

The King's Word Divides

Mark 4:1-34

BPC 5pm – 6/2/2022

A few years ago I was at the footy, a classic Hawks v Geelong game. I went with a family and as we weren't able to all sit together, I ended up sitting half the game with one family member who supports the hawks and the other with one who supports Geelong. And it just so happens that for that first half, the Hawks were getting completely smashed.

And so I sat with one very unhappy young boy until half time when I changed seats to sit with one very happy Geelong supporter. But it just so happened for that second half, the Hawks made an almighty comeback to win. So for the entire match I sat with unhappy young footy fans.

Which of course made for a fairly complex train ride home... One was silent and grumpy while the other couldn't stop talking of the great game we'd experienced...

So the one event produced two very opposite reactions – as most sporting games do! And it's no great mystery why as those attending usually have a particular bias toward a team. But mixed reactions to the same event is something are very familiar with.

As my wife and I watch gardening shows, our responses could not be more different... As we've come out of lockdowns, some have been excited while others are anxious. As we've returned to meeting together, some are eager and others cautious.

The one event, the same news, is often met with a very divided or opposite reactions: this is something we often experience and the reasons why are sometimes clear but other times not.

But have you ever thought about why the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, has such mixed reactions and responses? The good news is proclaimed, some are confused while others are offended, some are curious yet others are bored. Some are moved and their lives changed, while others move on.

Why is this the case? What are we to make of this? As we arrive at chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus does seem to have an apparent problem, which is point #1 on your outline.

Over the past few weeks we've seen Jesus' popularity grow rapidly. Crowds flock to him as he heals many simply by speaking, he's driven out demons, cleansed leprosy, made the paralytic walk, and the people come from everywhere.

But despite his clear miraculous power, Jesus has made it clear that his priority is to preach – that was his purpose in coming (1:38). He's come to preach good news from God, the Gospel that the reign of God has come near – that God is setting the world right, bringing justice to his enemies and peace for his people just as he promised.

But as we've followed Jesus' ministry in Mark 1-3, as Jesus has preached good news to huge crowds, the responses have mixed to say the least. The scribes opposed him when he healed the paralytic. The religious leaders got upset when he welcomed Levi. He was accused of being demonic for casting out demons we heard last week and his own family thought he was out of his mind.

The religious and political leaders have both decided they want him dead and in the middle of all of that, there is this group of 12 misfits who have decided to leave everything behind and follow him.

And the parable that Jesus tells actually presumes this doesn't it? The story of the sower with the seeds and different soils Jesus says really is about the word going out and the varied responses it receives – and even in the parable, 3 of the 4 soils or responses don't bear fruit.

So what are we to make of this? Surely if what Jesus was preaching was really good news, we'd expect something a little different right? A little more encouraging?

Surely preaching God's Word would have had a better impact than this? And this is something I've often thought about. In my first year at bible college I went to my hometown to preach my first ever sermon. And it was a big deal for me so I courageously invited one my best friends who wasn't Christian to come along.

I preached on Ephesians 2 and the grace of God to make us alive even though we were dead in our sins. And afterwards one my old Sunday school teachers came up with tears in her eyes to tell me how encouraged she was by my sermon. But my friend? Well he gave me a pat on the shoulder and said I spoke well but the whole thing was just super weird.

So why does this happen? Why do the responses vary from hostility to apathy to joy and even life-changing loyalty? Is the Gospel Jesus proclaims really good news?

Well did you notice that in Mark 4 things really slow down. Over the past three chapters, Mark has setting a cracking pace. We've seen rapid movement from town to town, from synagogue to home, fishermen to whole crowds. Jesus has preached, healed, driven out demons.

And things really meet a crescendo in chapter 4. Just like last week the crowd again is so big in v.1 that Jesus enters a boat – not only to avoid being crushed but it serves as a floating platform to preach. And what we just heard read is the longest teaching of Jesus that Mark writes down for us.

And he teaches them a parable that both presumes and explains the varied and even hostile responses to his teaching. Because what on the surface looks like a problem with Jesus' teaching, is actually the surprising purpose he intends – which brings us to point #2.

