

Mark: Gardening Tips

Mark 4:1-20

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We come this evening to the gospel of Mark once again, and we come now to a section in the fourth chapter which contains at least four parables, the first of which we're going to look at this evening. That was actually the point of singing "Ye Sons of Earth Prepare the Plow," the whole rendition there by William Cooper to a tune that was familiar to you from a Christmas carol. Those words are beautifully expressive of this parable of the sower, or sometimes called "the parable of the soils." Before we read this passage together, let's once again look to God, the Holy Spirit. Without His work of illuminating the words of Scripture, all our efforts are in vain. Let's come before God in prayer.

Our Father, again we come as a needy people. We come as those who by nature are blind and cannot see and deaf and cannot hear, whose hearts are closed and dull and cold and dead. And we pray, Lord, as those who have been made alive by the Spirit: Come, Holy Spirit of God, and quicken us again and illuminate to us the words of Scripture that, that which we read and study this evening might be hidden deep within our hearts, that it might bear fruit for You, a hundredfold if it pleases You. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

1He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. 2And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, 3'Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. 5Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. 6And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 8Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.' 9And He was saying, 'He who has ears to hear, let him

hear.’ 10As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. 11And He was saying to them, ‘To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, 12so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN.’ 13 And He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? 14The sower sows the word. 15These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. 16In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; 17and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. 18And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, 19but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 20And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.’

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

They were coming from everywhere: men and women and children, families, young people who brought their friends. Most of them came because perhaps they were sick or they knew somebody who was sick, and Jesus had been performing these acts of healing in Capernaum and in the surrounding towns and villages—all kinds of sicknesses, deformities, disabilities that in this age could not be healed and remedied. Some were coming because they were poor and they thought perhaps in Jesus would come a Messiah, a Savior, One who would lift them up out of the poverty of their existence, give them hope, give them something to live for. Others were coming just because they were curious. A preacher was in town making a great name for Himself. Thousands were going to hear Him. Wouldn't you go and hear this man who'd been raised in Nazareth, not a considerable distance away, a carpenter's son? It represented in those days, I'm sure, the best entertainment in town. And some were hostile and there were enemies abroad. And there were visitors from Jerusalem and there were the religious police of the Pharisees and the scribes of Jerusalem. And Jesus is telling stories.

I. The message of Jesus is understood only by those who have ears to hear.

The first thing I want us to see is that the message of Jesus is understood only

by those who have ears to hear. It's understood only by those who have ears to hear. What did they hear exactly? These men, women, children, young people who came to hear Jesus—what is it that they heard? When they went home again and someone might have asked who hadn't been there, "What did He say?" They would say one thing, "He talked about the kingdom." That was Jesus' message: It was about the kingdom, the kingdom of God. I'm certain if you were to ask those who heard Jesus speak, even those who couldn't understand what it is He was saying, they would say, "He kept talking about the kingdom."

In the parallel passage in Luke it's very clear: "Soon afterward He went through the cities and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God," and then comes this parable. This parable is about the kingdom of God. That's how Jesus' came, preaching the kingdom of God. Those were the first words out of the mouth of Jesus just as they had been the first words out of the mouth of John the Baptist. There's something happening now and it's about the kingdom of God. "The kingdom of God has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom of God is among you." That's what they heard, with all the bells and whistles that the term *kingdom* would associate in their minds and in their hearts.

The word *kingdom* actually only occurs a half dozen times in the Old Testament. That's very surprising given that John the Baptist seems to sum up the whole of the Old Testament by saying, 'It's all about the kingdom.' And it *is* all about the kingdom. It's about the kingship of God. It's about the rule of God. It's about the reign of God. It's about God coming in redemption and restoration and saving a people for Himself and sending His Son as the King-Messiah. It's about the kingdom of God.

For centuries—perhaps for 200 years, 300 years perhaps—synagogues up and down the land of Judea had been talking and giving Bible studies about the kingdom of God. And many knew exactly what it meant (at least they *thought* they knew what it meant) that when Messiah would come, when the king-figure would arrive...According to the promises of the Old Testament, when the King comes He will destroy the occupying forces of Rome. Rome was everywhere. Their soldiers were on every street corner. Their banners and emblems could be seen fluttering in the wind no matter where you looked. Rome was everywhere. The jackboot of the Roman Empire had trodden upon Judea. And men and women heard Jesus speaking of the kingdom... "The king has come! ...and this spells the end of the Roman Empire," that's what many of them thought. It's like, I suppose, the words "Andrew Jackson" in the ears of a Southerner, or those words of Winston Churchill before Parliament in June, June 4 of 1940, "We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight them on the beaches. We shall fight them on the landing grounds. We shall fight them in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight them in the hills...and we shall never surrender."

