

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Mark 4:1-20 (read vv.1-9) "What Kind of Heart Do You Have?"

Intro. Beginning with this message we enter a new phase in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Up to this point, His teachings have been very clear and to the point. But after about a year and a half of such teaching and performing miracles, the common people by in large still had not repented. The multitudes were actively interested in His miracles but not in spiritual truth. Furthermore, the religious leaders were becoming more and more hostile toward Christ. So Jesus began teaching mostly in parables, as verse 2 indicates. Our text is an example of such teaching, which is one of the most familiar parables of Jesus. Verses 11-12 will explain why He spoke in parables (read). You see, once you repeatedly reject the gospel, you run the danger of having your eyes blinded forever!

In spite of the miracles & great teaching of Jesus, most of the people did not repent. Most people did not become true, committed followers of Christ. Now what's the problem? Is the problem with Jesus or the Word of God? No! There was nothing wrong with the Word of God. Heb. 4:12 says, "The Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword..." Likewise, Paul said in Rom. 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." The fact is, when people fail to respond to the Gospel, or fail to become fruitful Christians, the problem is not with Jesus or His Gospel, but with the soil of their hearts. The problem is with the kind of people who hear.

What we all need to do this morning is examine our hearts, and see what kind of response we are giving to the Word of God. If up to this time vv.12-14 described you, then you need to ask God to change your heart. He can do it, if you will let Him. So let's examine this important parable together.

Jesus tells the parable in vv.3-8. It is a simple story which many could identify with. A farmer went out to sow some seed. Often they would use the broadcast method of planting seed. They would plough the soil, and then they would simply scatter the seed over the field by throwing handfuls of it into the air. Over a large field, the seed would land in different kinds of soil. Some would fall on the paths that hadn't been ploughed. Some would fall in rocky soil that had little depth of good soil. Some would fall in soil where thorns would also grow & choke out the good plant. But some would fall on good ground, where the seed would grow and become fruitful. The whole purpose of all that work & investment in seed is to harvest much more grain or fruit than you planted.

This morning I want you to understand the meaning of this parable. I know this parable is very important, because Jesus said in v.9, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Those words are found when God especially wants you to hear something. How many of you have ears? How many of you have ears that hear? Then Jesus commands you to listen, because your eternal destiny may be at stake this morning. It is your reaction and reception to the Word of God that is going to determine whether you will be saved or not.

Jesus explains the parable beginning in v.14. A parable is an earthly story with a spiritual meaning. The seed is the Word of God. V.3 say, "Behold, a sower went out to sow." The sower is anyone who preaches, teaches, or shares the Word of God with others. There is a great need for such workers. Our business is to sow the seed. If you accept the challenge to become someone

who spreads the gospel, what kind of response should you expect from people? Jesus describes in vv.15-20 four kinds of responses people will generally give to the gospel. And in the responses, we see what kind of heart they have toward God:

## I. SOME HAVE A CALLOUSED HEART

A. Hardened by the Feet of the Sower – In v.4 Jesus said, “And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside....” The common ground in Palestine was split into long narrow strips; between the strips there were paths which were rights of way. Luke alone mentions that the path and the seed was “trodden under foot.” Seed fell there but would not grow because the soil was packed and hard.

Even so, some people have heard the gospel many times. The feet of those who preach the gospel have walked by many a time. So they have become hardened to the gospel. They seem dead to the gospel, giving no response whatsoever.

B. Allows Satan to Remove the Word - When the ground is hard, the seed cannot penetrate the soil. Staying on top of the ground, such seed easily became food for the birds, as Jesus indicated in v.4.

Jesus explains the spiritual application in the last of v.15, “When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.” Satan loves to keep people away from church, to keep them from hearing the Word of God. If he can’t keep you from church, then he will try to keep God’s Word from penetrating your heart. Some hear the preacher’s voice without one answering thought or emotion or faith. The Word of God goes in one ear and out the other. They could not for their lives tell what his message was about! They pay little or no attention to the Word of God.

