

FROM ONE SERVANT TO ANOTHER

What Causes Fruitfulness?

Mark 4:1-20

INTRODUCTION: He may have had his fingers cut off in an accident as child, perhaps with the axe falling upon them. Maybe it was a congenital deformity, but John Mark, the author of the second gospel in the New Testament was given the nickname “stump fingers.”

Mark was probably a teenager during the ministry of Jesus. Young people, Mark was in many ways just like you. His life was full of school and hormones. As he grew taller, he started getting hair under his lip and on his chin, and he began to notice the girls that he used to chase and tease getting pretty.

With all of this going on in his life, his mother had become a follower of Jesus; and after His resurrection, the apostles and other believers sometimes gathered in her house for prayer. From the gospel he would write years later, we learn that **Mark was especially touched by two of the qualities of Jesus:**

- **One was Jesus’ unlimited power.** He tells us in terse sentences how Jesus healed all kinds of diseases, cast out many demons from people, cleansed a leper, told a paralyzed man his sins were forgiven and then commanded him to pick up his bed and walk.
- **The other was that Jesus used His unlimited power to serve others.** Jesus never used the power He had at His control to make life more comfortable for Himself.
 - When He was hungry in the desert, Jesus would not convert stones into bread;
 - Yet He would take five little loaves of bread and two small fish and transform them into a banquet to feed thousands of hungry people who had come to listen to Him teach.
 - When the soldiers came to capture Him, when they beat Him, when they pounded the spikes into His wrists to fix Him to a cross, Jesus would not even call to Heaven for angels to come and rescue Him.

As Mark would write as his theme verse in his gospel,

Mark 10:45 ... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

So John Mark decided to become a servant of the Lord Jesus. Like any of us who choose to follow the Savior, he was not a perfect servant. He departed in the middle of his first missionary trip, probably because the going got tough.

But even with that rocky start, Mark didn't give up. He kept on serving the Lord, and kept on serving people. Near the end of his life, the Apostle Paul who had frankly been disgruntled with John Mark when he abandoned him and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, recognized how Mark had grown in the faith; and he asked Luke to bring Mark to see him in the Roman jail.

This same man, one hand nearly useless, stained with a reputation as a quitter, became the man God would use to write the Gospel of Mark, one of only four accounts of the life and ministry of God's own Son.

Don't give up! Don't quit! Look what God did in Mark's life.

- How many people across the ages have come to faith after reading the words penned by John Mark with his only useful hand?
- How many have served God and other people selflessly, having trusted Christ and following the Savior who came to serve?

I remind you of these things about Mark in order to ask you a question:

What happened to Mark to make Him such a fruitful servant of God's Suffering Servant, Jesus?

Has the same thing happened to you?

- **Are you a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus?**
- **Is your life fruitful for the Lord, bringing many to Christ?**

Could the same thing that happened to Mark happen to you?

- **Could you become a faithful servant of Christ?**
- **Could your life be so fruitful that many, many people enter the Family of Faith because of what God does through you?**

My friend, the answer to the second question is yes. If it has not happened yet, this could happen to you. You can become a faithful servant of Christ. Your life can become fruitful so that many people are saved as a result of the life you live.

So, what happened to John Mark? What could happen to you?

In chapter 4 of his gospel, Mark records a parable Jesus told that explains it.

Mark 4:2–20 2 Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

3 “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

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

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

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

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.” 9 And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

13 And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”

14 The sower sows the word.

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.

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

18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, 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.

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.”

Do you have ears to hear?

Which are you? Are you the wayside this morning? Are you the stony ground? Are you the thorn-filled ground? Are you good ground?

Do you even know what you are? Let’s talk about it. First, we must

I. UNDERSTAND THE PARABLE.

This parable is not about the sower or the seed; it is about the soil. As Susan Minter illustrates beautifully in her watercolor painting.

- A. Jesus said, the seed falls on the Wayside, the road or path.
 - 1. Birds devour seed.
- B. The seed falls on the Stony Ground, rocks on and beneath the surface.
 - 1. Seed sprouts but roots cannot go deep into the earth because of the stones.
 - 2. Sun causes it to wither and die.
- C. The seed falls on the thorn-filled Soil.
 - 1. Seed sprouts.
 - 2. Plant lives.
 - 3. Does not produce fruit.
 - 4. Because it is choked by thorns.
- D. The seed falls on the good Soil.
 - 1. Seed sprouts and lives.
 - 2. Plant grows.
 - 3. Produces fruit and multiplies into 30, 60, or even 100 other plants.

Now, we are blessed. We do not have to struggle to figure out what this parable means.

II. JESUS EXPLAINS THE MEANING OF THE PARABLE.

A. The seed is the Word of God.

Jesus says, "The sower sows the Word."

Peter was present when Jesus told this parable. Listen to what he wrote later.

1 Peter 1:23 having been born again, not of corruptible **seed** but **incorruptible**, through the **word of God** which lives and abides forever,

Peter says that the seed is the incorruptible Word of God!

