

Saving Faith Bears Fruit
Mark 4:14-20
Tim Becker – April 7, 2019

1. Introduction

In the previous two sermons we talked about our desperate need to be saved by God. What do we need saving from? From his righteous anger. Why is he angry at us? Because of our sins against him. God is holy and just and will judge all wickedness. We are sinners inside and out. Every person on the planet rightly deserves hell because they willfully violate his word and his worth. Our sins are creating a bitter pill for us to swallow. The first step away from hell is to see our sins as bitter rather than tasty treats that make life fun or fulfilling, and then to repent of them.

Last week we saw from Romans 3 that our only escape from God's judgment is found in Christ Jesus. And this the best news we could hear. God provided a way for us to be redeemed by sending his own Son to live a righteous life and to die on a cross not for his own sins, but for ours. Jesus paid the penalty we deserve for our sins and he satisfied God's anger toward us. The final step away from hell is to see Christ as sweet rather than irrelevant or boring, and then to put our trust in Christ alone to save us.

We are not saved by God because we deserve it. We can't work to earn his forgiveness. Obeying him sometimes, doesn't cancel out our disobeying him at other times. This is why Paul says in Rom 3:28 : "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." We are forgiven and declared just by God on the basis of our faith in Jesus, not on the basis of our good works. This is true even when those works are what his law prescribes.

We might think from this that doing godly good works has nothing to do with the Christian life. If I told you that good works were actually vital to saving faith, you might think I'd be contradicting myself and the Scriptures. This isn't a contradiction. If we have no good works, no fruit, then we aren't saved. To see this with me, please turn in your Bibles to Mark 4 starting in v. 1. Please follow along as I read v. 1-9 and then keep following as I skip down to read v. 14-20.

* Read Mark 4:1-9; 14-20.

Please pray with me.

* Pray

2. The parable of the sower

We see in v. 1-9 the parable of the sower that Jesus told the crowd. Then in v. 14-20 Jesus tells the meaning of the parable to his disciples.

In the parable Jesus tells of a sower of seed. What is the aim of the sower? To see plants grow so that they produce fruit and he can harvest a crop. Every gardener or farmer wants to see that. But not all his seed accomplishes his aim, right? In Jesus' parable, the problem isn't with the seed. We could say that the seed has enemies that keep some of it from sprouting, growing, and maturing. What are those enemies? The first is birds. Some of the seed falls where it can't hide in the soil; it just falls on a hard path. So, the birds easily find it and eat it up. That seed never even sprouts.

The second enemy in the parable is shallow soil. The seed sprouts quickly, but the roots don't go deep in the shallow soil. So, when the sun gets hot, the plant dries up because it can't get enough moisture.

The third enemy in the parable is what we would just call weeds. Just like in our gardens, if we don't kill the weeds, the weeds will grow faster than our plants and will steal the precious light and moisture so that the plants stay small and never mature. These plants never produce fruit.

Some of the seeds escaped from the 3 enemies and fell into good soil. These seeds grew up into mature plants. The plants don't all produce the same amount of fruit, but they all produced a good harvest, 30-fold, 60-fold, or a hundred-fold. We aren't told the kind of plant this is. It might be some kind of grain like wheat where the plant produces a head that then contains many seeds, 30, 60, or 100.

If you are a gardener, imagine that you have some green bean seeds. Are you happy to have your seeds get eaten by the birds? No. Are you happy to have your seeds grow into plants that are scorched by the sun? No. Are you happy to have your seeds grow into plants that are choked by weeds? No. What seeds are you happy with? What seeds accomplish the purpose for which you plant them? Only the ones that produce fruit, lots of green beans. Right? Getting this clear in our minds will go a long way to understanding why Jesus told this parable.

3. Jesus' explanation of the parable

What do some of the symbols in this parable represent? Jesus tells his disciples in v. 14-20. He says in v. 14 that what is sown is the word. What is this "word"? It is the words that Jesus was proclaiming to people. It is the word about the coming kingdom of God. It is the word of God. It is the Bible.

Who is the sower of the word of God? The ultimate sower is God. What does the soil represent? The soil is people who hear the word of God.

What is God's aim in sowing the word? He wants fruit, just like you do if you are sowing the seeds of green beans. Where else in the Scriptures might we look to confirm this ... that God wants his word to produce fruit in people who hear? And what does fruit mean?

4. What does it mean to bear fruit?

Look with me at Luke 6:46-49 on the screen. Follow along as I read.

Lk 6:46–49 : ⁴⁶ “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷ Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: ⁴⁸ he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

Verse 46 tells us what Jesus' big idea is here. He is warning his listeners. Why do you say you obey me with your mouth, but not with your actions? With your lips, you call me Lord, meaning master or owner. But you don't treat me like a master, for you don't do what I tell you. Jesus aim is for people to come to him, hear his words, and then do his words. What is the fruit of the word that Jesus wants to see? Obedience to what he says.

