

“Do you want to know a secret?” (2)

There was a 3 year old boy who went with his dad to see a litter of kittens. And when he got home he told his mother that, "There were 2 boy kittens and 2 girl kittens." His mother asked him, “how did you know?” He said, "Well, daddy picked them up and looked underneath, so I think it's printed on the bottom."

I guess the lesson is, try to avoid difficult answers, when your kids ask you easy questions. We are going to look at a parable of Jesus today, which is unusual in the fact that Jesus himself explains the meaning of it. And Jesus is going to ask us today, “Do you want to know a secret?”

We are going to look at the parable of the Sower. Please turn your Bibles to **Mark 4**. **Mark 4:1+2** “Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables.”

Can you imagine what a sight that must have been? What a pulpit that must have been to use, the Master teacher sitting on a boat because His following was so large. And Jesus says, “Listen” and then goes on to share the parable with those listening.

Mark 4:3-9 " Listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Now notice how Jesus starts the parable and how He ends the parable. He starts by saying, “Listen” and ends by saying, “He, who has ears to hear, let him hear." One of the most frustrating things as a preacher or teacher of anything is wondering if anyone is listening to what you’re trying to say to them.

And that goes for parents too. Those of you who have children will know exactly what I’m talking about. You tell your child not to do this or that or they will get hurt but they go ahead and do it anyway. And sometimes you say to them, “Did I not tell you not to do that? Am I just wasting my breath?” And then you get them to repeat what you have said, and they will usually tell you what you said but it’s pretty obvious that they didn’t really listen to you in the first place.

And that’s one of the reasons why Jesus’ favourite catchphrase was, “Let he who has ears to hear, let him hear." It didn’t just mean listen to what I’ve just said, it means think about it, pay attention to what I’ve just said. And it’s after Jesus sharing the parable with the people that He says to them, “Do you want to know a secret?” He says, “I’ve shared a secret with you about the kingdom of heaven.”

He tells us in **Mark 4:10-13** “When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "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!" Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

Jesus said He speaks in parables so that He can reveal secrets about the kingdom of heaven. And the parable He just shared did exactly what the parable was designed to do. It split the people into two groups, those who were interested in truth and those who weren’t. Because a large crowd isn’t surrounding Jesus anymore, the text says that “When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him.”

There were only a few that asked Him what the parable was about. Matthew tells us in **Matthew 13:10** “The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" There were only a few people who were really interested in these truths.

And so what Jesus is saying there when He quotes from **Isaiah 6:9+10** is that, ‘My people can see and perceive, My people can hear and understand but they just don’t want to’. He saying they don’t want to turn to God and be forgiven because their hearts are so far away from Me. He says My people have always seen, they’ve always heard but My people don’t want to listen and understand, because they are too stubborn.

Isaiah 29:13 "The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." A couple of chapters later in Mark 7:6-8 Jesus says, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

And its then, that Jesus asks those who are listening in Mark 4:13, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? Jesus is saying this secret about the kingdom of heaven is so easy to understand. He says it's so plain and obvious and yet none of you can understand it! He's telling them that they need to be able to understand this parable so that they can go on and understand other parables He will teach them.

It's much the same as Paul says to the church in Corinth. 1 Corinthians 3:1+2 "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready."

I guess most of us here have got photo albums in our homes. And in the album there will be a photo that most women don't like to show anyone and that's a picture of them when they were babies. But when you look at yourself when you were firstborn and then flick over a couple of pages you will see how you have grown over the years. And that's because that's what us humans do, we grow up.

The great call of Scripture is for growth, for you to grow spiritually. The minute you were born again in the waters of baptism, you should be starting to grow spiritually. And the more you study the word of God, the more you understand and grow, but we need to grow. A lot of kids in the world today are born with a disease that stops them from growing both physically and mentally. But sadly the same goes for some Christians, not physically or mentally but spiritually.

Hebrews 5:11-14 "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

Now notice how you become mature, "By constant use and training". You know, studying isn't easy sometimes but its something that all Christians need to do, they need to train themselves to do it. You see the desire for understanding the Bible will drive you forward to understand even more of the Bible. That's what Jesus' disciples did, they wanted to understand more and so Jesus gave them even more solid food.

Luke 24:27 "Then Jesus quoted them passage after passage from the writings of the prophets, beginning with the book of Genesis and going right on through the Scriptures, explaining what the passages meant and what they said about himself." What did Jesus say on the Sermon on the Mount? Matthew 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

So we find that these few people who were listening to Jesus didn't understand what the parable of The Sower meant, but they had the desire to know and so Jesus explains it to them. He says, "Here's a secret about the kingdom of God". Mark 4:14-20 "The farmer sows the word. 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. 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. 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. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

Jesus taught and explained the parable using an everyday life event; He uses the illustration of a farmer sowing his seed. Have you ever wondered why some people become Christians and then a little later they fall away? Have you ever wondered why some people are not Christians? We have people who come here every week and they hear the gospel of Christ being preached; they know what they need to do to become obedient to the Gospel, and yet, nothing ever seems to happen.