Notice that the devil hates the Word of God! He loves it when a distraction keeps people from hearing the Word of God in a worship service. The fact that the devil is involved in taking away the seed does not remove the responsibility from the hearer, for such a person allows him to do it.

I hope your presence here today indicates that you are interested in the Word of God, and you have not become hardened to it. Yet some people come to church, not because they are interested in the Word of God, but because of other reasons. They may come by compulsion, to please their spouse, or a parent. They may come by custom, because they have always done it. Some come seeking companionship and fellowship. Or they come to appear respectable before other people. Do any of these reasons fit you? Does the Word of God not really penetrate your heart? Does it not really make a difference in your life? Have you become hardened to the Gospel?

The main hope for such people is that they have their hard hearts “plowed up” with adversity and trials. In Hos. 10:12 God told Israel, “Break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD....” Trials have a way of causing us to seek the Lord. If you know of someone who has seemed hardened to the Gospel, but is facing a trial, now would be a good time to witness to them again.

## II. SOME HAVE A COWARDLY HEART

In v.4 Jesus said, “Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth.” It was typical of Palestine that a considerable portion of its tillable soil is found on top of layers of rock. It thus had no depth of soil to hold moisture. This illustrates another type of person.

A. Such People Desire the Offer of Salvation – In v.16 Jesus said, “These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness.” Jesus had large crowds who came to hear Him and see the miracles that He performed. They apparently were attentive. Not only that, but some gave a positive response. In fact, Jesus said in v.16 that they “immediately receive it with gladness.” They are all too happy to receive the promise of salvation: forgiveness of sin & eternal life. They rejoice in their new faith like a child rejoices in a new toy. While emotion should accompany true faith, it is easy for fallen human nature to counterfeit “religious feelings.”

Dr. J. Vernon McGee said, “These are what I call Alka-Seltzer Christians. There is a lot of fizz in them. They make as much fuss during a service as a rocket on a launching pad, but they never get into orbit... They have great zeal and energy during special meetings, but they are like burned out Roman candles after the meetings are over.”

Now I want to say that when Jesus saves your soul, & comes into your heart, there should be some emotion. You will experience joy like you’ve never know. But how does one know whether emotional behavior is the evidence of genuine faith? The answer is, “It is, if it can endure testing.” This leads to my next point.

B. Your Faith will Be Tested – Jesus said in the last of v.17, “Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble.” Tribulation & persecution is the hot sun of the parable. When you identify yourself with Jesus, you should expect it. Jesus said in Jn. 16:33, “In the world you will have tribulation....” Tribulation could include troubles, causing some to say “God, why did you let this happen?”

A true believer accepts tribulation & trials as part of their growing process. As Paul says in Romans 5:3-4, we know “that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” But the one who is not truly saved, what happens to them? Well we also see from this parable that:

C. Such People Will Be Offended & Fall Away - We read in the last of v.17, “Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble.” When their faith is tested, they stumble. It is the word *skandallidzo*, to put a stumbling block or trap in someone’s way. The testings of persecution are a stumbling block, for they disapprove of them and did not expect them to be part of the Christian’s life. They want a crown, but they don’t want to take up a cross to follow Jesus. They want the privileges of Christianity but not the price tags, and as soon as it costs them something to be a Christian, they quickly fall away. The soul that loves and pampers self cannot endure such tribulation. Thus, we also read in v.17 that they “endure only for a time.” Thus, there is no real work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. There is no real work of conversion in their inner being.

As to examples of such fair-weather “friends,” we read in Jn. 6:66 that some of the followers of Christ, “went back, and walked with him no more.” Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to suppose that among the many Hosanna shouters there were some who a few days later screamed, “Crucify him, crucify him.”

