

Mark 4:8

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[0 : 01] We shall turn again to Mark's Gospel, chapter 4. And we can read at the 8th verse of the chapter, Mark chapter 4 and verse 8.

And other fell on good ground, and it yielded fruit that sprang up and increased, and brought forth some 30 and some 60 and some 100.

Now, we're all conscious of a new interest in evangelism, arising partly out of our awareness of the crisis that faces the Church of God in Scotland in our own day because of declining attendances, and because we are being pushed to the periphery of the life of the nation.

But there is, of course, a very much more radical and important reason for evangelism, and that is that God himself has mandated the Church to engage in missionary ministry.

And that must always be the primary reason why we evangelize. It's not because of our awareness of human need, or because of our awareness of decline in the Church, but primarily because God has commanded us to go and evangelize every creature.

[2 : 03] But there is a very real danger that we talk about it, we worry about it, and yet we do so little about it.

And in a way, tonight I'm going to add to the volume of talk about it, because I want to look at some of the issues raised by this parable with regard to evangelism.

But I would also hope that beyond listening and beyond talking, it may also serve as a spire and as an encouragement, and in some measure also as guidance with regard to this very great question.

The details of the parable are familiar, because it's one of the Lord's most famous parables. It seems to me to highlight three or four great lessons.

It reminds us, first of all, of the need to sow the Word of God. Behold, there went out a sower to sow.

[3 : 26] And in verse 14, the Lord says, The sower sows the Word. Now, if we take that statement, we can emphasize its different elements in different ways.

We could say, for example, that it is enormously important that we should sow a good seed, that it is the Word that is sown. And that is obviously of tremendous importance, that what is sown is the truth of God, that what we have, it's not simply appeal to the emotions or to the affections, but it's primarily an appeal to the human understanding.

Evangelism is to begin with an exercise in explanation. We have the word of the cross, the word of reconciliation, the logos, the logic, the reason, the explanation, the assertion of the great doctrines of the New Testament.

And we have to be so careful that it is not that we sow, that the message is the authentic message of the New Testament, that it is a message which contains substantial and fundamental New Testament truth, theological truth.

We sow the seed of the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ. We sow the seed of the doctrine of the atonement wrought by Christ as he died in our place and as he died for our sin.

- [5 : 16] We sow the seed of the resurrection of Christ, of justification by faith alone, the seed of the imperativeness as he did of the new birth.
- We sow the seed of an urgent evangelistic appeal that says you must believe in Christ. You must turn from your sin and turn to God.
- This sower sows the world. He is not sowing merely anecdotes. He is not sowing merely stories.
- He is not sowing his own recollections personally. He is not sowing his own comments on current affairs. He is sowing the world, the great doctrines of the New Testament revelation.
- I would also reflect upon this proposition. The sower soweth the world. I would emphasize that there is so little interest shown in the actual method by which he sowed.
- [6 : 35] It may be that there aren't all that many ways of sowing seed. But it still fair common to say that there is no emphasis at all on the actual manner in which the seed dispersed this precious seed.
- Now I'm not altogether convinced that the method is irrelevant. but I am convinced that the method is of secondary importance.
- So long as we have the good seed, it doesn't matter by what process we get it out. So long as the instrument, the machine, the agency, the operation is such as allows for the dispersal of the seed.
- There are, I would suggest to you, forms of communication that do not admit of actually carrying the word of God.
- I don't believe that you can evangelize by using instruments of a musical kind by themselves.
- [7 : 58] Evangelism must be verbal. We must put God's gospel in words. But so long as the vehicle or the medium allows us to express the doctrines, to formulate God's message, it doesn't matter so much what the method is.
- So long as it allows us to get the message across. And that really is the urgent concern here.
- This man sows the seed. He doesn't only have it, he doesn't only say it's good seed, but he sows it.
- There is always the peril that we may be very, very proud of the seed that we have got, but it's kept in store, it's kept in the bag.
- And the great thing is to get it out, to get it into the world that needs it, to disperse it, to sow it in this great field, which the Lord says is the world itself.
- [9 : 19] it seems to me so easy sometimes to talk about evangelism. It's so easy to envy the great harvest of the past.
- It's so easy to look at the spiritual sky and say the weather is so unclean and conditions are so unfavorable. And to postpone the sowing, to find every kind of excuse for not actually going and sowing the seed.
- But until we sow the seed, there is going to be no harvest. And that's what surely we've got to attend to, to get the word across from the pulpit, get the word across on our own personal testimony, put that word in print in books and tracts, proclaim that word in door-to-door visitation, proclaim that word in open-air preaching, proclaim that word in radio and television, proclaim that word in public for a public discussion, proclaim that word in music and song, proclaim that word in film, proclaim that word in every conceivable way.

