

Mark 4:1-20

Date: Sunday, 14 February 2021

Scripture: Mark 4:1-20

Sermon: A Matter of Faith

Preacher: Justin Ang

Passage

Mark 4:1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mark 4:10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that

"they may indeed see but not perceive,

and may indeed hear but not understand,

lest they should turn and be forgiven."

Mark 4:13 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 along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 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. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Transcript

A Matter of Faith

I wanted to call this sermon the parable of the six grounds. I hope that I've caught your attention because you might know it by another name. Maybe you know it as the parable of the sower, or the parable of the seeds. In fact, when I told Rachel what I wanted to call this sermon, she asked, "Aren't you preaching on the parable of the sower?" And maybe you're asking, "Aren't there only four seeds? Aren't there only four types of grounds?" Maybe you're looking at the passage right now wondering how I managed to get six grounds.

And what I want us to see from the passage is the fact that indeed there are six types of grounds here in this passage that seed lands on. Do you notice it? There's the seed that's thrown onto the the path. There's the seed that's thrown onto the rocky ground. The one that's thrown amongst the thorns. That's three. Then there's another three, there's the seed that lands on ground that produces thirtyfold. There's the seed that lands on ground that produces sixtyfold and there's the seed that lands on ground produces hundredfold. Now you might suggest that that's not fair in counting it that way, but they do produce different yields don't they? What we should notice though, is that there are three types of grounds that are not useful, and there are three types of grounds that are. The first three aren't useful

because either they get picked by birds, wither in the sun, or choked by the thorns. The other seeds are fruitful.

And we know this passage don't we? If I asked you to tell me a Jesus parable, you'd probably tell me this one or the parable of the prodigal son. And if I asked you to tell me what this parable is about, you'd probably say something along the lines of "this parable is about the different responses of people who hear about Jesus." Right? There's one who rejects the Word. The one who rejects it when they suffer. The one who rejects it because of riches. And there's one who pays attention.

But today, my focus as we look at this most famous parable is to look at it from the perspective of faith. Or the lack of faith. Because if we talk about first three seeds, what's the problem with them? They land in soil which is too hard, too shallow or too thorny. The Word of God lands in the hearts of people whose hearts are hardened to the Word. And I want to suggest that it's a matter of their faith. They don't believe the Word, the seed that is sown into their hearts.

The heart of this parable is all about a person's faith. It's all about faith. Let me show you from the passage as well, have a look at verse 20.

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Mark 4:20 (ESV)

We're told that the difference between the first three seeds and the last three seeds is the fact that the last three seeds land on good soil. And the good soil are those who hear the word and accept it. They have faith. They listen to what they hear, they believe it, they accept it for it to be true. It means that the problem with the first three seeds is one of faith. Or rather, it's a lack of faith. Or in the words of one famous movie villain, "I find your lack of faith disturbing."

Let's look at the different seeds from the perspective of faith. Or lack of faith.

The Path

The first seed that lands on the path? The birds take the seed away. Satan takes the Word away from a person's heart. They don't believe in the Word. What I find interesting about this parable is that if you read it in the context of the previous chapter, Mark 3, we should realise that there are comparisons between this seed and cer-

tain characters in the previous passage we looked at last week. Do you see the parallel? The seed that falls onto the path represents who? The scribes from Jerusalem that come to Jesus. They accuse him of being from Satan. They don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God! Maybe you know someone like that, like the Scribes, the Pharisees, it's just in one ear and out the other with them when you talk about Jesus, when you talk about the gospel. You try to convince them of Jesus and they reject you.

This parable that Jesus tells here is a message for us with family, friends and neighbours who don't trust Jesus. It's a message that tells us that we should expect that hearts will be hardened. It's a spiritual battle that we're facing when we tell others about Jesus. Nothing more and nothing less! It's dealing with Satan and hardened hearts. It's a battle that requires prayer. Let me ask you, towards the beginning of this year, I laid down this challenge and said to you, to pray for a family member or friend who doesn't know Jesus. How are you going with that? I mean it. Because we are involved with a spiritual war, we have to pray. Faith itself is a gift from God!

