert. And Jesus did not have a sound system that could amplify his voice so that all of them could hear his preaching. But Jesus did not give up. He utilized what he had. He converted the beach into a gigantic amphitheater. He got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake. Then he began to speak the word of God to them. His voice carried over the quiet water of the Lake Galilee.

As Jesus looked at his audience, he recognized a serious problem. Many people were not really interested in the word of life. Other things were on their mind. To these people, the word of life was given, but it did not produce any fruit in their lives. They were looking for some practical benefits from Jesus such as healing. But physical healing would not last long. Jesus healed the paralytic, the man with leprosy, and the man with a shriveled hand, but in time they all died. Physical healing alone would not solve their fundamental life problems. Jesus wanted to heal them from the inside by

giving them the word of God. He wanted to tell them the secret of the eternal kingdom of God.

What did Jesus do to help the people? He told them a story that is known to us as the parable of the sower. He wanted to help them to have a right attitude toward the word of God. Only those who have a right attitude toward the word of God can understand and accept the true meaning of the word of God.

Look at verse 2. *He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said ...* Why did Jesus speak in parables? A parable is a simple story with a truth hidden in it. Parables can make abstract spiritual truth clear to the minds of people. Jesus told parables to help his audience to understand the secret of the kingdom of God. Parables can also be easily remembered because they are in the form of a story. In addition, only those who are willing to learn can get the truth from a parable. God's word is like hidden treasure when it is told in parables. Jesus did not throw pearls to pigs so that they would trample on them (Mt 7:6).

Only those who have a right attitude toward the word of God can perceive the truth. This means that we must study the word of Christ with a great learning mind. We must dig out the meaning. Jesus says in verse 9: *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* Unfortunately, some people listen but never hear the word of God. When Jesus finished telling the parable to the crowd of people, most of them said, "Hey, that's a nice story." But they did not see the relevance of the word to their life and went home disappointed. Only the twelve disciples and some others came to Jesus when he was alone to ask the meaning of the parable. What did Jesus tell them? Look at verse 11: *He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables"* Those who are "on the outside" are those who do not have ears to hear. The religious leaders in Jesus' time were those on the outside. They listened to the word of God, but they were not willing to hear. In fact, they were hostile toward Jesus who taught them the word of God. Jesus spoke to them in parables.

As Jesus was watching many people leave the shore with no understanding of the parable he taught, he was reminded of the people of Isaiah's time who saw things but never perceived and who heard things but never understood (12). The parable he had just told was a relatively simple parable (13). When the disciples and some others came to him asking for the meaning of the parable, Jesus was happy to explain it for them.

II. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (3-8, 14-20)

Look at verse 3. *"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed."* In this parable, the seed refers to the word of God and the soil the human heart. God has given us hearts that can take, store, and produce many things. If one stores only worldly things and sinful desires, his heart will produce sinful fruits. On the other hand, if we store the word of God in our heart soil, we will harvest fruits of righteousness in God. And this parable teaches us that the condition of heart soil determines how we can bear fruits in God.

Look at verses 4-8. *“As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”* There are four kinds of heart soil. Let us think about which kind is our heart soil as we study this parable.

First, the heart soil like a path (3-4, 14-15). Look at verses 14-15. *“The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.”* Have you seen any plant growing on Rt. 11 or I-81? No seed can sprout and grow on a path-like heart soil. God’s word makes no impression on such hearts. What are the things that can make people’s minds like a path? Worldly knowledge and philosophy can make a proud man’s heart like a path. Some people read the Bible as they read newspapers. The word of God is no more than common sense to these people. They hear the word of God. But the word goes in their left ears and comes right out their right ears. For example, many people would not believe God’s creation of the universe as taught in Genesis because of their common sense acquired from this world. They don’t treat the word of God as God’s word. Satan likes this kind of people. He whispers in the ears of these people, “Don’t believe anything that you cannot see or feel.” When layers of common sense, pride, and sinful passion are paved on their hearts like asphalt, God’s word have no chance of working in their hearts and lives. These people cannot obtain the secret of the kingdom of heaven.

Second, the heart soil like a rocky place (5-6, 16-17). Let’s read verses 16-17. *“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”* These are very emotional kinds of people. They become quickly enthusiastic, and again quickly become as cold as ice. They feel they are very faithful to God when they are in a revival meeting or a Bible conference. But they quickly forget the word of God when they face the realities of life. Emotional people can accomplish many things when they feel good. But they cannot do anything when they feel bad. These people cannot take root in the word, for the life of faith demands intellect, will and spirit, in addition to emotion. Those who have no root will become like chaff and will be blown away at the time of trouble or persecution.

