

## Mark 4:1-20, The Parable of the Sower

4 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that

"they may indeed see but not perceive,  
and may indeed hear but not understand,  
lest they should turn and be forgiven."

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

*In our last lesson, we learned that 1) Jesus was doubted by his family and his people; and that 2) Whoever does the will of God is of the true family of Jesus.*

*In this lesson we will learn that 1) We should not expect the gospel to be received in faith by everyone who hears it, for 2) The divine design of evangelism includes the rejection of it by many, and 3) The grace of God will insure that the gospel is received by those to whom it has been given, 4) Who will multiply their number many times over through their own witness to the truth of the gospel.*

I. Mark's "Sandwich" Technique - Here we encounter our second example of Mark's "sandwich" technique. As we learned last week, Mark often breaks off his narrative to insert some related material that illuminates what is being taught, then picks up the narrative again at the point where he broke it off. In this lesson the sandwich will seem "open-faced," because the material is of such length that we do not have time to consider all of it.

## 1. The Structure -

The structure of this second “sandwich” is as follows:

- a. The Parable of the Sower (vv. 1-9)
- b. The Purpose of Parables and the Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (vv. 10-20)
- a. Other Parables of the Kingdom of God (vv. 21-34)

## 2. The Parts -

The separation of the constituent part of the “sandwich” can be seen in v. 10: “*And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.*” Here, Mark inserts a second discourse of Jesus on the parables, given later at a time when Jesus and his disciples were apart from the crowd. Then in verse 21, the first discourse is returned to, as Jesus continues to teach using other parables, including the Lamp Under a Basket, the Growing Seed, and the Mustard Seed. The first discourse concludes in v. 34 with a nod to the second discourse, which is described in terms of a future occasion: “*He did not speak to them [the crowd] without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he [later] explained everything.*”

What is the significance of the sandwich structure? “The center of the sandwich in vv. 10-13 is the key to understanding the whole, that only in fellowship with Jesus do parables disclose the meaning of the kingdom of God.”<sup>(1)</sup>

We will look at the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation in this lesson, and consider the other parables in the lesson to follow.

## II. The Setting of the Parables -

1. The Size of the Crowd - Mark continues to emphasize the growth of the crowds that were coming to investigate Jesus. In 2:2, 4 we read that “*many were gathered together*” in a “*crowd*” that spilled outside the house and blocked the entrance. In 3:7, 8 we are twice told of a “*great crowd*” that gathered from all over to Jesus. The NKJV translates the phrase as a “*great multitude*” to reflect Mark’s use of a different word in Greek. This crowd pressed in on Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, threatening to crush him, so that he was compelled to direct the disciples to have a boat standing ready. In 3:20 another crowd formed at the house in Capernaum that was so large that Jesus and the disciples “*could not even eat*”. Here, Mark uses a new phrase, a “*very large crowd,*” to describe its overwhelming size. The word in the Greek translated “*very large*” is the superlative of the word rendered “*great*” in 3:7, 8. This crowd, then, is even larger than the previous one, and hardly less dangerous.

How could Jesus be heard by such a crowd, especially given the fact that he will soon have to move offshore into a boat?

“Exactly where Jesus taught cannot be said for sure, but a possible location is a natural amphitheater situated halfway between Capernaum and Tabgha to the south where the land slopes gently down to a lovely bay. Israeli scientists have verified that the ‘Bay of Parables’ can transmit a human voice effortlessly to several thousand people on shore.”<sup>(2)</sup>

2. Movement from the Seaside to the Boat - Jesus begins teaching on the shore but the crowd grew so large he had to climb in the boat and row out into the water a little. There we are told he “*sat in it on the sea*”. Actually, the Greek simply says he “*sat on the sea,*” though the boat is implied. This has reminded some commentators of Psalm 29:3, 10:

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters;

the God of glory thunders,

the Lord, over many waters...

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;

the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.”

Joel Marcus writes:

"Biblically literate readers might be reminded of the picture in Psalm 29 of God sitting in royal majesty on the waters and giving utterance to his earth-shattering voice ... If so, there is already a foreshadowing here of the central theme of the parable chapter, namely the kingly rule of God."<sup>(3)</sup>

James Edwards adds: "If Mark intends this allusion, then Jesus is again put in the place of God"<sup>(4)</sup>

### III. The Purpose of the Parable -

This parable was given in order to explain the rejection and opposition Jesus encountered in the previous chapter, and to encourage the disciples regarding future prospects.

#### 1. Theological Underpinnings: Sovereign Grace -

Jesus revealed to his disciples that he speaks in parables in order to hide truth from some and reveal it to others. Why would Jesus want to conceal truth from anyone? Jesus believed that God had sent him to be an instrument of the judgment of God upon his covenant people, to manifest who were truly elect children of God with the faith of Abraham and who were children of the devil (John 8:39-47). Simeon hinted at this purpose in his prophecy concerning Jesus:

"And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed'" (Luke 2:34-35).

Paul called Jesus "the stumbling stone" in Zion, quoting the Old Testament:

"They [Christ-rejecting Jews] have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written,

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (Rom. 9:33).

In a later chapter, Paul states the reason that some believe in Christ is not because of their innate goodness but because they were chosen by God to receive grace:

"So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace ... Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened" (Rom. 11:5, 7).

Paul clearly teaches that those who obtain the salvation of God are the elect, those upon whom God chooses to show his mercy. Jesus taught the same thing, that the Father must choose and draw to himself those who would be saved, else no one would come:

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (John 6:44-45).