Rocky Ground

What about the faith of the second seed that lands on the rocky ground? We're told in verses 16 and 17.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 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. Mark 4:16-17 (ESV)

Does this seed remind you of anyone from Mark 3? It should because it should remind us of the crowd. The crowd that comes to Jesus with joy because they're being healed but will eventually abandon Jesus when the going gets tough. They lacked a faith that was rooted deep. And so when the going got tough, they withered.

That's the problem with their faith. This should be a warning for us. It's not just once off prayer of repentance card. We should remember that faith is continuous. It needs to be rooted deeply. It's every single day that we trust in Jesus, it's everyday that we listen to his Words and we accept them! It's a warning to us that the Word of God needs to dwell deeply. Just as it says in Colossians 3...

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

I wonder whether we let the word of Christ dwell in us. Let me ask, how much time do you spend in the word each day? And I don't mean just to get information. I mean spending time in the word to get intimate with Jesus. That's something a good minister friend said to me this week. How often do we seek to meet with one another to encourage each other with the word of God? To warn, to spur one another on in the word, in love and good deeds? It's not just Sundays that we do it. I mean, think about it, if I said to you that you were allowed to only eat once a week, on Sunday mornings, what would you say to me? You might say, "Are you kidding me?! That's crazy!! I eat every single day thank you very much." Then let me ask you, "Why do we only seek to get fed the Word of God on Sundays?"

I wonder, whether we are a little too comfortable here in Australia. Being a Christian isn't really that difficult especially when you compare martyrs who have died for Jesus through history. You look to the Voice of the Martyrs website and you see the true and real suffering that Christians go through over the world. For example, during Christmas Islamist militants executed five Christians in Nigeria. They're reported to have said, "This is a warning to Christians in all parts of the world and those in Nigeria." We in Australia really don't know what suffering is when we look to what our brothers and sisters around the world go through. We stand up for religious freedom which is a good thing, but I wonder whether we do it because we want to protect ourselves from suffering, or because we want to be a blessing to our country. We want to bless our country by saying that everyone has a right to freely practice their religion? I talk about this because it strikes me that when Christians stand up for something, it's often for themselves, not for other people and that really saddens me.

May the word dwell richly in our hearts.

Thorns

What about the seed that lands amongst thorns? Jesus explains to his disciples, doesn't he what this means.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. Mark 4:18-19 (ESV)

Now this is challenging. Whenever I heard this parable, I always thought, well this seed is kind of me isn't it? I mean there are cares and there are riches and there are desires for the world. But it's not like it's a problem, because at least the seed is growing. Yes it's not growing that well, but at least it's growing. But the more I thought about this passage, the more I realise that Jesus is talking about a person's lack of faith because they are distracted by the cares, worries, riches of the world. The more we should realise that Jesus is actually speaking against a person like this.

Jesus himself demonstrates that doesn't he? Because what could we compare this seed to in Mark 3? What type of group could this seed be compared to? It's Jesus' own family. Aren't we told in Mark 3 that his mother, his brothers, his family think that he's out of his mind? They are looking and seeking for him and then he says to those around him that those who are part of his family are those who actually do the will of God? He almost outrightly rejects his family because they are distracted by the cares, riches and desires of the world. They care too much about what others think about them and are not fruitful.

Out of the first three grounds described. I think that the ground that is described here is the most dangerous and challenging for us here at Caringbah Presbyterian Church. We live in the Shire, we don't have persecution. In fact, there are many churches here in the Shire. And being a Christian might still seem to be cool. And I think that on a whole, we are a very rich church. I spoke to John earlier in the week about SRE, and being treasurer and he told me a very interesting fact about Special Religious Education. He said that the amount of money that received on a regular basis primarily comes from Caringbah Presbyterian. I think that's amazing isn't it? But it's a double edged sword. We are rich. No matter how you cut it, we are rich. And that can be dangerous because we can fall into the love of money. We can fall into worrying and caring about the world more than being concerned about Jesus, the kingdom of God and his gospel.

