

Scripture: Mark 4:1-20

Different Kinds of Hearers

Beloved in Christ, it is springtime. Farmers are now planting the seed in their fields. Ask any farmer what they hope for. They hope for a harvest. They want the seed to sprout and grow. The seed is explosive with life!

In the meantime, farmers face obstacles. Ask any farmer about their frustrations: insects, weeds, or disease, lack of rain or too much rain.

We have here the parable of the sower. The sower is Jesus. The seed is the life-giving Word of God, and the soil is people. This parable describes the various responses to Christ's message as He preached it and the responses to the gospel today as the message of Christ is preached.

In Mark chapters 2-3, opposition is growing against Christ and the message of His kingdom. The Pharisees were scheming with the Herodians to kill Jesus and the Scribes are saying Jesus has a demon.

Because they reject Him, Jesus will now teach in parables. We read about this in **verses 1-2**. Jesus again began to teach by the sea. A great multitude is on the land facing Him and Jesus is teaching from the boat. And we read in **verse 2**, *"Then He taught them many things by parables..."*

So why did He teach in parables? He answers that question after the multitudes leave. He explains the parable of the sower to His disciples and His other followers [see 4:34]. He says to them in **verses 11-12**, *"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, 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."*

What is He saying? Jesus teaches in parables so that those whom He wants to understand, will understand. *"To you..."* He says.. But those who are in darkness, will not understand. *"But to those..."* He says. God blinds the eyes of the unwilling so that they don't perceive.

The parable of the sower is like the cloud that separated the Egyptians and the Israelites when they were crossing the Red Sea. Do you remember what happened there? The same cloud brought *"darkness to the one [Egyptians], and it gave light to the other [Israelites]"* [Exodus 14:20]. Now this division is among God's people itself.

In this parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus assures the growth of His kingdom through the spreading of His Word in spite of obstacles and opposition. He says, "Listen!" He wants our ears. Are the crowds going to have the kind of ears that truly hear?

Unfruitful Hearers [vv.3-7; 13-19]

He begins, “Behold a sower went out to sow” [verse 3]. The sower represents Christ and others who spread the seed, the Word of God. He uses the image of a farmer. The farmer takes a bag of wheat seed and with his hand he spreads the seed everywhere. He makes no distinction as to where the seed falls.

Verses 4-7: some seed falls along the edge of the field on a hard footpath. The seed stays exposed on the surface. The birds come and eat it all up. Other seed falls on stony ground. The stony ground is covered with a thin layer of soil. The seed germinates and sprouts right away. But the sun comes up and scorches it. It has no root because the soil is so shallow. So the plant withers away. And some seed also falls in thorny soil. The roots of thorn-bushes and seeds of thorns are in the soil. The thorns sprout and grow faster than the wheat. Eventually the thorns choke the wheat so that the wheat bears no fruit.

So what is the problem? The sower is not the problem. He did his work. He spread the seed. The seed is not the problem either. The seed is good. The problem is with the soil. That’s where the fault lies –with the soil; in this case, with the hearers.

Now Jesus takes His disciples and other followers aside. He explains and applies this parable [verse 13].

In **verses 14-19**, Jesus says the sower sows the Word. He spreads the Word. But many do not profit from it because they don’t mix their hearing with faith [Hebrews 4:2]. The problem or fault is not the messenger who brings the Word of God in truth. Nor is it the Word. It is with the people.

Jesus mentions three kinds of unfruitful hearers [hard hearts, shallow hearts, thorny hearts]. The heart, in the first kind of hearer, is hard like the Pharisees and the scribes. It’s like the seed that fell on the hard pathway. They hear the Word but “*Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts*” [v.15]. They cooperate with Satan by treating the Word lightly. They might blame the messenger. They might not like a certain message.

The heart, in the second kind of unfruitful hearer, doesn’t count the cost of following Jesus [vv.16-17]. Like some in the multitudes, they are excited what Jesus can do for them. So they believe on Him. They are the ones “*sown on stony ground, who when they hear the Word, immediately receive it with gladness.*” They follow Jesus only for a time because the Word of God does not take root in them. When hardships come because they believe on Jesus, they stumble. They go back to their old life, saying, “this is not for me. It’s too hard.” They see the cross they are called to carry; not the crown that awaits those who persevere [continue] in faith. By giving up on Christ, they give up salvation and the crown.

