

Listen Closely

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Mark 4:1-20

For our sermon today, we are going to look at one of Jesus' parables. It's often called "The Parable of the Sower" or "The Parable of the Soils." Let me invite you to turn in your Bibles, if you have them, to Mark 4:1-20 where God's Word says this:

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. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching, he said:

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

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

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. 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. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 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. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 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. 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."

- Mark 4:1-20

My friend Jason is a guy that would not call himself a Christian. It's not that he hasn't been exposed to Christianity. He did grow up in the Bible Belt. He's seen Christians preaching on TV. Most of it was pretty goofy, but some of it made sense. He's even been in church a dozen or so times for Christmas and Easter. But he just never really got into the whole faith thing, you know? Jason lives in the real world of dollars and cents, the world of the here and now, not some pie-in-the sky dream world of saints and candles. And he feels pretty good about himself. He likes his family. He has friends, and his business is making money no thanks to God. Last

week when a couple of his religious buddies at the coffee shop started talking about God, Jason just said to them “Your God is my couch.” When they asked him what he meant, he said “Look, your God makes you feel good. My couch makes me feel good, so as far as I’m concerned they’re exactly the same thing. I’ve got my couch, so I don’t need your God.”

In the parable we just read, Jesus talks about people like Jason. Jesus tells this story about a first century Middle-Eastern farmer who went out to plant seed. Because this farmer is middle-eastern and first century, he does things a little bit differently than we would. To begin with, he doesn’t plow the field until after he’s put the seed on it. Instead of planting with a tractor, the farmer just slings a bag of grain over his shoulder and reaches into that bag and with a certain rhythm. He takes a step and throws some seed, takes a step throws some seed. As he throws that seed on the field, some of it falls on a path. Now that seed doesn’t land on the path because he’s a bad farmer or because he can’t aim! Rather, that seed lands on the path because the path is in the middle of the field. The field has lain fallow. It’s lain unused for several months during the dry season. Anyone who’s ever lived in a culture where you walk everywhere knows that there’s only one thing to do with an unused field and that is cut across it! So there would be these paths, running catty-corner through the middle of the field. As the farmer sowed, some of the seed would land on them.

When you have a field that has not had rain for months and people use it as a path, something happens. It gets hard and flat. So when that farmer threw that seed down, two things would occur. First, the seed would not be able to penetrate that soil in any way. It would just lay on top. And second, that hard flat soil would create an ideal table for the birds, so they would come take it away before it had any chance to penetrate and the seed would never even come to life.

Jesus is telling us this because that hard soil resembles people like Jason. They are hardened to the truth of God’s Word. They don’t receive it! I don’t know for sure why Jason is hardened to God’s truth. Maybe he was hurt by religion. Maybe he’s threatened by what Jesus might ask him to do if he becomes Lord of his life, or maybe he’s just been told that Christianity is silly. But for whatever reason, Jason is hardened to God’s message. Whenever he happens to hear it, it doesn’t penetrate his defenses. It’s almost like it’s in a foreign language, so he never interacts with it. He rejects it categorically, and it disappears. As a pastor, my heart goes out to Jason. I know his life seems to be going great in the here and now, but Jesus has said that Jason’s eternity depends on his response to God’s message. And for Jason, there’s no response at all.

Suzan is someone who might call herself a “de-churched Christian.” When Suzan was a sophomore in high school, she went to summer camp and made a decision for Christ. And that fall, she really got involved in the Youth Ministry at her church, and she loved it. She loved her small group leader. She loved the songs about God, and she loved her Christian friends. But then she went to college and, I don’t know, God just got smaller and smaller in her life. She made new friends who weren’t Christians. She tried a couple of campus ministries, but they weren’t great and, to tell you the truth, her non-Christian friends thought the people in those

ministries were kind of weird, so she quit. Then she took some classes where the professors really ridiculed Christianity. And now, she's just not sure.

She would probably call herself a Christian, especially when she has coffee with her old small group leader, but there's no fruit. It's been a really long time since she made any change in her life because of God. Jesus also talked about people like Suzan in this parable. He said that as the farmer continued to sow his seed some of it would fall on soil that was shallow rocky soil. Now the soil wasn't rocky because rocks were mixed in with it. It was rocky because there was a big shelf of limestone underneath the soil.

So this soil is on top of a big rock and that rock would have an effect. Once the dry winter had ended and the rains came, those rocks with that thin layer of soil on top would be the first part of that field to heat up, and the sprouts would just spring out of the ground, faster even than the sprouts in the healthy ground. So that part of the field looked really good. But there was a problem. That shallow layer of soil could not sustain the plant to the point that it bore fruit. So eventually the plant would run out of moisture and nutrients, and it would just fade away. The soil was too shallow.

