

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Mark 4:1-20

Key Verse: 4:20

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

Jesus' first message was about the kingdom of God (1:15). Jesus' last message in this world was also about the kingdom of God (Ac 1:3). Jesus' purpose of coming into this world was to bring the kingdom of God to people's hearts. In order to do that he taught the word of God. It was not easy for people to understand the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted to explain it in a way that people could understand; so he used parables (Mk 4:26,30). The word “parable” literally means setting one thing beside another in order to reveal what is hidden by comparing it to what is obvious. Someone said that Jesus' parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings.

In today's passage Jesus told the parable of the sower, which is the basis to understand all of his parables. This parable seems to be a simple story about agriculture. But it has deep spiritual meaning. It teaches us how to bear much fruit. Everyone wants to bear much fruit, but not everyone does. Some people confuse bearing fruit with success. These are totally different. Though one is successful in some areas, they may not be fruitful. Many whom society deems successful are miserable inwardly and fail to love others in a way that builds up their families and society. On the other hand, bearing much fruit means becoming a godly person and being a blessing to others. Bearing fruit is God's will for us (Gen 1:28; Ro 8:29). Bearing fruit is not an option; it is the purpose for which God gave us life. So bearing fruit is very important. Let's learn how we can bear much fruit.

First, Jesus told the parable of the sower (1-9). After confronting Satan's attack, Jesus moved from the house to the lake in order to cool off. There, many people gathered around him. So he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake and taught the word of God. As the boat swayed back and forth in the gentle waves, Jesus' voice, like the sound of rushing water, carried across the lake to all the people along the shore, though Jesus had no microphone (1). Jesus' words are always fresh, vibrant and penetrating. Circling seagulls were captivated by Jesus' voice and landed on the water in front of him to better

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hear the word of God. Fish began to poke their heads out of the water in order to hear the word of God. It was a beautiful scene. In this way Jesus taught the word of God everywhere—in a house, in the field, by the lake, from the boat, on the mountain; wherever he went—in season and out of season—Jesus taught the word of God. It was because the word of God gives life to man's soul and solves our deepest problems from the root.

Jesus began to speak in parables (2). Before telling the parable, he said, **“Listen!”** Why did he say this? Jesus wanted them to pay attention to the life-giving word of God. There were many kinds of people gathered along the shore. Some were only concerned about being healed. Others dozed quietly with their heads resting on their chests. When Jesus said **“Listen!”** some people may have suddenly woken up, sat up, and begun to pay attention. Jesus told a story, which I will paraphrase: **A farmer went out to sow his seed in the early spring. He scattered the seed using a broadcast method. The seed fell on four different kinds of soil. Some fell along the path which developed between fields for the farmers to walk on. The seed cannot penetrate the hard surface of the path. It just lays there until a hungry bird observes it, thinking “Wow! An easy meal.” Then it swoops to the ground, grabs it in its beak and gobbles it down. Other seed fell on rocky places. For a plant to grow it needs light and heat from the sun, carbon dioxide from the air, nutrients and water from the soil. As it should, the sun came out and provided energy. Did you know that the sun always provides plenty of energy for life? Every day of every year it provides an amount equal to 20,000 times that consumed by all people on earth. Thank God for the sun. Under bright sunshine, and in the fertile, shallow soil, the seed grew quickly. But since it had no root to supply water, the plant was soon scorched and withered. Other seed fell among thorns. The soil was good. The plant could soak in water and nutrients and it took deep root and grew. The problem is that the surrounding thorny plants were growing even more rapidly. Though the plant struggled valiantly to grow, the thorny plants robbed all water, nutrients, carbon dioxide and sunlight, until it was gradually choked to death. Still other seed fell on good soil. It sprouted leaves and took deep root. It received enough nutrition, water, solar energy and carbon dioxide. The process of photosynthesis went on without hindrance and the plants grew and grew. Though there were some heavy rains and strong winds, these**

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plants took deeper root. They blossomed and bore clusters of fruit—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.

