

The Parable of the Soils

Steve Hereford / General

Mark / Mark 4:1–20

INTRODUCTION

1. We are beginning a new chapter today in our study of Mark's gospel
2. It's chapter 4
3. Please take your Bibles and turn to Mark chapter 4 as we began the first of two extensive teachings found in the gospel of Mark
4. Read [Mark 4:1-20](#).
5. The story recorded in this passage is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 13:1–23; Luke 8:4–15).
6. None of the parables occur in the gospel of John
7. The parable we are considering today, Jesus says is key to all the other parables
8. He asked the disciples in verse 13, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?”

Mark begins verses 1-2 by giving us...

I. The Setting (vv.1-2)

a. Jesus teaches again by the sea (v.1)

1. Both [Mark 2:13](#) and 3:7 refer to Him teaching by the sea
2. The use of the word “again” in verse 1 looks back to those two verses
3. Jesus' teaching by the sea is nothing new
4. But by the use of the word “began” it points to a new departure in the *nature* of the teaching now given
5. Morally rejected by the Jewish leaders, Jesus adopted a new method
6. [Matthew 13:1](#) indicates that it was “the same day” when Jesus was charged with working in the power of Beelzebub
7. The teaching was given amidst growing hostility to, and sad misunderstanding of, His ministry

b. A very large crowd gathered to Him

1. So He got into a boat and sat down
2. The idea of sitting down was the typical rabbinical position for teaching
3. But in a more practical sense, He sat because of the rocking of the boat in the water
4. So He is in the boat in the sea and the whole crowd is by the sea on the land

c. He was teaching them many things in parables

1. Here the theme of His teaching is “the kingdom of God “(vv. 11, 26, 30) presented in parables
2. In chapter 13 His theme is the eschatological future
3. The word Mark uses for “parable” is the Greek word *parabolē*
4. It comes from preposition *para*, which means alongside or parallel
5. It means to lay something alongside something else
6. So *Parabolē* means placing one thing alongside another for comparison
7. It’s simply a way to make a comparison
8. Jesus is giving them a spiritual truth
9. To help them understand that spiritual truth, He gives them something that compares to it
10. If you go back to chapter 3, where it says that He was speaking to them in parables in verse 23, His immediate statement is, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom can’t stand. A house divided against itself will fall.”
11. That doesn’t sound like a classic parable; it only sounds like a comparison.
12. That’s what a parable is
13. It can be as simple as a logical truism or axiom such as that, or it can be as complex as a long, involved story, even as long and as involved as this one, or, for example, [Luke 15](#), a tale of two sons
14. Any kind of analogy, any kind of illustration, any kind of comparison fits into the broad category of a parable
15. By the way, Jesus didn’t invent parables
16. You’ll find parables in the Old Testament like in [Ezekiel 17](#) where the opening ten verses are an illustration or parable

17. Another parable in the Old Testament is where David had just sinned with Bathsheba, had sinned against Uriah, had Uriah basically killed and took his wife, after committing adultery with her
 18. And Nathan the prophet comes to David and says, “David, let me tell you a parable.” And he tells him a parable about a man who had a whole lot of sheep, and a poor man who had one sheep, and the rich man didn’t want to use any of His sheep; so, he stole the poor man’s sheep. David was outraged, and said, “That man ought to be killed.” And Nathan said, “You’re that man.” ([2 Sam.12:1-7](#))
 19. That was a parable
 20. You would never know what the parable meant unless it was laid alongside the story of David
 21. And when He said, “You are the man,” then David knew what the parable meant
 22. Old Testament rabbis used parables in the Old Testament era
 23. Pagan teachers also used parables
 24. So a parable is a way to make a comparison
 25. Now the parable of the sower is a parable about different types of soil
 26. This would tell us when the gospel is preached it falls on different types of hearts
 27. Jesus is going to tell us what those types are in verses 4-8
 28. But notice first what He says in verse 3
 29. He begins by saying, “Listen to this!”
 30. This is translated as “hearken” in the KJV, and “listen” in the NIV, ESV, and NASB
 31. The NASB adds “to this” for emphasis
 32. The Greek word is akouo which means to hear or obey
 33. It is used here as a present active imperative
 34. Present is calling for continuous action on the part of the subject
 35. And we all know what an imperative is, a command
 36. The present imperative calls for the continuing attention of the hearers
 37. Notice what He says in verses 9 and 23
- › **R.C. Sproul says Jesus was saying...**

Mark Chapter 11: The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1–20)

“I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say.”

