

Message #12

Mark 4:1-20

One of the great figures of church history was William Tyndale. He lived from 1494-1536 and he was known as the “father of the English Bible.” In fact, Tyndale is said to have been the greatest English Bible translator who ever lived. His New Testament, translated from Greek to English, was first published in 1535. The thing that prompted Tyndale to tackle this project, as I understand it, was twofold. First, he saw the ignorance of the local clergy. They were standing up and preaching stuff that was not consistent to the Word of God. Second, he saw the dominance of the Roman Church, who was keeping the people ignorant of God’s Word. So Tyndale decided to translate the Bible into English and try to get it into the hands of the people. His most famous quote was one he made to some clergyman: “If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that drives the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than you do.” Tyndale believed that every English-speaking believer should have a Bible in the English language. We owe a great debt to Mr. Tyndale.

According to the most recent statistics from the American Bible Society, 88% of homes in the United States have a Bible and most homes average 4.4 Bibles per home. There are over 320 million people in the United States and that means that nearly 281 million homes have Bibles in them. **The problem in this country is not that of owning a Bible; the problem is in understanding and applying the Bible.** The truth is there are millions and millions of Bibles in homes, but those who truly understand what is actually in the Bible are far and few between.

This problem is a similar problem that existed when Jesus was here. Now most people did not own Bibles in Jesus’ day. The Scribes and Pharisees had some copies of the O.T., but it is clear in many instances they had no idea as to how to interpret those Scriptures accurately. If they could have done that they would have recognized Jesus Christ.

What most people don’t realize is that the ability to understand the Word of God is an ability that God must give. God will only give this ability to those who are really interested in truth and in a relationship with Him.

We may clearly see this in this text here. Jesus, who is the Word of God, is teaching the Word of God, but He is only permitting certain people to understand what He is teaching. He is surrounded by huge crowds, but it is not the majority He permits to grasp His Word; it is a small minority.

IN A CONTEXT OF PEOPLE ALLEGING THAT HE WAS DEMONIC OR INSANE, JESUS KEPT TEACHING THE WORD OF GOD, BUT HE REVEALED IN PARABLES THAT GOD WOULD ONLY PERMIT A SMALL PERCENTAGE TO UNDERSTAND HIS TEACHING AND BEAR FRUIT.

Verse 1 informs us that Jesus began to teach “again” by the sea. This had been a long day. His family came to try to take Him back to Nazareth because they think He is out of His mind (3:21), but Jesus does not listen to them and He does not go with them.

Instead, He went out to sea to do some more open air preaching to crowds that were larger than ever. The fact that He is preaching to huge crowds does not mean that huge crowds were accepting Him or God's truth.

This seashore became a place where He taught many times on many subjects. The crowd was so large that He got into a boat and sat down. The word for "boat" would indicate that this was a semi-large boat, rather than a small boat like a canoe. But it was not a boat so large that all could walk around in it. So He sat down in the boat and the crowd was by the sea on the land.

Now the land rises up on hills from the sea, which kind of forms a natural amphitheater. This must have really rubbed the Pharisees the wrong way because He was not teaching in their synagogues or theological institutions. He is outside preaching the thousands by the sea.

George Whitefield was preaching in fields to minors in Bristol, and the crowds were upwards of 20,000 people. He wrote to John Wesley and asked him to join him, and Wesley's initial response was I was used to preaching in a nice room, sitting on a nice cushion and preaching from a handsome pulpit.

Verse 2 says He was teaching them many things. That word **teach**, which shows up once in verse 1 and two times in verse 2, refers to some form of didactic systematic instruction, but **the style of His instruction went from plain teaching to parabolic teaching.**

That word "parable" means to illustrate something by some comparison analogy. You place one thing beside another thing to communicate a point (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 338). You paint a verbal picture for people by using an analogy and you bring it alongside the point you want to make. **It has often been said that a parable is an earthly comparative analogy designed to reveal a literal heavenly truth.**

Now **verse 3** begins with two commands that He gives to the entire crowd, specifically "you listen," "you behold." By using this combination, Jesus is saying you need to listen to what I have to say and take a serious look at it.

We also observe from **verse 3** that this parable that Jesus wants everyone to take a serious look at and carefully listen to is a parable about a "sower who goes out to sow some seed." This has been called the "parable of the sower," but it also could be called "the parable of the soils."

This certainly would get the attention of the crowd because they were used to seeing this. The land around the Sea of Galilee was fertile agricultural ground. There were several plots of land with paths in between where crops were grown. In fact, we may recall that Jesus and His disciples got in trouble because they picked some corn on the Sabbath day and ate it. So this would be a parable to which these people could relate. **Now this parable is actually one that tells a story of what happened to the seed when it was sown.** There were four different parabolic results to the seed that was sown.

What we will see from this is that of all of the sown seed that is scattered by the sower, three of the four areas do not have lasting, fruitful results.

