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The Parable of the Soils, Part 1

Mark 4:1-20

The Central Work of the Rest of Our Lives: The Great Commission

Luke 19:10 the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

Mark 16:15-16 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

It is for this reason that I pressed onto our hearts this one statement:

Mark 1:17 "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."

This is what we were left in this world to do. But what should we expect as we preach the Word of the gospel?? That is a vital question!

It may seem strange to us that, after twenty centuries, the church of Jesus Christ is so small. That all over the world, the overwhelming majority of people do not believe in Christ.

In 1993, Christi and I flew with our two children, Nathaniel and Jenny, to Japan to do mission work there. We spent our first night in Japan in the Baptist mission house in Tokyo. Then, we had a few days there and got a sense of the massive scope of that great city. There were over 12 million people living there in 1993... close to 14 million now. Only 0.2% of Japan's population are evangelical Christians. Two out of a thousand!

Christianity has been in Japan since 1549. Almost 500 years... 0.2%. If Jesus really is the Son of God, why are so few people in Japan

Christians? Worldwide, the most generous estimate of evangelical Christians would be about 8.3% of the world population. Eight out of 100.

When we come to the task of evangelism, we are faced with the crushing fact that so few people respond favorably to the gospel.

Now as we move ahead in commitment to evangelism, our EXPECTATION is vital. If we assume that almost everyone who hears the true gospel will respond favorably, will become Christians, and we then see very scanty response, we may be strongly tempted to question our whole approach, including the message itself. We may want to change the message and our methodology and make it more “market-friendly”

Many so-called “Christian” leaders are constantly in a pattern of evaluation of results and a feedback loop to tailor message and methods for best results.

The result is a synthetic seed coming out of the laboratories of their imaginations... truly a false gospel.

And all because they expected that the gospel of the Kingdom of God, if it is the true one, will result in a vastly successful response in the human heart.

Today’s text, the Parable of the Soils, has everything needed to destroy that false expectation... for three of the four soils described here produce NO FRUIT for the Kingdom; three of the four result in no harvest, no crop, nothing of eternal consequence

It doesn’t mean the sower of the seed did a bad job, or that the seed needs to be altered...

This is Jesus’ expectation for the spread of the gospel... the realistic appraisal of what will happen as we evangelize until he returns!

I. The Context of the Parables

A. The Apparently Poor Response to Christ's Kingdom

1. From the very beginning, the response had been unimpressive, paltry by comparison with what we might have expected
2. Certainly huge crowds were around Jesus all the time... look how the passage begins:

Mark 4:1 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.

BUT most of the people were merely tolerating the teaching about the Kingdom of God so they could get to the good stuff... the healings, the signs and wonders. Jesus was the most amazing spectacle in human history, powerful entertainment... not to mention the desperation of those who came for the healings and all they cared about was that

3. So, the question was pressing: If Jesus really was the Son of God, why were so few people believing in him?
4. The basic issue... the state of the human heart and its reaction to the true gospel message

B. The Parables

Mark 4:2 He taught them many things by parables

1. What is a "parable?"
2. Greek: para + bole... "to lay alongside"... it is a teaching strategy in which aspects of the Kingdom of God are taught by comparison... something in this world is used to illuminate some aspect of the Kingdom of God by comparison; **"this is like that"**

C. Parables Both Conceal and Reveal

1. Jesus was surrounded by enemies who opposed him

- a. None of them doubted that Jesus was doing amazing, supernatural things... disease, demons and death were all subject to him
 - b. However, the official ruling on him: his supernatural power came from Satan
2. So, Jesus begins to act in judgment against the people of his own generation; and the parables are part of that judgment
3. Parables both CONCEAL and REVEAL spiritual truth

Mark 4:10-12 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ 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 ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

- a. Jesus was dividing the vast crowd into two categories... the outsiders and the insiders
- b. Both got the parables... but the outsiders only got the parables; the insiders also got Jesus' personal explanation of the parables
- c. This was to fulfill the work of judgment God had spoken centuries ago to the prophet Isaiah... ***"Be ever seeing but never perceiving... be ever hearing but never understanding...*** a statement of JUDGMENT on unbelieving Israel... Jesus was using the parables to HARDEN their unbelieving hearts
- d. By using parables with the outsiders and not giving them an explanation, he fed their perception that he was CRAZY

John 10:19-20 At these words the Jews were again divided. ²⁰ Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?"

