

WHAT IS YOUR SPIRITUAL HEART?

Mark 4:1-20

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Story telling is popular in preaching today. One does not have to look very far to find a preacher who is gifted in this regard. However, there is a danger that is often exposed if one is not careful when using stories for application. The danger is that the story is emphasized at the expense of the Scripture. The text is taken out of context to enhance the story rather than the story enhancing the text itself. Recently a local pastor, while addressing a football team in a pre-game devotion, told them that Jesus was going to come like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). He then reminded them that the football team that they were about to line up against was like a thief seeking to steal everything that they had worked so hard to accomplish. I share this only to demonstrate the danger of misapplying the Scripture to enhance one's story rather than allowing the illustration to enhance the Scripture. This pastor is one of many who stand in a pulpit every Sunday and, to borrow from the title of James White recent book, commits a "pulpit crime."

However, story telling can be a very effective tool when used properly for application. We turn this morning to the first of three parables that Mark shares during this period in Jesus' ministry. A parable is a story, a teaching device in which the earthly application is apparent but the spiritual application remains hidden to those who do not have ears to hear. The purpose of a parable is always to more fully reveal the nature and character of the kingdom of God, what the kingdom will look like and who will inhabit the kingdom. Jesus often used this form of teaching to enhance His message. There were other parables during this period in His ministry that Mark does not share. Remember, Mark's emphasis was more on the *actions* of Jesus rather than His *teaching*. Mark emphasized His *mission* more than His *message*. But he does not exclude the importance of the message altogether. Mark simply sought to demonstrate Jesus' authority as King and His life as Servant through His actions more than His teachings.

So why does Mark include this facet of Jesus' ministry here? I believe it is because for the most part no one understood the person and work of Jesus that had to this point in Mark's gospel been visibly demonstrated before them. God of very God had come to this earth, clothed in flesh, and taught the Scriptures and performed miracles in their midst to validate His teaching. And yet, they did not understand Him. The religious shepherds rejected Him. His own family ridiculed Him. His followers were nominal at best. And even His own disciples, the Twelve, did not fully understand His mission. It is interesting to note that of all the different groups we have seen to this point, only one truly understood the nature of Christ and His mission – the demons. So here, Jesus backs off a bit and begins to focus more on those that were His true followers, those who had ears to hear. In other words, Jesus begins to emphasize the *spiritual* necessity of knowing and following Him. So for those who were truly hungry and thirsting after Him, these parables would be clear to them through the Spirit or would at the very least drive them to ask a question of clarification regarding the earthly story. In other words, Jesus' focus changes here. While He will still teach the crowds and perform miracles in their midst, it is the growth of His disciples that we see becomes the emphasis of His ministry. He has a little more than a year to prepare His apostles for their ministry and for their teaching that becomes the foundation upon which the Church is built.

Our parable this morning is perhaps the most well known of all of Jesus' parables. Perhaps this is because the earthly story is easily remembered or because Jesus immediately interprets the

parable. Whatever the reason for its popularity, we learn from this parable that *only those who give clear evidence of receiving Christ will inherit the kingdom of God.*

I. The Sharing of the Parable (4:1-8)

We last saw Jesus sitting in the home of Peter, His headquarters in Capernaum, teaching those that had gathered. The crowd was enormous and included people from all of the groups that we mentioned earlier. The scribes and Pharisees, Jesus' immediate family, the crowds, and His disciples were all initially present on that occasion. Mark tells us that Jesus had departed Peter's home and was once again teaching them by the sea.

1. The importance of the parable (vv. 1-3a)

The importance of Jesus' teaching on this occasion would be apparent by both His actions and by His words. First of all, we see that Jesus got into a boat and pushed out from the shore a bit to place Himself in an instructional position. The crowds remained on the seashore and Jesus sits down in the boat facing them. He had assumed a position of authority and the people would immediately know that He was about to teach. We would liken it to a worship service where the pastor stands behind the pulpit and faces the congregation with the Word opened before Him. The congregation is immediately aware that, no matter what has transpired to that point in the worship service, when the preacher stands in the pulpit, he is there to proclaim the truth. They go into "listening" mode. The same is the case with these crowds. The moment Jesus pushed away from the bank in the boat and stopped and faced them, they knew that He was not in the boat to go fishing but to teach, and they too should prepare themselves to listen to what He had to say.

