**Sowing the Seed**

Mark 4:1-20

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How many of you plant a garden each year? Do you have seeds in the soil yet? I love that springtime is sowing time. I drove up to Madison on Tuesday afternoon for a speaking engagement and saw some farmers preparing their plots for planting.

Farming has really changed over the years. Tractors today are guided by GPS systems with sub-inch accuracy so that no section of soil is missed or any rows are overlapped. Seeds are precisely inserted into prepared soil along with a scientifically measured shot of insecticide to combat rootworm.

Some farmers still use horse-drawn planters and a few plant crops by hand. In Jesus time, farmers used a unique method for sowing seed.

Please turn to Mark 4 as we unpack the parable of the sower. Verse 1 gives us the setting: ***“Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.”*** Jesus taught in the synagogues and He also taught by the sea. I love that He used different methods without changing the message. We must be willing to do the same. What worked some time ago might not work now. That’s why we’ve been emphasizing the importance of loving our neighbors, which we’ve defined as anyone in need that we come across. We’re to start with those who live near us and also take the gospel to the nations.

The crowd is massive so Jesus jumped into a boat and sat down. It was common for teachers to sit while teaching. The crowd is fanned up the sloping hillside in a natural amphitheater where they could see and hear Him clearly. It’s been estimated that up to 10,000 people could fit on this hillside.

In verse 2 we read: ***“And he was teaching them many things in parables.”***  The word parable means, *“to throw something beside something else”* and has the idea of placing two things together in order to teach a spiritual truth. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, helping us to picture in concrete that which is abstract. Parables are like mental “time bombs” designed to be unforgettable and then to explode into meaning for those who are serious about listening to the Lord. There are approximately 35 parables found in the gospels.

Drop down to verse 10. I love how Jesus taught publically but also explained what He meant privately. That’s a good model for us. We must gather publically but also meet with Him privately in order to grow. In verses 11-12 He gives two purposes of a parable:

* **They reveal.** If someone is open they will understand the ***“secret of the kingdom of God.”***
* **They conceal.** Conversely, if someone is closed and hardened, they will ***“indeed hear but not understand.”***

In other words, we receive what we’re receptive to. If you are not open right now, you’re probably not going to get anything out of the sermon. Only those with receptive hearts will receive what God wants to reveal.

Verse 13 tells us that if we understand this parable we will be able to understand other parables as well: ***“Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”*** Sounds like we better pay attention, right?

Fortunately, we don’t have to guess about the meaning of this message because Jesus provides an interpretation for the disciples beginning in verse 14: ***“The sower sows the word.”***

Most parables have one overall meaning with lots of other applications. After reading and rereading this parable, I wrote down this summary statement: *When you go and sow, the kingdom of God will grow.*

Look at verse 3: ***“Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.”*** Jesus wants them and us to lean in and listen. The word ***“behold”*** is like saying, *“Lo and behold!”* and is designed to get our attention. Everyone back then understood how seed sowing worked. Perhaps Jesus is even pointing to a sower sowing while he is teaching.

A farmer would have a leather pouch across his shoulders filled with seed and would walk down paths slinging the seed out, much like we do when planting grass. The seed would be “broadcast” into all sorts of soil, some good, and some not so good [demonstrate by walking down the aisles].

The farmer’s goal was to get his good seed into good soil so it would grow because the seed has life in it. The seed is small but powerful and will produce fruit if the conditions are right. But it must be planted in good soil in order to achieve its intended purpose.

Do you ever wonder how someone you love can hear a clear gospel presentation and yet not respond by receiving Christ? Are you bothered when you see someone seemingly make a decision for Christ and get all excited about it only to end up drifting away when disappointment comes? Does it trouble you when others get all wrapped up in the worries or wealth of the world and bottom out spiritually? What’s up with all that? The bottom line in these situations is that conversion never occurred, though it seemed like it did. The problem was with the soil, or the soul…not with the seed or the sower.

