

## Mark 4:1-20 | Gospel Flourishing

### Tyler Velin | September 16th, 2014

I was a child who was raised on Disney movies, and I am excited to now have the ability to relive my childhood with my son. And as Owen was watching the Disney channel the other day I noticed a song which was playing. It said, "I know every kid has the power to make the world a better place, a better world, to plant a seed, to meet a need, cause I believe in the power of me."

And as man-centered as the song was, it hit me: even from a young age, our children are being taught this idea of human flourishing. We want humans to reach the pinnacle of their humanity. We want the world to be the best possible world and so we labor for it.

This is really the story of human history isn't it? Everyone is fighting for what they think will lead to human flourishing. They want to produce fruit which is of ultimate benefit to the world. The problem is that we have different views, and those different view often lead to wrong ideas and sinful results.

Take for example Hitler. Hitler didn't wake up one morning and think that he wanted to be an evil man. He genuinely thought that by ridding the world of the Jews and preserving and Arian race the world would be a better place. In fact in one of his radio broadcasts to the British people he said this: "It never had been my intention to wage war, but rather to build up a State with a new social order and the finest possible standard of culture. Every year that this war drags on is keeping me away from this work."

But we all know how that ended. It wasn't beneficial to flourishing. Today we see a new kind of flourishing being promoted. A school district in Arkansas has been presented with a plan that rids the school of gender specific language. They don't want kids to be referred to as boys or girls, but instead little purple penguins. Why? A quote from one of the motions supports says, "The agenda we're promoting is to help all kids succeed?"

They think that by eliminating human gender, they are contributing to human flourishing. But Biblically we can look at that and say that flattening human's gender doesn't promote flourishing, it kills it.

But the idea is still flourishing. So if humans want flourishing, and yet go about it wrong, how can we truly flourish? How can we truly produce a society which is the most beneficial to humanity at large? The Bible speaks of human flourishing, and today we are going to look and see how Jesus treats this idea in the gospel of Mark. Let's **pray**.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Mark 4. Here we see Jesus speaking in Parables for the first time in the gospel of Mark, and the parable we are about to hear is one of the most famous, but what I want us to do is to break this down Biblically and in light of the idea of human flourishing.

#### **Mark 4:1-9**

If you have been in church for a while, you are probably already beginning to decode this parable. But stop. Don't get ahead of yourselves yet. Because if we just skip forward to the interpretation of the parable we lose the miracle of this parables application.

Jesus loved to speak in parables, and the world parable basically means a comparison. Jesus like to use illustrations to make his point, so parables became the story elements of Jesus' teaching. But put yourself in the shoes of this great crowd which has gathered to hear Jesus speak.

They are itching for something fantastic, something mystical, something earth shattering. So Jesus goes out into a boat, because there was so many people. And he begins to teach. And this is what he says.

Listen, a farmer went out to sow his field. Some seeds fell on the path and the birds ate them, some seeds fell on rocky soil and they bloom but busted in the sun. Some seeds fell among the weeds and were choked out. And some seeds fell on the good soil and bore much fruit. He who has ears let him hear.

For a primarily agricultural culture, this is easily one of the most unimpressive moments of teaching. Galilee had the best soil, the best farmers, the best crops. Jesus is basically a living farmer's almanac here. This was his message to the crowd, the whole of it. You can imagine what the original hear was trying to gather from Jesus' message.

Did Jesus just want us to know that barren dirt is no good? No one likes plain dirt. Does Jesus want us to be mindful of where we scatter seed? I mean realistically this is a depressing story, only one quarter of the farmer's crops produced fruit. Does Jesus want us to know simply that good soil is necessary for good fruit?

This is the raw parable of Jesus. Are you enlightened?

I remember when I was a freshman in college I was friends with a poetry major, and we attended some poetry jams. And I remember sitting and hearing some of these "poets" and thinking, man this doesn't make any sense, but because I knew that they were poets and I was not, I needed to nod my head in somber, reflective agreement.

This is probably what the disciples are doing at this moment when Jesus speaks this parable. Seeds, path, rocks, thorns, fruit. Head shakes.