Jesus tells the massive crowd the parable of the sower and soils but then in v.10 we are brought into the inner conversation Jesus has with his disciples as he explains the purpose of his preaching.

¹⁰ *When he was alone, those around him with the Twelve asked him about the parables.* ¹¹ *He answered them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables ¹² so that **they may indeed look, and yet not perceive; they may indeed listen, and yet not understand; otherwise, they might turn back and be forgiven.**"*

Jesus says his preaching actually deliberately divides people – to the disciples who come to him, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to them. They are the ones who get it as Jesus gives them the explanation. But to everyone else, those outside, the whole thing is just a parable.

Often when we think about parables, we call them something like “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning” or a relatable story to help us understand spiritual realities. But notice Jesus says the opposite, parables are not quaint stories to help us grasp an idea. They are unclear on purpose.

Parables were a way of teaching designed to actually get us to think harder, to dig deeper into the story to find the real meaning. They were often comparisons, proverbs, sayings, or just a story like this one. And Jesus uses parables deliberately to divide – to reveal to some and conceal to others.

Mark makes it clear that this is Jesus’ clear purpose in vv.33-34, ³³ *He was speaking the word to them with many parables like these, as they were able to understand.* ³⁴ *He did not speak to them without a parable. Privately, however, he explained everything to his own disciples.*

His word divides as it brings salvation to some, but judgement on others. That’s why in v.12, Jesus’ explains his ministry by quoting from Isaiah 6.

As Isaiah was commissioned to preach to Israel, God told him the words Jesus’ quotes – that he would preach, but the people would not understand or respond. His preaching to them was actually God’s judgement on them as they closed their ears to God’s Word and hardened their hearts.

And so Jesus tells the parable of the seeds and soils here to explain what we’ve been seeing in Mark’s gospel but also what we know from experience. As God’s Word goes out, it will always divide as it both reveals and conceals – it brings salvation to some but judgement to others. That’s the purpose.

Because the story might seem strange to us – the sower seems careless and wasteful as he haphazardly throws seed on a path or amongst weeds and gets lucky that some manages to land on good soil. But it was common practice in the ancient world to sow then plough. Land was not cleared or prepared before sowing, and don’t think concrete path but just compressed dirt by foot traffic.

But that’s the point, the seed, which Jesus says is the word, the Gospel that he and the apostles preached and is still proclaimed today, is to go out broadly and indiscriminately because it despite the mixed response, it will find good soil.

So the question that we should be left asking as we listen to the parable is clear: which soil are we? What happens to the seed, to God’s Word as we hear it? That’s the clear point of the both the parable and the passage: are we actually listening? As Jesus said in v.9 and repeats in v.23, *Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.*

Jesus is telling us that God’s Word will always have mixed responses and we should be careful to make sure we are the one that bears fruit. And what Jesus describes is both familiar and shocking – we actually know it from our experience, I certainly do – and it’s what is happening right now.

¹⁴ *The sower sows the word.* ¹⁵ *Some are like the word sown on the path. When they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown in them.* This is what we’ve seen in the Scribes and Pharisees.

It is the person that hears the gospel, maybe even sits in church for years – but nothing ever sinks in. Like water off a ducks back, nothing is actually heard. And although that might shock us, it is possible to be in church for years for all sorts of reasons that don't actually include Jesus.

Whether the benefit of community, friendly people, or just a routine they've had for years. Yet the word never gets through or is given a second thought. And although they don't realise it or perhaps would even deny it, the struggle is actually spiritual – Satan comes and takes away the word.

The description is so simple, the event so common, yet it is still utterly tragic. The wonder of Christ's death for you, the joy of following him, the hope on offer is never understood or grasped.

And this might be you right now. You've heard sermon after sermon, chatted with Christian friends, but never thought it mattered – thought your sin was serious and worthy of judgement, engaged with Christ's claim upon your life, or given time to ponder the depths of Christ's love for you – you need to know you are being robbed of joy – distracted from eternal life and peace with God.

Then there's the second soil, v.16, *like seed sown on rocky ground. When they hear the word, immediately they receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root; they are short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately fall away.*

This is what we might call short-lived conversion. You have probably seen it. Someone that joyfully hears the Gospel and responds, there might be tears of joy! They like what they hear, forgiveness and love from Jesus, eternal life, a sense of purpose. The word is heard and they are happy to listen.

