

Sowing the Word of the Kingdom

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 4)

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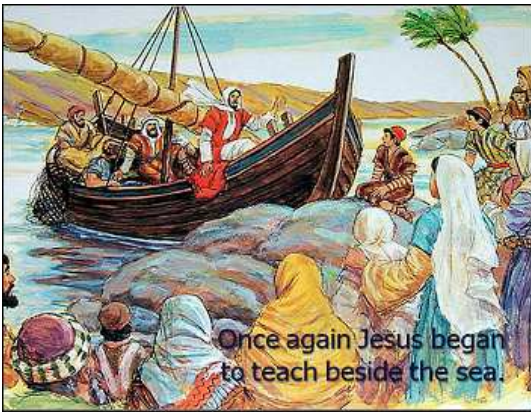
In our study of the Gospel of Mark, we're now in chapter 4. Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, is thought to be based largely on the reminiscences of Peter, and as we shall see right away, much of the story Mark tells centers around the Sea of Galilee where Peter and his brother, Andrew, were fishermen. We see that in the very first passage in this chapter.

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

"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, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

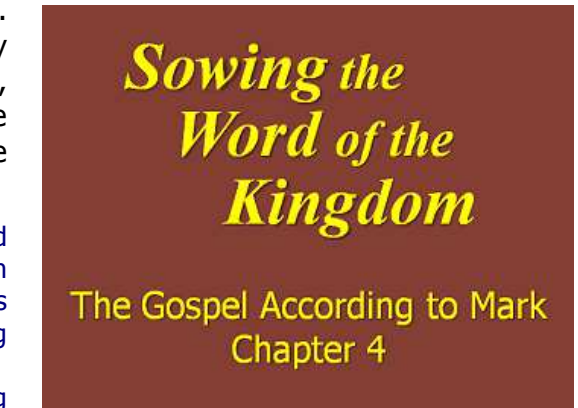
Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (4:1-9)

In proclaiming his message about the emerging kingdom of God, Jesus often speaks in parables — stories drawn from everyday life that illustrate some aspect of the kingdom. Here's a story about a farmer, sowing his seed at the beginning of the growing season.



farmer sowed his seed was a good place for it to grow. The critical factor in ensuring the harvest was the quality of the soil. This parable is often called the "parable of the sower," but it's really the "parable of the four soils."

In this familiar story Jesus tells, some of the seed falls on the hard path where the birds can easily make a meal of it. Other seed falls on shallow soil where it can't take root to any life-sustaining depth. Some seed falls into weedy patches where it gets choked out — just like your lawn grass when dandelions or plantain or clover take over. But some seed does fall on good soil where it can develop a root system, receive the needed nutrients and moisture, and produce a harvest. Jesus describes the yield as thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. It's worth noting that, in the agriculture of that time and place, a hundredfold was an astoundingly good crop,

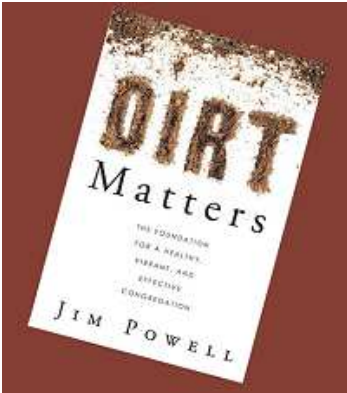


Farmers in ancient Palestine didn't have mechanized planters, like farmers around here use. And they couldn't work the soil to a great depth; they didn't have chisel plows or discs. Their method was to prepare the soil in some fashion, perhaps by plowing lightly with oxen or donkeys, and then to sow the seed by hand. As you can imagine, this wasn't always the most effective method of getting the seed where it needed to go. The soil was thin in places, and the terrain was rocky, inviting weeds and thorns. The farmers didn't live in the open country; their houses were clustered together in villages for protection from outlaws at night, and they had to walk out to their fields to work in them. So there were paths through the fields so each farmer could get to his particular patch of ground. Consequently, not every place the



and even sixtyfold was probably out of the ordinary. In this parable, Jesus is going for something well above average!

The “parable of the soils” is a parable of the growth of the kingdom of God — the message that the Lord has returned to his people and is beginning to expand his rule in their midst. But this parable is also a parable about parables. Jesus is going to explain this in the next passage, and show his disciples how the parables illustrate how God’s kingdom works. But already we see that the critical factor in the growth of the kingdom isn’t the accuracy of the sower’s aim, or the hybrid quality of the seed. The decisive factor in the harvest is the quality of the soil.