That soil was kind of like Suzan's faith. For whatever reason, it just doesn't seem to have the depth to stand up to the trials and temptations of life, so it withers it goes away when the heat is on. As a pastor and an ex-youth pastor, I've worked with lots of Suzans. I have to say some of the kids in my youth ministry that seemed the most committed to Jesus were the quickest to cave to temptation. Some of them have stopped following Jesus altogether. I pray for the Suzans in my life and in my congregation.

Adam is a church-going Christian. In fact, he's well-churched. He grew up in church. He married a church-going woman and his kids were at church on most Sundays when they were growing up. But Adam is also what we might call a distracted Christian. He believes in God. He's at church regularly. He likes the people there. His wife is a very spiritual person, so it makes her happy to go there. He doesn't mind it. But truth be told, his mind is just on a lot of other things. He's got his hobbies. He's got his career and family, and he's just busy. What Adam really wants out of life is to retire early so he can get to work on that golf swing. The Bible doesn't figure into Adam's thinking much at all. He wonders if maybe that will change later in life when he has more time, but he's not sure.

In the parable we read, Jesus also talks here about people like Adam. Some of the seed that that farmer planted fell on soil that was full of weeds. These weeds were already resident in the ground in Israel. Some of these weed seeds can live in the soil for decades. So when the farmer plowed that soil, it would stir up the weed seeds. They would get the light and moisture that they need to sprout, and they would just take off. And those weeds, which could grow to six feet tall, would take all the moisture and nutrients and sunlight from the crop and weaken it. That's what happened here. The competing plants dominated the seed, and it could never fully bear a crop.

Adam's faith is kind of like that. God's truth is choked out. It's fruitfulness is ruined by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. It's not that these cares are all evil. It's not evil to provide for your family, to want a successful career, and hobbies are great. But when these things get in the driver's seat, when they become our main priority, they ruin the fruitfulness of the word of God.

As a pastor, Adam might actually be the guy that concerns me the most, because he's such a nice guy and everything looks so good on the outside. But sometimes I wonder how can he sit there week after week and never seem to be challenged? Does he really get it? Is he spiritually alive? I'm not sure.

So there's Jason, there's Suzan, there's Adam and then there's Laurie. Laurie is the last type of person that Jesus spoke about in this parable. He called them good soil. That's Laurie good soil. Now that doesn't mean that Laurie is perfect! In fact, Laurie would be the first person to tell you that her life is kind of a mess! She's went through a divorce, and she has a lot of struggles, both with her ex-husband and just with her life. Laurie is often troubled by her sin. She wishes she prayed more. She's a work in progress.

But somehow God's Word just seems to get a grip on her life. It's not like the sermons or her small group always lead to some epic life-change, but they really do impact what she thinks about and the way she lives her life. It's kind of like she needs that exposure to God's Word to keep her where she needs to be in life. When she gets it, it works itself out in her life.

Laurie knows Suzan from work. She's thinking about inviting her and another friend to church. She's a little scared, but she feels like God might be telling her to do it, so she's going to jump.

Jesus talked in this parable about people like Laurie. I mean yes, there would always be hard soil, and weak soil, and weedy soil, but the farmer knew that wasn't all there was in his field. He knew that if he planted the whole field, there would some soil where the seed could penetrate and hold on and not be choked by weeds. He knew there would be a part of that field that would accomplish what it was designed for and grow that seed until it bore fruit. In the story, it did. It was great seed, and it fell on good soil. So it bore 30, 60, or even 100 grains for every seed that was planted there.

As a pastor, it's an honor to be involved in the life of someone like Laurie. Actually, it's an honor to be involved in anyone's spiritual life, but the Lauries in our flock, and we have a lot of them at Perry Creek Church, make ministry extra joyful. I love, love, love watching Laurie honestly wrestle with her own struggles and seeing God's truth change her life in little and big ways, week after week. She's just good soil!

OK, so that's the parable of the sower. Jesus gave us this parable about these four types of soil (hard / rocky / weedy /good), these four conditions that typify or represent the state of our hearts toward God's Word. It's a fairly well known parable. It's in three out of four gospels. Most of us have heard it before.