#### 2. To Reveal "the Secret of the Kingdom of God" to True Disciples -

To the disciples, the "secrets of the kingdom of God" had been "given". They did not come to realize who Jesus was on their own, but their faith was a gift of God. We see this when, for example, Peter confessed Jesus as the "Christ, the Son of God." Jesus told him his faith was given by the Father::

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

In John's gospel, those who belong to God hear his words. Preaching the gospel thus manifests the election of God in the response of the audience:

"Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (John 8:47).

Those who hear must have the ability to hear given to them. Calvin writes:

“Indeed, he makes a distinction among the hearers, by pronouncing some to have ears and others to be deaf. If it is next inquired, how it comes to pass that the former have ears, Scripture testifies in other passages, that it is the Lord who *pierces the ears*, (Psalm xl. 7,) and that no man obtains or accomplishes this by his own industry.”<sup>(5)</sup>

### 3. To Conceal “the Secret” as a Judgment Upon Unbelief -

Throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus continually forbids men to spread word of his miracles and shushes the demons who try to reveal his true identity. He does this because he wants to conceal his identity from those to whom faith has not been given. John 9:39 Jesus tells us that such concealment is also a judgment, a judicial blindness:

“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.’

Jesus had just healed a blind man, who was discovered by the Pharisees and interrogated about Jesus. They refused to accept the man’s testimony that Jesus was a prophet from God who made him able to see. So the blind man was given the ability to see (physically and spiritually) but the Pharisees, who were able to physically see, were made spiritually blind in the secret judgment of God.

Our text in Mark also represents spiritual blindness as a judgment. Jesus’ speaking in parables is for the explicit purpose (“so that”) of keeping the blind, blind and the deaf, deaf. That is why he addresses the parable to those who have “ears to hear” (4:9). It is not for those without ears to understand. Note that this judgment does not fall on innocent people but on those whose hearts are hardened to the things of God and who refuse to see and hear.

## IV. The Parable of the Sower and the Interpretation -

1. Listen and Behold - This is the only parable that begins with an admonishment both to hear and see, which elevates the importance of it. Also emphasizing the importance of this parable is 4:13, where Jesus asks the disciples, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” This implies that if they understand this parable they will understand the others. This parable then is the key to the other parables of the kingdom. Allen Cole calls it the “Parable of Parables”.<sup>(6)</sup>

2. The Sower - The Sower is probably in the first place Christ, because the phrase “went out” is reminiscent (esp. in the Gk.) of 1:38 (“came out”), and 2:17 (“did not come”), which are statements of Jesus’ Messianic purpose. That is not to deny its secondary application to any believer who communicates the gospel.

In the illustration, the sower is using the method of broadcast sowing, throwing seed on the ground indiscriminately from a bag or apron as he walks along. The seed would then be plowed under. This method seems to have been widespread in Galilee at the time.

3. The Seed Along the Path - The seed is the “word of God,” and more specifically, the gospel of the Kingdom. Some of the seed falls along the path, probably the footpath used by the sower to walk the fields. This seed is eaten by birds, which is a figure for Satan stealing the word that is planted before it even takes root. Satan will spare no stratagem when he notices an initial interest in the word of God.

4. The Seed on Rocky Ground - These are people who initially “receive the word with joy,” but later fall away. Much “evangelism” today is designed to produce a decision prompted by a human-engineered high emotional state. We should be wary of methods that seek to manipulate human emotion. “This is a theologically vivid description of a spurious conversion”<sup>(7)</sup>

5. The Seed Among Thorns - These are people who seem to genuinely believe at first, but they let the things of this world rule over them and choke out the word. The apostle John warns us:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

“They did not respond to the so-called ‘negative’ elements in the gospel (see *Rom.* 8:13; 13:12; *Col.* 3:5-9). They used no weed killer, and so the spiritual thorns drain away the supply of life.”<sup>(8)</sup>

6. The Good Soil - This is soil ploughed by God Himself, who prepares us by the regeneration of the Spirit to receive the word of God in true faith. The fruit envisioned is probably the multiplication of evangelism, as each “seed” yields more “seed”. Some understand it as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The average yield in this part of the world in the time of Christ has been estimated at a tenfold harvest. A hundredfold harvest would have been remarkable, perhaps even miraculous.

### Summary Thoughts

“Although Jesus does not preach himself, or announce himself as the Christ, the effect of his teaching, as presented to us by Mark, is to do precisely that. Jesus confronts the reader as one who brings salvation: to accept or reject his teaching about the Kingdom is to accept or reject both the Kingdom itself and the one who brings it.”<sup>(9)</sup>

“If there are only four ways to respond to the word of God, to what category does your response belong? That is the question this parable is designed to make us ask.”<sup>(10)</sup>

### Notes

1. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 126.
2. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 126.
3. Marcus, Joel. Mark 1-8 [The Anchor Bible], p. 291.
4. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [The Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 126.
5. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, v. II, p. 101.
6. Cole, Allen. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries], p. 92.
7. Sproul, R. C. Mark [St. Andrew's Expository Commentary], p. 77.
8. Ferguson, Sinclair. Let's Study Mark, p. 54.
9. Hooker, Morna. The Gospel According to Mark [Black's New Testament Commentary], p. 120.
10. Ferguson, Sinclair. Let's Study Mark, p. 54.