The explanation for this is their shallow commitment to the Lord. Just as the shallow soil caused the plant to quickly wither, even so all too many professed believers only have a shallow commitment to the Lord. These people are happy to receive the Word (cf. Ezek. 33:32). But their emotions are superficial, not based on deep-seated, deeply rooted convictions. They are strangers to the deep exercises of repentance and sorrow which should precede the joy. Such people fail to

consider that true discipleship implies self-surrender, self-denial, sacrifice, etc. It is the sunny side of Christianity which attracted them. They know nothing of its difficulties and depths.

Am I speaking to someone who is going through a trial right now? Are you being tempted to turn from Christ because of that trial. If you do, you need to reexamine whether you were truly saved to begin with.

Now let's move on to the 3<sup>rd</sup> type of soil. It illustrates that:

### III. SOME HAVE A CROWDED HEART

In the parable, Jesus said in v.7, "And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop." "Thorns" are prickly plants of vigorous growth. They grow faster than wheat and choke out the good grain.

Years ago I had a garden. Things really went bad when I went on vacation. Weeds grow faster than the fruit-bearing plants, and they just took over. They suck the moisture & nutrients from the good plants. Even so, some people never become fruitful Christians because too many things are crowding out what is really important. Now let's follow the process here in our Lord's explanation. First of all:

A. They are Receptive and Begin to Bear Fruit – In v.18 Jesus says, "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word." No doubt they gladly heard the Word of God as well. They respond to the Gospel. They affirm its truth. Luke adds that the processes of fruit bearing may have started, but not brought to completion. It appeared that this person would become a dedicated Christian. These people are very similar to the second group, but they appear to be more committed. They come to church and may even take a job or two. But here unhappily they stop short. They never get beyond a certain point in their faith.

B. Yet Things Begin to Choke Out their Spiritual Life – In v.19 we read, "and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Note that this person does not "fall away." His faith and fruit are just gradually choked out. The problem with many of us is that we are too busy and preoccupied with other things. Christ is not first and supreme in our lives.

Jesus mentions several types of things that may choke out your spiritual life, & they all relate to the world:

1. Cares - This refers to corroding cares, worries that eat away one's soul, little by little. The word means to be drawn in different directions; to be distracted.

Are you worried about your job or the economy? Are you worried about your health? Are you worried over some relationship problem? Worry will choke your spiritual life & keep you from being fruitful. If you have truly trusted in Jesus for salvation, can't you trust Him to take care of the day-to-day affairs of your life? Don't let worries choke your spiritual life.

2. Riches - This is the love of money, the craving of wealth and/or the inordinate yearning to cling to it (e.g. rich young ruler). The pursuit of riches can certainly choke out our spiritual life.

Yet notice that Jesus refers to "the deceitfulness of riches." How often are we led to believe by advertisers & others that riches will bring happiness? Jesus says that many are deceived by riches. While riches can make our lives more comfortable physically, and give temporary pleasure, there is no lasting joy in the things that this world has to offer. Furthermore, there are many rich people who are living miserable lives much of the time. Quite a few who have won a large lottery have regretted the day they won. Riches can bring misery instead of wealth.

3. Pleasures of Life – Jesus also talks about “the desires for other things.” He is talking about lustful desire. Some of these desires are sinful. Yield to sinful desires will certainly rob you of spiritual vitality. But I would add that even God-given desires & pleasures can choke out our spiritual lives if not kept in moderation. A hobby or interest in sports can be good & acceptable, but if you are spending more time with those things than with the Lord, and serving Him, then you will be unfruitful as a Christian. Life will hold just so much, and these people fill their lives with so many things that there is no room for spiritual fruit. They have no time to read the Bible; no time to pray; no time to serve.

Paul said in 2 Tim. 4:10, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” The love the world, and the things of the world, caused Demos to become unfruitful.

