

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 8/15/04 Brad Brandt

Mark 4:1-20 "Four Kinds of People in the Pews"*

Main Idea: There are four kinds of people in the pews today listening to God's Word, four kinds of hearts. According to Jesus' teaching in Mark 4:1-20 it was no different in His day.

I. Jesus told parables (1-9).

A. A farmer sowed seed (3).

B. The seed fell in four kinds of soil (4-8).

1. The first three produced no lasting fruit.

2. The fourth produced lasting fruit.

II. Jesus told the reason for the parables (10-12).

A. He told them to *reveal* truth.

B. He told them to *conceal* truth.

1. If you don't know the King, His kingdom is off limits.

2. If you want to understand kingdom truth, you must receive the King.

III. Jesus told the meaning of a parable (13-20).

A. There are people with hard hearts (15).

1. This person hears the Word.

2. This person loses the Word.

B. There are people with shallow hearts (16-17).

1. Trials will strengthen a true believer.

2. The same trials will expose an imitation believer.

C. There are people with crowded hearts (18-19).

1. This person "adds Jesus" to his life.

2. In reality, this person still loves something more than Jesus.

D. There are people with prepared hearts (20).

1. This person hears God's Word.

2. This person retains God's Word.

3. This person keeps exhibiting the fruit of God's Word.

Make It Personal: What happens when I hear God's Word?

There are four kinds of people in the pews. I'm not talking about age categories, or gender or social distinctions, either. I'm talking about heart conditions that people bring with them to the pews when they hear God's Word.

Most of us will spend a lot of time in the pews in our lifetime. As a pastor I see pews from a slightly different perspective than most, having the wonderful and undeserved privilege to preach the Word from the pulpit each week. But over the years I've sat in the pews as well. I figured it up that with four years worth of daily college chapels and then another four years of seminary chapels, that's well over 1,000 times of sitting in the pews under the teaching of God's Word. Have many sermons have you heard in your lifetime?

I'd like to share a personal observation, one I've made from the perspective of the pews and the pulpit. *When it comes to hearing God's Word, not everyone is hearing that is hearing.* You say, "What in the world does that mean!" Simply this. Just because I've "heard" a sermon doesn't mean I've really *heard* it. To put it another way, just because I *heard* last week's sermon doesn't mean I'm really *hearing* this week's.

The reason is this. When it comes to hearing sermons, the most vital organ isn't your ear. It's your *heart*. The ear can be working quite well, but that doesn't mean you will hear God's Word well. The key to hearing goes much deeper, all the way to the *heart*.

So I repeat. There are four kinds of people in the pews today listening to God's Word, for indeed, there are four kinds of hearts. That's not just my opinion based on personal observation, either. It's what Jesus taught in Mark 4:1-20.

What's the right way to listen to God's Word? We'll find out this morning. There are three movements in the text.

I. Jesus told parables (1-9).

Verse 1—"Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge."

Jesus is now about half way through His three year public ministry. Mark mentions another crowd has gathered. That's significant. Jesus' popularity was soaring. Curious crowds poured in to see and hear Him. He couldn't escape the multitudes. Wherever He went there were throngs of people longing to be with Him.

Note the first word, "*Again* Jesus began to teach by the lake." It's not the first time He taught by the lake (3:7) and it won't be the last. Due to crowd size and the opposition of the religious leaders, Jesus can't minister in the synagogues any longer as He did previously.

Please note that Jesus was open to new methods. When the door shut to the synagogue, He took His preaching ministry to the open air. The message never changes, but the methods must. Some of us resist this. Barclay gives an example:

"John Wesley was for many years a faithful and orthodox servant of the Church of England. Down in Bristol his friend George Whitefield was preaching to the miners, to as many as twenty thousand of them at a time, in the open air; and his hearers were being converted by the hundred. He sent for John Wesley. Wesley said, 'I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit.' The whole business of open air preaching rather offended him. He himself said, 'I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way—having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.' But Wesley saw that field preaching won souls and said, 'I cannot argue against a matter of fact.'"

Jesus was the Master at making the most of teachable moments. It was quite a scene. The Lord was in a floating pulpit with a huge crowd packed on the shore to hear Him. We see another change in methodology in verse 2.