How does this parable apply to us? What does it have to say to you and to me about how we should live our day to day lives? I think this parable has much broader implications for our daily lives than most of us might think, and I think that's especially true as we begin 2022. So let me give you three observations that will help us plug this parable into our lives, three observations about how this applies to every one of us. The first observation is about the focus of the parable, and it's this:

THIS PARABLE IS NOT PRIMARILY ABOUT CLARIFYING WHO IS SAVED

Now when I use that word "saved," that's a word that the Bible uses a lot. It just means people who are going to heaven. They are "saved," saved from eternal separation from God. This point is really important if we're going to understand this parable. The purpose of the parable is not primarily to clarify who is going to heaven. Let me explain what I mean. If you grew up in church, chances are you heard preaching or teaching about this parable, right? How many of you have heard this parable in church before? Chances are the main focus was on which of the four soils were going to heaven and which ones weren't. That's only natural. That's the first question that comes to our minds when we look at this story of the four soils.

We just naturally want to understand who's in and who's out, right? We look at the first guy, the soil on the path, and we figure he's not in, because the seed doesn't penetrate and nothing comes to life, so we figure he's not going to make it. And sure enough when Luke tells this parable, he says that guy "cannot believe and be saved." So we figure this guy is out. We look at the last guy, the good soil, and he's doing everything he's supposed to do, so we figure he's "saved."

But then we look at the two in the middle and we're not so sure. Was that initial burst of faith in the rocky soil enough or was it not? And what about the soil with the weeds? We all have weeds, competing priorities in our lives, right? Is he going to heaven? We want to know, right? But notice that's not actually the point of the parable. I'm not saying that this parable doesn't relate to salvation. It does. But diagnosing who's going to heaven is not the primary point of this parable. Notice that Jesus doesn't ever tell us whether the rocky soil or the weedy soil are saved. In fact, in Mark he doesn't tell us whether any of the soils are saved, because that's not the main point. To make that the main point of the parable robs the parable of its power for most of us in our day-to-day lives, because the parable is primarily about how we hear, how we listen to, how we receive the Word of God. That's what the parable is about. That's why Jesus starts the parable by saying "Listen, a farmer went out." That's why he finishes the parable "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." That's why when he explains the parable, he never uses the word "saved", but he uses the word "hear" seven times.

The question is not just "Am I going to heaven?" Then once I find the answer I'm done with this parable. The question is "How am I going to receive the Word of God? How am I going to hear it?" "Is it going to bear fruit in my life? Or is it going to be unable to penetrate? Is it going to wither? Is it going to be choked out by competing priorities?"

That's the question. We don't only face this question when we hear a salvation message for the first time. We face it every time we come into contact with the Word of God through reading or Bible Study or on the radio or through preaching. Every Sunday that you are here, you come into contact with the Word of God. And every time you do that, you face in a small way the test of this parable: How am I going to receive it? It's not just about clarifying who is saved. It's about how we respond to God's Word.

Secondly, there's a reality to this parable and the reality is this:

WE ARE ALL CAPABLE OF EACH OF THESE RESPONSES

Because the parable relates to our reception of the Word of God and not just to our one-time response to a salvation message, we are all still capable of each of these four responses every time we come into contact with God's Word, whether we are saved or not. OK? So the first soil was hardened, right? God's Word was unable to penetrate it as truth, and so that truth was sort of taken away. That does relate to salvation. We may know people who close themselves off to the point that they won't even admit that God's Word might be true.

I have a relative who for years was hardened to the gospel. She used every opportunity to show that Christianity was foolish. I think she did that because she saw the gospel as a threat. She had some fairly serious sin in her life. She knew that if she let the gospel penetrate, she would have to deal with that. So she did everything she could to keep it at bay. It's easy to see her as hardened

But sometimes, we do the same thing. We close ourselves off to God's truth because we see it as a threat. Jesus comes along and says "Love your enemies. Forgive everyone who wrongs you." What do we do so much of the time? We start making excuses. We tell ourselves "I've tried that and I just can't do it." Or we say "It doesn't matter. It won't make things better." Or we say "What does it really mean to forgive?" We make excuses! What we're really doing is playing games with ourselves to keep God's word from penetrating our heart. Jesus says "Don't do that! Don't harden yourself to God's truth!"

The second soil was rocky. It lacked depth. We may know people who make an excited commitment to Jesus and then just fade away. They just disappear from the life of faith completely. But can't you and I do the same thing with God's word? We come into contact with it, we resolve to change something in our lives, and then it gets difficult and our commitment wilts and the word doesn't bear any fruit.

The third soil is probably one that many of you related to when I read this parable especially during the holidays, because we can have these hectic, distracted, weedy lives that sometimes seem to turn our head every way but toward Jesus. That can happen with our basic commitment to Jesus, where that lifestyle just chokes us out and causes us not to think about God at all. But it can also happen weekly as we contact the word of God, right?