As we walk through this passage, ask yourself which kind of soil represents your soul.

Here’s how we’ll proceed. We’ll study each soil individually in verses 4-8 and then we’ll bounce over to verses 15-20 to see how Jesus ties each soil type to a “soul type.”

These four soils represent four different responses to the Word of God. It’s our privilege to ponder the parable and then hear how Jesus interprets and applies it. By the way, that’s the right way to study the Bible. Begin with observation – *what does it say?* Then go to interpretation – *what does it mean?* And then end with application – *what’s the lesson I can live out?*

**1. A Hard Heart.** Look at verse 4: ***“And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.”*** Fields in Israel were small and were separated from one another by paths that became like concrete from all the people and animals walking on them. The seed that hit this hard ground would just lie there until the birds gobbled it up. In our culture it would be like throwing grass seed on the sidewalk.

Jesus interprets the first soil in verse 15: ***“And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.”*** The phrase, ***“takes away”*** means, *“to seize with force, to rob.”* Notice that Satan does this immediately. He loves to bring confusion and to cause callousness when the gospel is communicated.

Are there any hard hearts here today? Do you feel cold or calloused? Have the feet of others beat you into a hard place? Have you been trampled upon? Do you have protracted pain or has bitterness put you in a bad place? Have you been burned in the past, maybe even by a church, and you’ve locked your heart into a vault?

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**2. A Hollow Heart.** The second soil is described in verses 5-6: ***“Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.”*** In that part of the world, much of the land was solid rock with just a thin layer of soil on top. The sun would bake the rock, which would keep the soil warm, thus causing the seed to germinate quickly. But because there was no root system, these plants would wither and die.

When these people hear the message, they become very exuberant and emotional. Look at verse 16: ***“And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.”***

This soil looks ready but the problem comes when problems come. Because of their emotional enthusiasm, their roots didn’t go down deep as we see in verse 17: ***“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.”*** As soon as difficulties come, they ditch their superficial spirituality. A person like this has a hollow heart and was never converted in the first place. Behind the emotional fervor is an empty faith.

We could call this “convenient Christianity” because this person likes the idea of forgiveness and heaven and receiving “God’s favor,” but doesn’t want any difficulties. This individual wants emotionalism not exposition and is controlled by feelings not faith. Or maybe the fault lies with a gospel presentation that was superficial and focused only on having great health and gigantic wealth. Benefits were promised without a cost being counted. A shallow gospel can lead to a hollow response. Listen. Christianity is not about sustaining some sort of emotional high.

Would you notice that Jesus doesn’t say ***“if”*** tribulation or persecution comes, but ***“when”*** it comes? The word ***“tribulation”*** has its background from the threshing roller used to smash grain and means, *“to crush, press, squeeze or break.”*

Trouble and tribulation will strengthen true believers and it also reveals those who have only had an emotional experience. It’s common for people to bail on Christ when things get challenging. Listen to John 6:66: ***“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.”***

Did you have an emotional response some time ago but now you’ve fallen away? Were you happy about Jesus but now you just feel hollow? Have problems come up with your job, your family or with your health? Inside are you angry because you’re thinking you didn’t sign up for this?

Perhaps you just focused on the benefits of belief without counting the costs of commitment – like repentance, dying to self and being all in for the one who is all in for you. Maybe you’ve never really been converted.

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**3. A Hindered Heart.** Seeds fall on the third kind of soil only to be choked out by weeds. Jesus describes it this way in verse 7: ***“Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.”*** The word ***“choked”*** means to *“choke utterly.”* The seed is strangled by thorns and thistles and ends up producing no produce. Have you noticed how hard it is to grow a garden when it’s full of weeds? The seeds of weeds are endemic to the soil, meaning the weeds are already there. I’m reminded that John Calvin referred to the human heart as a perpetual “idol factory.”

Jesus interprets this soil in verses 18-19: ***“And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are 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, and it proves unfruitful.”*** Let’s list the three things that can hinder a heart and keep one from being converted.

