

The Sower, Seed & Soils

Text: Mark 4:1-20

Introduction:

1. This chapter could be called the parable chapter in Mark. Mark focuses less on the parables in comparison to Matthew and Luke.
2. What is a parable?
 - A parable is really an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. They were a common method of teaching in the East and there are numerous examples of parables in the Old Testament (e.g. Nathan's parable delivered to David after his sin with Bathsheba).
 - The word 'parable' means "something thrown alongside of" so it has the basic meaning of a comparison or analogy. Christ told simple stories based on the experiences of his listeners to illustrate Divine truth.
 - Someone stated that a parable was like a doorway. *"Jesus' listeners stood at the doorway and heard Him. If they were not interested, they stayed on the outside. But if they were interested, they could walk through the doorway, and think more about the truth behind the parable and what it meant to their life."*
3. How is a parable understood?
 - We need to remember that a parable generally conveys one main truth. Warren Wiersbe: *"Sometimes a parable contains a certain amount of "window dressing" to provide a setting for the truth that it is intended to convey. Much foolish exegesis has resulted from trying to force a meaning on every item in a parable."*
 - We need to check our interpretation against other clear declarations of Scripture.
4. This parable focuses on the response of four different soils to the seed, picturing the four heart responses that can be expected to the Gospel message.
5. In this lesson we will consider **3 truths** about this parable from our Lord.

I. The Expression of the Parable (Vs. 1-9)

A. The Setting of the Parable (Vs. 1-2)

1. The time – it was the "same day" (Matt. 13:1) that the religious leaders had charged Christ with working in the power of Beelzebub. This is significant as it marks a sharp transition in the teaching ministry of Christ. Because he was "morally rejected by the Jewish leaders, Jesus adopted a new method." (Hiebert)
2. The location – the "sea side". Christ enters a fishing boat so that he is surrounded by water with the multitude on the sea shore. This would be a natural amphitheater with good acoustics.

B. The Story of the Parable (Vs. 3-9)

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1. The sower of the parable (Vs. 3)
 - a. This was a familiar scene to Christ's listeners. They would have either sown themselves or would have seen it done many times.
 - b. "Grain fields covered the landscape of Galilee. A man hoisting a seed bag over his shoulder and scattering seed as he slowly traversed his furrowed field would have been a familiar sight."
(JM)
 - c. "He (the sower) worked with a leather bag containing the seed, either wheat or barley, tied to his waist while he scattered the seed by hand. The field would be neither extensive nor fenced. The scattered grain was plowed in by means of a wooden plow, generally drawn by a pair of oxen." (Hiebert)
2. The soils of the parable (Vs. 4-8)
 - a. The wayside soil (Vs. 4)
 - i. 'wayside' = refers to the narrow paths that crisscross the Galilean landscape, separating the fields and providing both farmers and travellers access through the countryside." (JM) This would be like the path used by Christ and his disciples to go through the corn fields (Mark 2:23)
 - ii. The seed doesn't even penetrate the surface of the soil and is quickly devoured by birds. Whatever the birds missed would be "trampled under foot" (Luke 8:5)
 - b. The stony soil (Vs. 5-6)
 - i. These areas had a thin layer of topsoil covering a limestone layer below.
 - ii. "A hard-rocky surface, covered with a thin layer of soil."
(Robertson)
 - iii. The seed germinates quickly in the warm, shallow soil but soon withers in the heat of the sun.
 - c. The thorny soil (Vs. 7)
 - i. 'thorns' = a thorny bramble common to the land of Israel. Word used in Matt. 27:29 of crown of thorns.
 - ii. Both the seed and the thorns spring up together but the thorns quickly outgrow the grain stalk and choke it to death.
 - d. The good soil (Vs. 8)
 - i. The central mark of the good ground is that it produces fruit whereas the others do not.
 - ii. "some thirty...sixty...an hundred" = The volume of fruit produced is a startling point in the parable. Farmers in ancient Israel usually expected a six to eightfold yield at harvesttime. Christ's words represent yields of 3,000, 6,000 and 10,000 percent! (JM)
3. The soberness required by the parable (Vs. 9)
 - a. Christ makes it clear that this is not a mere story. There is Divine truth to be revealed through this parable for those who are open to receive it.
 - b. Hearing the Word of God comes with sobering accountability.

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II. The Enquiry about the Parable (Vs. 10-12)

A. The Disciples Request (Vs. 10)

1. They asked why about the parable – “*Why speakest thou unto them in parables?*” (Matt. 13:10) He will answer that question in Vs. 11-12.
2. They asked what about the parable – “*What might this parable be?*” (Luke 8:9). He will answer this question in Vs. 13-20.
3. The true followers of Christ entered through the doorway into more truth. This is a mark of a true disciple – he has a thirst to know more of God’s truth.

B. The Lord’s Reply (Vs. 11-12)

Christ outlines the two purposes of the parables:

1. To reveal truth – “unto you it is given”
 - a. Those receiving the light would be given more light through the parables.
 - b. ‘mystery’ = “In the New Testament it denotes not something mysterious and inscrutable but something formerly hidden which cannot be known by man apart from divine revelation but which is now revealed and imparted to those spiritually qualified to receive it.” (Hiebert) See Eph. 3:4-5
 - c. “of the kingdom of God” = the ‘mystery’ parables “all record failure and a mixture of good and bad. They portrayed the Jewish rejection of Christ that was taking place and also the present church age that fills the period between the postponement of the kingdom and the inauguration of the kingdom.” (Phillips)
2. To conceal truth – “but unto them that are without”
 - a. Christ quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10. Those who were wilfully rejecting the light would be barred from further revelation as an act of judgment. Matt. 13:13-15 “*Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.*”
 - b. “lest...they should be converted” = remember the previous chapter. They had hardened their hearts so many times they eventually passed the point of no return to where God would now not allow them any more opportunities for salvation.

