



CHRISTIANITY|EXPLORED

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS
YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

Video I: The sower

["There are six exits on this plane... Four doors, two on each side... And two window exits over the wings. Each door has..."]

So far, we've explored who Jesus is and why Jesus came. The question now is, how should we respond? What does Jesus ask of us?

Early in Mark's Gospel we saw people coming to John the Baptist to have their sins forgiven. They came out to him because they knew they were not the people they wanted to be, let alone the people God wanted them to be.

But John told them that someone much more powerful would come after him. Someone who would not only forgive their sin, but fill them with God's Holy Spirit.

As we'll see, in Mark chapter 4, Jesus in effect says: "If you come to me, it will be truly and miraculously life-changing. But you have to listen to me for that to happen."

In Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells a story that pictures the extraordinary, life-changing power of his words as tiny, vulnerable seeds.

What Jesus is saying is this. Just as seeds will only grow if you plant them properly, so the good news about me will only change your life... if you hear it properly.

"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 root. 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, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.'

"Then Jesus said, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'" (Mark 4:3-9)

I don't know if you realized it, but you had a walk-on part in that story. Everyone who has ever heard the good news, the gospel

about Jesus, appears in it. It's as if Jesus is holding up a mirror so we can see ourselves reflected back.

You see, although this story is called "The Parable of the Sower", the main focus is not on the sower. Or the seed.

Jesus focuses on the soil. Because each one of us is a different kind of soil. Each one of us receives the good news about Jesus in a different way.

We know this because Jesus explains the parable to the disciples after he tells it. And he wants us to ask ourselves the question, how am I responding to the gospel? What kind of soil am I?

The first type of soil is in verse 4: the path, where the soil is hard. The seed falls on it, and the birds immediately come and eat it up. Jesus explains that some people, as they hear the good news about Jesus, are just like that hardened path:

"As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them." (Mark 4:15)

The fields in ancient Israel were long, narrow strips divided by little paths. Over the years, the constant traffic of footsteps, hooves and wheels turned these paths as hard as concrete. So if seeds fell here, they'd never go deep into the soil, they'd just bounce off and remain on the surface.

The seed would become food for birds. Jesus says the birds who come and snatch up the seed are a picture of Satan, whose aim is always to stop the gospel from being properly heard – immediately if possible.

There's a sign near where I live. It says, "Thieves operate in this area. You don't have to be a victim. Guard your valuables."

And it's a very similar warning to the one Jesus gives here.

Satan is a reality, warns Jesus. He's like a thief who wants to take, not the wallet from your back pocket, but the gospel from your ears.

And there's nothing worse than discovering you've been robbed without knowing it. You don't even realize that you're missing something until much later.

But that's what happens here. Before the gospel even registers in the person's mind, something comes to snatch it away. This person may be a hardened skeptic who immediately rejects anything that will challenge their own ideas, or it may simply be someone who is easily distracted. As soon as the Bible is closed, the words are forgotten.

But, as the rest of the parable makes clear, you don't have to be a victim.

The second type of soil is in verse 5: the rocky places, where the soil is shallow.

"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." (Mark 4:16-17)

In Israel, some of the land has a thin two or three-inch layer of soil lying on top of the limestone bedrock. If seed falls there, the sun heats the soil quickly because it's so shallow, and the seed immediately responds. In the short run, this soil looks like the best kind of soil. The immediate growth is spectacular. But the bedrock only a few inches below means there's nothing for the roots to go down into, and no way for the plant to get moisture. So it quickly dies.

I love books, but I have a terrible habit of starting one, getting into it, and then leaving it unfinished while I start another one.

Some people have the same issue with the gospel. They start with real eagerness. They seem truly excited about getting to know Christ. But then the early excitement fades.

Because of their interest in Jesus, friends, family and people at work start cutting them out of the conversation, keeping them at arm's length – or worse. And at that point, the person decides it's easier to give up on Jesus than put up with the discomfort. The Christian life gets discarded. They haven't thought through what it means to follow him, the cost of being for what he is for, and against what he is against. Their desire to know him is revealed as shallow and short-lived, and they're not grounded enough to persevere, to finish what they started.

