

## **The Parable of the Soils**

**Mark 4:1-20**

**Covenant Waterfall, 14 June 2020**

Read

Pray

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### **Introduction**

I am the eldest of three brothers. My two younger brothers grew up with me in the same home, brought up by the same parents. We were all baptised as children, raised in the faith and attended Sunday School and church most Sundays throughout our childhood. Now as adults, it is only one of my brothers and I who are practicing Christians, who have received the gospel of Christ which we heard growing up. The question is, how come my other brother has not? He had the same upbringing, heard the same gospel? Why is it that some people respond to the gospel, while others do not?

Conventional wisdom says that the reason for this is that we all have free will. We all have freedom to either accept or reject the gospel. It's simply our choice.

While on the surface, that sounds plausible; if we read the Bible, we very quickly see that things are not so simple. Jesus actually deals with this very question in our passage this evening – why do some people accept or reject him and his gospel? Remember from the last three chapters of Mark, we have seen all sorts of responses to Jesus. The Pharisees have strongly rejected him, calling him demonic. His own family thinks he is mad. Many of the crowds flock to him for a miracle, but it is not clear if they have really accepted him for who he is. At this stage, it is only a small group of disciples who have left everything they know, and are following him.

In this passage, in particular the parable – commonly known as the parable of the sower, but which should really be called, the parable of the soils, Jesus sets out to explain why this is. As we shall see, Jesus' explanation of this is that is God alone who prepares hearts to

receive the gospel. The same gospel hardens some and softens others. Let's see how this is so:

- The Parable of the Soils, vv.1-9
- The Purpose of the Parables, vv.10-12
- Jesus' interpretation of the parable of the soils, vv.13-20

#### **A. The Parable of the Soils, vv. 1-9**

Up till this point in Mark's Gospel, we've seen quite a lot of action from Jesus – he has been preaching to crowds, teaching in the synagogue, moving from town to town, healing people, casting out demons and rebuking the Pharisees. What we haven't yet seen in Mark's Gospel is some of that content of his teaching. This changes here in chapter 4, and Jesus proceeds to teach a series of parables to a large crowd by the Sea of Galilee. This is the first of his parables. What then is a parable? It is a story, using every day language, to explain a deeper theological truth. Stories to explain the gospel, the kingdom of God, which he has come to preach and usher in.

Most of us are familiar with this parable. A sower goes out to a field and sows seed. Some falls on the path and is eaten by birds. Other seed falls on rocky ground, with not much soil. Starts to grow, but withers quickly in the sun. Other seed fell among thorns, so that when they grew, the thorns choked them, and they yielded no fruit. But other seed fell in good soil and grew and produced much fruit – thirty, to sixty to a hundredfold. Jesus ends the parable in verse 9, by saying, **“He who has ears, let him hear.”**

#### **B. The purpose of the parables, vv. 10-12**

**<sup>10</sup> And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables,**

After he's taught the parable to the crowd, he speaks separately to his twelve disciples, who ask him about the parable. In verse 11, Jesus explains to them that they have been given the

“secret (or mystery) of the kingdom of God.” What is this secret? It’s the gospel: that Jesus is the divine Son of God, the promised Messiah who has come to redeem his people from the curse of sin and death, forgiving sins, by dying on the cross and rising again. Now at this point, they obviously haven’t grasped all of this. Yet they know Jesus is no ordinary man. They are following Jesus, having forsaken everything to be with him. And as we will see as this Mark’s Gospel unfolds, they will eventually come to grasp this “secret of the kingdom of God,” the gospel. They will come to grasp it fully because, as Jesus says here, it has been given to them by God himself. They haven’t figured it out on their own, it’s a gift given sovereignly by God.

Then he goes on to say that while they have been given this secret, those “on the outside” do not understand it – everything is in parables for them. His parables remain riddles to them, they are unable to understand what they’re really about. In verse 12, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah 6:9-10, **“so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”**

What’s going on here? This quote from Isaiah is central in understanding what Jesus is trying to say in this parable. In its original context in Isaiah 6, Isaiah had been taken into the presence of God and commissioned to proclaim God’s Word to the people of Judah. As God commissions Isaiah, he utters those words in verses 9-10 that Jesus later quotes. In essence God tells Isaiah that the result of his preaching God’s word will be that hardened hearts will be further hardened – that people will see, but not perceive and hear, and not understand. Later on in Isaiah (29:18-19), God also says that the same word preached will soften the humble and poor in spirit.

