



GOOD SEED
Mark 4:1-20

Mark's gospel wastes no time or energy in getting down to business. An event has taken place that radically changes the way we look at and experience the world.¹ In **Mark 1:15** – the time has come. He said, "The kingdom of God is near." In other words: "Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God." Our parables today from **Mark 4** are known as 'kingdom parables.' It is the story of the Seed and the Sower. When the Bible has been translated into different languages – it is often referred to as 'Good Seed.' Parables are tools for decision-making – not mere discussion. If we look – listen – and pray they become an instrument for active participation in the life of faith.²

In our lesson today every aspect of life is given significance by the word that Christ addresses to us. As we examine the four kinds of soil given to us we can ask "What part of the parable are we living out today?" We can understand our empty, barren lives as a failure to respond to Christ – and our full, fertile days as a result of the Good Seed working deeply in our lives.³

We learn from the Epistle of James and other places of sacred scripture that we are called to be both hearers and doers of the word of God. Both are necessary. One complements and supports the other.

In my 30 plus years of ordained ministry we have moved from an audio to a visual generation. Listening has become a lost art or skill. Then we wonder why families and church fellowships can't communicate. The sermon has been forgotten by the time people make it out the front door. It is hard to do your work – unless you have first heard the directions and purpose. Remember, "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (**Romans 10:17**, NIV).

There are many voices calling to us – and demanding our love and loyalty. How do we hear the word of God amidst them all? Hearing – the ability to listen – is just as vital now as it was then.

I personally believe that Jesus and the 12 disciples had been planting and scattering the seed for only a short time when they painfully discovered the birds, the rocks, and thorns. Opposition has already raised its ugly face.

The culture in which the disciples were nurtured worshipped and adored the large and powerful. They despised the small and powerless. The disciples were

surrounded by the power and might of the Roman Empire and kingdom. Jesus is training them to go out into the world to build his kingdom. Then he challenged them by talking about seeds – and mustard seeds at that. He never mentioned sharp swords and swift stallions. So this kingdom talk about seeds was just a little underwhelming to them.

What the disciples had to learn then and now was that in the kingdom of God our worth – our value – our strength comes from God – nothing else. A seed in the hand of a sovereign God can forever change the course of history.

So today we come to the familiar parable that many of us learned in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. It is the first parable we encounter in Mark's gospel. It is as though Mark's gospel is telling us that every word we hear from now on in his gospel is **seed** for the kingdom of God. The word '**seed**' in **verse 4** is a symbol for the inspired word of the living God. It has power and potential in its very nature and design. One pastor abbreviated The New Testament as **T.N.T.** It has explosive power.

Yes, "Many of us learned in Sunday School that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Good definition – but it needs one clarification. The heavenly meaning isn't reserved for the afterlife – but for the here and now."⁴

A parable – depending on our willingness to hear and respond – has the ability to reveal truth or to keep us in the dark. A parable demands that we invest ourselves in the discovery and journey of truth. The truth will not be trivialized.

There are two audiences which Jesus speaks to in our lesson today – first is the large crowd by the sea in **verses 1 and 34** – second is the 12 disciples in **verse 10**.⁵

Yes, parables are more than simple stories, because the 12 disciples in **verse 10** are honest enough to share with Jesus that they did not fully understand the teaching. One of the amazing insights we learn from this lesson is that the sower – sowing the same seed – obtains different results from different soil. However, the sower still sows the seed equally in all four places. There is not one square inch of creation where the word of God has not invaded.

So, let us go to work and dig and explore the four kinds of soil or conditions of the human heart found in Palestine and New Holland, Pa.

SOME SEEDS FELL ON HARDENED PATHS.

Farmers often left paths for those who traveled through their fields. The ground naturally became packed down. The birds of the air would quickly eat the seed which was thrown there.

One of the worst things that can happen to an individual is to develop a 'hard heart.' There is no room or space for anything else to grow and mature in their lives except bitterness and barrenness.

Helen Keller was absolutely correct when she wrote “**There are none so blind as those who refuse to see.**” The same thing can be said about hearing and deafness. Seeds represented a future – and all they wanted was the past. Rick Warren, in his book **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE**, believes a closed mind represents actually the condition of the hardened soil or path. Reading the Bible on a regular basis keeps the believer in the range of God’s voice and will.

Many times our rebellion can harden our hearts. Our sin and rebellion begin to arrange clever arguments to justify our actions. We erect a defense against the truth. We build this protective shell around us. Regardless of what the word and the pastor teach – we shut it out – or shout it down. We refuse to listen.

Only the grace of God – and the joy of being forgiven can begin to penetrate this hardened soil and heart. It happened to Nicodemus, Chuck Colson, St. Augustine – and it can happen to someone here today. You can receive the gift of salvation! This is why Jesus scattered seed there as well.

One day the seed was dropped into the hardened soil of the life of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation was birthed. The seed was replanted in the lives of John and Charles Wesley and the Wesleyan Revival took root.

OTHER SEED FELL ON ROCKY SOIL.

The seed is actually planted and takes root – but its roots are not deep enough to sustain a long commitment and growing season. It takes time and thought to grow in God’s word and truth. Idle curiosity cannot sustain the Christian life during a cold winter or hot summer. Storms simply wash away the little soil that is there. An occasional drink from God’s word will not provide the nourishment needed for the journey.