A couple of weeks ago we looked at John 3:16, and I challenged you to find a way to show God's surprising love to someone around you during Christmas week. Do you remember that? Well, I hope some of you did that. I'll bet there are a number of us that fully intended to do that when the sermon was over. We walked out of here going "Right! I'm really going to surprise someone with the love of God this week!" But then Monday came and Tuesday and next thing you know, you were back in the weeds and the truth was choked out. It can happen!

We can be hardened, or shallow, or distracted to the Word, or we can bear fruit, right? Like the last type of soil, God's Word can come into our lives, and penetrate, and take root, and become a priority, and it can change us. It can bear fruit in our faith, and in our character, and in other people. That can happen whether it's the first time we've heard God's offer of salvation or if it's the thousandth time we've heard the word of God preached.

What I'm saying here is that this parable has far more application in our lives than just whether we are going to heaven or not. It applies in a small way every single time we come into contact with the Word of God. That's a small, week-by-week application for all of us. But that's not the only thing that this parable encourages us to do. This parable also urges us to look at the big picture of our response to God's Word. It encourages us to:

CONSIDER YOUR PRIMARY RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD

We can exhibit any of these four responses to God's Word in a little way in the moment. On any given Sunday, we might receive the word with hardness, or weakness, or distraction or fruitfulness. We can do that in the short term. But the passage invites us to look at the bigger picture. It invites us to consider the overall trajectory of our response to God's Word. In fact, the passage invites us to ask ourselves two questions, two questions that I think are very important for us as we begin 2022.

The first question is this: Overall, what kind of soil am I? I thought about entitling this sermon "What kind of dirt are you?" but I didn't think you would respond well to that! But seriously, what kind of soil am I? What has my primary, my normal, my go-to response to God's Word been in the past?

In general, what kind of soil am I? Am I hardened to God's truth, like the soil on the path? Do I choose not to accept God's truth as truth when I don't like what it says? Am I weak like the rocky soil? Do I tend to receive God's truth initially but then fade away when the heat is on? As a pastor, I've got to say I'm concerned about the weakness that I've seen in the faith of some American Christians as we've gone through the pandemic. There are a lot of Christians who have just stopped doing the things Christians do, stopped participating in church, stopped living in community with other Christians, stopped reading their Bibles. I've seen some walk away from the faith altogether. I'm concerned that the overall soil type of some Christians is weak faith.

We should all ask “Am I weak like the rocky soil?” Am I distracted like the weedy soil? Do I let things that are maybe bad, or maybe even good take priority in my life, and choke out the effectiveness of God’s truth? Or am I maybe fruitful soil. Does my interaction with God’s truth generally tend to produce life-change in me? Not “am I perfect?” but “am I changing?” Overall, what kind of soil am I? The parable wants us to give that some thought. I want to encourage you to go home and think about that today. Maybe that’s a good discussion with your family at the dinner table today. Maybe it’s a good discussion for your small group this week: What kind of soil am I?

When I was in youth ministry, we looked at this passage one time and I actually had the kids grab a container and go outside and gather stuff and physically mix up the kind of soil they thought they were, and then we told each other about it. Maybe that’s the way to do it I don’t know, but that’s the first question I think Jesus wants us to ask as a result of looking at this parable today: What kind of soil am I?

But there’s a second question that’s just as important, and it’s this: What kind of soil do I want to be? As we approach 2022, what kind of soil do you want to be? Now that you know what your basic response to God’s word has been, what do you want it to be in 2022? I’m not asking for some radical New Year’s resolution that you’ll never keep, like “I’m going to read ten chapters of the Bible every day or every sermon will produce epic life-change in me!” That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m just asking “When you get to the end of 2022 and look back, how do you want to say you responded to God’s Word?” What adjectives or adverbs would you like to be able to use to describe your soil? Would you like to say you were faithful in receiving God’s Word? Or fearless in receiving it? Maybe honest? Maybe vulnerable? Tenacious? What kind of soil do you want to be in 2022?

Because here’s the thing: God can change your soil type. He says in Scripture that He can give people a new heart, and He does it. I’ve seen Him do it in my ministry time and time again. In fact, I have seen him take every one of these soil types and turn them into amazing, faithful, joyful Christians that bear incredible fruit for Him.

The hardened relative that I mentioned earlier came to a living joyful faith. I’ve seen people with weedy soil, people who were distracted and wealthy and just too busy for God with a little tiny faith, and I wondered if they were spiritually alive. I’ve seen God clarify priorities and remove distractions and call them to a beautiful fruitful walk of faith. I have to say personally I am one of those who had a shallow, wilting faith and God reached in and changed my heart and brought it back to life.

God can change your soil. He can help you respond fruitfully faithfully the way you were made to respond to the truth of his Word. So these are two worthwhile questions for us to ask today. What kind of soil am I, and what kind of soil do I want to be in 2022?