

Sermon follow up

2/3/14

“The Sower, Seeds, and Soils”

Mark 4:1-20

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My sermon follow-up notes are kind of like deleted scenes that included on a “special features” movie DVD. Sometimes deleted scenes didn’t make the final cut of the movie because it was long enough without them; other times, the cut scenes don’t make it through the final edit because they simply aren’t as good or relevant to the storyline as the scenes that did make it. You’ll find notes of both kinds here.

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The setting of the parable in Mark 4 is very interesting, especially if we look at it visually/symbolically in light of the Scriptures as a whole. Jesus is once again by the sea. In Mark’s gospel, as we’ve already noted, any time we’re around water, Mark seems to be invoking his new creation theme. Let’s consider some links.

Jesus gets in a boat so he’s on the water, indeed, seated (enthroned) over the water (cf. Ps. 29:10). Then Jesus begins to speak (cf. Ps. 29:3-4). Clearly, Jesus is being put in the place of YHWH, the Creator and Covenant Lord.

The whole scene in Mark 4:1ff is strongly reminiscent of the first part of the creation week in Genesis 1, when the waters covered the earth, the Lord spoke over the waters, and the dry land (earth/soil) emerged.

Mark calls attention to the fact that Jesus is hovering over the waters (cf. Spirit hovering above the waters on day 1 of the creation week; Gen. 1:1-2) on a boat, while the people are standing on the soil (the word used in 4:1 for the shore/land is the same term used in the parable for the various soils later in the chapter).

Jesus is separated from the earth/people by water, just as day 2 of creation week separated God’s heaven from earth with a firmament of water.

From his position above the waters, Jesus begins to speak a story about seed and fruit, recalling the work of the third day of creation, when God spoke and created seed bearing plants. Later on in the parable, we find that the people who are standing on the soil will be represented by different soils. This is fitting because humanity is made from the soil in the beginning (Gen. 2). The people are standing on soil because they are soil. The different types of soil represent different types of people.

The whole setting is highly symbolic, and points us to Jesus as the one who recreates humanity and the world through his word. The parable is a new creation story.

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The parable of the soils is especially unique among the parables because it is self-referential. It is given pride of place in terms of both length and explicit interpretation for a reason. This is a parable about parables. It is a story about the story Mark is telling. Jesus is teaching about his teaching. Jesus is telling a story that explains what's going on in the story of the gospel (particularly the way different groups will respond to Jesus). In Mark's gospel, people respond to Jesus in different ways, and that diversity is explained here in terms of four basic categories. This is the key parable. It's the meta-parable. It's the parable about parables. It's the parable that explains all the others. If you get this one, you get them all.

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Recall that parables cut both ways. They are mysterious, enigmatic riddles, which reveal truth to those who humbly seek it out, and hide truth from the proud and self-righteous. The parables reveal truth to insiders, to those who are in Christ, to those who come to him for wisdom and as their wisdom. But the same parables conceal truth from outsiders. Those who do not have faith might as well be deaf; the voice of the Parable Speaker strikes their ears, but to no effect.

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Each of the soils teaches us something important about the Christian life and dangers we must avoid.

1. The seed that falls by the wayside reminds us that Satan would love to snatch the word away. Every sermon we hear engages us in a great Spiritual battle against forces of darkness. That's why Jesus gives so many warnings about being careful how we hear. *Truly* hearing is a matter of life and death. Sleeping or daydreaming in the presence of the word is not an innocent thing. We must cling to the word as our very life and not let Satan snatch it away. Many expositors and preachers of this parable spend quite a bit of time coaching congregations on how to listen to sermons with the greatest possible profit, and it's easy to see why. The word is an effectual means of salvation in which Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, but to be rightly received it must be believed and obeyed (WSC 88-89).

2. The stony ground hearer shows us that salvation is not just a matter of starting well, it's a matter of finishing well. Many make a good beginning, only to give up when the going gets tough. They allow tribulation and persecution for the word's sake to stumble them. Notice the place of the word in what Jesus says here: The world's opposition to the very word the stony ground initially received with gladness is the core issue. Which do we love and fear more, the word or the world?

The stony ground hearer certainly has faith, but it is only a temporary faith. However, Jesus qualifies the faith of the stony ground hearer in another way. His faith is lacking root. It's superficial. In other words, the difference between the stony ground believer and the persevering believer is not merely a matter of duration; the quality of their faith is different as well, even though they may be indistinguishable for a while.