Some of our men went to a gathering not long ago where Jim Powell was the speaker. Jim Powell is the pastor of Richwoods Christian Church in Peoria, a church that grew from a handful of members to thousands under his leadership. Jim wrote a book that Fred brought back with him, and I’ve also acquired a copy. The title of the book is *Dirt Matters*, and I believe it’s the best, most realistic, book about renewing church life I’ve ever come across. Jim Powell’s main point is that if a church is going to grow and fulfill its mission to expand God’s kingdom, the big question is: “What kind of soil do we find in that church?” Another way of asking the question is, “What’s the culture of the church?” Is the climate in our church a welcoming climate for new people? Is there conflict in the congregation about the church’s purpose, or about worship style, or about how decisions are made? Is the congregation just “rocking along” in a kind of nostalgia for the

“good old days,” or is there a willingness to hear and respond to a fresh word from the Lord, and make some changes? Are church leaders just looking for superficial gimmicks to revive the church, without getting down to deeper issues? You get the idea. Here’s a paragraph from *Dirt Matters*.

The reality is you can change the name, the logo, the bulletin, or the dress code; you can remodel the nursery and offer free coffee and donuts; but if visitors walk into your church and sense an unhealthy culture, it really doesn’t matter. You may draw people in, but you’re not likely to keep them.

What worked for other congregations is irrelevant. If we don’t address the culture of our churches, these cursory changes amount to little more than wasted money, wasted energy, and naïve optimism. (page 11)

As you can see, Jim Powell’s book is a direct spin-off from Jesus’ parable of the four soils. When it comes to sowing the seed of the kingdom of God, Jesus is telling us, *Dirt Matters*.

Let’s pose our first question for today: **What kind of soil does our church represent? Is it a hard and resistant soil, or a soil ready to receive the word of God? Is the culture of our church one that might “turn people off,” or one that welcomes new people into the kingdom of God?**

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, " 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'" (4:10-12)

Now Jesus explains to his disciples why he teaches in parables. The purpose of teaching in parables, rather than coming out directly with the proclamation of God’s emerging kingdom, is so that people won’t understand! That sounds counterintuitive, doesn’t it? We would expect Jesus to want to make his message as clear as possible, and here he’s telling his disciples that the parables are a way of *veiling the message* from most people.

Let’s remind ourselves that the good news of the kingdom of God is the working out of what God has been telling his people all along, through the Hebrew Scriptures — the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. And the great prophets of Israel almost always found their message of God’s rule and judgment rejected by the people they were speaking to. When Jesus says he teaches in parables so that “they may look and look but never see, and hear and hear but never



understand; otherwise they would turn and be forgiven," he's actually quoting from Isaiah, chapter 6. It was Isaiah's experience that when he called for his people to repent, and return to the Lord, they wouldn't respond or even listen. For most people, caught up in the issues and problems of living in a challenging world, the Lord's purpose just isn't "on their radar screen." So people are often offended by the news that God is alive and involved in their situation, because to take that message seriously would mean they need to make some changes in their attitudes and expectations. Jesus is looking for the people who are ready to hear what God has to say; he's looking for the right soil in which to plant the seed of the word of God, because "dirt matters." So he teaches in parables.

There's another reason, I believe, that the message of the kingdom has to be concealed from the indifferent, the unready, and the hostile. It goes back to what we often see at work in the Gospel of Mark — what scholars have called the "Messianic secret." Jesus, the bringer of the kingdom, is the Lord's anointed one, or Messiah. But if that "secret" became too widely known, the religious and governmental authorities would find their position threatened. Already we've seen, in Mark's account, that the Pharisees and the Herodians are conspiring to do away with Jesus. Eventually Jesus must go to the cross, taking up into himself all the sins of his people, so the Father can forgive them and give them the new life of the resurrection. But the time is not yet; as Jesus would say in John's Gospel, his "hour has not yet come." There are people to be healed, delivered from demons, made aware that God has returned to his people to live with them. Until that message penetrates people's hearts, who Jesus *really is* can be made known only to those who are ready to receive that word. Therefore, Jesus describes the coming kingdom only through parables.

Let's ask this: **Am I one who hears and hears — Sunday after Sunday — but never really understands? Or does the word of God that I hear, or read, move me daily to turn to him as a loving, forgiving Father?**

Now Jesus goes on to unpack the "parable of the four soils." We don't have to say a lot about that because what he means is pretty clear.

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

"The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 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" (4:13-20)



The parable of the four soils is different from other parables of Jesus. As I mentioned, it's really a parable about parables. Most parables make a point about the emergence of the kingdom of God, as we will see. But this parable is about the *preaching* of the kingdom. And it's almost the only parable Jesus explains to his disciples.

