

Why Most Reject Christ

Mark 4:1-8 ^{NKJ} Mark 4:1 And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: ³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ "And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ "Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ "But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ⁷ "And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ "But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

Mark 4:14-20 ¹⁴ "The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ "And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. ¹⁶ "These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ "and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. ¹⁸ "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ "and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ "But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

What do the following things all have in common: light, wind, waves, fish, bread, human cell tissue? All of those things were at the receiving end of a command from Jesus. He commanded light in the beginning; winds and waves to be still; fish to swim into a net; bread to multiply; human tissue in a blind eye; deaf ear, mute tongue or diseased condition to be perfectly restored. Now let me add to that list, and spot the odd one out: light, wind, waves, fish, bread, human cell tissue, demons, human beings. The odd one out? Not demons. Again all those things received commands from Jesus, and all of them obeyed. Which is the only group that did not obey Christ's voice? Human beings.

It's quite something to think that light obeys His voice; water obeys His voice; fish obey His voice, but human beings are able not to. That's not because we are so strong, it's because God has given us the awesome ability to say 'no' to Him. God has given the human heart not only ability, but also space and time to make choices. Humans can hear the voice of God, and choose to ignore it, refuse it or dismiss it.

That's what many people do. Remarkably, it is what most people do. Why do they do that? The answer to that question comes in this parable of the sower, or perhaps better, the parable of the soils. This parable does not contain a command. It is an explanation. It is a description. It is a diagnosis of why the Word of God does not work on people the way it does on fish, waves or bread.

Mark has already shown us how most people responded to Jesus. Some wanted to use Him as political tool. Some wanted to domesticate Him and bring Him down to size. Some wanted to discredit Him and paint Him as a servant of Satan. Only a minority in Israel chose to follow Him. After 18 months of going to every town and village in Galilee and announcing Himself and His claims clearly, after months of having the whole country – north, south, west and east come to Him and hear Him proclaim Himself as Messiah – what has been the response? Most people had not embraced Him. So now He begins to teach in parables.

The first of all Jesus' parables was this parable of the sower. Jesus gave this parable to explain why His message was received the way it was. It was not so much a parable calling for change as it was a descriptive parable describing Israel's response. He was giving an account for what happens when the Word goes out. And it's an account which not only describes something that happened in history,

but something that happens today. Something that happens every time the Word goes out, every Sunday, and even at this moment in this room.

To explain this event of the declaration of Christ to people, Jesus uses a simple image – a sower sowing seed in his fields. To understand the parable we need to understand the different elements in the story. There is a sower, there is seed, and there are four kinds of soil with four results.

That's important. You need to notice is that there were *four kinds of soil, but one kind of seed*. Jesus does not say, a sower threw this kind of seed here, and this kind of seed there. He took one kind of seed and it found four kinds of soil. A sower in those days would not be sowing with a machine down a furrow dug by a machine. He would be walking, with a satchel, a pouch of seed and as he walked, he would grab a handful of seed, and throw it. That's how seed could land on both a hard pathway and on shallow ground and on good ground.

Jesus did not declare Himself in four different ways. He was the same Christ. His message was the same everywhere He went.

When the Word of God is rightly preached, it is the same Word which is reaching different hearts. When the Word goes out during a sermon, it is just like that. It is the same Word, that is being preached to a wide variety of hearts. They preach the Word, and like that first-century sower, they scatter it out. What happens next is a result of the hearts that hear it, not the fault of the Word itself.

That same message is producing repentance in one person, and boredom in another. It is producing hope and faith in one, and unbelief and anger in another. What's the difference? They aren't different messages, are they? It is the same Word, being received by very different hearts

Jesus is teaching something about the Word of God. It is powerful. The Word is what does the work. By comparing the Word of God to seed, Jesus has brilliantly captured the nature of the Word. A seed contains within it all that is needed to produce a tree, a wheat stalk, grain – you name it. But apple seeds don't germinate when placed on a wooden table. Orange seeds don't grow when placed on a carpet. So the Word contains all that is needed to transform a person into a lover of God, but it will not do it when it meets a hard, unbelieving, shallow or idolatrous heart.

When there is no growth, no faith, no change, the problem is not with the Word. The potential for change is in the Word. But when there is no growth, the problem is not with the Word.

I want you to notice something else. Jesus did not describe *four sowers either*. There was one kind of seed, sowed by one sower, received by four soils. In this context, Jesus was the sower.

