

Mark

Chapter Four

Introduction

At our Family Camp, we hold some Bible studies in an outdoor chapel that overlooks Sequoia Lake. Between the pulpit and the lake behind it is a footpath. Often folks from other camps around the lake will walk by during the studies.

Pastor John Maher was teaching and he had come to a point in his study where he was talking about people who try to overcome the reality of aging by strenuous exercise. Just as he said this, a jogger came bounding along the path behind him! It was a perfect figure placed alongside his teaching.

Our text in Mark introduces a new word: Parables. Jesus began teaching using parables. Our English word comes from two Greek words that mean "to cast alongside." A parable is a story or a figure placed alongside a teaching to help you truly capture its meaning.

Perhaps, as Jesus was teaching by the shore, a farmer could be seen off in the distance. Jesus placed the figure of the farmer scattering seed in the soil alongside His teaching.

A parable is much more than an illustration. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and then compels that listener to make a personal decision about God's truth and how it relates to his or her life. A parable begins as a *picture* that arrests your attention and arouses your interest. As you contemplate the picture, it becomes a *mirror* in which you suddenly see yourself. If you continue to look at it by faith, the mirror becomes a *window* through which you see God.

What is it that Jesus wants us to see in the parables in Mark chapter four? Two things come to mind:

You are the sower sent by Jesus with the Word...

You are the seed scattered by Jesus into the world.

#1 You Are The Sower Sent
By Jesus With The Word
(4:1-25)

Teaching in parables marks a very important turning point in the ministry of Jesus. He had been offering the nation of Israel the kingdom of heaven on earth. He begins using parables for a reason, a reason that He states in verses eleven and twelve:

Mark 4:11 And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables,

Mark 4:12 "so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'"

This is a quote from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. It is the key to understanding why Jesus begins using parables. Let me read you the full quote, taken from Matthew 13:14 and 15:

Matthew 13:14 "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive;

Matthew 13:15 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'

These words are from the sixth chapter of Isaiah. The nation of Israel had closed their eyes and ears to God; they had allowed their hearts to grow dull to God. They had hardened their hearts against God. As a result, God would temporarily judge them: He would send Isaiah to preach, but they would not understand or respond to Isaiah. They were headed for a time of judgment at the hands of the Gentiles.

It is of profound significance that Jesus quotes these words from Isaiah at this point in His ministry. Jesus had been preaching to the Jews, announcing the kingdom of heaven on earth. But the Jewish leaders had hardened their hearts against Him. In chapter three they called Him "Beelzebub," the ruler of demons. Just as in Isaiah's day, they closed their eyes and ears to God.

What would God do? Just as in Isaiah's day, He would temporarily judge them at the hands of the Gentile nations. Jesus'

teaching by use of parables was a sign to the nation of Israel of their coming judgment at the hands of the Gentiles for having rejected their Messiah.

And that is exactly what history records! For almost two thousand years, the nation of Israel has been suffering at the hands of the Gentile nations. The kingdom of heaven on earth that Jesus offered Israel has been temporarily postponed while God disciplines the nation of Israel at the hands of the Gentiles.

The Apostle Paul applies this to you and I at the end of the Book of Acts. There, in Acts 28:25-28, *again quoting from Isaiah Six*, he said,

Acts 28:25 So when [the Jews] did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers,

Acts 28:26 "saying, 'Go to this people and say: "Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand; And seeing you will see, and not perceive;

Acts 28:27 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them."

Acts 28:28 "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!"

While God is disciplining the nation of Israel, He is calling disciples from all the nations of the world into His Church. "The salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles..." Jesus sent out His disciples to make other disciples from all the nations of the earth by broadcasting the word of His gospel to them.

The Parable of the Sower is placed alongside these deep truths to help you more fully capture their meaning. Disciples who are sent out into the world to broadcast the word of the gospel are like farmers in the fields broadcasting seed.

The farmer in Palestine would, using crude implements, clear out a field as best as he could. When he was done, all of the cleared ground would appear suitable for planting. He would walk up and down the field sowing seed, then turn it under a few inches. Then he would wait to cultivate and harvest the fruit from his labors.