We can all relate to the picture Jesus paints for us of the sower, and how the seed he sows brings forth a different result depending on the soil it falls into. Like the pathway through the fields, we may become hardened and self-protective. We may feel we've been trampled upon by the thoughtless behavior of others, or by difficult conditions that we face. Our anger and self-pity may act as a kind of asphalt or concrete paving around us to keep us from responding to God's invitation to life. How many people do you know who are so pressed down that they're not able to believe God wants to come to them?

On the other hand, we might respond gladly to the word of God to begin with, thinking that if we follow the Lord all our problems will be over. Then, when trouble comes, we find it's too hard to maintain our faith — especially if other people make fun of us. Then again, we might decide it would be a good thing to follow the way of God, but other things get in the way — hobbies or recreational interests, perhaps, or the need to make more money so we can have the latest electronic gadget or a bigger house or a newer-model vehicle. The

clutter of life gets in the way of following the Lord, and our faith gets choked out like the seed that fell among the weeds and thorns. You and I know people for whom this is the situation, and we may have been there ourselves at one time or another.

What's amazing, in Jesus' parable, is that not all the seed fails to grow. The word of God also falls on good ground — soil that's prepared to take in the seed and nurture it, producing an abundant crop. As Jim Powell says, *dirt matters*. So our next question to ponder is this: **Am I a person who's open to the word of God and what it can do in my life? Am I listening to this message just for entertainment, or do I expect to do something different as a result — to make a difference in the lives of people around me that demonstrates that the kingdom of God is really here?**

He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you--and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him" (4:21-25)

We have here what scholars call a *catena*, or "chain" of sayings of Jesus. The connection between these three sayings isn't entirely clear at first. We have to remember that Mark is probably writing down material that came to him by word of mouth, from Peter or other believers. When Jesus said something striking and pointed, people remembered and handed down those sayings; but they didn't always hand down the background, or context, in which Jesus uttered these words. So Jesus might have said these things on different occasions, but Mark has collected them here. And let's recall, too, that Mark's Gospel is a summary that sometimes leaves out material we find more fully presented in Matthew or Luke, who had additional sources.

Nevertheless, these brief sayings are powerful images that tell us something about the coming of God's kingdom. The idea of "hiding your light under a bushel" has become a proverb even in our time; we say that of someone who has a talent they aren't using. But Jesus is always *speaking about the kingdom*, and his meaning here is clear: If we know the truth about God's activity in our life, and in today's world, we ought not to keep people in the dark about it. There are occasions when, by word or deed or both, we need to let people know that God is real to us, and he can be real to them also. The kingdom of God may be a "secret kingdom," but it's a secret that's meant to be revealed at the proper time. Like a birthday party you're secretly planning for a family member, there comes a time when the secret has to come out; there's no point to planning such a party if you're never going to throw it.



Finally, there's a warning here. Jesus mentions two things that get brought out more fully in other parts of the Gospels. If we're critical of other people because of what they do or say, let's be careful to apply the same standards to ourselves; as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2). And if God gives us abilities or resources to do good, then if we don't use those resources for their intended purposes we'll eventually lose them. That's what Jesus makes plain in the "parable of the talents," in Matthew 25.

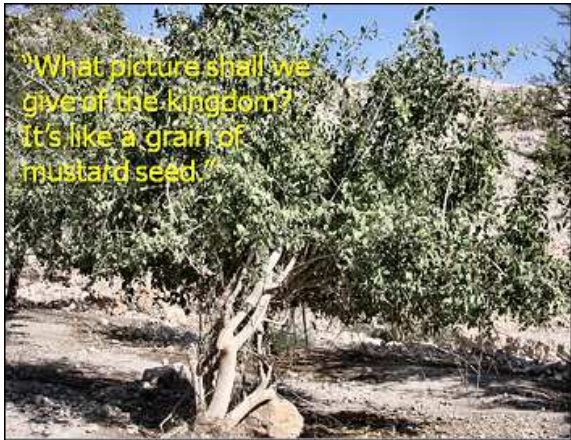
Question: **If I know the truth about God's gracious rule over all things, am I not obligated to live in a way that conforms to that truth, and to use my abilities to help others understand it?**

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything (4:26-34).

Jesus relates two more parables about seeds: the seed growing secretly, and the mustard seed. As with all parables, these stories describe the growth of the kingdom of God. When today's farmer plants a field of corn, wheat, beans or whatever, he doesn't just plant it and forget it; he might cultivate it with mechanized equipment or, if he's not growing organically, he may apply herbicides or insecticides as the crop begins to grow. The ancient farmer didn't have those tools available; once the seed was in the ground, it just grew by itself as the rain and the sun supported its growth. But neither the ancient nor the modern farmer really knows *how or why* the seed grows; that's built into the DNA code of the cell nucleus, and modern crop geneticists are really as much in the dark about it as the ancient farmer, about whom Jesus says "the seed sprouted and grew without him knowing how it did it." Jesus is saying the kingdom of God is like that, and also like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a bush as large as a tree. People may plant the seed, but the growth of the kingdom is up to God.



