



Mark 4:1-20
Four Kinds of Soil, One Kind of Seed

Summary: God wants to produce good things through our lives but it all depends on the condition of our soul.

The purpose of your life is to bear fruit. To do good. To be good. To help others. To honor God. In fact, the imagery of bearing fruit is quite common in Scripture. We read in the first chapters of the Bible that God created the world and then placed Adam and Eve in it and told them to **be fruitful and multiply**. He repeated the command to Noah (Gen 9:1,7) Abraham (Gen 17:6), and Jacob (Gen 35:11). We often think of it in terms of having children - and certainly that is part of what God meant, but there's also much more. Jesus told His disciples:

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit should remain

He said this while explaining that He is the vine and we are branches encouraging His disciples to abide in Him. If we do, He will produce what is referred to as the fruit of the Spirit - **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control** - through us (Gal 5:22).

What I'm saying is: God's purpose for your life is that you would know Him, allow Him to guide and direct your life wherever you are, whatever you are doing and bring goodness into the world through you. This is the goal. This is point. This is why you are here. God wants to do good in this world, and in you.

Think for a moment what that might mean. How do *you* bring goodness, excellence, truth, and beauty into the world at home or at work? How can your position and your profession, your personal interests and abilities be used by God as pathways to push His goodness into the world? How can, or does, God accomplish His purposes through you?

Again, God wants to produce fruit and He wants it to come out of your life. This is the plan. So, why doesn't it happen more often? That's what we'll explore this morning, but first we need to understand what parables are. Look with me at what Jesus says:

Mark 4:1 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat *in it* on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. **2** Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:
3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. **4** And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. **5** Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and

immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. 7 And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 8 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.”
9 And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”
10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 so that

*‘Seeing they may see and not perceive,
And hearing they may hear and not understand;
Lest they should turn,
And their sins be forgiven them.’”*

You may remember that Mark’s gospel is the shortest of the four in the New Testament. And, we have said, it’s like the teenage boy version: mainly action, lots of miracles including spiritual encounters with demons and not much teaching - but there is some, and we’ve come to it now – here in chapter four we’ll find four of the many parables Jesus taught.

So, what is a parable? A parable is a story used to make a point. It often helps people understand something new by pointing to something familiar.

You have to pay attention to understand parables, but their meaning isn’t necessarily ‘hidden.’ In fact, on other occasions Jesus told parables and expected people *would* understand them. For example, the famous parable of the Good Samaritan was told to a young lawyer who had first asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” When Jesus replied “to love God and love your neighbor,” the lawyer asked the question, “Who then, is my neighbor?” That’s when Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan. He expected the young man to understand what was being said and be convicted by it.

Another time (Matthew 21), Jesus spoke to a group of Pharisees and priests and told a parable about terrible tenants who leased a vineyard from a man and yet when that man sent people to collect the rent, the tenants beat them and sent them away. This happened several times, until finally the landlord sent his son to collect and the tenants recognized him as the heir of the property they were using and killed him. This upset the Pharisees and priests because they understood Jesus was talking about them: they were the wicked tenants who wanted to kill God’s son.

So parables are meant to be understood – they are tools used to convey truth. Jesus wasn’t running a special access program that you had to be read into and sign a non-disclosure agreement for. In fact, He was committing His message to His disciples and would then send them out to teach it to others.

But then, what do we make of this quote from Isaiah about seeing and not perceiving and hearing and not understanding? What is that all about?

Well, in order to 'get' a parable, you have to be open to receiving it's message. If you aren't open to receiving instruction about the kingdom of God because you don't believe Jesus or the things He is saying, then you won't understand the parables, because they are designed to help people understand spiritual concepts. You will hear, but not understand. You will may see the miracles He performs, but you won't be able to figure how He does it because you can't legitimately accept that He could really be God. You aren't willing to be taught.

On the other hand, if you are open to hearing Him, if you're willing to accept that God is right and you are wrong about life and how to live it, then you will hear what Jesus says and you will 'get it' when He talks in parables. And if you need help understanding, you'll ask for it just like you see the disciples do here. And as your understanding grows, so will you. You will become the seed that falls in good soil and bears good fruit, which brings us back to where we started.

Remember God wants to produce fruit in the world through us, to push goodness out in the world through our lives. But fruit grows on plants, and plants need soil – if fruit is what comes out of us, soil is like what is deep down in us. Jesus says there are four main types.

Mark 4:13 And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown (picture a well-worn footpath through a field – no seed that lands on it is going to grow). When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.

Jesus says some people have hard, firm, packed **solid soil** in their souls – they HEAR what God is saying, but refuse to respond. It reminds me of the saying 'the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.'

