

Mark 4:1-20 - On seeds, parables and hearts

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[0 : 00] Morning Church. Okay, the reading is taken from Mark chapter 4, verses 1 to 20. You can find that on pages 1005 in your church Bible.

You can also follow on the screen behind me. Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake.

The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

He taught them many things by parables, and in his teachings said, Listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed.

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places where it did not have much soil.

[1 : 15] It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered, because they had no root.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop. Some multiplying 30, some 60, some 100 times.

Then Jesus said, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. When he was alone, the 12 and the others around him asked him about the parables.

He told them, The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seen, but never perceiving, and ever hearing, but never understanding.

[2 : 38] Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. Then Jesus said to them, Don't you understand this parable?

How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown.

As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes it away, and the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes, because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word. But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things, come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

[3 : 57] Others, like seed sown on ground, on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop. Some 30, some 60, some 100 times that was sown.

This is the word of the Lord. Great, thank you, Yvonne. Do keep that passage open in front of you. We're going to be working our way through it.

Let's pray and ask for the Lord's help as we come to his word. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for your word to us.

We pray now that you might help us to listen carefully to what you're saying to us. Help me, I pray, to speak clearly. Help all of us to have tender, good soil hearts that listen and accept what you're saying to us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Now, let me tell you something which you're probably sure of anyway. That is that self-awareness is a rare thing, right?

[5 : 0 6] We are pretty good, I think, when it comes to seeing the mistakes of others and less good at seeing the contribution that perhaps we've made to situations.

Let me give you some examples to show you what I mean. Maybe you're at school, right? Maybe you've had a really bad week at school this week. And you know why you've had a bad week at school this week.

It's because the teachers hate you. They mark your work harder than anybody else's. They have it in for you. They see you coming. They're unkind to you, right? You're really sure of all that.

What you're less aware of is that the fact that you don't do any work might also contribute to the fact that you've had a bad week at school, perhaps. It's the same dynamic at work, isn't it?

When a project goes wrong or when a contract falls over or when that bid for new work doesn't come off, we are pretty clear on all the mistakes that other members of the team have made and are less clear about our own contribution to it.

[6 : 0 9] We're blind to that. It's the same in family arguments. Maybe you don't have family arguments, but if you do, it's the same in those, isn't it? Where the unreasonableness of everybody else in your family is really obvious to you.

Well, they're so selfish. They are always like that. They are always putting themselves first. And you can see it really clearly, but your own contribution to it, well, you're blind to that.

Now, obviously, that sort of lack of self-awareness is different in different characters. Some of us are inclined to self-pity. Some of us are inclined to arrogance. But the fact is that not knowing ourselves and not knowing our own contribution in any situation is really a problem, isn't it, in our lives?

Maybe you're still unpersuaded. Let me suggest to you something that you could do if you're unpersuaded that a lack of self-awareness is a problem. Why not, after church, speak to a good friend and say to them something like this, please, can you tell me everything that you think I am unaware of that contributes to the problems that I have, right?

And then just brace yourself for whatever it is that comes next. Now, in a sense, that is the dynamic of Mark chapter four. In Mark chapter four, Jesus is that good friend.

[7 : 2 8] And he's saying to you, listen, there is a spiritual version of a lack of self-awareness. And I want to, like a good friend with my hand on your shoulder, I want to show you the contribution that your heart is making to your acceptance of the gospel.

You see, we say things like this, don't we, in a sort of lack of spiritual self-awareness. We say things like, do you know what? I would be a better Christian if I went to a better church. Church is kind of boring, really.

It's a pain to get to. Or, do you know, life is so busy, I would be a better Christian if my life wasn't so busy. I would read my Bible and pray more if it wasn't for the kids getting up so early.

You know, Jesus would be more present to me in my day-to-day life if I didn't just have so much to do. Or perhaps you think, do you know what? Honestly, I've got better things to be doing, other priorities you wouldn't understand.

You don't know where I'm coming from. None of this Jesus stuff resonates with me anymore. And into that kind of lack of self-awareness, spiritual self-awareness, Jesus tells the parable of the sower in Mark 4.

[8 : 39] It's probably more accurate to call it the parable of the soils because it's the soil that's in view rather than the sower. In the picture, the farmer is liberally scattering the seed and in the image, Jesus is the one scattering the seed.

