

Pastor Kyle Mercer  
Jesus & Stories

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Series: Unknown  
Mark 4:1-20

## **BIG IDEA - The Conditions Necessary for the Gospel to Be Planted and Flourish.**

All right, Two Cities Church. That's the bull's-eye. That's the touchdown. That's the end zone. That's what it looks like for us to win as a church, and that's what we celebrate: people's lives that have been genuinely changed by Jesus. The way Jesus often changes people's lives is through other people. That's what you heard in that story.

There's Christa. Christa came to college, and she wasn't a Christian, and then Christa becomes a Christian. What does it mean to be a Christian? We can't say it any more clearly than it means to follow Jesus and help others find and follow Jesus. So, she's following Jesus, and then she just decides, "I'd like to help somebody else find and follow Jesus." What an incredible story.

Here's our conviction here: found people find people. When your life has been changed and transformed by the gospel, that's exactly what you want to see happen in other people's lives. You want to see people go from spiritually lost to spiritually leading. I love what Christa said. My favorite line she says in that video is, "Josie was my friend, but I wanted her to be my sister in Christ."

Can you relate to that? You have a brother or a sister that you go, "Man, they're a great brother and sister, but I wish they were my brother and sister in Christ." Some of us are heartbroken over our kids. It's like, "I love my sons and my daughters, and they're good sons and daughters, but what I really want them to be is my brother and sister in Christ."

Some of us feel that about Mom and Dad. "They don't understand. They did the best they could. They were great parents, but they don't even understand what I'm doing. They're far from God, and they're close to me. I just want them to be my brother and sister in Christ." We feel that maybe about our friends or our family member or our coworkers or our classmates.

Here's what we're going to do today. When you got in here, there was a little card and a pen. If you can grab that... I'm not going to look at what you write down, but I'm going to tell you what to write in a second. I want you to write down the name of one person...not two people, not three people. We're going to keep things really simple here...one person who is far from God and who's close to you.

If you brought them today, just write their initials really little down there. If you came here today and you say, "I'm not a believer. I'm a seeker. I'm a skeptic," then write *me* down on the card. Guys, we're going to pray for these people, because here's what we believe: the primary way God reaches other people is through faithful Christian people.

Every once in a while, someone stumbles upon a Bible. Every once in a while, someone finds a podcast or they're on their own spiritual journey. Most times it's Christians helping other Christians come to Jesus. So, we're going to pray right now for those cards. I'll give you a chance to write while I pray. Then at the end we're going to do something special. You'll see that in about 45 minutes. Let's pray.

Lord, we just right now want to give you these cards. These cards represent people we love. In the Old Testament (and in the New, to some extent), there are always these different symbols you would give us to remind us, ways you wanted us to remind ourselves. So, this card is maybe just a reminder of someone we love.

It might be a family member or a friend we write down. It might be a classmate or a coworker we're going to see tomorrow. It might be a neighbor or someone in our network. Lord, we just give these people to you. We pray for more and more great stories like the one we just watched where you help us to follow you, Jesus, and you help us to help others find and follow you. We pray this in your name, amen.

All right. You can type or turn to or swipe to or scroll to Mark 4. We're just covering 20 verses today. If you're new, we've been in this series. It's going to be a five-month-long, 20-week series through the gospel of Mark. We're looking at the man, the message, the ministry, and the mission of Jesus. I don't have time to go through chapters 1-3. You can go back and listen to those sermons.

Today we pick up, and Jesus is teaching again. I've told you this before, but Jesus shows up, and a good way to think about his ministry is a teaching, preaching, and

healing ministry. He taught because he loved the mind. He preached because he loved the soul. He healed because he loved the body.

Today, we see his teaching ministry. Look with me at verse 1. We're going to just dive right in. **"Again he began to teach..."** Jesus often would teach. **"...beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat..."** So, he's in a season of popularity. A lot of people are coming out, so he gets on this boat to create some space, as well as to use the water to amplify his voice. That's what's happening here.

**"...so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things..."** That's not new, but here's what is new: **"...in parables, and in his teaching he said to them..."** We'll see the first long parable that he shares.

Here's what I want you to know about Jesus. Jesus was a storyteller. About a third of the teaching of Jesus is in story form. In other words, here's what Jesus *didn't* do. He didn't just come and teach theology, although he did that. He didn't just come and teach spiritual truth, although he did that...the Sermon on the Mount and other places. He didn't just come and teach doctrine, although he did that.

When he could, often he liked to wrap theology and doctrine and spiritual insights in a story. In fact, that's what a parable is. A *parable* is a short story with a spiritual truth. It's a short story with a spiritual point. That's what a parable is. Like I told you, 33 percent of Jesus' teaching is parables.

Now, why does Jesus teach in stories? Well, because we love stories. I always give you a hard time, and I give myself a hard time, how much Hulu you watch and how much Netflix you watch and how much Amazon Prime you watch and how much HBO you watch and how much Disney you watch. Part of you says, "I can't help it, Kyle. They're just such great stories." That's why you watch a show.