Because look at what happens next: **Mark 4:10.**

Jesus tell us what this means. Why are you explaining to farmers the obvious nature of farming? And here Jesus is going to share with his disciples the key to flourishing. Because in the parable it ended with great flourishing. Crops producing thirty, sixty, and a hundred fold. But what makes this story of flourishing relevant?

Jesus answers them: **Mark 4:11.**

Jesus uses the phrase, Kingdom of God here. And when it comes to human flourishing, the Kingdom of God is the top dog. In the coming Kingdom of God there is no Ebola, there is no Ferguson, there is no ISIS, there are no hate crimes, racial issues, cancer, abortion, slavery, sex trafficking, or poverty. In the Kingdom of God we have a gracious God ruling his people in perfect peace. The Kingdom of God is where we will one day experience humanity as it was meant to be: under and in the presence of God himself.

And Jesus says, to you it has been given to understand the secret of the Kingdom of God. You can imagine the disciples giving another head nod of self-assurance here. Because we know at this point they don't get it yet. But what is the secret to understanding the Kingdom of God. Is it the knowledge of the scribes? The group think of the crowd? The exclusiveness of the disciples? No. The secret to the Kingdom of God is Jesus himself. Why will these men see something different in this parable, because Jesus is going to tell them. Because Jesus is gracious to their hard hearts.

We see a perplexing usage of the prophet Isaiah in this passage though. Look back at **4:11**. Is Jesus saying that he is hiding the truth of the Kingdom of God from people because he does not desire to forgive them? That sounds like a horrible God. We know that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, Jesus just said in the passage before this that he has come to forgive sin and heal those who are spiritually sick. Why does Jesus quote this passage? Because at this point the crowds might be with Jesus, but they do not believe Jesus. And in quoting this passage Jesus is saying that there is no forgiveness outside of faith in Christ.

Why doesn't the crowd get this, because Jesus has not yet made himself fully known to them. But one day, on two cross beams, and with three nails Jesus will make himself known to them. And when the crowd looks at Jesus then, then they will understand, then all who call on his name will be forgiven. But to believe in Christ without understanding the gospel of Christ is to miss Christ. Christ himself is the key to our flourishing.

Now Jesus is going to share with the disciples the divine intention of his parable. He is not making up a secret meaning to it. Jesus doesn't do that. But what Jesus is going to do is explain to the disciples the underlying spiritual reality of the parable which they are unable to see without Jesus. This is true for all of us. Unless Jesus graciously shows us the spiritual state of our hearts, we won't flourish. We will not see Jesus rightly.

So here we see the tale of four hearts.

Heart one: **Mark 4:13-15**.

This heart is a heart dead for Satan's good. Jesus equates the seed to the word, the gospel, and the soil to the heart. In this first example we see the hardest heart. You may have experienced people like this who are completely cold and hostile to the gospel.

They are disinterested in the Christianity because they feel like they have some higher sort of academic or cultural awareness which allows them to see the archaic and primitive faults of Christianity. But did you see why Jesus said they didn't experience growth and flourishing? Because Satan stole it away.

They are not hard because they are smarter than us. They are hard because Satan wishes for them to be hard. Satan doesn't want you to believe, and he is stronger than you. Peter calls Satan your enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. This heart opposes Christianity not out of a spirit of greater awareness, but a spirit of spiritual deadness. They will never experience flourishing because Satan doesn't want them to. Sin never brings flourishing.

Here is the tale of heart number two: **Mark 4:16-17**.

Out of all the hearts I have seen in my 7 years of ministry at the church, this heart is unfortunately the most prevalent. This heart is the flash in the pan heart. It booms and busts.

And for better or for worse, these hearts tend to be birthed on things like our retreat tomorrow. People get pulled out of the real world. This mess of unbelief, and they hear the gospel, they play games, they see a popular view of Christ and they blow up. They get tattoos, they change their profile pictures, they tweet "God's not dead." They are all in.

But when the first round of hardship comes. They die. And if we look back at the story these plants didn't die because the sun was hot. The sun wasn't the issue, they died because they had no roots.

These hearts think that being a Christian will be popular and easy, and they make an idol out of comfort and belonging rather than worshipping Christ. Christianity is not a step towards popularity. Look at what Jesus says in **Luke 21:16-19**.

