

# Mark - the Sower, the Seed & the Soil 3

by J. Glyn Owen

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of having good soil in our hearts, which is prepared by repentance, humility, and a deep understanding of God's word, and is essential for spiritual growth and fruitfulness.*

**Duration:** 47:57

**Scripture:** Matthew 13:23, Mark 4:8-9

**Topics:** "Parable"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the parable of the four types of soil mentioned in Mark chapter 4. The four types of soil represent different responses to the word of God. The people in all four categories heard the same word, but their responses varied. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding and applying the word of God, and encourages parents to teach their children to do the same. The sermon also includes a story about an elderly man who had a successful garden because he took the time to understand and care for the soil.

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## Transcript

I tried to answer the telephone yesterday and the person on the other end said, is that a foghorn? I said, merely. I hope you'll be able to understand what I'm trying to say this morning. We want to conclude the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soil.

We've had, I believe, a profitable time as we have been meditating upon this very remarkable utterance of our Lord. A parable which, in a sense, is an introduction and, at the same time, a key to all his parables. I hadn't intended spending three Sunday mornings on it when we began.

And what remains for us to do this morning is to come and address ourselves to the last of the four types of soil to which our Lord refers in that parable, namely, the good soil. And if you'd like to follow with me in the scriptures, you may turn to Mark chapter 4. I would like to read verses 8 and 9 and then verse 20. The passage from which we read this morning in John 15 deals with the same theme and is a very helpful background to what we are coming to look at now.

But our message is to be based on these words and their counterparts in the other two synoptic gospels. Mark 4 verses 8 and 9. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And he said, He who has years to hear, let him hear.

Then verse 20, where our Lord explains the spiritual application of those words of the parable. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Now, we have a practical end in view this morning and the practical end is this.

We want to see what really did our Lord mean when he said that your heart and mine can be like the productively good soil described here. I have no doubt that each of us in his or her own way would gladly acknowledge this morning before God a measure of disappointment with ourselves. We hear so much of the word of God.

We read so much of the word of God. Many of us converse with other people. We meet in small groups or we meet with larger groups so that the impact of the word of God upon us is considerable from that point of view.

But somehow, somehow our lives are still unfruitful. And however much we hear, however much we read, it does not seem to produce a correspondingly increasing harvest. Now, why should that be? How does one produce this good soil that in turn yields sixtyfold, even a hundredfold? Is it possible that there is a key here in this very parable whereby we can understand this and therefore can go out into a new week expecting some things that we've never known before? I believe our Lord has so much to tell us from this parable.

With this practical end in view then, we now turn our thoughts away from the three types of disappointing soils envisaged earlier in the parable, from the wayside soil, which was so hard, very much like a pavement, and when the seed fell upon it, there was no penetration. The birds of the air came, picked them away, and that was that. We turn away from that.

We turn away from that other soil, which was described as having a rocky subsoil, allowing only a transient response. True, the topsoil covering the rock was able to receive the word, and the word began to germinate, and you could see a new life bud, it would seem, but only for a moment, until the heat of the day rose, and then it was scorched, and it began to wither, and it died away because it had no root in itself. We turn away from that.

And we turn from the other type, the thorny type, as it has been called, from the facially clean plot of land, with its reasonably soft topsoil, but the ground underneath was cluttered by unseen roots and shrubs, so that even though it received the seed into it, and the seed was able to germinate and to begin to show signs of life, it never got very far, because these shrubs, these roots that were already in the soil, grew with the fruit of the new seed, and it was so hardy, and so tough, and so native to the soil, the old roots overcame and swamped and choked everything. We turn now to the good soil, and I believe that against the background of what we've seen, and what we are going to see today, there are at least three very important, very practical lessons that we can learn here. Now, the first of those lessons relates to the preparation of the soil that is to be good, the preparation of the good soil.

And other seeds, said Jesus, fell into good, good soil. The emergence of genuine, lasting, and ever-increasing fruit in the context of the parable is made to depend fundamentally upon the quality of the soil where the seed was sown. The seed of God is the most mighty thing in creation, and yet our Lord Jesus said, the result it will bring forth in your life depends very largely upon the quality of the soil into which it falls.

