

Mark 4:20

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Preacher: John MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Let's turn together in God's Word now to Mark's gospel, chapter 4. Mark chapter 4, and we'll read the last verse of this section, verse 20. Mark 4 at verse 20, others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the Word, accept it, and produce a crop thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown. As we go through the gospels, we quite often find what have been called hard sayings of Jesus. Some of his sayings that are hard to understand, others of them that may be all too easy to understand but very hard to put into practice, and sometimes both come together. For example, Jesus says, if anyone wants to be my disciple, he has to hate his father and his mother and follow me.

What does that mean? Or again, he talks about all kinds of sins being forgiven us, except one particular sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. What's that? What does he mean?

And even sometimes in parables, which we generally think of as fairly simple and clear stories, even there sometimes you find some very puzzling remarks of the Lord Jesus. For example, the parable of the steward, the unjust steward, ends in this rather strange way, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal habitations. I'm sure some of you have chewed over that one quite often. What does it mean? But when we come to this particular part of the Gospels, this parable of the sower, I think you'd agree that we don't need to fret about hard sayings of Jesus in the sense of, do we understand what the parable is saying, or even what it's meant to mean to us as we listen so much later on. The story's clear. A sower, farmer, he goes out, casts his seed to the right and to the left, sowing it, and it falls, the seed, into different types of soil, and some of it produces a crop, some of it doesn't. Straightforward.

And the meaning also, as Jesus gives it later on, the meaning is also clear. He says, the seed is the Word of God. It's the Bible. It's God's message. That's the seed. The sower or the farmer is the preacher. Or it can be even wider, preacher, evangelist, missionary, or a Christian, or a Christian, speaking to a friend, trying to explain God's Word, telling about their own experience of Jesus. So, there is the person sowing the seed. And the soils, Jesus says very clearly, they're people. Different soils, different people. And then the crop that he talks about, well, it's the results. Sometimes there's a harvest. Sometimes there isn't. Sometimes people listen. They believe. They change. Sometimes they don't. And it's as if the seed was never sown in the first place. So, there is the outline, very straightforward, of what Jesus is telling us here.

But obviously, I as a preacher, and you as a congregation, you obviously ask the question, what makes the difference? Why is it that sometimes the seed penetrates and then brings forth fruit?

[4 : 5 5] And why is it that sometimes it doesn't? Why do some people listen, respond to that seed, and why do others not? Obviously, any sensible farmer, he'd want to know. He'd want to know if he's going to get a good crop or not. Why waste seed? Why waste time? Why waste effort?

If there's not going to be any results, he needs to get a good harvest for his own livelihood and the livelihood of his family, for making a bit of profit along the line, and be able to live a decent life. And so, it comes to us as well. What makes the difference for preachers and for congregations?

What makes some people respond positively and others not so? We want to know, don't we? I certainly want to know. If God has given me the responsibility to preach his word, to sow the seed, then I must do everything I can to understand how to do it. What is it that's going to achieve the effect for which we pray and long? And the same is true for you as a congregation. You want to see harvest. You want to see fruit. You want to see lives changed. We want to know. It's what we are about as Christians, preachers, witnesses in our lives, a congregation of God's people.

Now, of course, there is underlying all that I've been saying and underlying the whole story that Jesus tells us, there is the mystery of growth, which for all our desire to understand, for all our desire to know how to go about things, we know that that's beyond us. It's in God's hand. In this very chapter, you can find the same thing. At verse 27, Jesus talks about a man who goes out scattering seed, and then it says, night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he doesn't know how. And then time goes by, and all by itself the soil produces corn, first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, and then comes the harvest. And we're left with the sovereignty of the Creator God. We were singing, weren't we, about that in Psalm 65, and it's exactly what we're told again and again in the Scripture. You tend the land, O Lord. You tend the land and water it. You make it rich and good. You drench the furrows of the land. You crown the year with fruitfulness. It's your harvest that overflow. It is God's mysterious sovereign work in the hearts and souls of men and women, the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit that causes soil to be receptive, that causes a man or a woman to listen and to accept and to be changed. Now, of course, that doesn't mean that the preacher or the Christian or the congregation can't do anything about it. That's not what the Bible teaches. As you think, for example, of another parable of the Lord Jesus here in Mark's gospel, beginning of chapter 12, he talks about a man who planted a vineyard. And then he goes on to say, he put a wall around it, he dug a pit for the wine press, he built a watchtower, and then he rented the vineyard. He'd got commercial sense as well. He wanted there to be a good harvest, a good profit from the harvest. And even so, we as Christian people, we must do our part. We must strive to spread the Word, to sow it here, there, and everywhere, to encourage growth using the means God has given us.