III. The Explanation of the Parable (Vs. 13-20)

A. The Priority of the Parable (Vs. 13)

1. This parable would function like a pattern to aid in understanding the rest of the kingdom parables.
2. Key symbols such as the seed and the sower are defined.

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B. The Pictures of the Parable (Vs. 14)

1. The sower – represents Christ at that time when he was proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and all believers that seek to sow the message of the Gospel (e.g. soul-winning).
2. The seed – represents the Word of God. Note: There is nothing wrong with the seed in any of these cases. The problem is in the condition of the soil. The seed does not need to be adjusted or tampered with to try and make it fit different soils!

C. The Particulars of the Parable (Vs. 14-20)

1. The Wayside Hearer – the Stubborn Heart (Vs. 15)
 - a. This heart is hard and calloused to the Word of God to the point where the seed doesn't even penetrate. This heart is hardened in unbelief.
 - b. Satan moves quickly to remove the seed from their hearts. He uses many means to do this. Highlights how that whenever the Gospel sower is working, Satan is active too! (See 2 Cor. 4:4) He snatches away the seed of the word "lest they should believe and be saved" (Luke 8:12)
2. The Stony ground Hearer – the Superficial Heart (Vs. 16-17)
 - a. 'likewise' = they are similar to the wayside hearer. The only difference is that their hard-heartedness is not so easily apparent being buried beneath the surface.
 - b. "receive it with gladness" = This hearer has a seemingly positive response to the Word. They get stirred and excited on an emotional level but deep down, the heart remains hard and unrepentant. "Shallow growth is the result of a spiritual experience that is emotionally exhilarating, but intellectually rootless." (McKenna)
 - c. "affliction or persecution...for the word's sake" = they quickly wither when they start to bear the cost that comes with being a disciple of Christ. This plant dies as rapidly as it grows.
 - d. Remember, this does not represent someone who is saved then loses their salvation. Rather, it pictures the false professor who on the surface appears to have come to saving faith but in reality, has only a shallow interest in the things of God.
 - e. J.C. Ryle: "It is quite possible to feel great pleasure, or deep alarm, under the preaching of the Gospel, and yet to be utterly destitute of the grace of God. The tears of some hearers of sermons, and the extravagant delight of others, are no certain marks of conversion...Their impressions are like Jonah's gourd, which came up in a night and perished in a night. They fade as rapidly as they grow."
3. The Thorny ground Hearer – the Suffocated Heart (Vs. 18-19)

The seed is strangled by three thorny branches. John Phillips outlines them as follows:

 - a. Worries – "the cares of this life" These are the pressures, necessities and distractions of life. Their minds are pulled in different directions. People get so wrapped up in the concerns of here and now that they do not take time to pause and consider their eternal destiny. They rush busily down the broad way

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- tragically unaware of the terrible fate that awaits them at the end.
- b. Wealth – “the deceitfulness of riches” Riches promise so much joy, satisfaction and fulfilment that millions pursue them full of hopes and expectations, only to find at the end, they have been lured into a trap and deceived. 1. Tim. 6:9-10 *“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare...”* Wealth is dangerous because it “insulates people from the realities of life so they do not feel the need for the Gospel” (Phillips). Heed the challenge of Mark 8:36 *“For what shall it profit a man...”*
 - c. Wants – “the lusts of other things” Luke’s Gospel says “pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14) One of the characteristics of the last days is that men will be “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2. Tim. 3:4) We live in a society given over to hedonism which means “a devotion to pleasure as a way of life.”
 - d. Challenge: While the primary interpretation refers to an unsaved soul, we can see how there is an application and warning for us as believers. The same things that keep the sinner from getting saved, keep the believer from growth and fruitfulness for the Lord. How thorn infested are the lives of some of God’s people!
4. The Good ground Hearer – the Sincere Heart (Vs. 20)
There are two marks that identify the good ground hearer:
- a. Whole hearted reception of the Word – He “heareth the word, and understandeth it” (Matt. 13:23) and “in an honest and good heard, having heard the word, keep it” (Luke 8:15). Romans 10:10 reminds us “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness...” The Word penetrates deep into this heart, transforming and changing it.
 - b. Patient fruit bearing – “and bring forth fruit” Luke adds the words “with patience” (Luke 8:15). This is in the present tense. They go on bearing fruit as a pattern of life. Jesus said, “...If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;” (John 8:31) We do not ‘continue’ in order to be saved or keep ourselves saved but we ‘continue’ because we are saved.

Conclusion:

1. The Challenge from the Sower – we need to be faithful in spreading the seed plentifully, irrespective of the condition of the soil. As we proclaim the Gospel, we can expect to see these four kinds of responses.
2. The Challenge from the Seed – there is power in the Word of God to accomplish salvation. We do not need to try and alter the seed but simply be faithful to sow it. In time, we will have the joy of seeing the seed fall on good ground and bring forth fruit.
3. The Challenge from the Soil – which soil best represents you? Are you a good ground hearer, allowing your heart to be ploughed and prepared by the Holy Spirit’s conviction, receiving the Word in sincerity? Or are you one of the other three? Respond with a true heart to the Gospel.