One of our staff came in the other day and said, "Have you seen *Better Call Saul*?" I hadn't seen it yet. He said, "We're six seasons in. It's amazing." That's a long story. That's 60 hours of your time. It's longer than it would take you to read *War and Peace*. We love these unbelievably long stories. We love stories so much that when you get together with old friends, basically all you do is tell stories.

I promise you. It doesn't matter if you're a guy or girl. You get together with your college friends, you get together with your high school friends, you get together with your single friends, and what do you do? You tell stories. Kids love stories. Our kids when they're young will beg us to read them a story or they'll beg us to make up a story and tell them a story.

Think about J.K. Rowling. J.K. Rowling is wealthier than the queen. How did *that* happen? Because she could tell a story. J.K. Rowling is so unbelievable at telling a story that she got 8-year-olds to read 700-page books and love it. That's the power of story.

Now here's what Jesus does. This is important. Parables (we're going to look at one today)... Jesus takes something supernatural and makes it natural. Jesus takes something complex and makes it simple. See, bad teachers take something simple and make it complex. Have you ever had *that* professor? You're like, "What? I thought I knew what this was about before I took your class."

Jesus takes the abstract and makes it accessible. I mean, how would *you* talk about faith? That's abstract. How would *you* talk about grace? How would *you* talk about mercy? How would *you* talk about love? How would *you* talk about truth? It's kind of hard to talk about. Just give definitions? Okay. What about wrapping it in a story? Jesus makes the abstract accessible.

So, what we're going to do today is look at Jesus' probably second or third most famous parable. His first most famous is probably the Prodigal Son. That's found in Luke 15. Today, we're going to look at the parable of the sower, or the parable of the soils, or the parable of the seeds. It has three different names because, you'll see in a moment, it's about soil and seeds and a sower. We'll get there.

Here's what's interesting. It's Jesus' first long parable that he teaches. That's cool. It's also one of the only parables we have that Jesus explains. A lot of Jesus' parables, you're like, "Uh, what does this mean exactly?" You read a parable, like maybe the wineskin parable we talked about last week, and you're looking for context clues. A lot of times you're like, "What did other commentators say? How have Christians for 2,000 years interpreted this parable?"

Fair enough, but with *this* parable we don't have to do that, because here's what Jesus is going to do. You're going to see this in a minute. He's going to say a parable, the disciples are going to say to him, "We don't understand that parable," and then he's going to interpret that parable. So, not only do we have the parable, but we have the divine interpretation of that parable by Jesus. Let's look. Verse 3:

***"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.***

***Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'"***

So, the parable only takes seven verses. If you've never heard it before, you might ask the same question the disciples are about to ask, which is "What does this mean?" You know this story, probably. Most of you do. You've heard some kind of explanation of it, but imagine hearing that for the first time. "What are you talking about? You're using a farming illustration? What does it mean?" Look at what happens in verse 10.

***"And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you [the disciples] has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.'"***

Did you notice he said, "Those outside"? Commentators notice this. As soon as Jesus gets his twelve disciples, there begins to be insider/outsider language. There are those on the inside, and there are those on the outside. Here's how to think about this today: there is the church, and then there is the crowd. In this room, I can't tell by looking at you if you're the church or the crowd. There is the Christian, and then there is the crowd.

The point of parables or stories is they both reveal and conceal depending on your heart. The point of a parable is to see if you have a spiritual appetite. If you want to know more, you can dive into these parables, and you will learn so much and will be changed, but if you have a hard heart, you won't care, and they won't matter.

So, Jesus is testing people's spiritual appetite and spiritual hunger. Up until now, it's like, of course everyone loves Jesus. He's popular. People love popular people. They like to be around somebody who knows everybody. That's not spiritual. They liked him because he healed people. Well, everybody likes free healthcare. They liked him because he did great miracles. Everybody likes to be around entertainment.

They liked him because he fed their bellies. The feeding of the five thousand. We'll see that. Well, everybody likes a free Hebrew Lunchable, or whatever you call it. He's basically saying, "Do you have a spiritual appetite?" He's questioning them. Now, here's what I want you to see. He's going to explain the parable in verses 13-20, and this is where we're going to focus our time: in the interpretation of the parable.

***"And he [Jesus] said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the***

***ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.***

***And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.***

***And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."***

We're just going to look at three things. The first one is...*Who is the sower?* The second one is...*What is the seed?* The third is...*Who are the soils?* That's it, and we'll be out of here.

## **01 WHO IS THE SOWER?**

Obviously you know the answer. The Sunday school answer is "Jesus" or "God." Yeah, yeah. Of course, at one level, God is the ultimate sower. He sows the seed. Jesus Christ himself is the Word of God. God gives us the Word. If God didn't tell us who he was, we wouldn't know. This is a good way to think about God: God has a missionary heart. God has a heart to reach people. God wants to be known.

