

Jesus Taught with Parables
Mark 4:1-20
Key Verse: 4:20

“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.”

In this passage Jesus begins to teach people by using parables. This was a new development in Jesus’ ministry. We must do our best to understand Jesus’ mind in this matter. It has direct implications for our own spiritual growth and for raising disciples as well. Jesus begins by telling the parable of the sower. Jesus’ main point is the kind of attitude we must have toward his word. Those who have a right attitude can bear abundant fruit. But those who do not have a right attitude remain immature and childish. Let’s learn how to be fruitful from Jesus today.

First, he taught them many things by parables (1-8).

Look at verse 1. “Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around 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.” Jesus faced mounting opposition to his gospel ministry. The religious establishment called him demon possessed. Even his family members thought he was out of his mind. Opposition would increase even more in days to come. Jesus could not teach in the synagogues any longer. However, Jesus did not back down from teaching the word. Jesus had a clear life purpose in God to teach the word of God to men. When the synagogues closed, Jesus went to the lake.

When Jesus began to teach, a large crowd gathered. They were thirsty for the word of life. They came to Jesus, one needy person at a time, two by two, in families, and by groups from communities, until they formed a large crowd. All kinds of people were there: professionals, laborers, paralytics, the athletic types, single mothers, rambunctious children, pious Jews, lawbreakers, tax collectors, ladies of the night, and the demon possessed. Some leaders would have wanted to run away from the crowd; they might have kept going in the boat until they reached the other side of the lake. But Jesus was different. He wanted to help them all in the best way that he could. What did he do?

Look at verse 2. “He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said....” Jesus taught them the word of God. Their real need was for the truth of God in their souls. They were miserable because they lived in ignorance of God. They were miserable because they struggled endlessly under the power of sin and death. But the word of God could give life to their souls. The word of God could heal their inner beings and restore the image of God in them. The word of God could make them wise for salvation and empower them to live as children of God in a troubled world. We learn from Jesus that what people need most is to have God in their hearts through the word of God.

Jesus taught in parables. What is a parable? Let’s read verses 3-8. “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.” This is a simple story with a deeper spiritual meaning. Parables are stories from everyday life that teach spiritual truth. Until now, Jesus had preached, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” But here Jesus begins to use parables. Parables are not meant to be drilled into listeners by preaching, but to be considered and understood through prayerful meditation and intellectual exercise. Jesus did not use only one method of delivering the word of God. Jesus preached the message, and Jesus also taught by parables. In one way or another Jesus was constantly communicating spiritual truth that could give life to the dead souls of men.

When Jesus taught the parable of the sower, he used a common, ordinary event in daily life to make a spiritual point. In so doing, Jesus taught us to see spiritual reality in the mundane things of life. Most likely, after this, when the disciples saw a man sowing seed in the field, they would remember Jesus’ parable. It might have stirred them to think on heavenly things and to be diligent in the work of God. There is a hidden mystery of God’s truth in nature (Ro 1:20). Later, St. Paul would compare a seed to our bodies and its beautiful flower to our resurrection body. When we see nature through Jesus’ parables, the living God speaks to us in volumes. The famous Buddha observed

that trees and flowers come back to life again every spring, and then he lamented that man dies and never comes back to life. It was because he saw nature without the parables of Jesus. In Jesus, we see that the new buds of spring are nature's evidence of the resurrection. Spring is not time to lament, but to rejoice over new life. When we hold Jesus' parables in our hearts, we can enjoy spiritual reality in the everyday events of life.

Second, Jesus explains why he taught in parables (9-12).

After telling the parable of the sower, Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." It was the end of Jesus' message. Put yourself in the place of a person in the crowd that day who heard this parable for the first time. It sounds like a story about a farmer sowing seed and no more. Someone might have traveled many miles, skipping work and hiring a babysitter to come and hear this parable. They might have thought they made a mistake in coming. Yet Jesus challenges his listeners to understand that there is more to the parable than they might think at first. Fortunately, Jesus explained everything to his disciples.