The third type of soil is in verse 7, and this soil has thorns that choke whatever the soil produces. Jesus explains:

"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." (Mark 4:18-19)

At first the plant seems to be doing well. But it can't compete with the thorns which grow up alongside it.

It's like the story of the young man who said, "Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. Will you marry me? I know I'm not rich, I don't have a big house or a beautiful car like Jeffrey Brown, but I do love you with all my heart." And the young woman replies, "I love you with all my heart too, but tell me more about Jeffrey Brown."

It's the same for the third type of person in the parable. Somehow they let their desire for other things become competition for their involvement with Jesus.

Their hearts are divided. Desire for security, comfort, approval or power, maybe money, maybe the desire for a potential spouse who doesn't share their view of Jesus – these desires, and the worries that come with them, become stronger than the desire for Jesus.

This person doesn't see that the security, comfort, approval and power that come from knowing Christ infinitely outweigh any treasure the world has to offer.

But the fourth and final type of soil is in verse 8: the good soil that produces a vast crop. Jesus explains:

"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown." (Mark 4:20)

This type of growth is out of the ordinary. Even modern farming methods can't produce the kind of huge crop Jesus describes here. He wants us to understand that something supernatural is happening.

When the gospel is heard by someone who truly hears it and does what it says, something miraculous happens, something that cannot be accounted for in human terms. And it happens when the person hearing the gospel sees Jesus for who he is, understands why he came, and what it means to follow him. It happens when they understand that Jesus is the greatest treasure in the world.

When I was younger I used to get a comic delivered by mail. It always arrived on a Tuesday just after breakfast, but because I

had to go to school, I didn't get a chance to read it until break time. And when that moment came I used to run out and find somewhere I wouldn't be disturbed.

Nothing could be allowed to stop me from reading that week's edition of my favourite comic.

Now, the surroundings weren't the most comfortable, but I was completely content as I opened my bag to read my comic. Nothing else mattered. Why? Because I had my treasure. It was all I wanted or needed.

When Jesus talks about the fourth kind of soil in this parable, he's talking about someone who not only hears the gospel about Jesus Christ, but makes it their treasure. When Jesus himself becomes more valuable to you than anything else in the world, that's when you know you've really heard him.

There may be areas of your heart you think are impenetrable and unreachable. There may be self-image issues, battles with addiction or alienation or abuse. You may feel trapped by all kinds of darkness inside you, things you feel you can't even admit. Let this parable give you hope.

I remember the story of a man who visited a cemetery in Italy. He said he noticed a thick marble slab over the top of one of the graves.

But, somehow, about a hundred years earlier, an acorn had fallen through a small crack into the grave. And over the years the acorn had grown and grown until eventually it had smashed through the surface of the hard marble and cracked the enormous slab into two pieces. As the tree grew up, it just pushed the marble aside as if it wasn't there.

There's a lot of power packed in that seed. All it needed was the right kind of soil. The good news about Jesus, though it may seem small and weak, has the power to break through any human heart – if only we will listen and act on what we hear.

The word of God doesn't come to us so that we can give the right answers to religious questions. It comes to us because God wants us to be in relationship with him. The gospel tells us that Jesus Christ has fully paid the price for sin on the cross, so the way is now open for us to know God and enjoy him forever, if only we will trust him.

But Jesus wouldn't have told the parable if that was an easy thing to do.

It's not a passive thing. It's not something that will just happen regardless of whether or not we choose to act on what we hear.

Jesus in effect says: "I can change your life. But are you listening?"

Video II: James and John

If God said to you, "What do you want me to do for you?" what would you ask for?

What are the things that, for you, make life worth living? What do you find yourself daydreaming about most? What are the things that – if you couldn't have them – would make you feel your life was empty and pointless?

In Mark chapter 10, two of Jesus' disciples – James and John – tell Jesus exactly what they want from him. And under the circum-stances, their words couldn't be any more inappropriate.

But first, before James and John tell Jesus what they want from him, Jesus tells James and John what he is going to do for them.

