

One Soil and Four Hearts!

It's been a long day. Jesus started the day teaching inside a home (Mark 3.20-21) and was approached by His own family who tried to "arrest" Him and drag Him back to Nazareth so they could 'take care of Him'. Then He was attacked by the religious leaders (Mark 3.22-30) who said He was an agent of the Devil. He warned them that they were close to the sin for which there is no forgiveness. Then looking around Jesus explains who is really in His family (Mark 3.31-35) as He points to those at His feet.

Now He heads to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps the largest crowd yet has assembled. And He pushes out in a boat to teach them in a natural amphitheater at the cove by the sea. As many as 7-10,000 people could clearly hear Him speak from that ideal spot on the shore.

And it is here in Mark, That Jesus starts His famous parables. Parables are fascinating. Jesus didn't originate them, but He did master them. Above all others Jesus was the Master storyteller and the supreme 'parabler'. In the Gospels more than 35 of Christ's parables are recorded. Many others were spoken John says – but these are the ones He wanted us to hear.

Parables were primarily not for reading, but hearing. Not for studying but for heeding. And Jesus uses them to expose the hearts of His hearers. In His first parable, and most important parable, Jesus is the farmer, His Word is the seed, and the listeners are like soil. All the soils are essentially the same. It is the preparation that differs. One soil has become hard as stone, another has become shallow, another has become crowded, and the last – has become just right.

Jesus presents this parable with Himself as the farmer (Matthew 13.37) seeking to grow a crop. Everything, as far as farmer Jesus is concerned -- depends upon the harvest. All the soils get the same farmer's sowing, the same seed, the same growing season, the same rainfall, and so on. But only one soil could be harvested, only one gave

to the farmer what he needed and wanted. Only one soil made it to the end of the season and was carried home by the farmer. So from the perspective of the farmer – which soil was good? Only the one that gave a harvest!

Jesus explains that the soils are the hearts of hearers. The difference in the soils (hearts) is based on their willingness to accept to seed (Word of God). Jesus puts the responsibility for responding to His sowing -- on the hearers. He says some hearts are hardened, some are shallow, some are crowded, and some are ready and willing.

Parables by Jesus

Jesus perfected the art of parable telling. His stories were so relevant, so vivid, and so clear – people listened deeply and thoughtfully. Jesus drew people to action by these parables. He was so effective in communicating via parable that on more than one occasion some listeners wanted to kill Him.

- Matthew 21:45-46 Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. 46 But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

The pattern Jesus followed was to take a common picture of everyday life that captured a person's attention. Then Jesus expanded the story until it began to mirror some part of the listener's life. Then if that person wanted to hear with their heart – that truth became a window into a spiritual truth that needed a response. Each correct response would open further truth. Christ's parables invited a person to examine and apply His truth to their life.

When the disciples asked Jesus why He used parables He explained that they revealed truth to some, hiding it from others. (Mark 4:10–12; Matt. 13:10–17). Thus the listeners were judged by what they heard. If it was nonsense to them – that meant their hearts were deaf to truth. If the parable made their heart seek to understand, they came seeking and confessing their need and Christ's truth was opened to them.

God's Word is truth. Jesus explained that we by our choices either prepare our hearts to receive truth – or to reject it. Truth is only heard by prepared hearts. This is so vital that Jesus mentions 'hearing' no less than 13x in this chapter. Genuine hearing involves truth acted upon and invites more truth. False hearing ignores and rejects truth

and leads to further darkness. James defines Biblical hearing as understanding and obeying truth (James 1:22–25).

Jesus used the parabolic method so people would listen. After going outside of the synagogue, a crowd in the open air could walk away at any time. So Jesus had *to interest them*. The best way to capture people's attention is with a good story and Jesus knew that.

The Parable of the Same Soil

So here we are. Mark paints a scene on the lakeside; Jesus is telling stories from a boat just off the shore. By Capernaum to this day, the shore slopes gently down to the water. The water drops off so steeply that a boat can anchor close to the shore. The hillside is formed into a natural amphitheater that can easily hold 7-10,000 people sitting and standing – and everyone could hear Christ's voice as He spoke.

So Jesus begins by saying, "Look!". Pointing off in the distance where a farmer is out working his field, "The sower went out to sow." As He spoke their eyes followed the action of that farmer sowing. Their minds were engaged; they knew what He said was true. This is the essence of the parabolic method. And Christ's goal was always to take people from the *here and now* to transport them to *the there and then*.

Jesus always began with a common every day event that was happening at that moment on earth – and transported their minds heavenward; He began with the visible to get them thinking of the invisible; He began with the ordinary and led them to the extraordinary. Even a child could understand when Jesus told these stories.