Even though the ground had been cleared and the whole field seemed suitable for planting, there were certain difficulties that the farmer could not account for. There were at least four soil types. Each of these could be present in a single field.

For one thing, either the wind or his bad aim would allow some seeds to be sown on well-trodden pathways that bounded the field, where the hovering birds would quickly snatch them up.

For another thing, the soil itself could prove difficult. There might be a layer of rock beneath the surface - too deep to be detected by the initial plowing. If that was the case, the shallow soil just above the rock would be warmer than the rest of the field. The seeds sown there would quickly germinate, but their roots had nowhere to go and the plants would be easily scorched by the sun.

Weeds were another soil problem. Even though the farmer had cleared out the weeds, their hidden roots remained in certain areas of the field. Some of the seeds would be sown among the hidden roots of weeds. Both the weeds and the plants would grow together, the plants eventually being choked out by the weeds in certain areas of the field.

Some seeds, *perhaps the majority even*, would fall in good soil and produce the fruit the farmer anticipated.

This parable took His disciples by surprise:

Mark 4:10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable.

What Jesus tells them and you in verses eleven through twenty-five is that *you* are the sower who sows the seed of God's Word into the different soils!

You Are The Sower...

Mark 4:11 And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables,

Mark 4:12 "so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'"

Remember, this quote is from Isaiah Six. It is in that sixth chapter that Isaiah hears the Lord ask, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"¹ Isaiah responds by saying, "Here am I! Send me."²

Just as the Lord sent Isaiah, so now Jesus was sending His disciples. They, and all disciples after them, are sent out into the world with the word of the gospel. They, and all disciples after them, are sowers who sow the seed of God's Word.

You are a sower of God's Word! The field you sow in is the whole world. The people you encounter - *their hearts* - are the particular soil into which you sow God's Word. Like the farmer's field, your field presents certain difficulties:

Some hearts are like the soil of the well-trodden pathway:

Mark 4:15 "And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts."

There are times when the gospel is presented and it has no noticeable effect at all. You can't see it, but in the realm of the spirit, the devil is stealing the word away from these hard-hearted people.

Some hearts are like the shallow soil above the layer of rock:

Mark 4:16 "These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

Mark 4:17 "and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble."

We've all seen *conversions* that turn out to be *catastrophes!* These people seem open and receptive to God, but as soon as they are called upon to endure and obey in the midst of difficulties you see that they have had no real change of character.

Some hearts are like the soil that contains hidden roots of weeds:

¹Isaiah 6:8

²Ibid.

Mark 4:18 "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word,

Mark 4:19 "and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

It is pretty clear that the first two heart conditions describe people who never were genuinely saved. People with crowded hearts, who become unfruitful, are a different matter. Unbelievers can certainly be described this way; but there are also many warnings in the New Testament to *believers* concerning the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things. Good soil with weeds describes believers.

You all know people who still have a strong profession of faith, but have gone after these things and have become unfruitful as Christians.

It is also possible for otherwise fruitful believers to find one or more areas of their heart still crowded by things that are contrary to God's Word.

Some hearts are like the good soil:

Mark 4:20 "But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

As you sow the Word, there are those who get saved *and* who, with uncluttered hearts, go on bearing fruit.

The sower and the seed are the same in each case; only the soil is different. What makes the soil different?

I don't think we can answer that, since we are talking about the human heart. The farmer can't tell where the rocks are buried, or where the roots of weeds will spring up; we can't see below the surface of the heart. A word that God spoke to Jeremiah might encourage us, though:

Jeremiah 4:3 For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem: "Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns."

God saw their hearts as hard and crowded - *just like the hearts described in the Parable of the Sower*. God appealed to their hard and crowded hearts. His appeal was also His enabling them to do what He asked: To break up the hard, crowded soil of their hearts so that they could receive the Word into good soil.

You never know when the gospel might begin the work of plowing up hard, weed infested ground! Just because a person responds with a hard heart doesn't mean that he or she will remain that way. The four soils do not describe types of persons; they describe the potential condition of hearts at any given moment. Your heart was once hard, like the well-trodden pathway. You ignored many invitations. But one day the gospel plowed up your hard heart and the seed sown found good soil!

