

***CROPS: Boosting the Harvest Yield (Mark 4:1-34) – Sunday, October 11, 2009 – Summit EFC***

Series: *Way to Go: Serving & Giving Like Jesus* (Gospel of Mark), Message #5 – Pastor Doug Corlew

The Dean of Admissions was interviewing a prospective student at the university's School of Agriculture. "Why have you chosen this career?" he asked. The kid said, "I dream of making a million dollars in farming, just like my father." The Dean was impressed. "Your father made a million dollars in farming?" "No," replied the applicant. "But he always dreamed of it."

As you know, I'm just a city-kid from the Chicago-area, transplanted here to rural Iowa, but I *have* learned from many of you, that once farming gets in your blood, you just can't shake it very easily! There's something about working the soil that inspires perpetual hope in every farmer. And it seems the only thing better than planting a crop in the spring... is bringing in the harvest come fall!

Of course, for most of the world's history, the majority of people made their living from the land. Today the number of family farms may be dwindling, as farms turn into factories, and technology changes our agricultural techniques. But one thing will never change: we cannot do without farmers.

And perhaps more clearly than any other profession, farmers exemplify dependence on God. A farmer can plant the seed, but he can't determine its yield. There are a whole host of factors beyond *his* control that will determine how much grain is produced when its time for the combines to roll.

In fact, a farmer can be very consistent from year to year in his habits of tilling and planting and cultivating – and yet a *bumper* crop one year can be followed by crop *insurance* the next. Even in the same year, seed planted in one field can produce much differently than the exact same kind of seed planted even just a few miles down the road.

So it's very interesting that as Jesus began His public ministry, He compared the crowds to the ***crops***. As we saw last week, Jesus was not necessarily impressed by the multitudes that showed an interest in Him. Because He knew that most of the people who heard Him teach would never produce a fruitful harvest, that is, their lives would not be permanently changed by His message. And at the same time, He did not want His disciples to be confused or discouraged by the uneven response of the crowds.

And so in **Mark 4:1-2** – *Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables...*

And now Mark's action-packed Go-Gospel slows down a bit, for one of the rare times when Jesus' words rather than His deeds are recorded at length. Evidently Mark feels it's very important for us to hear and understand this teaching. Now parables are stories which illustrate spiritual truths by comparing these truths with something familiar to the listeners, in this case sowing and growing. These are farming stories! So what can the crops teach us about the kingdom of God and how people respond to Jesus?

**1<sup>st</sup>**, consider that in the fields of the farmer *or* the Father, a bumper crop depends on **RECEPTIVE SOIL**. Now around here, weather conditions might be at the top of our list of variables that affect harvest yield. But keep in mind, the farmers of first century Palestine were not blessed with rich black Iowa soil.

So in **v 3-9** Jesus begins: "*Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and*

choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” 9 And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Same sower, same seed, various results. Why? Because of the receptivity of the soil. Look how the parable begins and ends. In the spiritual realm, it’s all about how well we listen (v 3), our ability to hear (v 9) – that is, whether or not we will receive the seed that is sown in us.

This point is made explicit in v 10-13 – *And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’” 13 And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”*

So we’re back to our insiders and outsiders theme from last week. Jesus’ teaching is for members only! – those who have *been given the secret of the kingdom of God*. And notice this is not due to *their* good judgment or superior intelligence or ethical merit: spiritual receptivity is *given* to them by God. And the effect of Jesus’ parables is simply to reveal the state of people’s hearts: those who believe are given insight to understand and apply. The rest are simply confirmed in their disbelief.

Unlike many of us then, Jesus is unwilling to relax the tension between divine sovereignty and human free will. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart; and yet Pharaoh, at the very same time, hardened his own heart. We humans are responsible for our actions, and we always respond to God exactly how we *want* to respond. And yet, throughout Scripture, there is this constant reminder that a Sovereign God in heaven is working out His purposes, even through the unforced choices of people.

So beginning in v 14, Jesus explains the parable: “*The sower sows the word.*” This is Jesus Himself, scattering the seeds of the gospel far and wide, onto all kinds of soil.

But He is not at the mercy of thorns and weeds and stones and other obstacles. He will harvest what He has purposed to harvest, even against discouraging odds. While it would be hasty to say that three out of four people who hear the message will reject it, it’s certainly fair to say that of the various *kinds of heart-soil* that hear the gospel, three-quarters of them are not going to be receptive.

