



Speaker:
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The Seed of the Gospel

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 12 of 12

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We're looking at the first twenty or so verses of Mark's fourth chapter today.

Last week, I did say that this boat would reappear into the story. Jesus had made sure a boat was ready because he knew the crowds would become unmanageable. I also said that it was always his intention to use the boat as a platform for preaching! And the nature of this message was that of the *parable*.

Let's begin by reminding ourselves what a parable is. You may have heard it described as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning". It's a natural story with a spiritual lesson.

The Middle Eastern peoples have always used parables. And the twelfth century Jewish theologian and philosopher, Maimonides, wrote a great deal about parables and metaphors. And he spoke about the balance we need to get, and cautioned against looking too closely at the finer details.

So we'll try to discover a balanced view of this parable today.

Before we begin, I'd like to address this issue of using parables as a way to hide truth from people. I think the most obvious and startling fact is that **Jesus intended some not to be saved**. He used the parables on this occasion to be *unclear*. He WANTED most of the hearers to remain in darkness.

The other point is that parables are also used to make things clear. Jesus didn't think, *Right, I need to be unclear now. What I need is a good parable!* He simply chose to make parables a "blind spot" **for those hearers**. It's not that the sower parable is beyond understanding by the average man. He could have used the same parable elsewhere to bring *clarity* to the teaching. And anyone today can go into a bookshop, buy a Bible and read Jesus' explanation of the sower parable. So even those God's never going to save can understand them.

Jesus simply chose this way of depriving people of understanding.

- He could have withheld salvation from this crowd by speaking Spanish
- He could have withheld salvation from them by being somewhere else
- **He chose to withhold salvation from these people by making them unable to understand parables.**

He has the sovereign right to dispense salvation to some and withhold it from others. And it's carried out precisely, according to the purposes of election.

Let's get into it then.

Firstly, the seed is the word of God. The seed is being sown right now, to each of you.

But who is the sower in our passage? We can think of this referring firstly to Jesus Christ himself. God the Son came in human form and walked the same earth we're occupying right now.

And he taught. He preached the message of the kingdom: that God is the King of Kings, and he is calling people to be subjects of this kingdom. He sowed **gospel seed**.

He left his own home, the glorious, spiritual realm of the third heaven, and visited his field. The field is the world, and he sowed his seed with the intention that there would in due time be a great harvest.

And so it is with his servants. They too are to be thought of as "sowers". Some preach in church buildings like this. Others speak to people in the city centres, or climb on boxes and evangelise the masses who go to football matches. They might speak a brief word to a neighbour, post a Christian leaflet through a door, or post a comment about Christ on Facebook. Whatever the method, when you communicate the gospel message, you are a sower of God's seed.

So now we know what the seed is, and we know that the Christian, in partnership with the saviour, is a sower; let's consider what happens when this seed is sown.

Some of the seed sown by the farmer falls on the path. It's easy enough for the birds to see, and they immediately swoop down and take the seed. In his explanation, Jesus tells us that this picture is what happens with some people: they are given the seed of God's truth, but Satan comes and steals it from their minds.

Satan is involved. Whether it's that individual angel himself, or it's done through the agency of one of his millions of demons, Satan is the thief. How he steals this word I don't know. Perhaps he causes people to think about their Sunday dinner, or what will happen in the next episode of their favourite TV programme. However he does it, he ensures that the message has gone in one ear and out the other!

How important it is to listen! Turn to Rom 10:13-14. It says, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? **And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?** And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Even for the ones who have *been* redeemed, it's needful that they try to listen. I'm as guilty as anyone of struggling to maintain focus a lot of the time. It could be that I don't get enough sleep the night before, or I allow other thoughts to swamp my mind. Whatever it is, it's my fault. Could this picture describe you? Even just five minutes into this message, has it all been a blur? Then wake up! And I'll try to keep you awake.

So that was one kind of hearer. They just carry on shopping or whatever. They may attend church, though. They may go to every meeting. They may even get involved and help the church in some way. But for all this, they're just pew warmers, sitting in their bubble of darkness.

The second result of sowing mentioned here is that some seed falls on stony ground. I'm a recent convert to gardening, and I can see that stony ground that has only a thin covering of soil isn't much good for growing things. Our parable shows us that when seed falls into this type of ground, it can't put down proper roots. Its roots are shallow.

The plant starts growing. And for a while it flourishes, and looks like the good crops. But when the strong sun comes out, there's a problem. The lack of deep roots means there's no moisture, so the sun dries up the plant, and it withers and dies.

