

The Parable of the Sower

- Turn in your Bibles to Mark 4, as we prepare to study the Word together. Once again we will find Jesus teaching by the sea, and once again the crowd will force him to make adjustments. This time, he will teach from the sea, in a boat. I asked the elders to build a lake out here for this Sunday so I could preach from a floating pulpit. They offered to bring up the cattle trough and let me sit on a rubber raft while I preached. I declined that offer. Let's look at this text together and then examine it under three main points: parable, key, and explanation.
- Mark 4:1-20
- Once again, we see Mark's sandwich technique in this text, with the B, the meat of the sandwich found in verses 10-13, where Jesus gives us the key to understanding the whole: only those in fellowship with Jesus will understand the kingdom of God. That's the key principle. The two "A's", on either side of this meat, are the parable told and the parable explained. This parable is told by Matthew and Luke as well and is very familiar to most of us. Parables were Jesus' preferred method of public teaching, and his favorite subject to explain by way of parable was the kingdom of God.
- What is a parable? The word comes from the root word that literally means, "to put beside." It is a comparison, sometimes a simile ("The Kingdom of heaven is like...") In simplest terms, it is a physical picture that teaches us a spiritual principle. Jesus told parables to make a point, to teach a principle, or more than one. Parables reflected daily life, in this case, farming, but they are not simple and they are not easily understood. Many of Jesus' parables were powerful bombs that knocked the listener off his heels, out of his complacency. Like the parable Nathan told to King David in 2 Samuel 12 about a wealthy man with many sheep who took a poor man's only lamb, Jesus' parables also say to the listener, "You are the man." A parable is used by Jesus like fishing: you take the bait and then get the hook, which is the Word of God. Who is the Word? Jesus is, and you cannot understand parables apart from the one who tells them. That, again, is the key principle. Let's look at the parable.
- **Parable**
- Jesus starts with a command: Listen! He will say it often in his ministry, reminding us of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" Like a parent must train a child, or a wife must train a husband to *listen!*, it is the only way we will understand. Because this is not a lesson in audiology or the mechanics of the ear, as Dr. Elaine could give us: this has to do with engaging our wills to take heed, to seek to understand, so that we can **DO**.
- Jesus describes a scene that would have been very familiar in first century Palestine where, I have read, farming was a hardscrabble affair. We think of planting crops in our backyard gardens as tilling, making rows, then carefully dropping seeds, appropriately socially distanced apart from each other, and then covering them, applying fertilizer and water, and waiting to eat fresh corn on the cob! No big deal. But this sower went out to sow, and he scatters seed *everywhere!* The seeds fall on the beaten-down pathway, on the rocky soil filled with stones, among the fierce and vibrant weeds and thorns, and *some* even fall on good soil. The picture here is: sow the seed first, and then plow the seed under, although some believe the farmer would plow before and after. Justin Martyr lived more than 100 years after this parable was spoken by Jesus and in a sermon on it, Martyr said, "So intent was the farmer on a harvest that he sows in every corner of the field in hopes that good soil might somewhere be found." But as we see in the parable, fully $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seed and of the labor to sow the seed is lost! **BUT**. The parable ends on a triumphant note, as does the Gospel. Verse 8 builds to a crescendo of a harvest of 30-fold and 60-fold and 100-fold! A harvest of 100-fold was almost unheard of, and when it is mentioned in Genesis 26:12 in reference to Isaac's harvest, what follows is "and the Lord blessed him."
- This is why I prefer to call this the parable of the sower, not the parable of the soils. What we see in this parable we see in the lives of God's people who have been transformed by his providential power. The gospel produces a yield that far outstrips any argument about human worth or merit. The Lord is the sower, and his ministry at first looked like a total failure: 12 men, and one of them gone into betrayal and suicide? But look now at what the Lord has done! Look now at those all over the world who are being changed by the power of God through the Gospel of His Son! Do not think that the Pharisees, the unchanged crowds,

the adversaries as hard as stone then and today will be the last word. No, the Sower went out to sow, and the harvest will be beyond compare. What are we to do? As disciples, we are to LISTEN! Jesus starts the parable with that command, and he ends the parable with it: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” At one point in Luke’s gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, *Let these words sink down into your ears...* Hey, isn’t this one of the top five of the top ten wish list that we want for our children: that when we speak to them, our words will sink down into our ears? That they will not just listen with glazed looks and nod in oblivion, but that they would really hear and take to heart what we are saying to them? Yes! Jesus is saying the same thing to His disciples. To you and to me.

