

Mark 4:1-4; 13-15 Parable of the Sower--Hard Hearts

Although Mark talks a lot about Jesus teaching people in various settings, Mark's short format means that there's not as much content of Jesus' sermons as we find in, say Matthew. These parables about the Kingdom of God are placed here, so that we can understand the reasons for the surprisingly varied reactions to Jesus' message: "**Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand**" that we have encountered so far in Mark. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom has resulted in responses ranging from the enthusiasm and commitment of the first followers who become the Twelve apostles in the positive, all the way through the decidedly negative reaction of the Pharisees and Herodians who were plotting to destroy Jesus, and the ultimate blasphemy of the scribes from Jerusalem who attribute this new work of God to the devil. Somewhere in between these two extremes were the skepticism and misguided concern displayed by Jesus' mother and brothers, and those who were just confused because Jesus' teaching was so unlike anything that they'd heard before. Then there was the superficial enthusiasm of the crowd, excited by the display of miracles, recognizing Jesus' power, and in hope of healing, and cleansing of demon possession, but not understanding that these signs were there not to impress them with Jesus' power, but to point them to the Truth of His message. How can people respond so differently? The answer to these questions is going to be shown in our parable today to depend on the condition of the heart that receives this seed of the Word.

1 He began to teach again by the sea

Jesus is again teaching by the Sea of Galilee, as He was doing in Mark 2:13.

And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that

The crowd is both an obstacle and an opportunity. The very large crowd here provided the opportunity for a large number of people to hear about the Kingdom of God, and that was a great thing. But, when the Bible says that the crowd was gathered around Him, the idea was that the very large crowd was again pressing Him.

He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land.

So now Jesus has a problem; He can't teach underwater, and yet this very large crowd is pushing toward Him, with his back to the Sea. But Our Jesus is a problem-solver. He is our example of a can-do attitude in ministry. He didn't dismiss some of the people to make it easier on Himself; He figured out a way to teach this large and pressing group of people. He got into a boat and taught the people from there. There was another problem. The noise must have been tremendous. *It's* amazing how sound bounces and carries off of the water—you can hear people who are far away, like they're right next to you. Exactly where Jesus taught cannot be said for sure, but a possible location is a natural amphitheater situated halfway between Capernaum and Tabgha to the south where the land slopes gently down to a semi-circular bay.

2 And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching

The word Parable means "something put beside something else". In other words a simile, a comparison. And in the Parables, the comparison is always the same. It's a comparison of something on Earth which people can easily understand, with something in Heaven, which is more difficult to understand. So it's trying to explain something Heavenly, Profound, Divine using something familiar. A parable is *An earthly story with a heavenly meaning (Barclay, Mark, p.85)*.

Jesus starts out His parable with an interesting word:

³**"Listen to this!** It kind of tells the crowd that Jesus is going to say something very important, and He doesn't want the crowd to miss one word. He gets their attention first. **Behold.** Now to *behold* something means to see it,--parables are comparisons, but they're also something else—Word Pictures. Jesus is trying to get them to behold in their mind. In this parable, Jesus is going to talk about conditions of the heart, and he's going to explain how the condition of the heart, whether a

hard heart, a shallow heart, a crowded heart or a prepared heart determines how we react to God's Word. This week we're going to consider the first type of soil, the hard heart.

the sower went out to sow; ⁴as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. Can you picture this in your mind? The shapes, while a little familiar to us, were very familiar to Jesus' audience in this agrarian society. To Jesus' audience, these were mental pictures of things that were very familiar (persons sowing, seed, roads, birds eating grain) and it gets them thinking.

¹⁰**As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.** Now, I know that when we're reading the scriptures, the disciples can come off as kind of dim sometimes, but consider this, first they'd just heard this for the first time and didn't have two thousand years of thought to benefit from like we do.

¹³**And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?"** So Jesus, here is telling us that the Parable of the Sower is kind of Primer, or lesson in parables for the disciples, and it's important that they understand it correctly, so that they may understand all of the parables.