But never forget that these were stories that first and foremost were spoken and responded to as they were heard. Jesus didn't write them down to be dissected by the crowd – but spoke them to be mulled over and over in their minds.

Jesus went for an immediate response in their hearts. He wanted them to react in their hearts at that moment with truth and then either seek more – or sadly drift away. Parables are not allegories. A good allegory, like Pilgrim's Progress, can be picked apart word by word. Every part has deeper meaning. Parables are different. They are short stories with a simple message. Not every detail of a parable has some deeper meaning. A parable is like a flash of lightning followed by

thunder. The best way to study them is to ask – “What would stick in someone’s mind as they stood or sat hearing this for the very first time?”

Starting with Mark 4, Jesus has changed gears. The strong rejection of His message by the religious leaders in chapter 3 was followed by a switch to parables. In fact Jesus only uses parables from this point on in public teaching.

Jesus starts to target more than ever in His public ministry – individuals. Prior to parables He was calling to the nation of Israel to respond to the Kingdom of God. Now He asks for each person to examine their heart and see whether they would submit to God’s rule in their heart. So this parable is a presentation of the Gospel. Please join me at the lakeside, and listen to Jesus. Don’t follow along – just listen to Him speak to your heart.

- Mark 4:1-20 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. 2 Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: 3 “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. 5 Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. 7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 8 But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” 9 And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” 10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, 12 so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.’” 13 And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan

comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. 16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. 18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

What they heard

Remember the scene. Jesus points out an actual farmer at work. With a bag of seeds the farmer was spreading them across his field. As he did so the seeds landed on the same soil, but prepared in four different ways.

1. *The Soil under the Path:* First, Jesus points out the well trod pathways that surrounded that farmer's field: "And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it" (v. 4). In Christ's time the land was covered with small plots of land that were farmed. Fields were not fenced or walled, just marked off by the narrow paths and dirt roads that formed boundaries. To cross the land meant following these roads; travelers had used them to crisscross the land for centuries. Jesus once taught as He walked along such boundary pathways in Matthew 12:1, eating the grain growing along one of these ancient paths. The rich soil under these paths were trampled regularly by many feet and became a hard packed pavement. Seeds would bounce along and rest atop this hard surface until trampled or eaten by birds.
2. *The Soil over the Rocks:* Verse 5 describes the shallow soil: "Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away." This was also common in the land. Farmers always cleared their land, picking up any rocks that lay in the dirt. But this is no small rock in the dirt, this was a slab of limestone just below the surface of the soil too big to moved. The rich soil covered the slab but not to any depth. Plants would germinate in the sun's warmth held by the slab and thus grow

rapidly. It would appear for a while that this section of the field had the best plants until hot weather came, and the surface moisture was drawn out of the soil. Then the roots tried to find the deeper sources of water to feed the plants growth. But the limestone stopped the root; the shallow root system failed; the plants withered and died; and the farmer's hope of harvest ended.

3. *The Soil around the Thorn roots:* Verse 7 continues: "And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop." Again we have the same rich soil, the same farmer, the same seed. The only difference is again below the surface. This time lurking unseen were the fibrous roots of the strong local weeds – thistles or brambles as the Greek word ***akantha*** denotes. The tops of these plants may have been cut off by the plowing of the field, but the roots remained spread around and alive. Here the newly sprouted seeds were never able to out pace the strength of these roots that also sprouted anew and grew. The seeds were the outsiders, the thorns were the residents, and the seeds lost out the battle for life. Sunlight was taken by the rapid growth of the weeds, water was soaked up, and space was gone – the tender plants were choked and died.
4. *The Soil that was Good:* Then Jesus points out the last condition of the soil: "But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."
 - Remember it is the very same soil in all four pictures. It is rich agricultural dirt. The same farmer, the same seed, the same sun, the same rainfall – the only difference is in the conditioning.
 - The path or wayside area of the field had become hardened and packed down soil. The rocky area of the field had submerged rocks that were never removed. The weedy area of the field contained roots that were poised to burst back to life. But here the soil is good because it is not hardened, not shallow, and not infested with weeds.

As Jesus paused, each person who heard Him agreed mentally with what He said. They all knew from daily life that each farmer faced the same challenges when sowing a crop, hoping for a harvest. Then the moment of truth comes. Jesus continues with one final statement in verse 9: "And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

The parabolic “lightning” flashed in their hearts. Yes that is true. Yes the hard pack can’t even get seeds in. Yes the shallow soil terminates growth. Yes thistles choke seedlings. Yes good soil always rewards the farmer with a crop – and that was the whole goal of the story. The only purpose of a farmer sowing is to get plants to maturity and harvest. The truth seekers would ponder and then respond to this Word from the Son of God by asking Him more!