B. The sower is whoever delivers the Word.

- The ultimate source is God Himself.
- He sends it through a teacher.
- He sends it through a preacher.
- He sends it when you read the Scriptures.
- He sends it when you listen on radio, streaming, or CD.
- It doesn't matter who sows.
- The Word of God is always good seed.

C. Each of the four soils represent the way we receive the Word when we see or hear it.

1. They do not represent four types of people.
2. At any given moment, any of us can be an example of any of the types of soil.
3. As we talk about each, consider which kind of soil represents the way you are receiving the Word of God this morning.

D. The Wayside pictures Hard Hearts.

1. **The person hears (or reads) the Word, but they do not receive it into their life.**
2. **The birds represent the devil.**
3. When the people do not receive the Word into their lives, **Satan** comes immediately and **takes away the Word.**
4. My friend, **we cannot store up the Word of God to believe it and act upon it when we are ready.**
 - God is speaking to us today as we read and study His Word.
 - Maybe last week you were highly attentive and receptive to God's Word.
 - But this week, for whatever reason, you have disengaged. You are not interested. You are preoccupied.
 - Then Satan is gobbling that Word up to take it away from you.

- Friend, if you are lost, beware! As God allows you to hear the gospel that Jesus has died for your sins upon the cross and risen from the dead; and now this risen Christ offers to forgive your sins and give you eternal life if you will trust Him as your Savior and receive Him as the Lord of your life. He speaks that Word to you here and now. Today is your opportunity to receive that Word and trust in Christ. You cannot just wait until you are good and ready.
- Jesus warned that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws Him. The Father draws a person to faith in Christ through the proclamation of the gospel you just heard. The Holy Spirit convicts the lost person that they are a sinner and Jesus is the way of salvation. You have no guarantee of another opportunity to be saved. That is why the Bible declares, "Today is the day of salvation. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart."
- But dear believer, child of God, the same is true for us. Even as believers, if we are inattentive to God's Word, or do not receive it for whatever reason when God sows His incorruptible seed in our hearts, the devil still takes that Word away.

E. Stony Soil pictures a Shallow Response.

- 1. The shallow response is a response made only with emotions.**
2. The shallow response can outwardly show gladness at the Word. "Amen!" "That's a good word!" "Great message, preacher!"
3. Jesus said, but they have no root in themselves. There is no deep reception of the Word to believe it and to act upon it.
- 4. So, when trouble or persecution comes, those that made no more than an emotional response will wither and die.**
5. Folks, be warned! Speaking a profession of faith in Christ, but never truly receiving Him as the Lord of your life does not bring you salvation. That is why Jesus told us that many will say to Him on that day, "Lord, Lord, didn't I do this or that in Your Name?" But Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you!" Why? Because they only made a shallow, emotional response but never genuinely trusted Him as Lord. So their lives are still the same as they were before their emotional experience. There is no change, no transformation; there are no fruits from their life because there was no salvation.

F. The Thorn-filled Soil pictures people who at one time received the Word and were saved, but have allowed things to enter their lives that choke the Word.

What things?

1. **The desire for riches or pleasures or other things.** Not just the rich. The danger is the desire for riches!
2. **They are consumed with worry in place of trust and faith.**
3. **This seed has sprouted and still lives. These folks are saved.**
4. **But they do not produce fruit. They never lead others to Christ.**
5. **These are carnal Christians – saved but living for the world.**

They are often miserable.

Or they are happy only when things are going well.

6. **Many, many, many Christians are pictured by the thorn-filled soil.**
 - They attend church haphazardly.
 - They read their Bible sporadically at best.
 - They pray very little and only about the things that worry them or the things they want.
 - They hardly ever share their testimony or the gospel with another person.
 - They give little or nothing to the Lord and are critical of anyone who says they should tithe or give.
 - They are not concerned for lost people around them or the lost of the world.
 - They care only about what they like and about what they want.

G. The Good Ground pictures people who hear and receive or accept the Word of God.

1. **They are like the man who built his house on the rock, who do what the Word says.**
2. **They bear fruit.**
 - Their lives count for eternity.
 - They share their testimony and the gospel with others.

- They actively and purposefully pray for the lost, the ones they know and the ones they don't.
- They give because they know God has given to them, and because they want to invest in matters that will last forever.
- They love the Lord, and they love His church.
- They faithfully attend church, Bible study and worship.
- They gladly give up their personal desires for the sake of the Kingdom.
- And God uses their testimony, their sharing of the gospel, their prayers, their giving, their loving, and their faithfulness to bring many, many to faith in the Lord Jesus. Maybe 30, 60, or 100 or more.

3. It is the God-established consequence of putting the Word into practice.

CONCLUSION: So, have you figured it out. Do you know which kind of ground pictures you today?

And do you see? We get to choose. We do choose, every time the Word of God comes to us, however it comes.

If you have a history of being unfruitful soil, whether it's because you just refused the Word, or made a shallow, emotional response, or because you have allowed worry and the pursuit of money and stuff choke the Word, you can change that, today, beginning right now. Repent of what you have done, and receive this Word from the Lord today, and make it a habit. Make it your practice.