It is the message and the propagation of the message of matter. It's not the how of it. there is no sacred method.

It is this urgent insistence, get the seed sow. Now let us face the fact that most people in this land today are not Christians because they have rejected the faith.

[11 : 10] They are Christians because they have never heard the faith. that tragically is true of many who are regular in their attendance on so-called Christian services.

And yet here we are with our own complacency. We have good seed. It's an excellent bag, it's in a safe place. But we are not actually sowing it.

We talk about it. Remember great days when other men sowed it, and Spurgeon, and Chambers. We still talk about the incredible harvest that these men reaped.

But we are told here the sower soweth the word. He has the word, but more than that he actually sows the word.

He gets it across. The second lesson in the parable is this. it brings to the attention very clearly that an enormous amount of effort is apparently wasted.

[12 : 20] It goes for nothing. Now some men say that this is the main lesson of the parable. I don't agree with that. But it is yet, I think, an incidental lesson that so much of the evangelistic effort is apparently wasted.

You see yourselves, some of the seed falls by the wayside. It bears no fruit whatever. Some seed falls on stony ground.

Some seed falls among the thorns. And all that precious seed and all that precious effort is wasted.

And it may very well be that large areas of this field were stony. And large areas were full of thorns, invisible at the time of sowing.

So there is seed wasted. And there is effort wasted. And I think that so often we ourselves look at our own labours and our own situation.

[13 : 31] and we say, well, we wasted so much seed. We sowed so much that bore no fruit.

We covered so much wayside, so much stony ground, so much thorny ground, that the whole thing was a waste of time. And we say, look at the effort, see the wastage, see the returns.

There is simply abandon the whole project. Now I think it's salutary for us to come back to the kind of teaching we have here to see.

That it is to be expected that a lot of seed is in inverted commas wasted. A lot of effort goes for nothing.

A lot of the labor is absolutely fruitless. There are many, many situations where we sow seed and there isn't a single convert.

[14 : 42] There may be a ministry in a certain pulpit year after year and there are no conversions. We may engage in door-to-door visitation.

We may engage in fact distribution. we may ask person after person to come along to our church services and there is no fruit.

It is seed falling by the wayside and we are so soon discouraged and we say the whole thing is fruitless, the whole thing is futile, the whole thing is a waste of time.

or what is almost more tragic, we sow the seed and there appears to be some response. persecution or some difficulty and those who pardon converts fall away.

[15 : 52] Or those who pardon converts their faith is choked by the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. churches. And so again we say our methods must have been wrong because people fell away.

They lost their faith. Their faith was choked and so the methods must have been wrong. Now let's go back to the New Testament situation and see how much discouragement the church of that period had to face and was prepared to face in the work of evangelistic proclamation.

We see the Lord himself and he pitches as no man pitched before and no man has pitched since. And yet at the end of the day all we are left with is a crowd that chants crucify, crucify, crucify.

That ministry leaves him with only a small handful of disciples. It would be terribly wrong to say that because there was so much discouragement the method was wrong, the style was wrong and ought to be abundant.

The Lord himself, if I may say it reverently, had the terrible experience of seeing so much of his seed wasted and so much of his effort go for nothing.

[17 : 33] And wasn't that true likewise of the apostle Paul? Sometimes he preached and there was a considerable harvest. But very, very often Paul preached as in Athens and there is only a tiny harvest and sometimes there is no fruit at all.

