

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Great [and realistic] Expectations

(Mark 3:13--4:20)

Introduction: Check the stats...

Most baseball players who move from the minor leagues to the big leagues experience a bit of culture shock.

These players were all stars on all the teams they had been a part of to this point in their careers. If they hadn't been, they wouldn't be moving up to the majors. But, with the rare exception of the superstar, things change when they move to the majors.

In the majors, the competition is fiercer than anything they've ever seen. The opposing players are all world-class.

So, if a rookie heads into his first season expecting to excel like he did in High School, he's in for a rude awakening.

And that rude awakening could have been avoided by checking out the stats of the last one hundred and forty-seven years of professional baseball, because the stats don't lie.

The rookie would have learned that the best fielders in history made lots of errors. The best hitters struck out - a lot. (Babe Ruth is famous for being among the leaders in the strikeout category.)

And the best hitters could only muster a batting average of about 35%.¹ That means that the best players ever only got on base every third time they batted.

The way to avoid undue shock would be to accept that a career in baseball will come with some successes and lots of failures. So, the players have to come to the game with realistic expectations.

Today, we're turning our attention to a parable Jesus told that is just what we need to hear. This parable addresses expectations.

What are realistic expectations when we set out to spread His message and to make disciples?

Our study takes us to the gospel of Mark, and, as always, when it comes to understanding any passage in the Bible, context is king.

So, let's back up from our text to see what happened right before the Lord told this parable.

Background...

Jesus chooses the twelve apostles

Mark's gospel begins with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River by John.

From the baptism forward, the Lord was completely engaged in ministry. (Mark wrote what we often call the "GO" gospel.)

Mark shows Jesus preaching and teaching (1:14-15, 21-22, 39; 2:2, 18-22), healing people with various diseases (1:29-34, 40-45; 2:1-13; 3:1-6,10), casting out evil spirits (1:21-28; 32-34; 3:11-12), calling people to follow Him (1:16-20; 2:14), and raising a few eyebrows by violating Jewish traditions (1:27; 2:1-12; 2:16-17, 18; 2:23-28; 3:1-6).

¹ Ty Cobb has the best batting average of all time at .366. That's just a little bit better than one successful at bat out of every three.

The busyness continued as Jesus called all His disciples together and chose out of them [14]...*twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach [15] and to have authority to cast out the demons.*²

These men had seen Jesus perform miracle after miracle. They had heard His powerful teachings. They knew a good bit about Him.

But I'm convinced that each of these guys would have had questions about what they were getting themselves into when Jesus invited them, first, to be His disciples, and then called them to be His apostles.

Right after He chose them, they got a glimpse of what they had gotten themselves into.

Mark takes us from that scene of the choosing of the twelve to a decisive confrontation with some Jewish leaders.

Jesus, a "demonic exorcist" (!?) - and the unforgivable sin

I assume Jesus was in His hometown.³ Those who knew Him were concerned about Him and said, [21] "**He has lost His senses.**"

That is a picture of someone who is exhausted, stretched to the breaking point, overbusy. Some of you have been there and you know what that's like.

And then, Jewish scribes (experts in the Mosaic Law) came from Jerusalem to where He was. They accused Jesus of being a demonically empowered exorcist (Jesus pointed out that this was a laughably illogical accusation).

² The twelve were [16]...*Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), [17] James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, 'Sons of Thunder');* [18] and Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (referred to as Judas the son of James" in Luke's Gospel), and Simon the Zealot; [19] and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.

³ I infer this, but it is possible that He simply was in a house in the region of Galilee.

They were going straight for the jugular. But Jesus shot right back at them, telling them that their accusation against Him was "[**blasphemy against the Holy Spirit**]" - an unforgivable sin.

I'm not going to say much here about the unforgivable sin, except to say that it is to attribute the power Jesus had to perform miracles to Satan.⁴ Woah!

Now, just try to imagine listening to this exchange and being a freshly appointed apostle of Jesus.

Your new Rabbi has just been accused by some of the most prestigious religious leaders in Israel of casting out demons by the ruler of the demons.

That was about as condemning an accusation as we could imagine. It was rejection on a scale that they had never seen before being named apostles.

But your new Rabbi didn't back down.

He told these leaders that their rebuke of Him put them under God's judgment, that they were condemned for what they said about Him and the Holy Spirit.

This was an intense exchange. None of us would call it trivial or minor. This wasn't a skirmish. Both the scribes and Jesus brought out the big guns.

This was a game-changing confrontation. A line has been drawn and this confrontation won't be forgotten or gotten over.