Great results may come from even small beginnings. We

shouldn't ever assume that our efforts, as a congregation, to proclaim the gospel and extend God's rule over this community are insignificant. We may not think we're doing much in providing space for the AA or Boy Scouts, or hosting the food pantry. We may not consider it a great work to take Communion to folks in the nursing home, or send some of our members each winter to help build homes in Mexico. We may not suppose we're advancing the work of God by gathering each week to hear the Word and lift our voices in praise. We may not put a lot of stock in the small ways we help and encourage our friends and neighbors, or witness to them about the possibilities the Lord has in store for them. But the day will come, Jesus tells us, when these seemingly small things Christian believers are doing will come to a surprising fruition, and the vision of the prophets will become reality: "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14).

Like the farmer, we don't have to know how God is doing this. But we do have to sow the seed to begin the process. Let's ask ourselves, then: **Am I doing something, no matter how seemingly insignificant, to make the presence of the Lord real in the lives of people I know — and leaving the result to God's faithfulness?**

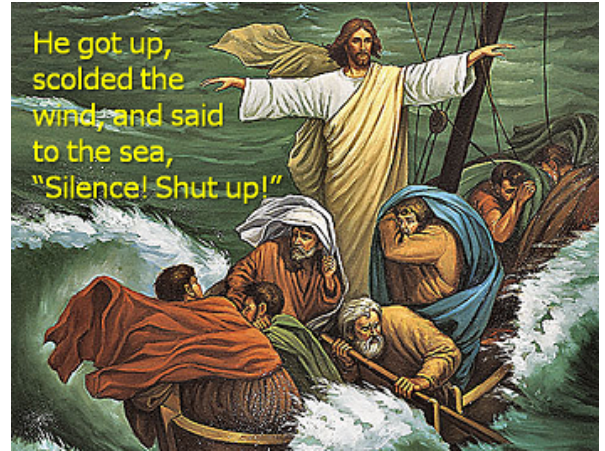
That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.

A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (4:35-41).

Finally, Mark ends what we call chapter 4 with the account of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. That body of water, which is really a fresh-water lake, is subject to sudden squalls that can overwhelm small craft like the fishing boats Peter and Andrew and James and John were using. Jesus and the disciples are crossing to the "other side" of the lake. They were starting from the north shore, near Capernaum, but from the point of view of the fisherman Peter who probably related this account to Mark, the "other side" wasn't the far south end of the lake but the east side, in the country of the Gerasenes, as we see in the next chapter. In the middle of their voyage, a windstorm comes up and the waves threaten to swamp the boat. The disciples can't

understand why, in this dangerous situation, Jesus isn't as alarmed as they are; he's just resting contentedly in the stern. With a word of rebuke, Jesus calms the storm and then scolds the disciples for their lack of faith.

Is the point of Mark's account simply that Jesus can bail us out of trouble if we call on him? I don't think so. The point is that Jesus' action gives the disciples a glimpse into *who he really is*: not just a preacher, or a healer, or some other charismatic figure, but one who can apply the power of the Creator God to the elements of nature. "Who is this," they ask, "that even the wind and the sea obey him?" And Mark says that "great fear stole over them" when they witnessed this power at work — a fear far greater than their fear of the wind and the waves. There's something awesome about Jesus, something revealed in this incident that strikes fear into their hearts because they're beginning to catch on to the truth: this is the Son of God who has authority over all creation.



We like to sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," or "He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own." And we thank him for taking our sins to his cross so that we may find forgiveness. But let's remember Psalm 130:4, "There is forgiveness with thee, *that thou mayest be feared.*" Jesus is our friend, the Savior who loves us — but we can't be casual or flippant about him, or careless in the presence of the One who "upholds the universe by his word of power" (Hebrews 1:3). In Mark's account of the storm at sea the disciples are beginning to find this out, and we need to see it too. Let's ask ourselves, then, **"Do I realize how awesome, even fearsome, the Lord Jesus is, even as he welcomes me into his healing, saving presence?"**

Let's conclude by reviewing, and rephrasing, our questions raised by Mark, chapter 4:

- Is our church the right kind of "soil" to receive the Word, and welcome new people?
- Am I really hearing the Word of God, and responding to him?
- Am I open to how God can make me a living demonstration of his kingdom at work?
- Am I "hiding my light," or am I using my abilities to help others understand God's ways?
- Am I consistently doing even the small things God will use to build his larger kingdom?
- Is Jesus awesome to me, so that I'm not just trifling with him?

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