* **Cares of the world.** The word for cares is ***“anxiety.”*** This person is so caught up with cares and concerns that they can’t focus on faith.
* **Deceitfulness of riches.** To be ***“deceived”*** means to be seduced. That’s exactly what the love of money can do to us. 1 Timothy 6:17 says to not set our ***“hopes on the uncertainty of riches.”*** G. Campbell Morgan believed that persecution is Satan’s second best weapon; his first is materialism.
* **Desires for other things.** The phrase ***“desires for other things”*** can be translated as *“lusting for all the rest.”* Luke 8:14 defines this as ***“the pleasures of life.”*** God’s word cannot thrive and survive in a hindered heart. Proverbs 27:20: ***“Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.”***

I posted verses 18-19 on Facebook this week and received some immediate feedback. One person wrote: *“I gotta be honest, this has been me.”* A second person posted: *“This is me.”* A third person responded: *“It’s my struggle as the Lord presses in on me.”*

The apostle Paul had a so-called brother in Christ bail on him, revealing that in actuality, because he had a hindered heart, he had never truly been converted. His behavior revealed that he wasn’t a believer as stated in 2 Timothy 4:10: ***“For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me…”***

If you’re distracted you’ll eventually depart. If you’re all up in the ways of the world the Word will be choked out. If you have a hindered heart, there will be no harvest.

**4. A Humble Heart.** There’s only one kind of soil that produces a crop as seen in verse 8: ***“And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”*** The good ground was not hard, hollow or hindered. If a farmer during that time had a harvest that was seven times what was sown it would be called a good crop. To have yields of thirty, sixty or one hundred times would be astonishing. Notice the four words that show a continuous kind of action – *produced, growing, increasing* and *yielding.*

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I picture Jesus smiling when he declares in verse 20: ***“But 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.”*** The word ***“good”*** refers to that which is excellent and beautiful.

Humble-hearted people hear *and* accept and bear fruit. Luke 8:15 says that this person ***“keeps the word and bears fruit with patience.”*** He listens to the Lord, He loves Him, and then He lives it out. Saving faith produces fruit. I like what was said about the Bereans in Acts 17:11: ***“they received the word with all eagerness.”*** Those same words could be said about Edgewoodians (is that a word?).

Fruit bearing is the mark of a disciple according to Jesus in John 15:8: ***“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”*** When we are faithful, we will be fruitful.

**Questions for Kyle and Liesl**

Speaking of fruit bearing, I’m eager to introduce Kyle and Liesl Parks to you. Kyle is a candidate to become our Youth and Young Adults Pastor. Under Kyle’s leadership the ministry he led in his previous church tripled. His approach to ministry is highly relational as he seeks to connect students and singles to Christ and then equip them to live on mission.

1. Kyle, you mentioned that the Parable of the Sower is one of your favorites. How has God used this passage in your life and ministry?

2. Liesl, can you tell us a little about yourself and your family? What are the names of your sons and their ages? What do you guys like to do for fun?

3. Kyle, we’ve been learning how to live on mission by focusing on our neighbors and the nations. Tell us how you flesh out this value personally and in your ministry to students and singles?

4. Kyle, this is a very important position. If God calls you here, how will you provide leadership and direction for students in junior high and high school as well as for college students and young single adults?

5. Kyle, what excites you the most about being considered as the Pastor of Youth and Young Adults?

6. Liesl, tell us how you work with and support Kyle as a partner in ministry. Why do you think Kyle would be a good fit for this role?

**Hearing and Heeding**

Let’s go back to verse 9: ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** One of the keys to living the Christian life is to never stop listening to the Lord. Do we hear *and* heed what He says? If we’re not willing to “heed” what God says, we won’t “hear” what He says. To say it another way, if you’re willing to love God, then you will listen.

Here are some ways we can both hear and heed.