We must hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. Trivial pursuits produce trivial lives.

Mary and I have discovered that much of the soil at our Lake Wynonah home is rocky. We have soil – but it is not deep enough in most places to sustain certain plants or trees. We must add or supplement the soil that is there. Eugene Peterson reminds us it is not difficult to get a person interested in the gospel – but it is hard work to sustain the interest. Millions of people in America have made decisions for Christ – but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to be born again – but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. There is a great market for religious experience but little appetite for the journey of sanctification.⁶ There is a need to connect our lives to something more than the latest fad or headline. The word of God is an eternal word and therefore not always easy to digest without some preparation and perspiration. Remember how in **Mark 6:1-6** it shares that Jesus could do no miracle or good works in his own hometown? Don’t let your heart or soil become like that.

Our children's Sunday School will be learning today this life focus about **Mark 4**, "Growing as followers of God begins when we love and obey God's word."

SOME SEEDS FELL AMONG THORNS.

Dr. William Barclay shares that some farmers of that region were simply lazy. They did not work the soil. They did not go about the tough but necessary work of weeding the fields. A plot of land can only support and nourish only so many plants. Weeds compete for the same water – space – and sunlight.

You and I receive many words and promises every day. However, there is only one word which is faithful – trustworthy – and true. That is the word of God.

The distracted mind or heart reads and receives the word of God – but it is received like every other word.⁷ This word (the Bible) has top position and priority. We judge and discern all other words by this word. This is our blueprint and our true path.

It is difficult for God's word to be nurtured and to grow in a cluttered or distracted mind or soil. The latest data reveals that 74% of the homes in America are now online with the Internet. We receive an average of 52 emails a day between the home and office. Facebook now has 500 million accounts worldwide. It is as though God is saying, '**Can you spare me some time?**' All our latest gifts of technology offer us information – but only the Bible directs us to a **relationship** to God.

SOME SEED FELL ON GOOD GROUND.

Yes, despite the vigorous opposition to the word – it still yields a rich harvest.⁸ This is the central teaching of this lesson. Don't forget the good soil. Because of this assurance – the farmer's work and ours is never done. God does not call us to be perfect – but to be fruitful – plant the seed.

My friend and yours, **Laverne Hurst**, would occasionally wear a mustard seed necklace to church. It is a daily reminder to us that God's kingdom will triumph despite all the evidence to the contrary. It would not come by political revolution – "not with swords loud clashing – or the roll of stirring drums – but with deeds of love and mercy – the heavenly kingdom comes."

LASTLY, JESUS CHRIST WAS THE GREATEST SEED EVER PLANTED ON THIS EARTH.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

A few years ago, the late Dr. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe wrote a book entitled **WHAT IF JESUS HAD NEVER BEEN BORN.**

This book – along with a few others written – shares how impoverished our world would be today without the impact that Christ – and his life poured into others – has made upon our world. Think of:

- The hospitals that have been built.
- The colleges and universities established.
- The founding of the Red Cross and Good Will Industries.
- The abolition of slavery.
- The building of orphanages.
- The shelters for homeless people.
- The enactment of child labor laws.
- The missionary work around the world preventing unnecessary human suffering.
- The influence upon the Magna Carta.
- Our own Bill of Rights.
- The greatest literature ever penned.
- The greatest music ever written and performed.
- The greatest works of art ever created.
- The fueling of the Civil Rights Movement.
- The invention of sign language for the deaf – and the Braille system for the blind.
- Doctors, lawyers, teachers, pastors who have given of themselves to serve others.

You can add more from your own experience.

I close today with this familiar writing – I hope you hear it anew. It is entitled,

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew
Up in another obscure village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until
He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He
Never had a family or owned a home.

He never set foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles
from the place He was born. He never wrote a book, or held an office. He
did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.

While He was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against
Him. His friends deserted him. He was turned over to His enemies, and
went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two
thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece
of property He had – His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and
laid in a borrowed grave.

Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure
for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the
navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the
kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man

upon his earth as powerfully as this **“One Solitary Life.”**⁹

That was and is ‘Good Seed.’ Be sure this Good Seed is deeply planted in your heart.

The best time to plant this Good Seed was yesterday – the second best time is **today!**

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1542.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, May 4th devotional.

³ Ibid, Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, May 5th devotional.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1550.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, [et.al], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR B,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1993, first edition, page 311.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION**, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, ILL, 1980, page 12.

⁷ Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1549.

⁸ **“The New Interpreter’s Bible, VOLUME 8 – MATTHEW-MARK,”** Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1995, page 574.

⁹ The writing “One Solitary Life” is often referred to as ‘Author Unknown’ or ‘Anonymous.’ Recent research has this writing attributed to Dr. James Allen Francis in 1926 in a sermon preached at the First Baptist Church of Los Angeles. Half of the Internet search gives credit to Dr. Francis and others do not. A version of this writing appears in a book by Dr. James Allen Francis entitled **THE REAL JESUS and Other Sermons**, Judson Press, 1926, pages 123-124. Evidently there are different versions of this significant writing. I have heard it at the Radio City Music Hall in their Annual Christmas Program and have received it on Christmas cards down through the years.