Look at verses 10-12. "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; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'" Notice that the Twelve and the others around Jesus took the initiative to ask Jesus about the parables. Jesus did not volunteer the explanation until he was asked about it. Jesus wanted to interact with his disciples, rather than teaching them one-sidedly. We must learn from Jesus' disciples. When we don't know what Jesus is talking about, we must ask Jesus for help. Mark does not say what the disciples asked him. Matthew says that they asked him why he spoke to the people in parables (Mt 13:10). Luke says that they asked him what the parables meant (Lk 8:9). Jesus answers both questions.

The main purpose of Jesus' parables are for the instruction of his disciples. Jesus told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you." This tells us that the kingdom of God is the key to understanding the parables. The kingdom of God cannot be discovered through human means. It can be known only by the revelation of God. It is the gift of God. Jesus chose to reveal the kingdom to his disciples. The disciples could see God himself in Jesus. They could learn God's character and nature and how he was working in the world by being with Jesus. The first step in understanding the parables is to accept Jesus in our hearts and to see the kingdom of God.

The Bible says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings" (Prov 25:2). In fact, God hides himself in his creation. The kingdom of God is right there throughout God's creation. But only those who know the secret can see it. At one time, Isaiah the prophet was a man of doom and gloom. He had some insight, but he could see only the destruction of Israel due to the evil of the people. But one day, he went into the temple and saw God on his throne, high and exalted. At first, Isaiah felt that he would die in the presence of the holy God. Then God sent an angel with burning coals to cleanse his unclean lips and to forgive his sins. Suddenly, Isaiah's ears opened and he could hear God's voice. Isaiah found that God was crying out for someone to send to his people, saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah discovered God's broken heart for the lost world. Then Isaiah began to see that God wanted to save Israel and the people of all nations. Isaiah could see God's glory filling the whole world. Isaiah could see the coming Messiah who would establish a new heavens and a new earth. Isaiah could see the kingdom of God. We can see the kingdom of God when we know Christ personally. The disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus trusted them and shared the secret of the kingdom with them. So they could grasp the meaning of the parables. To them, the parables were a source of wisdom and strength.

There was another purpose to Jesus' parables. Jesus spoke in parables to veil his truth from those on the outside. To those who do not know the secret of the kingdom of God, the parables are simply short stories. They hear them and do not know their meaning. They see and do not perceive. Those who refuse to acknowledge God cannot understand the parables at all. God will not be mocked. Those who are haughty before his word are sent away empty. They hear the parable that can give life to their souls, but they do not receive its benefit. The word of God is like a sharp, double-edged sword (Heb 4:12).

Third, Jesus explains the parable of the sower (13-20).

Jesus went on to explain the parable to his disciples. But first he rebuked them. Look at verse 13. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'" Jesus expected them to

have keener spiritual insight, a stronger spiritual desire, and to grow in thinking power. Jesus also revealed that the parable of the sower was basic to the understanding of all parables. In explaining this parable, Jesus lays the groundwork for interpreting all parables. Let's listen to Jesus' explanation.

Verse 14 says, "The farmer sows the word." Jesus compared himself to a farmer. Many city people look down on farmers as unsophisticated agrarians. But Jesus was willing to compare himself to a farmer to explain spiritual truth to his disciples. As a farmer sows seed, Jesus sows the word. In this image we can learn something about Jesus. In those days farmers used a "broadcast" method of sowing. They spread their seed generously and it fell on all kinds of soil. In the same way, the word of Jesus is going out all over the world in various ways. Jesus is sowing the seed in America generously. We must thank God for this. We must also recognize that Jesus wants and expects fruit.

In verse 14, Jesus compares a seed to the word. As a seed has the potential for life in itself, the word of God has life in it. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active...." The word of God is different than any other kind of teaching because it has life in it. When the word of God is shared in a message or testimony, it continues to work by its own power, long after it was delivered.

In verses 15-20, Jesus compares soil to human hearts. The first soil was the path. Look at verse 15. "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." These people are hardened like a path and the word does not penetrate into them at all. It just lays there until Satan comes and takes it away. Sowing the seed is a spiritual battle against Satan. It has been this way since the time of Adam and Eve (Gen 3). Satan takes away the word of God and in its place he puts his lie. God tries hard to help people by sowing the word generously. But they become the prey of Satan. It is not because God is not trying. There is something wrong with them.

