

25-How Do You Hear the Word?

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Series on Mark
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Bible Text: Mark 4:1-20
Preached on: Sunday, January 21, 2018

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We turn now to the Gospel of Mark 4:1-20. Mark 4:1-20. I also want to read four verses from Psalm 139 in relation to this being the sanctity of life Sunday.

1 And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. 2 And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, 3 Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: 4 And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. 5 And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: 6 But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. 7 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. 8 And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. 9 And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. 10 And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. 11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: 12 That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. 13 And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables? 14 The sower soweth the word. 15 And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. 16 And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. 18 And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, 19 And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other

things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. 20 And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

And then Psalm 139:13-16.

13 For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. 14 I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. 15 My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. 16 Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.

Thus far the reading of sacred Scripture.

Dear congregation, sometimes we wonder, don't we, when the Supreme Court justices made that infamous decision now 45 years ago, if they had any conception of what they were doing, or if they would have paused if they knew that 45 years later we Americans would have killed 60 million babies in these 45 years? Meanwhile, more and more scientific evidence has come forward so that this entire nation knows, if not based on the word of God, if not even from a Christian perspective, that every child aborted is murdered because it is life from the moment of initial conception. And that is certainly made clear for us in these four verses that we read from Psalm 139:13-16. God is the Lord, David is saying, for my initial conception. In verse 13 he's teaching us that God is the Lord of each person's body and soul, "Thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb." In verse 14, he's saying he is the Lord who deserves to be wondered and praised, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are they works; and that my soul knoweth right well." And in verse 25 he presents himself as God the Lord who makes each child as a sacred work of art, "My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect." And at the end of verse 16, he presents himself as God the Lord of purpose and of grace in Christ when he says, "in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them." God superintends the entire process of conception, of life, of renewed spiritual life, of spiritual adoption into the family of God.

The last two days I was privileged to be in Mississippi giving four addresses at a conference on spiritual adoption but it made me think in these days of all the parents around the world who are longing for children and can't have any, and the mothers with all the guilt that they accrue when they abort their babies instead of carrying them full-term, and if they can't raise them, to give them up into the arms of these waiting parents to be. Oh, that God would awaken not only this country but the whole world. The numbers I gave you are just this nation. The real numbers of this world are triple that.

And so every 5-20 seconds somewhere around the world, babies being killed, murdered in the womb of the mother. May God fill us with righteous anger with unceasing prayer and with profound conviction that this atrocity, this human holocaust that makes every other holocaust in the world small compared to this one, that we would awaken and cry out to the heavens and take action as we are enabled to turn the tide of this tremendous evil, this blasphemy in the face of God who is a giver of life and is the only one who has the right to take it. But even as physical abortion is so dreadful, so is spiritual abortion and we, in a sense, are committing spiritual abortion on our own souls when we hear the word of God, hear the way of life spiritually and reject it and murder our own souls by not being good hearers of the word, and that's our focus this morning, that we might be good hearers, not soul-killing hearers of the word of God as it comes to us from week to week.

So we turn, then, in our series on Mark to Mark 4 and we look at verses 1 through 20 under the them "How Do You Hear the Word of God?" And we'll look at three thoughts: why did Jesus speak in parables; second, who are the false kinds of hearers; and third, who is the true hearer? How do you hear the word of God, three questions, why did Jesus speak in parables; who are the unfruitful hearers; and who are the fruitful hearers.

In our series on the Gospel of Mark, we've moved through three chapters now where we've been witnessing Jesus going about to establish the kingdom of God or as sometimes it's called, the kingdom of heaven. And the word "kingdom," perhaps you recall, is best defined as simply "the reign or the rule of God." It doesn't refer to a place but it refers to an authority, the authority of God in Jesus Christ. And repeatedly in these three chapters, we've seen Jesus breaking through, invading the world, if you will, through his teaching and his miracles, and as he does so to bring the kingdom of God, he's been meeting increasing opposition, opposition coming from all sides from various groups of people, the religious establishment as well as the indifferent, and by and large Jesus' message, the message of life, has been rejected by men.

