

## Holy Seed

Mark 4:1-20 | Jonathan K. Dodson | January 25, 2014

As we follow Jesus into Mark 4, he has already selected his 12 disciples, gone public with his ministry, created controversy among the religious Pharisees, and begun teaching in parables. He and his circle are creating quite a stir. We find them at the edge of Lake Galilee where crowds surge once again, pressing in around him. His popularity is so great, that in order to continue teaching without being trampled, he climbs aboard a boat with his disciples, about 30 feet long, which could comfortably fit 13 people. With the natural buffer of water, he's able to continue teaching. He tells a parable. Parables are fictional stories intended to communicate kingdom truths. In your Bibles, this parable is probably titled "Parable of the Sower," but is it accurate? Is the parable about the sower, the seed, the soil? What is Jesus trying to communicate? Let's see.

### The Path

Let's take a look at the sower: "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it" (4:3-4). What's being sown? Jesus interprets the parable as later saying, "The sower sows *the word*" (14). The sower sows a word not a deed. The "word" is a frequently a synonym for the gospel, the announcement of God's rule breaking into the world in the person of Christ. It is good news not doctrine. News is announced. When the so-called icpocalypse hit on Friday, people couldn't stop talking about it. They didn't just study the event; they announced (Twitter, TV, blogs, radio). The Word is something to be announced. **The gospel is a spoken word not a silent deed.** But that's not fashionable among many Christians today, who prefer to approach to the gospel: "Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words." Deeds over words. Falsely attributed to St. Francis, this quote falsely communicates the idea that the gospel can be communicated by action. But let's be honest. No one in Austin is going to see you give to charity, be kind to a coworker, or feed an orphan and conclude that the rule of God has broken into the world in Christ, and it is imperative to repent of their sins and put faith in Jesus to join his kingdom. **To draw a gospel conclusion, people have to hear a gospel message.** Though this good news inevitably produces good deeds. The seed being sown is the gospel word. This act is often referred to as evangelism. Evangelism is the heart of mission, cut it out, and you've got a lifeless enterprise. What is evangelism? Well its not proselytizing? Proselytizing, Pope Francis says, builds walls; evangelism builds bridges. Proselytizing is coercive. It attempts to *recruit* people to get behind your wall of doctrine, morality, or politics. I think of the angry free speech preachers on my campus in college or the Christian who is friendly with people at work until they tell him they could never be a Republican or that they aren't interested in Christianity. Proselytizing is about recruitment to a cause, but evangelism is sincere communication about Christ. Sharing this word about Christ is a matter of love not coercion. Consider the words of atheist Penn Jillette: "If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...how much do you have to hate somebody to *not* proselytize?" Now he's not making the distinction between evangelism and proselytizing, but he is making an interesting point. Evangelism is about love. To not share this word about Christ is

tantamount to hate. As Jesus' parable unfolds, we see four places the seed is sown: the path, rock, thorn, soil. We've looked at the path, where a bird snatches up the seed and devours it. People hear the gospel respond with a firm "no."

### Rocky Joy

The next place the word lands is rocky soil, where it immediately springs up, but later withers away, rootless and scorched by the sun. Jesus says these are the people who hear the gospel and **immediately receive it with joy** (16). Many Christians would consider an immediate joyful response to the gospel, a conversion, what Andrew Walls calls "deep consciousness of personal sin followed by a sense of joyous liberation." **An explosion of joy doesn't make you a Christian anymore than a bout of sadness makes you a nihilist.** A joyful experience in response to the gospel isn't evidence of conversion. But this isn't what our revivalist history would have us believe. Walk an isle. Have an experience. Point to a moment in time when you were converted in joy. That is a 20<sup>th</sup> century, western, and only partially representative conversion story. People who haven't had that are made to feel sub-Christian. But statistics show that many experience-based conversions are no conversion at all. **Of the 16,000 "conversions" occurred at X church in a five-year period, only 10 percent resulted in long-term changes in personal behavior.** Yet many evangelicals point back to joyful experience in the past as assurance of their salvation. Jesus is saying the opposite: joyous response to the gospel doesn't equal genuine conversion. In fact, C.S. Lewis, perhaps the greatest Christian apologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and philosopher of joy, was a reluctant convert. Now why linger over this? Because Christians falsely place assurance in past experiences and non-Christians have the impression that Christianity is unthinking emotional spirituality. Both have an incorrect and unbiblical impression. **Conversion isn't experience based its faith based.** This is Jesus' point. He goes on to point out why rocky soil response doesn't last: **"And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away"** (17). External pressures, suffering and persecution because of their beliefs leads to falling away. They don't endure. I have two friends who had powerful conversionary experiences, at least one of them accompanied with such emotion that he left our church gathering while I was preaching in tears. When I caught up with him he explained the sense of Christ lifting a burden he didn't need to carry. Several years later he and his wife were wooed away from Christ under the persecution of pluralism. They just couldn't agree with Jesus' unique claims to be the way the truth the life. I cant tell you how many times ive heard someone say of a friend, "Well they arent bearing fruit but I know they made a profession, were baptized, had a joyful experience, so they must be saved." This is anti-Jesus teaching. A past joyful experience isn't enough. Jesus says **"But the one who endures to the end will be saved"** (Mark 13:13). Notice that Satan was the one who snatched the word away. This is war. Will you bow to external pressures, circles of friends, cultural claims, or will you endure to the end? A "Yes! and no" is still a no to Christ.

