

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: BREATHLESS**

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

## **To Those with Ears**

(Mark 3:20--4:20)

Study #7

### **Introduction: Once upon a time...**

Fairy tales begin with the familiar refrain, "*Once upon a time...*" Those words launch us into another world with a story that captures imaginations.

There is nothing like a good story and parents know it. One of the great delights of my children's childhood for me was the opportunity it provided to release my inner Garrison Keillor.

I told stories of all kinds to my kids. Silly stories. Adventure stories. Stories with a point and stories without a point. I told them stories at bedtime and at mealtime and while we were walking on trails and when we were in the car - you name it.

Knowing that there is nothing like a good story, Jesus told stories, too. And most of His stories are a special kind of story we call *parable*. Jesus' parables capture the imagination more vividly than any fairy tale.

Today we will think about parables, generally, and about one parable in particular.

*To review...*

Last week we watched Jesus choose His twelve apostles and were impressed with the general ordinariness of the whole lot of them.

And what He did then He is still doing today. He chooses to use very regular, ordinary people - folks like me and you - in extraordinary ways. He delights to transform His followers, then and now, into *genuine, authentic, transparent* people through whom His power can freely flow

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

These leaders (scribes who have come to Galilee from Jerusalem) accuse Him of being a demonically empowered exorcist (an accusation that, as Jesus points out, is laughably illogical). But He also says that their accusation is "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" - an unforgivable sin.

Now we could talk for a while about the "unforgivable sin," and doing so would be helpful. But I'll say, briefly, that the unforgivable sin is to attribute the power Jesus had to perform miracles to Satan. Whether in the first century or the twenty first century, as long as someone believes that Jesus performed His works of power by the spirit of *unholiness*, that person cannot be saved.<sup>1</sup>

That was what the scribes believed and so they were guilty of an unforgivable sin.

Significantly, it was precisely at this point that Jesus' whole teaching ministry changed. Up until this decisive confrontation, He had freely and clearly taught about God and His ways to great crowds of people.

No more. From this day forward He taught in parables.

And this morning we follow Jesus to one of His favorite teaching venues, the Sea of Galilee, and listen to the beginning of His parables.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

**Setting:** Back to the Sea, again (v. 1)

*[1] He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land.*

Rather than take a chance on being mobbed (as had been the case earlier), Jesus took advantage of a nearby boat and began teaching from the safety of that boat.

### **There is Nothing Like a Good Story (v. 2a)**

*[2] And He was teaching them many things in parables...<sup>2</sup>*

Now, we know parables. Children love the parables of Jesus. Many of us parents have delighted to tell these stories to our children.

But, as we have grown older we have come to realize that parables are not **bedtime stories** to put children to sleep. They are **bugle calls** to wake us up.

Parables are both **windows** and **mirrors**. As mirrors, they help us see ourselves; as windows, they help us understand life and God.

And here is something else about parables. They can be tough to understand. Jesus intended them to be tough to understand. He meant for it to take work, real mental effort, to understand His parables.

It is the nature of parables to both **reveal** and **conceal**. To those who are spiritually sensitive and interested and willing to work at it, they reveal God's truth. But, to those who couldn't care less, they conceal the deeper lessons about life, faith, and God that the parable contains.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

If you are willing to dig, you'll find rich treasure in a parable. If not, if you won't ponder and mull and think and wrestle and cogitate and meditate, the parables remain stories, and nothing more.

Our plan for this morning is to explore one of Jesus' parables. It is the first recorded parable<sup>3</sup> and is among the best known. It is also one of my favorite parables, in large measure because it is about gardening.

Jesus begins with a gardener/farmer and his seed.

### **The Parable of the Soils (vv. 2b-8)**

#### **The Sower and the Seed**

*[3] Listen to this!<sup>4</sup> 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 is sowing. But he is sowing with a view to a harvest.

As is the case in most fields, some sections are better suited for crop development than others. Sadly, some of this sower's seed fell on hard-packed soil.

#### **Soil Types (vv. 4-8)**

*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.

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<sup>3</sup> This is true in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; John's Gospel contains no parables.