But challenge comes, what Jesus calls *distress or persecution*. Perhaps it's conflict with a friend or family member about their new faith or just feeling small and pressured as culture moves away from biblical ideas or just general hardship in life, their faith can't handle it.

Whether it's the cost at work or with family, the loss of friends or being left out because of your commitment to Jesus, or just the trial of sickness or loneliness, following Jesus just disappears.

This is the kind of the thing we see all the time in youth ministry – whether it's the initial response as they hear a talk or go on a camp, but when going back to school or mixing with their friends, it all seems to hard and following Jesus becomes private, occasional, and then gone.

But don't let the satire of this image or familiar nature of this response make it any less horrid. There is nothing trivial or comical about short-lived Christianity. And you'll find this is the case when you talk with those that go through this.

Speaking with a girl recently who fits this exact response, she's sure she's made the right choice because ultimately Jesus isn't that good and she deserves better than the health challenges she's gone through while being Christian. But do you hear what is actually happening there?

That really is just the wickedness of Genesis 3 isn't? To decide God is wrong, what He promises isn't that good, what God warns isn't that serious, and you're better off doing it your way.

So it's worth asking yourself, does your trust in Jesus actually have any depth? Have you been shocked by how easily your faith is shaken? Are you quick to abandon being thankful, or to pray or keep meeting together, to listen to God's Word when life circumstances change and are challenging?

We need to cultivate deep roots in our trust in Jesus so we can endure trials that will come. Challenging circumstances whether our health, relationships, finances, or just opposition for your faith: these are not just possible outcomes in the future, we should expect them – Jesus tells us to!

Trials and opposition will come but what will they reveal about us? Will we have depth? Will they expose us or strengthen us as God refines our faith as we see in Romans 5, James 1, or 1Peter 1. We should be eager to cultivate depth in our relationship with Jesus so we persevere.

We see this in the third soil that yes, grows a little longer, but still ultimately doesn't bear fruit. ¹⁸ *Others are like seed sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word,* ¹⁹ *but the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*

Notice we move from external pressure in the second soil to internal struggle in the third. This is what we'll see in so many of the crowds that follow Jesus. And although the description is brief, this is the kind of thing that often happens slowly over years. Notice how broad the things are that choke out the word – the *worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things*.

Jesus is being super inclusive – the word is choked out by everything that gets in the way, anything that distracts us from what is truly important, what we should be doing as Jesus' people.

This again is not unfamiliar to us. Life is full of opportunity and experiences that we can give our time and energy to and let it consume us and take over our priorities. Like a commitment to sport that takes over your availability to meeting with God's people on Sundays or being part of a growth group.

The commitment to success in work or study that consumes all your time and energy that you're too busy or just too tired to read your bible, pray, or meet with other Christians.

Whether chasing the career satisfaction, financial security and the deposit for the house, balancing a budget or time constraints to fit everything in, for the Christian it is the slow death of faithfulness.

I've seen this happen to youth and older Christians, to peers, professions and students, the wealthy and unemployed, those single and married – and we should not be thinking we are immune or it could never happen to us. We should ask are we slowly but surely making compromises?

Have you become unwilling to be challenged by your leaders or pastor? Allowing yourself to redefine what Jesus expects? Excusing a lack of doing what Jesus says because you know what's good for you in this season of life. What is it that distracts you, enables your sin, promotes your compromise?

Do you love Jesus more than your potential career and success? Do you trust him with your income and health? Do you seek him for your future plans, let him decide what stays or goes, whether service and generosity feature or not? Is the word in your life thriving or being choked?

Then finally, there is the good soil, v.20, *those like seed sown on good ground hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown.*"

Those that hear the word and produce fruit – not short-term conversion over a weekend, not a slow death of choking weeds, but real and lasting change – where our priorities, habits, our words, relationships, and love are transformed under the Lordship of Jesus.

Fruit of living like Jesus and for Jesus as we listen to Jesus. Notice that all four soils 'hear' the word, but good soil welcomes it. This is no casual relationship but a resolved commitment to God's Word.