That being said, one cannot verify whether or not his faith has root simply by a process of psychological introspection. The quality of one's faith is proven in the furnace, when tribulation and persecution come. The warning of the stony ground hearer should not make us doubt the validity of our faith but it encourages to brace ourselves in times of suffering. The tests will tell the tale. Are you ready to endure hardship for the sake of Jesus, without forsaking him?

3. The seed choked out by the thorns is very instructive. Again, there is real faith and real spiritual life, but it does not last. What kills faith in this case? The trinity of [1] cares of this world, [2] the deceitfulness of riches, and [3] the desires for other things keep the plant from persevering in fruitbearing. In a word, worldliness chokes out the life of the believer.

To persevere, we have to see that Jesus is better than wealth, better than the material things of this world, better than the greatest pleasures the world can offer. We must believe his promises and not the promises of the tempter. We must know that real, lasting joy is found in Jesus. As Lewis put it, the thorny ground hearer settles; he is far too easily pleased:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

4. The fruitful soil shows us the mission of the sower will not fail. The 30, 60, and 100fold return would be considered supernatural, far more than any farmer could hope to receive in even the best harvest. If we want to be this kind of soil, we must receive the word, nurture it in our hearts, and let it grow within us. While we know from other Scriptures this fruitbearing response to the word only happens through God's sovereign and irresistible grace, the parable puts the stress on hearer's responsibility.

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Some interpreters think the soils are not static, so that a person can be one soil for time followed by another. In other words, a person is not necessarily one type of soil his whole life long. Rather, you can be one soil for a while, then another. The soils do not describe 4 fixed states, but 4 types of responses we make to the word. A good case can be made for this reading. For example, Peter and the other disciples certainly received the word of Jesus with joy for a while. But it didn't sink in. When Jesus began talking about his impending cross, Peter allowed the word to be stolen from him by Satan (Mark 8:33), as if he were the soil on the beaten path. Later, when Jesus went to the cross, the threat of persecution and tribulation causes them to stumble (Mark 14:27 uses the same word as 4:17). The disciples appear to be rocky soil at this juncture. But, of course, Peter and other disciples (Judas excepted) were later restored proving themselves to be good soil in the end, returning a harvest of 30, 60, and 100fold.

While that may be a pastorally useful way of applying the parable, I'm not sure that line of interpretation is really helpful. There is truth in the "dynamic" reading of the soils (haven't even the most fruitful, persevering hearers of the word still at times acted like rocky or thorny soil?), but I wonder if it really squares with the overarching intention of the parable. It seems to me that the parable of the soils is intended to describe and explain *ultimate outcomes*. If an otherwise fruitful, persevering hearer of the word stumbles into sin, it does not mean he has momentarily changed soil types. To put it another way, good soil can do bad things - but the parable isn't addressing that. Good soil might have to fight off the scorching sun or encroaching thorns. But the good soil remains good soil and keeps on bearing fruit in the grand scheme. The life growing in the good soil does not die. And those who do die spiritually (like Judas) were not temporarily good soil; rather, the whole point of the parable is to show that their apostasy proves they were some other kind of soil all along.

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Kevin DeYoung's book *Crazy Busy* has a great section on the thorny ground hearer:

The second danger is that busyness can rob our hearts. The sower tossed his seed liberally. Some fell along the path and the birds devoured it. Some fell on rocky ground and sprang up quickly, only to wither away with the first scorching heat. And some fell among thorns which choked out its fragile life. There's a definite progression in Jesus' parable (Mark 4:1-20). In some hearts, the word of God does nothing. Satan scoops it up as soon as it is sown. In other hearts, the word grows at first and then fades just as fast. Persecutions and trials put the would-be Christian out of commission. But in the third category of unsuccessful soil the word sinks in a little deeper. The plant spouts up, almost to the point of producing fruit. It looks a lot like good soil. New life seems to be taking root. Everything is on track for the harvest. Until the thorns come.

John Calvin says the human heart is "a thick forest of thorns." Jesus names two in particular. The first he labels "the cares of the world" (Mark 4:19). Do you know why retreats and mission trips and summer camps and Christian conferences are almost always good for your spiritual growth? Because you have to clear your schedule to do them. You get away. You set aside your normal insanity for a weekend and find the space to think, pray, and worship.