<sup>4</sup> The words "*to this*" are added. The Greek is simply the one word, "*Listen*"

As he threw his seed over the tilled earth, some seed would inevitably land on these footpaths. When this happened, the seed didn't find its way 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.

As the sower continued tossing seed, some 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 after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.**

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

It is not so much soil that has rocks in it as it is soil that is only a few inches deep 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 has no chance to develop a decent root system. When the sun (usually the friend of agriculture) shines on this plant, it scorches it and the plant dies.

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

*Weed-infested 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 may have been 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.

My experience with home gardening prompts me to say “AMEN” to Jesus' comment. The weeds will win just about every time over tender, succulent, vegetables.

Why? Who knows? Maybe the bad seed has more tenacity than the good seed. 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 hundredfold.”**

The seed sown on good soil yielded a good crop. This soil is not hard-packed, but is rich and deep and arable. This soil is regularly weeded, mulched, watered and fertilized.

And when the seed falls on this ground, it naturally produces the intended crop - grain, corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, whatever.

**Listen!! (v. 9)**

That is the parable. A couple of minutes ago, I said that parables are **windows AND mirrors**. They **reveal** and they **conceal**.

They are stories that teach about life and God.

But if we are to wring from them the truth they contain, we must give ourselves to understanding them. We have to really apply ourselves to unlocking their message.

That is why, at the end of this parable, Jesus cried out to His listeners, [9] *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

After the story-telling and after the invitation to the crowds to listen, a bunch of His followers (the twelve apostles + others) gathered around Him, confused about this new way of speaking.

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

And what Jesus did was to graciously pulled them into His confidence. What has been a public discourse becomes a private conversation between Jesus and His followers.

### **Jesus, to a Select Few (vv. 11-20)**

#### **Insiders and Outsiders (vv. 11-12)**

*Jesus’ pupils (v. 11a)*

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

Those who followed Him will receive private instruction. They will get up close and personal teaching direct from Jesus Himself.

But it will not be so the ones He calls “outsiders.” These are those who accused Him of being empowered by Satan. These are the ones who have prompted Him to teach in parables in the first place!

*Outsiders (vv. 11b-12)*

*[11b]...but those who are outside get everything 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 BE FORGIVEN.”*

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

Not so for the parable of the sower/soil/seed. Jesus hands the explanation to us on a silver platter. And He begins by explaining the two unchanging elements in the story.

#### **Two Unchanging Symbols (vv. 14-20)**

*[14] “The sower sows the word.*

This parable has very definite symbols that represent different things in the real world. In each of the four pictures, there is the seed, the sower, and the soil.

The SOWER is the one who communicates the message to an audience. It may be Jesus Himself (as in the Gospels). Or, it may be the Bible as we read it. Or, it may be the Christian who preaches, witnesses, encourages, or exhorts. The sower brings God’s message.

The SEED is the Word of God. It may be the message of salvation to someone who doesn’t know Jesus, or it may be a message of exhortation. It may be instruction.

And God’s message is compared to a seed. A seed just sits there, inert, apparently lifeless. Yet in the proper medium it brings forth life.

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 it, like the seed, will bring forth life.

These two ingredients, the seed and the sower, are static in this parable. They remain the same. But there is another ingredient in the parable, one that is dynamic. It is the SOIL.

In listening to Jesus explain this parable, we have to pay closest attention to the soils because the soils change as the parable progresses.

The four soil types present in the parable, proper, represent four different “soul” types. Jesus’ explanation of the “soul types” follows.

### **Soul Types (vv. 15-20)**

*“Hard-packed” 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 a man or a woman who hears the Word, but it doesn’t “take root.” They hear, but they don’t listen.

There is a hardness about this person. They don’t allow the Word to penetrate. It just bounces off. And these folks are easy prey for Satan, who will take away from them the Word that is sown.

When a garden has become hard-packed, and that is very likely in an environment like South Texas in a droughty summer like this one, I only know of one way to fix it so that it will produce a harvest. It’s got to be plowed under.

And the remedy God will frequently apply to a hard-packed soul so that it will produce a harvest is, likewise, the plow. Without God’s gracious application of trials, affliction, and disruption, the seed of the Word will just sit there - until the enemy finally steals it away.