- James Edwards writes, “Discipleship is not what we can make of ourselves, but allowing the Sower and the seed to produce a harvest of which we are incapable.” May I add a footnote concerning the situation we find ourselves in as a nation? We are incapable in our own strength to bring about racial unity in this nation. Only God can do that. **BUT.** He calls each of us to LISTEN to our brothers and sisters of color. And He calls each of us to humble ourselves, to look in the mirror and tell ourselves the truth about our own hearts and our own prejudices, and again, to be willing to HEAR our brothers and sisters who are not like us and to seek to understand their pain and feel their sorrow. And to care. And yes, to act on what we know is true and just. That brings us to the second point, and the meat of the sandwich:
- **Key (vs. 10-13)**
- Jesus was away from the crowd, and alone with his disciples, which included the twelve and others who were with them. And they asked him about the parables. This is when Jesus gives them a new teaching, in verse 11, and it is one of the most difficult passages in the Gospel. Parables were a way for Jesus to speak to outsiders, those who represent the 3 soils that would not grow life and bear fruit. To them, he was nothing more than a storyteller who sometimes fed them or healed them. But Jesus spoke to them in parables, as he quotes from Isaiah 6, so that those who see may not see and those who hear may not understand. But he says to his disciples in Matthew 10:16, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”
- This is hard truth, but Jesus is speaking in parables in order to begin to separate those who have come to him because they simply want to get something from him, and those who have come to him because he is Lord. So, Jesus turns to his disciples and says in verse 13, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” This parable is the door to the rest. Why? Again, James Edwards helps us: “The parable of the sower combines the two elements that form the core of Mark’s story and that are necessary for understanding the gospel, namely, Christology (in the parable) and discipleship (in its explanation).” The core truth of Christology is in the parable: he is the Sower and he is the embodiment of the Word of God that is sown and produces a harvest that cannot be calculated by men! Now let’s look at the third point, the explanation, and see the meaning of discipleship.
- **Explanation (vs. 14-20)**
- In simplest terms, the seed that is sown becomes the hearers in the explanation. The seed of the Word is scattered, and it falls into four different places that Jesus tells us plainly represent four different types of soils, or four different types of hearers.
- **The path.** The seed goes down, but it does not go in. It falls on hard packed soil and there is absolutely no response from the hearer. As soon as the word hits their hard heart it bounces off and the devil snatches it away. Don’t misunderstand here; this person can’t blame the devil for the condition of his heart. The devil is an opportunist, but the opportunity comes because this person does nothing at all with the word of God that comes to them. They don’t have a clue. I was reminded of the “Saturday Night Live” star in the early 90’s, Julia Sweeney who told the San Francisco Chronicle religion writer David Miller why she became an atheist at 38: “You know, like Jesus was angry a lot. When he turned all those people into pigs and made them run off a mountain, it was so hateful, not just to people but to pigs. I felt so upset for the pigs!” A reader responded, tongue firmly planted in cheek, “Reminds me of the time Jesus turned 5000 people into fish and bread and ate them.” Hard-packed soil. Hard hearts.
- **Rocky ground.** The seed goes down but not deep, and because the soil is shallow, the plant that springs up has no root. As soon as temptation comes, *on account of the word*, they fall away. William Hendriksen calls this the impulsive heart, saying, “they rush toward the preacher to tell him how his message gripped them. They are overwhelmed, moved to tears. In fact, they may even faint.” They may even have great joy! But

the proof that it is simply an emotional response is, Hendricksen wrote, “The commitment they made cannot endure testing.” No root? No fruit.

- **The thorns.** The seed goes down and in and something comes up. But just like with the rocky ground, this one does not last. It is choked out by “cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things.” That phrase alone is worthy of an entire sermon but let it sink down into your ears. The things of this world that draw us from Christ and his Word and his people are no friend to us. They are enemies of our souls and will end up destroying us. Paul talked about it often, apparently, writing this to the Philippians, “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” What happens to them? Their lives are choked out by the very things they crave.
- **The good soil.** This is discipleship: to hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit. All three are essential. Hear, accept, and bear fruit. The first three soils all HEARD the word. But none accepted it. They were not followers. Not of Jesus, anyway. But just one seed dropped into the heart of a follower can produce a harvest of 30, 60, even 100 times greater than what was sown!
- Let me close with two observations. First, only the hearts that are ‘good soil’ can receive the seed of God’s Word unto salvation. And only God can make a heart good soil and give us the ability to respond to him by faith. But we must respond! Let me ask you something: have you responded to the call of the Gospel?
- Second, there is fruitfulness that is evident in the good-soil hearts, the believers. Let me ask you something: are you producing fruit? 30-fold? 60? 100? Jesus says we are to ***bear fruit with patience***. Impatience and irritability and huffing and puffing will not produce more fruit in our lives any more than it would in our gardens. It requires patience. But patience is a virtue because it is always coupled with active faith. The gardener who produces the best and the most fruit knows that his crop depends first on God and His provision of rain and sunshine. And second, it depends on him, the farmer, to keep the soil nutrient-rich and weed-free. The same weeds that can choke out the seed before it ever produces any fruit can also greatly reduce the fruit the good soil produces. Those weeds include the cares of this world, deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things. A weed that must be pulled out of our hearts is the deadly and noxious weed of racism and prejudice. The poisonous fruit it produces is threatening to destroy this nation as it has already destroyed the lives of men like George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Christian Cooper. Before them, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Samuel DuBose, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, and Freddie Gray. But there are thousands of others. Some famous, like Martin Luther King in 1968. Some forgotten, like Laura Wood, a 65-year-old black woman in 1930 who was hanged by a mob with a plow chain in Barber, North Carolina, for allegedly stealing a ham.
- May God have mercy on this nation. May God change our hearts.