Why did He say that?
Who is the farmer?
What does the seed represent?
What are the pathways?
What are rocks and thorns?

The Heart that Seeks Jesus

Mark captures this moment so well. As soon as they could get to Jesus, after the boat came to shore, after the crowd thinned enough to get to Him they asked what was burning in their hearts. Look at verse 10:

Mark 4:10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable.

Then keep going to verses 33-34:

Mark 4:33-34 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. 34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

What was Jesus showing them? They asked what the parables meant, and Jesus answers them by explaining the parable. So the real answer is that you can only understand spiritual truth if Jesus is your Teacher. That was the lesson they had to learn. And now Jesus defines the spiritual significance of the elements of the parabolic story.

1. In v. 14a the sower is anyone spreading the message of salvation like Jesus asked us to do.
2. In v. 14b the seed is God's Word (see also Luke 8.11).
3. In v. 15, the soil is the human heart.
4. In vv. 15-20, the four responses to the Word are based on the condition of the soil (or heart).

5. In v. 20, only one soil (heart) experiences what the Word is supposed to do when received – bear a crop for harvest.

Oceans of truth lay before us who have the entire Word before us to use to compare and expand the truth Jesus gave to the disciples in this explanation.

Only the Word that enters the heart and becomes a part of that like is real. James and then Peter later comments on that reality in their epistles.

- James 1:21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.
- 1 Peter 1:23 having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever,

The symbol is Christ's story of God's Word being like seed is so true. We can't make seeds; they are part of God's creation. They are alive. God's Word is 'living and abiding'. So when we proclaim the Gospel it can't be our message – it must be His Word. Jesus is explaining why the same living Word makes no impact in some hearts. The condition of their heart is reflected in their response to God's Word. So what type of responses do we see? Jesus explains four.

1. *THE IMPENETRABLE/Hard/insensitive HEART:*

Hard hearted and resistant, living right on the edge of fruitful field -- are the unconverted. These are people who hear sermons but forget them. Nothing sinks in; they are resistant and unstirred by God. They go to church for show. Preaching doesn't interest them. They sit with their minds on other things. They leave with no more truth than they came with. They have no fear of God, no faith, no experience of Christ. Spiritually they feel not, care not, want not, and have not. For them Christ's death has no effect; they live and die and depart for a Christless Hell.

These are those hardened by the wheels of life. The hooves of their prejudices, fears, and falsehoods believed trample down the pathway of truth, hardening their souls. They are spiritually insensitive. Life becomes merely beer and a sport page, or beauty shops and gossip. They aren't overly bad, they just don't care about God. Sometimes hostile, but more often just disinterested. God is not relevant. Life is

full. Days are busy. That's Christ's point of the road of life. A place so used, so traveled, so filled with activity – that it can no longer receive a message from God. What a sober 1st Century warning to us who live at speeds unimaginable even 75 years ago.

Whenever a seed of God's Word lands into this busy life it is either crushed under the traffic of life, or quickly scooped up by the flutter of Satan's birds of distractions. The only hope for such a hard path is to be broken up. And often the unexpected upheaval of sickness, pain, disaster, or reversal temporarily opens softened soil. Think back – was it in the hospital or in a ditch somewhere with a racing heart you finally found life slow down enough to think about God? Then the living and abiding Word fell into soil made ready by God, and brought forth the fruit that repentance brings. If you are in a whirl, and God is not in your thoughts – beware lest you never experience the life He offers today. If you know Him, pray for the insensitive, hardened hearts that you know!

- The soil by the wayside pictures a hardened, unresponsive hearer. Here is the hard-hearted individual—one whom the Old Testament would call stiff-necked (e.g., Prov. 29:1). He is unresponsive, unconcerned, inattentive, indifferent, negligent, and often hostile. He wants nothing to do with the gospel. It just bounces off him. Satan is portrayed as a ravenous bird, hovering over the hardened soil, eager to pluck up the seed the moment it lands. Here our Lord warns that the human heart can be so pounded and beaten down with the traffic of sin that it becomes completely insensitive to the gospel. This is the heart that knows no repentance, no sorrow over sin, no guilt, and no concern for the things of God. It allows itself to be trampled by an endless procession of evil thoughts, cherished sins, and ungodly activities. It is careless, callous, indifferent—never broken up or softened by conviction or sorrow for wrongdoing. This is the heart of the fool described in Proverbs. He hates knowledge, resists instruction, and despises wisdom. He says in his heart there is no God. He will not hear for his mind is closed. And he does not want to be bothered with a gospel invitation. Many people have hearts like that. You can shower them with seed, but it just lies there and does not penetrate. And it does not stay very long before Satan comes and takes it away completely. Each time you try to witness to such a person, you must start again at the beginning. Dry, hard soil on the edge of the field does not necessarily signify someone who is antireligious. Some of the hardest individuals in the world stay on the fringes of true

religion. But because sin has so hardened their hearts, they are utterly unproductive and unresponsive to God. They are very close to the truth, very close to the good soil, often receiving handfuls of seed, but the seed will not sprout in their lives.¹

