

Jason Upchurch - Mark 4:1-9, 13-20 - The Good News Needs Good Soil

I don't usually advertise my own sermons, but if you missed last week's sermon I would encourage you to go back and read it or listen to it to understand the shift that is happening in Jesus's ministry and the significance of Jesus now preaching almost exclusively in parables. We covered **Vss. 10-12** last week noting that parables are really a form of judgment against hard hearted people to conceal the truth of the gospel from them.

This morning we're going to go back to verse 1 and actually unpack the parable of the 4 Soils. But here's the big idea: A true follower of Jesus will **obey his Word** to the end.

James 1:22 Do not be hearers of the word only but what? Doers of the word.

1 John 2:3 And by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments.

What Jesus calls people to is not a feeling, not an emotional state of being; he doesn't call people to be theology nerds. What he calls people to is his Word and to obey his word from the heart above all things.

In fact, how we treat the Word of God determines whether or not we're part of the family of Jesus. **Read 3:31-35**

Mark is connecting some dots for us. He puts these 2 stories together on purpose. What makes someone part of the family of God is doing the will of God. Where do we find that? In the Word.

And what Jesus is getting at here is the problem we've all faced. How do we understand people who only obey Jesus for a season, say they obey him but never have any noticeable change in their life? That's what this parable is about.

Now, remember that Jesus has transitioned to parable preaching here in Chapter 4. From here until his final week of ministry basically everything he preaches is in parables to hide the truth from unbelievers. Those who God gives ears to hear will hear and follow Jesus.

But for everyone else it's in parables. He only gives the interpretation of the parables in private to those who truly seek him.

And the story he gives here is simple enough for his original listeners. We have machinery to do most of our farming today but in Jesus's time farming was very simple. People had fields that were connected by a series of paths. Right next to paths were rocky areas, next to the rocky areas were less cultivated, weedy areas and then there was the actual field where the majority of the crop was sown and harvested.

It's similar to what we see across the street: we have roads, we have rocky culverts, there's a weedy strip alongside the field, and then good field itself.

But in ancient times they didn't have seed drills that placed seeds precisely in a row at certain depth and rate. The farmer - the sower - would have a big bag or basket and just toss out the seed at random throughout the field hoping for a fairly even spread.

Inevitably some of the seed would land on the path, some of the rocky soil, some of the weedy soil, even as the hope was that most would be on good soil.

Now, remember, Jesus doesn't give any of the interpretation to the main crowd. This is all they hear and they're perplexed. Jesus does this as a form of judgement to keep them from knowing the truth.

So what we're going to do this morning is look at the seed, look at the sower and then look at each of the 4 soils. So there's 6 points here and we're going to unpack each one.

1) What matters the most is what people do with Jesus's Word. That's what the seed represents. And if you scan the section where Jesus explains the meaning of the parable, you'll find is that the word "word" is mentioned 7 times. And 3 times the pronoun "it" is used to refer to the Word. So 10 times in 8 verses the word "Word" is mentioned. This is what is on Jesus's mind when he is giving this parable.

What is the word? The word is all of the Christian message. From the simple facts of the trinity and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - all the theology of Christianity - to the entire Christian ethical system of Christianity.

We could say that "the word" is what Christianity is all about and what Christians believe. Paul said to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:27** that he declared to them the whole counsel of God. He taught them everything the Bible had to say from every part of the Bible.

This is our job as those who make disciples. A lot of times we want to give people just the very basic information, the least amount possible. But actually our responsibility is - like Paul - to teach people all of what we believe and know.

And especially as we see the world around us, it turns out that many many people really have no idea what Christians believe about almost anything. We can't assume that people even know the very basics of the Bible. So we have to teach them with the Word.

That's what Jesus does. If you look at the sermon on the mount Jesus touches basically every topic possible: the Bible, the Law, anger, murder, lust, prayer, giving, forgiving, anxiety, false conversion, loving each other, fasting, showing mercy, on and on, theology. All kinds of topics, all kinds of issues.

And he actually does that with parables too. Even though the parables conceal the truth from unbelievers they are still designed to teach:

- Prodigal son: rejoice in conversion of sinners
- 10 Virgins: be ready for Jesus's coming.
- Talents: work hard for the Kingdom.
- Two Sons: obedience is not in words but in doing
- Rich fool: generosity
- Persistent widow: prayer

When Mark says he spoke the Word he means the entire Christian belief system. **Read 33-34**

Packed within the parables is the entire Christian belief system. And that's what this parable revolves around. The word.

