



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“What Do Hearts and Dirt Have in Common?”

Sermon Series: “The Way of Jesus”

Mark 4:1-20

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Mark 4:1-20 (NIV)

The Parable of the Sower

¹Again 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. ²He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

⁹Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹He 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 ¹²so that, " 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵Some 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. ¹⁶Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰Others, 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."

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 4:12](#) Isaiah 6:9,10
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Introduction.

Lorie's father was a gentleman farmer. He worked 9-5 in a white collar job for the Universal Rundle Corporation, but then he came home and did what he really loved – raising Hereford cattle on a small 30 acre farm in western Pennsylvania. Dad Wallace was a man of the soil, and he liked to get his hands in the dirt.

I remember the first time I visited Lorie's family on the farm. It was the summer after we met in grad school, and I stayed with Lorie's family for a week on my way back to Atlanta. About the third day I was there, Dad Wallace saw me heading out to go for a jog, as I had done every day of the visit. He said to me, "Peter, if you're looking to get some exercise, I've got some work for you to do in the barn!"



People who live close to the earth, those who farm and ranch, understand the rhythms and cycles of nature better than most of us. They also have a greater understanding of the life lessons that can be learned from these things. Dad Wallace was a man like that, and he appreciated the story about the farmer in the parable Jesus told.

Christ was a master teacher, and He had the ability to take the ordinary things of life and apply spiritual meaning to them. We read of one such instance in our passage this morning in the parable of the soils. This passage says a great deal about the human heart as well as the agriculture of Palestine.

Jesus returned to the lake region around the Sea of Galilee and continued His ministry of teaching, and the crowd that gathered was so large He had to get in a boat. Perhaps He did this for safety's sake, or perhaps He simply wanted to use the water as a natural sounding board to project His voice to the large crowd that gathered. In the message Jesus gave, He said that the Kingdom of God breaks into the world even as seed breaks into the soil when it is sown on the ground. He also explained in the comparison of the soils that there is always a diversity of response to the proclamation of the Word of God.

The parable of the soils is faithful to the agriculture in Palestine at the time of Christ in which plowing always followed the sowing. This sounds odd to us with our western techniques of farming, but it is accurate to the life in Israel in the first century AD, and many developing countries around the world today still plant seeds in this manner. The sower was not careless when he scattered the seed on the path or among the thorns. He did so intentionally because all the ground would be plowed, and it was only after the plowing did the farmer discover what kind of ground was there.

As we look at this parable, notice the four different soils and the four different hearts to which they correspond.

I. The Hard Heart.

In verse 15 Jesus said, *"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."* What Jesus says is that these people do nothing with the message they receive. Immediately after hearing it, any positive effect it might have had on their lives is taken away. Satan, who is our great adversary, prevents the message of the Good News from working its way into their barren hearts. The use of the word "path" also speaks of people who are too busy to stop and listen to the Word that God desires to implant in them. They have a fast pace of life, and they are unwilling and without time to stop and listen to the truly important things of the Lord.

What this says is that there are people into whose hearts the truth of God can find no entry. There are people who are either hardened to the message, too busy to listen, or who have a lack of interest and don't realize how important a decision to follow Christ really is. J. Wilbur Chapman was a famous Presbyterian preacher at the turn of the previous century. He told a story about a well known scientist who did geological studies on cliffs. This scientist would have a group of men lower him over the side of a cliff in a basket attached to a thick, heavy rope so he could study the rock formations. And he always made sure he had enough strong men at the top to pull him back up at the end of the day.

One day he asked to be let down especially far over the edge of the cliff, farther than he had ever gone before. When he did this, he failed to account for the added weight of the very strong, very heavy rope which added to the weight of his body. When the scientist was ready at the end of the day to have the men pull him back up, they could not budge him. It wasn't that he had gained weight



from a big lunch. What happened was that each extra foot of rope added to the weight of the man, and they were unable to pull up the weight of the man and the rope together.

Then Chapman said, "There are those who say 'no' and 'no' and 'no' to God for years and years, and the weight of their 'no's' gets so heavy they lose their ability to hear God. It is only by God's intervention that they will ever hear, because their hearts are so hardened to the Lord." Have you ever known anyone like that? Does this describe your heart today?

