

First Serve

Studies in the Gospel of Mark

Text

Mark 4:1-20

Topic

Jesus let's us know what we will be doing throughout the current age by telling & explaining the Parable of the Sower

Title

"On With the Sow, This is It!"

Introduction

The news media gave her the nickname "The Black Dahlia." Her given name was Elizabeth Short. She was the victim of a much-publicized murder in 1947. It is one of the oldest unsolved murder cases in Los Angeles history.

It may finally be on the verge of being solved... thanks to a soil-sample. A cadaver dog reacted to a site at a suspects former residence, and soil samples have been sent away for lab testing to determine if there are traces of Short's remains.

Soil-samples are the prominent feature in Mark chapter four.

Jesus tells a parable that we call the Parable of the Sower. There is nothing wrong with that title; but it could justly be called the Parable of the Soils, because that is where the major emphasis lies.

We'll see that there are four types of soil, and that there are tests to determine the types.

The soils represent the spiritual conditions and characteristics that can be found in the human heart.

With that in mind, I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Are You Willing To Admit To Your Soil Type?, and #2 Are You Willing To Submit To A Soil Test?

#1 Are You Willing To Admit To Your Soil Type?

(v1-12)

- The religious authorities from Jerusalem had declared Jesus the agent of Beelzebub, which was their name for the devil.
- The multitudes that pressed upon Him did so for healing and deliverance, and not so much to repent and receive the forgiveness of sin.

Jesus reacted by adopting a new way of teaching.

Mar 4:1 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea.

Mar 4:2 Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

Jesus had used parables previously; but now He would use them primarily. We'll see why in a moment.

"Parable" is from a word that means *to cast alongside*. Spiritual truths can be somewhat difficult to communicate. Or they can be dry, in their presentation.

A parable is a reference to everyday things that can be cast alongside spiritual truth in order to communicate it simply and effectively.

Jesus told the Parable of the Sower.

Mar 4:3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

Mar 4:4 And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.

Mar 4:5 Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth.

Mar 4:6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.

Mar 4:7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

Mar 4:8 But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

To plant your field, you'd go out with a bag of seed slung over your shoulder, and you'd broadcast it by hand in your field. After the entire field was covered with seed, you'd return with a hand-plow, or oxen pulling a plow, turning over the soil so the seed was just covered.

Some of the broadcast seed would "fall on the wayside."

If our Sanctuary was the field, where you are sitting would be the main field, and the walkways down the center and along the sides, and here in front, would be the wayside. It was unprepared soil that functioned as walkways and was, therefore, somewhat hard. The broadcast seed sat on top, unprotected.

Flocks of birds would follow the sower and eat the seed that fell on the wayside. It's like Nigel said, in *Finding Nemo*, "Birds gotta eat."

Sometime after the plowing, you'd discover that "some fell on stony ground." When we bought a tract home a few years after moving to Hanford, there was no yard. I started to prepare the front yard for grass seed by roto-tilling. I hit something hard. I thought it was a rock.

It was rock, alright; it was a huge slab of concrete buried about four inches under the soil. Apparently one of the cement trucks had dumped its excess load there and rather than clearing it out, the builder buried it.

I had to ask a friend who owned a tractor and a dump truck to come help me remove it.

There are rocks everywhere in Israel, as well as limestone deposits just under the surface. Even if the soil was prepared, some of the seed you broadcast will fall on ground that has rock a few inches beneath the surface.

Conditions there are great for quick germination, but not for sustained growth. The shallow roots cannot compete with the scorching sun, and those plants wither.

Weeds. My dad used to remind me, "You've got to pull out the roots." Even then, weeds find a way into your field. Left unchecked, they choke-out your plants.

Just when it seems hopeless to be a farmer, you're reminded of the bounty that the remaining plants can produce - thirtyfold, sixty, or a hundred.

Nothing new here. Everyone living in Israel knew these things. If Wikipedia had been a thing in first century Capernaum, this would be the entry under "Soil Types."

After what was probably a long, pregnant pause for emphasis, Jesus made this stunning personal application:

Mar 4:9 And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Whoa! That's different. "Go figure it out." They were going to have to work at understanding what Jesus taught. No more freebies.

It was time to separate the disciples from the disinterested - to see who was following Jesus for Who He was, and not simply for what He could do.

Why this radical change? His disciples were wondering too, so they asked Jesus to clarify.

Mar 4:10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable.

The twelve guys Jesus had specially chosen, and other close followers, were understandably confused, and curious.

Commentators sometimes criticize them, pointing out that they waited until they were alone to ask about the parable, so as not to seem ignorant in front of the crowds.

I'd counter that by pointing out that, even with Jesus' subsequent explanation, there are Bible teachers who **still** remain confused about the parables.

At any rate, I, for one, am glad they asked, and that the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to record Jesus' explanation.

Mar 4:11 And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables,
Mar 4:12 so that 'SEEING THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND HEARING THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND; LEST THEY SHOULD TURN, AND THEIR SINS BE FORGIVEN THEM.' "

"The mystery of the kingdom of God." That phrase is, as Donald Trump might say, "Huge."