And the seed, as we saw with the kids, is the word of God, the message of the gospel, the good news of the kingdom. This message that he has been telling since the beginning of Mark's gospel of repentance and faith in him for forgiveness.

And this seed lands on four different types of soil. The path, the rocks, the weeds, and the good soil. And those soils, we find, are human hearts, the different responses to the same message, the same gospel message.

And the parable, in effect, says that our spiritual condition is a reflection of what's going on in our hearts. You know, in the parable, all the other conditions are the same, right? It's the same seed, it's the same farmer, it's the same weather, but the responses are different as a reflection of the heart.

So let's just start by walking through these different types of soil. The first is the path. I think first, when I read this as a kid, I imagined that this was sort of, you know, like concrete slabs. I don't think it's really like that.

[9 : 52] What really is going on here is like compacted soil. It has been squashed down by foot traffic. And the seed landing here stays on top, it is snatched away by the birds.

And Jesus explains the picture in verse 15. Look at verse 15. Some people, he says, are like seed along the path where the word is sown.

As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. It's a tragic image. This is the image I was trying to conjure up with throwing the seeds around the church building here, that it would just go to waste.

There's nothing for it to take root in. Perfectly good seed goes to waste, snatched away, we're told, by the devil himself, because the hardness of the heart has prevented it from penetrating even in a small way.

By its very definition, this is hard, isn't it, to address in a gathering like this? If your heart is like the path this morning, then you're probably not listening to me.

[10 : 53] Probably on your phone, doing the word search on the notice sheet or counting the chairs or something like that. But let me just try and wake you up for a moment. Because Jesus here wants to wake us up to the possibility that the reason that we're not a Christian this morning, the reason that we find all of this a bit dull and a bit impenetrable is not because the seed is bad.

It's not because the farmer is poor or the weather is no good. No, it's because our hearts are hard to the message of the gospel, trodden down from years of refusing to listen and the seed just kind of bounces off.

The very idea that you are owned by a God who has made you, that you are given a life to live for his glory, and that your failure, our failure to live life for him and for his glory, that failure has left us in a moral peril before a holy God.

A moral peril that only Jesus can save us from. Those ideas, you never really thought about them properly. That's because you won't think about them. So let me ask you this morning whether that might be you.

Might you be like the path this morning? Honestly, it's lots of people in our world, isn't it? The people around whom we spend much of our time. Perhaps you're a parent this morning and you find that your children are like this.

[12 : 18] Or maybe your nieces or your nephews or your grandchildren or your mum or your dad. They're just not interested in any encounter with the gospel message.

And every time you try and share it, it's like it just bounces right off. They ignore it. The devil snatches it away. And it's desperately sad because the seed is good. The farmer is kind.

The weather is the same for everyone. But it takes no root. The second soil is the rocky soil. Here the image seems to be shallow soil over some kind of bedrock.

So it's not just that the soil itself is littered with stones, but more that the soil is just a shallow layer over a bedrock underneath it. The soil warms up quickly in the sun.

So the seed sort of germinates quicker than any of the others springing up ahead. Eventually, though, that layer of rock becomes a problem because the roots can't go down. So the plant doesn't last.

[13 : 16] The sun gets hotter into the summer and the plant is ruined. Look down at verse 16 and you'll see Jesus' explanation. Others, he says, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. This rocky soil and the weedy soil afterwards that we'll find point to this reality that false faith and true faith look, at least for a time, identical to one another.

You know, at the start, there's no difference between the shallow soil plant and the good soil plant. In fact, if anything, the shallow soil plant is growing ahead of the good soil plant. But then things start to get more difficult and more difficult in a very specific way.

Look down and notice what he says. It's here, it's about trouble and persecution coming because of the word. So here is it, as we discover, having listened to the gospel and in a certain sense accepted it, we discover that that actually makes our lives more difficult and not easier.

Perhaps we thought that trusting Jesus might just be a kind of nice bolt-on to our life. You know, kind of a cultural insurance policy for when we die. But then being a Christian turns out to make really tough demands of our life choices.

[14 : 41] Doesn't prove to be very popular with our friends or our family. And so we give up. You know, the seed was good, the farmer was kind, the weather was the same for everybody, but the soil was shallow.