"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." (Mark 10:33-34)

So how will James and John respond to the news that their closest friend of the past three years is about to be brutally murdered? Grief? Greed.

"Then James and John ... came to him. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we want you to do for us whatever we ask.'

"What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

"They replied, 'Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.'" (Mark 10:35-37)

Although they've just called Jesus "teacher", there's clearly something about Jesus' teaching they haven't yet understood.

He is deliberately going to give up his life for others. They, on the other hand, are desperately trying to hang on to their lives for themselves. And this is not the first time the disciples have revealed a petty, small-minded lust for glory.

Three times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer, die and rise again. And the incredible thing is that on two occasions, the disciples' react by thinking of their own greatness.

They want power and prestige. They want importance and status and recognition.

Like many of us, they want to win. But Jesus wants something different for them. Something infinitely better.

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?'" (Mark 10:38)

Now what Jesus means here is: Can you do what I will do?

Can you die on behalf of sinners? Can you bring down the barrier separating sinful human beings from their Creator once and for all, so that they can have an infinitely satisfying relationship with God? And can you be raised to life again to prove that death and sin have been conquered?

"We can," they answered." (Mark 10:39)

But of course, they can't.

Like you and me, James and John need to be saved themselves from God's rightful anger at sin. As Jesus said, they don't know what they're asking.

They're blind to the fact that the joy of following Jesus isn't found in status. It's found in service.

When the other disciples find out what James and John have been saying to Jesus, we read that they "became indignant" with them. And let's be honest, that's not because they think James and John were wrong to ask for power. It's because they wish they'd thought of it first.

"Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.'" (Mark 10:42)

That's the way of the world. And it's the way of James and John. We try to grasp for power so that we can lord it over other people. But now listen to the way Jesus turns things upside down.

"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." (Mark 10:43-44)

Jesus says, "If you're really my disciples, everything's got to change. If you really want to be first in the kingdom of God, if you really want to win, get ready to serve."

But why would anyone want to trade in status for service? How can we possibly loosen our grip on the things that we want so badly?

The reason James and John and the other disciples are grasping after these things is because they don't understand that Jesus is already offering them something infinitely more valuable. Himself.

"Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45)

You see, if Jesus had simply given them what they wanted, it never would have satisfied them anyway. No amount of power, or money, or achievement, or family, or friendship, or sex or spirituality is ever enough in itself. We just want more.

And there's a reason for that. The deepest cravings we have – the ones that we unsuccessfully try to fill with all these other things – can only be fully satisfied by loving and serving the One who made us. It's the way he made us to be.

We go looking for contentment and satisfaction and fulfilment in all the wrong plac-

es, and we chase after them in the hope that they'll give us what only God can.

In the Bible, it's called idolatry: turning something God has created into a substitute for God. It's turning a good thing... into a God thing.

And Jesus' closest disciples do it, even when Jesus has just personally offered them the greatest treasure in the entire universe.

The writer C. S. Lewis once said:

"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

That's James and John. That's us. Far too easily pleased. If only we had eyes to see it.

But Mark chapter 10 ends with real hope. Because there, ironically enough, is a blind man with perfect vision.

"As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus ... was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'" (Mark 10:46-47)

Bartimaeus is different from the disciples in many ways. Apart from the fact of his physical blindness, he's a beggar who has nothing of any material value apart from his cloak. He doesn't call Jesus "teacher", but "Son of David" – in other words, God's King in God's world. It's the only place in Mark that someone recognizes Jesus in this way.

And notice that, rather than coming to Jesus with a demand that Jesus should do for him whatever he asks, Bartimaeus knows he deserves nothing, has nothing to offer, and simply cries out for mercy.

"Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" (Mark 10:48)

Unlike the disciples who care about their own status, Bartimaeus is willing to make a fool of himself in the eyes of others, so long as he is able to get close to Jesus.

"Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him.' So they called to the blind man, 'Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you.'

"Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus." (Mark 10:49-50)

The cloak is all he has of any material value. But he lets it fall to the ground, because he knows that standing right in front of him there is something – or someone – of infinitely greater value.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

"The blind man said, 'Rabbi, I want to see.'" (Mark 10:51)

To Bartimaeus, Jesus is more than just a "teacher". He uses a word that in the original language means "Master". "Master", he says, "I want to see."

