

The Word-Centered Church

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[0 : 00] Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered round 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.

He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said, Listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no roots.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.

Then Jesus said, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. When he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 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, so that they may be ever seeing, but never perceiving, and ever hearing, but never understanding.

[1 : 19] Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven. Then Jesus said to them, Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word.

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. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word, and at once receive it with joy.

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. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word.

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. 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. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Great. Thanks very much, Emma.

[2 : 35] Where's Emma gone? There's Emma. Thank you for reading. And it'd be great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open on page 1005, as we have a look at that together. My name is Martin Ayers.

If we've not met, I'm the senior minister here. And we're just going to look at that together. It's the second week in a series we're having here, the Living Church, thinking a bit about what kind of church does God call us to be.

So let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you have spoken to us in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And through him we can know you and know your grace and know your will for our lives. We pray, Father God, that by your Spirit you will guide us as a congregation, as a church, as individuals, wherever we stand with you, that you will speak to us and align our hearts with your message, that we can respond rightly to you.

For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Great. Well, we've got a little garden. We live over near Annisland, okay? And last year I had these friends visit me and they came on holiday to stay with us, but they've got green fingers, our friends.

[3 : 52] And they were actually appalled at the state of our garden, okay? They thought, Martin, do you never go in this garden? And they just couldn't help themselves, right? Even though they were on holiday, they started working on our garden all day.

I kept trying to have conversations with them and they wouldn't stop doing the gardening while I spoke to them. And it was amazing. Like, they finished and the garden looked amazing. It was a place you'd actually want to be in.

So this year, unfortunately, I couldn't make it an annual visit. It was a bit of a one-off. So I thought, well, I'm on my own. So I got some seeds and started this sort of vegetable growing project with my girls.

I've got three girls. And I got these seeds. And it's been amazing, you know, because I don't know what I'm doing in the garden. But we've had this amazing effect. So basically, sunflower seeds. Here's a little sunflower seed. I mean, you know them because we snack on them, don't we? They're a healthy snack. You don't feel guilty when you're watching TV and you have sunflower seeds or you give them to your hamsters. And basically, we planted them.

[4 : 49] And I've got a picture here of the sunflower. Check that out. Isn't that extraordinary? That's twice as high as me. It's amazing. And then Google did something clever with it. Look, when I took the picture, that looks good, doesn't it?

Amazing. And we've grown them from tiny little tomato seeds. We've got these tomato plants growing. We've grown peas and we've grown carrots and we've grown lettuces. All on this little patch of ground.

It's been amazing. But the key, the highlight, the astonishing highlight has been the courgette plant, right? It is a beast. It's an absolute beast. If you've never grown courgettes, the seeds are about as small.

I've got some here. I'm not going to pass this around. But the seeds are, you know, just this big. And this thing takes over your garden. So just have a look at that. It's a beast. And basically, what I like are mini courgettes.

I was thinking I could stir fry them and we can use them. So I just need to keep taking the courgettes as they grow, but get there quickly. Okay, so we went away for one week.

[5 : 50] One week. Absolutely astonishing. We got back and there's a picture on the screen of my girls holding the results. So it's all gone totally wrong, basically, because we've now got these in.

Look at that. We've got like six of these. Okay. We're having to sort of stuff them with things and roast them. My girls just could barely lift them. Absolutely amazing.

So we're picking up this story, right, that Jesus told. And if you just look at verse one, you see again that by now, in the sort of true account from Mark of Jesus' life, the crowd is so great around him that he has to teach from a boat.

He has to get into a boat and push back from the shore to address the crowds. An amazing impact. Presumably, people have traveled for a whole day to get there, at least. They want to see this man. He's demonstrating he can do what only God can do. And just imagine you've gone there. You've traveled for a whole day to get there to see this man, Jesus. And you get yourself within earshot of this unique man.

[6 : 54] And he says, in verse three, he says, listen. And then he tells a story about a farmer sowing seed.

And he talks a bit about the different seed and about the sun and the birds and the rocky places and the different ways the seed gets on and how some of it produces a great crop.

And then he says in verse nine, whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. And then he stops. And the crowd starts to peel away. And what do you think if you're there?