Now, Jesus said that, not me. Some of our Christian forefathers spoke and wrote voluminously upon what many of them refer to as law work. Now, some of you know that terminology, that language.

Perhaps it's strange to others of you. Law work. And boy, how they could write, and how they could preach on law work.

What did they mean? Now, if you read their tomes, they would put it like this, I believe, many of them. They would say that you can only come to Mount Calvary when you've already been to Mount Sinai. You can't come to the foot of the cross of the Savior and to the place where eternal life is given as a gift until you've made a spiritual excursus to Mount Sinai, and where you recognize the law of God as the law of God, telling you and telling me what God requires of us, reflecting the character and the nature of God, and therefore the demands of God, so that when we have done that, we actually recognize the plague of our own hearts.

When we've been to Mount Sinai, when we've seen the significance of the divine law as it is epitomized in the Ten Commandments, we recognize that God is holy, and we cannot give him what he requires of us. Now, our spiritual grandfathers and their fathers before them, if I may so speak, they used to make a lot of this. But what they meant was this, you see.

If the soil of the human heart is to receive the seed of the gospel of grace, that soil has to be plowed. It has to be broken. It has to be turned upside down.

And the stones have to be broken and thrown out, and the weeds have to be taken out and thrown out and burned. In other words, you cannot just come from a pagan life and receive the word of God into your heart just as it is and expect the most. The soil has to be prepared.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. Our spiritual forebears did not say that you cannot have a momentary conversion taking place right at once in the twinkling of an eye. They didn't say that.

But what they did say is this, for the soil of the human heart to become fertile requires a lifetime of preparation so that repentance to them was not something that only took place at the point of conversion. It did there. But it was a lifetime business.

It is something that goes on day after day after day after day, whereby the word of God and the spirit of God and the providence of God, all working together as God alone can make things work together, have this impact upon us, churning and preparing the soil. I believe on some other occasion I told you of a neighbor of ours in our first home. You won't mind me repeating it.

You'll all have forgotten it anyway. He was an octogenarian, about 84, 85 at this time, and he had just a tiny little plot of garden in his backyard. Really, it was just a border.

And he offered to give me a hand when I came into a wilderness garden in our first manse. And when I saw his little plot of garden, I thought, well, here's the man to help us. And one day I asked him, how on earth can you grow so much in your in your little garden? And he said to me, my boy, he said, you see that earth? You see that soil? That soil goes through my hands at least twice every summer, every spring, every summer.

And I, I, I, I break it down, he says, and I guarantee you, you wouldn't find 20 stones larger than a quarter of an inch in the whole of the plot. It goes through my hands. I break it.

And as I do so, I know exactly what the soil requires, and I give it. Oh, men and women, this is the ministry of God. And if only we were prepared for this, you know, the hardest heart in knots this morning could become the most fertile of all.

Now, without enlarging, the good soil may be described both negatively and positively. Negatively, and I have to say this to be true and loyal to our Lord here, I have to say the negative. Negatively, the good soil will not be characterized by the faults of the other three.

That I mean, by that I mean this. The good soil will not be like the wayside soil, which was so hard that the seed just didn't penetrate. It just got on the surface and the birds of the air took it away.

So if your heart is a heart that has a good soil this morning, the word, however feeble the preacher, that just doesn't matter. If it's the word of God and it comes upon the soil of your heart, if it's good soil, you take it in, you take it in. Then again, the good soil will not be like the so-called rocky soil, offering the seed a purely superficial reception for a moment and say, oh, that was good.

I must do that. I must obey that. I'm glad I went to church this morning.

I had a very good message. It's so wonderful. The Monday morning comes.

Tuesday afternoon arrives. We've forgotten all about it. The good soil will not be like the so-called thorny soil, which, though it apparently received the seed, produced such hindrances and opposition beneath the surface, right down there in the depths, that the seed, even though it was the seed of the divine word, came to nothing.

That's the negative picture. The soil of your heart and mind will not be like those first three described by our Lord if our heart is good soil. Let's put it positively.