We want this church to grow, the seed to have its effect. Well, we have to be sure that there are no obstacles in the way. We have to be sure that the premises we offer people to come and hear God's Word are the right ones. We wouldn't dream in the middle of winter of not turning the heating on so that people would freeze and never come back. Of course, we have our responsibilities. We want to reach out beyond these four walls, and so we use God-given wisdom to have targeted outreach where we believe that there will be those who are ready to listen. Even if they're not, we know that we look for the right way to reach out to them. We know that very often the sower is a preacher of God's Word, called by God to be a minister of the Word. And so, we do everything we can to ensure that we have trained and we have gifted preachers who will be God's instruments to cause the Word to go forth powerfully to the right place and in the right way. All that is true, and it lays a tremendous responsibility on us. But ultimately, both the soil and the human heart are in the hands of God, and it is God's sovereign grace that brings about the harvest that we long to see. That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus, the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound that are all, but you can't see where it comes from or where it's going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit of God. It is the sovereign work of God in His sovereign grace. But at the same time, we have to go along with what the

[11 : 15] Bible tells us. And the Lord Jesus does explain very carefully what happens in the soul of a man or a woman in which the seed of the Word is sown, those who hear that Word, and what we should look for and what we should encourage in order that that growth may indeed come. And what I'd like to do this morning is notice how three times Jesus told this story, the parable of the sower, and at the very end of it, in each of the three Gospels, the verse that I've read to you, verse 20, basically that verse is given to us, but there's a difference in each of the three accounts. A different word is used. They're not contradictory. They complement each other. Each one gives us a different element, a different facet of God's truth. But if you look here in Mark 4, verse 20, you find that Jesus says, others, other people, like seed sown and good soil, hear the Word, and they accept it. They accept it. If you were to look at

Matthew's gospel, they accept it according to Mark, they understand it according to Matthew. And if you were to turn to Luke's gospel, chapter 8 at verse 15, you find that what Jesus says there is that they hear the Word, they hear the Word, and they retain it. Some translations put it this way, they keep a hold on it.

They retain it. So, it's the same story. It's the same work of the Holy Spirit. It's the same task that you and I have to spread God's Word. And yet, as it enters into people's ears, their minds, we trust further on too into their hearts and souls. We find that they accept it, they understand it, they retain it.

And then there's a glorious harvest. Just notice in passing that it does say in the three gospels, those three verses that you can compare, that they all, in the first instance, all hear. First of all, they must hear the Word.

And that puts a tremendous responsibility in all of us. That's what Paul tells us in Romans chapter 10. How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? So, we have a responsibility to make sure in every way we possibly can that people hear, whether it's within the walls of your church building, whether it's in some other place, that you feel is more appropriate to reach people who would never come to these services, whether it's out in the open air, whether it's in a camping center where the children are gathered, and they are preached to in that summer environment. However it is, the responsibility comes on you, if you are a believer today, to do your utmost to ensure that people hear God's Word.

[15 : 02] But while we accept that, and it's obvious, we do then go on to ask the question that we asked earlier, what makes the difference between the first three soils and this last soil? Why is it that in the last soil they accept, and they understand, and they retain the Word, and all the others don't?

Well, let's look at the three ways Jesus describes it. Firstly, from Mark's gospel, in our text here, we read that the person concerned accepts the Word. He hears it, and then he accepts it. Now, of course, going back to the original story, there's a great challenge here for the sower. He's got to get up early, in all weathers, in order to do his sowing of the seed. He's to clear away obstacles, like we read about the man who was making a vineyard. He's to do everything that is his responsibility. So do I, as a preacher of God's Word. I must be familiar with, I must study, I must see that God's Word is soaking into my mind and to my heart, and that I am molded by and moved by, and that then, as I go out to preach God's Word, that I do so, not relying myself but on the power of the Holy Spirit.

All that is my responsibility. And you can think of what yours, as a Christian, can be in different ways in order that you take away obstacles from people hearing that Word, instant, in season, and out of season, as Paul tells young Timothy. But there's a challenge here as well for the hearer.

I've been talking about the preacher. I've been talking about Christians, this congregation. But there's a challenge for the person who hears this Word of God, this gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus died for sinners, and if you repent and turn to Him, you will be saved. That's what the Word says. And it may be that this very morning there are those among us who have heard many, many, many times, as here in the story, many times this living Word of God. But God comes when you think of the Word Jesus uses. He says they hear and they accept. God's Word is not enough just to hear it.