I guess you think. That's quite disappointing, isn't it? That's quite underwhelming. And so lots of people are just leaving, underwhelmed by Jesus.

But if you stick with him, if you stay with him, he explains what the story means. He says to the people who stay around in verse 11, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

[7 : 55] But to those on the outside, everything is said in parables. So you've got different people. You've got insiders and you've got outsiders. And to be an insider, all you have to do is trust Jesus enough to stay with him and listen to him teach.

And when we understand what he teaches, we realize this parable, it explains all the parables. And more than that, it's a parable that explains Jesus' whole strategy for bringing the kingdom of heaven

down to earth.

And the key that unlocks the parable comes in that little verse, verse 14, where Jesus says, verse 14, the farmer sows the word.

It's a parable all about the word of God, God's word that we have in the Bible. From the mouth of Jesus and in God's word, the whole of the Bible is God's word. And the big idea for us to grasp this evening from the parable that we're going to think about is that Jesus calls us to be a word-centered church.

Why does he do that? Because Jesus is the king and he is building a kingdom. Right from verse 1 of Mark's gospel, he tells us this man is the king. So this is the momentous news about Jesus, the Messiah.

[9 : 12] That's king language. He's God's anointed king. And then we journey with the disciples as they follow Jesus. And through what he does and what he says, they realize that he is God's king.

He can do what only God can do. So in Mark chapter 1, he's anointed with the spirit and he immediately takes on their great enemy, Satan. That's what kings do. He goes into combat with our great enemy.

Then he proclaims that the kingdom of God has drawn near. That the saving reign of God has now arrived in him coming. Then he calls people to repent. In other words, to acknowledge that he is the king.

Then he demonstrates what life is like in his kingdom. So he commands an evil spirit to leave a person. And he does. And he tells a paralyzed man to get up and walk.

And he walks. And he tells a dead girl to wake up. And she wakes up. And now Jesus teaches us what his strategy is to advance that kingdom across the world.

[10 : 11] He says, just as a farmer scatters seed, so Jesus spreads the word of God. And as people respond rightly to the word and become his followers, the kingdom grows.

And the picture Jesus uses there is of something that starts so insignificant and small, takes time to grow, and then you end up with a super abundant harvest.

And the work is the spreading of God's word by God's spirit-empowered people. Jesus has ascended now, but we, his people, have his spirit that we can continue that work.

Spreading the saving news of who Jesus is and what he did. Now just to see that in action for a moment, I thought it'd be worth just turning over into Luke. I think the slides will have the verses on if you don't really want to turn over.

But if you kept a finger in Mark 4, in Luke chapter 24, you get this on page 1062. Jesus is alive again after he died.

[11 : 13] And he says to his followers in verse 46, this is what is written, the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. Well, that's what we've seen in Luke. Now in the very next book that Luke writes, Acts, just over past John, we see the story of that being fulfilled, of God's unstoppable word going out to the nations.

The disciples get promised the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 1. Why does the Spirit come? Jesus says you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses.

It's so that they can witness. The word needs to spread. Then in chapter 4 of Acts, there's some external persecution on the church and the church prays.

And Luke tells us the result. He says, It's unstoppable, the word. In chapter 6, there's an internal dispute that threatens to fracture the church.

And they resolve it. And Luke says to us, So the word of God spread. The word of God is going out. Chapter 12, verse 24, there's this tyrant Herod and he's put to death.

[12 : 28] And Luke tells us, But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. And by the time Acts finishes, it finishes with the Apostle Paul in Rome.

It's kind of the epicenter of the world at the time. And he's in prison. But the last word of Acts is the word unhindered. As Paul's in prison, but because of the way where he is, he is able to keep preaching the word unhinderedly.

And the word is going out. You can imprison the messengers, but you can't stop the message because God is building this kingdom through the word of God going out.

So what kind of church is God calling us to be? Well, if Jesus is still a farmer today, scattering the word, we should hear the Spirit calling us to be a word-centered church, to get on board with his work in the world.

Last week we heard that we need to be a cross-centered church. We need the cross and we need to know we need the cross and depend on it every day. Today we're seeing we need to be a word-centered church.

