

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

◆**Intro:** Years ago when we first moved to Iowa, I was curious about how farmers planted so many acres so quickly. A farmer friend, Tim, offered to introduce me to the modern techniques. He explained that his planter, pulled by the tractor, cut the soil and actually blew a seed at a time into the earth through a tube. He invited me to stand on the hitch and watch it in process, which I did. Off we went, bobbing and grinding across the sunny Iowa landscape. I didn't see much, really. Mostly a cloud of dust that quickly obliterated the sun and any view of the tractor. Mostly I was just hanging on and hoping not to get planted myself! The accuracy of today's GPS coordinated equipment is partly why the parable in our text today is so shocking to us. Nobody scatters seeds aimlessly today in hopes that they grow. Scientists like my son study the plant DNA, engineer healthy plants whose seeds are expertly planted every so many inches at an exact depth. There is very little accident. We wouldn't think of scattering seed in places they wouldn't grow. So the fact that God scatters his Word that way is a bit unusual. Why doesn't he zero in on the good soil alone? Yet story after story that Jesus tells points to God's universal and indiscriminate spreading of his truth. (In one story, tares (a weed) are allowed to grow among the wheat. In another fishnets gather in both the good and bad of the sea for later sorting. In our text seed is scattered on four different varieties of soil.) God seems to operate over a vast array of good and bad.

◆So what is this parable telling us? Is Jesus merely observing that some folks listen and learn while others do not? And if that is so, what's the point of saying so? It is often pointed out that one of the best ways to read a

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

parable is to find yourself in it. So lets look at the soils and evaluate ourselves by what we see.

◆1. Am I willing to be tilled?

◆ We're looking now at the hardened soil. And the question before us is, "Is this me?" Or at the very least, "How am I like this? Am I hard soil?" The packed earth, the beaten deer trail, rootless, smooth and hard, leading from one scenic overlook to another, or along a stream. The part of the lawn you tried to seed in the Spring but that remained grassless because the kids have a swing hovering there and they constantly trod the earth into a hard, un-aerated layer.

◆ In spiritual terms, the packed soil is the untouchable sort of person. The impervious one. The one unmoved by the truth of God. Nothing breaks in on them. They are not touched by a stirring message, though others around them may weep. They watch reports of tragic family life on television, yet feel nothing, react not at all, except to wonder if there are anymore pretzels. Explicit horror in story or film does not unease them, much less shock their sensibilities. Uncertainties do not make them nervous. Their loved one may die, but they may not feel compelled to attend the funeral. They honestly do not think much about what comes after this life. For that matter they don't think much of this life either.

◆ These folks might know there must be a God, but God doesn't attract them much. They have a slippery silicon surface, a waxed waterway to which little can stick. They hear about God's ways of generosity and compassion, but it's hard to muster a smile, much

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

more so a gift. These are folk who don't look you in the eye when they talk because they don't feel a lot, or connect much.

◆B. How does this happen, we might ask? And the answer is that people are just like the soil. Usually we become packed and hard by the weight that has walked over us and the lies we believe. It take time and lots of foot prints.

◆1) Pains have come, but have never been dealt with. People have hurt us, but we pretend we're strong and it doesn't matter. We think we just put it out of our minds. Talking about it would show weakness, so we close down inside which is worse than weakness in the end. Add to that that the news is negative. The government is going to the dogs. The media is one-sided. The rich just get richer while the poor get poorer. There is so much that is not as it should be in the world we know. How do we assess all this that we see?

◆2) The hard soil folk are those who listen to Satan's messages instead of God's.

◆Verse 15 says "Satan comes and takes away the Word that was sown in them." How does he do that? By telling us other things: a) God's word may disturb your conscience, but Satan tells you that it's exaggeration, and that sin is not really so deadly as God says it is; b) a God who punishes or has wrath is unenlightened and outdated; go ahead and be whatever you feel you are. God makes no judgements; c) how much can you really trust the Word of God anyway? Science contests

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

everything in it; d) preachers are only in it for the money; e) the church is full of hypocrites;

◆ We believe these lies and what happens to us? We develop poor character because of our painful circumstances and our misinterpretations of the world. Afraid that people don't care about us, we may unconsciously monopolize every conversation, speaking louder than everyone else. Everyone knows it but us. Or, disappointed by life, we may back away behind our masks, sharing nothing at all; pleasant on the outside, distant on the inside. No relationship. Consumed by our own interests or hobbies. Escaping sorrows into addictions, or knowledge. Skeptical of everyone's intentions. Confident that our feelings and opinions have a higher degree of accuracy than all those around us. Satan has helped us become proud and hard, and un-listening, packed.