In the same way, Jesus’ preaching (and subsequent gospel preaching today) has the same effect: it hardens some people and softens others. Many people will hear God’s word, the gospel preached. Many will not understand it – God’s Word will remain a riddle to them in parables, and as a result, they will not turn from their sins and repent. Yet others, hearing exactly the same word, the same gospel, will perceive it, receive it and be transformed by it.

Is this because some are cleverer, or some have more faith than others, or are more predisposed and open to spiritual things in their nature? Basically – is there an added advantage within us that enables us to receive Christ, while others can’t?

The Bible tells us that actually all humans are in the same boat here. Outside of Christ, we are all dead in our sins (Eph 2:1). None of us seek God, none of us understand spiritual truths (Rom 3:11). If there's nothing within us that can cause us to positively respond to God, then it can only be that it is God himself who makes it possible for us hear his gospel and receive it. Only God can raise us up from the dead and give us ears to hear and transform our hard hearts to life in Christ!

So then what does this mean for those who do not receive Christ? Has God himself hardened their hearts towards him? Or is it their own depravity and resistance to God that they remain unwilling to receive Christ?

Let's look at how Jesus interprets the parable of the seeds to find out more...

### **C. Jesus' interpretation of the parable of the soils, vv.13-20**

#### ***First response***

**<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> 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.**

Having told the parable earlier, Jesus now interprets the parable to his disciples. In verse 14, Jesus is clear that the seed which the sower sows is the Word of God. In the NT, the word of God is synonymous with the gospel (Eph 1:13, Col 1:5 etc.). The sower, therefore, is the preacher who preaches God's word – sows seed – everywhere. He doesn't withhold God's word from anyone, it is preached to all.

In verse 15, we see that some seed lands on the path, where we know earlier from verse 4, that birds come and devour it. Jesus says here that these are people who hear the gospel – yet it fails to penetrate their hearts. Before it is able to take root, Satan comes and snatches it away.

This is describing people who may have heard the gospel preached – maybe once off, or even over years, attending church Sunday after Sunday, but remain untouched and

unmoved by the gospel. Their minds are elsewhere, they are simply not interested and remain hardened to the gospel. They think it's all foolishness. Jesus says that for these people, Satan prevents that gospel seed from taking root.

This points us to the reality that we are in the midst of a spiritual battleground for souls, every time the gospel is preached. Satan, who is the prince of this world, and who has all unregenerate hearts under his sway, tries his best to prevent gospel seeds from taking root. He is opposed to the purposes of God and uses all the means he has to distract people from hearing the word. How does he do this? He sows doubt and distractions in minds, he makes the thought of going to church not appealing – he will do what he can to stop people from letting the truth take root in hearts.

### ***Second response***

**<sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> 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.**

Here we see that seed not only falls on the path, but also on rocky ground. As the soil is not deep, the seed springs up immediately. But as the sun shines down on it, it very quickly withers away, as its roots do not run deep due to the rocky ground.

This second category of people that Jesus describes here are those that initially respond positively to the gospel. They receive it with joy, get involved in a church. On the surface, it looks as if they have genuinely received Christ. They taste something of the things of the kingdom, they are enlightened in some way by the Holy Spirit – they hear the preaching of the word, partake of the sacraments. They endure for a while, yet when tough times come – when the sun scorches them - they very quickly fall away. These are whom are described in Hebrews 6:4-6:

**“who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, <sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, <sup>6</sup> and then (fall) away...”**

The reality is that they were never true believers in the first place, their hearts were not regenerated by the Spirit. Their repentance was superficial, their hearts remained hard and they ultimately loved their sin more than Christ.

### ***Third response***

**<sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> 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.**

This other seed falls among thorns. The thorns grow up around the plants that were sown and thwart its growth, preventing them from bearing fruit. Jesus says that this third category of people are those who hear the word, it even takes root, but it bears no fruit – it is unproductive.

