



READ MARK 4:1-34

Pursue

- In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus depicts himself (the sower) spreading seed (the word preached) broadly among four types of soil (people's hearts). This parable serves as a kind of mirror for its listeners. Where is my heart, and how does it respond to the word of God? The first soil/heart is hard - like the religious leaders before Him, the word has no effect and is snatched up by Satan. The second and third types of soil/heart are shallow and crowded, respectively, like the crowds surrounding Him. The word is sown, and at first, it appears it is being received, but ultimately it doesn't produce a harvest. In the second type of heart, it receives the word initially, but it can't penetrate deeply and find rooting because below-the-surface hardness is there too. Without deep roots, this heart falls away when trial comes. The third heart receives the word with a crowded heart, whose desires for this world choke out the word's growth. Last, Jesus described the good soil/heart, a heart that hears the word and accepts it - like his disciples.
 - Is there any way in which you are hardening your heart to God's word? What would a soft and receptive heart look like for you?
 - Is there any way in which you need to deepen your understanding and enjoyment of the word so that its roots might grow deeper in you?
 - Is there any way in which the word of God is being choked out by the desires of your flesh or worldliness?
- When helping the disciples understand the purpose of parables Jesus says, "To you 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."

Jesus again depicts that there are some inside and some outside the Kingdom of God. It should cause us to ask hard questions. Why do some people have good hearts and some do not? Why would Jesus not want people to turn and be forgiven? It seems as though Jesus is saying it is His will to turn some people over to receive judgment.

 - How do you respond to the idea that God turns some people over to judgment? How will this inform your prayers for your loved ones who don't believe?
- Jesus then goes on to flip people's understanding of what the Kingdom of God is like on its head using three more parables. A lamp under a basket, a seed growing, and a mustard seed.
 - The parable of the lamp describes the illuminating work that the Light of the World does as it enters the kingdom of darkness. It reveals the children of the kingdom and exposes and pushes back the darkness. This light should not be put under a basket despite what the Pharisees or Jesus' family wants.
 - The parable of the growing seed reminds its listeners that while it may not seem that the Kingdom of God is growing and is at work because it is hidden or under the surface, God will bring growth and a harvest, and all the farmer does is harvest it. People likely expected the Kingdom to come in glory, power, and might on full display. But here, Jesus reorients their understanding.

- Lastly, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a very small seed, a mustard seed. No one expected the kingdom of God would appear so small and feeble at first. But Jesus reveals that this small seed (the kingdom of God) would grow into a massive tree, so much so that the birds of the air, representing the people of all nations, would take shelter in its branches. Think back on the promise of God to his people in Genesis which ends with God saying... “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” God is fulfilling his kingdom promises!!
 - Does one of these parables stand out more to you? If so, why?
 - How do these parables about the Kingdom give you hope?

Practice

We know that it is God alone who changes hard hearts of stone into soft hearts of flesh, ready to receive the word of God.

- If people in your group don't yet know Jesus, ask if they are willing for the group to pray for this work of God in their lives. If they are comfortable, consider laying hands on them as you pray.
 - If you have families in your group, consider praying for each of the children who do not yet love Jesus to have this work begin in them!
- *BREAK INTO PAIRS*
 - For those in your group whom God has saved, spend time praising God for his work of salvation!
 - For those in your group whom God has saved, spend time asking the Spirit to continue cultivating a receptive, eager, tender heart to God's word.
 - Spend time praying for loved ones who do not yet love Jesus, and ask the Spirit to soften their hearts to hear his word!

Proclaim

- At the beginning of this series, we encouraged people to choose one person this semester that they would pray for and share with. Encourage group members in this relationship. What is something you learned, was convicted of, or encouraged by that you will share this week with that person who doesn't have faith in Jesus?