Let's look at another passage. Lk 11:27–28 says, “As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” Who is blessed by God? The one who hears God's word (the seed) and keeps it (the fruit). What does it mean to keep God's word? It means to do his word, to obey it.

So, when God sows his word into a person's life, his purpose is that his word bears fruit. When we act according to his word, we bear the fruit that God desires.

5. How important is it to bear fruit when you hear the word of God?

How important is it to bear fruit from your hearing the word of God? If you don't bear fruit, will you suffer any negative consequences? If you do bear fruit, will you enjoy any benefits?

In the passage we looked at a moment ago, Jesus said that hearing his words and doing them is like a man building a house that had a solid foundation. His house was not shaken when the flood came. The man who hears Jesus' words and does not do them is like a man building his house without a solid foundation. When the flood comes, his house immediately falls and is completely ruined. Jesus is giving a word picture where the house is a symbol for a person's soul. What is at stake for the person who does not follow

Jesus' words? Ruin, judgment, hell. What is the reward for the person who follows Jesus' words? Salvation, eternal life with God.

In Mk 3:35 Jesus says that "whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." What distinguishes the spiritual family of Jesus? They do the will of God, not just hear it. Doing the will of God is the fruit that distinguishes those who are really saved from those who are not.

6. Salvation by works?

Some of you are hearing this and thinking that this sounds like we are indeed saved by works rather than faith. When Jesus says, "whoever does the will of God, he is my brother or sister or mother," is this what he means, that a person is saved by doing the will of God, instead of by putting their faith in Jesus?

To find the answer, turn in your Bibles to John chapter 15. Keep your finger in Mk 4 because we'll be coming back there. Please follow along as I read. I'll make some comments as I go.

Let's start in v. 1, "¹ I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." Let's follow this word picture. Jesus is a vine, think grape vine. God the Father is the vinedresser. People are the branches growing from the vine. Look at v. 2. How important is it that a branch bears fruit? Very. If a branch doesn't bear fruit, what happens to it? It is taken away, off the vine.

Let's keep reading starting in v. 4. "⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." To abide means to stay connected to. Just as branches must stay connected to the vine if they are to bear fruit, so people must stay connected to Jesus to bear fruit. While the fruit appears on the branch, we could say that the branch doesn't produce the fruit, the vine does. In the same way, people who are in Jesus produce fruit. It looks like it comes from them. But the real fruit producer is Jesus working in a person, not the person themselves.

Let's read 2 more verses in John 15. Verse 6: "⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." Not abiding in Jesus means being disconnected from Jesus. This is a matter of the soul. These people don't persist in repentance of their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior. These people never were born again. What does this look like on the outside? Like branches that fail to produce fruit. They may hear Jesus and even be able to repeat back his words, but they don't obey Jesus.

Lastly, look with me at v. 8, “⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” Does bearing fruit make you a disciple of Jesus? No, it proves or shows that you are disciple of Jesus.

7. Where are we so far?

Let’s move back to the parable of the sower in Mark 4:14. Why did Jesus tell this parable? What does he want to teach us? God desires fruit from those he saves. When God speaks his saving words in a person, he not only desires for them to hear the call to repent and trust Christ, he desires that they actually act on his call, actually repent and trust Christ and then live that out. What does fruit mean? It means obeying the word of God. It means loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. It means loving your neighbor as yourself (Mk 12:30-31).

How important is this for a person who wants to be a Christ follower? It is essential to their salvation. Branches that bear no fruit show that they are not Jesus’ disciples. Branches that do, prove that they are disciples saved by Jesus.

Does this mean that salvation is by works rather than by faith alone in Christ alone? No, the fruit comes because Christ has already saved you and is at work in you. If you weren’t saved, you’d have no fruit. “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

8. Another aim of the parable: how to hear

Is this Jesus’ only aim in teaching this parable? No, he wants to teach us something by his description of the 3 soils that do not produce fruit. He is warning all those who hear his word to take care how we hear. He is describing 3 lethal weapons that oppose the work of the word of God. Each of these is the work of the devil. Each one contains a unique warning. Let’s look at them.

9. Lethal weapon 1: immediate disregard of the word

Take a look at v. 14-15. “The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.” The birds who eat the seed on the path are a symbol for Satan coming to take away the word that is sown. A person may hear God’s word, but then right away they lose what they heard. We can hear without hearing, right? Satan is behind this. He’s behind all 3 of these deceptions. These deceptions are deadly because unless the word bears fruit, the hearer is not truly a saved disciple of Jesus.