To the extent that the apostles didn't know what they were getting themselves into, they now have a pretty clear picture that being Jesus' apostles will involve serious opposition.

⁴ Please see the Appendix at the end of the sermon manuscript for a couple more thoughts on the unforgivable sin / blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' family

Then there was a brief exchange where Jesus' family was present. They wanted to see Him. But He identified His mother and sister and brother, NOT as Mary, and his flesh and blood siblings, but as anyone who did the will of God.

That's the end of the background. Now we come to today's passage.

The scene shifts to the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus was with "***a very large crowd.***" (4:1)

It was so large that He couldn't address the whole crowd from the beach. So, He got into a boat that was out floating on the water, sat down, and began to teach the crowds who were sitting on the shore.

It was at this point that the whole tenor of Jesus' teaching ministry changed. Up until that confrontation with the scribes, He had taught about God and His ways to great crowds of people with clarity.

No more.

Story Time (v. 2a)

[2] And He was teaching them many things in parables...⁵

We love Jesus' parables. They are great stories - and, yes, they can be hard to understand.

We have to understand that Jesus intended that they be hard to understand. He meant for it to take work to understand His parables.

It is the nature of parables to both reveal and conceal.

To those who are not open to hearing and learning, the parables *conceal* deep lessons about life, faith, and God. They remain stories and nothing more.

But, to those who are spiritually sensitive and interested and willing to ponder and open to learning, the parables *reveal* God's truth.

Today, we're diving into the first parable listed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.⁶

It is listed first, I believe, for two reasons. One, because it concerns receptivity to the message Jesus brought. Two, because it brings a measure of realism to our expectations when it comes to the results of sharing His message with others.

I love this parable for the message it brings, and, of course, because it's all about gardening.

The Parable of the Soils, to Everyone (vv. 2b-8)

The Sower and the Seed

[3] "Listen to this!"⁷ Behold, the sower went out to sow"

Every garden and every farm has to have somebody willing to throw seeds. After all, no seeds, no crop. And the field Jesus envisions has just such a sower.

We don't know what kind of seed this farmer was sowing. But he was definitely sowing with a view to a harvest.

As is the case in most fields, some sections of this gardeners' plot were better suited for crops than others.

Sadly, some of this sower's seed fell on hard-packed soil.

Soil Types (vv. 4-8)

⁵ Approximately one third of Jesus' teaching is recorded in the form of parables, but He wasn't the first to use parables as vehicles for communication. We find a number of parables in the Old Testament, and the parable was a favorite teaching style of the Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day.

⁶ John's Gospel contains no parables.

⁷ The words "*to this*" are added. The Greek is simply the one word, "*Listen.*"

Hard-packed soil (v. 4)

[4] “as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up.”

In the ancient fields of Palestine, there were little footpaths that ran back and forth through the fields on which the sower walked while he cast seed.

As he threw his seed over the tilled earth, some seed would land on these footpaths. When this happened, the seed didn't sink into the ground, but lay on the surface.

Birds would swoop down and eat the seed. And, of course, there was no harvest, no crop at all, from those seeds.

Then, some of the sower's seed fell on rocky ground with shallow soil.

Shallow soil (vv. 5-6)

[5] “Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. [6] “And when the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

Not a lot of comment is needed here. Many of us could go out into our backyards this afternoon, dig down six inches, and find a perfect illustration of what Jesus was talking about.

In my garden it isn't so much that the soil has rocks in it as it is that there are only a few inches before you reach bedrock.

In such a soil, a plant germinates quickly and sprouts quickly, because the sun warms the soil quickly. But due to the shallow soil, the plant can't develop a decent root system.

So, when the sun (usually the friend of agriculture) shines on this plant, it scorches it, and the plant dies.

Other seed fell on the part of the field where there was already a good, strong crop - of weeds.

Weedy soil (v. 7)

[7] “Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

Here there was no problem with the soil itself. It was probably rich, full of organic material, and moist from recent rains.

The problem was that this soil was crowded. There was competition for nutrients, moisture and space. The good seed and the bad seed fought for the soil's resources.

Weeds, thorns, and thistles waged war with the grain. Jesus says that the thorns choked out the good seed.

To which I say, “AMEN.” That's my experience. The weeds will win just about every time over tender, succulent, vegetables.

But mark it down. If weeds and veggies compete for the same space of the garden, the veggies will lose to the weeds every time.

Finally, we come to the fourth soil.

Healthy soil (v. 8)

[8] “Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundred times as much.”

The seed sown on good soil yielded a good crop.

This soil was not hard-packed but was rich and deep. This soil was regularly weeded, mulched, watered and fertilized.

