

LIKE SEED SOWN ON GOOD SOIL

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.”

After calling his disciples, Jesus made them his family members. Now Jesus begins to teach them about the kingdom of God. Jesus' purpose of coming into this world was to establish the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God from the beginning of his earthly ministry. Yet the kingdom of God is so mysterious that it cannot be explained fully in propositional statements. So Jesus used parables. A parable is “a placing besides, a comparison” in order to reveal something hidden. They are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. To understand Jesus' parables, we need to listen very carefully, with a truth-seeking attitude. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13:44-45). This treasure cannot be discovered with human reason and effort alone, but only by the help of the Holy Spirit. We need to humbly ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate our hearts.

In today's passage Jesus taught the parable of the sower, which gives us the basis to understand his other parables. This parable was given with a simple agricultural setting. It was easily understandable to common people based on their life experiences. In our times, Jesus might base his parables on modern technology, like computers or smartphones, which everyone is familiar with. This parable teaches us how to bear fruit. Everyone wants to be fruitful; no one wants to be unfruitful. What does it mean to be fruitful? It does not mean to be successful in the world. It means to grow in Jesus' likeness, which leads us naturally to do good works. Suppose someone earns a lot of money and becomes famous and powerful as a leader with many followers; yet their personal life is ruled by the power of sin and they behave shamefully in private. Is that person fruitful? Of course not. Such a person is tormented by guilt and shame and has no peace or joy. A truly fruitful person grows in Christ's character, which expresses love, peace, joy, and humility.

God wants people to bear this kind of fruit, and this makes us genuinely happy. Let us learn how we can bear this kind of fruit.

First, the parable of the sower and its purpose (1-12). Verse 1 starts with the words, "Again Jesus began to teach by the lake." The scene has shifted from a house to the seashore (3:20). For Jesus, it was a time of strong opposition from religious leaders who envied his growing popularity. Jesus was in a spiritual battle. So he moved to the lake to focus on teaching the word rather than getting involved in politics. Jesus preached the word of God in season and out of season. Wherever Jesus went, he taught the word of God: in a house, on a mountainside, in the synagogue, while walking along the road, or here by the lake. Where there was a great Bible teacher, so many people gathered that Jesus had to get into a boat. He sat in it out on the lake, as the people stood along the shore at the water's edge (1b). Jesus' crisp, clear voice carried nicely along the water's surface and everyone could hear him well. Jesus' words gave life to the perishing, forgiveness to the guilty, hope to the despairing, and healing to the brokenhearted. Jesus' words refresh our souls and give true rest.

Jesus taught the crowd many things by parables (2). Before telling each parable, Jesus said, "Listen!" After finishing, Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (9). Jesus emphasized listening. Why? On the surface, Jesus' parable of the sower would seem too simple to consider. But it had a deep spiritual meaning. To really understand it required listening carefully with full attention. Only those who are humble in heart and alert can listen like this. Proud people have no room to listen to such a story. Jesus went on to tell 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 between fields that farmers walked 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. And 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 20,000 times the energy consumed by all people on earth. Thank*

God for giving us 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 plant soaked in water and nutrients and began to grow. Yet, the surrounding thorny plants grew even more rapidly. Though the plant struggled valiantly to grow, the thorny plants robbed all water, nutrients, 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 sunshine, nutrition, and water to activate the process of photosynthesis and the plants grew and grew. Though there were some heavy rains and strong winds, these plants took deeper root. They blossomed and bore clusters of fruit—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown. It was a great blessing to the farmer.

On hearing this story, most of the listeners thought, “We know this. Why are you talking about this? It is a waste of time.” With a grumbling spirit they went their own way. These people had ears, but not ears to hear. However, others, including the Twelve, were different. They realized that Jesus was talking about something especially important which they could not understand. They had humble hearts and were eager to know the deep meaning. They were truth seekers, like the Bereans (Ac 17:11). When Jesus was alone, they came and asked him about the parables (10).

Jesus was awfully glad and explained to them why he taught in parables: “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 they might turn and be forgiven!’” (11-12) Jesus’ quote from Isaiah 6:9-10 is paradoxical. At first glance it seems that God wants to prevent people from receiving forgiveness. However, God’s intention is the opposite. God really wants people to be forgiven freely by grace. This was the purpose for Jesus’ coming and the main point of his message (2:5,10). Receiving Jesus’ forgiveness is the secret of the kingdom of God. When we receive forgiveness, we are set free from guilt and shame. We can have true peace and joy. There is also a warning here. This blessing is given only to those who turn from their sins. Those who do not turn will not be forgiven. They will remain under the power of sin and darkness. Jesus is ready to forgive our sins. Let us listen to

Jesus' words, receive forgiveness, and become children of God who can enjoy his kingdom.

Second, unfruitful and fruitful soil (13-20). Though Jesus was pleased with those who came to him, he mildly admonished them: "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (13) Then he explained the meaning of the parable. The sowers are Jesus and his disciples—those who preach God's word. The seed is God's word. The soils refer to people's hearts. Though Jesus describes four kinds of soil, there are just two kinds of people: unfruitful and fruitful.

Unfruitful hearts are compared to a path, rocky soil, and thorny soil. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown (15a). Their hearts are so proud that the word of God finds no entry point to get in. Though they hear the word of God, they never accept it. The consequence of not accepting the word of God is serious. As soon as they hear the word, Satan, like a hungry bird, comes and takes away the word from their hearts (15b). Since they do not hold onto the truth, they remain in the devil's deceit and wicked thoughts.