Verse 2—"He taught them many things by parables." It wasn't His first parable (we saw Jesus use parables last time in 3:23), but it marked a significant increase in the use of parables. We'll be looking at one this morning, but Mark makes it clear Jesus taught *many* truths using *many* parables. Mark 4 records at least four parables. In the parallel account of Matthew 13, there are at least six. Altogether you'll find 30+ parables in the synoptic gospels.

Yes, Jesus used parables. But why? For starters, it got people's attention. Keep in mind, open air preaching is different from conventional preaching. In the synagogue people are pretty much forced to listen all the way to the end—even if you disagree with the preacher you seldom get up and leave in the middle of his message. But in the open air people are free to walk away at any time. And that's what they'll do unless the preacher grabs their attention—and holds it.

It's hard to walk away from a story. Here's one of the best. We commonly refer to it as the parable of the "sower," but the story really is not so much about the sower as the soil. More accurately, it's the parable of the *four soils*, for as we'll see, the problem in the story is not with the sower. Nor with the seed. The problem

lies with the soil.

Verse 3—"Listen! [Jesus began by quieting the mass of people on the shore, "Listen up!"] A farmer went out to sow his seed." Note the action...

A. A farmer sowed seed (3). Farmers in Jesus' day didn't use John Deere tractors. In this story, a common first century farmer used the primitive method of farming. He broadcasted his seed. He had a sack of seed over his shoulder, and he walked through the field. As he went he scattered the kernels of grain all over the ground.

What happened to the seed? According to Jesus...

B. The seed fell in four kinds of soil (4-8). Verse 4—"As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path [KJV, 'by the wayside'], and the birds came and ate it up."

Picture the scenery. There's a field. Around the field, and perhaps through the field were walking paths. People trampled on these paths. So did their wagons and animals.

What did the traffic do to the soil on the walking paths? It packed it down, and made it hard. So hard that what happened to the seed that fell there? It could not penetrate the soil, and thus could never germinate. Jesus said it simply became bird feed.

Verse 5—"Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow." The second type of soil is rather deceptive. It's "stony ground," as the KJV puts it. There's soil, but not much. From the surface it looks okay. You see dirt. But what you don't see is that the topsoil is only an inch deep. That's enough room for a seed to germinate, but it's not enough room for the plant to establish its root system.

Soon the plants popped their heads out of the rocky ground. Did they last? No. Why not? Verse 6—"But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root." No root, no fruit. Keep this in mind. *Fruitage is always a matter of rootage.*

Verse 7—"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain."

I remember planting a garden when I was in the sixth grade. I was all excited. I worked the soil. I marked out the rows. I dropped in the seed. That was in the Spring. Baseball was also in the Spring. So were a lot of other things I liked to do. Guess what happened to the garden after a couple of months? You guessed it. You could barely see the plants for the forest of weeds. And the weeds choked the life out of the plants.

Seed doesn't have a chance if you don't get rid of the weeds. The problem is not with the seed. The seed will germinate, take root, and even start to grow. But the weeds will actually sap the life out of the good plants.

But there is a happy ending to the story. Verse 8—"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

Finally! There was no fruit from the packed soil, or rocky soil, or thorny soil. But some of the farmer's seed landed on good soil. And what was the result? A crop, thirty, sixty, even one hundred times more than was sown!

To summarize the results of the four soils...

1. *The first three produced no lasting fruit.* The second and third showed some initial promise, there was

some growth, but no lasting fruit.

2. *The fourth produced lasting fruit.* Lots of fruit, up to a 100-fold increase.

At which point Jesus concluded the story with these words in verse 9, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

You say, "That's interesting, but what's the point?" Actually, that's what Jesus' disciples wanted to know and that brings us to the second movement in Mark's text.

II. Jesus told the reason for the parables (10-12).

Verse 10—"When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him [note the two groups: the Twelve, that is the apostles; and "others around Him," referring it seems to other disciples of Jesus that Mark distinguishes from the Twelve] asked him about the parables." Don't miss the plural "parables." Jesus had spoken other parables, too. Mark gives the abridged account. Jesus' answer to follow has to do with the purpose of parables in general, not simply the purpose of the parable of the four soils. "Why do you speak in parables, Jesus?"

