**THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

***Mark 4:1-20***

***“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.” (v.20)***

Today Jesus teaches us how to bear much fruit in our lives. Bearing much fruit means to live a transformed life in Jesus’ image and be a blessing to others, including family, society, and the world. Bearing fruit is not an option; it is the purpose for which God gave us life and God’s will for us (Ge 1:28; Ro 8:29). To help us bear fruit, God already gave us his words. They are his gift for us, more precious than diamonds, gold or silver. In today’s passage, Jesus emphasizes the importance of our hearts because it is the condition of one’s heart that determines whether we receive the gift in vain or bear thirty, sixty, or a hundred times the amount of fruit. May God help us to accept this truth from our hearts! Are you ready to listen to Jesus’ words? Then let’s go to the Sea of Galilee, Jesus’ classroom for today!

Look at verse 1. ***“Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge.”***  Many people came to Jesus due to their spiritual thirst and need for healing. As his first priority, Jesus began to teach them the word of God. As the boat that Jesus sat in swayed back and forth in the gentle waves, Jesus’ voice, like the sound of rushing water, carried across the lake to all the people along the shore, though Jesus had no microphone. Jesus’ words are always fresh, vibrant and penetrating. Even circling seagulls were captivated by Jesus’ voice and landed on the water in front of him to better hear the word of God. Fish began to poke their heads out of the water in order to hear the word of God. It was a beautiful scene. In this way, Jesus taught the word of God everywhere – in a house, in the field, by the lake, from the boat, on the mountain; wherever he went – in season and out of season Jesus taught the word of God. It was because the word of God gives life to man’s soul, solves our deepest problems from the root, and makes us fruitful.

Jesus taught them many things by parable (2). A parable is a hidden truth decorated with a short story familiar to our common lives. Jesus came from heaven, and he eagerly wanted people to understand the secret of the kingdom of God (11). The best way was to teach in parables. Someone once said that Jesus’ parables are earthly stories which have heavenly meanings. In today’s passage, Jesus introduces a seemingly simple story about agriculture. But it has deep spiritual meaning. To understand Jesus’ parables, we need deep spiritual desire to really listen and meditate on what he is saying. Therefore, Jesus begins today’s parable with a word of emphasis, ***“Listen!” (3a)*** and ends with the words ***“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” (9b)*** Jesus’ parables give deeper understanding and the joy of the kingdom of God to those who hear them with truth-seeking hearts. But to the unconcerned and unbelieving, they seem only like empty words. Rather than giving life, they bring judgment (11-12).

What was the content of Jesus’ parable? Look at verse 3. ***“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.”*** A farmer with great hope for an abundant harvest went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, some on rocky places, some among thorns, and some on good soil. But only the seed that fell on good soil produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times (4-8). Here the farmer represents Jesus, or in general, God’s servants who preach the message about the kingdom of God. The seed is the word of God (14), and the soil is the condition of the heart of those who hear the word (Mt 13:19). As a seed itself has life and the potential to produce a lot of fruit, the word of God itself has life and great potential in it. In this parable, we can see that the soil the seed is planted in is critical to bear fruit. Jesus teaches that there are four kinds of hearts. Let’s consider the different kinds of hearts that Jesus mentions.

First, hearts like a path. Verse 15 says, ***“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.”*** Their hearts are so stubborn that the word of God finds no entry point to get in. Some kind of pride, prejudice or bitterness completely hardens their hearts like concrete. Though they hear the word of God, they never accept it. The consequence of not accepting the word of God is serious. Satan, who is compared to a hungry bird, comes and takes away the word from their hearts. They become the prey of Satan who fills them with lies and wicked thoughts. Their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They become slaves of immorality and all kinds of depravity, and worship idols (Ro 1:21-32).