But just in case some of them did not immediately notice this by His actions, He plainly says, "**Listen to this!**" It is an exclamation from the mouth of our Lord. He silences them and with these words He tells the entire crowd to go into "listening" mode. The chatter must stop. There must be silence so that all could hear. Some of the older translations have, "**Hearken!**" That carries the idea of the attention that should be given to what Jesus was about to proclaim. What Jesus was about to say would make serious demands upon the attention and thought of the hearers.¹ What Jesus was about to proclaim in the form of a parable was of utmost importance to all of those gathered on this occasion.

2. The parable itself (vv. 3b-8)

Having gained their attention, Jesus then shares this parable, known as "The Parable of the Sower" or "The Parable of the Soils." Both are acceptable titles because while the parable emphasizes the sower scattering the seed, the application drawn comes from the different soils.

The parable in its earthly form would be immediately recognizable to all of those present. This picture of a farmer sowing seed was commonplace in their daily lives. What would have caught their attention here is how the sower seems to haphazardly distribute the seed. Seed was a precious commodity, so much so that the sower would take great care as to where he sowed. The soil was of utmost importance for the seed to sprout, take on life and later be harvested. However, this sower intentionally sows seed in a variety of places, places where he would not ever think about plowing and harvesting later.

¹ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark*, 106.

The first batch is sown **“beside the road” (v. 4)**. This was a place where the soil was packed down hard by people walking beside the road. The ground was so hard that the seed could never germinate, and even if it could the people trampling it would make it impossible. Further, we see the expected result of sowing on these hard, open places, **“the birds came and ate it up.”** I see this visibly demonstrated in my back yard every spring. I put grass seed down with the hopes of seeing a nice green, plush backyard under my trees. However, the ground is packed so hard from rain and erosion that the seed cannot take root. All I end up with is a backyard full of birds! Perhaps I could save time and money by just putting up a bird feeder and forgetting the nice backyard.

The second batch of seed is sown **“on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil” (v. 5)**. The picture here is not a place with rocks strewn over the surface, but an area with only a thin layer of soil covering a solid ledge of limestone,² limestone being common even today in Palestine. The soil, only a few inches, was not deep enough though it was warm and moist. As a result, the seed would germinate too quickly, fail to take root properly, and would quickly die, literally burn up from a lack of water.

The third batch **“fell among the thorns” (v. 7)**, not literally among the thorn bushes, but into the ground infested with their uncut roots. The thorn bushes had probably been burned off, but their roots remained deep in the soil.³ The seed actually germinated and survived and grew, however the thorn bushes grew back up alongside of them, choking the smaller and less durable plants out. The smaller plants were deprived of needed sunlight and moisture.

The final batch of seed **“fell into the good soil” (v. 8)** and produced in some cases even beyond what was expected. **“Good soil”** stresses the nature of the soil that one might have expected to find one sowing in to produce a harvest. **“Thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold”** shows the tremendous output of the harvest beyond that which was sown. In other words, this was a desirable and advantageous crop. Farmers today would call it “a good year.”

II. The Purpose of the Parable (vv. 9-12)

But the story does not end with the telling of the parable. If this were the end of the story, then we might expect that the crowds would have gone away disappointed. After all, Jesus had not really told them anything that they did not already know. As a matter of fact, they probably would have taken nothing from Jesus’ story other than there was a dumb farmer somewhere that they should learn not to emulate because he had wasted so much of his seed by sowing in places that he knew were not likely to produce. But Jesus adds on little caveat in concluding this parable, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 9)**.

Again, this might seem somewhat simplistic. Unless one in the crowd was physically born deaf, then they had all heard what Jesus had said. Is that what Jesus meant by saying, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear”**? Was Jesus merely referring to physical hearing or is it possible that there was something more, something deeper, that the normal Joe in the crowd was unable to hear?

We get our answer in what happens next. At some point later, when the crowds had dispersed and Jesus was alone with the Twelve and other of His followers, they approach Him and ask Him about the parable. You see, this small group that hung around knew that when Jesus said, **“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,”** He was saying that more than attention to

² Hiebert, 107.

³ Ibid.

what He was saying was important. There must also be discernment. And these that hung around did so because, while they had given their utmost attention to His teaching, they had failed to discern what Jesus really meant. They were smart enough to know that Jesus was not simply giving a beginners class in agriculture but they did not know what He was teaching. And so they ask Jesus what it was that He was trying to get across to them.