Verses 11-12—"He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" "

Wessel acknowledges, "These verses are among the most difficult in the entire Gospel." Why did Jesus talk in parables? The answer has to do with what Jesus calls "the secret of God's kingdom." The word translated "secret" is *mysterion*. It appears only here (and in the parallel accounts of Matt 13:11 and Luke 8:10) in the Gospels, but Paul uses it twenty-one times in his epistles. And John uses it four times in the Book of the Revelation. Don't think of "mystery" in the sense of some Agatha Christie mystery novel. It basically refers, again citing Wessel, to "God's disclosure to man of what was previously unknown. It is proclaimed to all, but only those who have faith really understand."

Jesus said He told parables for two reasons.

A. He told them to **reveal** truth. What's more...

B. He told them to **conceal** truth. Listen to His words again, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you." Who is *you*? Jesus' followers. Those who have followed Jesus are entitled to this kingdom truth. And don't miss the passive verb, "has been given to you." In other words, you didn't seek it or earn it. It was given to you on the basis of the sovereign and gracious purposes of God (remember 3:13).

Conversely, "To those on the outside [that's those who haven't followed Jesus and are thus on the outside of His kingdom] everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

You say, "Jesus makes it sound like there are some people He doesn't want to understand this truth." Indeed. He's not interested in giving people further truth about His kingdom if they don't intend to heed it.

Yes, Jesus told parables for two reasons, to *reveal* kingdom truth, but also to *conceal* it. The Master told stories like the one we're considering to *reveal* kingdom truth to His followers and to *conceal* the same truth from those who refused to follow Him. We might say that "talking in parables" is kind of like "talking in riddles." Those who possess the key *get it*. Those who don't possess the key *don't get it*.

You say, "What's the key?" It's not *what*, but *who*. Simply put...

1. *If you don't know the King, His kingdom is off limits.* The key to the kingdom is Jesus the Christ.
2. *If you want to understand kingdom truth, you must receive the King.* He's the key to parables. He's the key to life itself.

Matthew Henry put it this way, "A parable is a shell that keeps good fruit for the diligent but keeps it from the slothful." That's helpful. So does this observation by R. Alan Cole, "His parables are designed to test rather than to illuminate, and to test, not the intelligence, but the spiritual responsiveness of His hearers."

Now we're ready for the climax, the third movement of our passage.

III. Jesus told the meaning of a parable (13-20).

Verse 13—"Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word."

Every parable basically contains one focal point or one key lesson. The parable of the four soils is the foundation to all the others for it shows who is in the kingdom and who isn't.

Verse 14—"The farmer sows the word." In the story, the seed represents the Word of God. Who does the farmer represent? Although Jesus doesn't say explicitly, the farmer is the messenger who proclaims the Word.

What do the soils represent? They illustrate different responses to the Word. There are four types of soil which represent four types of hearers representing four types of people.

Warning: You are about to see a picture of your heart. One of the following responses is true of you. Which is it? Here are the options. Sitting in pews this morning, first of all...

A. There are people with hard hearts (15). "Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them."

First of all, notice please that all four people in Jesus' story "hear" the Word (15, 16, 18, 20). They all hear the same words. They all hear the same message of Christ.

How is it that two people can hear the same message preached from the Word of God, and one respond in faith and the other in ridicule? Is the problem with the message? No. The problem deals with the condition of the heart.

Jesus says that two things are true of the first type of respondent

1. *This person hears the Word.*
2. *This person loses the Word.* What went wrong? He heard the Word, yes, but then what? In the parallel account of Matthew 13:19 we find a clue: "He understands it not." And as a result here's what happened—verse 15 again, "Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them."

He hears and loses the Word. What's the first hearer's problem? He never allowed God's Word to penetrate his heart. He's got a hard-heart.

This is the person who hears the Word, but it makes no logical sense to him. Do you know anybody like that? Have you ever shared Christ with an intellectual skeptic? "Prove to me that the Bible is true, and I'll believe it. Prove to me there is a God, and I'll consider what you have to say. Just prove it."

This is also the person who says, "I'm satisfied with my life the way it is. If this 'Jesus-stuff' works for you, fine. Just don't bother me." That's the hard-hearted person.

By the way, can God reach a hard-hearted person? Absolutely! The fact is, every one of us enters this world with a heart that's callused to the things of God. But God in His grace is in the business of melting hard hearts. There's a second type of hearer...

