

LESSON THREE

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

“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.”

MARK 4:20

REFLECTION

You can find them in the middle of busy cities, sometimes shoehorned between towering skyscrapers, sometimes perched in boxes on high balconies and even flourishing on the exposed corners of luxury penthouses. Stately old country homes and suburban cookie-cutter houses have them. And, of course, the rustic, rambling farmhouses of rural back roads always have them. Gardens. They come in all shapes and sizes. Vegetables, fruit, and crops of various kinds usually give away their sower's tastes. There's something unforgettable about tucking tiny seeds into the soil and watching what happens. Have you ever planted seeds and watched them grow? What impresses you most about this growth process?

SITUATION

People flocked to hear Jesus teach and see him heal, but they seemed more interested in his wonders than his words. But when Jesus used a planting story, he had his audience's attention. They were all familiar with the realities of plowing soil and sowing seed. His parables provoked curiosity. They sounded like the parables told by the rabbis in the synagogue, yet Jesus' stories seemed deeper, truer, and harder to understand. Even the disciples found it difficult to grasp his points. When they asked what he meant, Jesus told them.

OBSERVATION

Read Mark 4:1–20 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

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. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that,

"they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at

once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ 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. 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.”

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

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.”

⁹ And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, ¹² so that

‘Seeing they may see and not perceive,
And hearing they may hear and not understand;
Lest they should turn,
And their sins be forgiven them.’”

¹³ And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 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.”

EXPLORATION

1. What kind of people does the *hardened soil* represent (see verses 4, 15)?
What kind of people does the *rocky soil* represent (see verses 5–6, 16–17)?

2. What kind of people does the *thorny soil* represent (see verses 7, 18–19)?
What kind of people does the *good soil* represent (see verses 8, 20)?

3. What do the sower and the seed represent (see verses 3, 14)?

4. How does the story of the seeds parallel our spiritual lives?

5. How will our lives change when we begin to bear fruit?

6. What are some examples of what a fruitful Christian might do?

INSPIRATION

Think about your first encounter with Christ. Robe yourself in that moment. Resurrect the relief. Recall the purity. Summon forth the passion. Can you remember?

I can. 1965. A redheaded ten-year-old with a tornado of freckles sits in a Bible class on a Wednesday night. What I remember of the class are scenes—school desks with initials carved in them. A blackboard. A dozen or so kids, some listening, some not. A teacher wearing a suit coat too tight to button around his robust belly.

He is talking about Jesus. He is explaining the cross. I know I had heard it before, but that night I heard it for sure. “You can’t save yourself, you need a Savior.” I can’t explain why it connected that night as opposed to another, but it did. He simply articulated what I was beginning to understand—I was lost—and he explained what I needed—a Redeemer. From that night on, my heart belonged to Jesus.

Many would argue that a ten-year-old is too young for such a decision. And they may be right. All I know is that I never made a more earnest

decision in my life. I didn’t know much about God, but what I knew was enough. I knew I wanted to go to heaven. And I knew I couldn’t do it alone. No one had to tell me to be happy. No one had to tell me to tell others. They couldn’t keep me quiet. I told all my friends at school. I put a bumper sticker on my bicycle. (From *Six Hours One Friday* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. At different times in our lives our “soil type” may change. Which soil type currently represents your response to God and his Word?

8. What tactics does Satan use to prevent you from hearing and understanding God’s Word?

9. What “thorns” may be choking your ability to bear fruit?

10. In what ways are you trying to nourish the spiritual “seed” God has planted in your life?

11. What is your church doing to promote spiritual growth of seekers and believers?

12. What can you do to help the seed take root in others?

LIFE LESSONS

At times it may be helpful to think of your whole life as a certain kind of soil and ask God to show you what kind of changes he desires to make in you. At other times, it may be helpful to think of specific areas of your life as different kinds of soil. You are more like a farm than a field, and God is busy planting in some places, tending in others, and harvesting in other corners of your life. Take a thoughtful tour of your life, considering different areas and asking God to point out ways you can be more responsive and obedient to him.

DEVOTION

Jesus, you are the patient sower in my life. You've used others to place certain seeds, and sometimes I know I haven't appreciated their work as I should have. Help me express gratitude when I sense that you are placing others in my life to serve you on my "farm." Lord, do what you need to do to make my fields productive for you. I'm the farmer and farm, but I belong to you.

JOURNALING

How can you weed out the "thorns" that hinder your spiritual growth? Are there some rocks that need to be dug out? Beaten-down soil that needs to be tilled?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Mark during this twelve-part study, read Mark 4:1-34. For more Bible passages about responding to God's Word, read Psalm 119:99, 138; John 20:22-29; Acts 2:38-41; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Peter 2:2.