The response of this small group is valuable for us. So often today, people are satisfied with what is on the surface. Congregations today are filled with people that are satisfied with knowing what the preacher knows. They use this to gage their spiritual maturity. After all, if they know what the preacher is proclaiming, then their understanding of Scripture must be on the right track. The problem, of course, is when you have shallow preachers preaching to shallow minds. We must be careful that we do not become satisfied with our understanding of God's Word. I appreciate a flock that presses me in my study and understanding of Scripture, who often asks questions about a sermon for clarification and deeper understanding. You see, it is a mark of maturity that one asks questions, not that he is satisfied that he knows all there is to know. That was the fault of the crowds. They went away, again, perhaps disappointed, because they had not heard anything new. They were satisfied with the surface. But not this small group. They wanted to understand what Jesus meant. They pressed Him to give them more.

So Jesus gives them the purpose of this and all parables that He taught, **“To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables” (v. 11)**. This truth drives some people crazy, even in evangelical ranks. What is Jesus saying here? He is saying that the truth is revealed to some, and remains hidden or veiled from others. In case they did not understand Him, He drives the truth home, **“so 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” (v. 12)**. In other words, these truths are purposely veiled because of the blindness and hard hearts of those outside. These parables served as an instrument of judgment on those who saw repentance and forgiveness as an undesirable result of what they see and hear. It is not that Jesus did not want them to know the truth. They themselves did not want to know the truth. Their sin was their deliberate attempt to bury the truth. I like how one pastor puts it,

While Protestant liberals (and sadly, many evangelicals) find this offensive, this makes perfect sense in a covenantal context, where there are both covenant blessings and covenant curses. In explaining these parables to his disciples, Jesus is, in effect, pronouncing a covenant blessing. In hiding the mysteries of the kingdom from the others, Jesus is pronouncing a covenant curse.

This means that whenever Jesus speaks in a parable there are two kinds of people to whom he is speaking. To his disciples (which includes the twelve plus all those who now follow Jesus and who believe that he is at the very least a prophet sent from God), the parables reveal the unfolding mystery of the story of redemption. More specifically, the parables reveal what the kingdom of God is like, how it advances and how it will be consummated at the end of the age. To the multitudes who, sadly, see Jesus as nothing more than a walking emergency room, and to the religious leaders of Israel (whether they be from the Sanhedrin, or the local scribes and Pharisees), Jesus' parables are a form of judgment. They may understand the surface meaning of the story and they may even understand (as they often do), that Jesus is using these parables to expose their self-righteousness and lack of care for God's people. But what they don't see is that these parables actually serve to blind them to the truth so that everything Jesus does remains a

riddle or an enigma. This is what we mean when we say that the parables are a form of judgment. The more Jesus speaks to them in parables, the madder and more troubled they become.⁴

So in a very real sense, we see Jesus, in teaching in parables, is turning them over to themselves. It is much like those in Romans 1, “who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (v. 18) and who God gives over to their depraved minds and hard hearts (vv. 24, 26, 28). The crowds should have known that there was more to Jesus’ teaching, but they did not care. Remember the unpardonable sin? These men were blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and what would be the result? The Holy Spirit would be removed from them. They would not be able to hear or able to see. Repentance for them would be impossible. For those who argue that Jesus would never veil the truth or hide the truth, they should see that Jesus is just fulfilling His promise.

But for those who desire the truth, Jesus makes it evident.

III. The Explanation of the Parable (vv. 13-20)

Jesus’ explanation of this parable serves both as the basis for understanding the parables that follow in Mark’s gospel but also to reveal a bit more about the **“mystery of the kingdom of God.”** While this had already been given to them in one sense by His appearance to them and their reception of Him, they still did not know the deeper things about the kingdom. So Jesus interprets this parable for them to reveal something more about the kingdom, something that is evident to us who have the rest of the story but not to these who had only been with Jesus a short time. Jesus’ explanation involves two things.

1. The sower and the seed

Jesus does not identify who the sower is in this instance, but it is commonly held that Jesus Himself is the sower of the seed based upon the parable of the wheat and tares where the Son of Man is identified as the sower (Matt. 13:37). As William Hendriksen points out, “By a legitimate extension of the figure we are justified in saying that the sower is not only Jesus but anyone – minister, missionary, evangelist, any genuine witness-bearer – who truly proclaims the Son of man’s message.”⁵ The seed is identified as **“the word,”** referring to the word of the kingdom.