The preoccupied heart is the third kind of unfruitful hearer [vv.18-19]. These are the ones sown among the thorns. They hear the word but other things take priority in their hearts, not Christ: the cares of this world, dreams about riches and the desire for other things. On a side note, many people think that North America is the place to get rich. This is their opportunity and eventually greed crowds out Christ. These are the thorns in their hearts and these things choke the Word out of their lives. All they can think about is money and the good life. If something must come first; it’s not Christ but these earthly things! But Jesus says in Matthew 6:24, “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*”

These three soils represent three kinds of unfruitful hearers. They also teach us about the evil spiritual influences that resist the Word in everyone who hears the Word preached: Satan, our own sin, and the world. Think about how each influence works opposes the Word of God taking root deep within. We too need to hear this as a warning to us, to be watchful. Think back to the first word in Jesus' parable to God's people: 'Listen!'

There is great disappointment when one following Christ, singing the songs, worshipping Christ, and then . . . walks away from it all; never to return again. This happens and it's sad. It's like a big setback for a congregation. You can't say they lost their faith; their faith never was genuine. Christ remains veiled to them. The most sad thing is for Christ to say to such a person, 'Depart from Me; I never knew you.'

But the focus or emphasis on this parable of the sower is not the first three kinds of hearers, but the fourth kind of hearer and the glorious character of the harvest. This brings us to our second point

Fruitful Hearers [vv.8, 20]

We read in **verse 8**, the celebrating of the remarkable harvest: *"other seed fell on to the good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty and some a hundred."* Especially, the hundred fold is an unusually large harvest! In Genesis 26:12, there is a reference to Isaac sowing in the land and reaping a hundred fold, "and the Lord blessed him." It mentions the Lord prospering him.

In spite of all the opposition in the proper hearing of God's Word, it is remarkable how great the harvest is. According to **verse 20**, what about the seed sown on good ground? *"Those who hear the Word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."*

"Good" ground means receptive soil, fertile soil. The word, by the work of God's Holy Spirit, takes root in their hearts. By God's grace, they hear because they want to hear. They put the message into practice. You see the fruit of faith: new life, love, joy, peace and longsuffering. In John 15:5, Jesus says, *"He who abides in Me and I in him, bears much fruit"*. The focus is on abundant fruit: 30 fold, 60 or 100.

To them it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom. By faith, they see more than a man. They see more than a crucified Savior. They see the King who conquered sin, death and hell for them. They see a King who won a kingdom for them. They give their lives for Him, giving thanks. They give their lives for the cause of His kingdom! They see and perceive. They hear and understand! Following Christ has more to do with taking up the cross and following Him than with an endless round of spiritual excitement.

This is not their work. This is the work of God's grace in them by His Holy Spirit. They hear; they accept; they bear fruit [present tense] as verse 20 says. In other words, the fertile soil represents those who continue to hear God's Word, continue to accept it, and continue to bear fruit. Unlike the other three kinds of hearers, they endure, persevere by God's grace through faith to the very end. This is because there are held by God in Christ.

By God's grace, His Spirit softens hearts. We see beyond the short-lived trials and persecutions. We see something far greater than the riches of this world where moth and rust destroy. He will not allow anything to break their commitment to Christ who so loved them and gave Himself for them.

Greater yet, this harvest is the reward to Christ for His work of salvation accomplished on our behalf. Christ's reward for His labor for us – offering His perfect obedience to God in our place and paying the full penalty for our sin. This is His harvest. He is *"the first fruits"* [1 Corinthians 15:23], He *"shall see His seed . . . and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand"* [Isaiah 53:10].

One day Christ will gather in His harvest and all the chaff He will burn with fire. He, our risen Savior, guarantees an abundant harvest. In the meantime, we live in the time of the growth of the kingdom. Be encouraged. His grace is stronger than our sin. It's the time for sowing the life giving seed. Be in church. Be attentive. And spread the Word to others. He raises the dead to life, makes the deaf to hear.

It's really important for parents to make this a priority in the lives of their children. Take the time with them. Talk with them. Pray for them. Read the Bible to them. Take a long break from the cell phone. Sow the seed of His word. Don't worry wondering if they will be lost to the world. Take action now. Sow the seed. Pray that His Word may spring to life in their hearts and lives.

This parable requires seriousness. The emphasis is the same today as back then, "Listen!" [v.3] and He concludes in **verse 9**, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* Listen closely and take it to heart. God has your good in mind. Amen.