

THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS
MARK 4:1-20

INTRODUCTION

The earliest recollection of a specific sermon which I have goes back to when I was in about the fourth grade. I was sitting on the hard pews with Rob and my two other brothers in the small Methodist church that my family attended in Wisconsin. I remember the pastor telling a story about a young southern lad who was helping his elders put a roof on a house. He was nailing shingles near the peak of the roof when suddenly he lost his footing and began to slide down toward the edge. The boy in panic uttered a quick prayer, "Lord, help me. I'm gonna die." Suddenly the young man's suspenders caught on a nail, and he came to a quick but welcome stop. So the boy said, "Never mind, Lord. My pants caught on a nail."

Because I remember the story, I remember the point that the minister was trying to make: We often fail to recognize and give thanks for the answers that the Lord gives to our prayers. The story that the preacher used to illustrate that idea was not especially profound. But it created a vivid picture in my mind, and I still remember it today.

Good stories are attractive. They communicate. They stick with us. Jesus was a master story teller. We still remember His stories today. We call them parables. By one count the four Gospels contain almost sixty of his parables. They comprise about 35% of these New Testament biographies. A Sunday school definition that some of us learned for "parable" is perhaps as good as any. A parable is described as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

Having spent some time in the Old Testament looking at the Book of Ruth, I thought that we might come back to the New Testament and do a series on the parables. I have preached on some of the parables before. I plan to omit parables that I have spoken about more recently and add some which I have not preached about before. I have eleven in mind that I plan to cover.

Scholars are not in complete agreement about the chronological order in which the parables were presented. But I plan to deal with these eleven in something close to the order in which Jesus may have talked about them. I will also use at least one parable from each of the four Gospels. Matthew and Luke describe more of the parables of Jesus than do the other two books.

One of the things that I most disliked as a child was weeding my family's garden. We had a large garden right in the backyard, and every summer it needed weeding. On some of it my brothers and I could use a hoe. But my father insisted that we pull the weeds nearest the plants by hand. So every summer we would spend time pulling weeds by hand.

The other aspects of gardening were pretty tolerable. Spading and raking were OK. Planting the seeds actually bordered on enjoyment. Harvesting the fruit and vegetables was downright fun. One of the biggest benefits was that we boys learned something about agriculture as a result of going through the process.

When Jesus appeared on the scene in the first century, He wanted people to learn something about the kingdom of God. Just about everybody back then knew a fair amount about agriculture. It was an agrarian society. But most people had difficulty grasping what it was that God was seeking to accomplish in the world. So Jesus used the terminology of agriculture to help His countrymen understand God's program for mankind.

The Lord is still at work today accomplishing His program. He is, in fact, growing a kingdom. He wants His followers to contribute to that growth process. In the parable before us this morning Jesus uses the terminology of agriculture to describe what God is doing. What was immediately obvious to His first century listeners is a little less obvious to us. So we need to examine the role of the sower, the seed, and the soil to understand more clearly what responsibility we have in the things that God is seeking to accomplish in our world.

The Parable of the Soils, as it is often known, is contained in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We will look at Mark's version of the story this morning.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND AND...) Before we consider the factors involved in the growth process, we are going to look at Roman numeral I in the outline, THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE PARABLE. This parable is also found in Matthew and Luke. This is the only one that we will look at in Mark.

The setting for this parable is the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. (CAPERNAUM MAP) Verse 1 of Mark #4 says that there was a great multitude that gathered around Jesus. So He got into a boat, pushed off a little from shore, and began to speak to them from the boat. When I was in Israel years ago a guide claimed that a crowd of 5000 people had recently been gathered along the sea shore near Capernaum, and someone pushed off from shore and spoke to the crowd. They discovered that the acoustics of the setting were such that most people had no difficulty in hearing the guy talk from the boat in a normal voice. Matthew's gospel implies that Jesus was near Capernaum when he spoke to the crowd and told this parable. (SEA OF GALILEE) Somewhere along the coast near there Jesus told the Parable of the Soils.