B. There are people with shallow hearts (16-17). "Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."

There are fossilized people—that's the hard-hearted. Then there are fickle people, the shallow-hearted. Shallow-hearted people tend to be impulsive. You can talk them into anything—and out of it, too.

It's like the Fitness Center syndrome. On December 31 your friend urges you to buy a membership at the Fitness Center. "We can work out together. It'll be good for our health." "Great idea!" you conclude. So you work out three times the first week of January, twice the second week, once the third week, skip the next week, and then conclude, "I'm just not the fitness type."

The world is full of shallow-hearted folks. They go to church, hear the Word of God, and are emotionally touched. They shed a few tears and quickly announce, "That's what I want. I want to follow Jesus."

You've seen them. They walk the aisle the first week, join the church the next week, sign up for a ministry the following, and are gung ho for Christ. But it lasts for about a month, or maybe two. Then they're gone.

What's the problem? They're shallow-hearted. They have no root. They made an emotional decision, but never grasped what real repentance and belief in Christ involve.

Arthur Pink hit the nail on the head with this observation, "Sadly most modern evangelistic efforts appeal to produce this type of hearer. The bright singing, the sentimentality of the hymns, the preacher's appeal to the emotions, the demand of churches for quick results produce nothing but superficial returns! Sinners are urged to make a prompt 'decision', then are assured that all is well with them. The poor soul leaves with a false joy."

When I lived in Israel one of my jobs was to work in the date plantation. One day our Israeli foreman took us to a field where we saw a most interesting sight. There was a row of tall, date trees, but the trees had uprooted. A storm had come and toppled the trees, and there they were--lying on the ground.

We asked what happened. In his broken English our Israeli boss told us this variety of tree had been imported, and had one vital flaw--a weak root system.

So it is with the shallow-hearted listener. He hears God's Word, and even responds to it emotionally. He "receives the word with joy." That's not saving faith but a deficient sort of emotionally based assent.

But the bottom line is this. Jesus says he has *no root*.

Now what is it that reveals his root system deficiency? The answer is one word—*trials*. Jesus says that when "trouble or persecution comes" he quickly falls away.

You see, trials are indicators. When trials come one of two things happens.

1. *Trials will strengthen a true believer.* That's what James 1:2-4 says. And...

2. *The same trials will expose an imitation believer.* It's true. Trials will draw a true believer closer to Jesus Christ. But what do the same trials do to a shallow-hearted hearer? They drive him away from the Lord.

Have you ever met someone who said, "I tried that Christianity stuff, but it didn't work."? What's that person's problem? He's got a shallow perspective of Christianity, if not a shallow-heart.

I was a teenager when I saw this firsthand. Three of my buddies came to an outreach event one Saturday, and there they heard about Jesus Christ. At the end of the service they each made a "decision" to accept Christ as their Savior.

I was thrilled! All three were invited to join us for church the next day. Only one came. And after a couple of months he, too, was gone.

What was the problem? I learned a valuable lesson and here it is. It's possible to *profess* Christ and not *possess* Christ.

As Jesus warned years ago, there are people with hard hearts. And there are people with shallow hearts. Thirdly...

C. There are people with crowded hearts (18-19). "Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."

The crowded-heart hearer is the most baffling to me, and for this reason. Matthew's parallel account says this third type of listener "becomes unfruitful [as the KJV renders it; Matt 13:22]."

Ponder that. According to Jesus, some people will hear His Word, and make a 'decision' to receive His Word. To use contemporary terms, they may even shed tears at the altar in front of a church, or sign a card indicating they've prayed the sinner's prayer. Why, they may even go through a new members' class and join a church.

Now, if a person "becomes unfruitful," what does that imply about the person? You could see fruit in his life... for awhile. He looked like a Christian...for awhile.

Until what? Verse 19 says until he yielded to three influences: "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things."

What's the problem with hearer #3? He's got a crowded heart. He's a camellian kind of person. He's easily influenced by the world around him. He came to Jesus for the wrong reason. He never grasped the fact that becoming a Christian involves a radical reordering of your priorities. He was willing to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, but rejected Him as Lord. In short...

1. *This person "adds Jesus" to his life.* However...

2. *In reality, this person still loves something more than Jesus.*

Dear friend, know this. Becoming a Christian involves more than an intellectual or emotional 'decision'. It requires genuine repentance.