2. *THE SHALLOW/ROCKY/Rebellious HEART:*

Jesus was surrounded by crowds of shallow souls. They followed, listened, enjoyed His messages – but never could get around to doing anything with what they heard. These are the impressionable ones, unlike the hardened ones. Moved to tears at times, able to talk at length about the Lord – but never deeply changed. They are unstable, un-rooted, temporary and fragile. Their spiritual life has as much life as a cut flower. They look great until they wither.

Humility is absent from their lives. Ambition drives them. Sorrow for sin is unseen, and confidence carries them along. These hearts with unseen rocks can be enthused and excited. Quickly they respond, talking much of the things of God. They are swept along by great movings of God. They want what others have. They seek to learn the “how to’s” but never the “whys”. Outwardly their growth appears extraordinarily and often meteoric. They are drawn to the warmth of fellowship but never repelled by the coldness of sin. They are attracted to the light of the Word but never emptied of the darkness of their own way. They want Christ without sacrifice, joy without contrition, growth without obedience.

The shallow souls can freely discuss needs, fears, conflicts and struggles. They are pleasant and fit right in for a time. But down deep in their lives resides a large outcropping of unrepentant sin. Hidden by the soil of profession, by the foliage of activity, and by the enthusiasm of the moment – the submerged rebellion in their life is unseen. But as soon as troubles come they wither. When afflictions come they dry up. When persecutions come they flee. When God brings them to a point they must turn to Him or go their own way – they abandon all appearances of Christ.

Deceived by their own sins, they remain unwilling to give up their own ways. Lostness is never faced, sins are never repented of, the Spirit is never received, the Word is never grafted into their souls. Their old life isn’t passing away, and they have nothing new that Christ begins.

¹MacArthur, J., F. 1997, c1988. *The Gospel according to Jesus : What does Jesus mean when he says “follow me”*. Includes index. (Electronic ed.). Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House: Grand Rapids, MI

They have never been converted. And so when the heat of troubles comes they walk away from the Christ they never knew. They were never rooted into Christ, His Word was never implanted in their souls. They were never saved. Sin and not Christ -- is the anchor that holds them.

That is why Jesus said to go and make disciples. When we teach those who respond to the Gospel what Jesus expects of them they will either grow because His grace is present, or wither because it is absent. The danger of Christ's Church in the 21st Century is that we have multitudes of undisciplined, untested, unrooted Christians. Among them are the rocky hearts just waiting to cause great reproach upon Christ as they abandon Him and seek to soil His Worthy Name.

- The problem was, he had a shallow emotional response to Christ which never penetrated his entire heart—his intellect and will. When affliction came, there was immediate rejection. I am convinced that this is where so many of the enemies of the faith come from. Too many, through their emotion, tasted something of God's power, but not true conversion. In falling away they became bitter and jaundiced and terribly lost. Affliction, like the sun, brings growth to roots in good soil, but withers the shallow profession of faith. Helmut Thielicke aptly says: There is nothing more cheering than transformed Christian people and there is nothing more disintegrating than people who have been merely "brushed" by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth and no rootage. Therefore, they fall when the first whirlwind comes along. It is the half-Christians who always flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test. So even that which they think they have is taken away from them. This is the wood from which the anti-Christians too are cut. They are almost always former half-Christians. A person who lets Jesus only halfway into his heart is far poorer than a one hundred per cent worldling. He does not get the peace that passes all understanding and he also loses the world's peace, because his naivete has been taken from him.⁶ Certainly authentic faith involves great emotion. If there is no emotion, it is a crippled or even bogus faith. But true faith is also a matter of the mind and will. Jesus once cooled a disciple's glib vow to follow him wherever he went by replying, "Foxes have holes and birds of

6 6. Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 57.