And you can imagine committees of the church and they look at Paul's reports. You spent all those days in Athens and all you have to show for is two possible converts.

And so we say, never go to Athens again. No more open air preaching. No more apoliterical preaching in which you build on the position of these men, their own religiosity.

People have said that Paul was wrong enough to philosophical, too apologetical, too scholarly because there were only two converts.

And we so often say the same thing. No more door-to-door recitation because we had no converts, only two converts or whatever. We get so discouraged. But Paul did not get discouraged.

[18 : 57] And you come right down to all the great glamour names of evangelism. You see Thomas Chalmers, that great master of inner city ministering evangelism.

Time and again, Chalmers trudged up and down the stairs of those dark east den closest in Glasgow. And there was no response.

He went to one close some 39 times and found only hostility. There was no response.

There was no welcome of open arms. There were no obvious returns. men. You take a stranger case still.

William Chalmers Burns and his China ministry. Chalmers Burns left Scotland and revival. A powerful awakening ministry.

[20 : 04] He went to China and there was scarcely any fruit. But those men faced the discouragements. What I'm saying is that we ourselves are totally unrealistic in our expectations and that we are far too ready to take discouragement as a sign that we ought to abandon the work.

even on a secular commercial level it would commonly be expected that a salesman would get only a 1% return on his own efforts his own door to door visitation to use that term.

But he would not abandon the method because the returns were so apparent in consequence. And I think that we should face it that a great deal of the seed that we sow is going to be apparently wasted.

A great deal of the effort will apparently go for nothing. And yet the effort ought to be persevered. Most of those contacted in door to door visitation will show no interest.

Most of those who preach to the open air will switch off. Most tracts get torn up.

[21 : 50] There is no doubt whatever as to those facts. and yet there is nothing in them but what this great parable leads to expect.

That a great deal of the effort is going to be wasted. But for the sake of the proportionate success that the Lord also promises we are to persevere in the labor that he has assigned us to.

well there are those two lessons we have to sow the seed. We have to face a high level of discouragement.

The third lesson is this the importance of the soils or the importance of the soil. We find such a wide variation in the returns.

there are some people and the seed falls by the wayside. The devil who comes in says the Lord before the word registers.

[23 : 03] It never gets through the wall of incomprehension the wall of prejudice. They sit there's some gospel but they don't hear a single word.

you might ask me how would I feel tonight if I were told that somebody here hadn't heard hadn't understood a word that I said.

I'd feel distressed in a way. I'd feel at a certain level that I'd failed. but I would also have to confess that I'd feel very much less disturbed than I would have some 20 years ago because it seems to me totally predictable and quite intelligible that many people come to Christian services and yet don't hear and don't listen.

I'm very conscious that my personality creates immense obstacles to comprehension. The accent is all wrong.

The vocabulary is all wrong. But then I met other people their accent is impeccable and their vocabulary is non technical.

[24 : 35] and yet they have the same phenomenon to contend with. They find too that people sit through the service and they don't hear a single thing.

There's a famous story about William Wilberforce taking his House of Commons colleague the younger Pitt to hear the gospel preached by John Newton.

And Wilberforce was very anxious that Pitt would hear the great preacher. And to Wilberforce's delight Newton excelled himself in that particular sermon.

It was a magnificent sermon. And he was so thrilled that Wilberforce that Pitt had heard it. But there were no sinners outside the church.

And Pitt turned to Wilberforce and said, what on earth was that man talking about? the message had made not the least impression.

[25 : 51] It was exactly as the Lord had said. It fell by the wayside. The devil had picked it up before it had got over the threshold of Pitt's massive intelligence.

It hadn't registered in a single iota. Now you go through the whole sequence of thought in the parable here. sometimes not a word is heard, says Christ.

It's not projected, it's not even heard, it doesn't penetrate, it doesn't get through to the intellect, it doesn't make the least impression. Sometimes it does get through the stony ground here and there is a little response, there is joy and they seem to receive the message.

There is an immediate response, there is immediate diffusiveness, apparent Christian elation. But then after a while the going gets tough, that person abandons the faith.

