

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Mark 4:1-20

Part 2

Intro: When I began to restudy this parable, I did not intend to spend two Sundays on it, but I did not proceed very far until I realized that I was going to need more than one Sunday on it. So, if you were not here last Sunday morning, I apologize for beginning with you in the middle of this text. But I will try to bring you up to date on what we learned so we can all finish together.

I believe that we should keep in mind as we study any of the Gospels that, among other purposes that the Lord had in His ministry here on earth, He was training twelve men, one of whom was a “drop-out” to carry on His work when He would go back to the Father. So the teaching of the parables were directed particularly to them, but other believers profited from them as well, just as we can.

We also thought together about just what a parable is. It was a method of teaching which our Lord used very freely. By definition the Greek word for parable means something that is laid along side of something else. In teaching this means a story which serves as an illustration of some spiritual truths that the Lord wanted His disciples to understand. Or a parable can be a simple statement. We learn that from verse 23 in the previous chapter of Mark, chapter 3. You can see by looking at that verse that the Lord was responding to the scribes who had accused him of being a messenger of Satan. They said that the Lord was casting out demons by the prince of the demons, who is Satan. But the Lord showed them and everyone else within listening distance, that that was a ridiculous charge. And so He asked, “How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom is divided against itself, that cannot stand.” If the Lord were casting out Satan by the power of Satan, that would be an illustration of a kingdom being divided against itself. And if that were the case, Satan would be destroying both himself and his kingdom.

A parable is really a way of illustrating the truth. And so the Lord taught this simple parable of the sower to illustrate some important points which the apostles would encounter in preaching the Gospel. Among other ideas He wanted to get across to them was that not everybody who professes faith in Christ really has true faith. But we will learn more about that today.

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I also spent some time last Sunday emphasizing that we can't expect everybody to understand, not only the parables, but the bulk of teaching that we find in the Bible. One of the most common reactions to this parable is that the sower wasn't very smart or he would have plowed up more of his ground, would have cleared the stones out of his land, and would have gotten rid of the weeds. But people say that because they do not understand the lack of equipment that the people had in those days. They actually did very well with what they had. And yet there is a greater truth here. It is that people cannot understand the message of the Bible unless God opens their minds and their hearts to the truth of the Bible. The Bible is foolish to people who do not know the Lord. They can't understand it. It is foolishness to them. I never had a course in "the Bible as literature," but it would be very interesting to hear how any non-Christian, even though he, or she, has a Ph. D. in literature, would interpret the Bible. The Holy Spirit is the only One Who can teach us the meaning of Scripture. A person who seeks to teach the Bible does not have a job of teaching like he would teach Shakespeare or Browning, or any one of the great classics. The Bible is God's book. Its teaching is God's teaching. And it can only be understood as the Holy Spirit enables us to understand it. I trust that He will be pleased to do that for all of us today.

Now let me re-read the parable to you. Dr. Charles Feinberg, who was my Hebrew teacher in Seminary, urged all of us in his classes to form the habit of reading the Bible accurately. He said that much false teaching arises out of our failure to read the Bible carefully. Listen now as I read verses 2 through 9 of Mark, chapter 4. **(Read.)**

The sower sowed seed in four types of soil. The first was "by the way-side." The second was "on stony ground." The third was "among thorns." And the fourth was "on good ground."

Now we are very fortunate that we have the Lord's explanation of this parable. And, as I mentioned last week, from verse 13 the Lord seemed to indicate that the meaning of this parable was a key to understand other parables, the Lord said, "all parables."

Now let me read the Lord's explanation of the parable. And we have this beginning with verse 14 and going down through verse 20, here in Mark, chapter 4. And we want to be just as careful in reading our Lord's explanation as we were in reading the parable itself. **(Read.)**

We need to remember in dealing with the details of the parable that not every detail is meant to apply to the Lord's message. First we are told about

I. THE SOWER AND THE SEED (Mark 4:14).

We are not told who the sower is. He could be anyone, the Lord, any of the disciples, or you or me. The important part of verse 14 is not who the sower is, *but what he was sowing*. "The seed is the Word."

Note that this expression, "the Word," is found once here in verse 14, twice in verse 15, and once in verses 16, 18, 19, and 20. In Luke 8 where this same parable is found, Luke tells us in verse 11 that "the seed is the word of God." In our Lord's day it would have meant *the Old Testament*, but today it is an expression that includes the NT as well. The parable itself would indicate that the seed is *the Gospel* which is really at the heart of all that the Bible has to say.