When the seed falls on this ground, it naturally produces the intended crop - in the case of my garden at home, beans, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, and chard.

And THAT is the parable.

Listen! (v. 9)

At the end of the story, Jesus looked out at the crowds who were listening and said, **[9] He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**"

If the listeners were to understand the message this parable had for them about life and God, they were going to have to apply themselves to unlocking that message.⁸

Jesus dismissed the crowds and He found Himself alone with His followers - the twelve apostles plus a few others. They came to Him, confused.

[10] As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve disciples, began asking Him about the parables.

With their questions, what had been a public discourse turned into a private talk between Jesus and His followers.

The Parable of the Soils, to Jesus' Followers (vv. 11-20)

Insiders and Outsiders (vv. 11-12)

Jesus' followers (v. 11a)

⁸ King David knew his own need to listen to God's Word with ears wide open. In one place, Eugene Peterson wrote that David "guzzled God's Word with outstretched ears." In Psalm 40, David wrote, **[6] Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; My ears You have opened.**

The imagery of that second line is fascinating. We are to picture a human head with no ears. But God has given David ears. In fact, the word for "opened" in that verse would actually be better translated "dig." God got out His shovel and dug through the cranial granite to make ear holes in David's head so that He could hear. I believe that for each of us there is a continuing need for God's shovel. Our ears can easily get stopped up so that we don't hear His message. Ears can be plugged up by cultural trash and audio junk. God will gladly bring His shovel to deal with such ears. He will unstop them so that we can hear. Ask Him.

[11a] And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God..."

So, this is a change from Jesus' method up to this point. Now, those who were following Him will get up-close-and-personal teaching direct from Jesus Himself.

Not so for the ones He refers to as "outsiders."

Outsiders (vv. 11b-12)

[11b]...but for those who are outside, everything comes in parables, [12] so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND IT WOULD BE FORGIVEN THEM."⁹

These are the ones who accused Him of being empowered by Satan. These are the ones who prompted Him to give parables in the first place.

And for these, the parables didn't reveal, they concealed.

With most of the parables, there is hard work to do. We have to think and pray and discuss with each other to unlock their meaning.

Not so for this one. Jesus handed the parable's meaning to us on a silver platter. He first explained the two static elements in the story.

Two Unchanging Symbols (v. 14)

[14] "The sower sows the word."

⁹ Why did Jesus stop giving clear lectures and begin to speak to the crowds in parables? It was because the multitudes He was addressing - at least for the most part - were not inclined to receive the truth He had to offer. So, He turned His teaching style to a mode (parables) that would deprive them of clear instruction. By teaching in parables Jesus not only invited His audience to think and pray and meditate and so find the real meaning of His words, He also allowed them the opportunity to turn a deaf ear to the point He was making, thereby lessening the judgment they would face for not obeying or trusting Him.

This parable has symbols that represent different things in the real world. There is the seed, the sower, and the soil.

The SOWER is the one who communicates God's message to an audience.

It may be Jesus, as in the Gospels. Or it may be the Bible as we read it. Or it may be the Christian who speaks or writes.

The SEED is the Word of God. It may be the message that God gives eternal life to the one who believes in Jesus. It might be a message of exhortation or instruction.

God's message is compared to a seed. A seed just sits there, inert, apparently lifeless. In the same way, God's message goes out as a word, sounding for all the world like any other word.

But give the word of God the proper medium and, like the seed, it will bring forth life and change.

These two elements of the parable, the seed and the sower, are static. But there is another element in the parable that does change: the soil. The soil is dynamic.

The four soil types present in the parable represent four different "soul" types.

Jesus' explanation of the "soul types" follows, starting with the hard-packed soil, which corresponds to hard heart.

Soul Types (vv. 15-20)

Hard-packed soil = hard people (v. 15)

[15] "These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them."

This first soil type represents someone who hears the Word, but not really. They hear without listening, so the seed never roots.

This person doesn't allow the Word to penetrate. It just bounces off. He is easy prey for the enemy, who snatches away the Word that is sown.

This is the ultimate tragedy. Someone rejects God's message.

Then there is the shallow, rocky soil which corresponds to a person who is only a temporary follower.

Shallow soil = temporary people (vv. 16-17)

[16] "And in a similar way these are the ones sown with seed on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; [17] and yet they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution occurs because of the word, immediately they fall away."

Here is the one who hears and receives the Word for the good news it is. But the seed doesn't produce a crop in his soul. And it doesn't produce a crop because the man wilts under pressure. He suffers from "shallow soul syndrome."