In this parable we can see that the soil the seed was planted in is important. Bearing fruit did not depend on the seed, but on the soil. The seed itself has life and the potential to produce a lot of fruit. But it needs the proper soil to grow in. In the same way the word of God itself has life in it. It has great potential to produce a lot of fruit. But in order to do that it needs a proper heart attitude in which to grow. That is why Jesus began this parable with the word “Listen!” and ended with the words, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (9). Everyone has ears. But there are two kinds of ears: ears that merely hear sounds, and ears that understand the meaning of what is said. For example, when we hear a foreign language we are aware of the sound but have no idea what it means. Beautiful music deeply moves those who understand it; but for those who don’t it is a mere lullaby. This can be applied to the spiritual world. Those who have spiritual ears to hear the words of God can experience the deep truth of the kingdom of God, find nurture and great joy, and grow spiritually. However, to those who do not have spiritual ears to hear, the word of God seems very boring; they yawn, shift around in their seats, and finally fall asleep. Let’s have ears to hear.

Second, Jesus explained the parable of the sower (10-20). After Jesus had dismissed the crowd and was alone with his disciples, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables (10). Actually, no one understood the meaning of Jesus’ words. Yet only the disciples came to him to ask. They acknowledged their limitation in understanding. They had humble hearts and a desire to learn from Jesus. So they asked Jesus’ help. Jesus was pleased with them. So he said, **“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you”** (11a). What does this mean? When we study the word of God humbly we can know who the holy God is. God’s holiness makes us aware of our sinfulness. For example, when Simon Peter experienced a miraculous catch of fish through obedience to Jesus’ word, he realized that Jesus is the holy God. At the same time he found himself as a terrible sinner. So he cried out, **“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”** (Lk 5:8b). When we realize that we are sinners and confess our sins, Jesus forgives our sins. Then God comes to reign in our hearts; the kingdom of God is within us. We have true peace and joy. In order to plant the kingdom of God in people’s hearts, Jesus was telling parables. But those who

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harden their hearts in pride, failing to acknowledge their sins, forfeit the chance to receive Jesus' grace. To them, the secret of the kingdom of God is hidden. So they are "ever seeing, but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding." They never experience the forgiveness of sins (12). This is a strong warning to those who harden their hearts.

Though Jesus was pleased with his disciples, he also rebuked them, saying, **"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"** (13) Then he explained the meaning of the parable. The sower is Jesus and also those who would preach the gospel after him. The seed is God's word (14). The soil refers to the heart condition of those who hear the word. Let's consider the different kinds of hearts that Jesus mentions.

- **Hearts like a 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."** Their hearts are so stubborn that the word of God finds no entry point to get in. Some kind of pride or prejudice or bitterness has completely hardened their hearts like concrete. Though they hear the word of God, they never accept it. The consequence of not accepting the word of God is serious. Satan, who is compared to the hungry bird, comes and takes away the word from their hearts. They become the prey of Satan who fills them with lies and wicked thoughts. Their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They become slaves of immorality and all kinds of depravity, and worship idols (Ro 1:21-32).

- **Hearts like rocky soil.** Verses 16-17 say, **"Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."** The good thing about these people is that they receive the word quickly with joy. They study the Bible frequently, attend Sunday worship service and say "Amen" many times. They seem to be good soil. But in reality, while they get an A+ in emotion, they do not score high in volition, or will. They are like a very thin platinum cooking pot (naembi). They heat up quickly and cool off just as quickly. They study the Bible superficially without the deep struggle that brings about fundamental change. They feel good, but they never make a costly commitment to Jesus. The moment trouble or persecution comes because of

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the word, they fall away. Persecution, like the sun in the parable, is a necessary ingredient for growth. Persecution purifies us from false hopes and helps us to take deep root in the word of God. Trouble or persecution is not the problem. The problem is that there is no root. Jesus encourages us to take root in his word. He said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32). Apostle Paul encourages, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him....” (Col 2:6-7a). In order to take root in him, we should get rid of rocks in our hearts: rocks of pride, rocks of unbelief, inferiority, bitterness, and the like.