And so the plant only lasted for a short time. I think as a sort of bit of an aside here, it's worth just noticing Jesus' wisdom here for how we take professions of faith.

He says here, doesn't he, that effectively we should take professions of faith seriously, but we should also take them patiently. I wonder whether this is perhaps particularly important for Christian parents and youth leaders to hear.

You know, how do you know if that profession of faith that your eight-year-old is making is genuine? Well, Jesus says, doesn't he, just like with anybody's profession of faith, you cannot tell whether it's genuine just by the earnestness of it.

In fact, earnestness is the speciality of the shallow soil. You can only see the genuineness of a profession when it is tested by trouble and persecution and whether it perseveres.

[15 : 48] So maybe when the eight-year-old turns 16 or 17 and their school friends are mocking them for attending church or when they leave home and living for Jesus is way more difficult, well, then you'll know whether their faith is genuine.

Now, the point is not that we discourage an eight-year-old from professing faith in Jesus Christ. Of course not. The point is that we don't give up praying for them or assume that it's all right because we need to see perseverance.

And that's not just for children, is it? Maybe this is for us this morning. Maybe there was a time when you would have called yourself a Christian. You were going for it. You were earnest. You were enthusiastic.

You couldn't wait to pick up a Bible in the morning. You couldn't wait to come to church and sing praises to God. But then it just got too difficult. You realized that following Christ came at a cost to yourself.

That following Jesus would mean saying goodbye to friends and family to serve the gospel somewhere else. Or that being a Christian would make you suspicious to the HR team at work. Being a Christian might narrow your chances of getting married and so you gave up.

[16 : 54] You gave up on the message. The third soil is similar in a way. It's the weeds. Here the plant grows and looks healthy and genuine just like before.

Indistinguishable from a genuine plant. But the problem here is that the soil is full of weeds. If you've ever done any gardening at all you will know that by definition weeds grow faster than plants.

When Vanessa and I lived in Liverpool we had an allotment. It was the trial of my life going to the allotment. I hated it. Vanessa loved it. But the only thing we were successful at growing in the allotment were weeds.

You didn't have to do anything. They grew fast. They grew tall. They took over everywhere. And that's what's going on here isn't it? Look at verse 18 and see what Jesus says. Still others like seed sown among thorns hear the word.

But the worries of this life the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word making it unfruitful. It's a tragic image isn't it?

[17 : 56] Interestingly here it's not so much that the challenge of the weeds is connected to the word. It's not persecution here is it? Rather this is just life. It's the troubles of this world.

The worries of life. You know will I have enough to make ends meet? Will I be alone? Will my children be safe? Will my parents be okay? And it's not just worries is it? It seems it's also successes.

It's the deceitfulness of wealth as he puts it. You know this trick that money plays on you that it makes you deceived into this idea that you've got everything that you need.

Those lies come and choke the plant and kill it. Again you probably don't have to think hard to think about how this might work or even to come up with examples. You can think of lots of people I was at university with friends who were passionate for the gospel people who considered going into full-time Christian ministry even did it for a time but now in midlife and often in successful jobs are now nowhere spiritually.

Their Christian lives have been choked by materialism consumerism holidays experiences and again this is a call for self-awareness isn't it to see that thing that you really desire that you really long for might it just choke the life out of you spiritually?

[19 : 21] The desire for money or possessions or even skills or adventure or travel even just that love fueled worry that you have for your grandchildren it can become the weeds and the thorns that sucks the life out of your soul leaving you dead at the harvest and Jesus you know like that friend with his arm on your shoulder is saying listen have you thought that that might be you?