How come we don't get people coming to Christ here, when the gospel is preached like they did during Biblical times? Well, maybe the best way to answer that question is by letting Jesus ask the question He was asking. How could the scribes and Pharisees misrepresent God the way they did? How could the disciples and those listening not totally understand what Jesus was teaching?

You see the way the word is being sown or being preached isn't the problem, the problem is the way people receive it. In other words those people who are honestly searching for the truth, it's those people whom the truth will become much clearer to. Jesus said in **Mark 4:3-8**, "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, some fell on rocky places, other seed fell among thorns and other seed fell on good soil."

But in His explanation He says that people are like the place where the seed lands. He's talking about **4 different** soils, which represent **4 different** reactions or responses when people hear the word of God. He says in **Mark 4:15**, "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."

Now we need to remember whom the word of God is being preached to, it's being preached to sinners. People whose hearts have been hardened with sin over the years. And so Jesus said that the birds are a picture of the devil himself, who comes down and take the seed away. But the reason the devil can so easily take it away is because the word of God has no impression on these people at all.

They are so hardened in sin; they don't even understand the significance of the words being said. In other words, the path is hard; the seed has got nowhere to plant its roots. They hear the gospel but don't hang around long enough to find out what it means to them. Because when people are hardened with sin, they always think that whatever's being said doesn't apply to them.

Remember in **Acts 2** when Peter preached the **1st** gospel meeting, **3000** asked, "Brothers what shall we do?" They wanted to hear more because they understood that what Peter had just finished saying to them, applied to them. But Peter also preached the gospel to thousands more on that day who didn't want to know and so his words landed on a hardened path. And then Jesus goes on to describe another reaction to the gospel.

He says in **Mark 4:16+17**, "Other people, 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".

I remember a few years ago, **Billy Graham** would come to speak at some big gospel meeting in a football ground somewhere and thousands of people would turn up to hear what he had to say. And at the end of the night he would always put an invitation out to people to come forward, 'Confess Jesus as Lord and become Christians'. And many people would come forward and give their lives to Jesus on the night. But the problem was that a few days after all the excitement had gone, the trouble of life was remembered and they lost interest in Jesus and fell away.

In other words, they hear the word of God, they accept it with gladness and joy but they have no root in themselves. And so Jesus says that they are OK for a while but as soon as any persecution or worry comes along from being a follower of God, they just give up. So the word that was planted in them at the start just springs up very quickly but the soil was lacking.

Mark 4:5 "Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow." He also said in **Luke 8:6** that the soil "Had no moisture." And so when the sun comes out, it's quickly burnt up because it has no root and lacks moisture. Jesus is saying this; there are hearts out there that will receive the truth with great readiness and joy as **Luke 8:13** tells us. And He says it's not until the heat gets turned up, that these people fall away.

You know it worries me when people become Christians without even studying the word of God first. People need to know and understand Who and what they are committing too. Because Jesus says, that whenever the heat of tribulation or persecution comes along because of the word of God, their delight in the truth just withers away and dries up.

Luke 14:26-35 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me

cannot be my disciple. "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. "He, who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus says, "Listen, if you want to become a follower of Him, your going to have to sit down and think hard about it first". "You're going to have to love Me more than you love your own family". "You're going to have to carry your own cross and suffer like I suffered". He says, "You're going to have to put Him first in front of everything else in your life." He says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

In other words think about it, think a lot about His words and after you have thought about it even more, He says in **John 16:33**, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." And so Jesus goes on to describe another type of response to the gospel in **Mark 4:18+19** "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."

A mother and her young son returned from the shops and began putting away the groceries. The boy opened the box of animal crackers and spread them all over the table. "What are you doing?" his mother asked. "The box says not to eat them if the seal is broken" The boy explained. "I'm looking for the seal."

And the point is that there was nothing wrong with the box. And in the case of the seed that fell among the thorns, there is nothing wrong with the soil. It's not too hard like the seed that fell along the path, there's enough soil for the seed to take root unlike the seed that fell on a rocky place. It's not the soil that's the problem; it's what is in the soil around it. It's the environment in which it is living in is the problem.

You know one of the ways that Satan likes to attack God's people is with worry. Worry is the greatest joy stealer there is. Jesus says there are **3 things** that steal your joy as a Christian. He says there are **3 things** that can stop you from becoming a fruitful follower of the word.

