

How we respond to God's Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Keep your Bible open at that passage, page 1005 and Mark chapter 4, as we look at these verses together. You find inside the service sheet an outline of where we're going with this passage.

Now seeds can seem pretty unspectacular, can't they? And yet they have properties that are nothing short of superpowers. New insights into the earliest events of seed germination have been discovered by an international team of researchers from the University of Münster in Germany.

And they discovered that plant seeds can store their energy in a dry state for years, only to suddenly release it and then germinate.

And one striking recent example is with Death Valley in North America. Death Valley National Park, it's North America's hottest and driest place.

And yet some seeds that had been there in the dry and hot desert for decades were able to germinate after some rainfall and produce a rare and spectacular bloom several months later called Super Bloom.

[1 : 15] I don't want to douse it, of course, with my knowledge of botany, except to say that seeds have tremendous power in them, tremendous power for biological life.

So in the parable of the sower, Jesus speaks about another kind of seed, which is the seed of the word. The word is seed, and it's got tremendous power.

What's the word? The word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news of the kingdom is the seed, is the word that Jesus is speaking about. And it's powerful because it can change your life, and it's how God's kingdom grows in this world.

So Jesus tells this story of a farmer and what the farmer does when he sows his seed. And then Jesus gives his interpretation on this parable. And he's showing how we respond to God's kingdom.

He's forcing his listeners, both then and now, us today, to ask, how am I responding to the good news of Jesus Christ? How is it taking root in my heart and bearing fruit in my life?

[2 : 27] And so we're going to look at three points this afternoon. First is the point of the parable, which is to hear, verse 1 to 9. Second, the purpose of parables, it's to divide, verse 10 to 13.

And then third, the people in the parable. And Jesus is after our response, verse 14 to 20. So the point of the parable, the purpose of parables, and then the people in the parable.

So first of all, the point of the parable is to hear. So, so far in Mark's gospel, Jesus' priority has been preaching and teaching. And so here again, if you look down, verse 1 and 2, what happens?

Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. Just picture the scene. The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat, sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

And then he began to teach them many things by parables. What's a parable? A parable is a vivid story or an analogy drawn from everyday life.

- [3 : 35] And really they're like word pictures. Word pictures that are designed to communicate important truths. And so what is the point of this parable? Well, notice that Jesus is speaking to a large crowd.
- So see how he begins in verse 3. He says, listen. The farmer went out to sow his seed. Jesus begins with this summons for his hearers to listen.
- And that's how he ends too. So just look down at verse 9. Then Jesus said, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. So listening and hearing is crucial for grasping this parable.
- In fact, Jesus uses the word hear eight times in the parable. And so we need to hear. Because in life we can hear and yet not really hear.
- Just like on an airplane where they go through the safety information before the flight. You can sit there. You can hear words. But really switch off to what is being said. Thinking that it's completely irrelevant to you.
- [4 : 41] Unless of course the plane is about to crash. Then it's very relevant. And yet you switch off. You hear. But you don't hear. And so if we step back from the context of this parable.
- And we see the wider context. This parable comes just after Jesus has had some extreme reactions to his teaching. So there have been those who have been for Jesus.
- His disciples. And there are many others who have been against Jesus. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law. In fact the Pharisees and the Herodians were even plotting to kill Jesus at the end of chapter 3.
- Now where is it? Chapter 3 verse 6. So all these people had heard Jesus speaking. They'd heard words from his mouth. And some have listened to him.
- Whereas others haven't. And so Jesus tells this parable to draw this out. Because it's emphasising the response to Jesus and his teaching. And it's a perfect story for an agrarian society like theirs.
- [5 : 46] And it's describing this first century farmer scattering his seeds far and wide. And his seed reaches four different kinds of soil. So see verse 4. Some seed falls on the path.
- But the birds come and eat it up. Secondly. See verse 5 and 6. Some seed falls on rocky places. But there wasn't much soil. So the plants didn't last.
- And thirdly. Look at verse 7. Some seed falls among thorns. But they choke the plants. And then fourthly. Look at verse 8. Some seed falls into good soil.
- So it grew and produced a massive harvest. And so the parable. As Jesus goes on to explain. It's about how we respond to the seed.
- Which is the word of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news of the kingdom. It's about how we respond to it. But before we get to this.
- [6 : 43] We need to see that this is not just a parable about us. It's also a parable about Jesus. Because Jesus is saying something significant here about himself.
- Jesus is the king. And this is how his kingdom grows. Back then and now. If you were here when we began Mark's gospel early on.
- The first recorded words of Jesus in Mark chapter 1 verse 15 were these. The time has come. He said the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.
- And so with the coming of Jesus. The kingdom of God is near. And so this parable is describing the inbreaking of God's kingdom in this world. Which is going to increase and multiply.
- As Jesus describes there in verse 8. And so it's going to grow as Jesus proclaims his message. And as men and women respond to it.