And that's what they wanted Jesus to say. That's why the curious came to hear Jesus because He was speaking about the kingdom of God. And many of them heard that word *kingdom* and they saw the surrender and defeat of the Roman Empire. That's the kind of thing they wanted to hear.

And instead what are they hearing? They're hearing a story about a farmer, a farmer so insignificant—not even, not even a good fishing story. Since He's sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee after all...because of the crowds He's gone into this boat and sat down, and He's using the water of the Sea of Galilee as a natural sounding board for the great throng of people on the shoreline. Not even a good fishing story—it's a *farming* story.

Jesus is telling stories. That's what every good communicator does, isn't it? That's what we're told. "Every good communicator is supposed to tell stories." If ever there was an opportunity for being sensitive to the seeker-friendly context now in which Jesus is ministering and preaching it was this. But, you know, when Jesus tells this story, many of them don't understand it. And more than that, Mark and Luke and Matthew cite the fact that Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapter 6, "So that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." Jesus is speaking in parables. He's speaking in parables. And Mark says, 'This is the reason. It's the same reason that is given to the prophet Isaiah when Isaiah is commissioned by God to be God's mouthpiece, God says to him, 'You're going to take a message and it's a message that people won't understand. And it's a message that people won't accept and it's a message that people will reject. That's My commission to you.' And there's a sense in which Jesus is speaking in parables to fulfill that very same thing.

There are two functions for parables.

One was to prevent His enemies from taking action against Him. You know, what would the henchmen of Pilate—? What would Herod's men in Galilee, hearing Jesus proclaim Himself as king and saying to the people of Galilee in the north that the kingdom of God has arrived—what would Herod's men make of that? They would've arrested Him immediately, taken Him down to Jerusalem, imprisoned Him, maybe put Him to death...too soon. So one of the reasons for Jesus speaking in parables was in order to prevent His enemies from taking action against Him too soon.

But there's another reason to for Jesus speaking in parables, because the parables act like tongues do on the Day of Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost when men and women spoke in tongues, it was a curse upon the people of God. It was a curse upon the Jews. It was saying God was taking His word and He was taking His gospel and He was taking it to the nations of the world. It was a divine, covenantal curse on those who had rejected His message...and there's a sense in which the parables are doing exactly the same. Because there were

those who should've understood the words of Jesus but they didn't understand it, and in a sense it was God's covenantal curse. And Jesus is saying, 'I'm bringing My word and I'm bringing My gospel and I'm bringing it to those who have ears to hear.' "To you," He says in verse 11, "To you—" And He's speaking now to His followers and to the Twelve. "To you has been given the secret, the mystery of the kingdom of God." He's talking about the Twelve and those around Him. There's a fundamental lesson here. That you don't get to grips with the message of Jesus from a distance. That spiritual illumination only comes to those who are personally committed to Jesus Christ, who have ears to hear what Jesus is saying. Unless there's a personal relationship, unless there's communion, unless there's fellowship with Jesus... To this eager, tiny band Jesus gives Himself wholly.

So Jesus tells this parable and then He explains it to this tiny band. And actually in doing so He explodes two myths about parables. A lot of contemporary scholars think the parables should not be interpreted. It's a bit like explaining a joke. You know, if you've got to explain a joke then it's not a joke. 'And there's a sense,' modern commentators say, 'if you have to explain a parable then you've missed the point, because the whole point of a parable is to create an affect.' Well, Jesus explains the parable, so you can throw that one out the window.

And then, when I was in seminary it was all the rage...and it's still the rage in some quarters still...that parables only have one point, and that if you see two things in a parable you're going astray and if you see three things in a parable you're definitely wrong. And the whole point was to perhaps avoid some of the extravagancies of parable interpretation. There's an interesting interpretation of this parable that emerges out of the Middle Ages. When Jesus says at the end that some produce a hundredfold in fruit, a hundredfold harvest, it's referring to the martyrs who have given their lives to Christ. And when Jesus speaks of the sixty-fold harvest, He's speaking of the monks who have given and made a vow of celibacy. And when He's speaking of thirty-fold, who are the thirty-fold? Those whose contribution was being an obedient wife. Only thirty if you're an obedient wife. Well, Jesus is speaking in parables and He's speaking in parables to those who have ears to hear. And let's come up close to Jesus. Let's sit at His feet. Let's listen to His voice, hear Him tell this story about a farmer sowing seed on the ground.