Well, in chapter 4, Jesus turns his attention to this seeming anomaly: why is the kingdom of heaven meeting with such opposition? Why is the kingdom of heaven so seemingly powerless, so few responding favorably to it? And Jesus addresses this question by bringing us a parable, the first parable in the book of the Gospel of Mark, but in this parable and three more that he will give in Mark, not nearly as many as he gives in Matthew and Luke, by the way, Jesus will give us a rather full answer to these questions.

So in verses 1 and 2 which provides us with the setting of the parable of the sower, we're told he specifically speaks in parables, so we want to look at that first. Then in verses 3 through 9, Jesus tells us the parable. Verses 10 through 13, he goes back to verses 1 and 2 and describes why he tells us things in parables. And then in verses 14 through 20, he interprets going back to verses 3 and 9 the parable he's told. And so really there's three things going on here, there's the whole question of why he's talking in parables, and then there's the question of the first parable, what kind of hearer am I? Am I a false hearer, and he gives three kinds of false hearers, or am I a true hearer of the word of God, a good

hearer, receiving the word in well-prepared soil? So those are the three points this morning.

Now Jesus is sitting in a boat on the edge of the Sea of Galilee and as was commonly done in those days, he was using the acoustic effect of the still water and the kind of theatrical setting where over against the hills he could speak into the people, his voice could carry, the water could act as a sounding board and he would be able to be heard by the thousands that were gathered to hear him. Mark calls the multitude in chapter 4 a great multitude, the first time he uses that word, meaning that there was no doubt thousands of people present.

Now Jesus, then, begins to speak in parables and that raises the question: what is a parable? Well, the simplest definition is it's an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. That's not a bad definition but we may say to get it more nuanced, a parable is a story drawn from a world of familiar people, familiar things, used to convey some unfamiliar spiritual truth that builds from the known to the unknown. Etymologically, the word "parable" means "to cast alongside by way of comparison." So you compare something physical, earthly, to some spiritual truth so that the spiritual truth is grasped, illustrated, and passes on instruction.

Now the goal of a parable is, therefore, to teach spiritual and heavenly truths but to teach them in attractive ways. A parable is simple, it's succinct, this is one of the longest parables, actually. It's engaging. It always has elements of surprise and reversals. It gets your attention and it's a story and people like stories. So parables are effective teaching tools and Jesus' parables are always God-centered or Christ-centered. They almost always, by the way, underscore man's responsibility, and they also emphasize the graciousness of the Gospel, but all the parables are related to the kingdom of God. One scholar, pastor/scholar, has rightly divided the parables, I believe, into four sections: those parables that speak about entering God's kingdom, parables of faith and repentance and conversion; secondly, parables that talk about growing in God's kingdom, spiritual growth individually, in the church, and so on; and thirdly, parables that talk about living in God's kingdom, the Christian life, relationship to the word of God like the parable of the sower this morning, or love, or forgiveness, or outreach, or restoration; and then there are some parables that talk about finishing in God's kingdom, parables that talk about the end in final judgment. But all the parables in one way or another can be drawn back to the reign and rule of God, the kingdom of God: entering it, growing in it, living in it, finishing it.

Now the parables have a variety of goals in terms of Jesus' teaching. A parable makes teaching truth more palatable and at the same time more convicting. Think about the parable that Nathan told David and then said, "Thou art the man!" How convicting it was for David. A parable also makes Jesus' teaching less threatening for his own ministry. The Pharisees couldn't get hold of him and arrest him as easily when he spoke in parables because they couldn't nail it down. A parable also from Jesus' part was important because it fulfilled Old Testament prophecy which spoke about the Messiah to come. Psalm 78 is speaking in parables. But then there's a surprising element as well, a parable was not only

meant to reveal but also to conceal, not only to help understanding but to hide understanding, and that is what is focused on actually here in the Gospel of Mark. You see, Jesus says in verses 10 through 13 that, "It's given to you disciples to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God and I will teach them to you in parables, but to them that are without, or those who are outside of my disciples, these things are done in parables that they may see and not perceive," verse 12 says, "and hearing they may hear and not understand lest at any time they should be converted and their sins should be forgiven them."

