

**THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

Mark 4:1-20

Part 1

**Intro:** Anyone who has read the Bible at all, especially the NT, surely knows the parable of the sower. But, as it was when our Lord first told this to the multitude with His twelve disciples present, to most of them it was just a simple story. And it is interesting that no one except the twelve disciples apparently thought that there was a meaning to what the Lord told the crowd. They could have accused the Lord of teaching a class in Agriculture 101. Or, what the Lord said in the parable was so familiar to them that they could have wondered why He took their time in telling them such a story.

But people treat the Bible that way even today, don't they? I have talked to people who were amazed that I would spend time in a church service teaching the Bible. They have felt that the Bible might be interesting as history, or simply as literature, but they didn't have the slightest idea that the Bible contains a message that people today, and in every generation, need to hear. People look at us like there is something wrong with us when we tell them that the main thing we do in all of our meetings is to teach the Bible. They can hardly imagine that there would be anything that would be more boring.

Paul was really right when he wrote to the Corinthian church telling them:  
14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

On the other hand you have a man like Jeremiah the prophet, one among many, who said,  
16 Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts (Jer. 15:16).

It is always encouraging when you find people like the twelve disciples, who when the crowd was gone, asked the Lord about the parable. See Mark 4:10. God had evidently given them the impression that there was something in the parable beyond the mere words that the Lord had given to the whole multitude. And, as the Scriptures go on to relate, there was a message, a very important message, which the disciples needed to know,

and wanted to know. It is usually a good sign when people get interested in the Bible.

Twelve times the word *parable*, or *parables*, is used in the Gospel of Mark. Seven of the twelve are right here in chapter 4: in verses 2, 10, 11, two in 13, and then in 33 and 34. The parable given here in Mark 4 which is my text for today's message, is found also in Matthew 13:1-15 and in Luke 8:4-10.

I spoke of a parable when we were considering Mark 3:23, but let me explain again what a parable is.

When I was a youngster going to Sunday School, I had a teacher who told us that a parable is *an earthly story with a heavenly meaning*. That is partially true, but not all parables are stories. Sometimes it is just a statement of truth, like we had in Mark 3:24 where we read that the Lord said that "if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand." The Jews had said that our Lord was casting out demons by the Devil, the prince of demons, and the Lord drew an analogy between what they were saying about Him, and the fact that a house divided against itself cannot stand. That was the parable that showed how foolish the Jews were in making such an accusation about our Lord.

In our text for today, we do have a story. It has to do with an unnamed sower who went out to sow some seed for the purpose of eventually having a crop of wheat, or corn, or of whatever the seed might be. The people who were listening to the Lord probably knew that the events He described in the parable had been known to happen over and over again. But the Lord told this story, not to entertain the crowd, but to get a message across to them, at least to those who, as He said, had ears to hear.

So the Lord was not just a storyteller, but the parable was in a form that would catch the interest even of children, but the story was not an end in itself. It was the foundation upon which the Lord was going to reveal some truth to those who wanted to hear. And so, since we know that people naturally consider the Bible to be a lot of foolishness, a desire to know the truth would have to be given by God.

The Greek word for parable has been brought into English in what is called *a transliteration*. This means that the Greek word is brought into the English almost letter for letter the way it is in the Greek. I think you

will understand when I tell you that the Greek word for parable is παραβόλη. You can probably hear what sounds like our English word *parable* when I pronounce the Greek word παραβόλη. It is formed from two Greek words, βάλλω, *to throw* or *toss*, usually with some purpose, and παρά is a preposition which means *beside* or *near*. So a parable in the Bible is a statement or story which is placed along side of some truth for the purpose of illustrating that truth which is the case with the parable that we are considering today. To simplify it all, we can say that a parable in the Bible is an illustration of a truth, or truths, that the Lord was seeking to teach His disciples.

Now the fact that this is an important parable is seen in the fact that it is to be found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But it is brought out also by our Lord when He was proceeding to explain what the parable meant. And now I am referring Mark 4:13. (Read.) I don't think it is possible to know everything that the Lord had in mind when He spoke these words. Either He meant that if you can't understand this parable, you will not be able to understand any parable, or He may have also meant the interpretation of this parable is a key to the interpretation of at least some of the other parables.

