

Mark 4:1-20

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Preacher: B Maiden

[0 : 00] Shall we just briefly pray? Father, we do pray that you would give us receptive hearts, make us good soil.! This morning we pray as we hear your word.

! Help us to respond to your word in the way that Jesus expected people to respond to his words, with repentance and with faith, with obedience.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it's lovely to be here, and thank you for those words of introduction, Paul.

I have to tell you that I haven't really preached to a congregation like this anyway for about 18 months. So I'm a bit out of practice, so I hope you'll bear that in mind.

And I really feel dependent upon God this morning. And I hope that you'll pray for me, and I hope that you'll pray for our church in Kendall.

[1 : 03] We're actually meeting in the town hall this morning. Since lockdown, we've been meeting as two congregations in our building, one at 9.30 and one at 11.15.

And both congregations are growing. And we'd love to continue to meet together as one congregation like we used to before lockdown. And one possible solution to this is to meet sometimes at least, even every week possibly, in the town hall in Kendall, which is the only place we can think of that's any bigger than our church building.

So they're meeting there this morning. So please pray for guidance for the elders that they'll make the right decision about that. Okay, I want to speak this morning about this really important parable. It's an important parable because it occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And it's one of my favorite parables.

I love these parables about sowing and reaping. It's a picture that Jesus often used in his ministry. And it's about a sower.

[2 : 17] And we were talking about this in Sunday school this morning. The boys and girls will remember it. It's about a sower who sows his seed. And in those days, they didn't have nice cultivated fields like we do.

Well, maybe you don't in the evening. I don't know. But we have nice cultivated fields in the Lake District. And nearly all the seed that's sown grows well.

But there they would scatter the seed. And some of the seed would fall on the path. Some of the seed would fall in shallow soil where there wasn't much depth of soil. And some of the seed would fall amongst the thistles and the thorns.

And it would get choked. And it wouldn't bring forth fruit. And some seed would fall on really good, fertile soil and bring forth fruit.

So, I think that this parable has two ways, two applications, two ways we can think about it.

[3 : 18] And the first is that it's an encouragement to preachers. It's an encouragement to those who proclaim God's kingdom, who preach God's word. And the second, and the one I want to particularly stress this morning, in a little while, is there is a warning to those who hear the message of the kingdom, to those who hear the word of God.

So, sowing the seed is a bit like preaching the word, proclaiming God's word. And Jesus was the great sower. And he began to preach.

You can read about this in Mark chapter 1. And he began to preach. And his message, right at the beginning, was the time has come. The time that God's people have been waiting for for so long, all through the Old Testament period.

God's kingdom. That time has come. God's kingdom. The king is here. So, repent and believe the good news. And that's the response he wanted.

He wanted people to repent, which means to turn from everything that's wrong, everything that God doesn't like, everything that isn't like Jesus. He wants us to repent.

[4 : 35] And he wants us to believe the good news. I'm going to say more about that this evening. We're going to be looking at that this evening in more detail. What it means to repent and believe.

So, that was Jesus' message. That's the response that he wanted from the crowd. Like this crowd gathered on the beach by the Sea of Galilee when he first preached this parable.

The response he wanted was repentance and faith in himself. And the parable shows us the different kinds of responses that were in that crowd.

And I've got no doubt at all that in this congregation this morning, all four of these responses to God's word will be here. They will be present this morning as I'm preaching.

And you need to ask yourself, what kind of soil am I? How am I responding to Jesus? How am I responding to his word?

[5 : 38] What kind of soil am I? So, as I've said, this is an encouragement, first of all, to proclaim, an encouragement to those who preach the kingdom of God, who preach God's word.

And Jesus wanted this response of repentance and faith. What response did Jesus, the great sower, get from the crowd?

Well, if you read through Mark, you get to chapter 2. As early as chapter 2, you find that there's opposition.

There's opposition from the scribes and the Pharisees to Jesus and his message. By the time you get to chapter 3, they're plotting to kill him. Chapter 3, beginning of chapter 3, they're plotting to kill him.