One of the most effective evangelistic preachers in the 1800's was Charles Spurgeon. Listen to what Spurgeon said in his book, *The Soul Winner*. "If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be repented of, and his conversion is a fiction. Not only action and language, but spirit and temper must be changed..."

Which raises the question. Was the crowded-heart hearer ever really saved? For that matter, what about the shallow-hearted person?

I'm convinced that the following insight by Jonathan Edwards is right on, "It follows that if there is no real and lasting change in people who think they are converted, their religion is worthless, whatever their experiences may be. Conversion is the turning of the whole man from sin to God... What, then, shall we make of a person who says he has experienced conversion, but whose religious emotions die away, leaving him much the same person as he was before? He seems as selfish, worldly, foolish, perverse, and un-Christian as ever. This speaks against him louder than any religious experience can speak for him."

I'm concerned. There are a lot of "thorny-soil" people in our country. They've professed Christ, for sure. They say they love Christ, indeed, but the fact is they love something more than Christ. And that which they love—*this life, wealth, and the desires for other things*—in the end chokes the Word right out of them.

Someone will say, "Well, he may be backslidden, but he's still a Christian." Are you sure? John says, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15)." James says, "The friendship of the world is enmity with God (James 4:4)." Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24)."

The farmer's not doing too well, is he? He's zero for three so far, no harvest yet. That's about to change. Thankfully, although there are people sitting in pews today with hard hearts, shallow hearts, and crowded hearts, we have reason to hope.

D. There are people with prepared hearts (20). "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

What's the difference between the person with the hard-heart, the shallow-heart, the crowded-heart, and the prepared-heart? All of them "hear" the Word. Three out of four "receive" the Word. But something is different about listener #4. Three things are true of the fourth listener.

1. *This person hears God's Word.*
2. *This person retains God's Word.*
3. *This person keeps exhibiting the fruit of God's Word.*

What is fruit? Fruit is the visible evidence that the Word of God has taken root in a person's heart. People with prepared hearts not only hear the Word. They hold fast to it. They appropriate it. Through thick and thin. Throughout their lives.

Beloved, the gospel is an amazing story. God is King, and this is His world. He created mankind to live for His honor, but the first man rebelled against Him.

That's why this world is such a mess. People go their own way instead of God's way. And consequently, they are living under the deserved wrath of God.

Which is what makes the Cross so astounding. At the Cross, Jesus died as a substitute for sinners. He took upon Himself the penalty of sin, the conquered death three days later. Today God in His grace promises to forgive all who will repent of their sins and receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.

But who benefits from this offer? The person with a hard heart doesn't. But neither does the person with a shallow heart. Nor does the crowded-heart hearer. Only those whose hearts the Spirit has prepared do.

O friend, listen to Jesus words. Lots of people hear the Word. But only one out of four hearers in the story

responded in the right way. Only one brought forth fruit. Only one persevered. Only one is fit for the kingdom. Does that describe you?

And by the way, there's a secondary application here. Even category #4 people, those who know Christ, can at times listen to the Word with hearts that are hard, or shallow, or crowded.

"I don't care what the Bible says. I'm not going to forgive her after what she did to me," Sally mumbled to herself at the close of the sermon on forgiveness. What is that but a hard heart? Fellow Christian, do you ever come to church with a hard heart?

"I'll sing in the choir today, and I might even work in the nursery, but I sure don't feel like listening to a sermon. I've got too much on my mind." What kind of heart is that? Jesus said, "When trouble comes they—the shallow hearted—quickly fall away."

Bill closed his Bible after the missionary finished his Sunday School lesson. A battle raged within, "Wow. I could give to that's AID's project in Africa. I should give. But then I won't be able to buy that RV. Oh well, maybe some other time." What did Jesus say? The "desire for other things" comes in and "chokes the Word." The crowded heart.

There's a lesson here for Christians, too. Whenever you sit in a pew, ask the Lord for a *prepared* heart, a heart that is tender to hear and respond to His Word.

So there they are, four types of hearers. There are *hard* hearts, *shallow* hearts, *crowded* hearts, and finally, *prepared* hearts.

Which describes you? Be honest. How are you responding to the Word of God right now in your life?

Make It Personal: What happens when I hear God's Word?