And that, ironically, is exactly the request James and John should have made.

"Go," said Jesus, 'your faith has healed you.'

"Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road." (Mark 10:52)

James and John and Bartimaeus are asked exactly the same question by Jesus: "What do you want me to do for you?" And isn't it striking that while the disciples are rebuked by Jesus for their request, Bartimaeus is "healed" – a word which literally means "saved".

Why does Jesus respond differently? Because while the disciples demand that Jesus do whatever they ask of him, Bartimaeus knows he's in no position to make demands. He knows he needs mercy.

Although James and John are blind to it, blind Bartimaeus knows that the greatest treasure in the entire universe is standing right in front of him. He knows it can't be grabbed with a grasping fist.

All he can do is open up his hand, beg for mercy, and begin to follow Jesus.

So how should we respond to Jesus?

What do you want him to do for you?

Video III: Herod

Ignoring your conscience can be a terrible thing. As the old saying goes, "we are the choices we have made".

Conscience is a nag. It tells us to do inconvenient things at inconvenient times, it makes us uncomfortable and it won't leave us in peace.

But sometimes, listening to our conscience – and by that I mean our God-given sense of right and wrong – will affect far more than our bodies. It will affect the ultimate destiny of our souls. Because we are the choices that we have made.

Mark chapter 6 contains one of the darkest moments in the Bible. It records the story of King Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, a man who tragically refused to listen to his conscience, even though it cost a man his life... and may well have cost him his own.

Also caught up in the tragedy is John the Baptist, a man we were introduced to at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel.

A friendless, solitary figure, John the Baptist tells people about Jesus and the rescue he offers. He urges people to "repent", a word which means to turn away from sin, and turn back to God.

And that's exactly the kind of talk that can get you into serious trouble.

"Herod ... had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison.

"He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him." (Mark 6:17-20)

Before he met Herodias, Herod had been married for over twenty years. However, during a visit to Rome he allowed himself to fall in love with Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod proposed to her and she agreed to leave her husband, as long as Herod agreed to leave his wife.

So they started living together in Galilee. And even though John the Baptist tells

Herod that what he is doing is wrong, and we know that Herod respects John as a "righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20), Herod ignores the warning, and his own conscience. He puts John in prison, perhaps partly to protect him from Herodias, who wanted John dead because of what he'd been saying.

We're told that every time Herod heard John, he was "greatly puzzled". Now this doesn't mean that he was confused by John's teaching, as John's teaching was pretty clear. It means that Herod's morals were thrown into confusion, because John had exposed the way in which Herod was rebelling against God. Nevertheless, as we saw, Herod "liked to listen to him" (Mark 6:20).

Perhaps you've experienced something similar as you've come to see that you've been living life without reference to the loving Creator who made you. Perhaps, like Herod listening to John, you listen to the words of Jesus and want to go on listening, despite the disturbance they cause.

So Herod continued to listen. Week after week it went on. The people at the palace must have thought that their king had gone religious.

Mark tells us that "Herod feared John", even to the extent of protecting him. But there was something that Herod was not prepared to do.

Yes, he would listen. Yes, he acknowledged that John was a good man. Yes, he was even prepared to give John his protection. But Herod would not stop his adultery. He would not turn away from what he knew was wrong. Or as the Bible puts it, he would not repent.

As we've seen, the right response when we understand that we have been rebel-

ling against God is to repent. It is to do an about-turn, to turn away from our rebellion and come to God for forgiveness and rescue. But that's the one thing Herod won't do.

Then one day, on his birthday, Herod throws a party for all his friends and colleagues. Mark's comment at this point is very striking: "Finally the opportune time came" (Mark 6:21).

As we're about to see, it's an opportune time for Herod, but also for Herodias. The question is: who will seize the opportunity, and who will miss it?

"On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.