Positively, the good soil will be characterized by the very opposite of these conditions. The good soil will be evidently softened to receive the word of God, softened by circumstances, softened by the spirit of God, softened by a sense of awe in the presence of God, softened by the knowledge of ourselves as well as the knowledge of God. That is humble.

Then the good soil will be deep and not shallow. So that when the seed begins to germinate, it can send its roots deep down, even into the subconscious life. And as the roots go down, so will the shoots go up.

And the thing that is emerging is strong. Let me add to that. The good soil will be cleaned out and cleared of thorns and thistles that would serve as an active opposition to the influence of the word of God in the soul.

Repentance is a very radical change of mind that renders a person willing to throw out anything and everything that's contrary to the word and the will of God. If I am really born again of the spirit of God, then I have come to that point where I am prepared to throw out of my life any old weed, any old stone, any old thing from the depths that is inconsistent with the incoming of the Lord Jesus by his spirit. Now much of those things go out at conversion, of course.

How many of us remember this? Oh my, I remember what a funeral I had the day I was born, spiritually. The things that had to be thrown out, the things that had to be burned and no one saw them being burnt, save I and my God alone. Most of us have to go that way.

There are things that are illicit and wrong in our lives and we have to get rid of them and they have to go out, out of the soil. But some of them have a peculiar habit of coming back again so that we need to have this ongoing process of excluding from our lives such things as we are convicted of by the spirit and the word of God. Now this is the good soil.

The good soil is this. Assuming there is someone here this morning and the Lord comes to you and says, look man, look, look woman, look my child. You know there's something been growing in your heart for a long time.

It's an insidious weed. You know what it is. I'm not going to tell anybody else, but you know what it is.

Get rid of it. Get rid of it. Tear it up and throw it out.

Now that's the good soil that does that. Gets rid of it so that there is this constantly cleansing operation going on and thereby the seed becomes purer and cleaner and more fertile as the days go by. The production of the soil.

My friends, this is a lifetime business. And it necessitates that we should utilize every means of grace and every moment's opportunity to do it to the glory of our God. May I ask therefore that if any of us have stopped doing this, we start again.

And if any of us have never really started doing this, let's start today. If any man be in Christ Jesus, there is a new creation. What kind of a new creation? Oh, says Paul, all things are of God.

That's the new creation. The things that are not of God and the things that are not pleasing to God are thrown on one side. And as that is done, the soil becomes prepared for the best that God can give us.

And that life will soon become a garden like a watered garden full of fragrance, rare, bearing the fruit of the spirit and the fruit of God. Now, the second thing I want to say briefly is this, and this will have to be very brief. I want to notice one or two lessons here very simply concerning the way in which the good soil receives the word.

The reception of the seed by the good soil. You may know the good soil by the reception it gives to the seed and its response to the good word of God, as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews calls it. In the context envisaged in the Synoptic Gospels, the good soil receives the word of the kingdom of God and acts upon it in a worthy manner.

Now, that's the point. How do you know the good soil? It receives the word of God so that the word of God can bring forth the fruit which God requires. It's the reception of the word.

The people represented by the four types of soil, all of them heard the same word. They heard the word of the gospel. They heard, in this context, the gospel of the kingdom, that the king has come.

And in the person of the king, all the resources of heaven are at the disposal of men for the fulfillment of God's purpose. God was in Christ. The power of God, the grace of God, the mind of God, all there in Christ.

He is the king of the kingdom. And those who receive the word, receive the word concerning the kingdom and its king represented in Jesus Christ. Now, here in the three gospels, I want to choose out three key words.

Because they describe the mode in which the good soil receives the seed. And there are three key words here. First of all, those concerning whom it can be said that their hearts resembles the good soil, understand the word as they hear it.

Now, Matthew puts this negatively and positively. And it's very important. This truth is presented negatively and positively in Matthew 13.

Negatively, Matthew puts it like this. In Matthew 13, verse 19. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, does not understand it, this is the negative statement.

The evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. Now, Matthew answers a question for us.