There’s an unusual twist in the Greek language. The verb “to hear” is akouein, and the

verb “to obey” is hupakouein, which simply adds the prefix hup, which we would translate as “hyper.” So in biblical terms, obedience is “hyper-hearing.” There’s hearing and then there’s hyper-hearing. That’s what Jesus was calling for here—the kind of hearing that goes beyond the eardrum and affects the heart, prompting obedience.

› Notice now...

II. The Parable of the Soils (vv.3-9)

First Jesus says in verse 3, “Behold, the sower went out to sow”

· Notice...

a. The sower (v.3)

1. He went out to sow
2. This was typically done by hand
3. The sower would carry a bag of seed, often slung over the shoulder
4. He would walk through the field scattering the seed
5. This method was known as broadcasting
6. The time of sowing was usually after the early rains had softened the soil making it more receptive to the seeds
7. They depended heavily on the seasonal rains
8. The early rains were critical for sowing
9. The latter rains were needed for the growth and maturation of the crops
10. Also before the sower sowed the seeds, they would plow up the soil by using plows drawn by animals (often oxen), hoes, and sickles

b. The soils (vv.4-8)

› There were 4 types of soil:

1. Pathway soil (v.4)
 - a. This is seed that fell beside the road
 - b. And the birds came and ate it up
2. Rocky soil (vv.5-6)
 - a. This is seed that fell on the rocky ground
 - b. It didn’t have much soil

c. It immediately sprang up because it had no depth of soil

d. The sun scorched it and it withered away

3. Thorny soil (v.7)

a. This seed fell among thorns

b. The thorns came up and choked it

c. It yielded no crop

4. Good soil (v.8)

a. This seed fell on good soil

b. It grew up and increased

c. It yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold

c. **The call to hear (v.9)**

“And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.””

III. The Explanation of the Parable (vv.10-20)

a. **The question to explain the parables (v.10)**

1. It came from His followers

2. And His disciples

a. Jesus told around 30 to 40 parables

b. The disciples need Jesus to explain most of them

i. [Matthew 13:36](#), “Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.””

ii. [Luke 8:9](#), “And His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable meant.”

iii. [Matthew 15:15](#), “Now Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.””

iv. [Mark 7:17](#), “And when He had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples were asking Him about the parable.”

b. **The purpose of the parables (vv.11-12)**

1. It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom (v.11)

- a. And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, everything comes in parables”
 - b. “to you” is emphatic
2. This distinguished the disciples from those without (Hiebert)
 3. The mystery of the kingdom was given to believers not unbelievers
 4. Unbelievers are “outside” the kingdom
 5. This is what Paul said in [1 Corinthians 2:10](#), “But to us God revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.”
 6. This revelation is to believers
 7. It is “to us” in [1 Corinthians 2:10](#).
 8. It is “to you” in [Mark 4:11](#).
 9. There are three things we can learn by this emphatic position of the disciples in this verse:
 - a. Contrast: The emphasis on "to you" ("ὕμῖν") underscores the special privilege and understanding granted to Jesus' disciples. They are contrasted with "those who are outside" ("ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω"), who do not have this direct access to the mysteries of the kingdom
 - b. Privilege: It highlights the disciples' unique position of being given insight into the deeper meanings of Jesus' teachings, as opposed to the general crowds who receive teachings in parables
 - c. Intentional Teaching: By emphasizing "to you," Jesus is making it clear that His teachings are not universally understood and that there is a deliberate differentiation in how the truths of the kingdom of God are revealed
 - d. Verse 12 is a quotation of [Isaiah 6:9–10](#), “9 He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not know.’ 10 “Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Lest they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their hearts, And return and be healed.””
 - e. These words of Isaiah appear several times in the New Testament (cf. John 12:40; Acts 28:26) to denote a judicial blindness that comes to people as the penalty for hardening their hearts against the light
 - f. Jesus implied that the parables did serve as a judgment on those who deliberately rejected Him and His revelation
 - g. [Matthew 13:34–35](#), “34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He was not speaking to them without a parable 35 so that what was spoken

through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.””