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. (16). These people are shallow and governed by their emotions. Their problem is that they do not commit to Jesus. The moment trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away (17). Persecution serves a good purpose. It purifies us from false hopes and helps us to take deep root in the word of God. If we have a root, we can persevere through trials and grow deeper still. So 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).

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 (18-19). These people's problem is that thorns grow rapidly and eventually choke the word out. One thorn is the worries of this life. Worries are endless; we are so used to

worrying that if we stop worrying, we think something is wrong with us. In truth, worry comes from lack of faith. Another thorn, the deceitfulness of wealth, arises if we begin to love money. This leads us to fall into greed, which is idolatry (Col 3:5b). Those who are infected with greed love the world and indulge in all manner of pleasure-seeking. Paul warned: “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 6:10). One more thorn, the desire for other things, includes sexual immorality, substance abuse, and the like. These kinds of desires give birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown gives birth to death (Ja 1:15).

The common factor of these three kinds of people is that they are all unfruitful even though their situations and conditions are different. Their unfruitfulness cannot be blamed on the seed or the sower. It is precisely the fault of the unfruitful person, whose attitude toward the word of God is not right. In order to bear fruit, their hearts need to be cultivated. Simply speaking, they need to repent. “Repent” is not a bad word. It is one of the most wonderful words in the Bible, for it tells us the way to enter the kingdom of God. In 1:15b Jesus said, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” When we keep with repentance, fruit comes (Lk 3:8a). We should know that fruit-bearing is not optional for human beings. It is God’s will for us. God’s first words to mankind were the blessing, “Be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen 1:28a). So there is no excuse for being unfruitful, even though we may think we have many good reasons. We must be fruitful! How can we? Let us learn from the seed sown on good soil.

Let’s read verse 20 together: “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.” This soil is so fruitful that the farmer is fully satisfied with his harvest. What is the secret to bearing much fruit? It seems that this must be a hidden and mysterious secret. Yet the Bible clearly says it is to hear the word and accept it. To “hear” means to pay attention to until we really understand the meaning. To “accept” means to believe it is true and to respond accordingly, respecting the source. This is simple, not complicated. Anyone can do this. So those who want to be extraordinary have a hard time hearing and accepting the word of God. Only those who are humble can hear

and accept it. Then they experience the power of the word of God, and it becomes the foundation of their lives.

For example, Jesus told Peter to put out into deep water and let down his nets for a catch. As an experienced fisherman, Peter knew this was ridiculous advice. But he respected Jesus' word more than his own idea and experience. He said, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:4-5). Then he caught such a large number of fish that his nets began to break. This experience became the foundation for his calling to discipleship and growth as an apostle. He became the pillar of Jesus' church--one of the most fruitful gospel workers in history. To hear and accept the word is not something we only do once. It is the way to continue our relationship with Jesus. This relationship is like a vine and its branches. As we remain in Jesus, 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.

As I thought about the deep meaning of Jesus' parable, two examples came to mind--one negative, and one positive. Recently, a noted Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias passed away. Shortly afterward, Christianity Today revealed that he had abused many women around the world over a period of years.¹ The allegations are numerous and specific, and his behavior was likely criminal. This was so discouraging. Many women's lives were ruined by him. How could this have happened? Though many people were evangelized through him, we cannot say that he was fruitful. Rather, God's name is blasphemed among unbelievers because of his hypocrisy. Though he was highly gifted and an excellent communicator, his character was not transformed by the words of God. Even though he was successful in ministry, his life was miserable. He was a slave of lustful desires. This should be a warning to us all. We are all vulnerable to the power of sin. When we study the words of God, we should examine ourselves and accept the words of God with sincere repentance. Then the word of God will transform us. This is more important than trying to do some kind of great work.

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-rzim-investigation-sexual-abuse-sexting-rape.html>

On the other hand, there is an unknown evangelist named George Liele (1750-1820). He was an African American born into slavery in Virginia. His father was known as the only genuine Christian among the slaves in his vicinity. George had the fear of God and tried hard to do good works. But as he listened to the word of God in a message, he was convicted of sin and spent six months in deep despair over his wretched sinful state. Later, he accepted the gospel deeply and was baptized. Since then, though he remained a slave, his life was totally changed. He experienced true freedom in Jesus. He lived out the gospel truth as a faithful husband and father. He supported himself and his family by transporting cargo with a horse and wagon. He was recognized as a messenger of God's word and raised as the first black preacher in the Baptist Church. Because of his faithfulness and powerful preaching many were converted to Christ through him. He emphasized that slaves could have true freedom even if they remained as slaves. Through him, churches were planted in South Carolina, Georgia, and later Jamaica. Space does not allow to tell of his good works. Suffice to say that his influence spread to Nova Scotia, England, and Sierra Leone. In fact, he was the first missionary sent out from the USA, years before Adoniram Judson. But people did not recognize him at that time. Still, he remains a most fruitful man of God. So his biographer refers to him as "an unsung hero."²

In today's passage we learn that the word of God has life-giving power to transform us. If we humbly accept the word planted in us, it will save us and transform our lives (Ja 1:21). This is the way to real happiness and fruitful ministry. Let us pray to accept the words of God in our hearts and live by them. Surely, we will bear much fruit.

² Shannon, David T.; White, Julia Frazer; Van Broekhoven, Deborah; *George Liele's Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero: The James N. Griffith Endowed Series in Baptist Studies*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press), 2013.