II. The Shallow Heart.

In verses 16 and 17 Jesus said, "*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.*"

This was not ground that was full of stones. Rather, it was a narrow skin of soil over a shelf of limestone, like we have here in central Texas. All around the Sea of Galilee the soil was like this. In many fields the outcrop of rock through the shallow soil could not even be seen. It was only after the plowing that the farmer discovered the condition of the soil. Seed which fell there germinated all right, but because the soil was so shallow and held so little nourishment and moisture, the heat of the sun soon withered the sprouting seed, and immediately it died.

The meaning of the parable is this: some people act on the spur of the moment; they respond impulsively. They initially accept the message, and even with joy. But immediately they fall away. Whenever trouble or persecution come their way, they give up what at first they had so enthusiastically embraced.

It is always easier to begin something than it is to finish the thing, isn't it? How many of us start off the year with New Year's resolutions only to find ourselves abandoning our new commitments by March. Perseverance is the key, and a shallow commitment rarely lasts when things become difficult.

There was once a little girl who fell out of bed in the middle of the night and cried out to her parents. Her father rushed into her room and asked, "What happened? How did you fall out of bed?"

The little girl replied, "I guess I stayed too near to where I crawled in!"

That's the way it is for many in the Christian life. We stay too near to where we crawled in. When things become difficult or when someone puts us down for being a follower of Christ, we decide the way of Jesus is just too hard. Or we rely on the emotion of the moment and even peer pressure in making a commitment to Christ, but it doesn't last. The spiritual high of the mission conference, or Fun in the Son, or the Cursillo weekend retreat begins to fade, and we wonder where the depth of our commitment went. Continuance is the test of reality in the Christian life, and perseverance is the mark of true discipleship. Does the shallow heart describe you this morning?

III. The Preoccupied Heart.

"Still others like seed sown among thorns, hear the Word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in a choke the word, making it unfruitful" (vv. 18,19). At first, the seed makes good progress in this soil, but then the growth is choked out by weeds.

Any of us who has spent any time weeding can relate to these verses. I have a confession to make. I hate to weed! Whether it is a lawn, or a garden, or anywhere, I hate to weed. When I weed, my tendency is to pick off the tops of the weeds, because it is so hard to dig down and get to the root. You dig down and struggle to pull with your fingers with all your might until they are numb, and



still you can't quite get all of it. And I've discovered that the weeds in Texas are particularly stubborn little buggers! So the path of least resistance is just to pick off the tops.

That's the way many of us are in our discipleship, too. We tend to just pick off the top of a few bad habits, and we think we have our lives in order. But the roots come back, and they choke out our fruitfulness in Christ.

What are the weeds in the soil of your heart that are preventing your growth in Christ today? There are three things Jesus mentions in particular that are sources of choking off our growth in Christ: the worries of this life; the deceitfulness of wealth; and the desire for other things.

Worry is the first weed Jesus mentions. What do you worry about? What are the things that weigh upon your heart, that you know you should give over to God, but you can't help but worry? Children? A job? Money? Grades? A girlfriend or a boyfriend? Global warming? The economy? The roast in the oven?! Over Christmas, our son Jason who just graduated from college, shared that this fall he's often had nightmares in which he thinks he has a final for which he hasn't studied, or a paper that is due, and he's so afraid he won't graduate. Then he wakes up and realizes it's all just a bad dream.

Worry will choke out your life in Christ. Our Lord said to His disciples, "*Why do you worry? O you of little faith.*" We should trust God more and cast our cares on Him. Henrietta Mears directed the college ministry at Hollywood Presbyterian Church for over 30 years, and she impacted many of the great Christian leaders of our generation including Billy Graham, Bill Bright, and Earl Palmer. Toward the end of her life, she was asked what she would do differently if she could live her life over again. Instantly she replied, "I would have trusted God more." Worry prevents our growth in Christ.