c. **The parable explained (vv.13-20)**

1. This parable is key to the other parables (v.13)
2. It is foundational and essential for understanding the other parables
3. If they cannot understand this parable, how will they understand those that are more obscure?
4. So Jesus asked them, “Do you understand this parable?”
5. He knew the answer
6. He knew they didn’t understand the parable
7. So He asked, “How will you understand all the parables?”
8. Jesus explains the parable in verses 14-20:
 - a. The seed the sower sows is the word of God (v.14)
 - i. We need to understand the power is not in the sower; it’s in the seed
 - ii. The seed is the word of God
 - iii. [Hebrews 4:12](#), “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
 - b. The pathway soil are those who hear the word but Satan immediately snatches the word from their hearts (v.15)
 - c. **J.C. Ryal** says, “These are they who hear sermons, but pay no attention to them. They go to a place of worship, for form, or fashion, or to appear respectable before men. But they take no interest whatever in the preaching. It seems to them a mere matter of words, and names, and unintelligible talk. It is neither money, nor meat, nor drink, nor clothes, nor company; — and as they sit under the sound if it, they are taken up with thinking of other things. It matters nothing whether it is law or Gospel. It produces no more effect on them than water on a stone. And at the end they go away, knowing no more than when they came in. There are myriads of professing Christians in this state of soul. There is hardly a church or chapel, where scores of them are not to be found. Sunday after Sunday they allow the devil to catch away the good seed that is sown on the face of their hearts. Week after week they live on, without faith, or fear, or knowledge, or grace, — feeling nothing, caring nothing, taking no more interest in religion, than if Christ had never died on the cross at all. And in this state they often die and

are buried, and are lost for ever in hell. This is a mournful picture, but only too true.”

- d. The rocky soil are those who hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, but fall away (vv.16-17)
- e. **J.C. Ryal** again says, “These are they on whom preaching produces temporary impressions, but no deep, lasting, and abiding effect. They take pleasure in hearing sermons in which the truth is faithfully set forth. They can speak with apparent joy and enthusiasm about the sweetness of the Gospel, and the happiness which they experience in listening to it. They can be moved to tears by the appeals of preachers, and talk with apparent earnestness of their own inward conflicts, hopes, struggles, desires, and fears. But unhappily there is no stability about their religion. “They have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time.” There is no real work of the Holy Ghost within their hearts. 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. No sooner does “affliction and persecution arise for the word’s sake,” than they fall away. Their goodness proves as “the morning cloud, and the early dew.” ([Hosea 6:4.](#)) Their religion has no more life in it than the cut flower. It has no root, and soon withers away. There are many in every congregation which hears the Gospel, who are just in this state of soul. They are not careless and inattentive hearers, like many around them, and are therefore tempted to think well of their own condition. They feel a pleasure in the preaching to which they listen, and therefore flatter themselves they must have grace in their hearts. And yet they are thoroughly deceived. Old things have not yet passed away. There is no real work of conversion in their inward man. With all their feelings, affections, joys, hopes, and desires, they are actually on the high road to destruction.”
- f. The thorny soil are those who heard the word but it was choked out (vv.18-19)
- g. **J.C. Ryal** once again says, “These are they who attend to the preaching of Christ’s truth, and to a certain extent obey it. Their understanding assents to it. Their judgment approves of it. Their conscience is affected by it. Their affections are in favour of it. They acknowledge that it is all right, and good, and worthy of all reception. They even abstain from many things which the Gospel condemns, and adopt many habits which the Gospel requires. But here unhappily they stop short. Something appears to chain them fast, and they never get beyond a certain point in their religion. And the grand secret of their condition is the world. “The cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things,” prevent the word having its full effect on their souls. With everything apparently that is promising and favourable in their spiritual state, they stand still. They never come up to the full standard of New Testament Christianity. They bring no fruit to perfection. There are few faithful ministers of Christ who could not point to cases like these. Of all cases they are the most melancholy. To go so far and yet go no further,—to see so much and yet not see all,—to approve so much and

yet not give Christ the heart, this is indeed most deplorable! And there is but one verdict that can be given about such people. Without a decided change they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Christ will have all our hearts. “If any man will be a friend of the world, he is the enemy of God” ([James 4:4](#)).”