What causes a person to immediately disregard the word of God when they hear it? Let’s look at three reasons.

First, a person may be hostile or just opposed to the word of God. A person might be opposed because they've always thought that the Bible is a fairy tale for weak-minded people. Or they might be hostile to God's word because they've experienced a terrible tragedy in their life and so are sure that God either does not exist or is mean and uncaring. Or perhaps a person simply loves things that they know the God of the Bible opposes, things like sexual immorality, a party life style, or lavish materialism. Satan works through our family and friends, our schooling, our entertainment to oppose the seed of God's word from taking root and bearing fruit. Some people are so successfully disciplined by the devil that they oppose God's word as soon as they hear it.

Second, a person may simply be mentally weak or lazy or with bad mental habits. Nobody wants to think of themselves this way. Our minds are a muscle that can be powerful when trained. But many of us have trained ourselves to have short attention spans. Watching a video or TV show or reading a tweet or Facebook post are so easy on our mind. They require no hard thinking to follow. We begin to think that everything should be mentally easy and fun and entertaining: our classrooms, jobs, news reporting, and even our preaching.

People didn't always believe this. Neil Postman wrote a book about this called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Why should we care if our minds are weak or strong? God gives us arguments in his word. And the arguments take much longer than a few sentences to explain. They take a big book. One of the ways Satan snatches away the word of God as soon as it is heard is by keeping us too weak-minded to grasp it.

The third cause of a person immediately disregarding the word of God is the least complicated or exciting. Many are simply too sleepy to read the Bible and too sleepy to listen to God's word preached on Sunday mornings. For years I looked forward to my Friday and Saturday nights because I could really indulge myself with me-time. I didn't have to get up for work or school the next morning, so I'd stay up until 1 or 2am. After staying up until 2am on Friday night, sleeping in until 11am on Saturday morning, staying up until 2am on Saturday night, how alert do you think I was at 9am on Sunday morning? This is some of you right now. You are alert during the singing because that is participatory and active, but within a few minutes of sitting down to listen to the sermon, you can hardly concentrate or stay awake. Satan has won. How? By convincing you that the best thing you can do for yourself is to stay up late Fri and Sat nights. The seed of God's word has little chance to take root. You can hardly hear it.

In this parable, Jesus is warning us to take care how we hear his word. He tells us that the first lethal weapon results in Satan immediately taking away the word. Jesus is calling us to be awake to Satan's strategy and do all we can to fight it.

10. Lethal weapon 2: tribulation and persecution on account of the word

Look with me at v. 16-17 to see the second lethal weapon against the seed of God's word bearing fruit. "And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they

hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.” Instead of the word being immediately taken away, it is immediately received with joy. But it doesn’t last. The person does not continue to receive it with joy. They don’t embrace the word for long.

Why does this happen? Jesus names two possible causes: tribulation or persecution that arises on account of the word. Tribulation is trouble that causes distress or affliction. Let’s say that you receive God’s word with joy, but you soon realize that you can no longer do your job and obey God’s word. Let’s say you work at a nightclub supporting illicit sex. Or you work at a Planned Parenthood clinic. Or you keep the books for a boss that wants to you “cook” them. If you actually begin to act according to the word you have received, you will have to quit your good job. You have to drop one or the other. You reason that you can’t possibly give up your good job, so you choose to not obey God’s word. Tribulation has come and you fall away.

Persecution is punishment or harassment, usually severe because of a person’s following Christ and obeying his word. Imagine that you are a new Christian in Chengdu China. A coworker invited you to a Bible study where you heard God’s word and immediately received it with joy. You started going to the Early Rain Covenant Church, but on Sunday Dec 9 (this is true), police detained more than 100 church members and leaders. It’s been about 4 months and the pastor and some elders are still in prison. Police have pressured landlords to evict many others who refuse to stop meeting in homes for worship. Some have been evicted out of 2 apartments in 4 months. Others have been brought to the police for questioning. Some have been beaten. What are you going to do? You don’t want to lose your apartment. Worse, you don’t want to be beaten or go to prison. It seems best to just pull away from the church and from your faith in Christ. You choose not live according to God’s word. Persecution has come and you fall away.

Tribulation and persecution are not typical problems for Christians in America. This may change. They have been major issues for most Christians living in most countries during most of the centuries of the church’s existence. How soon will persecution come to us? Jesus is warning us to prepare so the seed of the word of God won’t fail to bear fruit.

