

Mark 4:3-8, 13-20¹
Sowing the Gospel Seed

Mark 4

3 “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.

4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

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

8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

14 The farmer sows the word.

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.

16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

17 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.

18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;

19 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.

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.”

¹ 1984 NIV

Introduction

This well-known “parable of the seed and the sower” is found in three different places in the gospels (Mk 4, Matt 13, Lk 8). It deals with some perplexing questions in life:

- Why does a wife believe and her husband reject the Christian faith?
- Why does one brother become a missionary and the other a murderer?
- Why do two children raised in the same family end up with completely different values?
- How is it that the same Word of God produces such differing results in the human heart?

I find at least five principles in this parable that both challenge and encourage us about sowing the Gospel seed.

I. Principle 1: Build your sowing on the Word of God.

Jesus said the seed is the Word of God (Mk 4:14). The Word of God has the power to change the human heart. Mere preaching of human words will not talk people into a new heart. Mere church programmes won't do it either.

Yes, it's necessary in our day to reach people where they are with our age-group programmes. If we don't reach them, we can't win them or train them or send them out to minister to others.

But if we want conversion that paves the way for healthy spiritual growth, we must build our sowing on the Word of God. Preaching and programmes that are not Word-based may produce quick result but it won't last. Preachers who preach about everything under the sun except what God has actually said rob people of the spiritual nourishment that they desperately need. Programmes that are not Word-based will end up shallow and superficial in spiritual depth.

Many church and ministry trends have come and go. But here's what I want to drive home. Be a student of the trends. Study your culture. Learn from what others are doing. Don't reject things outright without looking into them. But above all, never substitute a trend or a fad or the hottest new thing for the teaching and learning

of God's Word. Without the Word, our churches may grow but they will not produce fruit that lasts. Without the Word, we are like other social clubs out there in the world. In reality, we are often "poor cousins" of the social clubs out there.

American pastor-teacher, Jeremy Myers, once shared of a man who got a book contract because he doubled the size of his church in a few short years. His book gained him popularity, so he was asked to become the president of a Bible college. However, within a few short years after his departure, his church crumbled. The elders, the Pastor-turned-Bible-College President and the church growth experts were soon asking, "What did the present pastor do to destroy the church?" The experts went in to determine what had happened and found that at the time of the church's explosive growth, two other large and prominent churches in the area had undergone splits, and the church in question happened to be on the receiving end. Nothing the first pastor did grew the church, and nothing the pastor after him did destroyed the church.

When a church grows by gaining members from the problems of other churches, it is just a matter of time before this new church fails as well. Neither pastor did anything special or anything wrong. The first just happened to be at the right place at the right time, and didn't stick around long enough for the sky to fall. Instead, he got a book contract and a College President position. The second pastor, although he thought he was getting a thriving church, was doomed from the start. He ended up with a broken church. And yet, the pastor-turned-college-president's book on how he grew his church and you can too is still on the bookshelves available for purchase.

So who are we to believe? Who do we trust? Do we try one method after another until one of them clicks with our church?

Myers added, “While reading all of these books on church growth during the last eight years or so, trying to find the ‘secret’ to church growth, I came across one book which laid it all out so clearly and so simply, I could hardly believe what I was reading.

This book explained the church's origin, builder, durability, purpose and function. This book tells us not to conform to the world. This book tells us to teach what God wants people to hear. This book tells us to be people and ministry oriented.”

What was this book which Myers was referring to? You guessed it—the Bible; the Word of God.

(<http://www.tillhecomes.org/Other%20Writings/Church%20Growth.htm>)

II. Principle 2: Sowing produces differing results in different hearers.

This is the central teaching of the parable. Remember that there is nothing wrong with the seed. The same seed that the birds eat is the same seed that produces a good crop. And it's the same seed that produces a plant that withers away or gets choked by the thorns.

I preached in a church one time. I was very convicted by what the Lord had put in my heart to say to the people. So, I believed I preached with all the passion and compassion in me. But as I was preaching, I noticed that the people out there mostly looked solemn and heavy hearted. Nevertheless, I preached on. Later on, I talked with the pastor who invited me and asked him if there was any problem in his church. He revealed to me that he and his leaders were actually in some kind of cold war, and what I preached seemed to be directly addressing their church situation. And there I was preaching without knowing that I had touched a raw nerve.

After this church, I had to preach in another church nearby. I had intended to preach the same sermon. But after my experience with the earlier preaching, I was rather hesitant. Eventually, I decided to trust God to work.

It was a totally different atmosphere altogether in the second church. The people looked joyous and all eager to worship and hear from the Word that day. As I preached, I could see many appreciative nods and encouraging smiles. I believed the Lord had used that sermon to bless many in the second church that day.