The Pharisees heard the same preaching from Jesus as everyone else, but they came with a pre-existing conviction that He was not the Messiah. So, when the seed of God's message landed on the soil of their souls, they simply would not receive it.

So too, today, there are those who HEAR the words of eternal life, but they are not willing to receive them, so the words lay there, doing nothing until the birds come along and eat them.

Jesus makes it clear that these birds are like Satan who is very real and the enemy of our souls. He would like nothing more than to keep people from ever hearing about Jesus. If they must hear, he will do all sorts of things to create doubt including stirring up misconceptions about Jesus along with cults and heretics that distort Jesus because he intends to keep people from receiving God's word.

If you feel the soil of your soul is hard and you find yourself unwilling to receive the seed, pray, and ask God, if He is real, to soften you, and then watch for His hand to move in your life.

If you *know someone* whose heart is hard, pray for them, ask God to plow their soil and prepare them to receive the word when it comes.

But think for a minute what has to happen to hard soil in order for it to be prepared for planting – it has to be pierced. Whether you use a shovel, a rake, a roto-tiller, or a tractor – hard, compact, firm soil has to be disturbed, broken up, and turned over before it becomes loose enough to be planted. That’s sometimes a painful process and it’s always disruptive, but it’s necessary if anything is going to grow, especially if it’s going to grow well, for consider the next type of soil:

Mark 4:16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble.

This is a picture of people who seem to love Jesus in the early days of a spiritual spring when everything is going well – they receive the gospel **with gladness**, but when the trials and testing of summer come, they don’t have a strong network of roots to keep themselves nourished and upright. The condition of their soul could best be compared to **shallow soil**.

Friends, this is a very real thing; Jesus is pointing to something that actually happens to make His point. Seeds planted in shallow soil are warmed quickly by the sun in spring and often begin to grow before seeds which are buried deeper. But in order to survive the heat and dryness of summer the plant needs to be able to send roots down deep into the soil. If the roots can’t grow down because rocks get in the way, the plant will struggle to stay healthy.

Without deep roots the plant can’t thrive and produce as many flowers or as much fruit, it has to put more energy into staying alive, fighting off disease and resisting heat. What looked so promising in the spring may be dead and gone by the height of summer.

But notice, there is no problem with the seed – it produces a plant. There’s really not even a problem with the plant, it wants to grow, the problem is with the rocky soil – the roots can’t grow down like they’re supposed to.

So, what do we do? Well notice, the answer is not to shield these fragile plants from trials, testing, and persecution, to make sure they never face difficulty - *Jesus promised these things would come*. The answer is to get them into some better soil, remove the rocky obstacles to faith so they can send down some serious roots. In other words: if you want to grow big healthy plants and produce a good harvest of fruit, you need deep, fertile soil.

The problem is, weeds often grow under those same good conditions, as we see next:

Mark 4:18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, 19 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.

We've seen solid soil and shallow soil, so I'm going to describe the souls of these people as **starving soil**. These people can't decide whether to live for themselves or to live for God. They hear and receive the gospel, but it's not the only plant they're growing, it's not their primary goal or desire, it's one among many others which then choke it out and keep it from bearing *much fruit* as various plants compete for resources and nutrients in the soil.

Christian, take special note of this in light of what we just saw about shallow soil and in light of the time in which we live and the general context of our lives here today in Northern Virginia. Take special note of this: *prosperity is just as much of a threat to us spiritually as persecution*. There is a danger from rocky soil which makes it hard to grow, but there is also a danger in the kind of fertile soil where anything can grow, including things that grow bigger and faster than the seed planted in your soul.

Where is success or opportunity a threat to your soul? Where is material or financial success strangling you spiritually? How are the other commitments on your calendar killing the most important things in life?

Now, you have to know, weeds don't choke out good plants suddenly. They grow quickly, often quicker than desirable plants, but it doesn't overnight. Weeds creep in and consume more and more of your resources over time.

You only get one Sunday a week, you only have 24 hours in a day, and you only have so much money in your paycheck, – how are you going to spend those things? Will you use your life to glorify and serve God, or to accomplish your own self-determined goals? Will you believe in and value His purpose for your life, or will you try to grow something else too, something alongside whatever He's doing. You're not saying there's no place for God's plan. You're actually including it your garden, but you're hoping to grow a few other things as well.

My friend, Jesus said you can't serve two masters; you are going to wind up loving one and hating the other (Matthew 6). So, which is it going to be? Jesus or the world? Is Jesus really sufficient for all your needs or do you think there is *just a little bit more* out there that you need to find or take care of?