By the time you get further on in chapter 3, they're saying that he's possessed by Beelzebul, who was an evil spirit. Later on after that, Jesus' own family come and try to stop him preaching.

[6 : 43] They're embarrassed by it. He goes to the synagogue at Nazareth, his hometown, and he preaches there. And the response is, this is just the carpenter, the carpenter's son.

We know his mother. We know his brothers. We know his sister. And they were offended by it. So, Jesus preached God's word. Jesus preached the kingdom. He wanted repentance.

And he wanted faith. And what did he get? He got all kinds of responses. He got a negative response, as we've just seen. He got a shallow response from the crowd. They followed him.

As long as he was performing miracles, the crowd followed him. But he didn't last for very long. And then, very, very sadly, he would preach the word. And some people would claim to have become disciples.

And they would last a few months, a few weeks, a few months, maybe a year or two. And after that, they would stop following.

[7 : 44] I was reading earlier this week in John chapter 6. John chapter 6 starts with 5,000 people being fed by Jesus in the wilderness. He then goes on to the synagogue at Capernaum.

There's a crowd in the synagogue. He's preaching there. And after the sermon in the synagogue, in John chapter 6, verse 66, it says that many, many of his disciples, that's the word that's used, many of his disciples no longer followed him.

Now, Jesus got all those responses that I've just been going through with you. And if Jesus, and he was the greatest preacher ever, he was by far the greatest ever preacher.

No one ever spoke like Jesus did. No one ever spoke like this man. He was the spirit-filled preacher. And when Jesus preached, those are the responses he got.

He got the hard response. Some people, no impression at all. He got the shallow response. Some people followed him for a bit. The crowd.

[8 : 56] He got the overcrowded response. They claimed to be disciples, but other things came in and became more important than Jesus. And Jesus became less and less important.

And they gave it all up. The word the Bible uses for that is apostasy. They apostatized. They gave up the faith that they once professed.

And some seed fell on good soil. That's the good news. Not all the seed was lost. Some of it fell on good soil. Now, if Jesus got the response like that.

If those were the responses to God's word that Jesus got. The greatest preacher who ever lived.

Then, it's the kind of response that we should expect as well. And I just want to encourage preachers this morning to keep on preaching.

And not to think that just because they're getting these different kinds of responses. They're not preaching properly. Jesus was the greatest preacher ever. And this is the kind of response or non-response that he got.

[10:03] Well, this is how people are going to respond to God's word. But keep on preaching. Because there's going to be some seed that falls on good soil. And there's going to be seed that's fertile.

There's going to be ground that's fertile. And the seed is going to sprout in that ground. And there's going to be a harvest. And it's not just going to be a little harvest. There's another parable in Mark chapter 4 about the mustard seed.

Which is a tiny little seed. And yet, it grows into a big garden shrub. In which the birds of the air can roost at night time. Build their nests and so on.

And that's Jesus' picture of the growth of the kingdom. And it is growing. It's growing all over the world. It's wonderful to hear about the work here amongst the Japanese people. It's wonderful to see people from other countries as well.

It's the same in Kendall. I mean, nobody comes to Kendall from abroad. But we're getting more and more Eastern Europeans in our congregation. We're getting people from Russia.

[11:09] We're getting people from the Ukraine. We're getting people from Poland, Romania. Coming to church on Sunday. It's wonderful what God is doing in this world. There is going to be a harvest.

There is a harvest. It's coming. It's developing even now as we speak. Yes, there are terrible, terribly hard places like Britain. Really, really hard ground. But some of the seed will always fall on good soil.

So keep preaching. You're going to get exactly the same kind of response that Jesus got. There are going to be people who oppose you. There are going to be people who reject what you say.

We're not going to listen to you. There are going to be people who you're quite encouraged about. And then you're terribly disappointed by. Your heart breaks because they walk out on Jesus.

They walk out on the church. You don't see them again. They give it all up. It's going to happen. It happened to Jesus, as we've just seen. And it's going to happen to you. But don't give up.