- h. The good soil are those who hear the Word of God and accept it and bear fruit (v.20)
- i. They “heard and understood” and then “bore fruit”
- j. That’s the definition of a true Christian
- k. They “heard in the word of truth, the gospel,” Paul says in [Colossians 1:5](#) and they bore fruit
- l. [Colossians 1:5–6](#), “5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel 6 which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and multiplying, just as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth;”
- m. Matthew and Luke also record this parable
- n. Matthew focus on these three elements of hearing, understanding and bearing fruit while Luke focus’ on the kind of heart that can understand
- o. Matthew says in [Matthew 13:23](#), “And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.””
- p. Luke says in [Luke 8:15](#), “But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.”
- q. Both of those verses say this kind of hear “bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty” ([Mat.13:23](#))
- r. Luke adds they “bear fruit with perseverance” ([Luke 8:15](#))
- s. **John MacArthur** says “Jesus always threw a shocking element into virtually every story He told. And the shocking element in this story is a crop of ‘thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.’”
- t. He says, “Now, most of the things that I’ve read would suggest that an average crop would be 7.5 percent, not even 10 percent. Ten percent – tenfold – would be a massive, massive harvest. So, the Lord really blows the lid off their thinking when He says 3,000 percent – not tenfold – 6,000 percent, 10,000 percent. So, we’re talking about a kind of power in the plant that’s way out of sync with what they would normally think.”
- u. This is the power of the Word not the sower

- v. The sower only has to sow
- w. He is not to alter the seed to fit the kind of ground it falls on
- x. He is to give the already written and given gospel
- y. Don't change it to fit the audience
- z. Preach it just as it was given to you
 - i. [1 Peter 1:23](#), “for you have been born again not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.”
 - ii. They were to be good stewards of the gospel
 - iii. Paul said in [1 Corinthians 4:1–2](#), “1 Let a man consider us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found faithful.”
 - iv. Once again **J.C. Ryal** says, “These are they who really receive Christ’s truth into the bottom of their hearts, believe it implicitly, and obey it thoroughly. In these the fruits of that truth will be seen,—uniform, plain, and unmistakable results in heart and life. Sin will be truly hated, mourned over, resisted, and renounced. Christ will be truly loved, trusted in, followed, loved, and obeyed. Holiness will show itself in all their conversation, in humility, spiritual-mindedness, patience, meekness, and charity. There will be something that can be seen. The true work of the Holy Ghost cannot be hid. There will always be some persons in this state of soul, where the Gospel is faithfully preached. Their numbers may very likely be few, compared to the worldly around them. Their experience and degree of spiritual attainment may differ widely, some bringing forth thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred-fold. But the fruit of the seed falling into good ground will always be of the same kind. There will always be visible repentance, visible faith in Christ, and visible holiness of life. Without these things, there is no saving religion.”

CONCLUSION

1. Which are you?
2. Which class of hearers should you be ranked?
3. With what kind of heart do you hear the word?
4. **J.C. Ryal** again says, “Never, never may we forget, that there are three ways of hearing without profit, and only one way of hearing aright! Never, never may we forget that there is only one infallible mark of being a right-hearted hearer! That mark is to bear fruit. To be without fruit, is to be in the way to hell.”
5. We don't know hearts but God does and He uses the Scriptures to plow it up

6. I agree with what R.C. Sproul says, when he says, “I think the greatest weakness in the church today is that almost no one believes that God invests His power in the Bible. Everyone is looking for power in a program, in a methodology, in a technique, in anything and everything but that in which God has placed it—His Word. He alone has the power to change lives for eternity, and that power is focused on the Scriptures.”
7. Remember the parable of the soils is telling us the different types of hearts the gospel falls on but only one that understood and bore fruit shows salvation
8. This is good to know as we present the gospel
9. It’s also instructive to know that you should never try to give someone assurance of their salvation
10. You need to wait and see which kind of heart the gospel fell on because with both the rocky and thorny soil both received the word but it was only temporary
11. They both fell away and were unfruitful
12. Plus, you’re not the Holy Spirit
13. It also explains why someone doesn’t receive the truth
14. Our job is to sow the word
15. It is God’s job to plow open the heart
16. May He open hearts now as we pray
17. Let’s pray
18. Lord’s Supper

Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 5:45 PM June 1, 2024.