There must be more. It's not enough even to like hearing it. It may seem a strange thing that some people come fairly regularly to church with no intention of committing themselves to Christ, but they do like the atmosphere, and they even like preaching when it's well done. You think of Ezekiel there in Babylon in chapter 33? We're told, strange indeed, you know, people were mocking him. And yet, God says to them, you, Ezekiel, are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well. For they hear your words, but they do not put them into practice.

[18 : 50] So, it is possible to hear that Word. It's possible to like hearing the Word. It's possible to agree with the content of God's Word. It's possible, too, to want to believe one day. Not yet, but then someday I certainly will. But friend, if this by any chance describes you, think of how solemn and how urgent the issues are when God's Word, salvation in Jesus Christ, the destiny of your return, never dying soul, when these things are at stake. How solemn it is. There's a little incident in the life of Bishop J.C.

Ryle, a former bishop of Liverpool. He was talking with a young man whom he knew fairly well, and he knew that this young man, he'd heard the gospel many times, but he was very much drawn to the world and its ambitions and its pleasures, and he knew that some of them at least would never ever stand up alongside the gospel. They couldn't go together. And Bishop Ryle was urging this young man not to delay his faith in Jesus Christ, not to delay to take up his cross and follow Jesus. He spoke to him of, as Felix did to Paul, or rather, the other way around, as Paul did to Felix, as I was saying to the children, sin and righteousness and judgment. And the young man stopped him, and he said, Oh, but Bishop, haven't you forgotten the dying thief? And what he meant, of course, was that the dying thief at the last moment was able to turn and believe, 11th hour conversion.

And Bishop Ryle looked at him, and just a couple of words. Remember, Bishop, said the young man, the dying thief, and Ryle said to him, Which one? Which one? The good seed was sown in one heart, yes, at the last moment to the glory of God's grace. But the other died mocking and cursing. The seed took no fruit.

So you and I must respond. This is about, it's about me. It's about you. What shall I do with Jesus, who is called the Christ? So Jesus says that people, they hear, and then they must accept.

But then he goes on to say in Matthew's version that they must hear and understand. That's the word he uses there, they understand. And here's a big problem, of course, because the Bible tells us that we don't understand by nature. Listen to the apostle Paul, Ephesians 4, 18. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Listen to Paul writing to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 2.

[22 : 16] The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for their foolishness to them, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

There's an incident in the life of William Wilberforce, the great liberator of the slaves. As a young man, he was a very close friend of a man who became prime minister, William Pitt the younger. And it was during that friendship that Wilberforce was converted. He became a believer in the Lord Jesus. And full of zeal for the Lord and longing to see others brought to faith in Christ, especially his friend William Pitt, he kept telling him about what had happened to him and urging him to listen to the gospel and to respond to the gospel. But Pitt, though still a close friend of Wilberforce, he didn't respond. He was like the seed on the rocky soil. But eventually, one day, Wilberforce persuaded Pitt to go and hear one of the best preachers in London at that time.

If I remember rightly, it was Henry Venn of the so-called Clapham sect. And that particular Sunday, William Pitt, he wasn't yet prime minister, he soon was to be, he went along with Wilberforce, and Wilberforce was enthralled. The preaching was fantastic. The minister was anointed by the Spirit of God. He made everything so clear. He showed the reality of sin, and he showed the reality of salvation in Christ, and he showed the need for a response to believe in Jesus. And he felt, I'm sure many of you have felt this sometimes, he felt, how can anyone leave today without believing in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. So, they left the church, and Wilberforce, really excited, he says to his friend William Pitt, well, what did you think of that? I didn't understand a word of what that man was saying.

Of course, understanding darkened. That's what Paul says. Now, there is, while that is true, and that it's only the Holy Spirit who can change hearts, again, we come back to the fact that there's a responsibility, in this case, for the preacher to be clear, to be passionate in his proclamation of God's truth. But let's come again to the hearer. That's what this is about, the hearer. You, this morning, you've heard perhaps this message many times. You've understood it outwardly. Perhaps you're one of those people who, you know your Bible well, and you could tell me everything about it. You could tell me everything that I've been saying and that I'm going to say. But I ask you, using Jesus' Word, have you understood in your heart of hearts? Have you determined that you must understand what this message is? Have you seen the biblical picture of yourself as true, a sinner under the judgment of God? Have you truly understood that Jesus came and died on the cross of Calvary, because that was essential in order that sin might be justly punished, and that salvation might be offered full and free to everyone, to you? Have you truly understood that when Jesus rose from the dead, those who trust in him, they rise in newness of life? And it's not just a case of hearing the Bible.