Then how do people become so hardened? There may be many reasons. One man heard a sermon from a famous pastor. In the sermon the pastor proclaimed that only Jesus was the way of salvation and that those who rejected Jesus would go to hell. After hearing the sermon the man asked if his dear mother, who was so kind to everyone all the time, would also go to hell if she did not accept Jesus. The pastor told her, "That's what I believe the Bible says." Then the man hardened his heart toward the word of God for 35 years. Jesus describes what happens when the word is planted in a hard heart: nothing. Absolutely nothing. If our hearts become hard, we must cry out for God's help. Ezekiel 36:26 says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Look at verses 16-17. "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." These people heat up in an instant and they cool off in an instant. Some have labeled them "impulsive" people. More than 20 years ago, at one prayer meeting, Dr. Samuel Lee announced, "Let's pray for the raising of 561 full time American shepherds." One young man was moved and said in his testimony the next week, "Don't pray for 561, but for 560, because I am one. I will be a full time shepherd for America." Less than one month later, he disappeared. What is the problem with such people? They have no root.

Taking root is something unseen. It happens under the surface. It happens through deep personal struggle with the word of God during times of trouble and persecution. It happens when we learn to live by the truth instead of by our feelings. Last week, many young messengers received the word of God and delivered powerful messages with a joyful mind. They wanted to continue to grow in faith, so they decided to struggle with the word of God regularly through testimony writing. But it was not easy for them to keep their decisions. They needed a little help and they need continual prayer support. Chris Thompson accepted Jesus personally at his Easter conference. Then he made a practical decision to cut a harmful relationship to grow spiritually. He wants to put down roots in Christ. His mother once told me that more than anything else in the world, she wanted Chris to know Christ and to be a good example for his siblings. I am sure that right now, she is rejoicing in heaven. May the Lord help all of our young ones to take root in Christ.

Look at verses 18-19. "Still others, like the 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." These people do not fall away in an obvious manner. They seem to be hanging in there. But one day they find that their

spiritual life has been choked. They never bear fruit. They may fill a pew regularly. But they do not bear fruit. What is their problem?

Jesus identifies three kinds of thorns. The first is the worries of this life. The second is the deceitfulness of wealth. The third is the desires for other things. Just as a gardener has to weed out his garden to allow the plants to grow, we must weed out of our hearts these thorns. Shepherd Tom Guihan decided to go on a “media fast” before Easter to give his heart fully to the word of God. It was somewhat hard for him. But he found that when he gave his mind and heart to the word of God instead of television, the word of God became so sweet to his soul. He enjoyed the life of God and prepared a wonderful message.

Look at verse 20. “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.” The good soil people are different because they accept the word. They not only hear it, but they accept it. They accept it as the word of God to be obeyed and put into practice. God told Father Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing...and all nations on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). Father Abraham accepted this promise and trusted God with his life. He obeyed God’s command to go to a new land. At various times in Abraham’s life the word of God came to him. Each time, Abraham obeyed the word of God immediately. God made him a blessing to all peoples on earth.

Bearing fruit to God is totally a matter of our heart’s attitude toward the word of God. God is good and he is working for good. God’s word has life-giving power in it. What determines if we are fruitful or not is our attitude toward God’s word. If our lives are unfruitful, we cannot blame anyone else. It is totally our own responsibility. God made us in his image. God gave us the gospel. The gospel plants forgiveness in our hearts. The gospel plants grace in our hearts. The gospel plants the living hope of the kingdom of God in our hearts. The gospel plants the love of God in our hearts. This changes us into spiritual beings who bear the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we bear this kind of fruit, God is glorified and we are happy and victorious.

This passage has been like a mirror to us. When we look in the mirror what do we see? Are we like the path, rocky soil, thorny soil, or good soil? Jesus wants us all to be good soil so that we can bear abundant spiritual fruit. Let’s take this parable to heart until we find one specific way to become better heart soil. May God richly bless you.