Jesus next explains the second type of soul illustrated by the second type of soil.

*“Shallow” people (vv. 16-17)*

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

Here is the person who hears and receives the Word for the good news it is. But, the seed of the Word doesn’t bear fruit. And the reason for the lack of fruit-bearing is that this person is subject to wilting under pressure. This person suffers from “shallow soul syndrome.”

He doesn’t stubbornly reject the truth. But, there is a lack of earnestness. He is not solid.

Hardship causes him to fall away from the Word. He is subject to the dangers of falling away when either persecution or affliction comes his way.

Just like soils in South Texas benefit from supplements - acids and nitrogen and molasses and organic material and beneficial nematodes - to produce a crop, the person with shallow soul syndrome needs soul supplements if he is going to produce a harvest for God.

There are lots of supplements that could be recommended, but I’m going to key in on one. I’ve seen this supplement applied to lots of souls (including my own) and frequently to great effect.

It is the supplement of community. Add community to the soul of someone who is wilting under pressure and you will often see a near-miraculous revitalizing.

And I’m not just talking about hanging together with church friends.

When the Bible speaks of community, it means soul-to-soul relating. Words like authentic and genuine and transparent come to mind.

It is an iron-against-iron sharpening kind of community. It is the kind of community where the “one-anothers” of the New Testament happen.

It is Bible-centered, Jesus-centered, prayer-centered, service-centered and Holy Spirit-led community that will turn a wilting Christian into a fruitful, healthy Christian.

That kind of community deals a death blow to shallow soul syndrome.

Then Jesus went on to explain the problem with the third soil type. The weed-infested soil describes the crowded soul.

*“Distracted” people (v. 18-19)*

***[18] “And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, [19] but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.***

This guy hears the Word. But, the busy-ness of life gets in the way of an undivided focus on God’s message. Wow. If there is a soil for our time, this is it.

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

The choking is not a sudden act. It is not a trampling and devouring. It doesn’t happen over the course of 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 lures of this world keep reeling him in.

So, what can be done for such a crowded life, where there are divided loyalties? The heart, like the garden, must be weeded!

Every farmer and every effective gardener knows that he must not only love fruits and flowers. He must also hate weeds and thorns. He must get on his hands and knees and pull the weeds out by the roots - ruthlessly.

And the Christian who would see a harvest for God will pull up by the roots:

- the weed of worry - and consciously trust God;
- the weed of the idolatrous pursuit of this world’s riches - and fix his hope on God’s eternal riches; and
- the weed of an insatiable hunger for things other than what God has provided - and learn contentment.

The discipline of weed-pulling is essential to yielding a crop for God.

Finally, we come to the soil that brings a smile to God’s face. Jesus links the healthy soil to the healthy soul that produces a spiritual harvest.

*“Fruitful” people (v. 20)*

***[20] “And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”***

This is what we want to become - people who yield a crop for Jesus. People who:

- keep our souls soft and arable and resist becoming hard-packed;
- mulch and fertilize our souls with the nutrient of Christ- and Word- and prayer- and service-centered community.
- ruthlessly weed our souls of anything that would compete with God’s message.

And THAT is the parable of the soils.

Now, for the time remaining today I want you to think with me about one wrong way to look at the parable, one helpful truth we can glean from the parable, and one huge, glaring personal exhortation that arises from this parable.

## Conclusion:

First, a word about a purpose I'm confident Jesus did NOT have in mind when He told this parable.

*NOT the purpose...*

It is tempting to try and figure out from this parable who is and who is not saved. I've read books and talked to lots of people who want to look at the four soil/soul types and use them to determine which ones have eternal life and which ones don't.

That's an interesting discussion, but a problematic one. And the reason it is problematic is that there is nothing to suggest that Jesus' purpose in telling the parable was so that His followers could figure out the eternal destiny of the four soils.

Neither the words nor the themes related to that issue crop up in this parable or in Jesus' explanation. We don't read "saved" "eternal life" "faith/believe/trust" "Heaven/Hell" "grace" or "condemnation" here.