Now I hope we are ready to look more closely at the parable and the explanation that the Lord gave to it. And remember that the Lord gave this basically for the benefit of His disciples.

First we have:

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

The story is a very simple one. It is one which even a child would be able to understand. Today farmers have big equipment which they use if they are planting seed on a large scale, but in those days a farmer would usually carry seed in a bag which he carried hanging around his neck. And he would throw the seed upon the ground, a handful at a time.

Some of the seed fell outside of the ground that had been prepared, where the soil was packed down, and as fast as the farmer would throw the seed down, the birds would come along and eat it up.

Some other seed fell on ground that had a lot of stones in it, so the seed the farmer had sown on the ground could not establish a root system. The

seed sprouted and started to grow, but when the sun came out it scorched the plant, and it died. So there was no harvest from that seed.

Still other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns choked it out so there was no harvest in that part of the ground.

Finally, some of the seed fell on good ground, and it produced a harvest to the delight of the farmer, but some more than others. Some reproduced thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundred-fold.

There is nothing particularly unusual about this story. I can imagine that there were men listening to our Lord as He told this parable who would have said, "Oh, all of this has happened to me every time I have planted a new crop!" But the sad thing is that most of the people were satisfied just to have heard the Lord relate this incident of a farmer planting corn seed or wheat. *Note how the Lord ended the parable in verse 9. (Read.)* They all had ears, and they all could hear what the Lord said. If some had trouble hearing, they could ask someone nearby what the Lord had said. *But what did the Lord mean by this statement?*

The Lord knew that they all had ears and could hear His words. But what He was saying was that there were some who had been given the ability at least to know that the Lord had a purpose in telling this parable *because God had opened their ears to know that there was a message to be learned from the parable.* And this is illustrated by

## **II. THE RESPONSE OF THE MULTITUDE AS COMPARED WITH THE RESPONSE OF THE TWELVE DISCIPLES (Mark 4:10-12).**

Do you notice something very strange here, and yet the very thing that I have just been talking about? The multitude that the Lord had been teaching listened to the parable, and then began to leave *without a single person among them asking what the parable meant!* This is truly amazing, isn't it? And yet it happens every Sunday in the best of churches. People can be interested as they listen to the message, but as soon as it is over they forget what they have heard, and never think how the message might apply to them.

In our Tuesday Bible Class where we are studying the epistle of James, we are learning that the burden that was upon the heart of James, the

Lord's brother, was this very thing. And his appeal was that they should be more than hearers of the Word; they needed to be doers of the Word. They needed to apply the truth of the Word of God to their own hearts and lives. This has always been the problem with people, and sometimes even of the Lord's people. It may be the problem with some of you here today. Out of that whole crowd there was not one person who stayed behind to ask the Lord why He had told them that story. But, thank God, it was different with the twelve disciples.

I want you to notice that some time elapsed between the end of verse 9 and the request that the disciples gave to the Lord according to verse 10. It would have taken some time, perhaps quite a bit of time for the crowd to disperse. But the disciples did not forget the parable, but they pursued their desire to learn more.

Salvation is a work of God upon the souls of people. It is not a matter of our so-called free will. Man's will is not free to seek God. His will is in bondage to his sinful nature. Left to ourselves none of us would ever have sought God, or have come to Christ or have believed in Him. None of us would have ever had ears to listen to the Gospel. But notice the way the Lord responded to the disciples when they asked Him about the parable. This is what He said: "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God."

What did He mean by the word "given"? Given by whom? There can be only one answer to that question. *It was given by God!* He is the One Who gives us ears to hear. He gives us the desire to pursue the meaning of the Lord's words, or, to pursue the meaning of the Bible passage we are reading, or the Bible message which we hear preached. Solomon told his son in the book of Proverbs that he ought to seek wisdom, the wisdom of God more than he would seek either gold or silver. And yet most people are more interested in gold and silver than they are in the Word of God. The desire for gold and silver keeps people from any interest at all in the Word of God.

But notice how the Lord responded to His disciples. I don't have the time in this service to examine the full answer. We will get to that next week. But the Lord spoke of "the mystery of the kingdom of God." He meant that with His coming into the world, the Father began to reveal truths concerning the Gospel that had not been revealed before. The Gospel is not only difficult to understand; it is impossible to understand until the Lord

begins to open our ears and our hearts, not only enabling us to understand, but causing us to want to understand and to want to know more.