◆ C. What I don't want us to miss here, is that Jesus' parable is an invitation to evaluate. Are you becoming packed soil? Of course, good soil is best. It produces life! But the question is, would you be open to becoming good soil? If so, you must be willing to be tilled. Some non-Christians are hard soil, expecting very little, disappointed very much. God has things to tell you but it might require breaking up your ground. Some God-followers go through hard-soil times. They know of God, but their life is fruitless because they avoid every attempt at tilling it. Oh we try to fill it, but we avoid any tilling (help, change, learning) True filling of life comes only with careful tilling of the soul as well.

◆ If we see any packed soil in ourselves the solution will not come until we submit to the Master Gardener. God allows us to cooperate

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

with him, you see. He does not require us to like suffering. He does not like suffering. But if we will be fruitful we will have to change our response to trouble and believe God's bigger, sovereign hand is better in the end. Your soil can soften as you chose to trust God in small ways, and be open to following him through pain. No one changes who will not chose to do so. No one changes who will not seek to mature. No one softens who refuses to admit her hardness exists. But God is offering you fruitfulness.

◆ *“For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is short-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,” 2 Peter 1:5-10, NIV.*

◆ To often you and I wait around expecting to become fruitful without breaking up any soil! Peter advises us to “make every effort.” What effort are you making?

◆ OK, on to another type of soil that the Word of God wants to be planted in. The rocky soil. and the question before us is...

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

◆2. Will I send up shoots, or send down roots?

◆Does anyone remember Flintstone Jawbreakers? Does anyone own a leisure suit? Remember these (show bellbottoms). Or these (show heelys). These were all hot times at one time.



Everybody wanted them! But nobody wants them

now. The shallow soil is the wishy-washy person



pushed by the wave of the day.

◆The shallow-rocky soil is the fad-following soil. It is a veneer of humus over solid bedrock, or pockets of earth in boulder territory. In spiritual terms its the opportunist God-follower. God is cool as long as the sun is shining! If the emotions are high, if I'm not in the hospital, if my paycheck is secure. This type is receptive to God doing miracles, and giving immediate answers to prayer. But should God say "Wait", or "No" this one will hit the road, whither, or pass out. When stock prices bottom out or he breaks a leg, God is the last person on his mind. If he does come to mind, it might be in anger. Folks like the fair-weather soil are often church people who have started out with God and have given up on him because things didn't go their way exactly. God was to the rocky soil person a tool that was supposed to grant them successes.

◆B. So then, do you see any fair-weather soil in yourself? Is there a way we merely seek to use God, versus serve God? Realize that to last you need roots. Trees can even grow on rocky slopes, but only if they send down roots. And roots take time. They don't happen overnight. Shoots can happen overnight. Not roots. You cannot cram for the exam when it comes to the character of your soul and the impact of God's Word. That means

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

we need time and effort. We need to *wait* on the Lord to renew strength. Waiting takes time and practice. This is where the practice of spiritual disciplines comes in: intentional time set aside (sabbath) to attend to God and to talk with him. To listen to his leading (reading and studying the Word). Memorizing scripture. Making time for small group life. Fasting from food, or media, or the phone, or hobbies to make time for God. You know about these, we've discussed them frequently around here. What are you doing to build spiritual rootedness into your life?



◆ Third soil. The weedy soil. And our question is, as you may have noticed, similar in nature to the others, isn't it?

◆3. Will I admit my need to weed?

◆ This is another type of field. Its got the crop a little, but it also has other occupants beside the good seed: milkweed, thistle, dandelion -you name it. Oh it has corn stalks alright, but something is wrong; there's just no corn on those leafy poles. Oh there are tomato plants in the garden, alright. Just very few tomatoes! That's because the weeds are as high as the garden plants, and they suck up the rain, and nutrients too!