● **Hearts like thorny soil.** Verses 18-19 say, **“Still others, like seed 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.”** These people receive the word of God and it begins to sprout in their hearts and to take root and grow. The problem is that thorns grow together, and more rapidly, and choke the plants. Jesus mentioned three kinds of thorns. A powerful thorn is the worries of this life. Practically speaking, living by faith means to overcome real problems in daily life by faith. When our security is threatened, we can easily fall into worry. As students, we worry about getting passing grades and graduating. After graduation, we worry about getting a proper job. After getting a job, we worry about who to marry. After marriage, we worry about how to pay our mortgage. Then we worry about how to support and raise our children. Later we worry about paying their college tuition and helping them to marry. Then, we worry about our grandchildren, I heard. We are so used to worrying that if we stop worrying we think something is wrong with us. In reality, we can spend our whole lifetime worrying. Changing our stage of life does not solve our worry problem. In truth, worry comes from lack of faith. When worries attack, it is the time to entrust our lives to God and to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (Mt 6:33).

Another thorn is the deceitfulness of wealth. Wealth itself is not a problem. The problem comes when one assumes wealth will make them happy. Then they begin to love money and fall into greed. Greed is like a deep abyss, a bottomless pit. It is one brand of idolatry (Col 3:5b). Those who are infected with greed lose the desire to sacrifice. Instead they love the world

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and indulge in all manner of pleasure-seeking, thinking that they can be fully satisfied with what they buy. But no one can buy happiness, meaning of life, or honor with money. Most of all, no one can buy eternal life with money. So Paul warned: **“Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”** (1 Ti 6:9-10). The last thorn mentioned is **“the desire for other things.”** This includes sinful desires: sexual immorality, alcohol and substance abuse, and wild parties. These kinds of desires give birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown gives birth to death (Ja 1:15). Yet fruit-bearing is also hindered by human desires that are not necessarily sinful: sports, entertainment, achievements, social relations, and so on. In his parable, Jesus talks in detail about thorns. When these kinds of thorns grow in our hearts, we must pull them out right away through repentance.

- **Hearts like good soil.** Verse 20 says, **“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”** The big difference between this soil and previous soils is that this soil is fruitful. It is so fruitful that it more than compensates for all of the unfruitful soils. What is the secret to bearing much fruit? It is to hear the word and accept it. This is very simple, not complicated. It means to allow the word of God to come into our hearts and to rule over us. This is different than using God’s word for our own benefit. It is to surrender oneself to God. In order to do that, we must really pay attention to what the word of God says. We need to deny ourselves and discard our own ideas. We need to learn a thorough obedience to God’s word, not picking and choosing according to our preferences. We need to practice ongoing obedience to God’s word throughout our lifetime. This is to have a personal relationship with Jesus like a vine and branches. As a branch remains in the vine, so we remain in Jesus. Then God surely blesses us. We can grow to be more like Jesus and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We can fulfill God’s purpose for us. Our lives will be meaningful and a blessing to others. This is only possible when we hear and accept God’s word.

What are the implications of the parable of the sower? **First, Jesus wants us to have a right attitude toward the word of God.** The word of

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God has life-giving power to transform us. If we study the Bible to accumulate informational knowledge, we may only become self-righteous and proud. But when we study the Bible as the living word of God, we can find ourselves as sinners in the holy presence of God. We can repent of our sins. The words of God transform us deep within and we can live a new life. Then we can bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which pleases God, and be a blessing to others. This surely happens when we have a right attitude toward the words of God. If our lives are not fruitful, the problem is our attitude toward God's word. We cannot make any excuses before God. When we simply hear the word and accept it, the word of God transforms us and enables us to bear much fruit. A great way to hear and accept the word is through consistent, systematic Bible study, including writing and sharing reflections on God's word. Let's have a right attitude toward the word of God.

Second, Jesus wants us to grow as kingdom workers who can preach the word. The kingdom of God began when Jesus preached the word of God. Where the word of God was preached, there was the kingdom of God. That is why Jesus preached the word of God very diligently, wherever he went, in season and out of season. Jesus wants his disciples to be equipped with the word of God and to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mk 16:15). When the apostles preached the word of God, as we see in the book of Acts, the kingdom of God advanced. Without the preaching of the word, nothing happens. When we preach the word of God, those who hear the word and accept it will bear fruit. In this way, God's kingdom advances. Let's pray that we may be equipped with the word of God and preach the gospel so that the kingdom of God may advance through us.