It's not just a case of reading it, not just a case of agreeing with a whole lot of it, but it is an accepting, an understanding. And if you can't understand it, then what do you do? Well, of course, there's something that you do. You look to God in the silence of your own heart. You remember the words of Jesus when he said, ask, and it shall be given you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you. And if you've never yet fully understood, and you can't say this morning, Jesus is mine. I trust in him as my Savior. My sins are forgiven. By God's grace, I've been born again. Then I ask you, do you really think that Jesus, if you were to turn to him and say, Lord, I'm asking, show me. Lord, I'm seeking, help me to find. Now, it may be that if you do that, it won't be as dramatic for you as it sometimes is for others, as it was for Saul on the road to Tarsus. But then you could go out from this church building this morning, metaphorically dancing with joy, because you're able to say, one thing I know. Whereas I was blind, now I see. I couldn't understand before, but God has opened my eyes, and now I do. So, our Lord Jesus, telling this story, he says that when you hear the word, you need to accept it, to understand it. And the third word that he uses in Luke's gospel is retain it or hold on to it. Now, that's obviously essential for the seed. It must stay in the soil.

[28 : 08] There may be droughts, there may be floods, there may be vandals, there may be thieves, but the soil must stay there. And it must be holding on, as it were, to the soil. And that's also essential when the word comes to you, when God's word about Jesus and your need to trust in him and to receive new life in him. When that comes to you, then it's essential that that word is not just, ooh, you hear it, and away it goes. That was the problem with the other three soils, wasn't it? The first one, the soil lands on the path, trodden down hard, and so it just couldn't sink in. And the word can float around a person's mind, a person's consciousness, but no more. The second case, here were people genuinely interested. But they weigh the issues, and then they decide that the cons outweigh the pros, that there are too many difficulties in following Jesus. Loss of friends, loss of academic respectability, loss of employment opportunities, who knows what else. And so, they do not retain that word. And then the seed that falls in the thorns, the cares and the pleasures of this world.

God doesn't take away pleasure. This world is full of pleasures that God gives to us. But pleasures that are Satan-inspired, pleasures that turn us away from Jesus and all the goodness and the blessing that he gives, they're so clearly wrong. Demas, that was what happened to that man, the friend and fellow laborer of Paul. But the good soil, Jesus says, it retains. It keeps hold on the word that it hears.

The person recognizes that he's dealing now with the most important issues of his life, with eternal consequences. And he can't try it out. You can't try it out just for a time. That's what happens with political parties. I was listening to people being interviewed in Falkirk.

The big problems in the Labor Party there. And one man said, well, I voted Labor the last time. I'm not going to vote Labor the next time. It could be the same, of course, for conservatives or liberal Democrats or Scottish nationalists in other circumstances. See, the point is there, you can try out the political party, vote for them this time. And if you don't like them, if they haven't done what you want, you vote for someone else. That's not the way it is when you hear the word about Jesus Christ.

It's a case of saying, Lord, I come. Lord, I believe. Lord, I accept. Lord, I understand. Lord, I want to keep this word. That's why conversion is so often described under the metaphor of marriage. True marriage.

[31 : 04] Biblical marriage. Not the kind of marriage that our government wants to define, but true, true marriage in its truest sense. Because there the one person says to the other, I take you, forsaking all others, till death do us part, to love, to cherish. And that's what you will do with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Retain Him. Hold on to Him forever. And there'll be a rich, rich harvest. What is the harvest? Well, for you as a congregation, there is a numerical aspect, 30, 60, 100 times. It could mean these seats being filled. It could mean spilling over and other congregations being formed. Because God is able to do that. And His seed can produce such a harvest.

But there's also the harvest of righteousness, the fruit of the Spirit that leads to a life and a community like this one, vibrant with the love and the power of Jesus Christ.

Today, we've all heard the Word. You've heard it. Accept it. By God's grace, understand it. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it goes so far beyond our human capacity to preach it or to explain it, and a person's capacity to accept it.

And that's why we pray for the great work of the Holy Spirit in every heart today, so that we might, all of us, truly accept this Word of God in Jesus Christ, and know new life and a rich harvest. In Jesus' name, amen.

[33 : 19] Let's close our service singing Psalm 126 on page 41—no, Psalm 126. It's in the Sing Psalms version.

Page 171. Page 171. To the tune Denfield, when Zion's fortunes God restored, it was a dream come true. And notice verse 5, a joyful harvest will reward the weeping sower's toil.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.

[34 : 46] Amen. Amen. Amen. us to realm. Restored a fortune's gracious thought like streams in desert soil.

A joyful harvest will reward the weeping so ever in fall.

The one who bearing see to sow goes that with tears of grief will come again with songs of joy bearing his harvest sheep.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and always. Amen.

singularly church is equal to the christ of the angels ft going to have good into sight, hanging in love and tender.

[36 : 26] Hum RC