Now I could spend the rest of our time this morning on this one verse. Sowing the seed is likened to preaching the Gospel. And this is all that the sower had.

No preacher who stands where I stand this morning any place in the whole world, has any business doing anything else but preaching the Word. And this goes for Sunday School teachers as well. This is the message that we need to give to people throughout the week. We are not on a stage to glorify ourselves. We are not entertainers. We are not politicians. We are not psychologists. We are to be sowers, sowing the seed of the Word of God. We are not judges to decide what should be in the Scriptures, and what should not be. We have the same charge that Paul gave to Timothy years ago, and you can find it in your Bible. We are to "preach the Word." The best job that you and I can do, is not worthy of what the Lord deserves for us to do, but the job that is given to all of us is to sow the Word of God, hoping that by the grace of God it will take root in someone's heart that they might be saved. We are to sow the seed, "preach the Word." We have no right to do anything else. The Twelve who were with the Lord needed to know this, and to remember this, but so do we! Most people will never hear it if we don't tell them.

But is it going to be easy? Are people waiting for us to come to them with the Word of God? Will we be able to convince everyone who hears

us that they need to be saved? The answer to all of these questions is, NO! But the charge still remains: “Preach the Word.” The Twelve were never to forget why they were here, and neither must we.

Before we leave this part of the parable let me add one word of caution. It is this: We need to be very careful that we are preaching the true Gospel. Salvation is not a reward that God gives us because we are worthy of it, or because we have worked for it. It is not even mostly a work of God, but partially a work that we do. It is a salvation that is all of grace. As we are going to be learning in our Tuesday Class as we study the epistle of James, works are the result of true salvation, but can in no way add to the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is much preaching of false Gospels today; we need to make sure that what we are telling people is the truth of God.

For the remainder of the parable our Lord focused attention on where the Word would be sown. Four places are specified, and only in one was there a harvest. Does this mean that one fourth, or twenty-five percent of the apostle’s work would be successful?

If the Lord had said that this farmer’s land was divided into four equal sections, then I might think that we could expect a twenty-five percent positive response to the ministry of the Word. Our responsibility is to sow the seed; the Lord is the One Who determines when and where we are going to see fruit.

But let us move on in the parable. And now we turn to

II. THE FOUR SOILS (Mark 4:15-20).

The Lord first mentioned:

A. THE WAYSIDE (Mark 4:15).

The archenemy of the Lord is the Devil. How utterly ridiculous it was for the scribes to say that the Lord was serving the Devil, which meant that they thought that the Devil was greater than the Lord. The Devil is not greater than the Lord. He is great in wisdom and power, but is not wiser nor more powerful than the Lord. Instead he is the Lord’s main enemy. And, as such, he hates the Word of the Lord, and in particular he hates the Gospel. And he will do everything he can to take the Gospel away from

people. The wayside is like a well-worn path. The ground is hard and packed down. The seed lies exposed on the hardened path, and the sower is followed, not by a bird or two, but by flocks of birds who devour the seed almost before it hits the ground.

It would be interesting to know how many people have heard the Word, have known what the Gospel is, and yet have treated it as something that is totally unimportant. In Luke's account he said that Satan's purpose in snatching the Word away was "lest they should believe and be saved" (Luke 8:12). The Apostle Paul said in his epistle to the Ephesian church that our conflict is not basically with flesh and blood, that is, people, but with "principalities, and powers, . . ." He will distract people when the Gospel is being presented to them. He will cause people to ridicule people who hear the Gospel, and keep them from taking the message seriously. The Lord wanted His apostles to be aware of who their enemy was.

The second soil that the Lord mentioned was:

B. The "stony ground" (Mark 4:16-17).

It is easy for the servant of the Lord to be deceived by this kind of a person because he displays a great deal of favorable emotion over the Word of God. He responds immediately when the Gospel is presented to him, and is very happy about it all. He does not hesitate in telling others about the Gospel, urging them to believe it, and receive it, as he has done.

But he soon finds that other people are not as interested and excited about it as he has been. In fact, his friends begin to drop him off. They don't include him in the things that they do. In fact, they criticize him, and speak of him as having lost his mind. As time goes on he misses his friends and the good times that they used to have together. And just as "immediately" as he had responded to the Gospel, he "immediately" gives it all up, and goes back to his old friends and his old sinful ways. Why? Because everything was taking place on the outside, but nothing on the inside.

