

Mark 4:1-20 "Get Your Heart Ready to Get in the Book"^{**1}

Main Idea: In Mark 4:1-20 we're going to learn from Jesus the importance of getting your heart ready to get in the Book. There are three points to the text, which will lead to the observation that there are people with four kinds of hearts listening to the Word. There is also a lesson here for us as believers, for there are four ways we can read and listen to God's Word.

- I. Jesus told a parable about the Word (1-9).
 - A. A farmer sowed seed (3).
 - B. The seed fell in four kinds of soil (4-8).
- II. Jesus told the reason for the parable about the Word (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 first receive the King.
- III. Jesus applied the parable about the Word (13-20).
 - A. Some people receive the Word with hard hearts (15).
 - B. Some people receive the Word with shallow hearts (16-17).
 - C. Some people receive the Word with crowded hearts (18-19).
 - D. Some people receive the Word with prepared hearts (20).

Make It Personal: Take steps to get your heart ready to get in the Book.

1. Sing a song like, "I Need Thee Every Hour."
2. Read/quote/sing/pray a psalm like Psalm 59:16-17 and Psalm 139:23-24.
3. Read/listen to God's Word.
4. As you are taking in the Word, look for one main truth that stands out.
5. Pray in light of what you have learned.
6. By God's grace, live in light of what you have just read/heard.
7. Learn from what others have learned from God's Word.

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Mark 4:1-9

Get in the Book! That was last Sunday's sermon from 2 Timothy 3:14-17. We need to be in the Book every day and under the Book whenever the church gathers and opens the Book. Why? Because of the vital part God has orchestrated the Book to have in our salvation (14-15), our sanctification (16), and our service (17).

But...it's possible to read the Bible every day and never miss a sermon or Bible study at church, and not get what the Lord intends from the Book.

Something's missing. Something that Jesus talked about in a parable He taught in the text before us.

Get Your Heart Ready to Get in the Book. That's this morning's message. The condition of our heart is vital to what happens when we get in the Book.

Let's hit the pause button on our 2 Timothy series and go to Mark 4:1-20. It's there we're going to learn from Jesus the importance of getting our hearts ready before we get in the Book. There are three points to this text, which will show us there are people with four kinds of hearts listening to the Word.

It's an evangelistic parable. But it also speaks to a vital reality for believers, too, for there are four ways we can read and listen to God's Word. And they each have to do with what's going on in our heart.

Friends, I want you to get in the Book. But know this. When it comes to getting in the Book, the most vital organ isn't your eye that you read with, or your ear that you listen to your audio Bible with. It's your *heart*. Unless your heart is prepared, you will not benefit from the Book as God intends.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous development of this text, see the sermon preached as a part of a series in Mark on 8/15/04.

Now to our text, point one.

I. Jesus told a parable about the Word (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 methodology. So when the door shut to the synagogue, He took His preaching ministry to the open air. The message never changes, but the methods must.²

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 (Jesus used parables 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, or as we’ll see, the *heart*.

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...

² 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.’” Barclay, p. 84.

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. *Fruitage is always a matter of rootage.*³

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 that point Jesus concluded His story with this exhortation in verse 9. He began by saying, "Listen!" (verse 3). And now concludes by saying, "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 point two in Mark's text.

³ Observation by J. D. Jones, p. 93-4.

II. Jesus told the reason for the parable about the Word (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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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.”

I think that *is* what He is saying. He’s not interested in giving people more truth about His kingdom if they don’t intend to heed it.

So Jesus said He 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*.

And what’s the key? Actually, it’s not *what*, but *who*.

1. *If you don’t know the King, His kingdom is off limits.* The key to the kingdom is Jesus the Christ. So...

⁴ Wessel, p. 648.

⁵ Wessel, p. 648.

2. *If you want to understand kingdom truth, you must first 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."⁶ 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."⁷

Now we're ready for point three.

III. Jesus applied the parable about the Word (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 key lesson. This particular 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 with four types of hearts.

