

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER OR FARMER: HOW MEN RECEIVE THE WORD OF GOD

MARK 04:01–20

Introduction: Minister of the Word

There are at least two great lessons in this parable.

First, there is the lesson of sowing the seed, the lesson to the messenger of God. The messenger of God or the genuine believer is to sow the seed, the Word of God, wherever he is — no matter the difficulty, the opposition or the discouragement. When Jesus stood before people, He knew the kind of people who sat before Him. He knew...

- the hard, closed hearts of the religionists and others.
- the shallow, deceptive enthusiasm of the poor and needy and of others.
- the worldliness of the well-to-do and of others, how entangled they were in *things* and pleasure.

He knew that many would never listen, but He also knew something else: if He just kept sowing the seed, some would bear fruit. Some soil would be fertile, craving for the truth of life and eternity. Therefore, they would “hear...accept...and produce a crop [bear fruit]” (v. 20). This is the reason Jesus continued on. He kept sowing, never giving in to discouragement — sowing that some might be saved and bear fruit. Jesus expects His followers to do the same, to continue on no matter the discouragement or opposition. There are some soils that are fertile, ploughed, and ready to receive the seed and to bear fruit.

Second, there is the great lesson on receiving the seed, the lesson to the hearers of the Word of God. The soils, that is, human hearts, vary among men. The variance ranges all the way from hard pavement-like hearts over to soft, ploughed hearts. Just what kind of heart a man has depends upon how he has lived and responded and conditioned himself throughout life.

The condition of his heart determines how he will love God and his neighbour, whether he will be responsive or closed-minded. The point is that God holds a man responsible for the condition of his heart and for how he responds to the gospel.

In this parable Jesus paints the picture of various soils (hearts) and how they receive the seed, the Word of God. (See notes, Mt. 13:1-9; Lk. 8:4-15.)

- I. Jesus began a new method of teaching — the parable (vv. 1-2).
 - II. The parable: a sower or farmer sows (vv. 3-9).
 - III. The response to the parable (vv. 10-12).
 - IV. The meaning of the parable (vv. 13-20).
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MARK 04:02 PARABLE (PARABOLE)

He taught them many things by parables. Mark 04: 02

Literally means placing a thing by the side of something else for the purpose of comparing. The word *comparison* best describes a parable.

1. A parable is a comparison: it is an earthly event pointing out a heavenly truth. It is a comparison between the earth and heaven.
2. A parable is a comparison: the earthly story has to be delved into to discover the heavenly truth. The spiritual point is found only by active thought and effort, by actively *comparing* the physical world with the spiritual world. In fact, the more a man thinks and meditates upon a parable, the more he usually sees of the truth.

Jesus is the *Master User* of the parable. No man ever used the parable so effectively. Why did He use the parable so much? (See Mt. 13:10-17; Lk. 8:9-10 for the reasons.) □

I. *Mark 04:01–02 Teaching of Jesus Christ*

Jesus began a new method of teaching. He began to teach by parables. Note the setting was “by the lake,” and the crowd was large. The word for *large* (pleistos) means *very great*. The crowd was so large that they overflowed the lake shore, and they pressed in upon Jesus so much that He was forced into a boat.

The parable was a new form of teaching for Jesus (see notes Mt. 13:10-17; see *Parable*, Mk. 4:2).

II. *Mark 04:03–09 Receiving the Word of God*

The parable Jesus told was a simple story, yet its meaning was profound. It was not understood by most (see vv. 10-13). It concerned an event known by practically everyone who was familiar with sowing seed. Jesus said five things in this parable.

1. The farmer sows some seed that *does not take root*. There are two kinds of soil that bear no root at all. These two soils differ from the other soils in this very fact: there is never any root.
 - a. There is the seed that falls upon the *path*, the unploughed, packed down areas right outside the ploughed field. The path joins the field, may even be a part of the field; but it is in the corners, the hard to reach areas that cannot be reached with the plough.
 - b. There is the seed that falls upon the rocky places, the rock that lies right under the surface of the ground. The rock holds the water and heat longer; therefore, the seed shoots its plant up almost immediately. But there is no root to the plant; consequently, the sun scorches and kills it.

2. The farmer sows some seed that *takes root*, but it does not yield fruit. This is seed that falls among thorns. The thorny soil is part of the field. It has been ploughed, but it is deceptive ground. It looks good, but lying right underneath the soil is a mass of thorn roots ready to spring up. The fact that they were not destroyed in the ploughing and that they are already in the ground means that they will spring up faster and choke the seed.
3. The farmer sows seed that produces a crop [*bears fruit*]. This is seed that falls upon good soil. Note two things about this “good soil.” It yields fruit, and when fruit appears, it increases and grows. This is the significant fact to see in the good soil.
4. The farmer sows *only a few seed that bear 100 percent fruit*. All seed in the good ground bears fruit, but each plant varies in its degree of fruitfulness. This, too, is significant. Some fruitful plants bear only 30 percent. They are very weak plants, 70 percent unfruitful. Other plants bear only 60 percent. They too are weak, being 40 percent unfruitful. There are only a few plants that bear 100 percent of their potential fruit.
5. Jesus stresses the importance of the parable. The message of the parable is heard only by the spiritual: “He who has [spiritual] ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 9). Luke tells us that *He called out (ephonei)* (Lk. 8:8), shouted the words, which stressed the importance even more. The message was so important, so critical. Jesus wanted all to hear and understand; but He knew, brokenly, that all would not hear.

III. *Mark 04:10–12 Response to the Word*

The response to the parable is twofold.