- the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). True belief involves all of the person, who then weathers affliction and even persecution.²
- These people joyfully receive the good news of the gospel because of the promises offered. They grow a bit and initially show some promise of growth. These people understand some of the basics but do not allow God’s truth to work its way into their souls and make a difference in their lives—*they have no root* and thus *last only a short time*. When trouble comes (the scorching heat, 4:6), they decide not to believe the gospel or its promises and thus fall away. Jews who accepted Jesus as Savior were excommunicated from the synagogue and often disowned by their families (see John 9:22–23). Satan can always use sorrow, trouble, and persecution to draw people away from God. Ironically, those who let the message take root in good soil find that sorrow, trouble, and persecution bring them closer to God³.
 - Because the person’s heart is hard, like the stony ground, the gospel never takes root in the individual’s soul and never transforms his life—there is only a temporary, surface change. **tribulation or persecution.** Not the routine difficulties and troubles of life, but specifically the suffering, trials, and persecutions which result from one’s association with God’s Word. **stumble.** The Gr. word also means, “to fall” or “to cause offense,” and from which comes the Eng. word “scandalize.” All those meanings are appropriate since the superficial believer is offended, stumbles, and falls away when his faith is put to the test (cf. John 8:31; 1 John 2:19).⁴
3. *THE CROWDED/distracted/divided HEART:*
- Weedy soil represents a heart preoccupied with worldly matters. That is a perfect description of a worldly person—one who lives for the things of this world. He or she is consumed with the cares of this age. Such a person’s chief pursuit is a career, a house, a car, a hobby, or a wardrobe. Prestige, looks, or riches are everything to the weedy heart. Have you known people who fit this category? For a while they look just like the rest of the field. They come to church, identify with the people of God, even show signs of growth. But they never bear spiritual fruit. They are uncommitted and preoccupied with the world’s pleasures, money, career, fame, fortune, or the lusts of the flesh. They say

²Hughes, R. K. 1989. *Mark : Jesus, servant and savior*. Preaching the Word. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

³Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill. Gr. Greek

⁴MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) . Word Pub.: Nashville

they are Christians, but they care nothing about a pure life. That is the response of weedy soil. The germinating seed that looks so good will ultimately be overwhelmed by the thorns of worldliness, and eventually the weedy heart will show no evidence that good seed was ever sown. What happens when the seed that once looked so promising is choked out? Has such a person lost his salvation? No, he never had it. The Word of God fell on a heart that was unprepared because it was full of malignant weeds. That person received the seed of the gospel but not into clean soil. The gospel germinated but was choked out before it could come to fruition. The person with the weedy heart was never saved in the first place. Weedy hearts may be willing to accept Jesus as Savior, but not if it means letting go of the world. That is not salvation. Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). And the apostle John wrote, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Soil must be cleansed of the weeds and thorns if it is to produce a crop.⁵

- "Thorn patch" people, overcome by worries and the lure of materialism, leave no room in their lives for God.⁶
- The farmer probably would not intentionally scatter the seed into an area filled with thorns and briars; this probably refers to the seed falling among seeds or roots of thorns that cultivation had not destroyed. Thorns rob the sprouts of nutrition, water, light, and space. Thus, when *the thorns grew up*, the good seed was choked out and could not grow to maturity and yield a crop.⁷
- These are people who attend to the preaching of Christ's truth and to a certain extent obey it. Their understanding assents to it. Their judgment approves of it. Their conscience is affected by it. Their affections are in favor of it. They acknowledge that it is all right, good and worth receiving. They even abstain from many things which the Gospel condemns, and adopt many habits which the Gospel requires. But here unhappily they stop short. And the grand secret of their condition is the world. "The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things" prevent the word having its full effect on their souls (verse 19). With everything apparently that is promising and favorable in their spiritual state, they stand still. They never come up to the full standard of New Testament Christianity. They bring no fruit to perfection. To go so far and yet go no

⁵MacArthur, J., F. 1997, c1988. *The Gospel according to Jesus : What does Jesus mean when he says "follow me"*. Includes index. (Electronic ed.). Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House: Grand Rapids, MI

⁶Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

⁷Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

- further—to see so much and yet not see all—to approve so much and yet not give Christ the heart, this is indeed most deplorable! And there is but one verdict that can be given about such people. Without a decided change they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Christ wants our whole heart. “Friendship with the world is hatred towards God” (James 4:4).⁸
- This is Satan’s most subversive tactic of all. These people hear and accept the word and allow it to take root in their hearts, giving hope of a harvest. But *thorns* grow up and choke out the growing seed. Thorns rob nutrition, water, light, and space from newly sprouting seeds. Distractions and conflicts rob new believers of time to reflect on and digest God’s Word in order to grow from it, as well as robbing guidance and support from interaction with other Christians. Jesus described the thorns: *worries of this life; deceitfulness of wealth; desires for other things*; Worldly worries (no matter how important or how minor), the false sense of security brought on by (or merely promised by) prosperity, and the desire for material things (including anything that serves to distract a person) plagued first-century disciples as they do us today. Daily routines overcrowd and materialistic pursuits distract believers, *making it* (that is, God’s Word) *unfruitful* in their lives⁹.
 - Here the thornbushes are not visible because they have been burned off the surface, but their roots are intact. When the seed is sown on this soil, then watered and germinated, the entrenched thorns also sprout and grow with a virulent violence, choking out the grain before it can produce any fruit. This portrayed a divided heart, a heart divided by irreconcilable loyalties. This heart makes some gestures toward Christ, but “the worries of this life” (literally, “the distractions of this age”) draw it back. It is pulled in other directions, leaving no room for spiritual concerns. “The deceitfulness of wealth” (“keeping up with the Joneses”) draws them with the promise of great good. This involves buying things you do not need to impress people you do not like with money you do not have. This is a divided heart—like the heart of the girl to which a young man once proposed. He said, “Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I’m not rich. I don’t have a yacht or a Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.” She thought for a minute and then replied, “I love you with all my heart, too, but