Other people, they're like the thorns, says Christ. The seed comes. You don't know the thorns are there. the seed of the thorns grew up simultaneously.

[27 : 15] But in all the signs of emergent discipleship, all the signs of spiritual promise, reformation of the life and change in habit and a new ardent and attending church, a new religiosity and books are purchased and questions are asked and everything seems set fair for authentic Christian discipleship.

But then there come the cares of the world and all those other things and they choke the world and it bears no lasting fruit. Well, behind all these things there is an element of human responsibility.

People deliberately switch off. they won't listen. People deliberately wilt when the pressure is applied to the young Christian lives.

People deliberately opt for deceitful riches, for affluence and preference to opting for Christ.

All that's true. There is a far more fundamental point than that and it's this, that the response always depends on the soil.

[28 : 38] In many ways this parable is not the parable of a soil, it's the parable of the soils, because it's a soil that makes the difference.

And I stand confronted with this terrible fact. I may have good seed, but unless it falls into good soil, it's going to bear no meaningful and no lasting fruit.

And I may say to myself, well, it's sin for a soil analyst. Let him tell me what kind of soil I have. Well, I hardly need to. God has told me, God, I am sowing the seed of the world in or upon the hearts of natural men.

And that means men who cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. They simply lack the ability to comprehend the things of God's Spirit.

their intelligence doesn't function at the level of spiritual things. Their minds are enmity against God.

[29 : 56] Their hearts are closed by prejudice. That is the picture that God's word gives me. And I've got to face it as an evangelist.

And so have you in your own personal testimony. you are sowing the seed in a totally unsuitable soil. Now what can I do?

All I can do is impress upon myself the solemn and terrible fact that until the soil is changed, there can be no possibility of response.

I can have the best seed, I can sow it in the prescribed fashion, I can water it with all the diligence I can muster, I can apply the most expert husbandry, I can secure light, I can secure warmth, but if the soil is wrong, there is not the least hope of a lasting harvest.

And I know also my own total inability to transform that soil. There is nothing I can do to transform that human heart.

[31 : 27] Now I want tonight to remind you that important though our responsibility is, it is of absolutely overriding importance that we realize that without God's work, without God's prior work, all our evangelism goes for nothing.

things like that we have to do. And anxious as I am to mobilize the church out of its complacency, I am also terribly anxious that the church should realize that the problem is bigger than men can manage.

The problem we face is not only the problem of getting good seed, and of effectively dispersing it, we face the problem of changing the soil.

And that's why we have to cry to God that the word go forth, not only in clarity and authority and power, but go forth in the spirit's demonstration and in the spirit's persuasiveness.

And there is a danger, I think, at the present time that we are overreacting to our own Calvinism, overreacting to our emphasis on the primacy of God's grace, and that we need to realize that tonight there is a terrible dependence in evangelism, that without God, we can do nothing.

[33 : 25] There are men and their hearts are as hard as stone. Other men and the soil is so shallow. Other men and their hearts are full of cares and distractions.

what do we do? Find eloquent preachers, erect new communities, buy better equipment for highways and byways, all that has its own relevance.

But we need a power, not a role, to change the hearts of men and women. and that's why all evangelism has to be prosecuted with a sense of helplessness and a sense of dependence and the concomitant cry to God, Lord, break up this fallow ground, change the soil, change these men because unless the Lord opens hearts, unless the Lord removes prejudices, what can you get?

You can't get any number of professed decisions. You can't get any number of shallow conversions. You can't get any amount of joy and any amount of hand clapping, any amount of whishonnas and hallelujahs, but you cannot get conversion to Christ.

it's the soil, it's a parable about soils, about wayside, about stormy ground, about thorny ground, and we need the invincible might of God to change man's responsiveness and to eliminate man's apathy and man's prejudice.

[35 : 22] Now let me put the whole thing another way, because what I'm saying can be so abused. You imagine a man and he's sowing seed on the pavement.

You imagine a man tonight going just outside this church with a bag of seed and sowing it on the roadway. And along comes some wise man, some wise woman and says to him, what are you doing?

