

**THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOIL**

Mark 4:1-20

**Intro:** Our Lord, Who was the greatest of all teachers, taught with parables. What is a parable? The dictionary defines it as “a comparison; specif., a short fictitious narrative from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn; as, the *parables* of Christ” (Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, p. 718).

The Greek word, παραβολή, is essentially the same. It means “placing one thing by the side of another” and then comparing them. It was a teaching tool that the Lord used frequently. This parable at the beginning of Mark 4 is probably the best known of all of our Lord’s parables.

When He had finished this parable, His disciples wanted to know why He taught in parables? And we have His answer in verses 11 and 12. Anyone who does not believe in election and the sovereignty of God in salvation will not understand the Lord’s answer. (Read vv. 11-12.)

“The mystery of the kingdom of God” has to do with the full understanding of the truth of salvation. Some people, in fact, many people, who heard our Lord telling this story, while they would have been very familiar with a sower sowing seed, and getting different results from different places where the seed would fall, would recognize that part of what the Lord was saying, but they did not understand the Lord’s purpose for telling such a story, especially when most of them could have told the same story themselves.

But notice that while the Lord told His disciples, “Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God,” they needed the Lord to explain it to them. That tells us a lot about Bible study and Bible teaching. Those of us who know the Lord still need the illuminating work of the Spirit in order to understand the Word of God, even what we might call the simpler truths of God’s Word.

This story does not represent the way farmers plant seed today. While the farmers in those days did some preparation, it was not as extensive as the work that farmers do today. They did not plant such large crops as farmers often do today. They did not have the equipment to do so. It is true that farmers in any age have to put up with poor soil, and weeds, and birds, but they were special problems in those days.

In my college days in the south I had the privilege often of preaching in country churches. The people were usually poor. Their homes were often hardly more than shacks, but you would find in those poor place people who were the salt of the earth. I had grown up in Tacoma and only had a very scanty understanding of the work of a farmer. But I learned a great deal from those simple people, and it was always a blessing to get out on weekends to minister to them.

They would not have been surprised at such a parable as this that the Lord told His disciples. But the doctrine that the Lord had in mind in telling such a parable, they would have needed an explanation. And notice how in verse 13 the Lord made it clear that understanding this parable, was a key to understanding all of the Lord's parables. So this was the place to start.

The parable was about "a sower," or we would say, a farmer, one who went out to plant seed for the purpose of eventually harvesting a crop. It was also about the "seed" which he sowed, and finally the harvest, or lack of harvest that he got from the various places where the seed was sown.

So let us look now at:

### **I. THE PARABLE (Mark 4:1-9).**

We have already seen how the people flocked in great numbers to hear the teaching of the Lord, and that they noticed a great difference between the teaching of the Lord and the teaching of the scribes. It was a very unconventional place for a Bible class, but the Lord adjusted to the circumstances that He had to. So he was in a ship just off of the shore in the sea of Galilee, and the people were on the shore, a multitude of them, listening intently to what our Lord had to say.

As He started, He called upon them to listen: "Hearken."

Then He spoke of four different conditions regarding the soil. The first one he mentioned was a place where people had been walking across the land. The land was packed down, and so the birds had a feast on that part of the land where the farmer was working. It was not large, but the farmer hoped to get some harvest from it.

The second was land that had a lot of rock in it. The soil was good, but

the rocks kept the seed from establishing a good root system, and so although it was the first to sprout, it did not last because it did not have enough soil to support it.

The third was soil where thorns grew up with the seed. You will remember that when the Lord brought judgment upon Adam after he had sinned, the Lord said that the land was going to be cursed with “thorns . . . and thistles” (Gen. 3:18). And that has been a plague that farmers have had to deal with from that day until this.

The last of the four soils was good, and it brought the farmer a harvest – some of it thirty fold, some sixty, and some an hundred! This is what the wanted.

And then the Lord concluded that part of his teaching by saying, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Now of course everyone has ears, and ears are given to us so we can hear. But the Lord did not say, “He that hath ears let him hear,” but “he that hath ears to hear let him hear.” It is God who gives us ears to hear the Word of God, which includes the ability to understand the Word. That ability is God-given. Not all have it, but it is a cause for great rejoicing if reading the Word, or hearing the Word, also causes you to enjoy hearing it, and even wanting to hear more.

This concludes the parable. The Lord obviously taught more than this, but John Mark took this part because he wanted to focus attention on this part of the Lord’s teaching. But we believe that it was not just John’s desire in writing his Gospel, but that this was all according to the leading that the Holy Spirit gave to him.

So when the crowd was gone, and the Lord was with His disciples, they wanted to know what the parable meant. You see, they had “ears to hear.” And, as we learn from Matthew’s account of this same parable, the disciples wanted to know why the Lord taught in parables (which was probably included when Mark said simply that they asked the Lord about the parable.