Tell us why the seed sown on the pathway, on the roadway, on that hard, hard exterior. Why didn't it come to anything? One reason is this, Matthew. The only one he mentions is this.

They didn't understand it. They didn't understand it. And because they didn't understand it, they wouldn't receive it.

Now, let's get the positive. In verse 23 of Matthew 13, we read these words. As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it.

He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case, a hundredfold, in another, 60, in another, 30. Now, my friends, this is exceedingly important. You and I are expected by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the enabling of the spirit and the gifts that God gives to people within the church and within the fellowship, we are expected to understand his word.

And if we don't understand that word, we cannot grow. We cannot grow. Now, it's as simple as that.

You cannot grow and flourish as Jesus envisages it without a corresponding understanding of the word of God. Now, this matter of understanding spiritual truth is both a divine gift and a human responsibility. If I don't put those two things together, then somebody will be aware of an overemphasis, and there would be an overemphasis.

Paul tells the Corinthians these words. He says, the natural man, the unspiritual man, the man who's not born again, the unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him. And he is not able to understand them because they're spiritually discerned.

The natural man, the man in his own, in his human nature, unchanged, unredeemed, unregenerate, he simply cannot take in the truth. He can't understand it. But the man who is born again has an anointing, as John tells the readers of his first epistle.

You have an anointing, he says, and you don't need that any man should teach you. You have an anointing. You have the capacity to understand.

If you use it and cultivate it, you have it. You see, God doesn't give us his gifts without good reason. He gives us the gift of the anointing to understand his word because he wants us to understand his word.

We need to understand his word. Now, whereas Paul, there in 1 Corinthians, stresses the basic fact of human inability apart from the spirit of God, Jesus, in this passage, stresses the fact of human

accountability. God has given you the spirit.

God has made you a new creature. God has caused his word to penetrate into your hard heart, bringing life. Now, then, he that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

You know, this is exactly what Jesus is stressing here. Over and over again, he says it. And he said, he who has ears to hear, let him hear, Mark 4, 9. Again, later on, if any man has ears to hear, let him hear.

For to him who has will be given more. And from him who has not, who hasn't taken it in by understanding, even what he has will be taken away from him. Would you make your heart into good soil? Then, my friend, you and I have got to study the word of God.

And we've got to give it that application of our minds and of our thinking capacity that any, any, anybody in school or in college has to give to his subject. This is our subject. This is the thing for which we live and for which we want to die.

This is the faith we want to live by. This is the faith we want to die by. Therefore, we must understand it.

I don't know that I can say anything more important than that. This is not, of course, a matter of academic distinction, but rather of intelligent apprehension. You know, in the world of the spiritual things, it's not a matter of whether you've got a degree, whether you're a graduate or a fellowship or what you have.

It's not that. It's the matter of what the Spirit of God gives you. But you must use it.

And if the Spirit of God has given you the anointing to read his word and he's put his Spirit within your heart, then you must employ the Spirit and allow the Spirit to teach. And this means lessons. And my Lord has a strange habit, you know, of announcing some of his most important lessons at an early hour in the day and others of them at other times.

But we need to be there when he's giving his lessons. Let me go one step further. I wish I could spend more time on this this morning.

I would have normally. If you are the fortunate parents of children, see that you teach them also to understand what they read and what they hear. There is nothing which is more confusing to a young life brought up in a Christian home than just having a string of texts that make no sense.

Now, I speak from a pastor's background here, and I tell you it is one of the most devastating things in trying to help young people brought up in Christian homes. When the only thing that has been done, in itself a very noble thing, but the only thing that has been done is to memorize scripture. That's a wonderful thing to do.

Please don't misunderstand me. Do that. Would to God we had more of it.

But don't just run it in. Tell the children what they mean. Give them give them the understanding of it.

If they haven't the understanding of it, their soil, the soil of their souls cannot be good soil. In fact, there may well be a great tragedy and reaction later on if they have just received a lot of mumbo-jumbo that they can make no sense of. And my friends, we have to be honest, that's all some of our children have had.

We've never reasoned with them. We've never taught them. And may I say so kindly, the primary responsibility for the teaching of children lies upon the shoulders of father and mother.