Amongst all the people who hear the gospel, some receive it with great and immediate enthusiasm. They often surprise us with their rapid conversion, and we might even thank God for this miracle of grace.

But there's something faulty with this apparent conversion. It's not an experience which began with true repentance. Instead, it was a quick decision to "choose Christ" for some reason or another. For some, they make these fake professions of faith because they don't like the feeling of being "left behind" when their friends claim to have been converted and get baptized. Sadly, it's very possible that the friends they're copying are as lost as them.

Or it could be they saw it as a way to gain respectability. You might consider that when churchgoing was respectable, churches were full to the rafters. Now it's less so, many churches have all but emptied.

Or it could be the novelty of a new way of life which attracted them. Some are restless and are always looking for the next project in life.

But this person didn't have proper roots. You see, if you're to become a child of God, you have to have Christ Jesus as your root. You need that strength to hold you up and nourish you. It says in Proverbs 12 and verse 3: "A man shall not be established ["made firm"] by wickedness; but the root of the righteous shall not be moved."

The one in our parable **hasn't** been brought to the point where they feel that the only remedy for their sinful state is Jesus. They **haven't** counted the cost of being a follower of Christ. They just want to launch out recklessly into this new way of life.

Some of you may have met people like this. Their heart isn't prepared soil, but is stony. And although they sit in our congregations, professing to be believers, they are still **dead in sin**.

Their doctrine might be sound, but it's head knowledge only. They draw near to God with their mouth, but their heart is far from him. Their heart of stone hasn't been replaced with a new heart of flesh by God. It remains stony.

If you are one of the very few people in this world who belong to God, then be assured that he will test you. He will send evil as well as good your way. But if you're a believer you'll have the faith to know he "does all things well".

The hearer in our account is sent a test. Some persecution comes his way. It doesn't have to be anything major. It could be that he realises his faith could lose him friends or family. He could face losing his job. He risks the business he's built up over many years. Whatever it is,

something happens which makes him think, “No thank you. If this is what happens to a Christian then you can count me out!”

This reminded me of that great little book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The character Pilgrim left the City of Destruction accompanied by another, called Pliable. Not long into their journey, they stumbled into a swamp called the Slough of Despond. It was one of the trials which they had to face. Here’s what it says:

“At this Pliable began to be offended, and angrily said to his fellow, ‘Is this the happiness you have told me all this while of? If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect betwixt this and our journey’s end? May I get out again with my life, you shall possess the brave country alone for me.’ And, with that, he gave a desperate struggle or two, and got out of the mire on that side of the slough which was next to his own house: so away he went, and Christian saw him no more.”

In that story, the end of Pliable was a sorry tale. And in real life, the end of the man or woman who has been faking their belief is terrible. They deny God as quickly as they claimed him. And they become what the Bible calls “apostates”, forever abandoned by God.

Let’s move on to our third example.

The seed here doesn’t vanish straight away. And it doesn’t fall on stony ground, so it puts down some kind of roots. The problem here is that the ground isn’t as sound as is first thought. The ground is dominated by weeds. The plant grows a bit, but is soon overcome by thorns.

Jesus shows that this refers to a man who apparently believes, but allows himself to be distracted from the Lord’s work. It’s said that these distractions include “the cares of this world” and “the deceitfulness of riches”. What do they mean?

The “cares of this world” could be anything which takes his attention. And the problem is that it takes *so much* of his attention that the effects on his life which you’d expect from a believer don’t materialise.

Now listen: the responsibilities which pull the man away from the Lord could be legitimate. It’s good to work for a living. It’s good to spend time with your family. It’s good to fight against injustice. **But it’s the amount of time you devote to them which matters.**

I have a family, and spend time with them. I have hobbies and interests, like shooting and fishing, which take up some of my time. There’s nothing wrong with any of these. But if I allow any of them to get in the way of my ministry, then there’s a problem.

Then there’s the issue of money. What does the Bible say? You all know it. It’s found in 1 Timothy, chapter 6 and verse 6: “...godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment [or clothes] let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich [they that want to be rich] fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil [that is, all kinds of evil].”

And if my Christian life is completely overshadowed by these things, you have every right to question whether I'm even saved.

The man described by the parable is in just that position. For whatever reason, whether a legitimate responsibility or a foolish greed for money, it was the ruin of him.