[12:10] Keep on sowing that seed. It's the only way that God's kingdom will grow. Through the preaching of God's word. So if you stop preaching, that kingdom won't grow.

And if you preach it, will. So keep on preaching. That's my first message for this morning. Okay? Have you got that? Good, good, great.

So that's the first point. There's only two points. Second point, this is an encouragement. This is a warning to those who hear the message of God's kingdom.

The point of the parable of the sower is there in verse 9. If you look at verse 9. Jesus said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

This is a parable about hearing the word of God. Now, I've just been explaining that when Jesus preached, he expected repentance and faith, or he wanted repentance and faith, leading to a life of obedience.

[13:18] And yet, he warns us here that there are those who hear his words who will never understand it. That's in verse 12.

People who hear and who never understand. That doesn't mean they don't understand it with their minds. They understand it with their minds, but they don't understand it in the sense that they don't stand under it.

That's what the word understand means here. They don't stand under what they hear. You can hear the word of Jesus without really hearing it.

And this is the message of this parable. It's possible to hear the words of Jesus, and it's possible to hear the words that's preached here every week, to be here, and for the sound to impinge upon our eardrums, and even into our brains, but never to really hear what's being said.

Never to stand under it. Never to understand it. Never to understand it. To stand under it. And these different soils represent different ways in which we can hear without hearing.

[14:35] When Jesus preached, he expected us to hear and to heed, to listen to what he was saying, and to act on what we heard.

In the Second World War, there was a lot of bombing of cities in this country, in Germany, in Japan. Bombing of cities. And there were air raid warnings.

The siren would go off. And people, when they heard that siren, they wouldn't just stand there or sit there. They'd find the nearest air raid shelter.

If they were in London, some of them would go down into the tube station for the night. They didn't just say, ah, yeah, an air raid shelter. They didn't just say, ah, an air raid.

They would find a shelter. That's when they really heard the warning, the siren. They would find a shelter.

[15 : 39] They'd do something about it. They would respond. And, there may have been people, I'm sure there were, who heard the siren and they thought, well, I've heard that before.

I won't bother to do anything about that this time. Nothing much happened last time. And they don't do anything about it or they didn't do anything about it. And the result was disaster for them.

You should listen to Jesus like people listened to air raid warnings during the Second World War.

When Jesus speaks, you should really listen. You must listen to Jesus. You know, there's a verse in Chapter 6 of Mark about Herod, King Herod.

And, he had John the Baptist in prison. And, he was very reluctant to execute John the Baptist.

Why? Well, Mark says, he liked to listen to John the Baptist.

[16 : 46] King Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist. He liked his sermon. He liked his preaching. I don't know what he liked about them.

But, there was something about John the Baptist's sermons that attracted King Herod. But, he never really listened. And, when he came to it, when he had to choose between his wife, his wife's will, and John the Baptist, he chose to obey his wife.

But, he liked to listen to Jesus. And, Jesus ends his sermon on the mount with a parable about two men, a foolish man and a wise man.

And, the wise man builds his house on a rock. And, the rain comes, and the floods ascend. And, the wind blows against the house he builds, but it's built on a rock, so it stands, it's secure.

there's a foolish man, he builds his house on sand, and the same winds blow, and the same rain falls, and the same floods come, and his house falls down.

[18 : 05] Some of you children probably know a song about that. The wise man built his house upon a rock, the foolish man built his house upon the sand, and the rain came, and the floods came, and the house on the sand fell flat.

You've heard that one. Is it just me? You do think it sometimes, yes. And, Jesus said, the foolish man is a man who listens to his word, who hears his word, and doesn't do anything about it.

It's possible to hear the words of Jesus, and not do anything about it. James says in his letter, that we should be doers of the word, not hearers only, and if that isn't true of us, if we just hear the word, and don't do it, James says we are deceiving ourselves.

We're actually deceiving ourselves. We may be good attenders of church, we may listen to good sermon, but if we don't actually do anything, James says, we are deceiving ourselves.