⁸Ryle, J. C. 1993. *Mark*. The Crossway classic commentaries. Crossway Books: Wheaton, Ill.

⁹Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

tell me more about Johnny Brown.”⁷ A heart which is overcome with a love for riches and the things of this world is *not* a believing heart. “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). Many began well, and it looked like they were believers, but the love of the world has strangled all vestiges of Christianity from their lives.¹⁰

- **cares of this world.** Lit. “the distractions of the age.” A preoccupation with the temporal issues of this present age blinds a person to any serious consideration of the gospel (cf. James 4:4; 1 John 2:15, 16). **deceitfulness of riches.** Not only can money and material possessions not satisfy the desires of the heart or bring the lasting happiness they deceptively promise, but they also blind those who pursue them to eternal, spiritual concerns (1 Tim. 6:9, 10).¹¹
- Then there are the thorny-ground hearers, those who let the cares of the world distract them. That is the world today. So many people today are letting the world shut them out from God.¹²
- **TODAY’S THORNS**¹³: We must welcome God’s Word exclusively so nothing stifles or distracts us. We must weed out or avoid the thorn patches. As James wrote, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” ([James 1:22 NIV](#)).

The Thorn

Worries of this life. Society says, “Take care of yourself; no one else will.”

The Problem

Fear of persecution for being identified with Christ can neutralize people who are worried that they will be ridiculed. Daily concerns, schedules, and pressures can snuff out our time and energy to grow. Worry consumes our

The Solution

[James 1:12](#), “Blessed is anyone who endures temptation” (NRSV). [Philippians 4:6](#), “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don’t forget to thank him for his answers” (TLB). [Matthew 6:31](#),

⁷ 7. Walter Underwood, *The Contemporary 12* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), pp. 86, 87.

¹⁰Hughes, R. K. 1989. *Mark : Jesus, servant and savior*. Preaching the Word. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

Lit. literally

¹¹MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) . Word Pub.: Nashville

¹²McGee, J. V. 1997, c1981. *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.). Thomas Nelson: Nashville

¹³Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

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tlb Scripture verses marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971 owned by assignment by KNT Charitable Trust. All rights reserved.

	thoughts, disrupts our productivity, and reduces our trust in God.	"Therefore, do not worry" (NRSV).
Deceitfulness of wealth. Society says, "Wealth brings security, power, and happiness."	Wealth can take God's place in our lives. It can become an idol—the focus of our activities and devotion. It tempts us to deny our dependence on God, taking our eyes off eternal values. Wealth leads to pride.	Jeremiah 9:23, "Do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth" (NRSV). Luke 12:34, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (NIV). 1 Timothy 6:6, "Now godliness with contentment is great gain" (NKJV). 1 Timothy 6:10, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (NKJV).
Desires for other things. Society says, "Indulge yourself; try it all; get all you can."	Indulging our desires leads to all kinds of problems. It weakens our will power, stifles our spiritual growth, and leads to companions who will pull us down.	Romans 13:14, "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (NIV).1 Corinthians 15:33, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character' " (NIV). 1 Peter 1:13–14, "Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (NIV).

4. THE FRUITFUL HEART:

- **CONTINUES. 4:20 hear ... accept ... bear fruit.** Three Gr. present participles mark continuing action. Believers, in contrast to unbelievers, hear God's Word because God allows them to hear it. They "accept" it—they understand and obey it because God opens their mind and heart and transforms their lives. The result is that they produce spiritual fruit.¹⁴
- **EXISTS.** It is a promise to the discouraged disciples that there is good soil in the field. Lest they be shaken by the people's negative response, Jesus wanted them to know that there is a huge field cultivated and ready to receive the seed. It will bear abundant fruit¹⁵
- **MULTIPLIES.** A farmer would be happy indeed to see his crop multiply even ten times—thirty, sixty, or a hundred would be an incredible yield, for it would mean even more to plant and

¹⁴MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) . Word Pub.: Nashville

¹⁵MacArthur, J., F. 1997, c1988. *The Gospel according to Jesus : What does Jesus mean when he says "follow me"*. Includes index. (Electronic ed.). Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House: Grand Rapids, MI

harvest in the coming year. If we bear fruit, it is proof that we have listened. These are the true disciples—those who have accepted Jesus, believed his words, and allowed him to make a difference in their lives. Notice that the seed bears seed. In other words, those who preach the Word yield others who preach the Word to others who preach the word and so on. These believers *produce a crop*. There are varying yields, but that should never affect the farmer's desire to sow or the disciple's desire to spread the Good News¹⁶.