He doesn't stubbornly reject the truth. But he isn't solid.¹⁰ So when hardship, persecution, or affliction hits, he falls away.

Next, Jesus explained that the weed-infested soil describes a crowded, distracted soul.

Weedy soil = distracted people (v. 18-19)

[18] "And others are the ones sown with seed among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, [19] but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

¹⁰ Jesus says this person doesn't have a firm root within.

This man (or this woman) hears the Word. But the busy-ness of life gets in the way. He doesn't give priority to a laser-beam focus on God's message.

The good seed of the Word sends up a seedling that is choked out by worries and riches and the desires for "stuff."

This choking is not a sudden act. It doesn't happen in one blistering day when the sun scorches a young, rootless plant.

No. It takes time to choke out the life of the good seed.

This man or woman knows full well that what God has commanded is good, and that what He has promised is good. But the distractions of this life keep reeling him in.

Finally, we listen as Jesus links the healthy soil to the healthy soul that produces a rich, spiritual harvest.

Healthy soil = fruitful people (v. 20)

[20] "And those are the ones sown with seed on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundred times as much."

This listener:

- resists becoming hardened and works hard at keeping his soul receptive to God's message.
- fertilizes his soul with the nutrients that promote growth.
- loves to bear fruit so much that he ruthlessly weeds his soul of anything that would compete with God's message.

And THAT is the parable of the soils.

In the time remaining, I want to say three things.

FIRST, I'll give some thoughts about developing healthy, fruitful soils. SECOND, I'll point out one way to view this parable that I believe is dangerous and wrong.

THIRD, I'll tell you what I believe is the main reason Jesus gave this parable to His first disciples as the first parable, and why it is so very important to us, today.

Conclusion:

Tending our own gardens...

It's impossible to read this story reflectively and to not take a moment to examine the state of our own personal garden's soil, the state of our own soul. And I think it is right that we do that.

Softening a hard soul

You might see yourself today in the parable and recognize hardness, like the first soil in Jesus' parable, or like the garden in my yard was during last summer's heat and drought.

If that's you, I could point you to hopeful stories in Scripture of hard hearts turning soft, of barren lives becoming fruitful.¹¹

To grow what has been a good garden this spring, I had to take the shovel and pickaxe, aerate the soil, and start fresh. (And yes, I am an excellent gardener when we get good rains.)

For you to move from hardness to fruitfulness may require walking a path of repentance, of confession, of allowing God to soften you, even if it involves the shovel and the plow of trials and pain.

But, yes, there is hope, even if you are in a place of hardness right now, for the garden of your life to become fruitful for Jesus.

Nourishing a shallow soul

¹¹ Review the story of Manasseh from 2 Chronicles 33. Refer to the message from April 23 on the life of Manasseh. Go to the www.nwchurch.org and click on "current messages" to find "Manasseh: Up From the Ashes."

If you see yourself in the shallow soil, you see a tendency to drift away from stability and your joy in Jesus, there is also hope.

Applying nutrients and organic material turns South Texas dirt into fertile soil.

And applying the nutrients of regular exposure to Scripture, to times in prayer, and to the pursuit of Jesus-centered community will deepen your soul and allow you to be fruitful.

Weeding a distracted soul

Or you might, on reflection, see yourself in the garden filled with weeds and thorns.

Your soul is distracted by worries, wealth, and stuff. (What Jesus calls ***“the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things.”***)

You struggle to maintain a focus on Jesus.

Well, every successful farmer and gardener must not only love fruits and flowers. He must also hate weeds and thorns. He has to be willing to regularly and ruthlessly pull weeds.

And for you to turn your distracted soul into a fruitful soul will involve pulling the weeds of worry to let faith grow, and the pursuit of wealth for wealth's sake, and the accumulation of stuff for stuff's sake.

So, yes, the distracted soul can change and bear fruit for God.

It is legitimate and healthy to apply this parable to the strengthening of our own souls before God.

I do believe, though, that there is an illegitimate and unhealthy way to use this parable.

NOT the purpose...

It is tempting to look at the four soil/soul types and try to determine which ones have eternal life and which ones don't.

That approach to the parable is interesting...and problematic.

It's problematic because there is nothing in the parable to suggest that Jesus' purpose in telling it was so that His followers could figure out the eternal destiny of the people He's describing.

Neither the words nor the themes related to that issue crop up in this parable or in Jesus' explanation.

He doesn't use the words *saved* or *eternal life* or *faith / believe / trust* or *Heaven / Hell* or *grace* or *condemnation* here.