So in its immediate context, the sower is Jesus Christ, who purposefully sowed the word of the kingdom in all different types of soil. Jesus understood that His message would be met with rejection from some. But He sowed it nonetheless. In the end, at the judgment, these that rejected the word that Jesus proclaimed would have no one to blame but themselves. They had every opportunity, more than many would ever have, to hear and receive the message and the Messenger. But they rejected Him. Their judgment was on their own heads.

But this further serves those that would follow Jesus in proclaiming the gospel. It is a reminder that we too are to proclaim the gospel to all men indiscriminately while understanding that some will not receive it. Many will respond just like the crowds did and walk away desiring to know nothing more about Jesus. Their hearts are just like those that Jesus came to who saw repentance and faith as undesirable or unnecessary. The gospel is foolish to them, and the Cross

⁴ Kim Riddlebarger, <http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/downloadable-sermons-on-mark/>

⁵ William Hendriksen, *NTC: Mark*, 155.

of Christ an abomination. While they might not react as forcefully as some of Jesus' crowd, their response brings judgment upon them as well.

2. The soils

The soils represent the hearts of different people and their response to the message of the gospel. It is very evident from Jesus' explanation that only one of these will inherit the kingdom of God. However, many of these "soils" are members of churches today, perhaps even here at Grace Covenant.

The first soil, the hard soil of the roadside, represents people who hear the message, but as Sinclair Ferguson aptly states, "it is like 'water off a duck's back to them.'"⁶ They have unresponsive hearts. The message of the kingdom simply slides off the surface of their hard hearts. While they hear the message, it takes very little to divert them and take their thoughts off of the truth. Of course, the adversary is at work to see to this as Jesus notes. Satan still works today to strike doubt into the minds of those that allow it concerning the truth. His famous line still dupes many today, "Surely God did not say..."

The second soil describes a person who hears the gospel and responds impulsively. They give every outward appearance of being filled with the joy that comes with knowing Christ savingly. But, like that plant with shallow roots in shallow soil, underneath there is a hardness, limestone in their heart that will not allow the Word to take root. So at the first sign of trial, they wither (Jn. 12:42-43). They prove that their initial reaction was superficial. Our churches today are full of people with impulsive hearts who are products of inappropriate, high-pressure evangelism and church growth methods. Many "respond" with little or no understanding of the gospel, giving no signs of repentance because they are not told what repentance entails, they join the church, and in many instances they are never seen again.

The third soil in many respects is good, but it is infested with thorns and weeds. No spiritual weeding has been done through spiritual disciplines to give an opportunity for spiritual growth. While there is initial growth, this person gets choked out and begins to pursue the things of old because sin has not been rooted out of their hearts and they remain preoccupied with the things of this world. Again, we find this type of person in the church today that does not deal with the sinfulness of sin and peddles the grace of God like it is a free pass to heaven. Sin is coddled rather than dealt with for what it is, an offense to God. Many are told to remember the prayer that they prayed and they can rest assured that they are forgiven. While there is full forgiveness for sin in Christ, this type of counsel brings a false assurance of salvation and is damaging to the soul of those who have never truly dealt with their sins and continue to live their lives for this world rather than the next. We also see this type of heart in a church where there is no clear distinction between the church and the world. The more worldly a church the more it caters to a worldly heart. A preoccupied heart feels right at home in a building that is nothing more than a country club or a concert hall with stained glass windows.

The last soil represents those who will truly inherit the kingdom of God, and they alone. It is really rather simple. **"They hear the word and accept it and bear fruit."** Jesus adds a stipulation here. While the second and third hearts hear the word and accept it in some way, they never bear fruit. In the good heart, the word takes root. Weeding and plowing is done with the harvest in mind. While some hearts bear more fruit than others, all of them bear fruit. There is evidence in their lives that they truly know Christ. While they still sin, they are learning to hate sin like God hates sin and are repentant. There is evidence of spiritual growth because the

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Mark*, 53.

desires of their hearts have truly changed. The Word of God deeply penetrates their entire being so that they live lives according to God's Word. Simply put, they walk their talk.

Conclusion

1. Are you one of the “devil’s birds?” Are you “sowing” or “snatching” the seed?

2. Think of one family member or friend who professes to know Christ and does not show evidence of Christ in their life.

3. Every person here this morning falls into one, and only one, of these soil categories. **Which soil describes your heart?** Hard soil (unresponsive heart), rocky soil (impulsive heart), thorny soil (preoccupied heart)? Then please understand this morning that you are standing outside the kingdom of God, your father is the devil, and your home is in hell. The only ones that inherit the kingdom of God are those who hear the gospel, receive the gospel, and bear fruit.