And so we can ask:

## **II. WHY PARABLES? (Mark 4:10-12).**

Parables were a very simple form of teaching. By definition a parable is

short, so people are not held very long by any of them. But the Lord may have surprised His disciples when He said that He had two purposes for teaching with parables. And they were diametrically opposed to each other. He wanted *to conceal the truth* from some; but *to reveal it* to others. Some were satisfied with the story, but others, like the disciples, wants to know the meaning.

I think that the Lord was teaching His disciples that we are not to try to force the truth down people's throats. Paul told Timothy that "the servant of the Lord must not strive" (2 Tim. 2:24). We must be patient with people who are indifferent to the truth, or even those oppose the truth. But we must all remember that we are sent to preach the Gospel, *not to debate it*. If the Lord gives people a hunger for the truth, they will come back. But apparently most of the people that the Lord spoke to on that day were content to hear, and then leave. That is the way it always is.

But now we come to:

### **III. THE EXPLANATION OF THE PARABLE (Mark 4:13-20).**

#### **A. The sower.**

The Lord was a sower. He was training His disciples to be sowers. And we know that this is a commission that we all have. Not all of the disciples were called to be apostles, but all believers are called upon to sow the Word. This is not limited to pulpit ministry, although it includes pulpit ministry. But we all are commissioned to sow the Word.

Referring again to my time with those poor farmers in rural Texas, it was customary to have "revival meetings" every summer. (Tell about my experience with a man in the community who did not go to church.)

We are all to be sowing twelve months out of every year, and three hundred and sixty-five days out of the year *as the Lord brings opportunities our way*.

But now let us identify:

#### **B. The seed (v. 14).**

Very clearly the seed is "the Word," *the Word of God*, or to be more

specific, the Gospel. This passage is dealing with the message that brings people into the kingdom of God. Remember verse 11. A farmer may sow several kinds of seed, but in this parable there is just one seed.

But then the Lord went on to talk about:

### **C. The soil (vv. 15-20).**

As we have already seen, the Lord recognized four types of soil. And these represent four kinds of people, with four results which follow the sowing of the seed.

#### **1. The wayside (v. 15).**

We are not in this business of sowing very long before we learn that we are not only sowers, but we have to be soldiers. We have an enemy to contend with, an enemy who will do everything he can to keep people from hearing the Gospel, but once they have heard it, he looks for the opportunity to snatch it away from them. He may do this by putting doubts in their minds about the Gospel. He may sow doubts about the truth of the message, or about the Lord Himself. But he is a master at getting the Word of God away from those who have heard it. Many a child has grown up hearing the Gospel from the time they could remember anything, but perhaps the Devil and Satan (the same person) has made them think that knowing the Gospel is the same as believing the Gospel.

#### **2. Stony ground (vv. 16-17).**

It looks at first like these people have really been saved. They have received the Word “with gladness.” And it may look to the sower that there is fruit here, real results from the preaching of the Gospel. But it always takes time to tell if a person has really been saved, or not. There are many people today that fall into this category. As long as things do along in a pleasing way, they continue. But as the Lord said, when affliction or persecution comes their way “for the Word’s sake,” they are gone!

It may be that before the Lord comes there will be persecution for those of us who know the Lord. That is not the idea that many people have about the Christian life. They have been told that being saved means problems solved, not more problems of a different kind. So, to get rid of the opposition, they make themselves absent from the meeting of the Lord’s

people. I have seen this happen many, many times. They go along fine for a while, but then something happens and you don't see them anymore. And they go back to doing what they were doing before the Gospel was presented to them. We must never give people a false idea of what it means to be a Christian, a child of God. When people tell us that they are "born again," we need to ask them what they understand about what that means. There is a lot of stony ground among professing Christians.

Next we come to:

### **3. Thorny ground (vv. 18-19).**

These are people who hear the Word, and apparently accept the Lord. They believe the facts of the Gospel, or at least they say that they do. But "the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of others things, enter in, into the heart, and choke out the Word. It is not that the Word lacks power, but it is that there has been a faulty idea of the Gospel, and worldliness chokes out the Word.

But, thank God, there is always the"

### **4. Good ground (v. 20).**

Notice the expression that we have hear that we have not had before: "and bring forth fruit." The Gospel changes lives. It is not always fruitful at the same time and to the same extent in every case. But the Gospel is life-changing. Salvation is a work of God in the heart, and it manifests itself in a transformation of life. Christians are not perfect, but they are changed. They are not perfect, but they are interested in becoming holy as God is holy. This is why the sower sows the seed. He looks for the fruit, and rejoices when he sees it.

**Concl:** This parable is a first, basic message on what we as sowers of the Word of God when we go out into the world to tell people about their need of salvation, and the only Savior. We tell them about the grace of God toward sinners. We sow the seed faithfully. But this means that we need to be very careful that we know our message. We are to proclaim the truth, just as the responsibility for the sower is to sow the seed. But only God can bless the work of the farmer, and only God can bless His Word which we carefully sow, in order that it might bring salvation to those who hear the message.