It is a spiritual crisis if our hearts become hardened like this. The signs of a hardened heart may be numbness, coldness, or lack of interest toward the word of God. We may attribute the hardened condition of our hearts to messengers, the atmosphere, or other excuses. But if anyone feels his or her heart becoming hardened, it is time to repent based on the word of God. Hosea 10:12b says, *“…break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.”* Ezekiel 36:26 gives us God’s promise, *“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.”* When we repent of our stubborn hearts with tears, the Holy Spirit grants us new and soft hearts.

John Bunyan, the English writer and preacher best remembered for his book “The Pilgrim’s Progress”, once could not accept the word of God due to his human ideologies and doubt, even though he had attended church for a long time. But one day, while reading the Bible, he realized that Satan was taking all the word of God from his heart while he was doubting. Since that time, in his repentance, he began to listen to every sermon with careful attention, writing down some important notes. After returning home, he had personal time to reflect on the words planted in his heart. As he continued doing this, his heart became softened, and he tasted the sweetness of the word of God. Later, he could write one of the masterpieces of Christian allegory, “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” Our spiritual growth and fruit bearing cannot be done naturally. When we cultivate our hearts with the plow of repentance and sincere desire for God’s word, the word of God can be planted in our hearts, grow and bear much fruit in our lives.

Second, hearts like rocky soil. Look at verses 16-17. ***“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”*** The good thing about these people is that they receive the word quickly with joy. They study the Bible frequently, attend Sunday worship service and say “Amen” many times. They seem to be good soil. But in reality, they study the Bible superficially without the deeper struggle that brings about fundamental change. They feel good, but they never make a costly commitment to Jesus. The moment trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they fall away. Trouble or persecution, like the sun in the parable, are necessary ingredients for one’s spiritual growth. They purify us from false hopes and help us to take deep root in the word of God and Jesus. The problem of the hearts like rocky soil is that they cannot take deep root due to rocks in their hearts. Rocks represent self-seeking, and an old value system or lifestyle. Such people cannot follow Christ in times of sacrifice and self-denial.

In John chapter 6, Jesus fed the five thousand with the five loaves and two fish. They were satisfied and intended to make Jesus their king by force (Jn 6:15). But when Jesus began to teach that he is the bread of life and that they needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life, they all left because they held on to their own selfish dream and desire. But the twelve disciples were different. When Jesus asked them, *“You do not want to leave too, do you?”* Peter answered, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68).* The disciples took root in the words of eternal life and Jesus. As a result, they grew to be spiritual giants who changed world history.

We need to remove the rocks in our hearts and take root in Jesus as we listen to God’s word, eat daily bread and reflect on what we learned. This spiritual struggle is invisible to the outside world. But regardless of people’s indifference, if we continue to do it, we can experience the victory and fruit of the word of God. When we studied Deuteronomy last summer, we learned the secret of spiritual victory from missionaries living in Africa, Russia, the Middle East, and Indonesia. In the midst of many hardships, like a family member’s death, material loss, hostility from Muslim neighbors, and times of self-denial, they all alike held on to one word of God’s promise and took root in the word. God blessed them to bear fruit in their inner spiritual growth and in their mission lives. We too must hold on to one word of God in times of trouble and persecution so that God may bless us to take root in Christ all the more and bear much fruit.

Third, hearts like thorny soil. Verses 18-19 say, ***“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.”*** These people receive the word of God and it begins to sprout in their hearts, taking root and growing. The problem is that thorns grow together with it, and more rapidly, thus choking the plants. Jesus mentions three kinds of thorns. A powerful thorn is the worries of this life. When our security is threatened, we easily fall into worry. As students, we worry about getting passing grades and graduating. After graduation, we worry about getting a proper job. After getting a job, we worry about who to marry. After marriage, we worry about how to pay our mortgage. Then we worry about how to support and raise our children. Later we worry about paying their college tuition and helping them to marry. Then, we worry about our grandchildren, or so I hear. In reality, we can spend our whole lifetime worrying. It’s so lamentable. Changing our stage of life does not solve our anxiety. In truth, worry comes from lack of faith. When worries attack, it is time to hold on to Jesus’ promise in Matthew 6:33, *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