"When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests." (Mark 6:21-22)

In other words, Herodias' daughter dances in a way that gets the half-drunk guests sexually aroused. Herod, in a phrase designed to impress upon his guests what a generous, powerful man he is, says to the girl:

"'Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you.' And he promised her with an oath, 'Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.'" (Mark 6:22-23)

"She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?'" (Mark 6:24)

And Herodias doesn't need to be asked twice.

"At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: 'I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'" (Mark 6:25)

And this is the key moment in Herod's life. He is suddenly in an extremely dangerous place. We are the choices we make. And this choice – this moment – will have a profound effect on what Herod will become. Will he stand up for what he knows is right, or will he suppress his conscience one more time?

"The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother." (Mark 6:26-28)

Under pressure from friends, family and work colleagues, Herod stopped listening to his conscience. He allowed the head that warned him, the tongue that told him to repent and be rescued, to be literally cut off.

Much as he feared John, Herod feared his guests more.

And when all is said and done, I wonder if Herod's guests really did respect him any the more for keeping his drunken oaths, and needlessly slaughtering a man he had previously protected?

But how many of us would have done a similar thing in Herod's position? The fact remains that many, many people will do just that. At the crucial moment, we will deny what we know is right because of what the family will think, what business colleagues may do, or because of what friends will say. Or because we know it will mean changing much-loved habits.

It's no small thing when we consider what we have to lose if we obey Jesus' words.

Jesus himself knew first-hand what it was like to suffer, to be misunderstood and ridiculed – even by his own family. In Mark chapter 3, we read that his family:

"...went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" (Mark 3:21)

But when his family arrive at the house where he is teaching, Jesus says something remarkable.

"A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.'

"'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked.

"Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:32-35)

It may be that in listening to your conscience, you feel afraid of what it will cost you to do what you know is right. I hope Jesus' words here are a great comfort. He reminds us that if we take his words seriously, even if the people closest to you think you're out of your mind, there is a loving family of fellow believers who are there to support and encourage one another. Whoever does God's will, whoever follows Jesus, is your brother and sister and mother.

But it goes even further than that. In Mark chapter 10, Jesus makes this amazing promise to all those who put their trust in him:

"'I tell you the truth,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to re-

ceive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.'" (Mark 10:29-30)

Yes, there will be persecutions of one kind or another. But with them, Jesus promises extraordinary blessings, and extraordinary joy, that will far outweigh any suffering we might face.

I wonder if you see the parallels Mark wants us to draw between John the Baptist and Jesus? Both preached the same message – that we need to turn from our rebellion against God and accept the rescue he has lovingly provided.

Both were protected by powerful men: Herod and Pontius Pilate, both of whom tried to remain neutral but could not. And both John and Jesus suffered violent deaths as a result.

There is, of course, one further point of comparison. Why were both John and Jesus killed? Because in both cases, when Herod and Pilate found themselves under pressure from those around them, they would not listen to their conscience.

Herod is mentioned a final time in the Gospels. Pontius Pilate sends Jesus to meet Herod, and in Luke chapter 23, Luke records what happened. The meeting between Herod and Jesus is ominous, not because of what is said, but because of what is not said. Luke tells us:

"When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer." (Luke 23:8-9)

You see, there does come a time, after repeatedly refusing to repent, when sadly there is no longer an opportunity to do so. It's easy to put it off, to say that we don't have time, or to think that we have too much to lose, or that there'll be a more convenient time in the future.

Of course, it's never easy to repent. And conscience is rarely convenient. But Herod's story reminds us that there is a cost when we refuse to listen to God's word. It also warns us that we may not get an opportunity later.

When Herod got no answer from Jesus, he and his soldiers mocked Jesus by dressing him in an elegant robe and sending him back to Pilate, who apparently enjoyed the joke. We read that on that day:

"Herod and Pilate became friends – before this they had been enemies" (Luke 23:12).

It is a tragedy that John the Baptist lost his life. But the tragedy of Herod himself is even greater. Because when he silenced his own conscience, he lost something that was more precious even than life itself: the opportunity to turn away from his wrongdoing and turn back to God. The opportunity to repent.

Ignoring Jesus' call to repent and believe may earn us the approval of other people.

It may even win us friends.

But it will eventually earn us the rejection of Jesus.