Jesus took three of his disciples onto a mountain, and on that mountain he was transfigured before them. His appearance changed. They saw a glimpse of his future glory, and a cloud came, and he was joined by Elijah, the prophet, and by Moses, the lawgiver, two representatives of the Old Testament, the law and the prophet.

[19 : 42] Moses and Elijah, the Old Testament, the law and the prophet. Peter said, let's build three huts, or dens, you would call them boys and girls, let's build three dens.

One for Jesus, one for Abraham, and one for Isaac. And there was a voice from heaven that Moses and Elijah disappeared. And there was a voice from heaven, and the voice from heaven said, this is my son whom I love.

Listen. Listen to him. You must listen to Jesus. And if you hear sermons and even read the gospel and don't do anything about it, you are deceiving yourselves.

so you must listen to Jesus. And these four soils are different ways in which we can listen or not listen to Jesus.

I'm dealing particularly with the first three. This morning and then this evening I want to look at the last one, the good soil, in more detail. Some of the seed falls on the footpath, on the path, behind the soil, and it's trodden underfoot.

[21 : 08] Or it's gobbled up immediately by the birds. And these are people who hear the word of God and it makes no real impression on them at all.

They don't stand under it. They may reject it. They may say they don't believe it. They're hostile to it sometimes.

but they may not be hostile to it. They may actually, in a sense, believe it, i.e. believe that it's true. But they don't really listen. They're just sermon tasters. It's possible to be a sermon taster.

It's possible to get used to hearing sermons. You may even like a good preacher. You may be a connoisseur of sermon.

[22 : 07] You may be able to give preachers points. Eight out of ten for content. Seven out of ten for presentation. And go away and not do a thing about what you've heard.

You're just a sermon taster. I think this is a real danger in churches where there's an emphasis on the preaching of the word of God as there should be in every decent church.

The real danger is that people get used to hearing people who handle the Bible well and familiarity breeds contempt.

And they just, it's a habit they get into of listening to good sermons. And do you know what they do when they go on holiday? They go to Kesech for more sermons. Or they go to Word Alive for more sermons.

They may even go to both if they're really, really keen. Their whole life is listening to sermons. How many sermons have you heard in your lifetime? How many sermons have I heard?

[23 : 15] How many sermons have I preached in my lifetime? Hundreds and hundreds, not just heard, but preached. I've actually probably preached more than I heard.

And yet it's possible to do that and never really to listen to Jesus. Never really to repent. Never really to believe.

And James says that if that is true of us, we are deceived people. We may be well-informed people, but we are deceived people.

And I've no doubt there are people like that here this morning. This soil would have been in that crowd on the beach at Galilee, and I've no doubt that it's here this morning. There are people who are familiar with God's word.

They are familiar with Jesus. They're familiar with the gospel, but it has never actually made much of a difference to their lives. They're not living lives of repentance, turning from everything that is against what Jesus is like, or what Jesus taught.

[24 : 30] And lives of faith and trust in him, and humble obedience to him, out of love for what he's done for us. I wonder if there's anybody like that here this morning.

I'm sure there is people like that here this morning. And it's Satan, you know, who snatches the word away. it's the activity of Satan that causes us to hear God's word and not do anything about it. And then there's the shallow soil. The shallow soil is soil that's over hard rock, limestone or something. And it's only a thin layer of soil.

And so the shoots emerge very quickly. And they emerge quickly because there's no depth of root underneath. there's nothing underneath. It's all surface.

Nothing underneath. And then when there's a dry period, it shrivels up. It shrivels up as quickly as it shoots up.

[25 : 36] And Jesus says these are the people on whom God's word seems to make initially some impression. It says here that they receive the word with joy.

They receive the word with joy. Now in the book of Acts, that word receiving, that phrase receiving the word means that they became Christian.

I don't think it means that here. But in the book of Acts, they would have been welcomed into the church, they would have been baptized, they would have been welcomed into the church, they'd receive the word. And Luke says in Acts chapter 2, those who received the word were baptized and added to the church.

So these people look like Christians. They probably think they're Christians to begin with, and other people think they're Christians to begin with. And then the tests come.