What is Jesus doing? He is saying, the problem is not with the Word, and it is not with Him as the preacher either. Because the sower in this parable is Christ. And if ever there was an expository, doctrinally rich, practical understandable teacher filled with the Spirit, it was Christ. Yet with His preaching, there were still indifferent hearts, impulsive decisions and double-minded followers.

Now of course, no preacher is like Christ. Some preachers are nearly the very opposite of Christ. But let us assume that you have a preacher who does what preachers are supposed to do – rightly divide the Word- interpret it correctly, apply it responsibly, teach it compassionately, communicate it effectively.

The point of the parable is that even when you have that, there are still four responses. So this immediately dismisses the idea that if the Word isn't working in your life, it is entirely your

teacher's fault. The fact is, teachers do their job when they deliver, like a waiter – what God has prepared, not when they embellish like a chef. And if a teacher is delivering the seed, he is doing his job.

One kind of sower – Christ. One kind of seed – the pure Word of God. Four kinds of soil – four different heart responses.

Today we want to consider the first three – the negative responses. Why do hearts reject the beautiful message of Jesus Christ? As we look at the first three soils we see an indifferent heart, an impulsive heart and an infested heart.

I. The Indifferent Heart

³ *"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ "And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.*

As the sower reaches into his pouch, takes a handful and throws it out at random, some of those seeds land on the wayside. What is the wayside? In Israel of the time, the land was just criss-crossed with fields. Usually these fields were fairly narrow, and they were separated from other fields by narrow paths, about a metre wide. The path was not a tarred or paved road, it was simply soil which had been packed down and walked on again and again, until it had become hard. It was no longer even considered soil to sow in, it was considered the pathway, the road, the gravel road next to the garden patch.

When seed lands on a hard-baked pathway, it simply lies on the surface. You may as well have thrown it onto a marble floor. It will not germinate, it will not start doing its work of germination. And if seed simply lies exposed on the pathway, then it becomes like scattering bread crumbs. The birds are going to come down and eat. They do not merely nibble – they devour, they utterly destroy all remains of those seeds so within a few hours the way is picked clean, and you would not know that a sower had sown any seed there.

That's the image in the parable. Now Jesus explains this image to us.

¹⁵ *"And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.*

Jesus says this heart gives no room or space for the Word to penetrate at all. It is as hard as rock, and when the Word comes, it is quickly stolen away by Satan. It is no accident that the kind of ground which does not allow for any penetration is hard ground, and the kind of heart which rejects God's Word is said to be a hard heart.

Hard hearts don't understand the Word, it does not penetrate and it is quickly stolen from them by Satan before anything else can happen with it. This heart is so hard, it is more like a road that people walk on, than a field in which people sow in. It is less like a place for God's Word, and more like a place for the world's feet to walk up and down. The person's heart is so hard that the Word does not even begin to go in. It does not even start to process. Meditation does not even begin. The Word is landing on the top of the mind, only landing in the ear, so to speak. And before anything more happens, Satan comes and steals the Word.

This is what many people did in Israel to Christ's claims. This is how the Pharisees were - closed. in rejection, indifferent.

Now, Jesus added a tragic extra to the story of the hard heart. The hard-hearted person is his own worst enemy, but he is not his only enemy. Because waiting in the wings, Jesus said, is the devil. Satan is pictured like a bird. Now what do birds typically do when they see someone coming with a big bag of seed or bread? They gather.

Which might give you some indication of what demons do every time the Word is preached. Imagine a host of demons at every church service, hovering like birds, watching to see if you are going to leave the Word on the surface with a hard heart. You have to ask, why would Satan want to snatch away the Word so quickly? Because every now and then, even the hardest ground can have a crack in it, and the seed might be blown into it, and a bit of rainwater might set things going. He makes sure that the Word which hits a hard heart very quickly disappears from conscious thought. How would he do this?

Distraction during the sermon. Were the demons ever known to do things to people like throw them into the fire or the water? Do you think it would be unlikely of them to send a strong wind to slam the door? Or to give an infant a sudden tummy ache, or itch, or nightmare? Or to send some unbelievers down the street in their Harleys or in cars with stereos blaring? Distractions don't distract hearts that are taking in the Word, but they serve as the moment when he snatches the Word away from the hard of heart. He could do it through diverted thoughts, while listening or while reading. Reminding you of the lunch at home, the schedule tomorrow, the bills to pay, the people to see.

He can do it through deceiving thoughts: Pride which says, I already know this, I don't need to listen to this. Or this isn't a problem in my life, but boy I wish so-and-so was here to hear this today. Or, I can't accept this, this is childish fairy-tales. Maybe procrastination which says, yes this is true, but not now. I will get to it, when I am ready, or when I am older, or when the children are older, or when I pay off the house, or when I get that promotion, or when I emigrate.