- **DEMONSTRATES.** These are the people who really receive Christ's truth into the bottom of their hearts, believe it implicitly and obey it thoroughly. In these the fruits of that truth will be seen—uniform, plain and unmistakable results in heart and life. Sin will be truly hated, mourned over, resisted and renounced. Christ will be truly loved, trusted in, followed, loved and obeyed. Holiness will show itself in all their conversation, in humility, spiritual-mindedness, patience, meekness and love. There will be something that can be seen. The true work of the Holy Spirit cannot be hidden. There will always be some persons in this state of soul wherever the Gospel is faithfully preached. Their numbers may very likely be few compared with the worldly people around them. Their experience and degree of spiritual attainment may differ widely, some producing thirty, some sixty and some a hundred times what was sown. But the crop of the seed falling into good ground will always be of the same kind. There will always be visible repentance, visible faith in Christ and visible holiness of life. Without these things, there is no saving religion. And now let us ask ourselves, What are we? Under which class of hearers ought we to be ranked? With what kind of hearts do we hear the word? Never, never may we forget that there is only one infallible mark of being a right-hearted hearer! That mark is to bear fruit. To be without fruit is to be on the way to hell¹⁷.
- The seed of God's Word does not bounce off the surface of this heart. It does not momentarily flourish only to shrivel under adversity. It is not divided by its competing desires and strangled. It is a heart that allows God's Word to take deep root in it. It produces first a harvest of character: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22, 23). Then it produces a harvest of good works (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus conveys to us the love of

¹⁶Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

¹⁷Ryle, J. C. 1993. *Mark*. The Crossway classic commentaries. Crossway Books: Wheaton, Ill.

the Godhead. He, by his death, tells us that we are not only loved, but in need of his atoning blood because we are sinners. We are loved. He died for our sins, that we might live. Is he communicating with you? Right now, the most important thing is that we *listen* to him and receive the Word, not with *hard* hearts—that is busy hearts, impenetrable hearts that need to be broken up. And not with *shallow* hearts—only the emotions are touched. These are strangled by love for this world: “I love you with all my heart, God, but tell me what the world can do for me.” We should listen to God with a heart that is good soil, where the Word of God grows a rich harvest.¹⁸

- But there are different degrees of fruit-bearing here: thirty, sixty, and an hundredfold. You remember that the Lord said to His own in that Upper Room Discourse as He was going out on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, “I am the genuine vine.” Then He told them that He wanted them to bring forth fruit, more fruit, and much fruit. There are three degrees of fruit-bearing in those who are His own in that instance, just as we find three degrees in this parable.¹⁹

OPEN OR CLOSED: The four soils represent four different ways people respond to God’s message. While Jesus was talking about four different kinds of hearts and each’s readiness to receive the gospel, his words could also apply to us in two other ways: (1) different times or phases in our lives; (2) how we willingly receive God’s message in some areas of our lives and resist it in others. For example, you may be open to God about your future, but closed concerning how you spend your money. You may respond like good soil to God’s demand for worship, but be like rocky soil with regard to helping people in need. Strive to be like good soil in every area of your life at all times.²⁰

Taken at face value, the message of the parable of the soils is clear: of four soils, only one is good. Only one produces fruit, and thus it alone is of any value to the farmer. This good soil pictures the believer. The weedy soil and the shallow soil are pretenders. The soil by the wayside is an absolute rejecter. Indeed, fruit is the ultimate test of true salvation. In the harvest, weedy soil is no better than the hard road or shallow ground. All are worthless. Seed sown there is

¹⁸Hughes, R. K. 1989. *Mark : Jesus, servant and savior*. Preaching the Word. Crossway Books: Westchester, Ill.