1. The disciple hears the parable. He does not just hear the words, but he hears the message, and he hears with his heart. The disciple is receptive — willing to think and to meditate and to receive the message into his life. The disciple is willing to do exactly what the parable teaches. Thus, God reveals the mysteries of the Kingdom of God to him.
2. The unbeliever hears the parable, but not with spiritual ears. He just hears the words. Note that Jesus called unbelievers “those on the outside.” An unbeliever is *outside*, standing on the outside; he is an *outsider*.

The *outsider* does exactly what Jesus says.

“Ever seeing but never perceiving” (v. 12).

“Ever hearing but never understanding” (v. 12).

Why does the *outsider* not perceive or understand? Jesus gives the reason: that “they might turn [be converted] and be forgiven” (v. 12).

- a. They are unwilling to receive what is taught into their lives and hearts, unwilling to change their lives, unwilling to turn, to be converted. Therefore, they shut their

minds, twist the truth, and rationalize their behaviour. But note: God cannot give His pearls to the pigs (see Mt. 7:6).

- b. They experience the law of conditioning. The more they harden their minds and hearts to the truth, the harder they become. They become more and more conditioned against the truth. Their openness and sensitivity to spiritual truth dwindles more and more until it is gone. The law of spiritual conditioning says that the more we receive spiritual truth, the more we increase our capacity to understand and grow in spiritual truth. But the opposite is also true. The more we reject spiritual truth, the more we decrease our sensitivity and become hardened to spiritual truth (see notes, Mt. 13:10-17).

Thought 1. There are many who are *outside*...

- who are hard-hearted against spiritual things.
- whose hearts are shallow or whose minds are superficial. They are rootless, having no depth — usually in all areas of life.
- who are worldly-minded, interested in spiritual matters only as a little *extra* added to their lives.

IV. Mark 04:13–20 Meaning of the Parable

The meaning of the parable is given by Jesus Himself. (See notes, Mt. 13:1-9.) Note several facts.

The emphasis is upon the kind of soil which receives the seed, that is, the kind of person who receives the Word of God. All four soils, (all four types of persons) heard the Word, but each received it in a different manner. How each received the Word depended upon the kind of soil they were. The following points show this.

=> The path's soil is an unploughed heart...that results in a hardened life.

=> The rocky soil is a rootless heart...that results in a superficial life.

=> The thorny soil is a worldly heart...that results in a strangled life.

=> The fruitful soil is an honest and good heart... that results in a fruitful life.

1. The seed by the path: the path's soil is an unploughed heart that results in a hardened life. The person by the path does hear the Word of God. He is present in church; but he is off to the side, out of the way, not involved. He lets his mind wander, thinking little and involving himself even less. He respects Christ and the preacher and would not miss a service, but he is on the outer circle, paying little attention to the warnings and promises of the Word.

Note what happens: before the person believes, the devil comes and snatches the Word away. It is taken from the person; the person never applies the Word to his life, never really lives sacrificially for Christ. (See Judas Iscariot and see Herod who enjoyed listening to John the Baptist, Mk. 6:20.)

Acts 28:27 *'For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'*

Eph 4:19 *Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Heb 3:13 *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

Prov 28:14 *Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.*

Prov 29:1 *A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.*

Rom 2:5 *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.*

2. The seed on the rock: the rocky soil is a rootless heart that results in a surface, superficial life. This person hears the Word and becomes excited over it. He receives the Word, professes belief in Christ, and makes a profession of faith before the world. But he fails to count the cost, to consider the commitment, the self-denial, the sacrifice, the study, the learning, the hours and effort required. He does not apply himself to learn Christ; therefore, he does not become rooted and grounded in the Word. He is only a surface, superficial believer.

Again, note what happens: when trials and temptations come, he falls away. His profession is scorched and consumed, burned up by the heat of the trial and temptation. (See John Mark who at first failed to endure, Acts 13:13; Demas, Phile. 1:24; and the men who discovered that following Christ cost too much, Lk. 9:57-62.)

Mat 24:12 *"Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."*

Luke 6:49 *"But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."*

Luke 9:62 *Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

Gal 4:9 *But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?*

Heb 10:38 *"But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."*

2 Pet 2:20-22 *If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."*

Rev 2:4-5 *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp-stand from its place.*

3. The seed among thorns: the thorny soil is a worldly heart that results in a strangled life. This is a person who receives the Word and *honestly tries* (professes) to live for Christ. Christ and His followers and the church and its activities appeal to him. So he joins right in, even professing Christ as he walks about his daily affairs. But there is one problem: the thorns of worldliness. He is unwilling to cut completely loose from the world: "[to] come out from them and [to] be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17-18). He lives a double life, trying to live for Christ and yet still live in the worldliness of the world. He keeps right on growing in the midst of the thorns, giving his mind and attention to the *worries and wealth and pleasures of this world*.

Note what happens: fruit does appear, but it never ripens. It is never able to be plucked. The thorns choke the life out of it. It never lives to be used. (See *The Rich Young Ruler*; Lk. 18:18f; *Ananias and Sapphira*, Acts 5:1f.)

Mat 6:25 *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"*

Mark 4:19 *"But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."*

Luke 12:19 *And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."*

1 Tim 6:9 *People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.*

Luke 21:34 *"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap."*

4. The seed on good soil: the fruitful soil is an honest and good heart which results in a fruitful life. These are they who have an honest and good heart; therefore, when they hear the Word, they keep it.

John 15:5 *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

Eph 5:9 *(For the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth.)*

Phil 1:11 *Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.*

Col 1:10 *And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. ■*

MARK 04:20 PRODUCE A CROP

Note the three steps involved in bearing fruit or producing a crop.

1. Hearing the Word.
2. Accepting the Word.
3. Producing the Word, that is, doing and living the Word. □