**1. Trust the Word of God to produce lasting growth.** Did you hear that the Bible is now on the American Library Association’s Top Ten Most Challenged List for the first time? We will unashamedly continue to preach the gospel and teach the Word here at Edgewood because as Romans 1:16 says, it is the ***“power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”*** When you speak into those who are not yet saved, make sure to continuously sow the seed of God’s Word into hearts, and not just your own thoughts, political perspectives, opinions and ideas.

**2. It’s always a bit scary to sow the seed.** When a farmer sows seed he’s putting grain into the ground instead of using it to feed his family. Farmers know what it is to live on faith. Psalm 126:5-6: ***“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.”***

I contacted a friend who farms this week and asked him a question: *“As a farmer do you ever have doubt that the seed will sprout when you plant it?”* Here’s how he replied: *“I used to stress over it every year. What if it rains, what if it doesn’t. There are a hundred things to worry about…we plant when the conditions are right and let God take over. It doesn’t turn out how I expect, but it always turns out. The things we can handle (weeds) we do, but the things beyond our control He will handle.”*

**3. A small percentage of what is planted actually grows to maturity.** I talked to a woman last week about the opportunity she had to share her faith with a family member. I rejoiced with her and then she told me that she felt like a failure because the person did not receive Christ. If we are to use the percentage from the parable, only 1 of 4 actually bears fruit. Don’t despair. Just keep sowing. Keep smiling and serving up the Word. Acts 17:32-34 reminds us that a few respond while many reject.

**4. Not all believers will bear the same amount of fruit.** We’ll all bear some so don’t be jealous of those who seem to have more. At the same time, don’t coast either. In a similar way, in the Parable of the Talents, each person received a different amount (see Matthew 25:14-30). The key is to use what you’ve been given for God’s glory.

**5. The harvest will be huge.** When the seed of the gospel gets into a humble heart, exponential growth will happen. That’s really the point of the parable - *When you go and sow, the kingdom of God will grow.* The harvest is sure. Isaiah 55:11: ***“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”***

**6. Pray that God will prepare the soil in souls and in our society.** I went on a prayer walk with my friend Jim Tuesday night on the UW campus. He does this several times a week, sometimes leaving at 8:00 pm and returning at midnight. That explains in part why so many students are coming to Christ (see Colossians 4:3-4). Can I encourage you to participate in the National Day of Prayer this Thursday? Believers are gathering for breakfast and lunch at the Quad Cities Prayer Center. There are also gatherings at various locations in the QCA during the lunch hour – a printout is available on the resource table.

**7. Keep sowing the seed.** Our job is to sow. The seed will germinate when it hits the prepared heart. Ecclesiastes 11:6: ***“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”***

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This parable must ultimately become personal. It’s interesting that each of these four soul types ***“hear”*** the Word – in the first instance, the seed fell ***“along”*** the trampled trail. In the second, it fell ***“on”*** rocky ground. In the third, the seed settled ***“among”*** thorns. In the fourth, the seed went ***“into”*** the good soil. Have you allowed God’s Word *into* your life?

I saw some farmers preparing to plant while I was driving on Tuesday afternoon and on Tuesday night I saw what a spiritual harvest looks like. The Bible Study I was speaking at in Madison was supposed to begin at 9:30 p.m. but the guys didn’t arrive until 10:00! I shared Scripture with them and openly wept as I realized that most of them were brand new Christians. I was overjoyed when I met someone who lives in the same dorm in which I came to eternal life 36 years ago!

I shared my salvation story with the guys and urged them to commit themselves fully to Christ so that they will bear fruit for Him. I went to bed at 1:00 a.m. and couldn’t sleep because I was so excited to see what God is doing in the middle of a secular, humanistic and godless campus. The gospel is taking root and fruit is sprouting everywhere!

Are some of you ready right now to let the seed of the gospel get *into your soul?*

**Closing Song:** “Our God”

**Baptism Video:** Saturday night and Sunday at 8.