The parable doesn't shed light on the question of who is saved and who isn't.

It does, however, provide a great benefit to us who follow Him as we go about sowing the Word among the people we know.

A word to the wise sower...

Let's remember the timeline when Jesus gave this parable.

It was shortly after having chosen His twelve apostles and immediately after His clash with the scribes who accused Him of being a demonically empowered exorcist.

The Lord knew that just as He had been rejected by the scribes (Mark 3:20-30), His followers would also face responses of acceptance and rejection, opposition and embrace, as they sowed His message.

He will soon send them out on their own to preach and teach and heal and cast out demons. After His earthly ministry is over, responsibility for spreading the message will rest with the apostles.

They needed to know that some who listened wouldn't respond well at all. Some would respond well, initially, but would then stop following. And some would produce a great harvest for God.

How discouraging it would be if they expected that every time they shared the message, the listener would receive it, follow, grow, and bear fruit - because that certainly was not going to happen!

It would be like a major league baseball player getting discouraged every time he made an error or struck out.

That would be unrealistic. So, Jesus told this parable to prepare His followers - then and now - for this reality.

To the overly optimistic among us, Jesus' parable is a cautionary tale. As you sow the seed of God's message, don't be surprised when some don't respond the way you wish they would.

Some of the people you would think most likely to respond positively, won't. Some of those you most desperately want to respond positively, won't.

Having heard this parable, you'll still be sad, but you won't be surprised.

But this parable speaks every bit as much to the pessimist.

As you spread Jesus' message indiscriminately among the people you know and those you meet, it will sometimes fall on rich, deep, soft soil.

The message will be received, your friend will be persuaded of the truth about Jesus, the heart will be nurtured and kept weed free. A crop will grow from that heart.

And you never know who might respond to the message about Jesus you have to share. The one who receives it might be the one you would least expect to receive it.

Let's use the opportunities this summer holds to spread the message.

Ask God to provide you with open doors to share with cousins, kids, parents, grandkids.

Ask Him to provide you with fresh opportunities with neighbors, with people at work, at your gym.

As you go out from this place, you go out as a commissioned sower. Your mission is to sow God's message as lovingly and as wisely and as broadly as you can.

But, by all means, sow, tell, share, speak, serve, love!

Appendix - The Unforgivable Sin (Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit)

[Mark 3:21] And when His own people heard of this, they came out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses." [22] The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." [23] And so He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? [24] "And if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. [25] "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. [26] "And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! [27] "But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. [28] "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons and daughters of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" - [30] because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

In verses twenty-one and following of Mark 3 Jesus encountered serious opposition from the religious leadership of the Jews.

They charged Jesus with working in league with the devil - to cast out demons! As the Lord pointed out, this is demonstrably laughable. Why would Satan cast out Satan?

But, as we see from what He goes on to say, their accusation was also a very dangerous accusation. Jesus performed His exorcisms by the power of the Holy Spirit. And to confuse the Holy Spirit with Satan (the spirit of unholiness) is unforgivable - literally.

Here, I submit some thoughts about what Jesus says is the unforgivable sin.

He addresses the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12, Mark 3 and Luke 12.

Where the context is clear (Matthew and Mark are set in a clear context; Luke doesn't include much in the way of context), it is clear that Jesus is responding to the accusation by the Pharisees (so, Matthew; Mark identifies them as scribes) that His miracles were being performed by the power of Satan rather than by the power of God.

By this accusation, His opponents were actually doing two things:

1. They were demonizing the ministry of Jesus.
2. They were equating the Holy Spirit (the third member of the Trinity) with Satan.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is fundamentally concerned with glorifying Jesus (see the Upper Room discourse, especially John 14-16). So, this equation of the Spirit's ministry with the unclean ministry of the devil is a *perfectly* perverted understanding of the ministry of Jesus.

It seems clear to me that Jesus is saying that as long as a person believes that the power source for the miracles He performed was diabolical, that person cannot be saved.

Until a person changes this sinful belief, they are unforgiven. However, I find nothing in Mark 3 to suggest that this sin cannot be repented of.

If a person who has believed that Jesus' miracles were demonically empowered becomes persuaded that Jesus and His works are sourced in God the Holy Spirit and NOT in Satan, that person will receive eternal life when they believe in Jesus.

Some who have written about this statement of Jesus believe that only the generation that saw the miracles of Jesus firsthand can be guilty of this particular sin. And, in a very strict sense, I believe that is true.

However, more generally, anyone who associates the works of Jesus with Satan rather than with God, even in 2023, cannot be saved and is guilty of an unforgivable sin.