As the heart gives in to the distraction outside, or inside, Satan is there in the blink of an eye to take that Word away before you give it any more thought. And you go home, have a Sunday lunch, read the newspaper, and everything seems fine. It was just a bit of emotions that were getting worked up, you tell yourself.

But I want you to notice something. The birds only eat what is lying on the surface and exposed. Satan can only steal what is not taken and hidden. Only a hard heart that is refusing, rejecting and resisting the Word of God, is vulnerable to having the Word completely snatched away.

Let's look at the second soil.

II. The Impulsive Heart

⁵ *"Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ "But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.*

Jesus was describing a kind of soil which was fairly common in Israel. Often in Israel, you will have a limestone layer covered by a thin layer of soil. The limestone layer is essentially like the wayside, seeds cannot penetrate it. If seeds land on limestone, that is on the surface, they will be devoured by the birds. But just covering the limestone would be a layer of soil, maybe a centimetre or a few centimetres deep. To the human eye, the soil looks as good as any. You can't see what is under the surface.

The result is this: Seed which falls on such shallow ground germinates in that little amount of soil. And because of its shallowness the suddenness and the speed of the growth is amazing. It can't get its roots down into the limestone, so it grows up and out. To the human eye, it looks like a very promising plant.

But the test comes when the sun comes out. The sun is good for plants with a root system. Plants with no root system, though, have no supply of moisture except what is on the surface, or already contained in their leaves. As the sun rises to its most scorching, these plants have no serious roots, and all that lush foliage on the surface wilts, dies and completely dries up.

Now Jesus explains the meaning of this symbol in His parable:

¹⁶ "These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ "and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.

This is the hearer we might call shallow or impulsive. He hears the Word, and accepts it. He even accepts it joyfully. This corresponds to the many people who were excited about Jesus. He was a folk hero to them – a possible King to overthrow Rome, a miracle worker who will lift every burden. But as soon as Jesus threw down His hard demands, called on them to be willing to die, take up their crosses, forsake all, then all the enthusiasm died off. When He told them that He wasn't going to be their personal miracle-worker and required them to submit to Him, and embrace Him at whatever cost, people walked away. Any sign of trouble or persecution, and their apparent commitment withered away.

Today, it looks similar, with a difference. He prays a prayer to accept Jesus as Saviour. He gets baptised. He tells others he is born again. There is excitement, there is gladness. There is euphoria. There even seems to be explosive growth. For the time he has been saved, he is just blossoming, outgrowing others who have been saved for years, it seems. But this is all to fade and die out completely. When is the decisive turn? When tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he stumbles. *Stumble* means he drops out of the race. He no longer professes Christ, he no longer obeys, loves serves. He goes back to his old life and his old ways.

Why does he do this? If he experiences direct persecution for the Word, he drops out. That is, if because of his profession of faith he faces any kind of rejection, loss of support, financial loss, family rejection, cultural rejection, slander, physical harm or threats of worse, he drops the whole thing. He has no root which goes deeper than his circumstances. If there is heat on the surface, he can't take it. He shrivels up.

If he experiences tribulations for the Word, he drops out. That is, because of professing Christ, he experiences trouble, difficulty, pain, hardship, testing. It might even be the pressures of increased commitment – the need to follow through with baptism or membership. And all of these are trials, tests to his profession of faith. He finds out that when someone names Christ, God starts to send them little doses of what His Son experienced on earth.

You see, the interesting thing is, the sun is good for plants with root systems. It makes them grow. And the biblical truth repeated over and over is, tribulation is good for true Christians, it makes them grow. It teaches us endurance, and patience, and longsuffering, and love for enemies, and admiration for Christ, and greater dependence, and more hope for heaven, and greater faith, and less worldliness, and greater loyalty to each other, and more gratitude.

But do you know what trials produce in the person who has no real root in Christ? Unbelief. Denial. Doubt. Casting away of the confidence. Anger. Hatred. Despair.

What is going on in the shallow hearted person? He's is actually a hard-hearted person, with a thin covering of openness to the Word. It is the superficial layer of impulsive reactions, whims, gut feelings, sudden passions. But such a person has not deeply submitted to Christ, and counted the cost.

III. The Infested Heart

Mark 4:7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

This is the image: this seed falls on ground with enough softness to receive the seed, it is not like the wayside. This soil is not merely a few centimetres of soil hiding a bedrock of limestone underneath it either. No, this kind of soil has enough softness and enough depth for a plant to take root.