Our testimony writing is one way we can take root in God’s word. We shouldn’t just hear the word of God, moved by the word of God, and then let it fade away in the shelves of our memory over time. Instead, we should meditate on it deeply, think about how it applies to our personal life specifically, and struggle to act on it. We can also share our testimonies with other believers to receive their prayer support. Our emotional response to God’s word is a good place to start. The Holy Spirit helps us to have such experience. Let us struggle to write and share sincere and honest testimonies so that we may take root in God’s word.

It is interesting to see how Jesus compares trouble and persecution to the scorching sun. The sunlight is very essential to the growth of a plant. The sun is not the problem. The problem is that if the plant has no root, it withers when the sun comes out. Likewise, trouble and persecution are God's training for us; when we overcome them by faith in God, we can come out stronger than before.

Third, the heart soil like a thorn bush (7, 18-19). Look at verses 18-19. *"Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."* This soil is rich--so rich that all kinds of plants grow in the field, including thorns and thistles. People with the thorny heart soil hear the word of God and want to live by faith. They seem to grow in faith. But their hearts are crowded with many other things in life. When they let small desires for money and other worldly things grow along with the word of truth, the thorns eventually outgrow the word of God and prevent them from bearing fruit.

People with the thorny heart soil tend to worry a lot, instead of trusting the promise of God. The truth is that they cannot improve their lives by worrying. When the word of life is choked by the things of the world, anxiety takes over their minds and hearts. They worry in the morning and in the evening. They worry at night. This is not a happy life. More importantly, this kind of people cannot obtain the kingdom of heaven.

Lot, Abraham's nephew in Genesis, really wanted to live by faith. He started his life of faith by following his uncle. But Lot's life of faith was a compromising one from the beginning. He was a believer, but his decisions were based on his own desires, not on the word of God. God gave him many opportunities to repent his compromising life. Abraham loved him like his own son. He even risked his life to rescue Lot who had been taken as a POW. But Lot did not repent his sins. He allowed his desires for the world to grow along with the word of God. The result was that he could not bear the fruit of righteousness. His life ended tragically.

Fourth, the good heart soil (8, 20). Let us read verse 20. *"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."* These are people who not only hear, but also obey and trust the word of God with an absolute attitude. The people with the good heart soil first hear the word of God. It sounds easy to hear God's word. But it is not. We sinners have an inclination to hear only what we want to hear. We hear God's word, but only selectively, things that we want to hear. That is why Jesus often said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." For example, the Bible is very clear about world mission, but some people close their ears to the great commission of our Lord Jesus.

Truth is often painful to hear because it requires repentance. When some young people are given the word of God for their spiritual growth, they sometimes react with disdain. Those who hear the word are those whose minds are truly humble. Noah is a good example. He obeyed God's word against the trend of the world. He heard God's word when the jeers from the laughing people rang his ears. He obeyed the word of God by faith even when doubts arose from within him. Jesus is the best example of this. He

obeyed God's word humbly unto death. Only truly humble people can hear the voice of God.

Those who hear the word in their hearts also obey the word. And those who obey God's word can bear fruit thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what is sown. For example, Matthew 6:33 is a great promise to all of us. It says: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The Pilgrim Fathers accepted this word and sought first the kingdom of God. When they arrived in the new land, they suffered a lot from hunger and disease. But they built their churches before building their own homes. Their spirit and heritage became the foundation of this nation for a long time. God was pleased with their faith and blessed this country abundantly. Now, however, many people seek their own desires and pleasures before God's kingdom and his righteousness. They may make more money this way, but they cannot produce eternal fruit in their lives.

God wants us to bear spiritual fruit. He created us in his own image so that we can bear good fruit in our lives. We have a fruit-bearing relationship with God. When we bear good fruit, our joy is complete (Jn 15:11). God has given us great potential to produce fruit, thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what is sown.

Again, how can we bear fruit of the word of God? How can we retain the word of God we hear? We must meditate on the word and struggle to apply it practically to our lives. Those who have the good heart soil keep God's word in their hearts and take root in it. They persevere with the word of God, despite many trials of life, until they produce abundant spiritual fruit. Jesus promises that they will inherit the kingdom of God!

What kind of soil do you have in your heart? How can you become a person with the good heart soil for the word of God? May God help us to think about these questions this week as we study the word of God and write personal testimonies! May God help us to retain one word of God so that we can inherit the kingdom of God! Let us read the key verse (20) once again: *"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."*