Verse 10 in our passage indicates that sometime after Jesus was alone with His committed followers, they began asking about the meaning of the parables that Jesus had been telling to the crowd. (PROJECTOR OFF) In v. 11 He says, **"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables..."**

Our translation uses the word “secret.” Most translations use “mystery,” which is closer to the original Greek word *mysterion*. Now a “mystery” in the New Testament is a disclosure to man by God of a previously unknown program for mankind. The particular mystery here has to do with the kingdom of God. The Gospel of Matthew tends to use the term kingdom of heaven. (PROJECTOR ON--- KINGDOM OF GOD) These terms have three different references in the Bible. 1. Sometimes the terms refer to God’s sovereign control over all the world. 2. Sometimes they refer to a coming earthly kingdom which will be ruled by the Messiah sitting upon the throne of David in Jerusalem. 3. And sometimes the kingdom of God refers to this “mystery form” of the kingdom in which Christ exercises His rule through the lives of all those who truly follow Him prior to His physical return to earth.

Jesus is explaining this to His disciples. But the others, described as “a very large crowd” in v. 1, get the description of this mystery form of the kingdom only in parables. Why? Jesus quotes from Isaiah #6, saying, “...so that **‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’**” It is a kind of judgment upon these other people. The religious leaders and even the brothers and sisters of Jesus have been exposed to Jesus’ miraculous deeds and His powerful teaching. But they have refused to believe His claims. So they are going to be excluded from an explanation of the meaning of these parables unless and until they accept His claims to be Israel’s messiah. (PROJECTOR OFF)

By using this teaching technique, Jesus will also be able to hold off the evil plotting of the religious establishment. In #3 the author notes that scribes had come down from Jerusalem and accused Jesus of getting His power from the devil. It will be difficult for them to accuse Jesus of specific crimes, like blasphemy and treason, if they only hear Him telling stories and not making direct, specific statements about His identity and mission. It is tough to accuse somebody of claiming to be God when that person is only talking about seed and sowers and soil.

II.

The parable itself focuses on three factors essential to the growth of crops. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SOWER) The first is THE SOWER. When the dirt was overturned in the spring, the farmers would take the seeds in a bag and scatter them by hand on their fields. (SOWING SEED) Their goal was to make sure that all of their field was covered with seed.

In His interpretation Jesus does not specifically identify the sower. But the context makes clear that it is Jesus Himself. He has been going around Galilee and Judea and even Samaria broadcasting the seed everywhere. That seed, of course, is the message about the kingdom of God. Soon the apostles will be given the task of doing that sowing. Eventually every follower of Jesus is going to be entrusted with the responsibility. Before Jesus leaves the earth, He instructs His disciples, (MATTHEW 28:19) saying, “**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...**”

So Jesus wants all of us Christians to be sowers of the Word. We have the responsibility to cover the whole field, the whole world. Some parts of that field may not be too productive. Even Jesus saw lots of resistance to His scattering of the seed. But our job is to scatter the seed everywhere. We scatter that seed among family and friends and coworkers and neighbors and classmates. Some of us scatter it in the prisons. Some of us scatter it in Good News Clubs in the elementary school. We have an opportunity next Saturday to scatter it among people who need free medical care. As a church we support missionaries who sow seeds to the ends of the world. Good sowers, in the spiritual sense, spread their seeds everywhere.

III.

(III. THE SEED) The second key element in this parable is THE SEED. Seeds are amazing little things. This is one kind of seed. (MUSTARD SEED) It is a mustard seed. Jesus elsewhere tells a parable about the mustard seed. The mustard seed is tiny. It looks lifeless. It doesn't look any more alive than this pulpit. I could leave it on my desk for a couple of years, and it probably wouldn't change a bit. Yet it contains life. Given the right conditions this seed could become a large mustard tree. (MUSTARD TREE) It could produce a more vibrant and obvious form of life and, in the end, thousands of other seeds.

Jesus says that the seed in this parable stands for the Word of God. Here that Word is specifically the message about the kingdom of God. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Messiah had come to His people. They needed to respond to Him and His message. That message was just words. But words have an awesome potential. They can destroy or infuriate or discourage. Or they can encourage or sustain or excite or give life. Given the right circumstances they can produce great things. They can produce a great harvest.

