

**THE SERVANT AS SOWER**  
**Mark 4:1-20**

Well it's no secret that evangelism can be discouraging at times. Anyone who has ever taken evangelism seriously and made a serious effort to share their faith with someone or to reach out, probably knows the pain of being misunderstood and rejected at times. And typically when this happens, what we do is we start to question: Is it me? Is it that I'm not an evangelist? Is it the way I shared the gospel? Should I have tried harder? Prayed harder? Spoke up more? Listened more? Asked more questions? And why is that at these big evangelistic events that hundreds or thousands of people will come forward to profess faith in Christ but after the mountaintop conference experience, they go home and never do anything with it and maybe even deny Christianity later. Well that's why this parable, commonly referred to as the Parable of the Sower, is here. It explains that. It explains why more often than not, people aren't as receptive to the gospel as we would like them to be or if they are initially, why they don't last because that's the same thing going on in Jesus' ministry. It's an incredibly encouraging parable for perseverance and for understanding the age in which we live. Let's read about it in our text today: Mark 4:1-20.

“He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, “Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven.” And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

So in verse 1 we find ourselves once again in a familiar setting: Jesus is preaching to the crowds from a boat on the Sea of Galilee just outside Capernaum. This is a familiar picture to us by now in Mark but Mark points out that something has changed recently in verse 2: It says, “He was teaching them many things in

parables.” **His manner of teaching has changed.** And it’s not that He hasn’t already used a parable to teach, it’s that He’s using the art of parabolic teaching differently.

### **I. JESUS BEGINS TEACHING IN PARABLES. (VV. 2; 10-12)**

First we ask, what’s a parable? They’re not what some men plow their fields with – a pair of bulls (phonetically similar but not the same – that’s supposed to be a joke!). Parables are stories or illustrations drawn from every day, familiar life experiences that are used to teach a spiritual lessons or spiritual truth that is unfamiliar. It’s like telling a story to make a point. And one might speak in a parable for a couple of reasons: 1) it could be used in a such a way that it actually makes the truth more clear and easier to understand or 2) they could be used in such a way so as to make the truth obscure to those who lack spiritual sensitivity.<sup>1</sup> And it’s the second reason, making the truth obscure, that He begins to speak in parables here to the religious leaders who have rejected Him and the majority of this large crowd who aren’t very spiritually minded but have been following Him because of what He had to offer them which was basically just a better life now. They wanted the physical blessings of the kingdom to come without the righteousness of the kingdom.

One of the things we’ve discussed in our Creation Sunday School recently is the Cosmological Argument, which is an argument for the origin of the universe (cosmos) that is based on the idea of **cause & effect**. Nothing that takes place in this world without it first being caused. Every forest fire started with a spark somewhere. Every domino that falls over must be pushed or made unstable somehow by something. So the cosmological argument basically concludes that this universe is one giant complex effect, something had to have caused it, like God. It’s far too complex, too intricate, and the necessary requirements for life to exist and thrive is far too fragile and narrow for it to be a product of non-rational random chance and circumstances.

And that’s a good way to think of Mark chapter 3 and Mark chapter 4. Mark 3 is the cause of Jesus’ parabolic teaching in Mark 4. Remember last week, people had been exposed to Jesus for quite some time and people are making up their minds about who Jesus is: And as we saw, their rejection of Christ as their Messiah King, their not believing in Christ and concluding that the miracles He was doing He was doing by Satanic power has resulted in the judgment of God where Jesus begins to conceal truth from them. And if that’s surprising to you, you have to remember He is God and He is not just a good teacher. This is a side of Jesus you won’t know unless you get in the Word. What you’re seeing is the judgment of God on this nation and especially the religious establishment that was out to kill Him and eventually does crucify their King.

#### **❖ Jesus teaches in parables as a form of judgment.**

And that’s something that needs to be emphasized so that we understand what’s going on. The parables are a sign of judgment, as in the OT when Israel had prophet after prophet sent to them like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but they wouldn’t listen. It’s the same as it was in their day: they had ears, but they wouldn’t hear (Ezek. 12:2) so He finally said enough is enough.

But you have to think, **it’s also an act of mercy** because the more you know, the more accountable you are. That’s why He pronounced woe on some cities like Capernaum: “If the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.” With Jesus Christ on earth before them, they received more and greater revelation and rejected it continually so according to Matthew 7:6, You could say He’s done tossing His pearls before the swine and giving what is holy to the dogs who hate Him and want to kill Him.