So God is the ultimate sower. In fact, one way to think about the Bible is, from Genesis to Revelation, it's the written-down record of God's mission. Let's put that aside for a second. Yes, ultimately, God is the sower, but here's who the other sower is. Every faithful Christian is a sower. Let me be really clear. Not just pastors. Not Christian professionals. Not evangelists. They're not the only people who sow the seed, which we'll see in a moment is the Word of God.

I don't know exactly what happened. I don't know when this happened. It has something to do (I've read about it) with the professionalization of ministry. When law became very professionalized, there was this long process, and then you held a lawyer in high status. When medicine was professionalized, you had a long process to become a doctor, and then you held them in high status.

Somehow, the church took that and did that with pastors. It became harder and harder to be a pastor. You had to get more and more education, and then there was more and more of a distance between the pastor and the people or the clergy and the

congregation. Well, we don't want to do that. We don't believe the only time the Word is sown is right *here*. How terrible would *that* be?

That is a perspective in a lot of churches. "Hey, we have to get them to church, because it's the only place, it's the only time, it's the only person who will sow the Word." If the only time the Word is sown is right *here*, then it gets sown 52 times a year. That's not very much for a city with a quarter million people with a room that seats 450. That can't be it. It has to be through *you* guys.

Here's what I want you to embrace. I just want you to embrace, if you're a Christian (I know not everyone in here is a Christian), that you're a sower of the seed. Here's what sowers are: they're normal people like you and me. I know you don't want to think of yourself as normal, but you're normal.

They're average. Most of us are average. That's what it means to be average. The majority of people are average. You're average. God uses average people. How about regular? God uses regular people. You're regular. I'm regular. God uses ordinary, everyday people. Here's what sowing is: I want to live my life with gospel intentionality. That's it. That's what it means to sow. I'm living my life.

You're doing the things you do. You're eating out. You're living life. You're trying to take care of your house. You're trying to work your job. You're trying to love your spouse. You're trying to raise your kids. You're trying to pursue your hobbies. Who knows all of the things you're trying to do.

You're looking forward to your next vacation, because you're just an ordinary, normal, regular person like everybody else in Winston. As you're interacting with all of these people who are far from God and close to you, you do it with gospel intentionality where you live, learn, work, and play.

Here's how you... And I'm growing in this. I'm no expert in this, but here's how you sow the seed. First of all, you're aware and awake. "God, this is something you'd like me to do." This is so awesome. Every person you meet, you assume God is already at work in their life. Why else would he introduce them to you? You're not special, but you *are* a Christian.

You have the Holy Spirit. You have the Word of God. You're in a church that's encouraging you to be intentionally evangelistic. Do you think it's an accident your neighbor has *you* as a neighbor? What if every person... Like, the new person at work. "I assume God is at work in her life. Why else would she work here? God could have put her anywhere. He puts her next to me."

I assume God is at work in my neighbor's life. I don't get that many neighbors. I get one next to me on *this* side and one next to me on *this* side and three across the street. That's all I get to be my neighbors. I assume God is at work. How exciting is that? All I want to do is just be faithful to sow the seed. Now we have to answer the second question.

## 02 WHAT IS THE SEED?

Look at verse 14. Verse 14 tells us what the seed is. So, the first thing you have to do is go, "I'm going to be a sower." It's not a special class; it's an "all skate" for Christians. What God wants to do he wants to do through all of his people. Great. It's really simple. Anyone can do it. We live our lives with gospel intentionality.

Secondly, what do we sow? It says in verse 14, "***The sower sows the word.***" The seed is the Word of God. We believe the Word does the work. We believe there's power in the Word. Here's what I love about the illustration of the seed. Think about the seed with me just for a little bit.

At one level, the seed is very small. I believe in the power of the Word of God, but hear me in this illustration. I think it's very helpful for us to understand that sometimes the Word of God just feels like a seed in our hands. It feels so small. You look at someone else's life. You look at somebody else's belief system, and you're like, "Here's a seed."

A seed is so small it can get lost. A seed is so small it can get stepped on and crushed. But let me encourage you. Here's what's so awesome about a seed. A seed is so small it's portable. You can take it with you anywhere. You can drop them without anyone even knowing. You're like, "My coworker didn't even know why I shared that video. I just shared that video with her because it had some spiritual truth in it I thought she'd like."

"My brother has no idea the reason I asked him that question. That was a seed. I just asked him that question so maybe he would think about something."

"My hurting friend or neighbor... I tried not to make it awkward, so I put an airbag around it, but when I said, 'Hey, I know you're going through something. Can I pray for you?' they probably didn't even know I was dropping a seed."