Because it would be wrong to think that Jesus is saying the last soil, the good and fruitful soil, is just automatic and easy for that Christian. The good soil is not immune to the challenges of the first three, but perseveres through them. Good soil cultivates depth and weeds out distraction and confusion.

Because it's worth asking what you would have done as you heard Jesus. You've followed him for weeks, you've seen the lame walk, the leper cleansed, heard the teaching of forgiveness and the kingdom of God, watched the crowds gather in amazement. You're there excited and enthusiastic.

Then before the biggest crowd so far Jesus gets in a boat, stands up and tells the story of a farmer sowing seed and the various growth that follows. No interpretation, not clarifying statement, that's it.

What would you do? If someone was to ask you, what was all that about? Would you just say, I have no idea – sometimes he just says weird things – he's kind of kooky – I love it!

Would you just move on, thinking some things he says are great and some things aren't. Some things you get and some you don't? Or would you long for clarity – to grasp it and live by it?

We see this in the disciples as they come for understanding in v.10. Not distracted nor content to stay in confusion and ignorance – they come to Jesus for answers who tells them that the secrets of the kingdom are *given to them* – to those who come to Jesus.

So what kind of soil are you? This parable is a call to ask how we are listening to God's Word. To examine our lives not just in our initial response or conversion, but the ongoing place and reception God's Word has in our lives as we see in James 1:21.

Do you have ears to hear? Not because it's easy or automatic, but because you long to hear, understand, and apply God's Word. And it does take effort. We see that in vv.22-25.

²¹ *He also said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed? Isn't it to be put on a lampstand?"* ²² *For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and nothing concealed that will not be brought to light.* ²³ *If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen."*

At first this little parable might seem unrelated to what we've just been looking at. Jesus begins with the purpose of a lamp – not to be hidden like under a basket, but elevated to shine brightly.

A lamp's purpose is to shine not be hidden, but then in v.22 Jesus says there is something hidden now that will be revealed. The contrast is between something being presently hidden or veiled that will eventually be fully revealed.

He's speaking about his ministry and proclamation – his preaching of the Gospel. As we've seen in Mark so far, it's true nature and power is hidden and unrecognised by many. But the day is coming when the veil will be removed and all will see clearly the reality of King Jesus and his rule.

This revealing began with Jesus' death and resurrection as the power and promise of the Gospel was confirmed but will be fully realised when Jesus comes back in glory bringing final salvation and judgement. So while we live in the present hiddenness and experience all the mixed responses that Jesus describes, we are assured that this will not be the case forever.

Hence why Jesus again calls us to listen in v.23, to have ears to hear, because how we listen now matters for eternity. The Gospel Jesus preaches, the good news we've been hearing and reading are the very words of God – God who loves enough to send his Son to die for us. His Word that bring us right relationship with him, to be in the kingdom, to flourish under his loving rule.

And so knowing this we should invest in our hearing. ²⁴ *“Pay attention to what you hear. By the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and more will be added to you.”* ²⁵ *For whoever has, more will be given to him, and whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.”*

Jesus uses an example familiar to his hearers – the size of basket you bring to buy grain will be the amount you get. Bring a small measure, get small, bring big, get big. Jesus says we should come to his word with big ears – what we put in is what we get out. That's what Jesus promises.

So what measure are you using? How much time, energy, and focus are you giving to truly hearing God's Word? And this is good for us to ask and reflect on because we do have the temptation to put all the responsibility on others.

The passage was too confusing. The sermon was long and boring. My small group leader doesn't make it clear enough. And although your leaders certainly aren't perfect, the vital question still is how much effort are we giving? How focused?

And why wouldn't we invest when in the Gospel there are abundant riches to enjoy and Jesus actually promises to give us understanding as we come to him. *More will be given* – but it comes with a warning – if we don't, even what little we had *will be taken away*.

So what kind of soil are you? What kind of soil do you want to be? And if we are still tempted to think that our commitment to the bible isn't a big deal, or perhaps discouraged by the growth we are seeing in ourselves or others, Jesus finishes with a great promise in the two parables of vv.26-32.