PARABOLIC SEED RESULT #1 – Some of the sower's seed fell beside the road and birds came and ate it up. **4:4**

Now there were paths or roads in-between the fields and when the sower would go out and throw his seed on the ground, some of the seed would land on the road or path and the birds would come eat it up.

PARABOLIC SEED RESULT #2 – Some of the sower's seed fell on rocky ground and immediately sprang up with no depth. **4:5-6**

Much of the ground in Palestine is rocky ground. In some areas there is a thin layer of topsoil on top of the bedrock, which is not necessarily seen when you plow the ground. Because of this, **the seed is able to germinate but it is not able to develop deep roots.** The ground did not have enough soil so there would be this initial surge of growth, but when the sun came up there were no solid roots and it scorched the plant and it withered away.

PARABOLIC SEED RESULT #3 – Some of the sower's seed fell among the thorns and the thorns choked off life and there was no crop. **4:7**

There seems to be a progression of things as it relates to failure. The first seed is eaten by birds before it germinates; the second germinates but withers shortly after it has germinated; the third actually sprouts but eventually is choked off after it has grown.

PARABOLIC SEED RESULT #4 – Some of the sower's seed fell on good soil and it produced a great yield and crop. **4:8**

Some produced a yield of 30 times, some 60 times and some 100 times. Naturally, 100 times yield would be the ideal. But all these numbers are good. Now Palestinian interpreters say that a typical yield in Palestine would be fivefold or tenfold at most, so the numbers described here are remarkable. Herodotus, the Greek historian who lived about 450 B.C., claimed that some of the soil was so rich in Palestine that it had a 700 fold return. He was probably exaggerating a bit, but Jesus uses the top number of 100 times return.

It is clear from these analogies that 75% of all seed that is sown does not produce and prosper. What is also clear from these illustrations is that the determining factor for a good crop depends a great deal on the soil where the seed lands.

Now having given this parable, Jesus says in **verse 9**, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." **Now what this teaches us is that just because one audibly heard the parable with their ears, did not mean they understood it in their mind and heart.**

This is a nice way of saying you not only need to hear this, but you need to understand this and what we will see is that in order to understand it, **God will have to give the ability to understand it.**

There is one true interpretation to this parable and if you do not get it, then you can just invent your own applications of what it means to you, which is what many people do with the Bible.

For example, if you are a farmer who just listened to this parable, you could say what He means is that we need to be very careful about where we plant our crop so we don't waste seed.

If you are a politician, you could say what this means is that we need to come up with some new courses on farm education. The farmers will be happy and I will get re-elected.

If you are a salesman who hears the parable, you could say we need to get out there and sell better equipment and better fertilizer to these farmers.

If you are a technological company who hears the parable, you could say we need to develop better ways to test the soil.

If you are a reporter who hears the parable, you could say we need to write about this agricultural scandal. What we have is a big story about wasting so much seed.

This is why Jesus said in **verse 9**, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, there is a true, accurate interpretation to this parable and those who hear it and comprehend it need to get it.

This pointed statement of Jesus Christ proves that people can fumble around with the Bible all of their lives and not have a clue as to what it is actually saying. There is a big difference between listening with ears and understanding in the mind and heart.

Verses 10-12 are critical. As soon as the followers were alone with Him, along with the twelve, they began asking Him about the parables because they didn't get it, either. We don't know the actual number of people around Him, but it was a much smaller group than the massive crowds. This would be the group He said were His family (3:34-35). **The big difference here between His family and the crowd is that His family wanted to know the precise meaning of the Word of God. They wanted to accurately understand the parable. Fruit-bearing people of God always want precise understanding of God's Word in any dispensation.**

In **verse 11** Jesus says the Kingdom program of God is a "mystery." A mystery in the Bible is something that must be made known by God. It is not referring to something unknowable, but to something that may only be known by Divine Revelation when God chooses to reveal it. Jesus wanted His disciples to clearly realize that not all people are privy to the same level of understanding. Jesus is going to reveal kingdom truth to His family through parables.

Jesus says in **verses 11-12** that the reason He spoke in parabolic language is so that the family of God could understand truth pertaining to the Kingdom of God, but those outside His family could not understand it. If they did understand it, they might return to Him for forgiveness. God was literally cutting off certain people from being saved. There is no getting around this. God sovereignly determines who He will permit to understand His Word. **If you have a passion to clearly and accurately know God's Word, you thank God because most don't.** The Word of God has supernatural power in it. It has the power to convict and save. People who had seen Him had rejected Him and He knew if He let them understand the Word of God, that the Word would cause them to believe in Him and He was not about to allow those calling Him satanic, who had blasphemed the Holy Spirit, to be saved. It is not just words of the Bible that need to be read; those words need to be understood. Those words need to be interpreted and only the family of God will be in a position to do this.

Now **verse 13** opens up with two questions Jesus asks His followers and disciples. The question is designed to communicate to them that if you are having a hard time with this parable, then you will really have trouble with the rest of them. Now in **verses 14-20**, Jesus gives them the interpretation of the parable.