- e. BUT the disciples were the insiders... they got not only the parable but the clear explanation from Jesus' own lips
- f. Then the parable became a powerful teaching tool... very easy to understand and remember once you got the key

D. THIS is the Most Important Parable

1. Jesus also underscored this particular parable as the gateway parable, the key to understanding them all

Mark 4:13 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

2. This is foundational, because it has to do with the basic issue of HEARING God's Word and understanding it
3. This is foundational to our salvation... the themes of this parable go to the root of Christ's whole plan of our salvation from sin

Romans 10:17 faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

As we will see, this parable has to do with the key moment in our entire lives... the moment of hearing the Word of God; do we hear it with faith and with a soft, yielded, submissive heart such that we bear fruit for the Kingdom? Or do we ultimately reject the word we hear and produce no fruit for the Kingdom?

Our eternity depends on how we hear God's word!

So... if we don't understand this parable, how will we understand any parable?

II. The Parable of the Soils

A. Let's Walk Through the Basic Facts of the Parable

Mark 4:3-8 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

B. Very Familiar to Them

1. Jesus' first-century hearers would have been very familiar with the details of this parable
2. It was fundamentally an agrarian society... the Promised Land was a land flowing with milk and honey, a land rich in agriculture
3. Probably most of them were farmers themselves; all of them lived very close to the soil—they saw farms around them all the time
4. Perhaps they could even see a farmer sowing seed while he was talking to them

C. Focus: The Soils and Nothing Else

1. The parable does begin with the SOWER... it literally says “the sower went out to sow”
2. But then, there is nothing said about the sower at all... he is not described as wise, clever, faithful or strategic; just sows the seed
3. Also nothing is said about the seed... there is only one seed, and that is the Word of God as we will see
4. But the real focus here is on the SOILS
5. The soils fall into two categories, or four categories, or six
 - a. Two basic categories: GOOD SOIL and BAD SOIL... based on the final outcome of whether the soil produced fruit or not
 - b. Four categories: the hardened path, the rocky soil, the thorny soil, the good soil
 - c. Six categories: the hardened path, the rocky soil, the thorny soil, and three different types of good soil depending on the final harvest

D. Soil #1: The Hardened Path

1. Farmland in Galilee was bordered by paths and roads that enabled travel without trampling the fields

2. The paths and roads would be hardened by the constant travel; all the more in that the climate was hot and arid
3. The road would have been as hard as concrete
4. Any seed that fell on this path would stay on the surface
5. Within a short amount of time, the birds would come and eat them up, or (as Luke 8:5 says) the seeds would be trampled underfoot and they would make no impact whatsoever

E. Soil #2: The Rocky Soil

1. New England farms are surrounded by stone walls, because the ground itself seems to grow stones... they are constantly pushed to the surface by subterranean forces
2. But Jesus is speaking about a bigger problem than that; farmers have to work hard to clear their land of such stones, but they do it; what they cannot get rid of is a subterranean layer of bedrock, usually limestone, which is not going anywhere
3. This layer of bedrock permits only a thin layer of topsoil and no access whatsoever for the seeds to get to the water down below the surface
4. As Jesus said, the seeds falling on this soil immediately spring up because they cannot go down; but when the sun comes up the plants are scorched and they die quickly because they have no root system