So, the same sermon was preached with the same conviction, passion, and compassion. But the visible impacts were different. Why? The two churches were facing different circumstances. The Lord used my sermon that day to challenge the first church to honestly work at resolving their conflict situation. My sermon was something the Lord wanted them to hear even though they would rather not hear it. He used the same sermon to encourage the second church to heartily give thanks and celebrate their oneness in the Lord's work. My sermon was something the Lord used to affirm their doing well in His work.

Good sowing is something like that.

- A man may see huge results in one church and then struggle for years in another church.
- One tribe is open to the gospel; another is resistant.
- One locality welcomes missionaries; another opposes them.

And you can't know in advance how your sowing will be received. Past success may be a good indicator but it is not a guarantee. That's why Jesus told this story. Our job is to sow the seed but as we sow, we need to be realistic.

Some seed will fall on the hard path, some on the rocky ground, some on thorny soil, and some will fall on good soil.

Sowing, even good sowing, of the Gospel seed produces differing results. Jesus told this story so we won't be surprised and we won't be discouraged when things don't go the way we expected.

III. Principle 3: Don't be misled by early success.

A businessman decided that it was time to retire from his business. He called in his son and gave him the news and a bit of advice—"Son, it's all yours. Let me also give you two principles to succeed—reliability and wisdom. First, take reliability. If you promise goods by the 10th of the month, you must deliver by then, you must deliver by then even if it costs you overtime, double time, golden time. You deliver what you promise."

The son thought for a while and then asked, "What about wisdom?"

The father shot back, "Wisdom is never making such a stupid promise!"

Indeed, in our desire to have early or quick success, we may resort to any means (even empty promises) to get the results. But the consequence is that it might cost us our reputation and undermine our trustworthiness. We may get the desired results early and quick, but the results don't last because people lost faith in us for we have over-promised but under-delivered.

Look at what Jesus said about the seed that fell on rocky ground. It sprang up quickly. Early success! We're going to have a bumper crop this year. Though the seed sprang up quickly, it had no deep roots. When the sun beat down, the young plants withered and died.

So let us take the warning to heart. If you have early success in sowing or ministry, enjoy it but do not celebrate too much too soon. Wise farmers know that there is always a long period between planting and harvesting. The "early risers" won't always be around when harvest time comes.

Think of it this way. Three of the four soils responded positively at first. But only one produced lasting fruit. Don't be misled by early

success. It's not always a guarantee of things to come. Instead, keep praying and persevering.

IV. Principle 4: Your initial judgment of people may be wrong.

You can't tell by looking what sort of heart a person has. That is, you can't infallibly know who will respond to the sowing of the Gospel and produce the good fruit of salvation. As the seed is sown in many places, it will find its place in many hearts. You simply cannot tell in advance how people will respond over the long haul. Some people you think would make good believers will fall away. And sometimes the most unlikely people will believe and grow to become strong believers.

We have to allow the sowing time to do its own work of revealing the true condition of every heart.

In 1994, my father-in-law was diagnosed to have lung cancer. My wife and I visited him regularly during his last months. I would pray for Him before we left his home. He had only been to church twice up till then—once when he gave my wife to me in marriage, and another when we brought him to a Chinese evangelistic concert.

Just 10 days before he died, I shared the gospel with him and asked if he would want to believe in Jesus. The look on his face indicated that he was struggling within himself. Sensing the working of God at this moment, my wife encouraged him to make the decision. After a while, he nodded his head with a sigh, as if releasing a deep resistance in him. He had been an idol worshipper for almost all his adult life. It was such a great joy as I prayed the sinner's prayer with him that evening. I also got a denominational leader to minister to him a few days later.

The day he died, I was actually with my mother in the hospital for her medical review. My wife called to tell me her eldest brother had decided he would give my father-in-law a Christian funeral as a gesture of last respect for him. My eldest brother-in-law was a non-Christian. In fact, my wife and I had earlier decided that we would tell the family of his profession of faith in Jesus Christ, but not insist on a Christian funeral if the family members were against it. It was

a pleasant surprise that the family had agreed to have a Christian funeral. And I suddenly became very busy since I was tasked to make all the arrangements!

But what a joy it was to be able to perform my last service to my father-in-law in this manner.

I found a most unlikely believer in the person of my late father-in-law. My initial judgment of him was wrong. He was never so hard-hearted that Jesus Christ would not be able to work in his life.

Don't let our initial judgment of a person be the final judgment of his eternal destiny. The Gospel seed sown in him might one day sprout forth the fruit of salvation while there's still breath in him.

V. Principle 5: Pray for God to give a new heart.

We do the sowing but the seed must do its work. It takes a receptive heart to bring forth fruit. What does a farmer do with unproductive soil? He ploughs it up, throws out the rocks, pulls up the weeds, waters the ground, and plants it again. God farms the human heart like that. Remember what God promised to disobedient Israel in Ezekiel 36:26, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

- A new heart!
- A spiritual heart transplant!

The farmer cannot of himself transform rocky soil into good soil. On the hillsides of Galilee, there are more rocks than soil. You could never get rid of all the rocks.