[13 : 32] And we need to remember that if you move on from St. Silas. So Stevie and Karen, just an example. Next month they're moving to New Zealand. We hope they'll look for a church. They're certainly expecting to look for a church when they move to Christ Church.

What kind of church should they look for? Chris and Ros Brett just moved to Argyle. We said goodbye to them last week. What do you look for in a church? You need to remember it if you stay. Four years ago, the minister of St. Silas moved on.

So St. Silas had to think, what do we want in our next minister? And that includes thinking, where are we as a church and what kind of church do we want to be? And in my job, you get to see these kind of adverts that churches put in for a minister.

You see what people write. You can imagine what people write. You may have done it yourself. A dynamic leader. An experienced motivational speaker.

Somebody with an entrepreneurial spirit and a great sense of humor. A creative thinker. That's what we want from our minister. And they might be reasonable.

[14 : 39] Of course, they might be perfectly reasonable things to look for. But what's of first importance for any church listening to God's call for what he wants his church to be is that we be a word-centered church, a Bible-centered church, so that we're on board with Jesus' work in the world.

And it's good to understand that because it explains why we do things the way we do them at St. Silas. It's not just that we are Bible kind of people, that we're bookish, that we're nerdier than your average Christian.

So we just kind of like the Bible. It's that kind of thinking. We can fall into the trap of thinking that choosing a church is a bit like choosing an ice cream, you know.

And you've got like vanilla and fish food and cookie dough and tablet. Tablet, very popular. Jackie, you brought tablet ice cream to our house. And so it's a bit like that with when you're looking for a church.

And this church, you know, if you're really into your immersive worship experience, you go, here, this church is better. It's got a sort of traditional liturgy. And that church, they're quite heavy on the Bible. As though it's just, you know, you pay your money, you take your choice.

[15 : 50] But the big thing that Jesus is doing in the world is he is doing it through his unstoppable word. And so that's what he calls his church to be centered on, to be a Bible-centered church because the mission of the church is to scatter the word.

So that's our point tonight. It's a one-point sermon. Jesus is calling us to be a word-centered church. And I've got five implications of my one point.

From the parable about the words, the first is this. It's the word of the kingdom. The word of the kingdom. We've seen that Jesus is the king. So if the farmer is Jesus and the seed is the word of God, then the field is nothing less than the whole world.

His agenda for the word of God is massive, and it's imperial. He wants to take over the world slowly, deliberately, and powerfully, as his word takes root in the hearts of men and women and children everywhere.

And that means that Jesus' agenda for the word is not the growth of our evening service. It's not even the growth of St. Silas Church.

[17 : 01] We're just one absolutely minuscule corner of the field. And it's not that that means our work doesn't matter to Jesus. It really does matter. Each of us has a role to play in God's kingdom-building agenda.

He is at work through us. But we need to grasp as well this epic vision for what Jesus really is doing. It's liberating. And my wife Kathy, when she was at university, she was on the exec committee of her university.

And she talks about how being on the exec, they started to feel burdened by things. It was almost as if they felt every decision they made as a committee, the whole of Christendom depended on it. And if they got it wrong, the church would just collapse around them. And it's so liberating to remember that we're just one little part of the field. And there's so much going on in the world that Jesus is doing.

He's executing a plan that spans continents and thousands of years and billions of people. And it's so liberating to open our eyes to that bigger picture. And it might be that the seed that we sow in our generation that germinates within a household and a family over decades.

[18 : 14] And the fruitful harvest comes long after we know them and long after we've been there. It's not the word of St. Silas. It's the word of the kingdom. That's a great thing to remember.

The next implication is it's the word of hidden power. The thing about scattering seeds is they look very weak. Back in April, when I was with my kids and we first scattered the seed in the garden, and I explained what was going on, our three-year-old, the next day, she went out and she sat by the patch where we planted the seeds, waiting to see the seeds come through.

And after a few days, she's forgotten about them. And I'm thinking, maybe they were bad seeds. I don't know. I don't know how it works. Maybe they're not going to grow. It looks very weak.

But all the time, powerfully, the garden has been transformed. The seeds have given dramatic results. And that's Jesus' picture of the ministry of the word in a church.