Listen to this observation from a Scottish pastor who wrote:

"It is characteristic of modern life that it becomes increasingly crowded and increasingly fast. ... It is not that a man deliberately banishes prayer and the Bible and

the Church from his life; it can be that he thinks often of them and intends to make time for them, but somehow, in his crowded life never gets round to it."¹

This description of the struggles of “modern man” was not written last week, it wasn’t even written this year, or this century. It was published over seventy years ago, in the 1950s. Being busy is nothing new, and it’s not something you just have to work through for a season. We all need to figure out our priorities and values, we need to figure out what we’re truly living for. You’re never going to have enough time or money to do it all, so what are you going to do? What is truly important? What are your priorities?

If you are struggling to grow and produce fruit in your life, you need to get back to Jesus. Don’t let your schedule get so overcrowded with the things of this world that you don’t have time for the Word, or prayer, or devotions, or fellowship, or coming to church.

And be prepared for that to make your life look and feel different from others. You can’t try to keep up with people who aren’t making a priority out of God.

C.S. Lewis makes this point in a comment I’ve come back to many times over the years. Writing about the way Christians should spend their money, he says in *Mere Christianity*,

“If our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc. is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.”

That is true of our finances, but it’s also true of our time – there should be things that we would like to do, but we just cannot do because we have other Biblical priorities. If you put living for Christ first in your life, if you are trying to be the man or woman, the husband or wife, the employee, the student that God wants you to be, you just AREN’T going to have time to do some of the other things you would like to do because you are either going to use the resources of your time, talents, and treasures to feed the seed of God or to feed the weeds in your life.

You only have so much of yourself to give - and if you feed the weeds, you won’t bear fruit the way a healthy plant does in fertile soil.

Mark 4:20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

¹ Barclay, Commentary on Matthew, 60-61.

Finally, we come to **fertile soil** and note it's *really* good soil - it produces up to a hundred-fold – proof that for those who will receive the seed and allow it to grow as God intended, the harvest of fruit that He wants to push out into the world through our lives will be overwhelming.

But it will take time. No one plants a seed and expects fruit overnight – it takes time to grow. Several weeks for tomatoes. Several months for chili peppers. Several years for avocados. And you need them all for some good tacos! And good tacos are definitely something the world needs more of.

Seriously though, Christian, keep seeking God and listening for His voice. Keep gathering with other believers in large groups like this and in small groups where you can connect, make friends, find encouragement, and minister to each other. Keep getting up to do your devotions, keep at your prayer list, keep trying to talk about spiritual things with your kids, your spouse, your roommates, keep trying to memorize Scripture, keep trying to be different at work, don't give up, be patient! Good things are growing in you and God is pushing fruit out into the world through you.

One last thing to consider: Jesus offers the seed to all of us, He's scattering it everywhere. And it's a good seed, it will produce a good plant, it will produce good fruit – if you accept it.

So, the obvious question for us to deal with this morning is: What am I doing with what I hear? What kind of soil am I and what kind of soil do I want to be: solid, shallow, starving, or fertile?

But the point of the sermon is not to call you to shape up and try harder. I'm calling you to recognize what's happening in your life, and then come to God, with understanding, and ask Him to fix anything that needs to be fixed. I'm calling you to see, understand, agree, and surrender.

I'm calling you to ask God to do a little soil test on you right now as we prepare to receive communion. He is the gardener. He's the one sowing the seed, He's the one who can till the soil, He's the one that can tell the difference between a good plant and a weed. He knows which to pull. He's the one with the clippers in His hand who knows which branches to prune in order to produce more fruit. Trust Him.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 4:1-20

Four Kinds of Soil, One Kind of Seed

Summary: God wants to produce good things through our lives but it all depends on the condition of our soul.

- What kind of fruit do you see God producing in you? What kind of fruit do you think He wants to produce?
- Where/when/how is the fruit from your life having an impact on the world? How is God making a difference through you at work, home, school, in the lives of others, etc.? (NOTE: the first question might be taken personally, i.e. God is teaching me to be more patient. This question is meant to explore how God's work in you affects the world around you – how your fruit affects others.)
 - o Where do you see fruit in the lives of others? How has that been especially encouraging to you?
- What are the benefits of God choosing to produce fruit through people instead of just doing it Himself?
 - o What are the drawbacks?
- What's one of your favorite parables, or one that really helps you think about or remember truth? Are there any you find confusing?
- Are you prone to become like solid, shallow, or starving soil if left to your own?
 - o Have there been seasons when you passed through these types of soil? What was that like? What helped you to change?
- What is your reaction to the following quote and what do you do about it's point?
 - o *"It is characteristic of modern life that it becomes increasingly crowded and increasingly fast. ... It is not that a man deliberately banishes prayer and the Bible and the Church from his life; it can be that he thinks often of them and intends to make time for them, but somehow, in his crowded life never gets round to it."*²

² Barclay, Commentary on Matthew, 60-61.