So this is rather surprising. On the one side parables teach things clearly, and on the other side they hide things remarkably. So to the disciples who truly followed and believed in Jesus, to them they are given the understanding when they hear the parable and they hear Jesus' explanation in particular in this case, they understand and they believe it, they embrace it and they want to follow it. But to the unbeliever, you see, parables are confusing. They don't grasp it. The truth is hidden from them. They're outside of the kingdom and they don't get its truths.

Now the Matthew account of this Mark parable goes into more detail in Matthew 13:14-15 and refers specifically to the prophecy of Isaiah, quoting Isaiah 6:9 and 10. That's where Isaiah, you remember, had the coal of the altar touch his lips, he was to go out to bring God's word, and he was to speak in parables so that his message will harden the hearts of many in Judah. So even when the word of God thundered in their presence, their blind eyes and their deaf ears would keep them from turning and finding forgiveness. And so the preaching of Isaiah would have the same effect as the preaching of Jesus. It would bring enlightenment to the people of God but bring confusion and darkness to the unbeliever.

So the word of God, in a sense that's true in every sense of the word of God but particularly in parables, it lightens his people and hardens his enemies, and this occurs, Matthew tells us, in accord with God's sovereign purpose and Jesus implies the same here in the Mark account in verse 11 and 12. God gives to some the ability to understand the issues of the kingdom of heaven, to others he does not, and this is in accord with God's holy sovereignty.

Now there are people who say this is a very proud position to take. It seems to make Christians better and more capable than the masses. But that's not the point of this parable, nor is it the point that Matthew stresses in the parallel account. Really what Jesus is stressing is that since his disciples are those to whom real understanding is given through parables, they bear a tremendous responsibility and they are to go out and proclaim his name. And in Matthew 13:16, Jesus makes it clear that his disciples are those who have been given the blessing of understanding the kingdom, so in verse 17 he tells them this blessing is something for which the great men and women of the Old Testament longed for, the giants of the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses and David. They longed to see what the disciples see, Jesus says, and to hear what the disciples heard. So to have this hearing ear and this understanding heart of understanding the

Gospel from the lips of Jesus is an unprecedented privilege and a tremendous responsibility and therefore hear ye the parable of the sower. That's what Jesus is saying.

Now because of this stunning privilege afforded them, the disciples were obligated to hear the parable of the sower with genuine understanding and that it would bear fruit in their lives. Having their eyes opened to see and their ears opened to hear means that they must see and they must listen and they must act upon what they hear. Now what does that have to do with us today? It has everything to do with us today. Actually what it tells us today is because we have the entire New Testament and we have also, we are also living on the other side of the cross and the resurrection and we have 2,000 years of guidance in church history by the Holy Spirit leading the church into various elements of truth based on the word of God, we have an even greater responsibility and an even greater privilege than if we had actually sat beside Jesus and were able to ask him questions. You see, although the disciples saw Jesus and listened to Jesus and ate with Jesus and walked with Jesus for three years in a physical tangible presence with God Almighty, we today living on this side of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ being in possession of the complete word of God, being endowed with the Holy Spirit who illuminates our minds to understand that word, we have a more sure complete word of revelation than the disciples had that day sitting in that boat, having opportunity to ask questions of the Son of God directly, and so we bear even greater responsibility. Hear therefore the parable of the sower. And what are we doing with that responsibility? Are we passing it on to others? Are we proclaiming it? Are we living it? Are we fruit-bearers? Are we good hearers of the word in the well-prepared soil of our hearts?

So Jesus proceeds then and he speaks about four kinds of hearers. Four kinds of hearers. Now what does that mean? Well, it means, first of all, as Jesus himself explains, that's the wonderful thing about this parable, Jesus himself gives us the explanation. We don't have to wonder what the truth is. He says the seed that is sown is the word of God. The sower is the one who declares the word, and that sower is ultimately, of course, Jesus himself, and through Jesus all his faithful servants who bring the word of God. But ultimately the sowing farmer is Jesus. He's broadcasting his word through proclamation and he's saying this word can reap eternal fruit in well-prepared soil. So it's not the skillful communicator, the professional organization, the beautifully produced literature, this series of meetings, the earnest friend, the super-church and all of its activities that in itself brings men from death to life. It's the farmer who sows the word and he is Jesus Christ ultimately whether he does it through the means of his servants or through some of these other means I mentioned. But the main thing is this: Jesus Christ teaching the word, reproving, correcting, instructing in righteousness, putting the truth in the heart and mind, germinating it, watering it, nourishing it until it becomes fruitful. That's what we can't do but what needs to be done for us. Even the servants of Christ can't do that. We don't have the power nor does any man. If Christ is not sowing the word, we have nothing. Without Christ working, we have nothing and we are nothing and we shall be nothing. He builds his church sovereignly, graciously, going forth, conquering, to conquer.