Sometimes you're able to walk out of a conversation and go, "I just dropped about five seeds. No one saw that." You're like, "What will happen? Will they grow?" Here's the other thing about a seed. I thought about bringing a seed up here, but you wouldn't even be able to see it. That's how small it is. A seed is potential. A seed is



health. A seed is life, but it's so small. You can't see all that when it's just in your hand. You only see that when you plant it.

Years ago, I was in a college ministry, and we would have these big conferences over New Year's. One of my mentors would always give... He had, like, five talks he gave. More than that, but he had five big talks he loved to give. One of his talks was known as the "acorn talk." He'd get up at the end of a four-day... You know, everyone is riled up. There are a thousand college students.

The final talk before he sent you back home, he would have this acorn. He would ask, "Does everyone see this acorn?" This would be in the middle of his talk on discipleship and multiplication and all this. They would say, "We see the acorn." He'd say, "Does anybody see the forest? You need to be able to see that in every acorn there are more trees. When you think about the trees, there's actually a forest in every acorn."

There's a guy (it doesn't matter if you've never heard of him) named Craig Groeschel. Craig Groeschel leads one of the largest churches in America. The reason I bring him up is I just got a book by him, and I was reading it. In the book he shares his testimony. I'm reading this, and I'm thinking Craig Groeschel grew up in a Christian home, probably, or his dad was a pastor. I don't know. I just thought that.

He's sharing the story, and he says, "Oh yeah. I was a crazy kid. I was off in college, and I was in a fraternity, and I was completely partying." He said, "One day on campus a Gideon was there handing out little green New Testament Gideon Bibles." He said, "I got the Bible, I went home, I read it, and I gave my life to Christ." I thought, "That's how Craig Groeschel came to Christ?"

I just picture this guy who gives... I mean, if you've met Gideons before, they give away hundreds of Bibles a day sometimes, probably mostly rejected. Then all of a sudden, this 20-year-old goes by. "Here you go." To me, that's a little seed. I don't know what's going to happen. Well, here's what happened: one of the largest churches in America; one of the most influential pastors in all of the world...through a seed.

Here's the truth, though: the seed has no power until it's planted. I think in churches we're really good at talking about the seed and how powerful it is. We're great at studying the seed. We're great at writing books on the seed. We're great at listening to podcasts on the seed.

We're great at getting in Community Groups and talking about the seed, but there's no power until it's planted. Then you have to wait, because as soon as you plant it, you don't know exactly what's going to happen. That's another principle of planting. I

don't know. It has to rain. Other things have to happen that are out of my control. All I can do is plant it.

Jesus is encouraging us. Here's the whole message: You're a sower, so live your life with gospel intentionality. Be awake and assume God is at work in every person's life you meet. By the way, your life will just get a lot more exciting. The second thing is sow the Word. We don't change the seed. We don't choose the seed. It's not synthetic seed. We don't add other things to it. We plant the seed and see what happens.

### 03 WHO ARE THE SOILS?

Here's what I want you to see. The rest of the time it's the soils, starting in verse 14. It's the only thing that changes. In this parable, it's one sower, it's one type of seed, and it's four soils. Look at verse 14. ***"The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path..."*** I'm going to go through each of these, but I want you to see them. The first soil is hard soil on the path.

***"...where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.***

***And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."***

So, the soils represent the human heart. The soils represent how people respond to the gospel. Everybody responds to the gospel; it's just how. Let's look at each of them. The first is the *hard heart*. This is heartbreaking. Some of you have family members. Some of you in here may have hard hearts. Many of us have friends or family members or coworkers or classmates who have hard hearts.

The hard heart is hard because, as soon as you share it... You throw the seed, and it feels like it just bounces right off. Do you know that person? It just bounces off. It's like it has almost no effect. There are different types of hard hearts. There's the angry hard heart. Do you know that person? They're angry at God who they don't believe in. They're angry at life, which is the same thing as being angry at God.

They're angry at the structure of reality. But if they're angry, you kind of go, "Well, maybe God is at work in their life." This doesn't happen that often, but every once in a while, I get an email, or somebody talks to me afterward, and they're angry about something I said. I'm always kind of like, "Yes!" I'm like, "Maybe I woke them up." Now, every once in a while, it's like, "I said something stupid. I shouldn't have said it." Fair enough. But most times, it's like, "No, actually there's conviction." Anger often is a response when I don't know what's going on inside of me.

So, there's anger, and then there's indifference. That's harder. That's more American. "I don't care. That's for you." "Sorry, Mom and Dad. That's for you." Or it might be a more kind of prideful indifference, like, "Yeah, I used to believe that too when I was not as smart as I am now. It's kind of primitive, kind of archaic what you believe."

The hard heart is hard because, well, it was walked on a lot. You might ask, "Well, how does someone's heart get hardened?" There are a lot of answers to that. It's kind of a mystery. There's a lot of mystery in theology. I don't know how everyone's heart gets hardened. Pharaoh's heart... Sometimes it says God hardened it. Sometimes it says Pharaoh hardened it. Sometimes it says it was hardened.