Last week I said that one thing we learn from this parable is that not everyone who claims the name of Jesus is actually a follower of Jesus. That's true. Three of the four of these soils claim to know Jesus.

The rocky ground claims to know Jesus but they don't really. The weedy ground claims to know Jesus but they don't really. And the good soil claims to know Jesus and they know him truly.

Three different soils, all of which claim to know him. The defining factor of whether or not someone really knows Jesus is what they do with the Word of God. What do they do with the entire Christian belief system?

You know when the Bible talks about apostates and false teachers it's usually talking about people who abandon Jesus because of sin. It's not usually that people deny that Jesus died or rose or lived a perfect life. They don't usually abandon because of the Trinity. Sometimes they do. But usually they abandon because of sin.

So what matters most is what people do with the Word. Let's talk about the sower for a minute before we look at the soils.

2) Anyone who preaches the Kingdom is a sower. **Read 14**

Who is the sower in this parable? Well, probably Jesus is talking initially about himself. He's the primary proclaimer of the Word of God. And those who are listening to his sermons are having all these different responses to his preaching about the Kingdom of God. So I think just in context we have to understand that he's initially talking about himself.

But it's a pretty fair bet that he's also talking about anyone who goes and preaches the Kingdom of God. Anyone who preaches the Christian belief system: theology and ethics.

In just a couple of chapters he will send out the 12 disciples to go cast out demons and preach the gospel as well and they have many of the same responses as he does. And they continued to have that mixture of responses all throughout their ministry in the book of Acts.

And because all Christians are called to go make disciples, teaching people everything we have learned from Jesus, we too can expect these exact same responses. Everything we see here is common to all those who seek to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

Side note about sowing: One of the ironies about the parable of the soils is that a farmer would actually take great care to make sure most of the seed was scattered on the good soil. Seed is a precious commodity and they can't afford to waste it so farmers take care to make sure the vast majority of the seed is scattered on the good soil. To scatter seed anywhere else would be wasteful.

The irony of the parable here is that obviously we don't know how people are going to react to the Word. We can't tell initially how people will respond. We don't know what soil we're scattering seed on when we talk to people. I don't know about you but I often assume some people are in one category when it turns out they're in another.

Sometimes we think a person would *never* come to faith in Jesus. And they end up being the most faithful saints. Other times we think so and so would make a wonderful Christian. Maybe their lifestyle and morals are already similar to ours and it's just a small jump to Christianity. But in the end they actually think their good morals are good enough for God and don't need Jesus.

The thing we learn about the soils is that we don't actually know what soil a person is until we see how they respond to the Word.

So we've seen the Word, we've seen the sower. Let's look at the soils.

3) The first soil: path. **Read 4, 15**

The path are those people who hear the gospel and understand the gospel but they never embrace the gospel. They never claim to love Jesus. They never claim to have been saved. There is no profession of faith, no baptism, no self-identification as a Christian.

These are not even nominal Christians - Christians in name only. They are simply those that can acknowledge the Christian gospel and ethical system long enough to reject it.

We know they know the gospel because the Word had been sown on them. They came in contact to the word. Maybe they grew up in church, maybe they went to camp or a retreat. Maybe they talked with their friend or family member for a while about the gospel.

But the response is "no thank you." Or maybe they're much more blunt.

Matthew and Luke's version add an interesting tidbit: what had been sown *in their heart* had been snatched away. In their heart is the important part.

See, conversion is not just knowing information. It's not just the ability to recite the Christian gospel or Christian ethical principles. The Pharisees knew the gospel and knew God's ethical principles. But hated Jesus in their heart.

Conversion is a heart transformation where someone loves the truth of the Word. They love knowing more about God, they love knowing how to live life in light of God's revelation. And those who are the hard path soil have no love for Christ or how he calls us to live.

One interesting aspect of this soil that Jesus makes clear for us is that someone's response to the Word is a spiritual battle. Who takes away the Word from the hard path soil? Satan.

Satan takes the Word. And Satan takes the Word *immediately* from this person. The response is swift because the attack is immediate.