Have you considered that? You see the seed is good the farmer is kind the weather is the same for everybody it's our hearts that are the trouble the final soil is the good soil really it's a mistake I think to take the parable mostly negatively because in many ways the big surprise of the passage is not so much the path the rocks or the weeds the big surprise of the passage is the size of the harvest at the end of it in fact it gets repeated in verse 8 and in verse 20 verse 8 still other seed fell on good soil it came up and produced a crop some multiplying 30 some 60 some 100 times he says same verse 20 others like seed sown on good soil hear the word accept it and produce a crop some 30 some 60 some 100 times what we're sown here then is the hope of the story that there is such a thing as good soil that produces a miraculous crop that although the stony soil and the weedy soil might be able to fake initial growth still only the good soil that bears harvest fruits for the farmer here I assume that

Jesus means that you can tell genuine faith not only by its perseverance over time but also by its fruitfulness over time that's what this 30 60 100 times means and for sure it's it's spiritual fruit isn't it in honoring God in godly character and behavior but it's more than just that here I think the fruit is implied in in more harvest more seeds sown more crops coming the word multiplying and spreading from the plant that stands the test of time and just as we can think of the negative examples we can think of this can't we you talk to the people in this room you will hear stories of perseverance through storms and trials you will hear conversion stories in extraordinary circumstances you will hear stories of good soil hearts who faced grief and loss and persevered racism and abuse and persevered love for Christ that's kept going and kept living for him you'll hear stories of families who've come to faith through the witness of children stories of missionaries sent to other places of churches started of communities transformed by the witness of the church and this kind of persevering fruitfulness is what we long for for a church isn't it that this merging of our churches together is not just a blip of shallow soil growth but of lasting fruitful

Christ honoring growth now there's a way to tell if you've understood the parable so far if you've understood what's going on there should be a longing in your heart that says something like this I want to be good soil I long to be good soil please Lord I want to be good soil I want to stand the test of time I want to hear this message of the kingdom this message of freedom and forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ I want to bear fruit I want to grow in understanding of the gospel I want to grow in love for others I don't want to give up I don't want to burn out I don't want to be choked out by other things Lord I want to be good soil that's what you should be saying now if that's you this morning and I hope that's all of us then you need to hear the second part of the parable because mark 4 is not only a description of the good soil it also tells you where good soil comes from because it points out to us that only God can make good soil so essentially it's not only I want to be good soil it's it's calling out to

God God make me good soil please Lord make me good soil this is a little bit complicated so stay stay with me if you can and notice first that mark has done this trick that we've seen him do a number of occasions on our way through the book so far that he has swapped in material that is a different chronological time and put it in our story so in verse 1 you'll notice that Jesus is in a boat right it's a floating pulpit that he has pushed out to sea so that the crowds can't press in on him but then in verse 10 you'll notice that he is alone with his disciples explaining the parable and telling them why it is that he is speaking in parables but then if you scan over to verse 35 you'll find that Jesus is back in the boat again of verse 1 now all that means that this story about the soils is more than just a story about the soil so yes this story is about self awareness about the state of our hearts but it's it's more than that he is he is giving us a prototype of a type of story that he's telling of parables and wants to tell you the special function that parables have in his ministry so the parables says Jesus work because they are clear explanations of gospel truth truth like the state of human hearts like we've been finding in Mark 4 and those clear explanations so simple stories expose the difference between an outsider and an insider to

[24 : 59] Jesus that's the language that he uses in verses 10 and 11 look down at verses 10 and 11 when he was alone the 12 and the others around him asked him about the parables he told them the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you but to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving ever hearing but never understanding otherwise they may turn and be forgiven now it's tricky but the point is that for some for those outside the kingdom the ongoing effect of encountering the clear explanations of the gospel in the parables is a hardening of their hearts a hardening which is transparently the fault of the individual because they can no longer claim that they haven't heard the gospel they've rejected it so Jesus point is not that the simile of the soils that we've been talking about is just too complex for an outsider of course that's not the case is it a child can understand the story rather the point is that the gospel truth behind the story is not something you work out intellectually with your brain the gospel truth behind the story needs to be revealed to you so that listening to parables makes paths more pathy rocks more rocky and weeds more weedy if that's possible and that's not unintentional from Jesus that is his intention in the parables the hearing of the gospel is a sense a kind of judgment on unbelief even as it brings salvation to believers let me try and illustrate it for you if I can imagine it like this it's not a perfect analogy but it will help a little bit imagine that I came to you and said listen I'd love to catch up with you I want to see can we go and get coffee at some point you said to me yeah sure that's great I'd love to spend some time with you Steve let's let's go and chat it'd be great can you what about tomorrow morning you say and I tend to you and say oh no I'm really so I can't do tomorrow morning I'm busy okay you say well what about tomorrow afternoon I can't do tomorrow afternoon I'm busy tomorrow afternoon okay well what about Tuesday I'm free to all day Tuesday I'm free all day Oh no I'm really sorry I can't do Tuesday anytime of the day I'm busy all day Tuesday okay no problem you say what about