Then the persecution comes, that's Jesus. The difficulties, the pressures, persecution on account of the word, trouble on account of the word.

[26 : 48] So these are professing believers. But when they're persecuted, the persecution reveals that there's no depth at all.

They're shallow. They're superficial. And after that promising start, they drop out. So what is one of God's purposes in persecution?

Why does he allow Christians to be persecuted? We've been praying for them this morning, all over the world, increasingly. Persecution is a fact for Christians.

And the New Testament says it will be. The New Testament says it's part of the package. unto us it has been given on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to be persecuted for his sake. That's just it. It's part of the package. If you become a Christian, you're going to be persecuted. We've done very well in this country. We haven't been persecuted properly for a long time.

[27 : 50] That means we haven't been tested. We haven't been tested by persecution. one of the reasons that God allows his church to be persecuted is to test the depth of their faith in Jesus, the reality of their faith in Jesus.

Now, the problem with becoming a Christian in Britain is that it actually starts you off, gets you started on quite a nice life really, doesn't it?

And church is quite a nice place, isn't it? And you quite like coming here, don't you? It's quite a nice place to come on a Sunday morning. Nice people. Nice people from all over the world.

I bet the coffee, Josh said that. I should imagine that the coffee is quite good as well. I'm not even sure that you have coffee on the Sunday morning. I'm sure the coffee is good as well.

It's a nice place to be. Nice people. And you become part of a kind of evangelical subculture enjoyable meetings, somewhere to go.

[29 : 00] So our life after conversion is probably in some ways better than it was before. Easier than it was before. And it's never been tested.

Will we still choose Jesus when the storm comes? Will our house stand when the storm comes? You know, when I was a child, my dad and mum used to like listening to George Beverly Shea, America's beloved gospel singer.

He died two or three years ago, aged about 103. I think he was still singing. And he sang a hymn called, I'd Rather Have Jesus Than Silver or Gold.

I'd rather be his than have riches untold. I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands. I'd rather be led by his nail pierced hands than to be the king of a vast domain and be held in sin's dread sway.

I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today. great. Great. Great. But let me ask you a question.

[30 : 21] How do you know? How do you know? If you've got Jesus and silver and gold, if you've got Jesus and houses and land, if you've got Jesus and the wolves applaud, how do you actually know that you'd rather have Jesus than any of those other things?

Unless the point comes, the time comes, when you have to choose between the two. And all over the world today there are Christians who are having to choose between the two.

If you become a Christian in, let's say, Egypt or Pakistan, just your ordinary big Muslim country, you'll be treated as a second class citizen.

You will almost certainly not get a decent job. You may end up working on the brick kilns in Pakistan for the rest of your life. And you'll never get out of them.

Would you be happy with that? If you had to choose either that or Jesus Christ? What would you choose? Your children were probably not going to university. You'd never have been to university yourself.

[31 : 39] There are increasingly, an increasing number of places in the world today where you have to choose between Christ and prosperity. Christ and your freedom. Christ and your popularity.

And increasingly, even, as in Nigeria, as we've been praying this morning, Christ and life itself. Will you choose Jesus? One reason why God allows persecution like that is as a test to know whether you really would rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.

That's why God allows persecution. So there's the shallow soil. Then there's the overcrowded soil. soil. And this seems even more promising than the shallow soil.

It seems to take root. It lasts longer than the seed that has been sown in that thin soil. It begins to grow, seems to grow, and gradually the thorns and the thistles that share the soil take over and they choke the seed.

And Jesus identifies these thorns and thistles with the worries or the anxieties of this life and he mentions this specifically, the deceitfulness of wealth, the deceitfulness of riches.

[33 : 14] So it's the distractions linked with wealth and success. And the anxieties, the worries that wealth, pursuing wealth and success bring.

If you read chapter 6 of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, there's a link between wealth and worry, wealth and anxiety. Jesus talks about laying treasure up in heaven, not on earth. And then he talks about people who are crippled by anxiety, by worry, about what to eat and what to drink and what to wear. And the pursuit of wealth, and Jesus calls it the deceitfulness, the deceitfulness of wealth, is one of the thorns that chokes the seed.