Your heart normally gets hardened primarily through sin. What happens to a lot of people is they'll say, "I'm going to..." They don't say this out loud, but they kind of make a deal with themselves, especially if they grew up in a Christian home. They'll say something like, "Well, I'm not really going to get really serious about Christ right now. I'm going to go through middle school, high school, and college, and then I'll get serious about Christ."

The problem is your heart normally gets hardened. Sin hardens hearts. Can you look at pornography and your heart not get hard? I don't think so. Can you be a part of the hookup/shack-up/breakup culture, where you functionally use other people's emotions and bodies, and it not harden your heart? Can you love money and pursue the American dream and be materialistic for a decade and it not harden your heart? This is what sin does. It hardens our hearts.

Jesus says in John 3 people don't come into the light... By "coming into the light" Jesus was saying, "Become a Christian and love me and follow me and receive Christ and repent." All that basically means come into the light. He says they don't come into the light... He doesn't say they don't come into the light because they're not intellectually convinced, but that's what people will tell you, because that's a lot safer answer.

"I'm just struggling with evolution." It's like, "Who are you sleeping with?" That's usually the question. Normally, what's going on is it's actually I love something. Jesus says they don't come into the light because they love the darkness. Now here's what's interesting. It says the heart is hardened, and then it says birds come. Did you see

that? It says birds come, and he says the birds are Satan. They take away the seed. Satan can use a lot of different things to take away the seed.

It's almost like there's a lot of seed, and if all the seed was thrown down, maybe it would rain. If all the seed was thrown down, maybe there would be some cracks, because that happens. Then it falls in, and all of a sudden something could grow there. The problem is not just the hard heart. The problem is birds come and take it away.

Now, how does Satan take things away? Through lying to us, obviously. Through giving us other ideologies to believe, which is happening a lot today. I'll tell you. And I want to be pastorally sensitive. This isn't a word for everybody, but I think this is a word particularly for our parents of kids who are still in the home.

My concern... I have this image in my mind of parents who are trying to scatter a lot of seed. They're like, "All right. We have to pray for them and do devotions and ask them good questions at the dinner table and get them in kids' ministry," and all this stuff. They're really intentional with spreading seed, and then unintentionally, or they're not even thinking about it, they go give their kids to the birds.

We're not anti-public school. We're not anti-state university. But I'm just thinking, how many people...? They're not even thinking about how their coach might be influencing their kid. They've not been very sophisticated in thinking about their nanny or their babysitter who their kids spend a ton of time with. They're not thinking about the educational system they're putting their kids in.

Every once in a while, you have a parent come to me, and they say, "Well, I don't know what's going on with Johnny. We spread so much seed, but then we sent him to Duke for a degree in evolutionary biology." What do you *think* is going to happen? I want to be sensitive, because some parents beat themselves up over some decisions they made.

All I'm simply saying is we have to be as wise with the seed we're planting as making sure we're not sending our kids out to the birds. We're putting ourselves in those situations. Sometimes friends can be birds. You spend all this time. And you know this. Once your kid gets over 5, they tend to spend more time with their peers than their parents, on average. Peers kind of raise each other in a lot of ways. That's what tends to happen.

Here's the other interesting thing about the hard heart. One of the reasons the human heart is hardened is because whenever you... Let me explain this technically. What happens with belief... This isn't just Christian belief. We know this psychologically.

Beliefs regulate your emotions. Not just Christian, but any belief. Think about it just for a minute.

When things are going the way you think they should go, you're calm. "I believed this would happen, and it happened." We don't like when things don't work the way we think they should, and we don't like when someone tells us we're wrong, because when someone says, "You're wrong," then we have to ask *this* question: "How wrong *am* I? If I'm wrong, how long have I been wrong? How many things am I wrong about?" People hate that feeling.

It's like, what if you've wasted half your life? What if there *is* a heaven and a hell? What if your sin *is* a big deal? What if you raised your kids wrong? No one wants to think about that. This is why Tim Ferriss, who I don't think is a Christian... He wrote *The 4-Hour Workweek*. He said in his observation (I thought this was so profound) most people in life would rather be unhappy than uncertain. People go, "I'm unhappy, but at least I know what I believe." Well, maybe you're believing wrong, and that's why you're unhappy.

You don't want to have to do the hard work of thinking through everything you believed wrong and how much of you is going to have to die, burn off, and change. So, people, as a reflex, harden their hearts because they don't want to change, because they don't want to know how wrong they would be. They don't want to know how deep that goes. That's the first soil. By the way, I think most persecution in the church comes from this soil.

Second is the *shallow soil*. Let's look at the shallow soil. The shallow soil is in verse 16. ***"And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away."***

This is the rocky, shallow soil. Here's what he says here. Their response is an immediate positive emotional response to Jesus, which is always exciting to see. We're like, "Man, we love this." I would actually call this *camp Christianity*. I'm not against camps. I sent my kids to two camps this summer. But camp Christianity is I go to camp, and I cry at the bonfire, and I break up with my boyfriend. Some of you have been to camp.