Warning. You are about to see a picture of your heart.

A. Some people receive the Word 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."

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

1. *This person hears the Word.* In fact, 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 from the Living God..

How is it that two people can hear the same message preached from the Word of God, and one responds in faith and the other with skepticism? Is the problem with the message? No. Is it with the messenger? No. Jesus indicates that the problem pertains to the condition of the hearer's heart.

In case number one, the person hears the Word, but...

2. *This person loses the Word.* What went wrong? It hits the hard path, that is, the hard heart. In the parallel account of Matthew 13:19 we find a related problem.

"He understands it not." His heart is hard, and his mind can't make sense of the truth he's hearing. Consequently, verse 15 again, "Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them."

So this person hears and then loses the Word. What could have nourished his soul is now gone. All because of a heart problem. He never allowed God's Word to penetrate his hard heart.

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."

He will not let the Word penetrate his heart, for his heart is hard.

⁶ In J. D. Jones, p. 83.

⁷ Cole, p. 145.

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 too is the hard-hearted person.

Can God reach a hard-hearted person? Absolutely! The truth is, every one of us enters this world with a heart that's callused to the things of God. But in His grace, the Spirit of God specializes in making hard hearts soft to the message of the Book.

But can a believer develop a hard-heart? Sadly, yes. And when that occurs, does it affect what happens when that person opens the Book? We know it does, don't we?

"Why do I feel like God is so distant?"

There are several potential answers, but here's the starting point, my Christian brother and sister. Have you hardened your heart to something God has already said to you in the Book?

Seventy times seven. Forgive your brother that many times.

Is that what the Book says? Yes, in Matthew 18:22. So if I say, "I won't do it, not after what he did to me," I've begun to pack down the soil of my heart to the Book and future seed will have a hard time penetrating.

Until I what? Until I obey the Book and forgive.

So if He seems distant to me, I need to take inventory. Have I seen a promise in the Book I've refused to believe? Or a virtue I've refused to adopt? Or a command I've refused to obey?

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

There's a second type of hearer...

B. Some people receive the Word 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."

So there are people with hard hearts. Then there are people with shallow hearts. Shallow-hearted people tend to be impulsive and fickle. You can talk them into anything—and out of it, too.

So the person with a shallow heart goes to church, hears the Word of God, and feels a tug at his heart. He sheds a few tears and says to himself (and perhaps others), "That's what I want. I want to follow Jesus."

Emotions are a good, God-given thing, but this person lives by his emotions. So with emotions stirred, he promises to follow Jesus this month, joins the church the next month, signs up for a ministry the following, and everything seems great. But it doesn't last, and before long, he's gone.

What's the problem? Jesus says some people are 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 on an emotional level, "receiving the word with joy," says Jesus.

But that's not saving faith. Jesus says he has *no root*.

And 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 can strengthen.*
2. *Trials can expose.*

Trials can strengthen a true believer. That's what James 1:2-4 says. However, the same trials can expose an imitation believer.

It's true. Trials will draw a true believer closer to the Man of Sorrows. But what do they do to the shallow-hearted hearer? They expose his true condition and eventually he "falls away," to use Jesus' words.

Have you ever met someone who said, "I tried Christianity, but it didn't work."? That's this person, the shallow-hearted hearer.

But let's be honest. Believers can do that too. Trials can strengthen me, yes, but they can also expose what's in *my* heart.

So I refuse to open my Bible one morning. And why? Because I'm looking at a Facebook message of someone who's mocking my Christian faith. And suppose I do open the Book. I find myself not thinking about what I'm reading, but that Facebook post.

What should I do? I need to get my heart ready to get in the Book. We'll talk about how to do that a little later, but there are two more to go. Hard hearts, then shallow hearts, then...

C. Some people receive the Word 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]."

Just think about that. According to Jesus, some people will hear His Word, and make a decision to receive His Word. Or to use contemporary terms, they may even sign a card indicating they've prayed the sinner's prayer, go through a new members' class, get baptized, and join a church.