And it's really important to remember that when we feel like the real action for church life is somewhere else. Maybe if we hear about what our friends are up to in a different church and it feels like there's just explosive growth and they're having these kind of, they're just having an amazing time and we think, oh, maybe we're missing out over here.

[19 : 34] And we need to remember that the real power is in the word. And more soberingly, we need to remember the word is powerful even when the results are not positive.

That's the shocking reality of the parable. As people walked away from Jesus that day, look at what he says back in Mark chapter 4, page 1005. Mark chapter 4.

In verse 11 to his disciples, he says, The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving and ever hearing but never understanding.

Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. I don't know about you, but I was told as a child that Jesus taught him parables to make complicated things more simple so that people could understand them.

But Jesus says that his parables are to make things less clear. They have a sifting effect on the crowds. Some people are rejecting Jesus and that walking away from him is the judgment of God on them.

[20 : 49] In other words, as we scatter the word of God, when people respond to God's word negatively, it's not because God's word is weak and doesn't work. It might be because God's word is powerful and it's accomplishing his work of judging those people for rejecting him.

But if we're hearing that and then we're worried, thinking, well, how do I know that's not happening to me? The key is to remember that in that story of Jesus telling the parable and then being with his disciples, to become an insider, all you have to do is stay with him.

That's all you have to do to stop being an outsider. Everyone in the crowd faced a choice. You could choose to stay with Jesus and hear more and be saved.

And that's what we can choose to do today. But where people choose not to do that, Jesus is still at work through the power of his word. And the power is hidden power.

So that sometimes, if you're in a church where we're prioritizing the Bible, you can think, what on earth are we really doing here? I can think that and I'm the one standing here speaking. What am I doing?

[22 : 01] I heard an American minister talking about he's had a kind of a Bible-based ministry for decades and there's a video of him on the internet explaining about that and he likens his ministry.

So he says, I feel like it's a bit like having a tree, a really thick tree and hitting it with my bare hands all the time, day by day.

And day by day, the effect is hard to discern. What am I doing here? There's this thick bark on the tree. But over years, it has a transforming effect on the tree.

And that was his illustration of his ministry in the church he's been in for decades. It's just his way of saying that you trust the word to do its work. It looks weak, but it's got hidden power.

And the results depend on where it lands. That's our third implication. It's the word that judges hearts. Jesus wants us to hear the parable and consider carefully how we ourselves are hearing his word.

[23 : 04] So he describes those four kinds of soils. And let me ask you to carefully examine yourself and think today, what kind of soil am I?

Are you a path? Are you in danger of not really hearing the word at all? Are you rocky ground? He describes the seed that shoots up and seeds that are on kind of shallow soil.

They do shoot up and then they have no root and they don't last. And what he describes, I guess, is someone who we might think is if we're feeling enthusiastic about Jesus today, but we're not putting roots down.

And I guess you'd put roots down, wouldn't you, by prioritizing meeting with God's people in fellowship because that's one of God's means of grace to help us grow. You'd prioritize time in prayer with God, time in God's word.

I've got a friend who often when I see him will say, what are you reading at the moment? And if you're someone who does read, if you can't read, it doesn't matter, but if you're someone who does read, it's important that we're intentionally reading stuff that feeds our souls and allows those roots to go down deep.

[24 : 13] Building deep Christian friendships. Serving Christ in different ways so that the roots grow. And when life gets hard or we even get stuck for being a Christian, we're steadfast.

Or what about the thorns? I think it's remarkable that this was 2,000 years ago and Jesus just nails the human heart. It hasn't changed, has it? The things that threaten us being wholehearted in the Christian life are exactly the same as what threatened the crowd that day.

He talks about God's word getting choked up and crowded out by the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things.

They choke up the word and they stop it from growing in the heart. But then the wonderful encouragement at the end that there is good soil, a crop that doesn't just yield two or three times, that would be remarkable, 30, 60, even 100 times over what was sown.

And we see that. We see that worked out in church life. You stay around church long enough, you'll see that. I remember a guy, when I was in London, I was working as a lawyer, he was a lawyer, he came to faith.