So through the book of Acts, for example, he's sowing abundantly in Samaria and in Antioch and Asia Minor and Greece and finally Rome, and then he strives across Europe

with his word, scattering the seed wherever he goes, leaving fruitful growth behind him. And today, he's the sower. Today, he's obviously walking through Latin America causing many many tens of thousands of conversions in Brazil and Columbia and other places. Sowing the seed. It's amazing what he's doing today in Brazil. Today, we just had, I just put a little Facebook post on a meeting we had this week with two men from Brazil who started a seminary and trying to work together with them to establish a ThM, a PhD program and they said, "We have 800 ministers that are lined up waiting for even a ThM program. They long to have more of the word of God just in this little new seminary, just five years old. That's hard to believe. I just put up that little Facebook post saying what we were doing, thinking, "Oh, this will hardly get any response, at least letting a few people know." A thousand likes and hundred shares and other comments, whatever the numbers were and people are just responding, "When is the program gonna start? We can't wait!" Oh, the hunger is like a hundred times what it is here in America right now. Jesus is walking through Brazil right now sowing the seed and people are responding, you see, and that's true in Africa as well, by the way, and in other Latin American Spanish speaking countries. God is doing wondrous things. The seed is being sown, being broadcast and people are responding by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

But responses can be different. People can be interested and respond and it doesn't necessarily mean that they're responding in the right way. That's the point of the parable. There are many different kinds of hearers, in fact, three kinds of false hearers Jesus says. So here, too, you see, God's sovereign purpose is at work. The same Gospel produces enlightenment or fruit in some and it produces little fruit or distorted fruit in others, and this is all in perfect harmony with God's sovereign will. And the results differ according to the soil of the heart. The state of the soil determines the fate of the seed, Jesus is saying. The way that someone responds to the Gospel does not reflect upon the power or the persuasiveness of the Gospel, the Gospel is Almighty, but it reflects upon the condition of that man or that woman's heart which either possesses or lacks the power of the Holy Spirit savingly according to his sovereign will. So the proclamation of the Gospel illicitly various responses that manifest the different hearts of different people, and so the point of this parable is that Jesus is facing the Pharisee, the Sadducee, the scribe, the disciple, the indifferent hearer, the calloused hearer, the curious hearer, and he's asking them all as he asks us all this morning, what kind of hearer are you?

So here is hearer #1: soil by the wayside. Soil by the wayside, that is, the hard-packed soil of a foot-trod path. Jesus mentions this back in verse 4 and then again in verse 15 he interprets it and he says when the seed of the word lands on this soil, it just stays on the surface, it doesn't penetrate. It's a foot-worn path. And Satan comes along and snatches away the word and the word of God is not even understood, it doesn't even penetrate the mind. It's lost before it's grasped. And so this is the kind of hearer who comes to church regularly and sits through the whole worship service and actually doesn't even really grasp what the minister is saying or doesn't want to grasp, and it doesn't do anything to this hearer.