II. The central role that the Bible plays in the kingdom of God

And let's see in the second place the central role, the central role that the Bible plays in the kingdom of God. "The sower sows the word," Jesus says. That's His explanation in verse 14. "The sower sows the word." That's a startling thing, isn't it, when you think about what Jesus has been doing? Jesus has been healing sicknesses and maladies. People have been bringing their children, their parents, their brothers, their sisters, their friends for Jesus to heal them.

“There's a point,” Warfield says. There's a point. Just for a moment in Capernaum, just for a brief moment when all sickness seems to have been banished by the presence of the King...And you might think that the kingdom comes through acts of supernatural miracles of healing, and that's how the kingdom comes: making the lame to walk, enabling those who couldn't speak to vocalize, opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping deaf ears. When the King comes marching into Judea some were thinking, “That's how the kingdom will come, in acts of extraordinary miracles, extraordinary acts of power.”

There are all kinds of thoughts about how the kingdom comes. I think we've got some folk in our day who think it comes through the sacraments. It comes through baptism. It comes through the celebration of the Lord's Table. And they take pride of place in the worship service and that these are the boundary markers of the children of God. There are others who think that the kingdom comes through force of arms, that if we send our troops out to Iraq that the kingdom of God will come, that Islam will be defeated and that the Christian banner will fly in the Middle East again. And others think that the kingdom of God will come through acts of social justice, that that's what we need. We need to engage in acts of social justice, works of mercy, works to the poor and so on. Through social reform, through politics, through legislation—the kingdom of God will come.

And Jesus says, ‘It comes by the word. It comes by the word.’ Jesus is the farmer and He comes proclaiming the word. It's the word that finds its final form in the Bible, in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books, these two million words in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek. This is how the kingdom of God comes. When you hold a Bible...some of you are holding a Bible in your hands right now...you're holding the very tool...you're holding the very instrument through which the kingdom of God comes.

Ask yourself what we're doing here tonight. What are we doing here tonight, you and I, in First Presbyterian Church on a Sunday evening? What are we doing here tonight? Compare it to the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. There are people more excited about the last edition of *Friends* than they are about what's going on here tonight. Now I had to smile just a little bit when Channel 2 was out on Friday night. There was an accident and the car hit the power pole in front of Channel 2 here in town and the power was out. My friends, what we're doing here is far more important and far more significant. We're singing the word and we're praying the word, and we're reading the word and we're preaching the word, because the kingdom of God comes by Jesus sowing the word of God. There's nothing else here. This is a beautiful building. There's no doubt about it. But in comparison to Hollywood...This pulpit doesn't rotate. It doesn't go up and down. It doesn't even have decent air conditioning. But it's a pulpit, and it's a pulpit from which the word of God is proclaimed and expounded. The Bible, it's the center of the kingdom of God. That's what the kingdom of God is all about. It

comes by Jesus preaching and teaching the word. He sows the word in the hearts of men and women. That was Paul's last thought, his swansong to Timothy: 'Preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season, Timothy. Preach the word! That's the important thing. That's the fundamental thing.'

III. The majority of those who hear the word reject it.

But notice, thirdly, that the majority of those who hear the message, the word, reject it. I put it in that blunt way because this parable is saying that only...well, only a quarter, only j of those in whom the word is sown, only j come to fruition. And it isn't because of any lack of imagination of the part of the sower. We need to embrace that.

There's a fundamental lesson, that there are three types of soil in which the word does not come to fruition. When a missionary comes and gives his testimony as they do hear on frequent occasions on Sunday evenings and Wednesday evenings, and they come and they tell you what they've been doing. They've been sowing the word. They've been faithful servants of God and they stand there and they tell you, "This is what I've been doing, and I've got almost no fruit to show for it." Be ready to get out your checkbook and write a check in support of that missionary because, alas, I think we're all of us guilty of being drawn by numbers and great numbers and inflated numbers of conversions. And here is Jesus saying, 'This is a fundamental truth, men and women. This is a fundamental truth that the vast majority of people reject the word of God.' They reject it as old-fashioned and outmoded and having nothing whatsoever to do with them.