[25 : 27] And just extraordinary impact of one guy becoming a Christian in terms of the family that he now, he's married, he's got children, but what he does at work, he's a partner in a law firm, and he's known as a Christian, he's a great witness there, he's other people, he's evangelizing other people, he's doing his work well for God's glory, and he's giving a lot of money as well, he's paying for a lot of ministry.

One guy, and we ran all kinds of invitational events, and there were all sorts of opportunities for people to come under the sound of the gospel, and sometimes the fruit seemed small, and then one guy, and a great crop, good soil.

And we can be super abundantly fruitful for Jesus if we let our hearts be good soil for God's word. All of us have to remember, before we're sowers, scattering, we are soil.

What kind of soil do you really want to be? And what are you doing about it? And just as that's true for us, personally, it's then true for other people as we scatter.

So that's our next implication about the word. It's the word that transforms lives. So the culmination of the story is not that the seed gets sown in lots of different places.

[26 : 43] It's that there's a crop. Jesus says, others like seeds sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop. Some 30, some 60, some 100 times what was sown.

That's the goal. That we would be so gripped by a love for God, Father, Son, and Spirit that we gladly lay down our lives for Him. And it's fruitful in what we do for Him.

And this is why the work is slow. This is why church ministry and church work is slow work.

Because people don't usually change very quickly to become more like Jesus.

It doesn't happen quickly. But that's the agenda for the word. So we want to see more people at our evening service. And that would be good, wouldn't it?

And it's good to rejoice if that happens. Or if we run an event and lots of people come. That's a good thing to rejoice there were more people. But the overall aim is not a big gathering.

[27 : 40] And if our aim is a big gathering, it will skew what we're doing away from Jesus' aim and agenda. It's not all about numbers. In fact, when you look at Jesus' own ministry, at times it looked very vulnerable and small.

He taught uncompromisingly about the cost of being one of His followers and loads of people left. Knowing that should help us feel less insecure about being a small gathering. And it could also make us bolder with each other in being willing to urge each other to get on in the Christian life, to be more godly. If a Christian friend challenges you, don't be angry with them for challenging you.

Sometimes we have to be brave and have the hard conversations because we share God's ambition for one another that we become more like Jesus and we see sin in one another's lives and it's good to be lovingly, graciously, challenging that in one another because we know Jesus' agenda for the Word of God is that it transforms people.

And even when that work looks slow and small, let's remember lastly, last implication, it's the Word that will win. And Jesus assures us of that in the parable. The first three types of soil ultimately produce nothing.

[29 : 03] And Jesus giving us that repetition of three prepares us for disappointments and setbacks in church life. A friend of mine says he thinks the hardest thing undoubtedly for him as a Christian in the Christian life has been seeing good friends who he partnered with and shared so much with drift away from wholehearted discipleship.

It's a tragedy. But Jesus forewarns us of that in the parable, that that will happen. But then by ending with that super abundant crop from the good soil, he assures us that the result is huge growth and a massive harvest.

just as we're seeing through history when you compare Jesus followers that day by the lake with the church around the world today. And we might not see huge results in our lifetime in Scotland. We might do. That would be great. But we might not. But either way, even if we don't, we will know we're on the winning team with Jesus. His kingdom will win.

And God is so good at winning, he can even take our disappointments and apparent failures and use them as part of his bigger long-term strategy for the world.

[30 : 19] Knowing that is a huge encouragement. And it can encourage us as well to be bold and take risks. So we come to our evening service together to be good soil, but we also become sowers ourselves as we take God's word to each other and to Glasgow.

and we entrust the results to him. Amen. Be good to think a bit about that. We're just going to have a couple of minutes. I've got some questions on the next slide.

And it would be really helpful if just in twos and threes you'd be willing just to pick a question and have a conversation about it. Thinking about how we could encourage each other to be good soil. Thinking about the things that might distract us as a church from being word-centered.

and also just maybe share how you are encouraged by the parable and what it teaches us about Jesus' powerful word of his kingdom. So let's take a couple of minutes on that now and then at the end of the service we'll put the questions back up in the hope that you can continue to speak about that.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.