Wednesday Wednesday I could do Wednesday afternoon what about you Oh no I can't do Wednesday afternoon I'm busy Wednesday afternoon. I'm washing my hair on Wednesday afternoon. You begin to think, don't you, that I don't want to see you, even though I've said I do. And that, in a sense, is how the parables work in the life of an unbeliever. You hear the gospel again. It's a simple and clear explanation of the gospel. Not interested. I don't want to know. And you are affirmed and confirmed in your unbelief. It's a judgment on you because it exposes your heart that actually the problem is not the seed, because the seed is good. The farmer is kind. The weather's the same for everybody.

But you're rejecting the message and hardening your heart to Jesus. And the parables expose that. This reality comes through again in the way that Jesus talks to the disciples about their faith.

Notice what Jesus says here. He doesn't say to the disciples, oh, you've worked it out. You deserve to be insiders. You're bright guys. No, he says in verse 11 that the secret of the kingdom was given to them. It was given by God. It was a free gift. It's the same idea in the bumper crop in verses eight and verse 20. You know, the idea is a farmer who received such a bumper crop, what would they say as they were harvesting it? They would say, wow, God's been good to me this year. Look what God has done.

Look at this crop. It's amazing. It's incredible. I can't believe it. Look what God has done. Because God gives us the growth. God alone makes good soil. So we're responsible, aren't we, for the hardness of our hearts, for the distraction of wealth, for the shallowness of our response.

[29 : 01] But the only one with the power to change us is the farmer. He's the one who can dig through the path. He's the one who can clear the stones, remove the weeds. So much so that if you understand the parable, you're not only saying, I want to be good soil and going away and trying harder. You know, I'm going to love better. I'm going to think harder. I'm going to do more. That won't help you. The soil can't weed itself. If you understand the parable, you'll be on your knees saying, Lord, make me good soil.

Please, Lord, make me good soil. Lord, will you pull out these weeds in my heart? I've seen them. Get rid of them. Will you dig through this bedrock and make me deep rooted in Christ?

Will you turn over this path? Because he alone can do it. Let me just try and land this for us as we close this morning. Perhaps you've been convicted this morning that spiritually you're not quite where you should be or where you pretend to be, where you'd like to be. You can see the weeds. They've been graciously pointed out to you this morning by the Lord Jesus. Perhaps you've seen that your desires are not what they should be, that your efforts are misdirected. Maybe you've lost sight of what's really important. Maybe there's a relationship or a career or a struggle in your life which is consuming you, throttling your spiritual growth. And it's easy, isn't it, in a moment like this to see that and to notice it, but not to do the right thing with it. What's the right thing to do? Well, it's to be sure that you can't fix it on your own. The right thing to do is to pray now in your heart that God by his spirit would do some gardening in you, that he would pull out that weedy desire for self-glory. He would break through that rock of worry that makes you depend on yourself, that he would defeat that anxious belief that relies on its own efforts and not his. Lord, make me good soil. And as we pray that for ourselves, let's pray like that for others in the church too, that our young people sat in this room and making noise behind me that you might be able to hear, let's pray that

God would make them good soil. That in a world that tells them that preaching is dull, that churches are irrelevant, that the gospel's nothing to do with them. May the gospel find good soil in their hearts that bears much fruit. Let's pray for others in the church who are going through trouble, that they wouldn't be scorched by the sun, but it would have deep roots that keep them watered through the difficulties. And let's pray that God, through Christ, would throw the seed far and wide in our neighbourhood, not being too excited by a fast response, but looking for a persevering, fruitful response.

Well, let me close in prayer. We'll just have a moment of quiet for us to pray in our own hearts and then I'll pray and then we'll sing together. Heavenly Father, we pray, please, make us good soil. We long, Lord, to persevere and to bear fruit.

[32 : 33] Please help us, we ask. We know that so often our spiritual lives are choked out by the worries of this life. Please, we pray, pull out those weeds that we might live lives for your praise and your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.