But God can! So, don't despair because of early difficulty.

Three of the four soils failed to produce lasting fruit. Is Jesus suggesting that 75% of our efforts will go to waste? No, but sometimes it can seem that way. Some people are hard to reach out to, others are easier. Some missionaries see amazing results. Others struggle for years with little to show for their efforts. Good soil can be hard to find. The good side is that when you find it, it can produce amazing results. Some people will gain thirty-fold,

some sixty-fold, and some a hundred-fold in their work for the Kingdom. God can do a lot with a little—that's the encouraging news from this parable. A few seeds sown in good soil can ultimately revolutionize a church, a school, a family, a neighbourhood, or an entire region.

In 1962, the Savi people of New Guinea were head-hunting cannibals. Their culture was totally different from that of Don and Carol Richardson, and yet this missionary couple attempted to share Christ with them. In fact, two rival Savi tribes, fascinated by the Richardsons, moved to live near the missionaries' jungle home.

But Don became frustrated by his inability to find a point of contact. He was also discouraged by the 14 civil wars he had already counted right outside his front door now that the two tribes lived side by side. Eventually, the Richardsons decided to leave. However, the Savi response surprised them, "If you'll stay, we promise we'll make peace in the morning."

The next morning the Richardsons awoke to see the most amazing ritual they had ever witnessed. The two tribes were lined up outside their houses, on either side of the clearing. Suddenly, one man dashed into his hut, grabbed his newborn son, and began to run across towards the other tribe. His wife ran after him, screaming and begging him to give the baby back to her.

But her husband wouldn't stop. He ran over to the other tribe and presented the boy to them. "I give you my son, and I give you my name," he said. Moments later, someone from the other tribe performed the same ritual with the same intensity and passion. Richardson found out later that as long as those two children remained alive, the tribes were bound to peace. If they died, then literally all hell would break loose—cannibalism, murder, civil war.

While this amazing scene unfolded before him, Don suddenly realized that this was the analogy he needed to communicate Christ. The next time he spoke to the Savi elders he told them of the perfect Peace Child, Jesus. Eventually, droves of Savi became followers of Christ.

Several years later, on one Christmas day, hundreds of Sawi from every tribe—tribes that had warred and cannibalized each other for many years—gathered together for a feast for the first time. A Sawi preacher stood up and read in his own language a piece of scripture—“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulders, and He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” What a blessed day it was!

Pray for God to give a new heart for the final word belongs to the Lord and not to us. God in his mercy will intervene and remove the heart of stone and replace it with a heart for Jesus. He does for us what we can never do for ourselves.

With God all things are possible. This is why we keep on sowing, keep on watering, keep on praying, and keep on waiting. We believe God can do things that are far beyond our expectations. He’s done it before. He can do it again. And he’s doing at this moment all over the world.

This parable teaches us both patience and hope. We need patience because some of the seeds we sow will never produce the fruit we hope for. But others will produce one hundred times more than we expect. And this is why we preach and pray and keep on sowing the Word. There is good soil out there even though it’s not always easy to find.

Conclusion

There are a lot of people who live and work around you who need to hear how God is working in your life as a believer—this is your faith stories, your testimonies. It's important to point out that effective testimonies don't have to be dramatic.

As a matter of fact, the difficulty of personally relating to a dramatic testimony (e.g. turning from a life of violent crimes) may give people an excuse—i.e. they might say, “Someone like that needs religion, but not me because I am not like that.”

However, your everyday story will relate to their everyday struggle, showing them that they too need the grace and leadership of God that you've found.

We all have a personal testimony—a story of how Christ changed our life. Having your testimony prepared is important. Preparing your testimony ahead of time makes sharing more natural when the opportunity arises. Here are a few steps to assist you when writing your testimony.

- *Step 1: Share what your life was like before you started living an adventure with Jesus.* Did you experience a lack of peace, purpose and significance? How did you try to fill these empty areas of your life? E.g. "I used to be very motivated by money and moving up the corporate ladder. But no matter how much success I achieved, I still felt like something was missing."
- *Step 2: Share how you came to a point of understanding and accepted Jesus into your life.* Describe the circumstances that led you to giving your life to Jesus and allowing Him to be in control. Describe the steps you took to becoming a follower of Jesus. E.g. "One day a friend mentioned that I was missing out on living a real adventure with Jesus. After looking into it more, I realized he was right. I realized that Jesus was the answer. It didn't happen overnight, but the more I learned, the more it all made sense."
- *Step 3: Share what happened after you gave your life to Jesus.* Describe how Jesus is filling your deep needs that you listed in Step 1. What changes do you see in your life today? How are you motivated to live differently now? E.g. "Now I feel a sense of contentment though life is still not perfect. And know that is due to Jesus being part of my life. Also, I now live with a sense of purpose in me."

We are called to sow the Gospel seed. Let's seek the Lord to help us go forth with faith and faithfulness. Amen!