[7 : 42] So everything depends on how one hears. Verse 9. Then Jesus said whoever has ears to hear. Let them hear. So you can listen to Jesus.

But fail to hear. You can read the Bible. But fail to take it in. You can listen to the good news about him. The gospel.

The good news of the kingdom. And yet still not have a clue about what Jesus is about. So the point of this parable is to hear. It's to hear. That's the first point.

Second point is the purpose of parables. And that's to divide. And the next scene is sandwiched between the parable. And then Jesus' interpretation of it.

And it's a scene where Jesus is now away from the large crowd. And Jesus is alone with his disciples. The twelve and some others. So look down at verse 10.

[8 : 38] 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 you might turn and be forgiven.

So do you get that? Jesus spoke to the large crowd in parables. But then he explains to his disciples in private. Well why?

Because the disciples are the ones who want to understand what Jesus is saying. Whereas the crowd don't. That's why Jesus says in verse 11. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

Jesus is referring to what was hidden in the past. But now has been revealed. Because now God is revealing his kingdom in Jesus.

[9 : 43] And so Jesus is unpacking what this means for the twelve. For his disciples. And some others. So he's also saying. Not everybody is going to get what I'm saying when I talk in parables.

Because the purpose of parables is to provoke a response. So there are those who will want to listen to what Jesus is saying. And those who don't want to listen.

So parables divide people according to how they hear. And listen to Jesus. Parables in a sense act like a filter. That separate people from one another.

So those on the inside. The disciples will hear and understand. But those on the outside won't. That's where Jesus uses this quotation from Isaiah chapter 6.

In Isaiah God had promised to judge his people. Because they didn't listen to him. And so God sent Isaiah as a prophet to the people. And yet the people stubbornly rejected God's salvation.

[10 : 47] They couldn't see or hear. Because they were spiritually blind and deaf. And Jesus is faced with the same kind of stubborn opposition here.

Same kind of stubborn rejection. And so Jesus' parables would function like the teaching of Isaiah. Isaiah. Jesus was teaching about himself and his kingdom through parables.

And as he did so, it would blind and deafen and harden people. And it sounds strange, doesn't it? As if to say, well, Jesus doesn't want people to get what he's saying.

Well, the parables are meant to confirm the state of people's hearts towards Jesus Christ. So they divide people. So whenever the message of Jesus goes out, whether from Jesus or from those today.

Whenever the message goes out, some people are being judged by God. Whereas others are being saved by God. And that's why people, whether then or now, can hear the good use of Jesus.

[11 : 54] But still have absolutely no clue about it. The message only confirms their blindness, deafness and hardness of heart towards Jesus.

So we can either listen to Jesus because we want to understand. Or we can ignore Jesus and misunderstand. Insiders will be given the secret of the kingdom of God.

Whereas outsiders will be confirmed in their unbelief. And it doesn't mean, of course, that people can never believe. But we'll never be given the secret of the kingdom of God if we refuse to listen to Jesus.

So the parable of the sower is meant to help us grasp all parables. That's what Jesus says, verse 13. Don't you understand this parable?

How then will you understand any parable? So every parable is teaching us about Jesus and about the kingdom of God. Where their purpose is to reveal our hearts, whether we are for Jesus and his kingdom or against him.

[13 : 02] So parables divide. That's the second point. Thirdly, the people in the parable. And here we see the responses. So Jesus says in verse 14, the farmer sows the word.

So what then happens when the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good use of the kingdom goes out? Well, Jesus gives these four responses. First, some people are like seed along the path.

Verse 15 says, 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. So in some people, the word is snatched by Satan.

It goes in one ear and out the other. It's like seed bouncing off a path where nothing happens. So the word makes no impact because it doesn't penetrate deep into the heart.

[14 : 05] There's nothing wrong with the word. The word is powerful. But Satan is always there, ready to snatch it away. And the reality is that this happens often.

It even happened to Jesus. And yet it's so sad. It's so sad when someone is so hard that they don't even take in any of the good news about Jesus.