Don't blame the Sunday school. Don't blame the church. And don't blame even your Christian day school if your children are not learning.

Fundamentally, father and mother, you are not mature enough to have children if you're not mature enough to teach them the word of God. Now, that's a strong saying, and I will stand by it. A man or a woman is not mature enough Christianly to have children in the home if he or she is not mature enough to teach them the word of the living God.

Understanding. That's the first thing. The second thing is this.

Such understanding must result in receiving. There's a beautiful word here. Receiving or accepting the word.

Those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it or receive it. Mark 420. Now, the verb really means welcome it.

That's what I want to stress. It's welcoming the word. Welcoming the word.

Sometimes the word will be one of reproof. Sometimes it'll be one of encouragement. Sometimes it will go so deep and hurt us so deeply that it will churn us inside out.

Welcome it. Sometimes it'll be like the honey from the honeycomb. Well, of course, you welcome it then.

But whatever the nature and the quality of the word of God, this good soil receives it. And says, if my Lord is angry with me, then there is good reason for it. And I must receive his rebuke as I receive his promises.

Do you do that? That's good soil. And the third is this. Such understanding and such welcome of God's word must be followed by its retention.

Luke 815. And I quote from the NIV. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart who hears the word and retains it.

Now, that doesn't simply mean retain it in memory so much, but it is retained within the soul to do its work. If the Lord gave me a word to reprove me, I remember it. And every now and again, I turn back to it and I check my life by it.

That's the point. If the word has given me or if the Lord has given me a word of encouragement in difficult times, I retain that word of encouragement. And when difficult times come again, I remember that.

And I allow the same word to bring the same ministry to me so that the word is within my soul. Now, this is how the good soil becomes what Luke calls an honest and a good heart. An honest heart.

And frankly, you know, that's all godliness really is. It's being honest with God and with men. Honesty.

Does your heart give such a reception to the seed of God's word? This is a proof that you have thus received Jesus Christ, the king of the kingdom, to rule within you because he rules by his word. I was reading last night of the coronation of her majesty, the present queen in Westminster Abbey. And someone has gone on record as describing the very moving scene just before the actual moment when

the crown was placed upon her brow.

Some of you may have seen this. You remember how the archbishop of Canterbury, as the chief citizen in the country, called four times towards each point of the compass, north, south, east, and west. And he asked them, or he spoke to them in these words, I present unto you the undoubted queen of this realm.

Are you willing to do her homage? And he looked to the north and he looked to the south, to the east and to the west, to all quarters, and not until four times he had received the acclamation of the multitude was the crown brought out and placed upon her brow. Are you willing to do homage to the king of the kingdom this morning? The measure of that homage is the measure into which you receive his word into your mind, into your heart, into your soul, and welcome it and let it abide there so that it is a lamp from within as well as a guide from without. Thank you for your gracious listening.

I'm almost through. How do you produce that good soil? Fruitfulness is not the condition whereby eternal life is earned, but rather the expression of that life freely given us by God through Jesus Christ. What is it that produces the fruit? I didn't mean the soil, I meant the fruit.

I think I said the wrong thing. The production of fruit in that good soil. Well, my friends, it's so beautifully simple that I find it challenging.

You know, the one thing we need fundamentally to be fruitful is this. If the soil of our heart is good soil, the only thing we need in that heart is the seed of the word, that's all. But you say, what about the Holy Spirit? Well, you can't separate the word from the Holy Spirit.

My words are spirit and they are life, says Jesus. You can't separate the word of the Lord Jesus from the Holy Spirit. That is a false dichotomy.

That really is heresy. The word of God cannot be dead. And if the word of the Spirit comes into my heart, it is a living word.

The word of God is quick, says the epistle to the Hebrews. That means alive. It's a living word.

The word of God is alive in the heart. And the only thing I need is this, is to have the word buried in my heart, buried in my mind, understanding it, welcoming it, and just leaving it there. Let it do its work.

And that word of God as seed is capable of bringing forth 30 fold, 60 fold, a hundred fold in a man's own life. This is what Paul meant. When he was writing to the Ephesians, to the Galatians about the fruit, to the spirit, there's a nine fold fruit.