F. Soil #3: The Thorny Soil

1. Unlike the last two soils, this soil is definitely capable of supporting a crop... the ground is fertile, soft enough to develop a root system, with water to feed the growth
2. However, there is a significant problem: the good seed has to compete with weeds—the plant Jesus speaks of is the *akantha* plant... the same thorns that would be woven together into a crown for Jesus by the vicious Roman soldiers... it also reminds us of the curse on farming God laid on Adam in the Garden of Eden

Genesis 3:17-18 Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you

3. As the grain begins to sprout, the weeds compete with the grain for all the available resources—the moisture in the soil and the nutrients, the food for the plants; furthermore, the fast-growing weeds would block the grain from receiving sunlight; Jesus said the thorns **CHOKED** the seed so that it did not bear grain

G. Soil #4: The Good Soil

1. There is a powerful contrast between this soil and the other three; this soil is called “good”
2. The seeds that fall on this soil produce a staggering harvest... Jesus says thirty, sixty, and hundred times what was sown
3. This would have been absolutely stunning to Jesus’ hearers; research shows that a middle-eastern farmer of that era would have been thrilled to achieve an eight-fold yield on his investment... that would have been a bumper crop; Jesus is speaking of an epic harvest unlike any that had ever been seen by any farmer

III. The Call to Hear

Mark 4:9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

A. This is the Central Issue: HOW WE LISTEN to God’s Word

1. He began the whole parable with this call

Mark 4:3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

2. Now he says this... if you have ears, then **USE THEM!**
3. As we said earlier, Jesus is already judging these people for their hard hearts
4. By stopping the parable there without any explanation, he was furthering their unbelieving assessment of him as insane, even demon-possessed

B. They Have Ears... But Do They Hear?

1. As I've been saying, Jesus' healings are all living parables of our basic spiritual problems...
2. God created our bodies to function properly... our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our legs to walk
3. But through sin our souls are spiritually dead... so our spiritual capabilities are destroyed
4. Psalm 115 speaks of how Israel's idols represented them spiritually

Psalm 115:4-8 their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ⁵ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ⁶ they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; ⁷ they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. ⁸ Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

5. So also these unbelievers... their eardrums vibrate with the sounds of Jesus' words; but can their hearts resonate with the truths behind the words??

C. Jesus' Special Ministry with His Own

1. Jesus deals differently with his own sheep

John 10:27-28 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

2. So Jesus gives them the private hearing, the special explanations of spiritual truth

Mark 4:10-11 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

The word "secret" also is "mystery" ... something that can only be understood if it is REVEALED by God

3. The Outsiders Do Not Get This

Mark 4:11-12 But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

4. The purpose of the explanation: perception, understanding...
INSIGHT... truth!!

IV. The Parable Explained (Briefly!)

Mark 4:14-20 The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people 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. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop-- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

A. Jesus' Personal, Private, and Powerful Explanation

1. Notice that this is written down by Mark in the pages of his Gospel
2. This secret is OUT... it is available to anyone who will read it
3. But it must still be revealed by the Spirit to the reader
4. The principle is the same for all time: without the inside word of Christ's Spirit, we will never understand

B. The Farmer and the Word

Mark 4:14 The farmer sows the word.

1. Literally "The Sower sows the word"
2. As I mentioned, the first and primary sower is Jesus Christ himself

Matthew 13:37 The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.

Certainly, as we've been saying, the preaching of the Word of God was the centerpiece to his entire ministry

BUT Jesus also commissioned his church after him to carry on the ministry of the Word

Mark 16:19-20 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. ²⁰ Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere

3. The Seed is the Word

a. First and foremost, the gospel of Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 2:2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the King of the Kingdom of Heaven... the Savior of the World; this is the central message of the Bible!

b. Beyond that, the Bible's truth from A to Z...

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed

The same principle occurs with any of the Bible's teaching... anything in the perfect word of God is SEED sown on human hearts; the same responses are needed

4. The Soil: Human hearts

Matthew 13:19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

Luke 8:15 the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

The basic issue here is the condition of the human heart as it responds to the Word of God

C. Soil #1: The Hardened Response

Mark 4:15 Some people 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.