God has His ways of breaking up hard, crowded hearts. He has His severe mercies in people's lives, which prepare them to receive His word into good soil.

The words Jesus spoke next can help you to maintain your heart as good soil into which more and more of God's Word can be sown, producing the greater yields of fruit:

Mark 4:21 Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand?"

Mark 4:22 "For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light.

Mark 4:23 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

Mark 4:24 Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given.

Mark 4:25 "For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

The common household lamp Jesus was describing was a clay dish filled with oil, with a wick put into the oil. In order to give off light the lamp had to use itself up; and the oil had to be replenished.

You are the clay dish, filled with oil:

2 Corinthians 4:6 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

God wants you to spend yourself for Him - like a burning wick in an oil lamp. As you do, He replenishes you by His Holy Spirit, "measuring out" more and more of Himself in proportion to your desire to serve Him with your whole mind and soul and strength.

There can be no standing still as a believer. If you are not moving forward, you are sliding backwards. People talk about "burn-out..." The real burn-out is not among those who are busy seeking and serving the Lord; it is among those whose wick is dry, whose lamp has gone out. Those who are "on-fire" for God cannot exhaust the supply of His Spirit. Those who let themselves go out grieve and quench the Spirit, and His supply is "taken away" from them. You are not a reservoir for the Holy Spirit to be stored within; you are a lamp for Him to fuel as you shine more and more.

Beloved, Jesus sends you out to sow the Word. Stay on-fire and you will both *sow* and *grow!*

#2 You Are The Seed Scattered By Jesus Into The World (v26-34)

Mark doesn't record all of the parables Jesus told at this time. The parable Jesus tells next, of the man scattering seed, is similar to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares recorded by Matthew. Since the parable is similar, its interpretation should be similar as well. When He interpreted the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, Jesus said,

Matthew 13:37 "...He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.

Matthew 13:38 "The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one."

Notice: The "good seeds are the sons of the kingdom"; the "good seeds" are believers that Jesus scatters in the world. *You* are the seed that Jesus scatters in the world.

These next verses are about the growth of the Church throughout this age as Jesus scatters believers into it as seeds. They

tell us to expect both *supernatural* growth and *unnatural* growth of the Church until the return of Jesus.

You can expect supernatural growth of the Church:

Mark 4:26 And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,

Mark 4:27 "and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how.

Mark 4:28 "For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

Mark 4:29 "But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The farmer scatters the seed into the field and expects it to grow and bear fruit for a bountiful harvest. Jesus scatters His disciples into the world and expects them to grow and bear fruit for a bountiful harvest at the end of the age!

You can expect unnatural growth of the Church:

Mark 4:30 Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?

Mark 4:31 "It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth;

Mark 4:32 "but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

A huge mustard plant, large enough for birds to lodge in, is unnatural. Birds, you remember, were symbolic of Satan in the Parable of the Sower. While you marvel at the supernatural growth of God's Church, Satan loves to counterfeit God's Church with his doctrines of demons, with his heresies, with his cults. This is the unnatural "growth" that the mustard seed illustrates. As Jesus scatters you in the world, the devil scatters his emissaries in the world, too.

These two parables pretty well sum up the Church Age in which we live. There is *opportunity* to sow the Word, but always Satanic *opposition*. The Church will prevail. Jesus promised,

Matthew 16:18 "...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

Conclusion

Mark summarizes Jesus' use of parables in verses thirty-three and thirty-four:

Mark 4:33 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it.

Mark 4:34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

Jesus was hiding the truth in parables in order to make the truth more visible to searching hearts. As you read in Proverbs 25:2,

Proverbs 25:2 It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.

When God hides truth, it is only to encourage you to seek it out more diligently! Metaphors, similes, illustrations, types, figures, and parables make God's truth like buried treasure. Don't you always get really excited when you see the hidden meaning in them? You see the hidden meaning by seeking it, by searching it out.

Mark gives two promises to truth treasure hunters: (1) Jesus speaks the word as you are able to hear it, and (2) when you are alone with Him, Jesus will explain all things to you!

Get alone with Jesus, and let Him speak to you through these metaphors, similes, illustrations, types, figures, and parables in His Word. You will become a better sower, and you will be more readily scattered by Jesus into a world desperate for the word of His gospel!