So this marked a **turning point in Jesus' ministry**. The way I see it, this is when the offer of the kingdom of God that He could bring and they were expecting is now removed or postponed until the Second Coming. So Jesus in turn is starting to turn His attention from the public and the crowds, to the faithful remnant and especially His future apostles. There's still a lot of public ministry ahead in Mark, but in Matthew's gospel which is more intentionally chronological about all of this, this event doesn't happen until chapters 12 & 13, where the gospel of the kingdom ceases to be preached and doesn't come up again until the Great Tribulation talk where it is offered once again to those Jews who will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." And when Jesus comes back, Satan will be bound and He will establish His kingdom, but what this parable is teaching the disciples is that this is what the experience is going to be like for a son of the kingdom (Mt. 13:8) between His first and second coming.<sup>ii</sup>

❖ **Jesus is preparing the disciples for ministry through these parables.**

Verse 10 speaks about His ministry emphasis shifting as well, "As soon as He was alone, His followers along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. To you it has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven." So He teaches the crowds and religious leaders in parables but reveals the teaching of the parables privately to His disciples, obviously including the 12 apostles minus Judas, and Luke also mentions a group of 70 whom He also sent out who were likely with them (Luke 10:1) – that's probably why it says, "His closest followers *along with* the twelve." And He's preparing us! After studying this parable myself this week, I have found myself prepared.

But now that we've got the context, let's look at the parable itself.

**II. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER. (VV. 3-9; 13-20)**

And I really like this parable because it's speaking my language. We're talking farming and sowing and reaping and yields. Basically, the **sower** here refers to someone who scatters seed with the intention of reaping a harvest of some kind. Obviously we don't see much of this type of planting today with modern farm equipment and row-crop farming. This type of sowing talked about here is more like a broadcast spreader farming where you spread the seed by hand and then lightly till it in later. Our state capital building in Lincoln, NE and your standard NE license plate has a sower on it that's referred to here. He has a bag of seed and he's spreading it by hand.

❖ **The Sower = Anyone who share the gospel/the Word of God.**

❖ **The Seed = The Gospel/the Word of God.**

Sowers sow the Word of the kingdom. What we need to notice though is that the problem isn't with the faithful sower. It isn't that he doesn't present the seed right... that's what a lot of preachers ask themselves after praying hard and working hard on messages to make it deep and practical and applicable and they feel there's no more they can do. It's not that the sower needs to wear different clothing or buy a designer seed bag to be more relevant.<sup>iii</sup> There are sowers who wear jeans and cowboy boots and there are sowers who wear suits and ties or scrubs or aprons and all can be equally productive sowers. Is the problem with the seed? Not if the seed hasn't been tampered with and the seed has been left alone. So if it's not the seed and it's not the sower, what's the problem? Why doesn't most of the seed sprout and mature and bear good fruit? **The problem is in soil, being compared here to the human heart. But what this parable teaches us is that there's going to be different responses to the Word of God – four in particular that we need to be expecting – seen in the four soils.**

And I must admit, like you, that there are times in my life where I have been every single one of these soils. It's only by God's grace that we even mature and bear fruit.

**1. Expect the enemy to have hardened some soil.**

That's the problem with the soil beside the road. It's been hard-packed by foot traffic. And when soil's too hard packed, all the seed can do is lay on top of the ground. And that's one of the things farmers deal with today is compaction from the heavy equipment or from using wrong equipment year after year. This is why many farmers have switched from disking to vertical tilling, for less compaction. I remember one spot in one our fields that year after year struggled to produce anything because it had what you call a hardpan in it. You couldn't drill into and so the seed just laid on top of the soil and you couldn't get a good stand. When it rained, it wouldn't even soak up water, it would just run off. It needed a lot of serious deep tillage with a ripper.

Well, when seeds can't penetrate, what happens? Birds come and eat it up and the birds here are symbolic of Satan. Like in Jesus' day, many people are hearing the Word but it's not sinking in and it's partly because Satan has them so deceived and so blinded by His devices and lies. It doesn't even move them or stir them – it's like there's a veil over their eyes and they can't see the truth or take it in or the moment they start to think critically about truth, Satan has a fiery darts he can throw to distract people and he even aims some of them at us (Eph. 5:16). 2 Corinthians says they have been blinded by the god of this world, Satan (2 Cor. 4:4). Their conscience has been seared by his lies. 2 Corinthians describes how Satan has built up fortresses or strongholds in peoples' minds and those strongholds are only broken down by the truth. Paul says, "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."