The kingdom of God, promised to Israel in their Scriptures - what we call the Old Testament - was no mystery. Many of its features were recorded. Beating swords into plough shares and such.

A "mystery" in the Bible is always something previously unknown that is being revealed.

The nation of Israel rejected Jesus as their King and, with Him, they rejected the immediate establishing of the kingdom of God on the earth. Jesus would instead return to Heaven to await His Second Coming when all Israel would be saved, receive Him as King, and enjoy the kingdom on the earth.

The question that naturally arises is, "What is going to happen in-between these two comings?" The answer is the mystery revealed through the Parable of the Sower, and the other parables Jesus will tell that describe the progress of this age during the wait for His return.

He will tell us that the predominant feature of the age between His two comings is that the Gospel will be seed spread by sowers into the soil of men's hearts until the final harvest at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Jesus quoted from the sixth chapter of Isaiah. It related a time in Israel's past when the Jews had refused to receive God's Word. Jesus said it was also a prophecy that was being fulfilled in His day as the Jews were rejecting Him.

This is *not* a general teaching about certain people being unable to hear the Gospel and receive Jesus. It is a specific prophecy about the people of Jesus' day who saw His miracles and heard His teachings but made a personal choice to reject Him. They hardened their hearts to the Word, and to the works, of God.

They had rejected the light, so they would be given no more light, but rather would be left in the dark.

Even what they had would be taken away - meaning in part that their King would ascend into Heaven.

Mar 4:13 And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

This reads like another minor rebuke, and maybe it was. At the very least, Jesus was letting them know that listening to the Word of God was going to take personal effort.

Salvation is not by works; not at all. It is the free gift of God, received by faith, where faith is not a work, but simply a response.

Once you are saved, there **is** work to do, and part of that work is to seek after God with all of your heart and mind and soul and strength.

As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after Thee.

Is that true of me? Of you? Or are we less like panting deer and more like hibernating bears?

A hibernating bear can go months without drinking water. *It's water comes from the breakdown of its fat.*

It's possible for us to become fat, then live off of our reserves, rather than daily seeking the Lord for a fresh supply.

Let me give you an illustration, not to burden you, but simply as a measure of your thirst.

When I was a young Christian, I would always get the Sunday teaching, so I could listen to it again. I believed the Lord was speaking to me through those messages, since He had led me to that church.

In those days the studies were recorded on cassette tapes. Those are in museums now. They've been replaced by mp3's you can download directly to your tablet or smart phone from our website. Or you can easily burn your own CD. Or you can subscribe to our free podcast.

If you're totally old school, you can have the weekly study transcript delivered to you via email, so you can at least read it.

Let me ask you this. If you miss a Sunday, do you feel at all compelled to listen to, or read, the study you've missed?

You don't have to. I'm not saying it makes you more, or less, spiritual.

But, if you simply ignore the message, you might be living off of your fat, rather than panting after the fresh water.

In His interpretation, Jesus will compare the four soil types to conditions and characteristics that can be present in the human heart. As we move into the application, the question to ask is, "Am I willing to admit my soil type?"

It's an important question, because we tend to think that, if we are saved, we are only, always, the good soil, in which the Word flourishes.

It's a little more involved than that. We can think in terms of the four soils as four different people who "hear"; **but we can also think of them as one person who "hears" the Word at different times in his or her life.**

We all know people who maybe seemed completely hard to the Gospel, as if the devil snatched it away, but who later came to Christ.

- That same person, although saved, can be stumbled by trials and persecutions.
- That same person, although saved, can become distracted by the cares of this life, and, for a time at least, live a marginal Christian life, producing no fruit.

No one person, it seems, is limited to one type of heart throughout their lifetime.

Thus the door is opened to honestly assess my current soil type, as we submit to the Lord's soil test in the remaining verses.

#2 Are You Willing To Submit To A Soil Test?

(v13-20)

Before we trusted the anonymous voice that commands our every turn via GPS, we had glove boxes full of maps. You'd need dozens of them just to go from here to Fresno. They were way too big - the size of a picture window - and impossible to re-fold.

If you could pull-over and spread-out the correct map on the hood of your car, it was a challenge to read them. Maps used symbols or colors to represent things.

Lucky for you, there was, on the map, a legend. Also called a key, legends are boxes in the corner of the map, and the information they give you is essential to understanding the map.

The Parable of the Sower is a legend, or a key, parable in that it is first, foundational, and unlocks the mystery of the parables that follow it to describe the things we can expect between the two comings of Jesus to establish the kingdom of God on the earth.

Mar 4:13 And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

Sure, once again this reads like a mild rebuke. Maybe, but what comes through is the understanding that this is the parable that sets the stage for the mystery phase of the kingdom that was being revealed.

Mar 4:14 The sower sows the word.

Anyone teaching or preaching the Gospel is a "sower." The first sower was Jesus, then His immediate disciples, followed by all the disciples made after them - whosoever believes in Him. You and I are sowers.

The Word - God's Word, the Bible - is the seed. It's a great illustration because, just as a seed has the capacity for life within it, so the Word of God is alive and powerful, able to save to the uttermost those in whom it takes root.