Those of you have this second heart will not survive because you will not endure. And even though you made it further than heart #1, you missed flourishing. You died the same death. Fruit is required to flourish. Fruit is required to be a source of life. So I counsel you, be with Jesus. Before you are with us, before you are with doctrine, or preaching, or fellowship, or prayer, be with Jesus. He will endure you.

Heart number three: **Mark 4:18-19**.

This is the gluttonous heart. This is the heart which desires Christ, but also desires everything else. This heart allows Christ to initially take root, but doesn't find it necessary to remove anything else from the garden.

These are the people who think they can confess that Christ is their savior and yet do not alter the way in which they live. They desire the same things, they sin in the same ways, and even though the plant may grow initially among the other desires it will be choked out. And like the other three hearts, it will not produce fruit.

John describes this heart in **1 John 2:16-17**. You see often times we get caught up on the phrase not from the Father. And we think God is opposed to fun. But God is after our flourishing. Why does God want us to alter our desires, because our wrong desires don't last. They will not produce fruit. They will not bring you to flourish they will bring you to death.

Then there is the last heart: **Mark 4:20**.

This is the gospel tilled heart. For this heart, the gospel falls on fertile, soft, tender soil. And in this heart the gospel takes off. We see the stock, we see its health, but we've seen this before. The distinction of the gospel heart is that the rocks are removed, the weeds are dead, and it bears fruit. Not just some fruit. Lots of fruit. Enough fruit to make up for the other  $\frac{3}{4}$  which produced no fruit.

So naturally Jesus wants us to have this heart. But here is the problem: in this story we are the dirt.

Dirt has very little control over its own quality. It is fundamentally unable to cure itself. It's not that your heart is bad and you need to change it. It's that just like dirt, all of our hearts are unkempt and we need a gardener to tend to it.

For those of you in here who are non-Christians, you may be frustrated with your desire for flourishing. You may see the world's view of flourishing and find it lacking, or you may see a Christian's view of flourishing and find it unattainable. And you are right on both accounts.

That's because outside of the great gardener there is no hope for your fruit, and outside of Christ there is no hope for your heart. But Christ has come to till the soil of unbelief. And he didn't come to do it with the traditional tools, he came to till it with the cross. He died for your unbelief so that you may respond, grow and produce fruit. Jesus wants you to flourish, and to flourish is to be with Christ.

So here is my word to you. Four times in this text Jesus uses the word "hear." First of all, place yourself in a place where you will hear the word. Church, GCF, the retreat, community groups. You cannot expect to flourish if there is no seed. But you also cannot expect the seed to grow unless the soil is taken care of. Pray that Jesus will soften your heart. Pray that he himself becomes the secret to flourishing. Because in Jesus we find our greatest hope, our eternal life, and the joy of worshipping before him forever.

For the Christian in here. I ask you, where is your fruit? To say you are a Christian but to not produce fruit is to be no different than the seed choked by the weed. Are you growing in your worship of Christ, are you growing in your affection for his word, are you growing in your love of the brothers, are you serving, loving, sharing, and giving.

This is what makes us distinct. Our fruit.

And here is where the rubber meets the road. Jesus is flourishing. Jesus is true love, and life. Jesus is God, and in him there is only true beauty and peace through his death in our place. One day we will live in a new heavens and a new earth.

And by being a Christian you have a capacity to be of ultimate benefit to this world through your evangelism. There is a world which will come before the presence of God himself, but only those who receive the gospel will be there. So produce fruit and preach.

Not everyone will believe in the same way not all the soils produced fruit, but it was never the fault of the seed. In the same way not everyone we speak to will believe, but it is of no fault of our gospel. It's the fault of broken dead hearts. The gospel will win. We will through a continuous effort of faith and obedience be part of the winning side.

St. Patrick's hospital in town as one of four treatments centers nationally for ebola. And the other night I saw the local news station interviewing people on the street asking them about what they thought about potentially getting an Ebola patient. One woman said, "I want someone in it. If you have the capacity to help, but choose not to, what good are you?"

She gets the idea of flourishing, but how much more should we seek to share the gospel and contribute to eternal flourishing.

This is our hope. This is our message. Jesus is the key. His message is the means. Be the church.