For the sower to keep going in his sometimes difficult job he has to have confidence in his seed. He needs to believe that the seeds, at least some of them, will eventually produce life. Likewise we Christians need to have confidence that the message which we spread will also produce life.

At times we may get discouraged about the state of Christianity in our neighborhood and our community and our country and our world. But we need to keep things in perspective. True Christianity has been growing around the world. Missions experts say that in the year 1000 there were about 220 unbelievers for every one genuine Christian in the world. Five hundred years later there were about 69 unbelievers for every believer. In 1900 they estimate that there were 27 unbelievers for every true Christian. In 1950 there were about 21 unbelievers for every believer. In the last fifty or sixty years Biblical Christianity has grown rapidly in South America, Africa, and parts of Asia. So today in the estimation of these missions experts there are only 7 unbelievers for every genuine Christian in the world.

Also the number of tribes and people groups without any exposure to Christianity and the Bible has been rapidly decreasing. There are only a few thousand tribes left without

any Christian witness. Plans are underway to reach these last people with the gospel in their own languages.

God is planting His kingdom. It is growing. People are responding to the Word. As we spread this Word around, we need to have confidence that it is powerful and alive and able to change people's lives for the better. In Isaiah #55 v. 11 the Lord said, "**...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...**"

IV.

The third element in the parable is THE SOIL. (IV. THE SOIL) The growth of the seed is dependent upon the condition of the soil in which it is planted. The individual response to the Gospel is dependent upon the receptivity of the individual who hears it.

A.

Jesus proceeds to identify three kinds of soil. The first kind of soil identified in our text is THE PATH. (IV. THE SOIL A. THE PATH) In v. 4 Jesus says, "**And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.**" Fields in Israel for hundreds and thousands of years have been laid out in strips. Usually a different farmer owns each strip of land. Between these strips were paths on which the farmers would walk as they scattered their seeds. (THE PATH) What was different about agricultural practices in the time of Jesus was that the field would be plowed after it was sowed with seed. In that way the seeds, even on a path, might be covered with dirt.

But before the seeds on this path could be plowed under, birds came along and ate it up. (PROJECTOR OFF) I had a couple of dry patches on my lawn this spring. I had some grass seed in my storage shed and some top soil. So I threw the grass seed on the dry spots, scattered the top soil on top of the seeds and watered it well. But the birds would not leave it alone. Before the grass could take root, most of the seeds were eaten by the birds.

Jesus says that those birds represent Satan. The picture that Jesus paints is that some people have exposure to God's Word. But in this kind of people the seeds don't have opportunity to even take root. There is a hard-heartedness that has developed such that the gospel doesn't get serious consideration.

There are many potential causes of this resistant condition. It could be religiosity. That was the problem with the Jewish rabbis. They had a nice organized theological system. But it was not consistent with the Scriptures, and this Jesus just did not fit their system. He broke their sacred traditions, and He did not fit their preconceptions about what the Messiah should be like. So He was rejected out of hand.

Sometimes religious people are like that today. They go to church or synagogue, at least sometimes. They have been baptized. They are pretty good people. They give

money to charitable causes, and they are convinced that they are good enough for God. So they don't want to hear any of this radical business about having to be born again.

Other people in this category may not be especially religious. Perhaps they are just occupied with the routines of life. They are busy. They go to work. They spend time with their family. They have their hobbies or sports. Sundays are a day for relaxation. They have friends, and God and Jesus are just not part of their lives. They feel pretty content. This gospel thing would be just too upsetting to their lives. So it doesn't get any kind of a serious hearing.

The only thing that will change these people is to have their soil broken up. They need to have that hard surface penetrated. It may take a divorce or a health crisis or a job loss or a death or an accident for the gospel to get their attention. Unless and until that happens, they may have exposure to the Gospel. But Satan comes and takes away the Word which has been planted in them.