Hopefully the majority of us here this morning are not like that, but the group envisioned by the wayside soil includes more than just the clearly hardened group, it includes those

whose consciences are so hard like a foot-worn path, nothing can penetrate their conscience, but it also includes the group who fail to understand the word of God. You see, you can come to church every Sunday actually for your whole life and never understand the word of God, never grasp the Gospel, and once the benediction is pronounced at the end of the sermon, you can go out into the church parking lot, you can go home careless, spiritually lazy, indifferent, sidetracked by unedifying conversation, and never actually get a single thought to what you heard in church for an hour and a half. It's unbelievable that we can be that hard, but that's how hard we can be, and so on Monday morning you don't even remember what was talked about the day before, and it's possible to do the same thing with the Bible. You can read the Scriptures every day and never pray over that word in earnest, and never meditate upon it in your heart. You can just check off, "I've done my daily devotions," but it never penetrates and you never bow before God and say, "I have offended God. I'm a lost sinner traveling to eternity. I need to be born again. It's my thoughts, my actions, my desires, that are reprehensible in God's sight." No, the seed is snatched away and you go from year to year, decade to decade, all that seed snatched away from Satan every Sunday. Such a waste. Such a tragedy.

My friend, is that you this morning? I hope not. I hope not. Do you meditate upon the word of God? Do you think back over the sermons you hear? When you read the Scriptures, do you pray over what you hear? Or is your heart like a holding tank where day after day and week after week the precious word of God is deposited only to be snatched away by Satan? Pray. Pray that you'll never be hardened soil by the wayside. Such a tragedy that is.

But secondly, there is another kind of hearer, Jesus says, who is like soil on stony ground. He explains that in verses 5 and 6 and then again in verses 16 and 17, and what he's referring to is this: in Palestine, there is a limestone bedrock very close to the top of the soil so in many places the layer of topsoil is extremely thin and this is what Jesus has a mind when he calls it the stony soil or the stony ground. It's not soil with rocks in it, but it's the thin layer of soil that rests on top of a rock shelf. And then as the spring and the summer move from warmth to outright heat, this thin layer of soil very quickly becomes parched with little rain in Israel, and while the crops in that soil might have sprung up quickly because there's little depth for the roots to go down, they soon will be scorched and wither and die as Jesus says in verse 6.

Now when Jesus explains this in verses 16 and 17, the point is that this particular kind of hearer responds with gladness and enthusiasm immediately to the Gospel because when the seed is sown in this thin soil, shallow soil, it immediately goes up because it can't go down, and so there's an initial though temporary manifestation of life, Jesus says in verse 17, and all of that is followed by a tragic withering of all signs of life under the sustained influence of temptation or tribulation or persecution. Jesus compares that to the sun coming out, and so when persecution or hardship or even the mundane regularity of life comes, the faith of these men and women and children evaporates.

There are many examples of, sad examples of this kind of supposed conversion because, you see, this kind of hearer, it seems like at first they're converted but it's little more than

an emotional reaction, it's little more than what our forefathers called temporary faith and people turn away, or if they see some tragedy or feel some opposition, they turn away. I spoke to a man on a plane not so long ago and he said he used to believe in God, he used to think he was a Christian, but he doesn't believe in God anymore because, well, when he was a young man, he had relatives that died in the holocaust, he said, and, "There cannot be a God and be a holocaust at the same time."

But we as Reformed people, we can take this up in a different way. When we first hear, when we first begin to understand outwardly the Gospel and how exciting it is, how it gives life meaning and purpose and structure, the wonders of the Scripture, the depths of God's truth, the profound capacity of Reformed theology to make sense of this world can thrill our mind and heart, our intellectual curiosity can be satisfied and there can be excitement instead of boredom. But when persecution comes in our personal lives or when things go in ways we don't expect and we experience cross providences, as the Puritans called it, well, our love for Reformed theology, for biblical truth can suddenly wax cold and we can be scorched by the heat of familiarity and deadening regularity and the cares, the persecution can trump the interest in spiritual things and our newfound faith withers and dies.

Is this you? Maybe you fear, maybe you fear, "I don't know. I don't know if I have saving faith or temporary faith. The roots don't go down very deep into me. I'm afraid of that. So maybe I just have temporary faith. Well, what is the difference between the two?" Well, it's this, let me give you five quick points. Temporary versus abiding. Temporary faith only lasts a little while, maybe some months, rarely a year. Well, is it possible a couple of years? I suppose but it's a temporary character. Saving faith is abiding. It deepens. It goes down into the soil. It develops a root system. 2. Temporary faith always folds up under persecution. It can't handle persecution. It turns away. Saving faith is strengthened under trials and persecution. Strengthened. It leans on God all the more. 3. Temporary faith is known for its rapid growth because it doesn't go down and its roots, it just goes up quickly. Saving faith usually is more gradual growth. The roots go down and the growth gradually grows up. 4. Temporary faith lacks humility, lacks true self-knowledge. Saving faith knows self-aborrence, self-doubts, learns to trust the Lord and not myself. 5. Temporary faith ultimately ends in self, ends in my own experiences, ends in my own emotions, my own joy. Saving faith drives me to Christ, always to Christ, to find my all in him and to seek the glory of God.