For most of us, it's not heresy or rank apostasy that will derail our profession of faith. It's all the worries of life. You've got car repairs. Then your water heater goes out. The kids need to see a doctor. You haven't done your taxes yet. Your checkbook isn't balanced. You're behind on thank you notes. You promised your mother you'd come over and fix faucet. You're behind on wedding planning. Your boards are coming up. You have more applications to send out. Your dissertation is due. Your refrigerator is empty. Your lawn is too long. Your curtains don't look right. Your washing machine keeps rattling. This is life for most of us and it's choking the spiritual life out of us. The second thorn is related to the first. Jesus says the work of the word is swallowed up by the desire for other things. It's not that possessions themselves are to blame. The problem is with everything we do to take care of them and everything we do to get more of them. Is it any wonder that the most stressed out people on the planet live in the most affluent countries? Cottages, boats, campers, timeshares, investments, real estate, snow mobiles, new cars, new houses, new computers, new iStuff—they all take time. We've heard countless sermons warning us about the dangers of money. But the real danger comes after you spend the money. Once you own it you need to keep it clean, keep it working, and keep up with the latest improvements. If the worries of life don't swamp us, the upkeep will. Jesus knows what he's talking about. As much as we must pray against the devil and pray for the persecuted church, in Jesus' thinking the greater threat to the gospel is sheer exhaustion. Busyness kills more Christians than bullets. How many sermons are stripped of their power by lavish dinner preparations and professional football? How many moments of pain are wasted because we never sat still enough to learn from them? How many times of private and family worship have been crowded out by soccer and school projects? We need to guard our hearts. The seed of God's word won't grow to fruitfulness without pruning for rest, quiet, and calm.

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Jesus puts a great deal of emphasis on how we hear the word in this section of Mark.

In the OT, hearing (really hearing!) includes obedience; indeed the Hebrew words for hearing and obeying are from the same root, and sometimes the

word for hearing is even translated as obeying (cf. Deut. 5:1, 6:4ff, 1 Sam. 15:22-23, etc.). To hear is to obey.

In Mark 4:23, Jesus says, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” In other words, those who don’t get his message are actually deaf. They aren’t hearing! Then Jesus gives the parable of the measure in Mark 4:24-25. Note the parallelism between the measure and hearing in verse 24. The measure you give is determined by your hearing (which includes believing and obeying, as in Deuteronomy). Those who refuse to hear/believe/obey the word will lose even what they have, e.g., the word and other covenantal privileges will be taken from them.

We must treasure the word of God. The Bible was designed primarily to be heard in a public context. It’s wonderful to read it privately, though obviously for most of history, ordinary covenant members did not have their own copies of the Scriptures. The WLC 154-160 cover the word as a means of salvation and our responsibility to hear it accordingly. Here are some further tips for sermon listeners:

1. Prepare to hear God’s word. Pray, get reconciled with others, and come to worship well rested. Most importantly, come with a “holy appetite,” as Puritan Thomas Watson put it (cf. 1 Peter 2:2). While we must distinguish the inspired Scriptures from fallible sermons based on the Scriptures, the Reformed tradition has strongly affirmed that the preached word is the word of God, insofar as it is faithful to the text. When the word is preached, remember it is your life (Deut. 8:3). Hear it as if God himself was speaking from heaven.

2. Come expecting to hear God speak. The word of God is living and active (Heb. 4:12). The word of God is powerful to save (Rom. 1:16). The word brings new birth and growth (1 Peter 1:23, 2:2). God certainly blesses the private reading and study of his word, but is especially delighted to minister to us through the word in a corporate meeting of his people (Ps. 87:2). Come to the public reading and preaching of the word as one who is coming into the very presence of God. Expect him to work through his word. Expect to be changed. Expect to be challenged.

3. Come prepared for battle. Satan wants to snatch the word out of your heart before it can take root. Come prepared to focus on what is read and preached. Be diligent. Listen attentively. Block out distractions - coughs,

crying children, the busy schedule of the upcoming week, the game later that afternoon. Don't just sit passively through a sermon, be an active and engaged listener. Make mental notes of questions for discussion or reflection later. Consider taking physical notes if it increases focus (though recognizing the sermon is not merely a lecture).

4. Make applications. Certainly, a good sermon will include applications, but it is impossible for the preacher to take the time or have the knowledge needed to apply the text to every single listener. Think through how the word preached applies to your life in specific ways; don't expect the preacher to do all the work for you. Every time we hear the word, we should put into practice what we have heard. You don't just "hear" sermons, you "do" them. See James 1:22.