¹⁴**The sower sows the word. ¹⁵These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.** In Mathew 13:37, it says that **He who sows the good seed is the Son of man**". Jesus is the one preaching, spreading the Word as he's teaching by the seaside. He's actually the one doing the sowing of the Word while he's telling them the parable about sowing the Word—the sower is Jesus—He is the Power behind the Word. And when we are spreading the Good News of the Kingdom we continue Jesus' earthly ministry, acting as His body; hands and feet, and mouth here on earth, so it's still a continuation of Jesus' ministry, we're just allowed to collaborate in the process. The ultimate sower is Jesus. So it's still God doing the sowing, it's just God working through us. Jesus said **Without Me you can do nothing.**

People often look at this parable and see 4 kinds of people, but it's describing 4 conditions of the human heart. More important than categorizing people into four groups; hard hearts, shallow hearts, crowded hearts and receptive hearts, is to remember that Jesus died for people with all four conditions of the heart. This parable is also a clear call to immediately examine our own hearts—and makes it clear that we are responsible for understanding His message about the condition of our heart at to remember that at times in our lives, probably many of us have exemplified these four conditions, to some extent. Jesus cares about ALL these hearts, and so should we.

The soil of the heart has the wrong character, the wrong starting material (Sin)

When the Bible talks about the heart, it's not talking about the beating thing in your chest that pumps blood around your body. It's talking about the center of your being, what makes you, YOU. The heart is the seat of **emotion** (Psalm 25:1 ; Prov 14:10 ; Isa 66:14 ; John 14:1 ; Rom 9:2), **intelligence** (Prov 16:1 ; Luke 9:47), **morality** (Psalm 58:2 ; Rom 1:24), **human choice** (Deut 8:2 ; Luke 21:34 ; Acts 11:23), and our **spiritual life** (Deut 6:5 ; Jer 31:33 ; Rom 10:9-10 ; Gal 4:6). The heart is where you think deeply, plan for the future, exert your will, decide how you feel about things, feel emotions, and worship God. It's how God sees us. We may look at each other and say, oh that person is tall or short, young or old, but God looks at us and says "what is the condition of your heart?". And by the way, the news isn't good. Jeremiah 17:9 says **that "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"** This is the normal condition of the human heart. When the person is not living according to God's will, it is the heart that is described as darkened, rebellious, callous, unfeeling, or idolatrous. It is within the heart that God works to create a work of heart. And it's even worse than that, because we also have an adversary, Satan. When a heart is hard, and the word is not penetrating, how easy it is for the enemy to distract us from hearing and receiving God's Word. He, and his minions literally remove

the Word devour it, most usually by distraction or confusion. Often, he uses our flesh to draw us away, like when you're sitting in a service, and all you can think about is: "I'm hungry—when's lunch?". Or "let's see, when I get home, I have to do this, and this, and that". He does this all of the time with unbelievers, immediately coming and taking away the word which has been sown, but we as Children of God should not give the enemy this opportunity. Hard hearts are kind of like clay. When clay is dry, it's as hard as stone. When wet, it's as sticky as taffy. Clay drains poorly, which leads to rot, and contains little air, which suffocates roots, so plants won't grow. The hard heart ignores, spurns, or rejects the Word of God, never allowing it to penetrate. The only real solution, if you want plants to grow, is to replace the clay with good soil. And that's exactly what God does: **Ezekiel 11:19** says "**And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,**". The new nature is the only ultimate cure for the hard heart. Soils harden by drought (refusal to cooperate with the Holy Spirit). When the Water of the Word of God, and in particular the Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ, is presented, it has one of two effects. Either someone lets the rain in, and accepts it, and the Word does a work in their hearts, or they refuse to let the rain penetrate their heart, they reject it, the rain rolls right off, and their heart becomes a little harder.

Soils harden by compaction (tribulation):

In ancient Israel, their fields of grain were not in the form of Victorian gardens, but in the form of long, narrow strips, with little paths between them that were rights of way—so people didn't have to walk all the way around the fields to get past them. But what that also meant is that these paths would get beaten down and compacted as hard as stone by years of people walking on them. Nothing grew on those paths, despite everything being overgrown around them. These are the kind of paths that Jesus is talking about. Any seed would just bounce off those paths.

Despite the evidence that God has put in their lives, and the promises He has given them, the people of God can react to trials and troubles by hardening their hearts, if they choose to. In Hebrews 3:7-9 [Therefore, just as] **the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear His Voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw my works for forty years.** Now the word tribulation in the Greek (thlipsis), means to press down or press together, exert pressure, **press down**. Pressing down on us of trials and persecution can harden our hearts like these paths, if we don't react to them the right way. And what's the right way? In Romans 5:3-5 Paul puts it succinctly: **³And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; ⁵and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**