Camp Christianity is I make a really, really emotional decision with my friends or we're up late in the cabin or the youth leader *this* or during the last worship song I walk the aisle. Again, a lot of it can be genuine, but my fear is that people make decisions at a retreat, they make a decision at a conference, they make a decision at a camp, and it's only an emotional decision.

It's like their emotions are given to Christ, so to speak, but not their head and their hands, just their heart. You can't come to Christ just emotionally in the same way that you can't come to Christ just intellectually. You have to come to Christ with your head, your heart, and your hands...your mind, your will, and your emotions. All of me comes to all of Christ.

What he's saying here is people have this immediate response, but then do you see what happens? It says the sun comes up, and it scorches. Now, what is the sun? The sun represents pains, problems, and pressures. He uses the words *tribulation* and *persecution*. So, the sun comes up. The first thing that pushes people away from Christ is pain, problems, and pressures.

This may be a saying in the business world, but this is certainly a saying in the church among pastors: what you win people with is what you have to keep them with. If I win you with "Jesus is going to solve all of your problems immediately in this life," then I have to keep you with that.

So, if people are won with a false gospel that "Hey, you're going to give your life to Christ, and everything is going to be fine. Your kids are going to be awesome, and you're going to have plenty of money, and you're not going to get sick," the moment something like that happens, their faith shrivels. I've seen this.

I don't mean to belittle this, but somebody dies or one of your main desires for your life isn't met or a prayer you prayed has not been answered the way you think, and your faith just shrivels. It's because most Christians in America don't believe the hard prosperity gospel; they believe the soft prosperity gospel.

If I tell you the hard prosperity gospel, you're like, "Oh, I don't believe that." If I'm like, "All right. Any of you can be healed of anything at any time," you're like, "I don't believe that. That's not biblical." All right. But you *do* believe you're never going to get cancer. You think cancer happens to other people. That's the soft prosperity gospel.

If I told you, "You're going to be rich...like, *really* rich; money is never going to be a problem," you'd be like, "I don't believe that." That would be the hard prosperity gospel. But, like, "Yeah, you're just always going to have enough; it's going to be easy for you to make money and keep money..." You believe that. We believe marriage is going to be easy. We believe our kids are going to be simple. We believe our job is going to be fulfilling, and then we're brokenhearted when none of that happens.

I actually believe if the first seed, the hard heart, is where all the persecution in the church comes from, the second seed is where all of the critics of the church come from. Almost every deconstruction story I've seen in the last two or three years are

just people who have a lot of church hurt. The sun came up, and they weren't ready. I don't mean to belittle the stories, but it's like, yeah, sheep bite. The church is a hospital. Everybody is getting better. We're all humble hypocrites. This is just what it is.

What you see here is... First, you have the hard soil. Next you have the shallow or rocky soil. Third, you have the *thorny soil*. Look with me at the third one. Verses 18 and 19: ***"And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word..."*** Look at *these* categories. ***"...but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."***

The second soil has to do with pain. The third soil has to do with pleasure. Do you see that? The second soil had to do with problems. The sun comes up. The third soil has to do with prosperity, the deceitfulness of riches, the cares of this world, the desires for other things.

It's interesting. What he says is there are two things that can take you away from Christ, and only two things: pain and pleasure. You're like, "That's everything." That's the point. I think pleasure is more subtle, and I think that's why it gets the longest description. The language is *choked*. When you choke something to death, especially a plant, how does it die? Slowly and silently.

That's exactly how most Christians' faith... It shrivels over time slowly. Sometimes they don't even know it's happening. When pain comes in, you normally see it. Someone is like, "I'm done. I'm mad at God. I'm mad at life." But when someone starts just making more money and more money and more money and life becomes more easy and more comfortable, one day they wake up like, "I'm not mad at God; I just forgot about God."

So, he gives us three things. They're broad on purpose: cares of this world, deceitfulness of riches, and desire for other things. So, *cares of this world*. What is that? It depends on who you are. What do you care about? Jesus is warning us that we can start to care about things too much, and it chokes up things in our lives. It's different in every season and stage.

When you're single, usually, especially if you're in the church and you love Christ... Most single people want to get married. Fair enough. But then, all of a sudden, it just gets choked up, especially by young ladies. They want a strong Christian guy. They want a Christian guy. They want someone who will go to church. They want someone who believes in God. They want someone who used to believe in God. Then they get married to the non-Christian, and their house is divided, and their kids are confused. The Word got choked.

It happens to married people all the time. It's like, it's fine. Everybody is working. You get married, and all of a sudden, you're "double income, no kids." Christ was the center of your marriage, and you married each other because you love each other, and you're strong Christians. Then you both have these careers, and they're both kind of taking off. One day, you look at each other and go, "My gosh. We have a career-centered home, not a Christ-centered home."