The first parable of the seed seems to present a fairly unkind approach to farming. A man scatters seed in v.26, goes to bed in v.27, and the seed grows without him knowing how. The crop grows in v.28 and then is harvested in v.29.

The point is that the seed grows. And that is what the kingdom of God is like says Jesus. Growth is inevitable. Despite how it might seem to us, God will grow, is growing his kingdom even if what we see around us seems to only be indifference, rejection, or abandonment of the Gospel.

God is growing his kingdom and the harvest will come – the sickle in v.29 is actually a picture of judgement when Jesus returns. So despite all the claims in our culture to be in the right side of history, according to Jesus there is a certain future that we prepare for now by listening well!

Kingdom growth is certain and enormous – that's the point of the second parable of the mustard seed. The mustard seed in v.31 is proverbially the smallest seed, but it grows into a large bush.

The kingdom starts small, as we've seen in Mark, those who respond to Jesus are few. It starts small and insignificant in the eyes of the world, but it will grow and keep growing. But the language of v.32, of *branches* and *birds of the sky nesting in its shade*, is taken from the OT – like Ezekiel 17 or Daniel 4. It's a picture of people from all different nations coming to be part of the kingdom.

Our gathering tonight attests to this reality as we sit here almost 2000 years later. From 12 to billions from all across the world confessing Jesus as Lord. It has grown and although we might not notice or be aware, it is still growing. The church across the world, even in the hardest places of persecution like China or Korea or Iran, the Gospel is bearing fruit as people trust in Jesus.

These parables and promises are designed to lift our eyes to see reality, that our listening and responding to God's Word is part of God's plans and purposes for the world. To urge us to listen and keep listening, to bear fruit for eternity.

But this promise of the growing kingdom is also an encouragement to sow. Did you notice as Jesus interprets the parable he doesn't say the sower is God or himself – just one who speaks the word.

When it comes to the parable of the sower and soils, we are both soil and sowers. Jesus sows the word. As we heard last week, he entrusts the apostles to preach the word (3:14), and still today, all believers who proclaim to the good news about Jesus share in sowing the seed.

So these parables in chapter 4 urge us yes to listen well but also to sow and sow broadly and generously. To speak of Jesus not because we are convinced that the soil is already good as if we could possibly know, but to sow indiscriminately to all we can.

To sow and to keep sowing even when there has been no response or just indifference. Because the language of sowing as well as experience tells us that from sowing to bearing fruit takes time. So let's sow, and sow, and sow! Let's invest in telling people the good news of Jesus. Patiently, persistently!

And yes this should look like in our personal evangelism with friends and family. But there are so many ways to do this here too. Sow by serving in Sunday school, kids club, and youth group. There

is real need in all of them – ministries that are fundamentally about sowing the Gospel – where you can be supported and trained to do it and not to mention the joy of sowing with others.

We should be eager to sow because as Jesus tells us, sowing *will* bear fruit. Not with every person, not always in what we get to see or experience, but sowing bears fruit. We sow with confidence not in our persuasiveness or ability or even our conviction – but with confidence in God.

As Paul says in 1Corinthians 3: ⁶ *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.* It's worth asking yourself if you actually believe that. God will make it grow.

William Carey was a Baptist missionary in the 18th century who went to India to share the Gospel. When he was in India he spoke out against social injustices like infanticide and widow burning.

But his main goal was to preach the Gospel. He worked on bible translation so people could read God's Word for themselves. But despite his enthusiasm it was hard work. His wife and children went with him to India. One of them sadly died, his wife became unwell and required significant care.

His ministry partner left, he decided it was too hard and returned to England. And for seven years he didn't see a single conversion. That's a long time to sow without seeing fruit. In a letter he wrote, "I have no Christian friends. I have a large family and nothing to supply their wants. But I have God and his word is sure." And eventually, one by one, then hundreds became Christian; the Gospel bore fruit.

But before he left England, never to return, he preached a sermon that has been well remembered, especially for his main point: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."

The seed will find good soil. God's Word will bear fruit. So let's sow generously, intentionally, broadly, and patiently. Let's attempt great things for God because he brings the growth. Let's pray.