But rather than sulking about this lack of results, Jesus wants His disciples to remember, as *they* begin to plant spiritual seeds, that the outcome is always in God’s hands. It’s our business to be planting, not digging up the seeds to see if they have sprouted yet. The providential power of God guarantees that good soil *will* be found. Remember, the parable does not end on a discouraging note, but with *good soil*, yielding a breathtaking harvest of one-hundred fold, which was extraordinary success in those days.

So what is the condition of the soil of your heart? Are you one of the minority, receptive to the Good News of Jesus Christ? – because *four* kinds of people are portrayed in the parable:

1<sup>st</sup>, there are **HARD-Hearted People**. 15 “*And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.*”

Some of the farmer’s seed falls onto these well-worn foot paths, probably around the edges of his field, and this seed quickly becomes bird food. Why? Because the soil has been beaten down by many travelers, it’s just too hardened, so the seed never actually penetrates the soil.

And so many people can go to church and listen to a sermon, and really pay no attention at all. They have no interest. They may or may not be involved in gross sin, they may or may not be hostile to Christ, but there is just no spiritual appetite whatsoever.

They walk around in a protective shell, their hearts are packed down until they are like concrete, and the Word of God has no more effect on them than water on a stone. And as the truth bounces around on the surface of their lives, Satan comes chirping along like a bird, and he flies away with that seed which could have given them life.

**2<sup>nd</sup>**, there are **HOT-Hearted People**. 16 *“And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.”*

So the second kind of soil isn't hard, but it's shallow – a thin layer of dirt with stone just beneath the surface. This shallow soil gets hot very quickly; the sun heats it up in no time, so the seed springs up fast. The only problem is that the sprouting seeds have only one place to go: Up. Instead of first becoming rooted, and gaining access to moisture, the plant springs up with no roots to protect it from torrid weather. And when the heat rises, the plant is scorched and it bears no fruit, despite a promising start.

Likewise, hot-hearted people respond to Jesus with great enthusiasm. They're all fired up and excited about their faith. But their response is superficial. Because as soon as troubles come, they fall away. It means they take offense. Turns out they were fair-weather friends of Jesus – kind of shallow, because the minute following Jesus becomes difficult, they quit. This isn't what they signed up for!

Maybe they were taught that being a Christian guarantees health and wealth. Having faith means all will go well. They were never told that Jesus said we should *expect* trials and challenges.

And since they were never *rooted and built up in him and established in the faith (Col 2:7)*, their superficial enthusiasm is bound to wear off eventually. Disillusioned and discouraged, these once hot-hearted people simply cannot sustain the emotion, and they bear no fruit, despite a promising start.

Then we have **3<sup>rd</sup>**, the **HALF-Hearted People**. 18 *“And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”*

In the farmer's field, thorn bushes may not even be visible when the seed is sown. They may have been burned away. But if the roots are still intact beneath the surface – when the seed is sown and watered and germinated, the entrenched thorns will also sprout and grow, eventually depriving the plant of its light and nourishment.

So Jesus is warning that even someone who seems strong in the faith can eventually buckle and be overtaken by surrounding thorns. Certain things can just get in the way of the nourishing light and warmth of the Holy Spirit in your life.

The *cares of the world*, for example (v 19). The cares of the world are the burdens you and I face on a day to day basis. This is the stuff of which life is made. These are concerns which are valid and important, but they are not eternally significant. From football games to flute lessons to fishing trips to flu bugs – our attention can be absorbed by, and our schedules can be packed with the cares of the world, which threaten to strangle the spiritual life right out of us, so that we bear no fruit.

For others, *the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for others things* take over (**v 19**). Jesus often warned that money can be a snare. It has the potential to lead your heart away from the kingdom of God. So why *do* we buy things we do not need to impress people we do not like with money we do not have? The desire to be rich not only leads to misplaced priorities, family tension, credit card debt, and a poor example to our children. It also reveals 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 tell me more about Johnny Brown.” A heart which is overcome with a love for money and possessions is not a believing heart.

Jesus said, “*No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money*” (**Matt 6:24**).