Spurgeon is supposed to have said this. I hope he did say it. I sometimes think that Spurgeon is a bit like Churchill. he's always been quoted as having said this.

And I can't believe that he said all these things that he's supposed to have said. But he's supposed to have said, persecution has slain its thousands. Prosperity has slain its tens of thousands.

[34 : 34] been done. And I think I know more people who have given up the Christian faith that they once professed because of prosperity than because of any persecution that has threatened them.

Prosperity is as big a test of the reality of your faith than persecution. as persecution. We pray for the persecuted church and rightly so.

Do we pray for the prosperous church? Because I'm telling you this, there are thousands and thousands of Christians who are nowhere today who once professed Christ.

Well, I'm calling them Christians because they profess to be Christians. There are thousands of people today who once professed Christ and who are nowhere spiritually today because the pursuit of prosperity and success and all the other things that they want in their lives have choked the seed of God's word.

It can be all kinds of things. The other things can be all kinds of things. It can be a relationship with somebody. It takes over. It can be a sport, a pastime, an activity.

[35 : 56] I know a number of people. who used to go to church. I can think of one person in particular in Kendall, actually, who used to go to church and who stopped coming to church because they did a lot of mountain running and that sort of thing.

And all these runs were on a Sunday. So they would go running instead of going to church. And it begins with maybe one Sunday and then maybe twice a month and gradually it takes over.

all that running, which is probably just ruining their knees probably. All that running up and down mountains, wonderful, isn't it?

But it's not as good as Jesus, I'm telling you. There are people for whom something is unimportant as running, although I know some of you think it's really important.

And your pastor actually did the park run yesterday with his children. So I must be careful what I say. Running is important, but he doesn't do it on a Sunday. At least I don't think he does.

[37 : 07] And he must be careful and you must be careful not to allow anything to become more important than Jesus, more important than church in your life.

Okay, so there are these people who seem to be doing well and then heartbreakingly there comes a time when you don't see them anymore. And there'll be people like that in this congregation.

Some of you young people in particular, brought up in Christian home. You're here now. Will you be here in 20, 30 years' time? I hope so.

But I'm sure that there will be people who hear God's word regularly, week by week, from Paul here and from others. And 20 or 30 years from now, you may not profess to be a Christian.

Be very, very careful. Jesus wants us to hear God's word with repentance and with faith. He wants us to be good soil. And the good soil are those who hear his word with repentance and with faith.

[38 : 22] They hear Jesus' words and they realize that they're going in the wrong direction and they turn around. They turn around really, really, in their hearts, they turn to Jesus.

That's what repentance means. and they believe, which means they trust, they depend on, they rely on totally on Jesus. They repent and they believe.

And that gives rise to a life of obedience to Jesus. If you don't live a life of obedience to Jesus after you've repented and believed, well, you've stopped repenting and you've stopped believing.

repentance and faith are not something you do just at the beginning of the Christian life and say, yeah, well, I've done that. That's the repentance and faith. Repentance and faith get you started on a life of repentance and faith.

And if you're not obeying Jesus, you've stopped repenting and you've stopped believing.

Repentance and faith. Trusting Jesus.

[39 : 33] Trusting that he died for your sins. Trusting his words. Trusting his wonderful invitation. Come unto me, all you who weary and heavy laden, burdened, and I will give you rest.

This is the cup of the covenant. Shed for many. For the forgiveness of sins. What wonderful things Jesus said. It isn't all just moral instruction.

It's gospel. It is wonderful invitation. Wonderful promises. And when we believe, we believe the promises of Jesus and we accept the invitations of Jesus.

And we also heed the warnings of Jesus and we follow the teachings of Jesus. That's what it means to believe in Jesus. Repent and believe.

Every person in this congregation fits into one of these categories this morning. Hard, shallow, overcrowded, or fertile.

[40 : 39] Which one are you? I'll be saying more about the fourth category this evening. So I hope you'll come along and hear more about repenting and believing. God bless you.

God bless you. God bless you.