And Jesus speaks of various types of soil. He alludes, first of all, to seed that falls on the path, seed that falls on the path. It just lies there shriveling in the sun. The sower is walking up and down the field. He doesn't have a tractor, doesn't have one of these huge things with air-conditioned cabins and digital radios and global positioning satellites and all the rest of it. No, he walks up and down. And as he walks up and down that piece of ground gets hard. There's no soil there. It's just dust and rock. And as he scatters that seed...You've done this when you go and buy that fertilizer with weed-killer, you know, for your grass. You should've done it...too late now...you should've done it a month ago, two months ago. Maybe you get that little, five-dollar thing that you hire. Forget it. It's a waste of money. Just throw it. Throw it like that. And sometimes it falls on the path and it just lies there and it's shriveling in the sun. But it's more than that because Jesus says Satan comes and snatches away that seed. The birds, they see it just lying there. They come down and they eat it. Satan is coming and he snatches away that word as soon as it is sown. My friends, the devil is walking about in this sanctuary tonight. He walks about in this sanctuary tonight. His henchmen are here. And some of you, your minds are so open that everything falls out. Nothing is retained. Your mind is elsewhere. Your thoughts are elsewhere. You're

thinking about, "When will this sermon finish?" Yes, that's what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, "I want to go home now." You're saying to yourselves, "I've got seventeen things I must do tomorrow morning." C.S. Lewis in his *Screwtape Letters*, in that so very English way of his, speaks of Satan's henchmen, reminding this person who's in church...And he's obviously in London, and he's thinking about the #75 bus and "Will it be late?" and "Has [he] missed his ride home?" And he hears nothing. Satan is prowling about making sure that the word doesn't germinate, doesn't bring forth fruit. Some of you have Teflon hearts and nothing sticks.

And some falls on the rock. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground. When they hear the word, "Immediately," Jesus says, "they receive it with joy." There's a response. There's an enthusiastic response...but it's not conversion. It's not regeneration. It's not a genuine work of the Holy Spirit bringing a person out of darkness and into light. They profess for a while, for a little while. Alexander McLaren, a Scotsman, you understand, said that "any initial experience of joy is bound to be doubtful." Only a Scotsman could say that (laughter). I think what he's saying is that if that's the only response, if that's the immediate response...There's no response of a conviction of sin. There's no response of the need for mercy. There's no response of the gratitude of a forgiven heart. There's just the joy and that's all there is. The enthusiasm of a large meeting, the psychological sway that an evangelist can often make, the expectations of parents about young children—there's a response just for a short time and it is gone.

And then there's a third kind and the seed falls on thorns and they are choked and it doesn't mature and it produces no lasting change. And then there's growing disappointment and trials and the cross and frustrations and difficulties come and they abandon their profession, like "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world," Paul says. And there's nominal Christianity. Only the Bible doesn't recognize nominal Christianity. It just speaks of it as apostasy. And Jesus says these are the three kinds of soil.

And there's a fourth one, and it gives a picture of what true Christianity is like, good soil. And the seed falls on good, cultivated ground and it brings forth...and some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundredfold. A Christian is known by his fruit. "By their fruits you shall know them," Jesus said. Now some shine brighter than others...but and some are thirty, and some are sixty, and some are a hundred...but it's not zero. It gives a template, you see, of what a Christian is. A Christian is someone who brings forth fruit, fruit to the praise and glory of God.

Let me ask you tonight, what is the seed, what is the word, what's it doing in your heart? Prepare the soil of your heart. You know, when you come to church, when you come to a worship service, when you come to read your Bible in the mornings or in the evenings—you need to prepare that soil. You need to cultivate it. You know, when Mrs. Wadsworth or Dr. Wymond are playing those pieces at

the beginning, take your seat. Open your Bible. Start praying. Prepare your heart and ask the Holy Spirit, "Lord, make me receptive. Keep the devil at bay that the word may bring forth fruit." As John Piper puts it in a sermon on this passage: "Don't play into the hands of Satan by letting the newspaper be your agenda for your Sunday mornings!" Read a Psalm. Read some Scripture. Spend some time in prayer before you come to church. You know you'll profit so much more.

Sometimes, you know, we have not because we ask not. And listen hard, my friends, to the word of God. Listen hard to the word of God. Read these bulletins that we prepare so diligently (maybe not so diligently this week) but read them; study them. Apollon, that fowl fiend is prowling about and he's saying to some of you...some of you young men, "Look at that beautiful girl." And he's saying to others of you, "A little more sleep, a little folding of the hands, a little catnap until it's over and I can go home." Focus, my friends. Focus! Focus on the words of the Call to Worship. Focus on the words that are read from the Scriptures. Have a receptive attitude, not a resistant one. *Love* the word of God. Love it with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And search for it, and when you've found it, treasure it like gold and silver. What kind of response—? What kind of response is the word going to have in your heart and mind tonight? Let's pray together.