The one spirit can bring forth the whole crop in one heart. I don't know whether any of you have read the story of a man who has been called the Black Samson of Zaire. This man had been a remarkable character, given to all kinds of vice.

And he was a very strong man, resembled the Samson of the Old Testament. While in prison for murder, Mawija, as his name was, was given the Bible by someone. And here is a part of the account he gives of what happened.

That night when the lights were turned out, I tucked the edges of my blanket into the sides of the platform above me to make it a curtain enclosing me. I tucked it around beneath me. Then I lit a candle and I read.

Every night I read. I finished my part and exchanged it for another. There were other prisoners that had had a bit of the Bible, which they'd torn up in order to hand it around.

And my heart drove me, says this man, to eat up the book of God like a wind-driven fire eats up dry prairie grass. This is a pagan recently converted. I chewed what I ate until no taste was left.

And then I swallowed it. Words of the Bible did not strike me hard at once. Rather, like a rainstorm, sorry, words of the Bible did not strike me hard at once, like a rainstorm.

They fell upon me slowly and quietly for a long time, like the wetness of a heavy fog. This book led me to a great treasure, which still causes me to marvel, in which I have never yet exhausted. What's the secret of it? What brings a pagan to life and become a servant of God and one of the most used men in this country today? Well, here it is.

It's the seed in good soil. As simple as that. And of course, what is true within a man's own heart is true extensively through us.

I close with these two illustrations. We've had a lot of snow recently, and I was reminded as I was preparing for this morning of that very wintry night in England when a young boy of 16 found that the snow was too much for him, and he couldn't arrive at the little church where he normally worshipped, and he turned into a little Methodist church. If I remember correctly, there were five people present, and the preacher wasn't very enthusiastic.

But he saw this youngster of about 16 years old, and he addressed him in the congregation, and he said to him, look to God, look to God in Christ, young man, and you shall live. And the service was over, and the young man went out into the snow to find his way home. And of course, he was none other than Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

Just one seed falling into one prepared heart, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon is reputed to have been the greatest preacher since the Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom. Certainly, he won more souls for Jesus Christ than most men in a lifetime. Or let me put it to you like this.

A missionary was home on furlough. You know the story perhaps better than I do. Having been out on the field in a certain African country for a number of years, seeing very, very little, he counted the number of African villages he had seen that had never heard the name of Jesus.

And he rehearsed this to the congregations that had invited him. And it was hard going, a story of struggle and toil and loneliness and suffering and homesickness and death in the family. And he went from one church to another, but in one of these churches, there was a young fellow who heard him, and his name was David Livingstone.

In the heart of young David Livingstone was prepared by this and by other circumstances, and the seed fell and it began to blossom. You see, the soil was ready. And as David Livingstone went out, not only did he bring the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ to a multitude that no man can number, but in turn, he being dead yet speaks as the cause of sending men and women everywhere all over the world in search of souls.

See the point? One seed in good soil. Is your heart and mine anything like that this morning? My friends, one thing is clear. We simply have no excuse.

None whatsoever. And we shall be answerable at last if we do not attend with greater diligence to the quality of our inner lives that we receive what God says and let it in the depth of our souls bring forth what pleases him best. Two things then.

Let's do that. That's one duty, and the other is this. Let us see to it that we proclaim that word, that seed, that we cast it and spread it abroad, far and wide, to young and old, black and white, rich and poor, cultured and illiterate, wherever we are, for this seed.

This seed of God, the word of God, has the capacity to bring life to the dead and to make good that which was rotten. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your holy word.

We thank you for the measure in which we know it is living and abiding, powerful and mighty, quickening and renewing. But we pray, our Father, that as we cultivate our hearts to it, and as we get rid increasingly of those things in our lives which we discover should never be there, may the soil be so productive that your name will be magnified, your will done within us, and we, each of us and all of us together, show forth the excellence of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. And through our united testimony, we draw the Gentiles unto thee, and the Jews.

Hear these, our prayers, and forgive our sins. In Jesus' precious name, amen.

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