Then you have kids, and then you have a child-centered home, oftentimes. You want your kids to have every academic achievement and every athletic endeavor and be a part of every activity and experience every amusement. You wake up one day, and they're 17, and they don't love Christ, and you're like, "But they're really good at basketball." Then you have to say, "I think we choked it. We didn't even see it." That's the whole thing. It happens so slowly.

Then how about the *deceitfulness of riches*? Nothing is wrong with riches. We have to keep saying this. Let's just take one minute on this. We're all rich. Historically, globally, we're all rich. The question is... Riches are just deceitful. Right? They lie to us. This is why everybody thinks rich people make twice what they make...until you make that much money. Then you think rich people make twice what you currently make.

The thing about riches is they lie to us. Here's what they do. They make a bunch of promises to us, and we believe all of the promises. Outside of God, nothing promises you more things than money. Money will be like, "I promise you health." You're like, "That makes sense, because I could buy the best healthcare, and I could fly to any Mayo Clinic I wanted to, so that would be helpful."

"I will protect you." God says he'll protect you. "Yeah, but what if I could live in one of those neighborhoods with a gate?" "I will meet all of your needs," God says. Yeah, well, so does a lot of discretionary income. It's very, very easy to one day just be deceived, because what money does is it amplifies your personality. It's like everything in your life is big, and God is getting smaller, and all of a sudden, Jesus falls to priority six on a list of five.

Look at the last one: a *desire for other things*. This is like the junk drawer for everything else. It reminds me of a guy... There's a guy in Pittsburgh (not in our church). He's in his 60s. He's about to retire. He's one of my mentors. I love this guy. He's such a godly guy. I'm talking to him about retirement, and he's telling me what he wants to do for retirement.

He has all of these missionary endeavors and things he wants to do for Christ and his church. He said this kind of sheepishly, because he wanted to honor his wife, and he knows I know his wife and everything like that. He said, "But my wife is not there."



He said, "I married her. She's a strong Christian." Then he said this to me: "Kyle, over the years, she has just cared more and more about gardening than anything else."

I'm thinking, "Gardening?" I buy my vegetables at the store. I skip all that stuff. By the way, what often looks like a desire in our lives and something we can't live without looks goofy to somebody else. But it was just so sad. I knew what he meant because I've been to their house. Yeah, the garden keeps growing. Those are the books you're passionate about. Those are the podcasts you're listening to. You want to travel to see other gardens.

Don't we all have that kind of version of something in our lives? Who knows what it's going to be on judgment day. "Lord, sorry. Somehow the fruitfulness of my life got choked up by an exercise routine that I got a little too into." It's so embarrassing when you have to say it out loud. You're like, "It was golf and tennis. It was video games. It was just using all of my money and all of my free time to see other parts of the world. That's who I am. That's what I cared about. That's what choked up my life."

I actually think the job of the church is to try to help people make it through the third soil. It's for us to look at each other... Because it's hard to see when you're wrapped around the thorn. Someone else has to be like, "Dude, your house is big enough." Someone else has to say to you, "You're a great dad, but you're traveling too much." Like, "Dude, your hobbies are... It's cool to have a hobby, but, dude, every weekend?" You can't often see it. It's choking the life of Christ out of you and out of your family.

Well, compared to that, he gives us a positive final one in verse 20. He says, "***But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.***" Basically, this is amazing. Back then, if you're hearing the story, you're like, "Yeah. There are a lot of paths. It's not going to fall."

You're used to rocky soil and thorny soil. This is the Middle East. What you're surprised at is to hear there's some good soil, something falls in, and it goes thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold. They say back then a great return would be 10 percent. (I know. Before cryptocurrency, you used to think that was a good return too.) That was a great return, so to say thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold... This is amazing.

Now, here's what he says. It's the whole idea of being fruitful, being good soil. What does he say? Three things: *hear, accept, bear fruit*. It's so simple but so hard. I'm going to say what you think I'm going to say. Yes, you have to hear the Word of God. Who knew what we're doing here is so important? I mean, not just *this* moment, but by yourself too. You have to read the Word. I don't know. Listen to the Word. Listen

to a podcast on the Word. What you find in people whose faith gets choked up... Somewhere they stopped reading the Bible.

How about accepting it? That's the harder thing. Accepting it is the posture of your heart, that you're under the Word, not over it. It's like, "Yeah, this is what it says about sexuality, and I should repent instead of resist. If I keep fighting this, what's going to happen is it's going to get choked up one website at a time. If I don't listen to what the Bible says about money, things are going to own me instead of me owning things, so what would be the best thing for me to do would be for me to submit this area of my life."

Then, finally, to bear fruit. Fruit is two things. The Bible says the fruit is your life (you have a changed life) and fruit is the impact you have on other people. Here's the thing about fruit. Your fruit should not be hard to find. It should be easy. It should be obvious. We shouldn't have to look at someone and go, "Man, I'm really just... Is there any fruit?" We do that sometimes to our friends. We're looking for one apple. We're looking for one thing to be encouraged by. It's like, "Man, I don't know."