But, says Jesus, the person "becomes unfruitful." What does that imply about this person? You could see fruit in his life...for awhile. He looked like a Christian...for awhile.

Until what? Verse 19 says until three influences exposed his heart's true condition: "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things."

What's the problem with this third hearer? His heart is crowded. He's sort of like a camellian, easily influenced by what's around him. Yes, He began to follow Jesus, but as the test of time verifies, for a *deficient* reason. He's never grasped that becoming a Christian involves a radical reordering of your priorities.

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 is not simply adding Jesus to a heart and life that loves something else more.

Repent and believe. Turn away and follow. All, of course, by the power of His grace, which is why salvation is from the Lord from start to finish (Jonah 2:8-9).

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..."⁸

Jonathan Edwards put it this way, "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."⁹

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, yes, 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.

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

But can't believers' hearts become crowded? We know they can. Which is why the NT epistles give so many exhortations like, "Set your hearts on things above (Col 3:1)."

So back to my morning quiet time. If I sit down at my desk and right next to me is my iPad, and across the room is my television on CNN, *before* I get in the Book I need to turn some things off and get my heart ready. Or my crowded heart will choke out the wonderful words my Savior intends to speak to me.

This farmer isn't doing too well, is he? He's zero for three so far, no harvest yet. Is there something wrong with this seed? No, no. Just wait. The farmer isn't finished yet. According to Jesus, there's a fourth hearer.

D. Some people receive the Word 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 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.*

⁸MacArthur, *How to Meet...*, 83.

⁹MacArthur, 24.

Fruit is the visible product of the seed that was planted, in this case, the evidence that the Word of God found a lasting place in this person's heart. People whose hearts God has prepared not only hear the Word, but they take it in, and it changes them, inside out. And you can see it, as Christ begins to make Himself known through them.

There's nothing like this seed, this word, this Book. Let's celebrate the message together yet again, the gospel message.

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.

And that is what makes what happened on the cross so astounding. At the cross, Jesus, the God-man, died as a substitute for sinners. He took upon Himself the penalty of sin, and paid it fully. Then on the third day, He conquered death and walked out of His tomb.

Today God in His grace promises to forgive all who will repent of their sins and receive His Son, Jesus the Christ, as Savior and Lord.

This is the seed, the word, the message of the Book.

But who benefits from this Word? The person with a hard heart doesn't. Nor does the person with a shallow heart. Nor does the crowded-heart hearer. Only those whose hearts the Spirit has prepared bear the fruit of lasting faith and lives that honor God.

My friend, please take heed to Jesus' words. Lots of people hear the Word. But one hearer in the story responded as God intends.

My non-Christian friend, we're so glad you are here. Jesus is telling you what you need. Not religion, but a new heart. And God will give it to you, if you will ask Him.

"Oh God, my heart is hard, and shallow, and crowded, and I can't change that. But you can. Please give me a new heart, one that will love your Son and live for Him. I believe He came to rescue me, and I put my trust in Him now."

And that's what we need, my Christian friend, every time we come to the Book, whether for our daily quiet time, or to hear a Sunday School lesson, or sermon.

"Lord, please help me get my heart ready. For my heart had become hard, or shallow, or crowded, but You sent Jesus to rescue me, and change my heart. Please do so now, so I'm ready to hear what You have to say to me."

Make It Personal: Take steps to get your heart ready to get in the Book.

Let me share with you the basic process I follow.

1. Sing a song like, "I Need Thee Every Hour."

It's vital that we express our *need* to God when we come to the Book.

2. Read/quote/sing/pray a psalm like Psalm 59:16-17 and Psalm 139:23-24.

We're prone to be blind to the condition of our hearts, so asking God to search us is vital.

3. Read/listen to God's Word.

4. As you are taking in the Word, look for one main truth that stands out.

5. Pray in light of what you have learned.

6. By God's grace, live in light of what you have just read/heard.

7. Learn from what others have learned from God's Word.