GOOD SOIL

Mark 4:1–34

Key Verse: 4:20

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

“Are you listening?” All of us have experienced a time when we were talking and people weren’t really listening. They may have even fallen asleep on us! It can be frustrating. All of us hear so many things every day, but often *we’re* not really paying attention, either. In today’s passage Jesus develops the theme of listening or hearing, especially to his word. We want to think about why Jesus emphasizes this so much. He also relates his parables of seeds to the kingdom of God. We especially want to learn what it means to be “good soil,” and how anybody possibly can be so. May God speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 1. In this verse Mark paints a typical picture of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus used a boat on the lake to address the crowd on the shore. It was so that the maximum number of people could actually hear him. People had come for many reasons. Some wanted healing for themselves or someone else. Some were curious. Some were trying to find fault. Look at verse 2a. As a teaching method Jesus used parables. There were times when he’d incorporate a parable in his teaching to help people understand better a point he was trying to make. But in this case he just told a parable and finished without explaining.

Look at verses 3–8: “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” This is one of Jesus’ most famous parables. Most people at that time engaged in some kind of farming, at least growing things for themselves to eat. But what immediately catches our attention here is the method of sowing seed. We’re used to farmers planting seeds in rows. But in the ancient world, seed-drilling machines hadn’t been invented yet. Some farmers would cultivate the land with an animal pulling a plow, then scatter seeds on it. But sometimes they wouldn’t have the time or resources, so they would just scatter the seed. We also notice a progression in the parable. The first soil, the path, produces no results. The second, the rocky place, is like a flash in the pan—a quick spurt of growth, then a quick death. The third produces plants without grain—the plants survive, but kind of miss the point. Only the fourth soil produces what the farmer intended. The listeners all would’ve been interested in the good soil. But Jesus wasn’t trying to help them become smarter farmers. Read verse 9. Everybody there probably had two ears and good hearing. But Jesus was really talking only to people with “ears to hear,” people truly interested in learning from him.

Look at verse 10. This happened often in Jesus’ ministry: The Twelve and the others would come and ask him about his parables. After his public teaching they didn’t forget; they wanted to know what he meant. Read verse 11. Jesus said the secret of the kingdom of God was “given” to them, whereas to the crowd, all that was given was parables. Why? It was a way of sorting people out. Those not really interested, people with their own ideas and agenda, would hear a parable and leave without thinking about it. But those seriously trying to learn from Jesus would be provoked by the parable to think more deeply and start having questions. It was to such people that God himself would “give” “the secret of the kingdom of God.” It tells us that God and his kingdom can’t be understood with our finite minds and common sense. God has to “reveal” the secrets of his kingdom to us. He reveals it only to those committed to seriously seeking.

Read verse 12. Jesus quoted from Isaiah’s prophecy. He was saying that people in his day were treating God the same way they’d been doing for many generations. People in that crowd had the privilege of seeing Jesus and what he did, by now, many times. They had the privilege of hearing Jesus speak, by now, many times. Despite this, many didn’t perceive who Jesus was, or understand what his deeds or words meant. Many didn’t see that through Jesus the kingdom of God had come near to them, and that now it was their chance to repent and believe the good news (1:15). If they did, they’d experience God’s forgiveness, and God would begin to rule their hearts. But many were taking it all for granted. God still wants people to turn to him and be forgiven. But he’ll never force us; we actually have to get interested.

Look at verse 13. Jesus is saying that if we don’t understand this parable, we won’t understand any of his other parables. It means it's a really important parable! Also, he’s rebuking his disciples. He’s glad they’re asking, and he considers them better than the indifferent people in the crowd, but he also expects them to grasp what he’s saying even without him explaining.

It’s so nice that Jesus actually interprets his own parable for them and for us. If we want to have the right understanding of this parable, we should put aside our own ideas and pay careful attention to Jesus’ explanations. Read verse 14. Jesus says the word of God is like seed. Like seed, God’s word has great potential in it. Like seed, God’s word can give life. God’s word can totally change somebody’s life, from the inside out. The problem is not the seed, but the soil where it falls.

Read verse 15. The problem with seed sown along the path is that it can’t even get in. Why? Because the path is too hard to absorb seed. Jesus is saying there are people with a mind and heart so hard, it’s like a path. What makes somebody’s mind and heart hard? It could be pride or self-righteousness, like the religious leaders. It could be holding on to stubborn ideas. A path is where many people, animals and vehicles have traveled. So somebody who’s lived habitually for a long time can become hardened like a path. People who hear it many times since childhood can become like path toward God’s word. When fear captures us, or when we’ve been hurt, we become too hardened to listen to God. The Bible says we especially become “hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb3:13). With a hardened heart we want to pursue what we want and don’t want anything or anybody to interfere, not even God. It’s a big job to break up ground that’s like a path. But that’s what repentance is. Jesus says if our hearts are hard, “Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown.” So there’s a spiritual dimension in hearing the word that we’re probably not so aware of. Satan doesn’t want us to receive God’s word, because if we do, we’ll transfer from Satan's kingdom to God’s kingdom. So Satan is always working to distract us from God’s word.