Many begin well, and it looks for a while like they are true believers. But over time, the love of the world chokes the Word of God from their lives, and they bear no fruit. But thankfully, the parable ends on an upbeat note, with a description –

**4<sup>th</sup>**, of **WHOLE-Hearted People**. 20 “*But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.*”

So 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. This heart is not divided by its competing desires so that it is ultimately strangled. Rather, this heart is fertile soil for the Word of God to take deep root, and it produces a bumper crop of Christian character and service.

Notice, not all of these whole-hearted people are going to bear the same amount of fruit. Some produce 30, some 60, and some an astounding 100 times what was sown in them. So we should not expect everyone to look the same. But the crop will always be present. There will always be a changed life, growth in the image of Jesus. The other three hearts produce no fruit, and so we conclude that they were never born again. Because all *true* believers will bear at least *some* spiritual fruit. After all, this is Mark’s definition of saving faith: hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit.

**21-25** – *And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” 24 And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 25 For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”*

So how about it – Do you have ears to hear the words of Jesus today? Is your heart a receptive soil bed for the gospel? If not, please realize these words of Jesus are not only a warning to you, but also a message of hope. Because you see, the great thing about God’s grace is that *He* is the gardener who can change your heart-soil!

He can take out the hard heart, the hot heart, the half heart, and give you a whole heart. He can plow up the tough soil, remove the underlying rock layers, weed out the distractions, and give you a first-rate topsoil heart, fertilized with the energy of the Holy Spirit!

Then 2<sup>nd</sup>, whether in the fields of the farmer or the Father, a bumper crop is only possible because of the **REMARKABLE**, life-giving power of a simple **SEED**. Two more brief farming parables highlight this truth:

**26-29** – *And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”*

Here Jesus emphasizes the natural, organic process of growth. We might have expected Him to say that the kingdom of God is like a shimmering mountain peak or a crimson sunset. We’d like to get our cameras and take a picture of something like that! But instead He compares the kingdom of God to a simple seed. A seed is not spectacular; no one gets out their camera to take a picture of a seed growing! It grows slowly, imperceptibly, while the farmer goes about his daily life.

Even if the farmer is absent, the soil produces *by itself* – the Greek word He uses is *automate*, from which we get our English word *automatic*. The seed contains within itself a power of generation and an orderly systematic process of growth - *first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear*. Remarkable!

**30-34** - *And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” 33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. 34 He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.*

So in this final parable, Jesus again compares the kingdom of God to a seed, but this time it’s a mustard seed, which was the proverbially smallest seed of Palestine – microscopic in size, yet it growing into a shrub large enough for birds to rest in it.

So if the previous parable emphasizes the natural process of growth, this parable emphasizes the dramatic contrast between the start and finish. You would never guess that such impressive results could come from such small beginnings. This of course is the history of the church... and it is also *your* story, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

*You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God (1 Peter 1:23)*. A physical seed is truly an amazing thing, but it can’t compare to the miraculous life-giving power which is inherent in the Word of God!

As **Pastor Colin Smith** points out, sometimes we might wish Jesus would have given us the parable of the bomber instead of the sower – where a certain pilot goes out to drop his bombs, because then the results would be immediate and consistent and impressive.

But Christ is telling us that the will of God gets done in people’s lives not by earth-shattering explosions but by the quiet teaching of the Word of God. It will be like a farmer sowing seed. The seed will not grow everywhere, and it will take some time, but where the soil is ready to receive it, this remarkable seed will produce an abundant harvest.

We might find this frustrating. We would like to see our culture transformed right now, but the problem with sowing seed is that it takes patience. It's not very spectacular like the dropping of a bomb, and things don't look a lot different when you're finished sowing than they did when you started.

If you teach Sunday School or help with Kids for Christ, if you pray with your children at home, or if you share a word of encouragement with a friend, you may sometimes wonder if your efforts make any difference at all. Remember that you are sowing seed.

Jesus made it clear that a great deal of the seed is unproductive. But the Word of God is living seed, and where that Word takes root, there will be a harvest! So keep sowing God's truth whenever you can. Keep putting it out there, and God will bring the results. God has called us to plant seeds, not to drop bombs. Sowing takes humility and faithfulness, but it is something that with His help we can do.

So this morning, if your heart has not been receptive soil for the Word of God, cry out to Him for a new heart. Step inside the kingdom of God, where all of us can be farmers! We might not make a million dollars – but the retirement plan is out of this world, when by the grace of God, we share in the eternal harvest, as fellow-laborers with the Lord Jesus Christ. *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*