1. Matthew's Gospel says they don't understand the Word
2. They have no response at all...
3. This is the overwhelming majority of people who first hear the gospel
4. Ephesians 2 says that people are naturally dead in their transgressions and sins, living in Satan's kingdom
5. As soon as they hear the Word of God, Satan works within them to snatch away the Word... it makes no impression on them, they do not fear God's judgments, they do not rejoice in God's promises, they do not take to heart God's commandments
6. NOTHING! Like they never heard at all!
7. Satan's activity here is so powerful and clever:

2 Corinthians 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

8. He may cause the sinner to mock the word, or to deconstruct the word, or counter the word, or forget it entirely
9. In any case, by the time Satan has finished with this person, the Word is effectively removed from his consciousness entirely
10. MORE NEXT TIME!

D. Soil #2: The Shallow, Emotional, Temporary Response

Mark 4:16-17 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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.

1. Many people are moved powerfully when they first hear the gospel

2. Jesus said they at once receive it WITH JOY!
3. Initial joy at the word is a good thing... so also are tears of sorrow over sin, and many other emotional responses
4. The problem here is there is no DEPTH to this response
5. They have not really come to grips with their true circumstance as guilty sinners before God
6. They have no deep connection with the truth of the Word or of the gospel
7. They have no ROOT SYSTEM
8. They see the gospel as a “life enhancer” not as a salvation from the eternal wrath of God
9. So, when trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they QUICKLY FALL AWAY
10. This response is obviously very grievous to evangelists and missionaries around the world
11. But this parable tells us not to be shocked when it happens
12. MORE NEXT TIME!

E. Soil #3: The Worldly, Double-Minded Response

Mark 4:18-19 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ 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.

1. Whereas the last soil type represents what happens when the world brings NEGATIVE consequences to the disciple’s life... trouble or persecution... this soil type speaks of the others side—the POSITIVE benefits the world offers that COMPETE with the gospel
2. The world offers a slap in the face to some or a glittering crown of worldly ease to others...

3. In any case, this person is consumed by what he might lose if he really follows Christ; he wants the comforts of money, possessions, and pleasures; he is anxious about money—that he cannot pay his bills; he is attracted to money, how much he can accumulate
4. He is like the Rich Young Ruler who is trying to harmonize money and God’s call on his heart
5. He is a double-minded person... the world’s siren call of worry and wealth is effective to crush out the seed of God’s Word and stop any progress he might make
6. Bottom line: The Word bears NO FRUIT in his life
7. MORE NEXT TIME!

F. Soil #4: The Eternally Fruitful Response

Mark 4:20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop-- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.

1. This is the point of the Word of God... FRUIT for the Kingdom!
2. The fruit proves the LIFE OF GOD flowing through the soul
3. The variability of the fruit is noteworthy but not as significant as the fact that 1) all three good soils produce SOME FRUIT; 2) all three good soils produce a STAGGERING AMOUNT of fruit... the third point 3) not all produce equal amounts is worth discussing in due time
4. Key statement from Luke:

Luke 8:15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

5. Where does this NOBLE and GOOD HEART come from?

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

6. Only the supernatural preparatory work of the Holy Spirit can produce this... a NOBLE and GOOD heart!
7. From this all the good fruit comes!
8. MORE NEXT TIME!

V. Central Call: Seek a Noble and Soft Heart

A. The Critical Moment of Your Life

1. What do you do when you hear the Word of God?
2. There is no more important moment in your life!

Mark 4:24 "Consider carefully what you hear,"

3. Especially, what do you do when you hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?
4. Which of these four soils represents you?

B. Seek a Noble Heart from the Holy Spirit

C. Seek a Soft Heart

1. Yielded... ready for the word... not hard, fighting against it

D. Watch Out for the Dangers of this World

1. The deceitfulness of wealth
2. The desires for other things

E. Set Proper Expectations for Evangelism

1. True gospel preaching produces all these responses
2. Don't change the message to fit the audience!