### Thorny Cares

The third place gospel seed lands is among the thorns, where it sprouts, grows, and is eventually choked out. What cuts it short? **"the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word"** (19). Instead of

external pressure of suffering, this person is choked out by internal desire. This person hears the gospel, receives it, but abandons Christ because of the deceitfulness of riches. The word deceitfulness is better translated “enticements.” Its not money that entices us but what money buys—comfort, entertainment, the fleeting satisfaction of temporary experiences. The lure of the city (scenes, bars, travel, restaurants, parks, Sunday brunches) and before you know it your skipping worship of the living God, disengaging from community with the saints, and worshipping lesser things. Jesus is saying to you “don’t take heart in your past joyful experience, don’t be seduced by lesser pleasures. You, see, Jesus isn’t the only one fishing. The lure of the city is hooked in some of your mouths. You prefer notoriety, fun, and being in the right scene more than coming after Jesus. You have been seduced by city life. But the gospel says, I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). The thorny cares prove unfruitful. The thorny response is a Yes..but no.

### Good Soil

So what makes conversion true? It’s not a matter of hearing and receiving the gospel. Jesus notes that each person (the path, rock, thorn) “hears and receives” the Word and *yet none endure*. So what sets the “good soil” apart? **The good soil produces fruit.** Jesus points this out twice (8,20). He says it is “growing up and increasing.” These two words show us that genuine faith grows up and out. We grow up in good deeds and character and out by multiplying. This means we can’t stay behind a wall; we have to multiply. No holy huddle. A missionary community. Fishers of men. Evangelists who loving speak. Jesus says true faith is fruit-bearing faith that moves up in gospel holiness and out gospel witness. So we’ve seen this parable is about evangelism (sower), but it is also about discipleship (soil). He finishes the parable declaring “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Then I imagine the crowds dispersed.

### What’s the Point of the Parable?

With the four responses in place, what’s the point? How should we respond? Well, this is where it gets interesting. We circle of seekers press in as the crowds move away. We’re told that those around him, along with the twelve, ask him to explain the parable. Jesus responds by saying: **To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”** But I thought Jesus came preaching the gospel so people would repent and be forgiven? There’s a lot of scholarly debate over this. Some think Jesus is teaching in parables so that his preaching *results*, not necessarily intends, for people to not understand. Other say Jesus is being *ironic*. He teaches in parables lest they turn: “because the last thing they want is to turn and have their sins forgiven!” The problem with these is two fold 1) They aren’t true to the grammar. The so that clause is always a clause of purpose in mark (60xs). 2) They don’t look closely enough at the context of the quotation. In Isaiah 6, where the quote comes from, God is revealed as holy, holy, holy to Isaiah, who is sent by God to announce God’s judgment on recalcitrant, idol-worshipping, hook-in-mouth Israel. He preaches that they will become blind, deaf, and unclean, just like the idols they worship. You become what you

behold. As a result, idolatrous Israel will be narrowed down to a stump of a tree, carted off in exile. So when Jesus announces the confusion of the parable, he is announcing its affect on idolatrous Israel (and anyone else who is lured away). When the word is preached to a rebellious people, it condemns them in their behavior. It renders them blind, deaf, and mute. When the gospel is preached, it either condemns or it saves. It is God's sovereign judgment meets our responsible rebellion. **But** there is an alternate possibility. But something hopeful is embedded in the judgment. In the stump remains a holy seed, from which a new shoot will spring forth, recreating Israel around itself. Such that the seed brings true life, springing up in good soil to produce good fruit. That *holy* seed is Christ. Jesus, as the holy seed, is giving us a holy warning, but in it a word of hope. When Israel is narrowed down, Jesus is the last Jew standing, who remakes, nurtures and grows a new community around himself. This is why its not just the 12, but the 12 and other people, those who will take Christ in, and bear his fruit. Jesus is saying those who do not bear fruit (and we bear fruit at differing rates, 30,60,100) have not taken the seed in. The one who endures to the end is saved. **We are not saved based on a past experience but on a past event with present faith in the person of Christ.** We cannot cling to a decision in the past, an emotion in the present, but must cling to Christ, the holy seed himself.

Perseverance of the saints. When John Calvin was asked by a young student, how might I have assurance of his salvation given God's sovereignty, Calvin replied: Look upon Christ; he is your assurance. Look upon Christ, trust Christ, meditate on Christ, read the Word of Christ, and you'll bear his fruit. So you see, the meaning of this parable isn't just the sower (evangelism) or the even the soil (discipleship), but *the seed*—the secret of the kingdom, was right in their midst, whose death and fruitful rebirth would create a whole new people. Keep your eyes on the Seed.