11. Lethal weapon 3: worldly cares, deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things

Look with me at v. 18-19 to see the third lethal weapon against the seed of God’s word bearing fruit. “And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

These are the temptations that are very active among us in our culture. These are the temptations of the prosperous. What kind of cares of the world cause a person to shrink the word of God in their life so that it proves unfruitful? Most any: cares for health or for children. Our cares cause us to shrink inward. They overwhelm our emotions so that we

don't think we have the energy to love others. Even our worship and prayers are affected as we become so preoccupied with our cares that we can't set our minds on things above, on God. Our delight in our salvation and our hope in God shrink as we can't get our cares off our mind. These cares seem so right to us that we fail to see what is happening to our soul. We blame God and wallow in our fears. The word of God is choked so that it proves unfruitful in our lives. Let's beware.

The second choker of the word is the deceitfulness of riches. Riches lie. Like what? Riches say, "I can save you from most any difficulty you might have. If you have enough of me, I can get you out of anything and into anything you'd like. I work better and faster than prayer. If you don't have me, you are damned. If you have enough of me, you are saved. How much of me do you need? Just a little bit more."

God and money are two competing gods. They both want your worship. But they don't sit on the same throne and their commandments are not the same. Jesus said that you can't serve God and money. You must choose. Many choose money. When your heart falls for the lies of riches, the word of God is choked. We think that comfort and wealth are blessings from God. They can be. But they are also temptations from the devil. And so many have given in to the temptation that Jesus warned (Mt 19:24), "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus knew what he was talking about. Let's heed his warning.

The third choker of the word is the desire for other things, things other than your worldly cares or riches. The things themselves aren't necessarily wicked, but your desire is. If you enjoy video games, can you imagine how your desire for that can choke the word of God in your life? Fortnite must be really fun. Players stop eating, stop sleeping, stop bathing, stop working ... they stop doing most everything except playing the game. Is it hard to imagine how something so captivating can choke the word of God?

Let me name a few more desires to help this warning connect with our lives. Pornography. Food. Movies. Some of you spend so much time watching movies that you have squeezed out the word of God from your life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that you are being disciplined by the movie industry more than by Jesus Christ.

Jesus is warning you and all of us. Satan is coming at us with lethal weapons to choke the word of God in our lives so that we fail to bear fruit ... and will fail to be saved. Only those with the kind of faith that bears fruit will be saved. Does yours?

12. Judging fruit

At this point, I hope you are looking for godly fruit in your life. I hope you are asking yourself, "Am I hearing God's word, accepting it, and bearing fruit from it?" Here are a few helps with that. First, this is a question you mainly ask about yourself, not others. We aren't mainly called to examine the fruit in others lives. I say mainly because God might have you in relationships where he is asking you to care for the soul of another. I think

especially of parents with their children. But there are other relationships this applies to as well.

Second, judge your fruit slowly. Look over a long period of time. If you judge over too short a time, you might err seeing a lack of fruit or err seeing the presence of fruit, with neither accurately reflecting your life. I would recommend that you consider your life over the past 6 months or longer.

Third, the presence of fruit from God's word doesn't mean perfection. Born-again, fruit-bearing Christians still sin. Ask yourself what is the trajectory of your fruit-bearing. Are you more and more demonstrating love for God and neighbor or less and less?

Last, be careful of comparing yourself to others. Notice that Jesus said that not all saved believers produce the same amount of fruit. Some are more fruitful than others. God has not given every one of his children the same capacity. Seek to bear fruit according to the capacity he has given you.

13. Cultivating fruit

The last thing I want to talk about is how to cultivate fruit. To bear fruit for God, you really must choose to do so. Usually it involves some form of denying yourself to follow Jesus' word. So, bend your will toward that. Do it.

But while the branch really does bear the cluster of grapes, it would produce nothing if it wasn't connected to the vine. And so, Christians produce fruit for God, but only because God is at work in them.

If this is true and you want to produce fruit, what should you do? Keep your connection to God healthy. Pursue the things that build up your soul in God. This especially means to give yourself to God's word and to prayer.

Did you know that some countries have a high incidence of malnutrition because of cultural factors, not because of a lack of good food? Friends, the American church has a high incidence of spiritual malnutrition because culturally we prefer to consume junk food instead of God's word. I am convinced that the single greatest thing you can do for the good of your soul is to read much more of God's word. If you want to cultivate godly fruit in your life, then eat up more of God's word. Put more of it on your plate day by day.

13. Conclusion

In conclusion friends, we are redeemed by God by faith alone in Christ alone. But the faith that saves is always accompanied by good works. When God's word works to save a

person, it works to bear fruit for God. These always go together. The good works aren't the root of God's saving us. But good works are the fruit of God's saving us.

So, let's take care how we hear God's word so that Satan doesn't kill off the seed before it bears fruit. And let's do all we can to bear fruit for God. To him be the glory.

* Benediction

Heb 13:20–21 : ²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.