Note that thorns in the Bible symbolise the curse. And this man is a product of the curse. Like you and I, he is a child of Adam, and he shares his father's fate by being subject to a fallen nature within and a cursed creation without. And so ends the hope of that man. He will share the same awful judgement as the ignorant shopper, the man who throws the tract in the bin, the inattentive pew warmer and the false professor.

Finally, we have if you like a *success* in the scattering of the seed. Some seed falls on good ground. It's proper soil, it's not stony, and it's not overtaken with weeds. In other words, it's prepared.

The seed falls onto it and takes good root. In its proper time it grows. And unlike the thorn covered plant, it bears fruit. Not just a little bit, but a lot.

Here is pictured for us the result of the true conversion of a sinner to God. The gospel seed is received gladly. The message convinces the man that not only is he a sinner in the hands of a holy God, but that his sin **must** be punished. After all, God cannot "let people off" unless the proper punishment has been exacted.

The man realises that the world has been visited by a redeemer, one who can save him from the terrible fate he deserves. He is convinced that this encounter with the powerful gospel message is no accident, and he believes that the death of Jesus Christ had something to do with him. He is persuaded that *somehow* his sin was transferred to Jesus. And God the Father punished his own Son with unimaginable fury in this man's place. HE BELIEVES THE PENALTY HAS BEEN PAID....AND HE GOES FREE. His sins forgiven.

Oh this man understood the message with his mind, just like the previous two did. But it was far more than that. His stony heart was removed, and replaced with one that was inclined towards God. He repented of his sin: that is, he was enabled to change his direction from carnal pleasure-seeking to wanting to do God's will.

He was the only one to produce fruit. So what is this fruit? The Bible uses that word as a picture in a variety of ways. But in this regard, it means changes both in the man himself and in the people around him.

- He is changed in that he now hates sin. He wants to be free from sin in every way
- He now finds that the things he used to delight in no longer have the same attraction
- He sees how some who he called "friends" no longer like his company
- He prefers the fellowship of Christian believers to the people of the world
- He loves to meet with the believers to worship God

- And *he* shares the gospel seed with others, and the Lord uses his seed to fulfil his purpose of the salvation of others

The references to thirty, sixty and a hundred in verse 8 simply show us how different converts produce different degrees of fruit.

The ground of a man's heart has to be prepared by God before any seed can flourish in it. You see, man's heart is utterly corrupt. It cannot choose anything good. Oh, a man will persuade himself that he is good. He tells himself that his acts of charity, or his kindness to others, makes him a pretty decent guy. Let me tell you what the Lord says about "good people" (Mat 15:19): "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies..."

The natural man cannot choose God. It's worse than that: **IF YOU ARE NOT IN CHRIST RIGHT NOW, YOU CANNOT DO ANYTHING WHICH PLEASES GOD.**

God made a plan before the world existed. He decided to create a race of men. Their fall into sin was inevitable, and he purposed to save some. At some point after one of these elect people have emerged into this world, God the Holy Spirit comes into their lives. He prepares their hearts for the seed. And then he brings them into contact with a Christian who shares the gospel message with them. He receives the seed of the word of God, and it takes root in him and he is saved. When he dies, the grave won't hold him, and he will be resurrected to eternal life.

Which are you? What type of hearer are you? Has this message been completely lost on you? Have you been thinking about your dinner? Or are you one who likes this message and wants to immediately "join the club" and proudly show off your new religious self, an identity which won't stand up to testing? Or maybe you're interested, and want to take this thing further, but you're too busy with responsibilities, or you love money too much.

However you receive what I've said today, unless you've repented and trusted in Jesus Christ, **you are lost**. You are under the shadow of God's condemnation. You have no right to believe that God feels anything but hatred towards you. Even the good things he's sent your way will be counted as evidence against you in the courts of God's judgement. You stand guilty, and the sentence is an eternity in the outer darkness.

But what if you're a believer? You who at some point received the seed gladly—not because you were any better than anyone else in this world, but simply because God chose you.

And you are now bearing fruit: especially, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, and so on. You've been brought out of darkness into God's marvellous light. All your sins—past, present and future—wiped out forever. And you look forward with me to a Paradise of unspeakable joy and happiness.

God's word to you today is that you should be thankful. Praise his holy name for everything. And be fervent in sharing the word with others. Spread the seed of the gospel abundantly, and experience the joy of serving God. Know that every instance of seed scattering will be successful, God tells us.

(Isaiah 55:11) “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”

Amen.