Peter, who was present at this explanation, would later write, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (First Peter 1:23).

Sower, seed, then soil; and, for our purposes today, we are concentrating, as Jesus did, on the four soil types as a test of our own hearts and our readiness to receive and to go on receiving this incorruptible seed and produce lasting spiritual fruit.

Mar 4:15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.

Seed that is tilled over will take root, because there is life in it. The reason everyone does not respond positively to the Gospel is that Satan is also at work in this age, and has strategies to "take away the word that [is] sown in [human] hearts."

Have you ever brought a friend or family member to church, or to an evangelistic event, and thought, "This message is just for them!" But if an invitation is given, they just sit there - as if they haven't heard a word, let alone the Word.

Many of us were like that. After I got saved, I could recall times that the Gospel was presented, but that the Word was quickly stolen.

It may seem silly, but once on the campus of UC Riverside, two guys handed me a tract. I was starting to look at it, but I had an urge to throw it away. There just happened to be a garbage can near me. I threw it in and forgot about it.

If you're passing out tracts, make sure there are no garbage cans around. And that there is a stiff fine for littering.

Mar 4:16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

Mar 4:17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.

The Gospel is so powerful that it can produce effects in a person's heart before they make a decision for Jesus Christ. This person, maybe, came forward to receive the Lord. Or you would say that their eyes were opened to the truth, and they began to seek the Lord.

In either case, when it became difficult to walk with the Lord, they stumbled - meaning they were offended that it wasn't going to be easy.

I would argue that this can describe believers, too. We are warned, are we not, to never consider it strange or unusual when we fall into various trials. We wouldn't need the warning unless we did think it strange.

Truth is, we **are** stumbled when trial or trouble hits enters our lives. It's the shallow response to get mad at God, or remain in a spiritual fog.

Among other things, it's a soil test. If I stumble in my trial, then it is indicating I have shallow soil.

But, guess what? I can recognize that I'm shallow, and I can break-up the rock layer, so that the roots of God's Word can go deeper, and so I can grow.

Mar 4:18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word,

Mar 4:19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

This is the soil that probably best characterizes life in these United States. We've been blessed, and are prospering (for the most part). Nothing wrong with prosperity. God Himself promised Israel they would prosper, for obeying Him.

We are not Israel, but Israel's example is instructive. The more they prospered, the more they forgot God.

- Their prosperity caused them to think more about physical things than spiritual things, leading to an emphasis on caring for their wealth.
- Their prosperity deceived them into thinking it was something they deserved, rather than a gift from God.
- The more they had, the more they wanted, in a refusal to be satisfied with what God had provided.

If you have any familiarity with the Old Testament, you know that they became "unfruitful" in their relationship with God, causing Him to discipline them.

Look at it this way. If you are in love with someone, you will forgo just about anything and everything to be with that person. The things you forgo are not bad; it's just that they become insignificant to you.

It's another soil test. Only you can ask yourself, "What would I rather be doing than spending time with Jesus?"

Whatever it is might (and I am careful to emphasize "might") be some worldly care, or some deceitfulness of your prosperity, or some desire for other things.

There is also good soil:

Mar 4:20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

You sow the seed and some of it will fall into hearts whose soil has been prepared to receive it. Those folks get saved and begin a life of producing spiritual fruit.

Want to go on being good soil, that produces fruit? Of course you do; and here is how you do it.

You "(1)hear the Word, (2)accept it, and (3)bear fruit."

Hearing the Word isn't merely listening to it, or being aware of it. It is active listening - the kind of listening Jesus indicated when He said "he who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Because of the strategies of Satan to steal the Word, and our own natural propensities to be stumbled or selfish, we need to really work at hearing.

Our time of waiting, and reflecting, upon God's Word each week after the study is a good example. We force ourselves - in a good way - to really hear the Word. Before it can be stolen; or we can stumble; or act selfishly; we wait upon the Lord so His Word can take root to bear fruit.

Jesus said good soil "accept[s]" the Word. It comes down to this: Will you do what God says, in His Word, despite it being contrary to your will, or uncomfortable, or inconvenient?

More-and-more, Christians are saying, "No, I won't submit to God." You see it a lot in marriages, because, after all, that's where we live. Too many couples are divorcing with no biblical grounds, contrary to God's very definite will for them. They count on the grace of God to later forgive them - after they've totally disobeyed Him.

We need to approach the Word as pre-submitted to it. Whatever God says to do, or to not do, I am ready to submit - to His glory and for my ultimate good.

Only when we hear and accept can we bear lasting spiritual "fruit."

Do some bear more fruit than others? It seems that way. But I think Jesus was indicating that, in my field - in my heart - I have potential to go on bearing more-and-more fruit.

In New Testament times, it wasn't really feasible to go through the field on your hands and knees to identify these soil problems. But if you knew there were rocks, or the roots of weeds, in the field, you'd be wrong to ignore those patches of ground.

If you are saved, you've been born-again by the incorruptible seed of God's Word. You **can** go through your field - your heart - and test the soil. In fact, you *must* perform a soil test, because we are prone to stumbling and selfishness, when we desire instead to remain spiritual.