But that happens. And so this is a warning, isn't it? Because the word of God can come to us. We can even sit in church. We can be there in body, but not in mind.

And so the word can make no impact on our lives. We can switch off to what God is saying. We can walk out the door and never think about what was said ever again.

So Satan can block the word from making any impression on our lives. And so it's just wasted. Secondly, there's the seed on rocky places.

[15 : 06] Verse 16 and 17. Others, like seeds sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no roots, they last only a short time.

When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. So in some people the word is scorched by trouble. So the word goes in, but not deeply enough.

It's received with joy. It's received with joy. And there's great potential, but it doesn't last. So Jesus is describing here the excitement of an initial good response in people who ultimately only end up being fear-weather friends of Jesus.

So when the going gets tough, they don't keep going. Some people will happily attend church every week for a while. They'll hear the Bible message.

They'll even agree with everything that's being said. They may even respond to it for a while. But because it's only a superficial response, then they quickly fall away.

[16 : 06] When trouble comes and they're persecuted at home, at school, at work, for whatever reason, whether big or small, when they suffer to some extent, the cost becomes too much and they decide to give up.

Because there's never been any real depth to their faith. The gospel hasn't sunk deep enough down into their hearts. I think suffering is one of the best tests as to whether we're a genuine follower of Jesus Christ.

Because following Jesus is always going to be costly. He said so himself. And if we're not a real Christian, or really a Christian, then we'll just give up and we'll settle for an easier life.

And you've probably seen this in people just as I have. There are people that I studied at university with and was involved in the Christian union with when I was in my early 20s.

And they followed Jesus with excitement, way back then. But they don't follow Jesus anymore. And some, today we put it down to just going through a phase. I was just going through a phase back then.

[17 : 19] I was keen, but now I've really grown up. I understand the way the world works. And those childish Christian beliefs are no longer mine. I've grown up. And that's what Jesus is saying here.

Some people show great potential at the beginning, but they never continue. And so let's never think that this couldn't be you or me. Because it could.

And thirdly, there's the seed among thorns. Verse 18 and 19. Still others, like seeds, 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.

So in some people, the word is choked by distractions. So again, the word goes out, but it bears no fruit because it's choked by the concerns of this world.

And so we need to be careful that this doesn't happen to us, don't we? Where worldly matters can squeeze out God's word and our concern for spiritual matters.

[18 : 24] And Jesus tells us how easily this happens. He mentions two seductions that choke the impact of God's word in our lives. The first is worries and the second is wealth.

So there are worries, the worries of this life. And we all have worries about family, children, marriage, singleness, home, job, money, future, security, and so on and so on.

Worry can be avoided. But worries can overwhelm us. They can preoccupy us. They can distract us so much that they choke the word from doing its work in our lives.

So all these things, as good as they are, can still distract us from the most important thing, which is allowing the word of God to work in our hearts, letting it shape us, rather than letting their worries shape us.

And then there's a second one, which is wealth. But he says the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things can choke the word. So the pursuit of wealth in this world can compete with our pursuit of God.

[19 : 36] And of course we have to earn money. That's no bad thing. But wealth can be deceitful if we believe that it's wealth that will give us happiness and security instead of God.

And we'll know that we're being seduced by wealth if we make our choices based on wealth rather than based on God's kingdom. So that might be in the job we choose, or the hours we decide to work, or the house we live in, or the leisure activities that we pursue, or the car we buy, or the clothes we wear.

All these things are choices. And they tell us whether we are pursuing wealth or we're pursuing God's kingdom. And so we need to be careful that wealth and the desires for other things don't choke the spiritual life out of us.

By getting in the way of us following Jesus and bearing fruit for him. So three negative responses, but there's an encouragement at the end because Jesus says some people are like seed on good soil.

Verse 20. Others like seed sown on good soil hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop. Some 30, some 60, some 100 times what was sown.

[20 : 50] So in some people the word is amazingly fruitful. So the word goes in like seed going into good soil and it's allowed to do its work and the response is fantastic.

That's why the word has got to take root in our lives. The powerful seed, the word, when it lands in the right kind of soil will produce this amazing harvest.

And so we need to hear the word and accept it if it's going to bear fruit. It's how we grow and it's how God's kingdom grows.

So let's pull this together just as we close with the practice of the parable. Because there's application here for soils and for sewers. So first of all, soils. The parable forces us to examine ourselves and our response to the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so the question for each of us is, which of these four soils best describes me? These soils are ultimately unfruitful.