I've been at camp several times during staff training and one thing the leaders bring up is that Satan also signs up for camp. We got all these kids here and they're preaching the gospel and for some Satan is taking away the Word from their heart just as fast as it's going out.

If you've ever fed wild birds anything you know they devour what is given them. I remember one time when I was a kid at the park and we had gotten some dinner from McDonald's and taken it to the park to eat. We started feeding seagulls and it was fine for about 2 minutes and then they just swarmed and started attacking all our food. My dad had actually left his keys on the picnic table and the birds were in such a frenzy they actually took off with the keys and dropped them quite a ways away.

This is what Satan does to those who are the hard path. It's a relentless assault on the gospel the moment it's preached. Don't forget that could be going on when you're talking to people.

And this is the response of many to the gospel. They know it, they get it, and they reject it in their heart because it is a spiritual battle from the very beginning.

4) Second soil: rocky ground. Read 5-6, 16-17

One of the similarities between the hard path and the rocky ground is how quickly they are found out. Those who are the hard path are immediately attacked by Satan, that's what Mark says. Those who are the rocky ground immediately respond to the word with joy. But then when persecution comes they immediately abandon the faith. **Read 16-17**

The other two soils take a long time to find out. But these initial two are fast. Jesus uses the word immediately for the first 2 soils.

In fact, the imagery here is kind of reminiscent of the book of Jonah at the end where Jonah goes outside the city of Nineveh, and you remember he makes a small shack. And God appoints a plant to miraculously grow up overnight to cover the shack and provide Jonah shade and relief from the hot sun. And then the next day a worm eats into the plant and the sun blasts the plant and its gone. Massive growth, massive destruction: 48 hours.

This is what often happens when people make a profession of faith in Jesus. They are excited. They read a million chapters of the Bible. They want to get baptized, they want to serve, they want to make radical changes to their entire life for Jesus. **Vs. 16** says that when they hear the Word they receive it with joy!

That's a good thing, isn't it? Don't we want joyful Christians? Don't we want people who are excited to know the Word and proclaim the Word? These people become the cheerleaders of the church overnight.

And then what happens? Persecution. Persecution like the blazing hot sun beats on them and beats on them and they wither like Jonah's vine. They are gone almost as fast as they appeared.

Actually, Jesus says 2 things affect them. Tribulation and persecution. **Read 17**

Tribulation is usually more general issues or situations. Persecution is typically attacks by people. And both of these are caused because of the Word.

It is because of allegiance to Jesus and the Word that these attacks come up.

I can't live the way I want to live and follow Jesus, so I have tribulation. Can't take money under the table any more. Can't hang out with my best friends any more and follow Jesus.

The danger of the rocky ground is discomfort. Following Jesus is uncomfortable and it's just easier to go with the worldly flow.

This is why when we tell people about Jesus we need to tell them plainly it's going to be hard to follow Jesus. It's going to be uncomfortable.

Jesus calls people to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. What does that mean? Denial of self means joyfully not doing the things that feel good to you.

My son and I go to the gym and when we get home my wife usually asks "how'd it go?" And my joking answer every time is "it was heavy." When you sign up for the gym you're not signing up for milkshakes and massages and pedicures. You're signing up for pain and difficulty and stress on your body and mind. Why? Because in the end it's worth it.

That's the gospel. The Bible says that following Jesus could get you fired, disowned by your family, beaten, sufferings, tribulation, nakedness, sword, affliction, trials, grief.

But in the end, eternal life in glory with Jesus forever. And just like the gym you have to push through the pain and anguish to receive eternal life.

In **Acts 14:22**: Paul strengthened the disciples encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God. And this wasn't theory for Paul: 3 verses earlier he had been stoned so bad his persecutors thought he was dead.

I'm just telling you right now if you're following Jesus, persecution will come. Mark it down. We were battering down the hatches the last couple of years with all these closures and mandates. It's the first time widespread persecution has been threatened and seen in the Western world. Don't think it can't happen again. Are you ready for that?

By the way, this is why when someone comes to faith in Jesus we who are older in the faith have a little bit of a muted praise. It's good, we want it to be good, we want to rejoice like the angels in heaven. But we know it's not always genuine.

I've seen this happen over the years, and you have too. People make a profession of faith, get baptized, start serving and you're all excited and wish you could have faith like that. You wish you loved Jesus half as much as these guys do. And then - boom - they're gone. Like gone gone. Time will tell if they're genuine.