Do you remember when that happened to you? Do you remember when the Bible and the truths contained in it began to draw your attention? God is at work in our hearts when this happens. You see, if the Lord had not chosen us and gave us to know the truth of the Gospel, none of us would ever have come to Christ. Before time began He chose us. Then after we were born He sought us. And He called us. He saved us, and we came to Him. And He has been keeping us and teaching us down to this very hour today.

But what about the many people who never come, and who die without coming to Christ? It was not given to them to come. How can we tell who will come, and who will not? We can't. That is the reason that we are commanded to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. There is only one Gospel for people throughout the world. We spread the Word. We sow the seed. But it is always God Who gives the harvest, Who brings to Himself those whom He has chosen to save.

We can't say from the fact that the people who were in that crowd that day, and who went away, were never saved. We are only told about what God was doing in the hearts of the disciples. According to the words of the Lord Jesus here, He had two reasons for teaching in parables. One was to reveal the truth to those to whom it was given of God to know the Gospel. On the other hand it was to conceal the truth from others. God is in charge. He didn't have to save anyone. Or He could have saved everyone. But what He has chosen to do, and He has that right, He has chosen to save particular people, but not all people. But He is going to save all of those whom He has chosen. One of the main reasons all believers are not in heaven today, is because there are still many to be saved who are not yet saved. God is God, and His will is going to prevail.

How did the Lord express it in our text? He indicated that anybody can see what the Lord was saying in the parable, but not everybody can "perceive" it. What did the Lord mean by this? He meant that they could understand the details in the parable, but they were unable really to know what it all meant. They could not understand the Gospel, or their need for it. And their departure without asking the Lord about the parable is evidence that they were not interested in knowing what He meant. The only way people can perceive and understand the Gospel which will lead

to their salvation, is when God reveals to them their need, opens their eyes to the Gospel, and by His mighty power draws them to Himself, saves them, granting them faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They would come to be healed, and to hear the Lord's teaching. But that is as far as it would go with them.

You can probably see from the notes in the margin of your Bible that verse 12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6:9 and 10. In no generation do we see people flocking to the Lord to be saved. And consequently we see even in the ministry of the Lord Jesus that He was constantly confronted with the unbelief of the people. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, where we find Matthew's account of this parable, it is recorded that the Lord gave a fuller account of what the Lord told Isaiah when He called Isaiah to go to the people of Judah in that time in Judah's history. Listen to what He said:

14 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:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross [which means to thicken or become calloused], 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.

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear (Matt. 13:14-16).

**Concl:** We see this in our own day, don't we? Karina with its massive destruction especially in New Orleans, followed by Rita which only added to the devastation, yet there has been no widespread turning to the Lord in our country. In fact, the Lord is hardly mentioned. With the threat of terrorism in New York this past week, who is crying out to the Lord for His mercy. We read of dreadful murders that take place throughout our country, but where are the people who are asking, "What does this all mean? What is the Lord trying to tell us?" Instead, we boastfully congratulate ourselves that so far the terrorists have not been able to attack us again here in our country. The ACLU is doing everything a Godless and anti-God organization can possibly do to get rid of the Bible and anything that has to do with God. There is no fear of God before our eyes, just a lot of pride along with an attitude of despair.

But an even greater tragedy is that we often find this same indifference, or

even opposition among professing Christians in our churches toward the teaching of God's Word. I mentioned to some of you some time ago that one of our ladies was in a church where an announcement was made that they were going to have a service that would be all music, *and no preaching!* And the people in the church broke out into a loud applause!

If the Lord has given you a love for His Word, don't boast about it, but thank God. It is evidence that God has done, or is doing, a work in your heart, to save you. If you can attend a service like ours, can hear the Word of God, and go away and forget about it, you ought to be alarmed! Call upon God and ask Him to give you eyes to see and ears to hear the truth that will transform your life, will lead to the forgiveness of your sins, and guarantee that when you die you will go to heaven, and not to hell.

May the Lord give us all an insatiable desire to hear His Word, to understand it, and to have it applied to our hearts and to change our lives that we might be pleasing to God.