Read verses 16,17. At first, people like this seem promising. They immediately receive God’s word with joy. Wow! But just as quickly, Jesus says, they fall away. Why? Because they don’t like to endure trouble or persecution. Jesus says trouble and persecution *will come* “because of the word.” Again he mentions spiritual opposition to God’s word. Many early Christians in Rome were facing intense persecution. Today we face the persecution of friends or family thinking we’re weird if we seem too serious about Bible study or ministry. Jesus says trouble and persecution are like the hot sun. Actually they’re healthy; they help us put down deeper roots and grow stronger. But he says people like the rocky place “have no root.” Their heart soil is shallow; there are lots of rocks underneath. And they don’t want to go through the ordeal of digging down to get the rocks out. They want to live on the surface of life and enjoy, without much struggle. Rocks in our hearts can symbolize many things. They can be hard places of pride, unbelief, fear, guilt, doubt, wounds, bitterness, resentment, idols, or sinful desire. Just as with the path, it requires tremendous effort to get these rocks out. But if we do, the word of God can go in deeper. This is the purpose of writing a reflection after a Bible study; it’s so that we can come to God honestly and struggle with the things deep in our hearts that are hindering us from accepting his word. It’s a hard struggle, but in the long run it’s really worth it.

Read verses 18,19. In thorny heart soil, Jesus says, the word of God grows, but it gets choked and fails to produce fruit. He also clearly defines for us what he means by thorns. He says “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” are like *spiritual thorns*. They choke God’s word out of our hearts. And like thorns, they don’t produce any good fruit; they just pierce us with many griefs. Anybody with any farming or gardening experience knows that weeding is essential to success. If we don’t diligently pull out the weeds, they’ll eventually absorb all the soil’s resources and take over the good plants. The seeds for weeds are sometimes hidden in the soil; sometimes the wind blows them in. In any case, they come in naturally. Likewise, as we live in the real world we find that we easily start worrying about many things. We easily get deceived by wealth—by the lack of it, by the abundance of it, by the desire for it. And desires for the world can grow stronger than our desire for God and his word. If God’s word is going to bear the fruit in us that he wants, we can’t just let these thorns grow in our hearts; we have to examine our hearts honestly. We have to rip out these thorns diligently. So Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

Read verse 20. Jesus says good heart soil is somebody who hears God’s word and accepts it. But in light of this entire parable, to accept the word isn’t an easy or superficial thing. Good soil has to be cultivated through repentance. Good soil accepts the word deeply, without holding anything back, without allowing any hindrances. Good soil accepts God’s word fully and wholeheartedly. And it doesn’t happen just once in a while; good soil goes through this process regularly. To be like good soil, we’ve got to make hearing God’s word our top priority. We’ve got to be willing to struggle hard and deal radically with anything that may be hindering us spiritually. To be like good soil, we’ve got to be totally open to God. To be like good soil, we’ll need a personal devotional life. Psalm 5:3 says, “In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” In Psalm 119 the psalmist wrote: “I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you…I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word…My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word…Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word…Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.”

Read verse 20 again. Jesus says good soil produces a crop. It multiplies greatly. People who are good soil mature in Christ-like character. And they share the word with others who are also good soil. People who are good soil spiritually reproduce. This verse implies that our level of fruitfulness depends on the degree to which we accept God’s word. And it gives us hope for ministry. In the midst of a majority of bad results, we need to remember Jesus’ hope that there will be people like good soil.

But his parables don’t stop there. Read verses 21–23. Here Jesus compares the word to a lamp on a stand. He emphasizes that it reveals hidden things. Why, all of a sudden, does he say this? In this context, we need the word of God to expose the condition of our hearts. It can be painful to face, but it’s really healthy to do so. Look at verse 24a. Jesus says, “Consider carefully what you hear.” In our day to day life, what are we hearing? What are we really listening to? And if we hear God’s word, do we *consider it carefully*? Or do we just skim over it quickly and move on to something else? Look at verse 24b. Again, Jesus implies that what we receive from God depends on how we listen to his word. If we’re superficial toward his word, or if we delve into it deeply, God will reward us accordingly, and even more. Read verse 25. When we gain some spiritual understanding, God will give us even more. On the other hand, if we think we know already everything there is to know about God and his word, even what we knew will be taken away from us.

In verses 26–29 Jesus tells the parable of the growing seed to balance the parable of the sower. In this case, the seed grows all by itself, without any human aid. It means that ultimately it doesn't depend on our desire or effort; we just need to trust God’s word to grow in us and in others. It’s God’s word *itself* that enables his kingdom to grow. Jesus ends with the parable of the mustard seed (30-32). The point here is the power of even the tiniest seed to change and transform beyond our imagination. In light of this parable, we need to believe the changing power of God’s word. Studying his word may seem like a small thing. But it changes people until they can become a part of his kingdom; they grow into a place of refuge for those who are tired and thirsty, a blessing to others.

In this passage Jesus mainly emphasizes how we listen to his word. Are we listening? May God grant us a new decision to cultivate good soil within us, no matter how much we may have to struggle to do it. May God help us accept his word so that he can truly rule our hearts and lives and make us a blessing.