B.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. A. B. THE ROCKY SOIL) The second kind of soil is described as THE ROCKY SOIL. Much of the land in Israel is covered with limestone rock. In many places this rock is covered with a layer of soil that is only two or three inches thick. (ROCKY SOIL) This is a picture of the land in the Golan Heights, near the Sea of Galilee. Seeds planted in this kind of soil can sprout quickly. But these plants have little opportunity to develop a root system.

Jesus says that this kind of soil is like people who have an immediate positive response to God's Word. They receive it with joy. They are all excited by this Christianity thing. Many in the crowd that followed Jesus were like that. They saw Him perform amazing miracles. He was healing lepers and blind people and the lame. He was out-arguing the rabbis from Jerusalem. The people in Galilee thought that Jesus was the best thing to come along since the wheel. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But their commitment was shallow. When Jesus began to get some opposition from the religious establishment, when the rabbis began to threaten to kick people out of the synagogue for being too cozy with Jesus, they lost their enthusiasm. When Jesus started talking about the cost of discipleship, some of them walked away. In John #6 v. 66 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:66) we are told, "**After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.**"

Jesus said in v. 17 of our text, "**When affliction or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately they fall away.**" On the surface these people appear no different than those characterized by the fourth kind of soil. But trials reveal the shallowness of their commitment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In John Bunyan's allegorical tale *The Pilgrim's Progress* the pilgrim Christian leaves the City of Destruction with a fellow traveler named Pliable who is just as enthusiastic as Christian is to begin this journey to the Heavenly City. Along the way the two of them

get caught in the Slough of Despond. They both manage to escape it, but Pliable declares, **“Is this the happiness you have told me of all the while?”** The difficulty with the Slough of Despond is more than he bargained for. So Pliable leaves the journey and returns to the City of Destruction.

There are many people who want beautiful branches and pretty leaves and delicious fruit in their lives. But they are unwilling to develop the root system that is necessary to sustain such a plant in the times of trial. They have not yet chosen to pay the price that is necessary for being a committed follower of Jesus. What is needed is a determination to persevere in the face of storms and droughts. What is needed is a commitment to the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. What is needed is a willingness to get up earlier or stay up later to read the Bible and spend time in prayer. What is needed is a willingness to turn off the TV at times and read a good Christian book. What is needed is a determination to trust God and follow His Word in a time of difficult testing.

C.

The third kind of soil is THE THORNY SOIL (IV. A. B. C. THE THORNY SOIL) Thorn bushes were typically cut off or burned down by farmers. But their roots were left intact, and the plants would eventually grow back. The good seed did grow in this soil. The roots would develop, but the weeds also grew. In the end the competition from the thorn bushes was too much. The good plant would be choked off, and no fruit would be produced.

In the spiritual analogy Jesus identifies three kinds of thorns. First, there are the cares, or worries of the world. The English word “worry” comes from an Old German word *wurgen*, which meant “to choke.” Thus the word came to mean “mental strangulation” and eventually what we understand by “worry.” That is an accurate picture of what worry does to our minds and to our lives. Worries tend to choke us. They dominate us and keep us from being fruitful in the Christian life.

The recent Covid pandemic was one of these worries of the world. When the pandemic first struck there was legitimate concern about the health challenge presented to all of us. For a time we didn’t meet as a church congregation. Then we offered a parking lot service. Then we added back an inside service. But the end result is that some in the congregation have not come back at all. This has been a universal trend for churches across the country. It isn’t good. A lot of these people are falling into the category of those who are the thorny soil.

Then there is also the deceitfulness of riches. I had a friend some years ago who came to trust in Jesus as a result of the influence of his cousin Greg. Greg had a charismatic personality. He was a salesman by nature. When he became a Christian, he told everybody about it. Many, including my friend, were converted to Christ. But then Greg got involved with one of these home business deals. He was good at it. In the beginning he did it part time, but soon it became his full-time job. He was making a lot of money, and he started getting other people to work for him. It began to occupy more and more

of his time. After a while he didn't have time for church any more. After a while that fruitful Christian life was choked off by the deceitfulness of riches.