The parable doesn't shed light on the issue of salvation. It does, however, provide a great benefit to us, His followers, as we go about spreading/sowing the Word.

*A word to the wise sower...*

When Jesus gave this parable, He knew that His disciples would soon be the "sowers" spreading the seed of the Word in their world.

And they needed to know that some of those who listened to their message would respond poorly; some would respond well, initially, and then would fall away; and some would produce a great harvest for God.

This parable alerts every one of us who share the Word to the fact that people will respond differently to the message we share. And to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

As you go out from this place, you go out as a commissioned sower.

Your job is to sow God's message as lovingly and as wisely and as broadly as you can. But not everybody is going to respond the way you wish they would.

This parable very helpfully tells us, "*That's OK. Expect different responses. Sow away!*"

Now we come to the VERY practical exhortation for you and for me.

*For those with ears...*

At the end of the parable, Jesus called out to those who were hearing Him speak that day and said, "***Let him who has ears to hear, listen!***"

He made clear that the issue in bearing fruit for God or not is how we listen to the Word.

Well, Jesus' immediate audience was - and is! - His immediate target. He wanted then, and He wants today for us to consider our own receptivity to God's message.

He says that the ear is the receptacle for receiving God's truth.<sup>5</sup> So, let me ask, how is your hearing today?

Is it possible that your capacity for hearing - REALLY hearing - God's message is compromised because you have your hands covering your ears? You have hardened yourself against hearing. You don't want to hear.

Jesus invites you to a fruitful life, but you'll never bear fruit for Him without outstretched ears to hear Him.

Take your hands down off your ears. Remove the ear protectors so that you can listen. Be receptive.

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<sup>5</sup> In the art of the Medieval church, the organ of conception for the virgin birth was Mary's ear.

Or maybe you can't hear His message as well as you might because other messages are winning the battle for your attention.

We all know that it's noisy out there.

And a lot of the noise is of the variety that makes it tough to receive God's message. The remedy is not to live the life of a hermit and retreat to seclusion from the world. But there are remedies...

Some of you are right now hearing messages that could overwhelm you. You are facing trials and threats. The message is "Destruction!" "Disaster!"

If that is you, are you making room in your life for community? If you are facing affliction, you can't live without it - and the greater the affliction, the more desperately you need community. It is in community that you will hear the message of love and acceptance and encouragement and support and honest reproof - exactly the kind of message you need if you are under attack.

And most all of us are bombarded by distracting messages all day long - hundreds of them each and every day - that distract us, tempt us, and would derail us from really listening to God's Word.

These messages plug up your ear canals so thoroughly that the good message of God's Word simply can't get through. It may be that you may need to do a little bit of weeding.

That might look different to different ones of us. But some or all of the following could be helpful:

Try paring down your exposure to media.

Tune your media intake to more wholesome fare.

Take an "electronic fast."

Go a day without the Internet.

Go an hour without Facebook or texting and use that time to listen to God's message.

Imagine your life a garden, free of weeds, well-watered with rich soil, producing a rich crop of love, joy, and peace for God.

A fruitful life hinges on listening.



**Appendix** - The Unpardonable Sin (Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit)

*[Mark 3:21] When His own people heard of this, they went 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 He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? [24] “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] “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 binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. [28] “Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons 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.

So, here are 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 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.

Since the ministry of the Holy Spirit is fundamentally concerned with bringing glory to Jesus (see the Upper Room discourse, especially John 14-16), this equation of the Spirit’s ministry with the unclean ministry of the devil is essentially a “perfectly” perverted understanding of the ministry of Jesus.

I believe 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 repents of this mindset, they are unforgiven and unforgivable. But I find nothing in this passage to suggest that this sin cannot be repented of.

If a person’s posture toward Jesus and His works changes from association with the devil (the *unholy* Spirit) to that of the Holy Spirit, he/she can be saved by placing trust in Jesus for forgiveness, based on who He is - the Lord.

Some who give consideration to this subject believe that only the generation that actually 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 does not associate the miracles and works of Jesus with God’s power, even in 2011, cannot be saved and is guilty of an unpardonable sin (i.e. - the sin of unbelief).