One of those fortresses and lofty speculations we work at tearing down is evolution: the idea of millions and billions of years is so saturated in literature and documentaries and museums and movies that it's a stronghold built into peoples' minds and it has hardened them against to the Genesis 1 account of Creation. And that is very purposeful on his part because if he can get you to deny God as your Creator then you won't be looking for His Redeemer promised in Genesis 3. Satan is the prince of the power of the air and his spirit, Ephesians 2 says, is actively working all the time through teachings like evolution to influence people.

And it's important to point out that Jesus is not teaching Kingdom-Now Theology for the disciples because during the Millennial Kingdom, Satan is bound. He's preparing them for the age we live in now where Satan is actively warring.

**2. Expect the lack of commitment from shallow soil.**

If a seed is planted in shallow soil, it can't put down deep roots and there wouldn't be a lot of moisture to keep it alive because shallow soil dries out fast. It's like a lot of our lawns this summer that can't get enough water! So, "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when [*not if*] affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away." So the sun is equated with persecution or affliction.

This seems to illustrate a professing believer who really isn't a possessor. They profess Christ but don't really possess Christ. That's one of the hard things about ministry: it's hard for us to tell who has really believed or not. Some people profess that they believe and they start getting involved and then all the sudden, they're gone and they deny the faith and never come back. They may even say things like, "I tried Christianity and it didn't for me." Why is that? The answer is in their response. You're not dealing with an it, you're dealing with a Him and they never really just got to know Him, the God who is there and is personal.

Difficult circumstance in life, the painful trials we go through, will cause these people to wither away. That's something Mark's original audience at Rome could really relate too as they were going through terrible suffering for their faith. Persecution has a way of purifying the Church and weeding out the true from the fake.

**3. Expect some to be choked out by weedy soil of worldly distractions.**

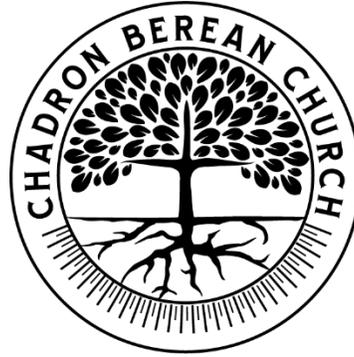
Some peoples' response to the gospel starts to grow but then the thorns come up and choke out the life of the seed so that it yields no crop. Jesus says, "these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Worries, riches, and desires for other things. Basically, anything that distracts us from God in this life. Some folks, all they do is live for the here and live for the now. And they never really start living for eternal things. There's nothing wrong with being a wealthy believer or enjoying certain activities in this world – but there is a problem when we start living for these things because then these things can start owning us rather than us owning them and that's idolatry. Worries can even become an idol. We can become so distracted by worries and desires for other things – it could be a sin or an object or a relationship – that we never allow the Word of God to produce much or any fruit in our lives.

I would say though, one of the things that is fun to watch is when someone before Christ has a passion for something and then after Christ they start using that passion for the glory of God.

**4. Expect some seed to grow and bear fruit in good soil.**

Finally, some good soil that bears fruit. Sadly, it's outnumbered 1 to 4. But that's what you expect when you plant a seed – to produce more seeds. And this one is described as yielding a crop producing thirtyfold or sixtyfold or even a hundredfold. And these are realistic numbers I think for one seed to produce 30 kernels or for wheat, 1 bushel/acre to produce at least 30 more bushels on dryland or 60-100 on irrigated.

Praise God for those who grow and bear fruit! This is soil that God is pleased with. There's really only one that's pleasing to God here. At CBC we want to be the fourth one, right? That's what our logo is all about that emphasizes deep roots and bearing fruit.



We didn't just come up with this because it's hip or it looks cool, though it is kind of cool looking logo. It's biblical and it's necessary to keep us balanced. What we want is deep roots in the word of God and to bear good fruit by accepting it's message into our lives and letting it move us to obedience.

The question we're left with this morning is, "Which type of soil are you?" John 15:8 says this, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

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<sup>i</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1230.

<sup>ii</sup> Andy Woods, *The Coming Kingdom, Lesson 017?*

<sup>iii</sup> John MacArthur, *A Diagnosis of the Soils, Part 1*, accessed 10 July 2020, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-18/a-diagnosis-of-the-soils-part-1>