Jesus says that the other category of thorns is simply the desires for other things. The term "desires" could also legitimately be translated as "lusts." I had a part in bringing Jeff to Christ in college. He grew quickly in his newfound faith. He got involved in our Christian fellowship. In my last year in college he lived in a house with me and five other Christian guys. After college he taught school, got involved in a good church and was teaching Sunday school. But Jeff was lonely. He never seemed to have much success in romantic relationships. I stopped hearing from him. Later I learned that he had moved into a house with another guy. He got involved in a homosexual relationship with him. He also stopped going to church. The desires for other things entered in and choked the Word, and it became unfruitful.

Charles Swindoll says that we all have a quiet, respectable, secret love for thorns. The question is: What will our priorities be? What will we allow to dominate our thinking? Will we dream about having money, or material things, or pleasure, or power? Or will the thing that really drives us relate to the advance of the kingdom of God?

D.

Finally we come to the fourth kind of soil, THE GOOD SOIL. (IV. A. B. C. D. THE GOOD SOIL) I have read that a good grain harvest back in the time of Jesus would produce 10% more seeds than a farmer started with. Some individual grains would produce an ear with 35 kernels. Occasionally 60 kernels would be produced on one plant, and rarely even 100 kernels.

The good soil symbolizes people who respond positively to the good news about Jesus. God's Word penetrates their lives, and it takes deep root. Their character becomes strengthened, and they reflect qualities of godliness even in difficult circumstances. Their lives have a positive impact upon others. The impact of some of these people will be greater than others.

Before the 1994 genocide in the African country of Rwanda (RWANDA MAP) 80% of the Rwandans identified with either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. The genocide involving Hutus and Tutsis revealed that the spiritual soil in the country was shallow and rocky and filled with thorns.

The gospel found good soil in Celestin Musekura. Celestin came from an animist family. His parents worshiped spirits and ancestors. A sower came along who was affiliated with World Venture, the missionary society of the Baptist group with which we are affiliated. Edward Kile was the first white man whom Celestin had ever seen. Edward came monthly to this rural village to tell stories about the Bible. Celestin was intrigued by the Jesus whom the white man described. This Jesus seemed to be a wonderful ancestor who did not ask blood of animals to give people peace. Instead He gave His own blood and made it possible for one to talk with, and be a friend of, the Supreme Being, God Himself.

Celestin later attended a Christian secondary school in a larger town nearby. There he encountered this missionary Edward Kile again. When Celestin heard the gospel explained once more, he responded. Celestin's life changed radically. His family rejected him because of his new beliefs. But Celestin developed a deep root system. He persevered in his Christian school. At times he had to beg for food and find food in the garbage. But Mr. Kile paid for much of his schooling.

Celestin went to a Bible institute in Congo. Later he returned to his home village as a pastor. Over time he saw his family members come to faith in Jesus. Later he went to Kenya for further theological studies. Later still he completed a Ph.D. Program at Dallas Seminary. He then began an organization to train pastors and lay leaders in Africa. Celestin has proven himself to be good soil, having borne fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

What kind of soil are you? More importantly, what kind of soil do you want to become? If your life could be characterized as a hardened path, you need to open up your heart to Jesus. You need to recognize that you are a sinner. You need to recognize that Jesus was God who became a man and that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins. You need to accept that payment by faith, trusting in Christ as your Savior.

If your life is like rocky ground, perhaps you need to work on your devotional life. You need to develop your spiritual root system. If your life is like the thorny soil, if there seem to be all kinds of distractions that pull you away from your commitment to the Lord, you need to work on your priorities. Maybe you need to reevaluate what you do with your time and your money and your energy. Jesus needs to be first in your life.

If your life is like the good soil, keep on keeping on. Trust the Lord to bear fruit through you. And be encouraged. Charles Colson wrote, **“Without commitment, our individual lives will be barren and sterile. Without commitment, our lives will lack meaning and purpose. After all, if nothing is worth dying for, then nothing is worth living for. But with commitment comes the flourishing of society--- of calling, of marriage, of the church--- and of our hearts. It's the paradox Jesus so often shared when he bid us to come and die that we might truly live.”** (*Christianity Today*, 8/4/2010)

Jesus challenged us all in v. 9 saying, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”**