We all have seen people like this. They go as fast as they came, but they don't come back. They "endure . . . for a time," but only for a short time.

The Apostle John was talking about people like this in 1 John 2:19: "They

went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would [no doubt] have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” There is no such thing as losing true salvation, but it is possible for people to appear for a time like they have been saved, but then something happens, and they go away, never to come back again.

Some people can keep up the appearance for years. They can work themselves into places of responsibility in our churches, but then they will turn away because there has been no change within.

The third soil is:

C. “Among thorns” (Mark 4:18-19).

These people “hear” the Word. They understand the Gospel. But they never let loose of the world. The Lord mentioned that these people have three problems:

- 1) “The cares of this world.” Lit. it is “the cares of this age,” meaning living in this world. Trench translates “cares” as that which draws the heart in different ways” (*Notes on the Parables of our Lord*, p.78). This is the person who tries to straddle the fence which separates the world and the Lord. The world has its pleasures, but it also has its trials. The same is true of the Christian life. It has its pleasures, but it also has its trials. However, to the person who merely professes faith in Christ, but has not really broken with the world and its ways, will eventually find himself going back to the world and forsaking the Lord and His people.
- 2) “The deceitfulness of riches.” Money means happiness to most people. But it is a deceitful happiness. It can’t buy health. It can’t buy peace. It can disappear overnight. Read the book of Proverbs if you want to know the truth about money. We all need it, but disaster is ahead when we live for money. We can’t take a penny with us when we die. How different are spiritual riches – the riches of God’s grace, the riches of God’s glory, the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and on and on!
- 3) “The lust of other things.” Lust means desire, strong desire. Men lust for power, for fame, for pleasure, for money. The Apostle John defined the world as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16).

But what effect do these have upon the Word. They choke it. They are like weeds and thorns in a field of corn or wheat. They can’t exist

together.

What a relief it is to pass on to:

D. “The good ground” (Mark 4:20).

The evidence of true salvation is “fruit.” What is “fruit”? A man who meant a great deal to me in my own Christian life, used to say that “the fruit of a Christian is another Christian.” I have learned as I have grown in the Lord and in the knowledge of His Word, that that is not true altogether. I have know of people who did not know the Lord, but who were instrumental in pointing others to Christ.

The fruit that the Lord produces in the lives of people who really know the Lord is “the fruit of the Spirit” which Paul spoke of in Galatians 5:22-23 and where it is in contrast with “the works of the flesh.” It is personal holiness. It is evidence that a person is “a new creature,” or *creation*.

But what did the Lord mean by “some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred”? Herbert Lockyer in his book, *All the Parables of the Bible*, on page 179 quotes a man names Lisco who said that just as we have three soils that were totally unfruitful, so from the good soil we have three degrees of fruitfulness from the good soil. All Christians are not fruitful to the same degree. Fausset in the JFB commentary series said that thirtyfold speaks of the lowest degree of fruitfulness, sixty, the intermediate, and an hundred, the highest.

Actually all of these speak of tremendous fruitfulness. In the area of money, if you invested a dollar and got thirty dollars in return, you would consider that a good investment. That would be thirtyfold. I don’t know what percentage of increase a farmer would consider a good harvest, but if he got thirty times the amount of what he planted, I imagine that that would be considered a great harvest. Sixty and a hundred would probably be considered totally amazing, possibly completely out of the question.

What is the purpose of God in salvation? It is to make us like the Lord Jesus Christ in love, joy, peace, . . . Now the apostles had been called to be fishers of men. Those who were fisherman valued a day’s work on the number of fish they would catch. Hearing the Lord speak this parable, they were being forced to think in terms, not of how many people they would win to Christ, but the degree to which the purpose of God in their

salvation was being accomplished. Even if you take these expressions as percentages, should they not have asked themselves, and should we not ask ourselves, how fruitful has the Word been in my life to date? It is by the Word that we have been saved, and it is by the Word, by believing the Word and obeying the Word, that the Holy Spirit is conforming you and me into a greater likeness to Christ.

Concl: So the big question facing all of us, is not, How greatly is the Lord going to use me, but How can I walk in fellowship with Him, yielded to Him, so that I will be growing to be more and more like my precious Savior? If we are growing in holiness, the Lord will take care of our usefulness.