Verse 14 is critical because it sets the stage for a true interpretation of the parable. What we learn here is **the sower sows seed and the seed he sows is the Word of God.**

We may make four observations just from this statement:

Observation #1 - The sower is one who is presenting the Word of God.

Certainly, this has an immediate application to Jesus Christ; it could also refer to the apostles who would present the Word and it also could refer to any in His family who would present the Word. The sower is one who is accurately presenting the Word of God.

Observation #2 - The seed is the Word of God.

This is what must be sown; the Word of God. **The problem is not with the seed; all seed is good. The problem is with the soil.** The seed in this parable is not money; it is the Word of God. The job of the sower is to sow the Word of God regardless of the results.

Observation #3 - The soil is the heart and what is going on in a person's heart when he hears the Word of God.

Observation #4 - The sower and seed and soil parable has to do with God's kingdom work.

This is how things work in the program of God. Until Jesus Christ establishes God's Kingdom on earth, this is the way God's Word will work. There will be four reactions to the Word of God:

REACTION #1 – When some people hear the Word of God, Satan comes and immediately takes away its effect. **4:15**

There are people who go to worship services and hear the Word of God; but just as soon as they hear it, their heart is so hard that it never affects them. In fact, they are more in tune with Satan than God, and Satan and his forces are right there to see to it that one does not understand and apply the Word. Satan and his forces are Word of God seed snatchers. **Satan does not want God's Word affecting any person's heart and mind.**

REACTION #2 – When some people hear the Word of God, they have some positive emotional reaction to it, but when trials and troubles hit, they immediately fall away. **4:16-17**

Emotional reactions to church services prove nothing. Don't miss what Jesus is saying here. The way you move into a true relationship with God is through knowledge with understanding of God's truth and Word, and not with feelings.

There are people who like to be around the Word of God. They are emotional and they love the happy-clappy feeling they get. Notice what Jesus says in **verse 16**, "they immediately receive the word with joy." There is the tip off to the problem. The Word of God is convicting. It reproves and it corrects. The Word of God is to be received reverently. So when you see someone whose immediate reaction is all positively emotional, it is a good indication that one is very shallow and sentimental, but not spiritual.

In fact, Jesus says these people who react this way have no solid spiritual roots. When the fun times are over and the pressure and tribulation comes, they shrivel and disappear.

REACTION #3 – When some people hear the Word of God, the world and wealth and desires take first priority and the Word is choked off in a person's life. **4:18-19**

This third group starts off with what appears to be some initial success. This group appears to take in the Word of God and grow for a while, but eventually this kind of person is so worldly "weed-ridden" that any good thing is suffocated.

Between Mark's account here and Luke's account (Luke 8:14), we learn that the things that suffocate many people are:

- 1) Worries of the world.
- 2) Deceitfulness of riches.
- 3) Desires for other things other than God.
- 4) Various pleasures.

These things choke the Word and there is no fruit. Warren Wiersbe said if you carefully look at these first three reactions, we may observe that the three enemies of the believer show up: Satan, the flesh and the world.

John Wesley wrote a story in his journal dated May 30, 1746. There was a famous pretty singer from a playhouse who apparently came to hear him preach and was almost persuaded to become a Christian. Wesley said she seemed to have a strong conviction concerning the Scriptures until an old acquaintance found her and they never saw her again. That happens a lot to many people. They get revved up for a moment about the Word of God, but the world, the flesh and the Devil gets the better of them and off they go and accomplish nothing.

REACTION #4 – When some people hear the Word of God, they accept it and bear fruit. **4:20**

Now this kind of person takes in the Word of God deeply and nothing takes precedence over the Word of God. The heart is in tune with the Holy Spirit and when this person takes in the Word, he/she applies it and, as a result, God bears fruit through this person.

There are four types of hearts described in this parable:

- 1) The hard heart.
- 2) The impulsive and emotional heart.
- 3) The preoccupied heart.
- 4) The well-prepared heart.

Now from a mathematical perspective, only one of four actually is serious about understanding God's Word. The numbers of people who went to hear the Lord speak were astronomical; but only one out of four were serious about God's Word. Numbers of people prove nothing.

We live in a time when churches are coming up with slick marketing strategies that are all designed to get people to go to their place of worship. They want people to feel real good about themselves. These are happy places that promote uplifting social and psychological benefits. But what all need to realize is that Jesus taught that only about 25% of all religious people are real serious about understanding and applying God's Word. That is what Jesus taught.

Now there is some debate as to whether or not the first three soils are lost people who never believe on Christ, or whether they are saved people who are not fruit-bearers.

There is an application to both groups. If you will believe on Jesus Christ, you will be saved. But that does not automatically mean you will grow to become a fruit-bearer. For that to happen, we need to take in the Word of God and apply it. The more we do that, the more fruit the Lord will bear through us.

Which heart best illustrates ours? Which reaction best describes us?