◆ A. The spiritual weedy plot is the person who has one part listening to God, and one part listening to the world. He's distracted. One ear here, one ear there, resulting in no ears of corn. Lots of foliage. Lots of silage. Not much of a crop. He's like a man talking to his neighbor through the car window, while standing in the street. He can't give his friend his full attention because he is obligated to watch the road for moving vehicles. So while he has a superficial conversation, he also creates road rage in the

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

mild-mannered soccer mom with the crying baby in the back seat. This plot of land is like the mother trying to get dressed while eying her infant precariously close to the edge of the bed. She's getting her toes caught in her hoes because she's hurrying, balancing, and hopping toward junior all at the same time.

◆B. Sometimes we are like this spiritually, aren't we? We dab in God's paint. It looks colorful. But we haven't put the brush to the canvas yet. There are finances to worry about. School to finish. Dreams to purchase... first. I know of one man who's been telling his friend for 13 years that he's "almost ready" to try church! He wanted to get the kids out of the house, the money situation stable, you know... Like others, he sees God and his Word of promise to be another thing to add to the "to do" list: get a good paying job. Save money. Go on vacations. Buy a house and a boat. Collect guns, or coins, or tools, or whatever. Have a family. Get the kids through school. Buy. Sell. Go to church once in a while...

◆Listen, God has no intention of being on your list of interests. This is God we're talking about. He is the list. He holds the list. He allows the list to exist. He's in or above every item on the list. Your life is about his plans for you, and my life is about his plans for me. Listening and talking with him (The Word) is the whole point of you walking this planet. Nothing less than that. That's the Bible's message.

◆C. Are you willing to do some weeding in your life? Again, Jesus' parable is not intended, I think, to make us just label which soil we happen to be. The story is his invitation for us to become good soil that produces bumper

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

crops! Now if we stay cluttered by the cares of the world, we might look leafy, but we'll be spiritually fruitless. The weeds of our self-image, achievement, or success all preoccupy us from noticing the actions of God in the world he made or hearing his voice in our own spirit. God and church are just tasks we do with all the other ones. What is it you are making your priority? Jesus invites you to make God's Word your priority.

◆ Harrison Ford, one of the most successful actors in the history of Hollywood said, "You only want what you ain't got." When asked what he doesn't have (and he has a lot!), he said, "Peace. And I hope to find it when I die."

◆ Verse 19 says that the thorns are the "lies of wealth" and the "desire for other things." Listen folks, God can weed our gardens. But we must cooperate. We have to be willing to pull things out of our lives for the sake of a better crop. We have to decide to place limits, and draw lines for ourselves. What is competing for the fruit in your garden? At better moments we realize our life is not our life, but God's garden. When we live that way, crop will come. But along the line it starts to feel like "our" garden, our life. And our concerns change: how good am I at being a Christian (instead of how good is God to me); how well am I doing at raising admirable children (instead of "are my children walking with God?");

◆ God can help you weed your garden by confession of sin, conscious choosing of his laws and paths. What are you putting into or taking out of your soil? Think of it as your time. Be evaluating your life before him in daily prayer, not prayers by rote memory but conversational prayer. Prayer

TEST PLOTS AND CROPS, MARK 4:1-20

Parables: Stories with a Secret #1

where we wonder with God, “What needs weeding in my daily practice, Lord?”

◆ **Conclusion:** The goal of the parable is not merely to comment on who is what in this world. It is to encourage us to want to become good soil. The story is his invitation for us to become soil that produces bumper crops! And a bumper crop it is! The normal yield in Palestine would have been 7.5x what was sown. Ten times would be fantastic. Jesus promise of 30/60/100 is nothing short of promising miraculous results from opening your heart to the Word of God.

◆ So, what are you working on? For some it's their body and fitness. Other's work on their bank account. Others define success in achievement. But Jesus story suggest we look at the crop that is our soul. There, a posture of submission, trust, and repentance go a long way. We have an advantage. We can hear the parable from the vantage point of Easter. The one speaking is the Risen Lord, to live for and with him is to really live. Ask him to into your heart. Ask him to work your field of soul. Ask him into everything.