I'm sowing the seed, he says. And the whole thing seems so absurd. And he'll be told to desist. Well, what am I doing?

I'm sowing seed on pavements. I'm sowing seed, the preciousness of God's word on Jeremiah Cuddle. But when men tell me to resist, when men tell me it all depends on God's decree, on God's election, on God's regeneration, I tell the man it may be so, but I also tell the man the electing God, the enlivening God, regenerating God, he told me to sow seed in the pavement.

And until God would draw us that mandate, I must sow seed in unlikely places. And I do sow independence upon God's own power to transform the soil in which I am sowing this good seed.

[37 : 07] We must sow the word. We must expect that a lot of the effort will be wasted. we must recognize our dependence upon God's power to transform the soil.

But I want to add one thing more. We must also expect a great harvest. harvest. Because even within this parable, there was a great harvest.

It brought forth, we are told, some 30 and some 60 and some 100. Now those yields were unheard of in the ancient world and they are largely unheard of even at the present time.

There was an absolutely magnificent harvest. Even granting that there had been so much apparent wastage, there was so much unproductive ground, so much the birds got, so much that the thorns choked and so much of the sun scorched and there was still a magnificent harvest.

Now there are so many intriguing points built into that whole great illustration. There is the emphasis on the variety of the yield. some Christians yield 30 fold, some 60 fold, some 100 fold.

[38 : 35] That variety is a fact of the life of the church of Christ. There is alongside of it the great statement of possibilities for ourselves that we can be 30 fold Christians or 60 fold Christians or we can be 100 fold Christians.

and what an ambition content just to be saved or anxious to bear this hundred fold harvest.

But I want to lay emphasis on something different and that is the magnificent optimism of the New Testament with regard to evangelism.

Now I've said enough about discouragements. the weary apparently unprofitable amount of slog and sheer labor that goes into any evangelistic work.

But it seems to me that the Bible also teaches us that the proportion which is productive is so productive that in the joy of it all the discouragement ought to be forgotten.

[39 : 54] We have such great pictures in the Bible and the New Testament especially. For example this tiny grain of mustard seed that grows into a great tree and all the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.

Ah you see when you go out with such a small seed, such poor soil, such a poor soil, such poor fertility. Yes says the Lord but I promise you it's going to become a great tree.

The parable of the leaven, a little leaven hidden in a lump of meal. Such a small proportion of leaven, such a large amount of meal and yet says Christ that little leaven is going to leaven the whole lot.

There are Romans 4 picture, Romans 5 picture. Where the apostle says where sin abounded, grace does death much more abound. Above all, the revelation 7 picture.

I beheld and lo a great multitude which no man could number. Out of every kindred and nation and people and tongue stood before the throne and before the lamb and the son.

[41 : 14] a great multitude. It is picking up so deliberately the marvelous covenant terminology of the Abrahamic covenant. In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed and the promise that Abraham's seed will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand by the seashore.

What am I saying? I'm saying that we have no right to be pessimistic. I'm saying we have no right to expect empty churches.

We have no right to expect declining church membership. We have no right to make a virtue of necessity and say we're called to be faithful not to be successful because the vision is a vision of a multitude.

The vision is of a mighty world. A world which is even statistically mighty. And I really feel it is a terribly important psychology to break the parameters of this confining repressive psychology so many of you perhaps have never lived in large churches.

You've only known maybe in your own local native churches relatively small gatherings. And it's so easy to say that's the norm. A minority church. A minority Christianity only a tiny little flock of believers.

[42 : 44] And I really think the whole psychology is wrong. I believe that we're sin abounded. Grace will much more abound. I believe that we should have the vision of a great multitude that no man could numb.

But I believe that we should be fit and word to words filling this church. what is the harvest?

What is the fruit? Some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, some a hundredfold. I am getting impossibly suspicious of the whole syndrome that says faithfulness not success.

And I want more success. I want addition. I don't want to engage in what is often called today management by objectives.

We can't impose programs on God's spirit. The Bible itself has imposed or has declared the spirit's program. And the spirit's declared program is a great multitude.