¹⁹McGee, J. V. 1997, c1981. *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.). Thomas Nelson: Nashville

²⁰Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

wasted, and the ground is fit for nothing except burning (cf. Heb. 6:8). It cannot picture salvation.²¹

Warren Wiersbe understands the issue clearly: It is important to note that none of these first three hearts [the soil by the wayside, the shallow soil, and the weedy soil] underwent salvation. The proof of salvation is not listening to the Word, or having a quick emotional response to the Word, or even cultivating the Word so that it grows in a life. The proof of salvation is *fruit*, for as Christ said, "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16)²²

OPEN YOUR EARS!: The hearing Jesus wants from us is not the kind we use to listen to background radio music or when someone starts to recount a long story we've already heard. To hear Jesus' words is to believe them, to use them immediately in decisions and attitudes, and to base life on them—our recreation and work, family plans and money matters, schooling and voting, praying and singing. To hear Jesus' words is to make Jesus our true Lord. What is Jesus saying to you?²³

²¹MacArthur, J., F. 1997, c1988. *The Gospel according to Jesus : What does Jesus mean when he says "follow me"*. Includes index. (Electronic ed.). Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House: Grand Rapids, MI

²² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Meet Yourself in the Parables* (Wheaton: Victor, 1979), 27.

²³Barton, B. B. 1994. *Mark*. Life application Bible commentary . Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Ill.

FIRST PUBLIC REJECTION BY JEWISH LEADERS	Matthew	Mark	Luke
A tour with the twelve and other followers			8:1-3
Blasphemous accusation by the scribes and Pharisees	12:22-37	3:20-30	
Request for a sign refused	12:38-45		
Announcement of new spiritual ties	12:46-50	3:31-35	8:19-21
PARABOLIC MYSTERIES ABOUT THE KINGDOM			
<i>To the Crowds by the Sea</i>			
The setting of the parables	13:1-3a	4:1-2	8:4
The parable of the soils	13:3b-23	4:3-25	8:5-18
The parable of the seed's spontaneous growth		4:26-29	
The parable of the tares	13:24-30		
The parable of the mustard tree	13:31-32	4:30-32	
The parable of the leavened loaf	13:33-35	4:33-34	
<i>To the Disciples in the House</i>			
The parable of the tares explained	13:36-43		
The parable of the hidden treasure	13:44		
The parable of the pearl of great price	13:45-46		
The parable of the dragnet	13:47-50		
The parable of the householder	13:51-52		
CONTINUING OPPOSITION			
Departure across the sea and calming the storm	13:53; 8:18,23-27	4:35-41	8:22-25
Healing the Gerasene demoniacs and resultant opposition	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39
Return to Galilee, healing of woman who touched Christ's garment, and raising of Jairus' daughter	9:18-26	5:21-43	8:40-56
Three miracles of healing and another blasphemous accusation	9:27-34		
Final visit to unbelieving Nazareth	13:54-58	6:1-6a	

²⁴MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) . Word Pub.: Nashville

The Parables of Jesus²⁵

Parable	Matthew	Mark	Luke
1. Lamp Under a Basket	5:14-16	4:21,22	8:16,17; 11:33-36
2. A Wise Man Builds on Rock and a Foolish Man Builds on Sand	7:24-27		6:47-49
3. Unshrunk (New) Cloth on an Old Garment	9:16	2:21	5:36
4. New Wine in Old Wineskins	9:17	2:22	5:37,38
5. The Sower	13:3-23	4:2-20	8:4-15
6. The Tares (Weeds)	13:24-30		
7. The Mustard Seed	13:31,32	4:30-32	13:18,19
8. The Leaven	13:33		13:20,21
9. The Hidden Treasure	13:44		
10. The Pearl of Great Price	13:45,46		
11. The Dragnet	13:47-50		
12. The Lost Sheep	18:12-14		15:3-7
13. The Unforgiving Servant	18:23-35		
14. The Workers in the Vineyard	20:1-16		
15. The Two Sons	21:28-32		
16. The Wicked Vinedressers	21:33-45	12:1-12	20:9-19
17. The Wedding Feast	22:2-14		
18. The Fig Tree	24:32-44	13:28-32	21:29-33
19. The Wise and Foolish Virgins	25:1-13		
20. The Talents	25:14-30		
21. The Growing Seed		4:26-29	
22. The Absent Householder		13:33-37	
23. The Creditor and Two Debtors			7:41-43
24. The Good Samaritan			10:30-37
25. A Friend in Need			11:5-13
26. The Rich Fool			12:16-21
27. The Watchful Servants			12:35-40
28. The Faithful Servant and the Evil Servant			12:42-48
29. The Barren Fig Tree			13:6-9

²⁵MacArthur, J. J. 1997, c1997. *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) . Word Pub.: Nashville

30. The Great Supper	14:16-24
31. Building a Tower and a King Making War	14:25-35
32. The Lost Coin	15:8-10
33. The Lost Son	15:11-32
34. The Unjust Steward	16:1-13
35. The Rich Man and Lazarus	16:19-31
36. Unprofitable Servants	17:7-10
37. The Persistent Widow	18:1-8
38. The Pharisee and the Tax Collector	18:9-14
39. The Minas (Pounds)	19:11-27