1. "The cares of this world" People are so caught up in this life that they forget about the next. They worry about their jobs, they worry about their homes, and they worry about having enough money to get by. And so Jesus says in **Matthew 6:25-34** "Listen; do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. He says, who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? He says; do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Jesus says you shouldn't be getting distracted by anything; He'll take care of all your worries. He says in **Matthew 6:33**, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." He says, listen, you're a Christian; you don't need to worry about these things, just leave the worrying to the unbelievers. **1 Peter 5:7** "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

And then Jesus tells us the **2nd** thing that can stop you from becoming fruitful and that is, "The deceitfulness of riches" The world's biggest con these days is this, 'get rich fast and you'll be happy'. Now whether that comes in the form of a new car, or a new home, it doesn't matter. I don't know if you have noticed, over the past few years the 'National Lottery' has now got even more chances for you to win every day of the week. They now have a daily 'National Lottery' draw.

And that's because they realise that in a world that is so commercial, people are lusting after the quick fix answer to their problems or a get me rich fast answer to your problems. But Jesus tells us that, that's not the fruit of the Spirit, like we find in **Galatians 5:22+23**. He says that those riches are the fruit of the world. He says people are being deceived into thinking that material goods are the answer to life. But He tells us in **John 14:6** that "He is the way and the truth and the life."

The only answer to this life is Jesus Christ Himself and if you want answers about this life then you need to look to Jesus, because He is the only one who has the answers for this life.

And then the 3rd thing that stops us from becoming fruitful is, "The pleasures of this life." You know everyone likes to have fun and there's nothing wrong with that but the problem comes when the fun becomes more important than godly living. There's nothing wrong with playing cards but the problem comes when you start gambling and your gambling habit takes over your life.

There's nothing wrong with having a drink, but the problem comes when the drink comes more important than God himself. God has given us the gift of pleasure, which in itself can be innocent but we need to remember that the world's idea of enjoyment is totally opposite to God's idea of enjoyment. You see, these 3 things or these 3 thorns that we have just mentioned are constantly in the environment that we live in everyday. And what they do is smother and choke the word of God.

And so Jesus says, the reason that these people don't bear any fruit is because of these thorns. He says, they look promising; they look like they are going to bear fruit but they never do and so they end up choking to death. He says, the thorns soak up all the moisture and riches that are in the soil and so the world ends up with all their attention and God just gets the dregs or whatever is left. They are starved of the truth, which is found in the word of God.

Then finally Jesus says in Mark 4:19+20 "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown." Jesus says, "This is the soil I'm looking for, this is the kind of response to My words that I'm looking for."

This soil is the total opposite to the 3 other soils mentioned. These are the people whose hearts are soft and tender; they received and cherished the seed, when it was planted. These people soak up the word of God and gain strength from it and go on to produce a crop of thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. Or as Jesus says in Luke 8:15 "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

They can see the world's riches for what they really are, they guard themselves against the worldly pleasures, and they cast all their anxieties onto Him because they know He cares for them. They produce much fruit; it's these people who are the long distance faith runners, who are faithful to the end.

And it's to those people who Jesus says in Mark 4:11, "Do you want to know a secret?" Don't be surprised when people don't want to hear about Jesus. Don't be surprised when people become Christians and only last a short time. Don't be surprised when people look like they are going to be great ambassador's for Christ but they fall away.

The secret is this, don't give up planting the seed, but persevere, you never know what kind of response you're going to get. You see, God's word doesn't vary but man's heart does. The nature of the response is dictated by the nature of the heart that receives it.

How is your heart doing today? What will your response be? If you're not a Christian, are you going to let God's word fall upon your hard heart, or are you going to respond and become a long distance faith runner because you want to know more truths from God's word?

And if you're a Christian, are you going to continue to let the word of God dwell in you richly, so that you can let God produce much fruit through you, or are you going to go back to the crowd who are not interested in truth? There's no mistake loved ones, you control what does and doesn't go into your heart. The biggest mistake we can make as Christians after studying this is to look around us and say, "Yes, I know people who fall into one of those categories". "I know someone who didn't last long as a Christian", that's not the point of the parable.

The point of the parable is to get you to look at yourself, is your heart felt response to the gospel described in this parable? And let me just say that it would be very foolish for anyone to stand and say, "Yes, when the seed fell on me, it fell on the good soil." Because you can't answer that question until the day Jesus returns or the day you die.

1 Corinthians 10:12 "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall"! Let's not judge each other with this parable. But let's continue to encourage each other to remain faithful to the end and trust in God to help us produce the fruit He requires.