[43 : 53] We should ask God for a great multitude. How absurd and how lovely it is. You're sowing seed on the pavement.

You're sowing it on the cobblestones and on the tarmacadam. And along come all the wise acres. And don't you think for a moment that they're all unbelievers.

Along come the ministers. Along come the theologians. and they say you're a fool sowing seed in the pavement with such expectations. And I may say yes but God is no fool.

And God told me to sow seed on those cobblestones. To sow seed on this road. That's what God said. God said I'd have a great harvest. God said he'd change the road.

He'd open it up. Make it porous, productive, receptive, fertile. God would do it. And we have to get a great deal more confidence and optimism back into our own mentality.

[45 : 05] I have had the privilege of being involved in large churches. Maybe I see things through those rose-colored spectacles. But why should this church too not burst, not break through its own parameters and become two, three, four?

Why shouldn't we fill this poor land of ours with congregations as eyes of stone away? Great multitude which no man can numb.

well you can still number the free church more or less accurately. You can still number this congregation and I want a church that you can't number.

I want to diverse every kindred and nation, every language and people and tongue. I want to pitch the gospel of Gallic accents to black men, yellow men, white men.

and believe that that word can bear, can absurdly bear fruit. And I want us all tonight to see that we are mandated by God individually as members of his church to sow the seed, not the ministers or the elders only, but all the members, every believer, everyone a witness for Christ, everyone baptized in God's spirit to witness for Christ.

[46 : 47] I want you all to expect that many of your words will be wasted, many of your steps, much of your slog, wasted, your books discarded, your tracks torn up, your message lasted, and want us to expect that.

But I want us also to expect that when we sow seed on the pavement, on the cobbles and on the tarmacadam, that God will bless it, that God will give us a great harvest, harvest, some even a hundred fold.

Let us lay to heart tonight, that we shall not let this church decline beneath its present level. Let us lay to heart tonight, that the three churches sunk low enough, that it must sink no lower, that it needs sink no lower.

let us lay to heart tonight, that God can give us a multitude, that God can turn our highways, our pavements, into fertile spiritual soil.

Let us in that confidence sow the seed in our own families, preach the word from our prohibit, spread the word, among our own friends.

[48 : 32] Let us in that confidence bring them to where God's word is. And they say to you on the way home, who was that funny man? And where is that funny man from?

That funny message? Many of them won't come back a second time. I've been through all that. Some come back twice, never come back again.

but a proportion come twice and thrice and four times and they stay. They were as unpromising as the other.

They were just as cynical, believe me, and just as contemptuous, and just as dismissive, and just as abusive, and just as insulting. God changed them.

Let's be prepared to waste time, to waste words, to waste effort, to waste shoe leather. Be prepared to be thought foolish and shown to be foolish, because God will give sometimes an abundant harvest.

[49 : 47] harvest, and wherever God disperses you, his own providence in years to come, never please accept that the church must always be small, always half empty, never accept it.

A half empty church is a challenge. A half empty church to me is insufferable. you fill it. Let us pray.

We ask thee, O Lord, in grace and pity to look down upon us, to bless thy word to us, and to give us inspiration and comfort, that we may learn to apply the truth and learn to respond to it.

And we pray, Lord, that anybody here tonight who has been shocked by the outlandishness of what we are engaged in and the apparent relevance of the gospel, that thou thy grace would arrest any such person and take him or her under thy known care and transform so that he or she may become good soil and bear an abundant spiritual harvest.

Many have come, Lord, into many a church to mock and have stayed to pray. May it be so for the sake of thy glory.

[51 : 14] Amen. We shall close by singing in Psalm 72 and from verse 17.

Psalm 72 verse 17 to the tune Effingham. His name forever shall endure. Last time the scorANT The star is shall, then shall be blessed in him and blessed, all nations shall be known.

Now blessed be the Lord our God, the God of Israel.

For he alone the Father deserves in glory of his name.

And blessed be his glorious name to all eternity.

[53 : 23] The whole earth let his glory fill. Amen.

So let him be. Now may grace, mercy and peace from God be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.