[21 : 55] And so we should hear the warning and make sure we're not like the people that Jesus describes. Because we can all hear and yet still fail to hear what Jesus is saying.

So not everybody who shows positive signs of kingdom life actually has the word rooted in their hearts and will bear fruit.

So you see, we can all belong to a church, maybe like Christ Church Glasgow. We can listen to the word. Yet if the word is snatched by Satan or scorched by trouble or choked by distractions, it won't bear fruit.

So Jesus wants us to be like the good soil that does bear fruit. Where we don't just listen, but we hear the word and accept it so that it might produce a harvest in our lives.

And so Jesus is speaking here about a significant issue. And we need to examine ourselves as to how we respond to his word.

[23 : 01] So there's the soils, but there's also sores. Because Jesus is the king and the king has enlisted us in his work of growing his kingdom.

And so following Jesus means that we are to be sores of the seed of God's word. The word of the gospel must be spread as far and as wide as possible. And as it is, people will respond to it in different ways and will produce different results.

And Jesus is so realistic about this. That's why I love this parable. Because he manages our expectations so that we're not disappointed and we're not discouraged when we do his work.

And so we must expect, according to this parable, that the majority of people that we speak to about Jesus, the majority will not or will only superficially respond to the word.

And most people that we speak to about Jesus and the good news of him are going to reject it. That will be our experience, and it is my experience, of sowing the word.

[24 : 10] Sadly, the good news of Jesus Christ makes no lasting impact on loads and loads of people. And yet we should also be encouraged because Jesus tells us that there will be people who accept the word, and those who do accept the word will bear fruit, and there will be this amazing harvest.

And so we must keep sowing the seed of the word because it's going to bear fruit. Gardening is hard work. If you want evidence, come and see my garden and see how bad it is.

And you'll see that gardening requires patience. You have to get down on your knees and a little travel and scoop up mud and stick things in and water them. And it requires perseverance.

And I can't be bothered spending my time doing that. And so what Jesus is saying here is that telling people about him is time consuming. And it is hard work.

But he's also saying it is worth all the effort. It certainly is. Because if we want to see people coming to faith in Jesus, and we do, then we have got to find ways of showing them Jesus Christ in his word.

[25 : 24] We've got to look for opportunities and pray for people to respond to the good news about Jesus. And so that means we've got to keep telling people about Jesus Christ.

Never stop telling people about Jesus. Because that's the most important, and it's the most powerful, and it's the most fruitful New Year's resolution that we can make.

I don't know what your New Year's resolutions are. But surely telling more people about Jesus has got to be the priority. To tell people that Jesus is Lord, that he is Saviour, that he came, he lived, he died, he rose again, and he came to give us life in all its fullness.

And so we need to spread the word of Jesus. Our church needs to spread the word of Jesus. Because although many people do reject it, the majority, there are some, the minority, we do accept it.

And when we accept it, we produce abundant fruit. Because while this parable is about us, it's also about Jesus Christ.

[26 : 35] Because it shows us how the king grows his kingdom. It shows us how the king intends for his church to advance across this world. It's through spreading his word.

So Jesus brought in God's kingdom through proclaiming the gospel. And still, as the word of God goes out, the kingdom grows. It grows to produce a harvest beyond compare.

And guess what? Jesus' strategy is successful. What he says here will always succeed. And so we've got the word.

We've got it in our hands. It's in our people. We've got the word. And so we need to use the word. The word has the power. It's not your skill or my skill. It's not how clever we are or how smart we are or how funky we are.

By telling people about Jesus Christ. The seed, the word has the power. It's the good news of salvation for you, for me, for all the people that we know.

[27 : 39] And that is the strategy for saving. There is no other strategy. So let's make it our resolution. Share the good news about Jesus. To go and share it with the world.

And watch and see what God does. Let's pray. Thank you, God, for your word to us. Through this parable that the Lord Jesus Christ told.

We thank you for the power of the seed that is the word of God. To change lives like ours. And to grow the kingdom across this globe. Give us that confidence in your word to do its work.

Help us to be faithful to telling people about Jesus. Because only he can change lives. Only this word, the word of the gospel.

The word of the kingdom. The good news about Jesus can change anything. So may it do that deep work of change in our own hearts. And in our lives.

[28 : 41] And through us out into this world. Until the day that Jesus returns. And your perfected kingdom comes. And we are with you forever.

So keep us focused. In doing this tireless work. Of sharing Jesus. With the people we know. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.