That's why we use things like *carnal Christian* and *nominal Christian*. It's like, "I don't see any fruit." Our fruit should be easy and obvious. So, Jesus basically... Here's the whole thing. We're to sow the seed. We ourselves *are* soil, but every good soil sows the seed. Jesus loved the illustration of seeds and sowing so much he actually talks about the cross in the sense of a seed being sown into the ground.

In John 12, Jesus says, "Hey, unless a grain of wheat dies, falls to the ground, and is buried, it remains just a seed, but if it's planted, it produces much fruit." He said this to talk about his death. Isn't that amazing? He said, "Me going to the cross looks like a seed." It looked weak. It looked powerless. It was easy to miss, but once you buried that seed for three days, it bore fruit through the resurrection of Christ, and for 2,000 years we have been celebrating the fruit of the seed of Christ going to the cross and dying for us in our place.

So, here's my question as we close. Would you sow the seed this week, starting today? Here's the thing about a seed that's neat. I told you earlier seeds are portable. You can put them in your pocket and take them anywhere. But seeds are small for a reason. Do you ever look at your neighbor...? It could be your brother. It could be your sister. It could be your parents.

This happens to me. I look at somebody, and I look at their house or I look at their life, and I think, "Christianity doesn't fit. I don't know that it will ever fit." What I'm normally thinking is Christianity that is now a tree in my life isn't going to... I can't fit a tree in their house. But then I look out, and I'm like, "Wait a second. I can fit a seed." I don't think there's any person you know that you couldn't drop a seed.

You're like, "Kyle, they're atheists." Well, drop a seed. "Kyle, they get angry every time." Drop a seed. "Kyle, they don't believe in God." Drop a seed. "Kyle, they were hurt by church." Drop a seed. What I want you to do right now is whoever's name you wrote down on the card... Would you just look at the card real quick? In your mind, just between you and the Lord, I want you to look at the card, and I want you to think.

We can't see people's hearts, but when you look at that card, do you see... Are they a hard heart? Here's what you do with hard hearts: I'm going to keep dropping more seeds. I'm going to drop so many seeds that the birds can't eat them all. I'm going to pray that they drop in a crack, and I'm going to pray that it starts to rain.

When you think of the second and the third soils... We know who these people are. They're people who have been hurt. They need to come back, and they need to get roots. They never had the root system. That was the problem. They need to come back. We're going to pray for them.

Here's what we're going to pray. In a moment, I'm going to ask you to stand if you want to pray a specific prayer. Not if you wrote a name down. Not everyone wrote a name down. There's one thing that changes soil that could change soil overnight. You go, "How does a hard path get changed, and how do rocks get out of the way, and how do thorns get moved?" One answer: a storm.

In a moment, I'm going to ask you if you want to stand, and we're going to pray a specific prayer over the person's name you wrote down. We're going to pray that God sends a storm into their life, which is a scary thing to pray. You say, "Kyle, is that biblical?" It's very biblical. When hard-hearted Jonah ran away, what did God send? He sent a storm.

Now, the prayer for storms is "Please wreck the ship they are running away on, but please save the sinner." We don't want people to get hurt. We want people to wake up. Jesus ends his most famous teaching ever, the Sermon on the Mount, with a storm. He actually talks about a future storm that's coming.

What he says about storms is storms reveal the foundation of our lives, and we want people to see what's underneath everything. Sometimes the only way that happens is a storm. So, if you're here today and the name you wrote down... You say, "Kyle, would you pray for me? Would you pray that God would send a storm in their life?" Would you please stand right now all across the room?

Guys, we're representing hundreds and hundreds of people who are far from God and close to us. Here's what I'm assuming. I'm assuming God is at work in their lives. I'm assuming God is up to something when I see a couple hundred people stand and say, "I love these people. They're far from God. They're close to me." In a moment we're

going to pray, and then we're going to sing. We're going to pray, "Lord, we're going to pray that you bring a storm. Lord, we're going to commit to plant seeds." Let's do that.

Lord, all across this room we just lift up brothers and sisters who we want to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of us are brokenhearted moms and dads. It's so heartbreaking, prodigal sons and daughters. For others, it's just friends and family. We just want to be so faithful, Lord, to plant seeds. We pray you would bring a storm, Lord. It is a good thing to fall into the hands of the Lord.

Lord, we just give these people to you. We ask that you would break them. We ask that you would wake them up, Lord. We ask that you would show them the foolishness of their ways. We ask that, as you did to Jonah, you would destroy the ship but save the sinner. Would you make us faithful this week to live with gospel intentionality, to assume you're at work, and to plant as many seeds as we can, Lord, and to trust you for the storm? We ask all this in Jesus' name, amen.