But then there's a third kind of hearer, the thorn-infested soil. This is the person who in the midst of thorns, you see. Jesus expounds this in verse 7 and he returns to it in verses 18 and 19 and what he's saying here is that the thorn-infested soil heart becomes unfruitful because the thorns choke out, the thorns and the weeds choke out the seed that is thrown among them. The seed doesn't necessarily altogether die but the plants don't bring forth fruit because they're choked, they're strangled by all the thorns and all the weeds.

Jesus tells us, even, what these weeds and thorns are. He says in verse 19, they are the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of the riches, and sinful, the lust of other things. The

lust of other things. So here's a trio of giants that have killed their thousands. A rather formidable comprehensive list: worldly cares, deceitful riches, sinful lusts of the flesh. They suffocate the growth of the word. They suffocate spiritual life.

First he says the cares of the world. Now in one sense it's legitimate, of course, to have cares in this world. We've got responsibilities. But you see, the difference here is that the cares of this life by the thorn-infested soil do not move that person to cast their cares upon Jesus as 1 Peter 5:7 tells us we must do. But the cares of this life then make us focus upon ourselves and we try to do it alone without Jesus, and we become concerned about ourselves perhaps or our own influence, our own prestige, our own popularity, and we care nothing about the life to come. It's the cares of this life dominate the cares of the life to come and so we carry on just wrapped up in ourselves and the cares of this life and we don't give thought and attention to things of eternity and it chokes the seed.

And then there's the deceitfulness of riches, Jesus says. Now riches in themselves are not inherently sinful any more than cares of this life are inherently sinful, and some wealthy people use their riches in wonderful ways, benevolent ways for the cause of God, but riches are deceitful when we imbibe the world's way of looking at them as if they can impart happiness or fulfillment. Riches can't do that. Riches may promise happiness and fulfillment, or seem to, but they don't give these gifts, and if they're not rightly handled, they often give what they don't promise: heartache and grief and distorted values. And then, too, riches can appear to be what they are not, they can appear to be abiding and durable but they're only temporary, and when centered upon, they choke out the seed of the word of God.

And then there's the lusts of the flesh. Now the word "lust" here actually does not mean just things like pornography, mental adultery, or physical adultery, or sinful passions, or sexual lust. It's a broader term. It also includes any kind of coveting, any kind of desire for any other thing, even legitimate things in themselves that still destroy the root system of any semblance of spiritual life.

And so the amazing thing about all three of these things is that inherently in themselves they are not necessarily bad but the problem with the thorny-grounded hearer is that he seeks to be a Christian without a deep and thorough work of real repentance and real faith and so he stays on the surface, he brings forth no fruit, and all these other things in life choke out the word of God.

J. C. Ryle put it so well, he said, "Some hearers of the Gospel have hearts like the thorny ground, they are they who attend to the preaching of Christ's truth and to a certain extent they obey it, they're understanding the sense to it, their judgment approves of it, their conscience is affected by it, their affections are in favor of it, they acknowledge it is alright and good and worthy to be received, they even abstain from many things which the Gospel condemns, they adopt many habits which the Gospel requires, but they unhappily stop short. Something appears to chain them down and they never get beyond a certain point in their religion and the grand secret of their condition is the world, the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the lust of other things prevent the word from

having its full effect in their souls, and therefore with everything apparently that is promising and favorable, in their spiritual state they stand still, they never come up to the full standard of New Testament Christianity. They bring forth no fruit to perfection. They are few faithful ministers of Christ who could not point to cases like these in their congregation and of all cases they are perhaps the most sad. They go so far and yet no further, to see so much and yet not to see it all, to approve of so much and yet not give Christ the heart. This is indeed most deplorable for Christ will have all our heart. Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."