Our God and our Father, we thank You for this parable. And we pray, O gracious God, bring forth fruit tonight in our hearts—thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. We want a hundredfold but only if it brings You glory. Take our hearts and seal them, we pray, for those courts which are above. Hide Your word within our hearts that we mightn't sin against You. Give us a seriousness about the things of the kingdom of God, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please rise. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

A Guide to the Evening Service

The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Be Thou My Vision

This ancient Celtic hymn text expresses the desire of a Christian to live a God-centered existence: for the Lord to be what we see, our constant mental preoccupation, our ever-present companion, our wisdom, our true Father, our protector, our delight, our only inheritance, first in our heart.

Praise Waits for Thee in Zion [Psalm 65] My People, Give Ear, Attend to My

Word [Psalm 78]

Jerome (who died in 420) said that he learned the psalms when he was a child and sang them daily in his old age. He wrote, "The Psalms were continually to be heard in the fields and vineyards of Palestine. The plowman, as he held his plow, chanted the Hallelujah, and the reaper, the vinedresser, and the shepherd sang something from the Psalms of David. Where the meadows were colored with flowers, and the singing birds made their plaints, the Psalms sounded even more sweetly. These Psalms are our love-songs, these the instruments of our agriculture."

Another writer (Louis F. Benson) writes of the impact of the Genevan Psalter upon the French exiles in Geneva in the middle of the sixteenth century: "The sight of the great congregation gathered in St. Peters, with their little Psalm books in their own hands, the great volume of voices praising God in the familiar French, the grave melodies carrying holy words, the favor of the singing and the spiritual uplift the singers,—all of these moved deeply the emotions of the French exiles now first in contact with them."

Fairest Lord Jesus

One of the songs many Christians learned as children in Sunday Schools and Bible Schools. We sing the first stanza only tonight, before the young children come down front for the devotional.

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say

This is one of Horatius Bonar's hymns and perhaps one of his most familiar. Based on Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30, it is a reminder of the passionate desire of our Saviour for the lost and perishing to come and embrace Him and know the joy of forgiveness of sins and peace with God. Bonar once wrote:

With a weak faith and a fearful heart, many a sinner stands before the Lord. It is not the strength of our faith, but the perfection of Christ's sacrifice that saves! No feebleness of faith, nor dimness of eye, no trembling of hand can change the efficacy of Christ's blood. The strength of our faith can add nothing to it, nor can the weakness of our faith take anything from Him. Faith (weak or strong) still reads the promise, "*the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*" If at times my eye is so dim that I cannot read these words, through blinding tears or bewildering trials, faith rests itself on the certain knowledge of the fact that THE PROMISE IS THERE, and the blood of Christ remains in all its power and suitableness upon the altar, unchanged and unaffected. God says that the believer is justified. What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

The Sermon

Tonight's sermon encounters a section Mark in which Jesus tells several parables. Last week we read the parable of the Sower (sometimes called, 'The Parable of Soils'). Tonight's passage see three more: the Parables of the Lamp, Growing Seed and Mustard Seed. T what exactly are parables? And why did Jesus use them? Everyone is familiar with Lightfoot's definition: 'an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.' Perhaps a better one is that of Vincent: 'A metaphor or story connected with the affairs of daily life is used as an illustration of moral and spiritual truths, on the assumption that what applies in one sphere is relevant also in the others.'

Parables have Old Testament roots. The Hebrew word (*mashal*) has a wide range of meaning. It can refer to a story or illustration (such as the farmer and the soils), or to a word picture, or even a wise saying (similar to a proverb). Essentially the parables served to do several things all at once: First of all they were convenient vehicles for veiling the truth from those who had no business knowing it. Jesus' enemies were foiled in their attempt to catch him out because they couldn't understand what he was saying! Parables served as covenant curses on the wicked. Second, they served as useful snapshots (for those 'with ears to hear') of what Jesus had come to do—to establish his kingdom, his rule. They powerfully depicted that King Jesus had arrived and was engaged in a work of spiritual restoration. They spoke of urgency and the need for a response. They divided hearers into those who were in Christ's kingdom and those who were not.

Tonight, nothing has changed. Jesus will come in his word and ask you, 'Do you have ears to hear?' And "What are doing about it?'

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