That's the rocky ground.

5) Weedy Ground. This is tough. **Read 7, 18-19**

Alright, there are a couple of things to note here. First, whereas the first 2 soils had immediate results, the third soil - the weedy ground - doesn't show itself for a long time.

These are people who self-identify as Christians for a long long time. These are people who are in church for years or decades.

If you think about the soil analogy, the time between initial planting to harvesting is a long time. The life cycle of a grain of wheat can be several months. So if you have 2 plants sprouting up and you're not sure which is which, you might need to wait for most of the life cycle of the plant to know.

That's how it is with people who profess faith in Christ sometimes. They can go most of their lives professing to know Jesus, saying they follow him, maybe they even become church leaders and teach - and yet they never actually know Jesus.

They never bear any fruit. Yeah, maybe they're moral - they have no obvious sins. They're not swearing like sailors, they don't look at porn. They're not gambling or getting drunk or greedy. But they don't ever flourish. They just stagnate their whole life. They never grow or bear fruit. They just hang around.

When we first moved into our home we had a pear tree in the backyard. And it had grown wild for quite a while. So the first year we were there we pruned it big time. And the fruit was just small and inedible. But we thought, we'll give it another year. So we actually pruned it a little more, watered it really well, and the fruit grew and it was still just nasty. And we thought, you know, we'll give it another year. This has got to be the year! And it was just as nasty and useless as it had always been. So we cut it down and burned it up.

It took us 3 years to figure out that this tree was never going to bear any worthwhile fruit. The same is true for the weedy soil. It can take a long time.

The second thing to note about the weedy soil is why it fades out. **Read 19**

Why does it fade? Because of pleasures and cares. It's interesting: it's just the opposite of the rocky soil. The rocky soil dies because of hardship - persecution and tribulation.

The weedy soil washes up because of pursuit of pleasures and riches. I think in our western world context this is actually the greater danger than persecution. We are so wealthy and there are so many pleasures and opportunities that's easy for us to get distracted from following Jesus.

Jesus gives us 3 very specific warnings.

1) Cares of the world. What is that? It's the cares that are common to unbelievers. We get wrapped up in success and keeping up with the Joneses and youth and beauty and what we're going to wear and eat.

Jesus says the Gentiles chase after all those things. I've seen people get choked by business ventures and sports and work and vacations. They prove fruitless.

2) Deceitfulness of riches. This is where we have to be so careful with money and riches. I like talking about finances: budgets getting out of debt and investing business. But we have to be very careful, myself included.

Riches are deceitful. They seem good, money can do a lot of good for the Kingdom, no one likes being poor, we want to be financially independent. We live in a wealthy country - or at least a country that pretends to be wealthy. And that can be a temptation.

1 Tim. 6:9: those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin.

If you're mind is constantly on how much you need or how much you don't have...if it's money and retirement 401ks that are always on your mind you are falling into temptation.

If we have food and clothing with these we will be what? Content. Joyful. Happy. Don't get choked out by deceitfulness of riches. And listen, thinking you won't get choked out is probably the biggest red flag that you'll be choked out.

3) The desire for other things. What is that? It's a catchall for everything else that might take your heart away from Jesus. Not always sin and sensuality - though it's often that. But it's anything that takes your focus off Jesus.

Many people spend decades in the church always wanting to follow Jesus more, read the Word more, fellowship more, pray more and they just never make it a priority because some other thing always gets in the way for 10, 20, 40 years. And many prove unfruitful.

Don't be unfruitful.

6) Good soil. **Read 20**

The good soil hears the Word - they take in the fullness of the Christian belief system - and they accept it. They take it and it transforms them.

Not overnight. Not fast. We don't measure fruitfulness of a believer by how much they've changed in a week or month or two.

We look at the long haul. Do you love Jesus more now than 2 years ago? Than 5 years ago? Are you bearing more fruit? What is the fruit?

We could say are more obedient now than 5 years ago?

Are you more forgiving?

Have you overcome any perpetual sins you struggled with?

Are you more filled with love / joy / peace / patience / kindness / goodness / gentleness / self control?

Do people notice your growth in the Lord?

Again, this doesn't happen overnight. But it will happen. Jesus says a good tree bears what? Good fruit.

And as Jesus says: He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Pray