John Owen put it this way, "We need to be killing sin or sin will be killing us." And that's the problem with a thorn-infested soil, the person doesn't kill sin. He let's sin be there and sin chokes, the thorn bush chokes the good seed and then we don't follow the advice of Evangelist which he gave Christian in "Pilgrim's Progress," let nothing this side of the world to come, let nothing on this side of the world to come get within you and take over you. Now pray, pray that you will not be a thorny-grounded hearer.

So there is the hardened heart, the impulsive shallow heart, the preoccupied strangled heart, but then there is also the well-prepared heart. Jesus says in verse 20, "these are they which are sown on good ground such as hear the word and receive it," and Luke adds in his account, "and keep it," and Mark says, "bring forth fruit." So four things. A true hearer hears the word and understands it, that's number 1. He receives it, number 2, he believes it, takes it to heart. 3. He keeps it. He strives to do it. And fourth, it brings forth fruit, fruit in different degrees, some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, some hundredfold. The Lord is sovereign. But the key point here, you see, is that the good hearer understands the word, receives it, wants to do it, and goes out to do it all in dependency on the Holy Spirit and he continues in it, Luke says, with patience. Isn't that interesting?

So you see, the good soil does not just suddenly understand the Gospel by some effortless magic or some act of self-will, but the Holy Spirit comes in his sovereign grace and gives him to understand the Gospel, to grasp the Gospel, and the Gospel becomes a throbbing desire within the soul that I not only understand it, but the things I don't understand about it, I want to run to Jesus for answers. I plead for understanding and light and when I'm confronted with a lack of clarity about the word, I don't just resort to indifference and let Satan snatch away the word, but I cry out in times of persecution and trial for application. I truly understand that Jesus does everything for a sinner that does nothing. I truly understand that there is salvation offered to the greatest of sinners. I truly bow in repentance and faith by the grace of the Holy Spirit and I use the means to understand the word, to receive it, to keep it, to do it. So the true hearer is in the word. He has the Bible. He reads the Bible. He loves the Bible. He wants to listen to preaching. He wants to get more of the word. He wants to pray back the word to God. He wants to meditate on the word. He wants to search out sin in his heart and repent of it. He wants to live by the word.

That's very different from the other kinds of hearers and the true hearer doesn't have this perfectly, of course. No, some bring forth thirtyfold, some sixty, some a hundred, some less, but the desire is there, you see, in a true hearer. He wants to bring forth fruit. He

wants to understand. He wants to obey it. He wants to receive it. He wants to do it and despite all his shortcomings the kingdom of God will be fruitful in the well-prepared soil. The roots will go down. Jesus will increase and I will decrease. And the fruits will go up and the kingdom will make progress in such a believer. Through ups and downs, there will be progressive sanctification, there will be a growing in the word of God, there will be faith and obedience and repentance and discipleship because the Holy Spirit acting sovereignly in that good soil will bring forth fruit by the Spirit's work for the kingdom of heaven, and so the King's purpose will be realized. His word of power will assure us of his kingdom's progress and the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, and they shall come from the north and the south and the east and the west to the marriage feast in heaven, a company that no man can number. The Christ who strides through Europe in the time of the New Testament, the Christ who's now striding through Latin America, the Christ who has sent reformations and revivals, and the Christ who even in dark times picks out a sinner here and there, who is still working in America though not as much as we would desire, that Christ will say on the day of judgment, "Behold, Father, here am I and all those whom thou hast given me. Those who have understood the word and received it and kept it, and by the grace of God brought forth fruit."

And that's to no credit of the believer himself. It's strictly the work of the Holy Spirit as a fruit of Jesus. Jesus is the man, the one man. Think about it, who when he fell into the ground and died, as it were, as the seed, what fruit came from his life. Think of the 12 apostles, how they spent themselves living and dying for Christ. How in one sermon Peter drew by the grace of the Spirit 3,000 men to Christ. Or think of the 500 on the Mount of Ascension and how within 20 years Paul could say that the Gospel has gone from the 12 into the entire world. And we think of all the millions of Christians around the globe today, those who are truly bearing fruit either 30, 60 or 100 fold. It's all the kingdom coming from one spreading to another the word of God, the word of God understood and received and believed and kept and shared, and the Spirit blessing it.