Sorry. I shouldn't use the phrase, "fall into the love of money." It's kind of like, how nobody falls into sexual sin. The truth is, people slide into sexual sin. Just as people slide into the love of money. People slide into worrying about, desiring and caring

about the things of the world. It's a very subtle but slippery slope. And the seed that lands into the thorns get choked. You don't fall into the love of money. You slide into it because you make compromises over a long period of time. It's almost imperceptible. But it's really there.

But at the heart of this ground, it's a lack of faith isn't it? It cares too much about the world, it lacks the trust in Jesus that he has got the whole world in his hands. It lacks faith that Jesus will provide for us. I was reflecting with a Christian family member and it occurred to us this week that the abundance that we receive has to be from God, right? If God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, then he is the one who provides what we have. James 1 says that every good gift comes down from the father of lights. So what about lack? If everything is from God, then it stands to reason that even our lack is from God. We might say, "Oh but that would mean he's not good, Justin! He hasn't given me what I want" And I would say, "it depends on how you see good. We define good in a very limited and short sighted ways." I'll give you an example, say you had to look after a child. And all of a sudden she got a metal fork out and was poking it into a hole in the wall. Would that be loving? Not if it's a power point that she's poking the fork into.

I'm reminded of Matthew 6 when he tells his disciples not to worry about what they will eat, what they will drink, what they will wear. Why? Because our Heavenly Father knows what we need and will provide for us. I love that passage because it's a reminder that we are called to seek his kingdom first and his righteousness above all else and everything we need will be given. When we worry about the things of this world, we're not trusting Jesus to provide for us. When we chase after riches, we're believing that money will be able to fulfil us more than Jesus.

Let me ask, are riches, the desires, and cares of the world something that you need to repent of? I pray that we would truly listen to Jesus' words here. They're so challenging. And it's applicable to each one of us. No one here is immune to it. I'll tell you why. Let me ask, "have you ever been discontent?" I know the answer is yes. Then you are not immune to being caught in the love of money, desiring after riches, and the things of this world. And we need to believe that Jesus can provide us everything. Just as Paul writes in Philippians that he has learned the secret of contentment. Whether in abundance or in need, he can do all things through him who strengthens him.

The Good Ground

Let's talk briefly about the three good grounds. The ones that produce fruit thirty, sixty, and hundredfold. I only need to talk briefly about this because we've spoken about what can prevent fruitfulness. A lack of faith through suffering, a lack of faith so that we get distracted. But I want to ask one simple question.

Are you fruitful?

Jesus in Matthew 7 talks about fruitful faith. Every healthy tree bears good fruit and every diseased tree bears bad fruit. It's not whether you declare yourself a Christian. I can tell if you're a Christian by your fruit. It's as simple as that. So are you fruitful?

Are you fruitful in good works? (Colossians 1:10)

Are you fruitful in holiness and righteousness? (Romans 6:22; Philippians 1:11)

Are you fruitful in the fruit of the spirit? (Galatians 5:22-23)

- Self-control? Or do we say the first thing that comes to our head?
- Gentleness? Or do we lash out in anger at other people?
- Faithfulness? Or are we unreliable, selfish?
- Goodness? Or do we do evil especially when no-one is watching?
- Kindness? Or are we ungenerous?
- Patience? Or are we impatient?
- Peace? Or are we overly anxious and worried?
- Joy? Or do we have a frown on our face?
- Love? Or do we hate others?

Are you fruitful in your burden for souls? (Romans 1:13)

Are you fruitful in your thanksgiving and praise? (Hebrews 13:15)

Are you fruitful in being generous with your time, your money, your resources, your entire life? (Romans 15:27-28)

Conclusion

Let me finish here by reminding ourselves of the gospel. Because in this parable we've been talking about seeds and grounds. As Jesus turns to go towards Jerusalem, in the gospel of John we're told he says this.

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12:23-25 ESV)

And what's Jesus saying here? The power of the gospel is found in Jesus, the seed, dying. And because he dies and rises from the grave, he's the reason why we can be fruitful, he's the reason why we can bear much fruit in our Christian walk. He's the seed that dies in order that we might live. Jesus comes as the seed so that we might be fruitful. So therefore, go out into the world and be fruitful.

Let's pray.