In fact, the problem is not that nothing grows in this kind of soil, but that too many things grow in it. The problem here is not depth, the problem here is space. This kind of soil hosts not only the seed of the sower, but the seed of thorns. You'll notice that Jesus does not describe the thorns as fully grown when the seed lands on the soil. Those thorns are also in seed form. But according to Jesus, the thorns sprang up with it (Luke 8:7).

And here's the thing: thorns or weeds thrive in most soils. You pull them out and leave just a fragment and they're back. They spread, they flourish, they grow quickly, so much so that we use them as analogies for speedy growth. The things we want to grow for food seldom grow the way weeds do. You have to do all kinds of work on the soil to get it to grow and grow successfully. You don't have to do that with thorns and weeds.

Now Jesus explains the meaning of this kind of soil:

Mark 4:18-19 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19"and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

Jesus says this kind of heart, this kind of hearer is not resisting the Word outright. He is not being shallow or impulsive with it either. He hears the Word, considers it, and takes it in. The problem is that there is no space for the Word to ever turn into something which changes him, because of all the other things in the heart.

What are these things?

Jesus describes three things: the cares of this world; the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things.

i) The Cares of this World

The way that comes out in English makes it sound harmless. The word for "world" is actually the word that is often translated 'age' – this era, this time; while the word cares' is a negative word meaning anxieties, worries, burdens. It might better be translated, "anxieties of this age".

This is not merely the pressures of living, it is something connected with worldliness. (Luke 21:34)

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.

Here is someone who has allowed the world to shape his priorities. Jesus the Messiah is present, but he is too busy keeping up with the rat race that the world has got him in. He has no time to listen to Christ, and receive Him. Not much has changed today. So it is today. Either the pursuit of wealth crowds out God, or the independence it brings crowds out God.

ii) The Deceitfulness of Riches

What Jesus is calling our attention to is not money or wealth itself, but the deceitfulness of it. Deceitfulness is the subject, riches is possessive. The deceitfulness of riches. This is a strong word which means trickery, fraud, deception.

People think that accumulating wealth will make their lives simpler. But you never reach the rainbow, though you chase it all your life. You never reach the mirage before it disappears. The man or woman chases wealth their whole lives, until most of life is spent and they realise they have lost all the things that were important while chasing wealth, and that wealth cannot now buy those things.

Now there was more than one young rich man in Jesus' time who couldn't embrace Jesus because he was pursuing money. They couldn't surrender the possibility of living differently to Christ and it choked the Word.

iii) The Desires for Other Things

This is simply the desire for pleasure apart from God. Whether it is material possessions, status, power, prestige, sexual lust, knowledge – it is simply seeking joy and pleasure outside of God. Like today, people in Jesus' time wanted things more than God. They loved creation more than the Creator. And anything that replaces God as your ultimate love is simply an idol. It might even be a good thing – a gift from God like a husband or wife, a child, a job, a hobby, a project, a goal, an education.

There is a simple word for that: idolatry.

Jesus' point is that these three things cannot co-exist with the Word for any real length of time. In time, like thorns do to useful plants, they choke them.

Jesus does not describe the plant choking out the thorns. How often does a plant you are cultivating just destroy the weeds around it? No, it is weeds that conquer regular plants, not the other way around. And so, Jesus is teaching, you cannot just let all of these grow together in your life at the same time, and hope in the end that the Word will get so big that it will nudge the others out. It just never happens that way. Allow these things in, let them grow, it is only a matter of time before they completely choke the Word in your life.

This world's priorities, a pursuit of riches, idolatrous desires, crowd out Christ.

Here is Christ's explanation of why people do not receive Him. Some are hard, and do not even give His Word a chance before Satan takes it off their minds. Some like the idea of Jesus in a selfish way, but underneath that, they are really still selfish. Others are more open, but they allow other things to crowd out Christ. Other things are simply too important to them to seek Christ.

If today you have not yet received Jesus Christ, then this parable has just X-rayed your heart and showed you one of three reasons why. Maybe you have rejected Christ's Lordship outright, and have no time for Him. Maybe you feel open about some parts of His message, but you still refuse to let go. Maybe you have chased after other things to where Christ has no space. If that is so, even today, you can turn to God. Even today you can call on Him to save you.

Maybe you have trusted Christ, but you are wondering why the Word of God seems dull, ineffectual, why there is so little growth. Look to see if one of these conditions is not returning to your heart.