Anotherthorn is the deceitfulness of wealth. Wealth itself is not a problem. The problem comes when one assumes wealth will make them happy. Then they begin to love money and fall into greed. Greed is like a deep abyss, a bottomless pit. It is one brand of idolatry (Col 3:5b). Those who are infected with greed lose the desire to sacrifice. Instead, they love the world and fall into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”* The last thorn mentioned is ***“the desire for other things.”*** This includes sinful desires: Sexual immorality, alcohol and substance abuse, and wild parties. These kinds of desires give birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (Jas 1:15). Yet fruit-bearing is also hindered by human desires that are not necessarily sinful: Sports, entertainment, achievements, social relations, and so on. When the thorns of worry, greed, or desires for this world grow in our hearts, we lose our spirit and become powerless. If these kinds of thorns grow in our hearts, we must pull them out right away through repentance. The best way is to resist and rebuke them immediately when we realize that Satan tries to plant such seeds in our hearts. Rather than harboring such deceitful thoughts, we must fill our hearts with the word of God.

Fourth, hearts like good soil. Look at verse 20. ***“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”*** The big difference between this soil and the previous soils is that this soil is fruitful. What is the secret to bearing much fruit? It is to hear the word and accept it. This is very simple, not complicated. Hearing means to hear the word with a humble and truth-seeking heart. Such people are ready to listen with great expectation. They listen to the word as the deer pants for streams of water (Ps 42:1a). Next, accepting is to accept the words as God’s personal voice. It is to surrender ourselves to God by denying our own ideas. We need to practice ongoing obedience to God’s word throughout our lifetime. This is to have a personal relationship with Jesus like a vine and its branches. As a branch remains in the vine, so we remain in Jesus. Then God surely blesses us. We can grow to be more like Jesus and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We can fulfill God’s purpose for us. Each of our lives will be meaningful and a blessing to others. This is only possible when we hear and accept God’s word.

In the same parable in Luke’s gospel, a good soil heart is described with the words, *“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Lk 8:15).* Having and maintaining a good soil heart requires perseverance. Perseverance implies spiritual struggle with much sweat and blood. No one is born with a good soil heart – it must be cultivated. It is a great thing that one’s heart is not fixed at birth, but can be transformed throughout one’s life. Think about farmers. In spring, they plow their hardened field, pick out the rocks and nourish it with fertilizer. After sowing seed, they continually pull out weeds and drive away wild animals and birds. In fall, after much sweat and tears, they finally taste the joy of the harvest. Likewise, one person’s heart can be transformed into good soil, but not in a single day; nor does it happen automatically as time passes. We need to earnestly pray to God for change. We need to plow our hardened hearts in repentance, pick out the stones of self-love in self-denial, and uproot the thorns of worries, greed, and sinful desires constantly. At the same time, we must obey and practice one word of God in perseverance until it rules over our life, becomes our own value system, and changes our lifestyle. God then promises to bless us with thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times the amount of fruit.

God called Abraham with the word of promise, *“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Ge 12:1-2).* Abraham believed and obeyed this word. But due to his childless situation, he was up and down with doubt and unbelief. However, he repented of his unbelief and held on to God’s promise again and again. Through this process, his heart was transformed into a good soil heart capable of producing fruit. When God commanded him to sacrifice even his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham believed God’s promise and obeyed the command. God recognized his faith and said, *“Do not lay a hand on the boy... Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Ge 22:12).* Then God blessed him with numerous descendants and sent the Messiah through his offspring to bless the whole earth.

The word of God is seed. The word of God is “living and active” (Heb 4:12). It is perfect, without any flaw. So the potential of the word of God is tremendous. Our heavenly Father really wants to bless his children through his word. So he gave his word to us as a gift more precious than silver or gold. But the seed can bring different results based on each of our hearts. It may produce either nothing or abundant fruit in one’s life. We need to choose. Which one do you want to choose? Let us trust in the power of God’s words and cultivate our own hearts unceasingly. May God reveal his glory through our transformed lives!