The next weed Jesus mentioned is the deceitfulness of wealth. Material possessions have a way of choking out our growth in Christ. What is your attitude toward the things you own? What is your attitude toward your car, your house, your clothes, your investments? In what do you place your confidence and trust in this troubled economy? Ken Olsen, the founder of the Digital Computer Corporation, once said, "Wealth is either a tool or an idol. Either you will use it for the glory of God and the benefit of others, or you will spend your life chasing and worshipping it." How is your wealth distracting you from serving God, and in what ways are you investing for the Kingdom?

The final weed Jesus mentioned is the desire for other things. What do you want more in this life than you want Jesus? What is it that you desire more than you desire Him? Think about it. Jesus said very plainly, "*You cannot serve two masters. You will either love the one and hate the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve two masters*" (Mk. 4:20).

Who or what competes with your devotion to God? In his new book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller says that an idol is anything that is more important to us than God, anything that absorbs our hearts and imagination more than God, and anything we seek to give us what only God can give. What competes with your devotion to God? Our desire for other things can become idolatrous, and we should guard against it.

These are the weeds that can choke out our growth in Christ.

IV. The Receptive Heart.

"Others, like the seed sown on good soil, hear the Word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown" (v. 20). This heart is a fertile heart, a receptive heart, which is ready to receive God's Word. This person is open to the work of God in his/her life. They are willing to be tilled, cultivated, and shaped. The result is that they bear fruit for God in their lives, and the fruit they bear is 30, 60 and 100 times what was originally sown.



Fruitfulness here should be understood as progress in becoming more like Jesus and making an impact for Him in the world around us, and we should note there is a difference in that impact. Not everyone is the same. There is 30-, 60-, and 100-fold. Some of us are more receptive than others, and some are also more fruitful than others. The key to any response is receptivity.

My wife Lorie is reading through an Advent devotional that extends through Epiphany which Christians celebrate this Wednesday. Yesterday she read a selection written by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher of the 19th century, about the visit of the Magi. In the selection Kierkegaard pointed out that the scribes Herod consulted could predict where the Messiah was to be born, in Bethlehem, but they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem when the Magi came to visit. They did not accompany the wise men to seek Jesus; they remained where they were.

Kierkegaard said in a similar way, you and I know where we can find God, but we make no movement. We remain where we are, just like the scribes in Jerusalem did. The Magi only had a rumor to go on, but it motivated them to make a long journey, while the scribes, who had all the knowledge, remained in Jerusalem. How can you and I become less like the scribes and more like the Magi in seeking after Christ this next year?ⁱ It will affect our fruitfulness in Christ, for sure.

Conclusion.

What kind of soil are you? What kind of heart do you have? Is your heart hard? Is it shallow? Is it preoccupied and filled with worry? Or is it receptive? Where are you with Christ today?

We stand on the threshold of a New Year. We also stand on the threshold of a new decade. The late Ray Stedman once told his congregation as a new year began: "On New Year's Eve we realize more than at any other time in our lives that we can never go back in time. . . . We can look back and remember, but we cannot retrace a single moment of the year that is past." Stedman then referred to the Israelites as they stood on the edge of a new opportunity in Deuteronomy 11 as they were about to enter the Promised Land.

After four decades of wandering in the desert, this new generation of Hebrews probably wondered if they had the faith and fortitude to possess the Promised Land. Then Moses reminded them that they had seen every great act which the Lord did (Deut. 11:7), and he reminded them that their destination was a land for which the Lord their God cared. He said the eyes of the Lord were always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of it (v.12).

In this New Year, we may fear the future because of events in the past. But we need not remain chained to our old memories because we can move ahead focused on God. Just as the Lord watched over the land and His people, so His eyes will be upon us. God's faithful care will extend to every day of the new year. We can count on that promise.ⁱⁱ

As you and I begin this New Year, may each of us cultivate a receptive heart to the Word of God which is able to turn our worry into hope and our fear into courage. His eye is on each one of us, and He will fulfill the promises He has made to us in His holy Word. You can count on it...just as I could count on Dad Wallace to offer me to do some chores in the barn whenever I went for a run! Amen.

ⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, "Only a Rumor," from *Meditations from Kierkegaard*, translated and edited by T.H. Croxall, 1955. Cited in *Watch for the Light*, pp. 290-291.

ⁱⁱ Taken from David MacCasland, *Our Daily Bread*, December 31, 2009.