And so even this church, many of you can say by the grace of God, you know a time, approximate time in your life, maybe some of you an exact time, it makes no difference, but where the word of God penetrated you and you understood it and you understood the Gospel and you treasured it and you lived it and you obeyed it by the grace of God. And now you strive with all shortcoming to bear fruit. You see, we are a little microcosm here of the greater macrocosm of the kingdom of God all throughout the world, that is those of us who are true believers, conquered by Gospel seed, still running the race set before us, still looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, still producing some fruit by the grace of God. Oh, would to God it would be more, but his kingdom shall progress. That's the point here because God has determined to give honor and glory to his Son in this world. The Lord of glory who reigns still rolls up his sleeves and makes bare his arm and delivers many from their spiritual death. So God's promises in his word about his word being effective will not return to him void. We have to trust the one who makes the promise. We have to trust the one who keeps sowing the seed of the word. Also in our own lives and in the lives of our wandering children, and in the lives of our congregations, there can be no growth without the Holy Spirit. But God the Holy Ghost

will come and he will use the word for his own ends. He will make good hearers of the word. He will carry on his work faithfully.

So let's not sow weeds in each other's lives. Let's bring each other the word. Let's sow the word. Don't be carried away by the novelties of our day. Don't expect things from newfound fashions and ideas either in church worship or in mass evangelism movements that center on man. Be steadfast and do the work of the Lord and you will see fruit. God will bring fruit upon the hearing of his own word. It's his promise. It's his truth. We don't need new things. We need the old things made alive and powerful in our hearts. And so God will make everything effective in his own time, in his own way. Trust him. Go forward and when you think that you fail in evangelizing your daughter or your grandmother or your friend, remember just like a minister, don't personalize their rejection. Remember the sovereignty of God. Keep bringing them the word but God alone can make it fruitful. Trust that. Keep going. Keep sowing. Keep farming and though you carry the weight of disappointment for the rejected word, don't let that disappointment drive you to despair but let it drive you to God. "Do for my grandmother, do for my father, do for my child what I cannot do for him or her."

Oh, there's a work to be done. There's a harvest to be reaped and God will use his word in you and through you, and direct all things in the end to serve the wise counsel of his holy will. Rest in that. Rest in the sovereign electing God and his all-wise will and his all-wise purposes. But even as you rest in that, ask yourself the question: how am I responding to the Gospel today? What kind of a soil am I today? How do I hear the word of God today? Do I do it with understanding? Do I receive it? Do I keep it? And do I bear fruit?

Hear therefore the parable of the sower and see in this parable your need for Jesus, your need for the Holy Spirit, your need for the Gospel. Behold, a sower went out to sow. Amen.

Great good of heaven, bless thy word now. Don't let Satan come and pluck it away from hardened soil but, Lord, help us to examine ourselves, help us to know that we, too, may be sound hearers of the word and do convict those who are not, do help them to cry out, "Teach me to understand, to receive, to keep, to bear fruit upon they word." O God, use thy word, we pray, for our eternal gain. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SUNDAY MORNING

1/21/18

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Votum and Salutation

Psalter 349

Reading of the Law of God

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-20

Prayer

Psalter 215

Sermon Text: Mark 4:1-20

How Do You Hear the Word?

1. *Why did Jesus speak in parables?*

2. *Who are the false kinds of hearers?*

3. *Who is the true hearer?*

Psalter 88 (standing)

Sermon Conclusion

Closing Prayer

Psalter 328

Doxology of Praise (pg. 415)

Benediction

1. *Why did Jesus speak in parables?*

2. *Who is the first kind of false hearer of God's Word?*

3. *Who is the second kind of false hearer of God's Word?*

4. *Who is the third kind of false hearer of God's Word?*

5. *Who is the true hearer of God's Word?*

6. *How do you hear God's Word?*

7. *How can you be made and kept a true hearer of God's Word?*