These are the people who get involved in church, hear the gospel, yet don't really make a break with the world. They love the world more than Christ. Outwardly they may appear to be following Christ, yet he is not truly Lord. Other things are far more important. They are still worshipping and serving the creation, idols – whether they be riches, fleshly desires and lusts, gaining possessions. These things choke the word and prevent any gospel fruit from being produced. 1 John 2:15-16 is a warning against this -

**<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.**

These people also, like the others, were never real believers in the first place – they loved the world more than the Father. And we see here if that is true, the love of the Father is not really in you.

### ***Fourth response***

**<sup>20</sup> 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.”**

Lastly, we see that some seeds are sown on good soil and produce fruit. They grow up and yield an abundant crop – 30, 60 and 100 fold. Jesus tells us here that these are the people who hear God’s word, the gospel, and accept it. The gospel takes root in these people and as a result, there is a crop of fruit. The fruit is the proof that the seed actually took root.

What does this gospel fruit look like? Visible, ongoing repentance – a break from our sinful past and a constant desire to continue to put to death sin in our lives. A visible faith in Christ, a love for Christ and his church, Growing in the fruit of the Spirit – growing in godliness, in Christ-likeness and desiring to conform our lives to God’s Word.

### **What do we make of all this?**

So getting back to our original question, the same question that Jesus seeks to address in this parable – why do some people respond and other reject the same gospel? Is it simply a matter of our free choice? From what we’ve seen here, we can see that it’s not as simple as that.

We saw that in verse 11, it is clear that it is God alone who gives the secret of the kingdom, the gospel to some, but not others. As Romans 9:13-18 says:

**“As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” <sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! <sup>15</sup> For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” <sup>16</sup> So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”**

God is God, he is sovereign, he can do as he pleases. Though all of us deserve his wrath because of our sins, he nevertheless chooses to have mercy on some of us. We will never know why he has mercy on some, but not on others – that is the prerogative of God alone.

Does this mean that God then is responsible for those who reject him? We’ve seen in this parable that this cannot be true. The responsibility for rejecting God’s word even after hearing it, lies with the hearer. That you love your sin and the things of the world more than God is on you, not on God.

Does this not seem contradictory? It's God who hardens and softens hearts, yet those who are hardened are responsible themselves? It may seem as a tension to us, yet not for God. The Bible speaks in this way in many places. For example in Acts 2:23, it says that Jesus was crucified according to God's definite, pre-ordained plan. Yet the act of the crucifixion was carried out by the hands of sinful men. Who then is guilty for the crucifixion? Not God, but the men who carried it out.

In a similar way, while it is God alone who chooses to have mercy on some sinners and not others, you are responsible for your own sins and rebellion against God. We are not robots, nor are we victims of our circumstance. We are accountable for our own actions, yet God remains sovereign over all of us.

### **Conclusion**

What hope is there then for those of us with loved ones who do not yet know Christ and the beauty of his gospel? There is much hope indeed! How come? If God left it all to us to choose Christ, none of us would respond to him because outside of him, we're lost and dead in sin. Yet it is precisely because it is he who graciously seeks us out, chooses to have mercy on sinners and raises the dead heart to life – that we can have hope that God can melt the hardest of hearts and draw them to Christ. Nothing is impossible for God! Pray for your unbelieving friends and family that God would prepare their hearts to receive the seed of the gospel!

We are also hopeful because in this parable we have a promise from God that when his word is preached, his gospel is proclaimed, there will always be fruit. Many of the seeds will fall on bad soil and will not yield fruit, as we have seen. But there will *always* be seed that falls on fertile soil and there God's word will not return void. He will enable his gospel to take root and produce an abundant crop. This is a great encouragement for us to share the gospel with those we know who don't know Christ. It's on us to faithfully preach God's word. This is the means through which God does what God can only do – raise up a dead heart to new life in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, what is the state of your heart? Is it like the hard, rocky soil, or is it soft, fertile ground for the gospel? The good news is that the Lord can melt a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Receive Jesus Christ! Receive him who has lived the perfect life you



could never live, and died the death that you deserved for your sins on the cross. Receive his gift of grace – that though you deserve wrath for your sins, in Christ, you receive pardon and forgiveness for your sins, a loving Saviour and Father who promises to never leave and forsake you, and the assurance that you will be raised up on the last day to eternal life in him.

Amen.