There is a question as to whether or not people of this class are truly saved.<sup>1</sup> I tend to think so, for Jesus did not say they fall away. Furthermore, Paul says in 1 Cor. 3 that some are saved, “yet as by fire.” They are saved, but they do little or nothing that bring reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ. On the other hand, we may question if a person can be a true Christian, and not be fruitful. On the other hand, some say there is always fruit if a person is truly born again. A changed life is the evidence of true salvation (2 Cor. 5:17). Regardless, we are to give heed to the warning of Jesus, and not let things crowd out our spiritual lives.

So we have seen so far that the devil got the wayside folk, and the flesh took care of the rocky-ground folk, but the world chokes out the Word for this third class of hearers. Now, let’s move on to the fourth kind of soil. Based on v.20, my final point is this:

#### IV. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A CONVERTED HEART

In v.8 Jesus said, “But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” Such a heart is good, not in itself, but good in the sense that it acknowledges its sinfulness, and recognizes that in Christ there is forgiveness. It is good like a patient is good and follows the advice of the physician.

Now if you are going to have a truly converted heart, you need to do the following:

A. Hear the Word of God – In v.20 Jesus said, “But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word....” In order to be a Christian, or grow as a Christian, you need to hear the Word of God. Are you listening?

B. Receive It and Hold to It - Most of you here today have heard the Word time and time again. What have you done with it? I hope you do like the person in v.20. Such a person “accepts” (*paradechomai*) the Word. You need to take it to heart and believe it. You need to learn it, and hold on to it, even memorizing the Word. They become doers of the Word, and not just hearers.

I want to challenge each of you to make a firm commitment to read the Word of God on your own. Make a commitment to come to church at least weekly, to hear the Word of God. You cannot become fruitful as a Christian apart from hearing & reading the Word of God, truly receiving it into your heart & mind, and acting upon it.

Now if you hear the Word of God, and receive it, believe it, and act upon it, then you will:

C. Become Fruitful – Jesus says in the last of v.20 that such people “bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” God expects every Christian to bear fruit. What kind of fruit should a Christian produce? Seed is to reproduce itself. One seed can produce many seeds,

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen & Ryle say no, Maclaren – yes.

and much fruit. Even so, a Christian is to have a part in reproducing more Christians. Have you had a part in bring others to Christ? We also should bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). That includes love, joy, peace, gentleness, and so forth. The character of Christ is to reproduce itself in you.

Now notice two points about this matter of fruitbearing:

1. The Amount of Fruit - Though all Christians bear fruit, not all bear the same amount. Notice the distinction in amount Jesus gives, 30, 60, 100-fold. In John 15:2, 5, 8 Jesus speaks of us bearing “more fruit” and “much fruit.” Perhaps we should not even expect all Christians to bear the same amount of fruit, but we should at least bear some fruit.

2. The Patient Endurance Needed - Luke 8:15 adds that such a person brings forth fruit “with patience.” Perseverance is the mark of the true believer. He doesn’t “fall away.” Jesus said in Jn. 8:31, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.” Also the present tense indicates a continual fruit bearing, not just seasonal, as it is with nature.

The farmer does not plant seed on day, & reap a harvest the next day. It takes a lot of work, and a lot a time to bear fruit. Furthermore, Jesus did not quit. He persevered until His mission was accomplished. Since He didn’t quit, neither should His followers.

There is an application to the soul winner. He or she should be encouraged by the fact that at least some of the gospel seed will fall on good ground.

Conclusion: So what kind of heart do you have? A calloused heart? A cowardly heart? A crowded heart? Or a converted heart? The first 3 types of hearts are capable of being changed. Christ would not have spoken the parable if He had not hoped thereby to make some of his hearers who belong to the 3 defective classes into members of the 4th. Thus, this parable is really an exhortation to self-examination, leading to salvation or further sanctification. If the Holy Spirit convicts you that you are not yet a believer, now is the time to repent of your sin, and trust in Christ as Savior.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975); Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Bob Marcaurelle (printed sermon); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Morris; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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