

Soil Sort

Mark 4:1-20 June 11, 2025

In 2020, the US was locked down. Travel was banned, parks were chained up, beaches cleared, and schools emptied. So what did Americans do? *Gardening*. Nationally, we already held the number 3 spot of home-gardening countries, but more than 20 million new gardeners sprung up during the pandemic, bringing the total number of American households planting stuff above 50%.¹

The uptick in this wholesome hobby had one problem: Seed shortages. Retailers saw a 200% increase in demand during the pandemic years.² One supplier had to totally shut down their website more than once to try to slow the orders coming in. Multi-year stockpiles of staple veggies like broccoli, carrots, lettuce, peas, and tomatoes were wiped out.

That's not the end of our seed concerns. A 2023 report shows that we have too small a supply of native seed for the recovery and conservation projects needed after fires, droughts, and floods.

Broccoli and forrest seeds are important, but not *nearly* as important as the seed discussed in Mark 4. In this chapter, Mark shares four of Jesus' parables with us. Three of them deal with seed. Not seed that grows a tomato or two, but bears a harvest of life-changing fruit season after season.

Mark 4:1-2 - ¹Again he began to teach by the sea, and a very large crowd gathered around him. So he got into a boat on the sea and sat down, while the whole crowd was by the sea on the shore. ²He taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them,

Mark usually focuses on Jesus' actions and interactions. But *this* chapter is one of the places where Mark takes the time to tell us some of the content of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus often used parables. He didn't *invent* them. We find some in the Old Testament.³ Other rabbis used them, too. But Christ used them "to a degree unmatched before His time or since."⁴

A parable is a vivid illustration of God's truth. The Sunday-school definition is an "earthly story with a heavenly meaning." I like Ray Stedman's definition: A vocal cartoon.⁵ Something meant to catch our attention and communicate a point and make us imagine and consider an essential truth.

But parables are *not* just moral stories. They're not God's version of Aesop's Fables. They aren't simply helpful proverbs packaged in an interesting way. Parables reveal truth about God, about His Kingdom, about His Way, *and* about humanity on a level that no worldly teaching can.

¹ <https://medium.com/@betterplanter/gardening-statistics-a15b33e0609f>

² <https://www.seedworld.com/us/2024/01/22/pandemic-still-impacting-home-garden-seed-market/>

³ Frank Gaebelein, D. A. Carson, Walter Wessel, and Walter Liefeld *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Ray Stedman *The Servant Who Rules: Mark 1-8*

Mark 4:3-9 - ³ “Listen! Consider the sower who went out to sow. ⁴ 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 didn’t have much soil, and it grew up quickly, since the soil wasn’t deep. ⁶ When the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it didn’t produce fruit. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good ground and it grew up, producing fruit that increased thirty, sixty, and a hundred times.” ⁹ Then he said, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.”

Jesus will give us the interpretation in the following verses, so I’m not going to do that here. Instead, as we allow these images to sink in, let’s consider elements from the delivery itself.

Jesus’ message to the crowd begins *and ends* with an urgent command to *listen*. Jesus says, “Hear what I’m saying. *Anyone* who has ears, please listen and consider.” This parable wasn’t just advice, it was core and crucial. Scholars note that the Lord used a term which echoed the opening word of the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”⁶ Pious Jews recited that phrase every single day. That verb doesn’t only mean hear or listen, it also means to *obey*.⁷

The point of parables is not that we *know* something, but that we *do* something. That we *respond* to what God has revealed. The truths delivered through these stories play out in our real lives.

Now, we call *this* story *The Parable of the Sower*, but really a better title might be *The Parable of the Soils*.⁸ We’ll learn that the soil is not just inanimate dirt, but has choices and responsibilities once the seed has fallen on it. But first, verses 10 through 12.

Mark 4:10-12 - ¹⁰ When he was alone, those around him with the Twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He answered them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables ¹² so that *they may indeed look, and yet not perceive; they may indeed listen, and yet not understand; otherwise, they might turn back and be forgiven.*”

Does that sound scary? It does if we don’t know the context. On an isolated first reading a person might say, “I guess Jesus *doesn’t* want certain people to be saved.” But that’s *not* what’s happening. Listen to how Matthew records Jesus’ answer to the disciples about why He uses parables:

Matthew 13:13-16 - ¹³ That is why I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand. ¹⁴ Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: *You will listen and listen, but never understand; you will look and look, but never perceive.* ¹⁵ *For this people’s heart has grown callous; their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back– and I would heal them.*

⁶ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁷ Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

⁸ Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

Jesus, the Son of God, was on earth, preaching, healing every sickness, working countless miracles, and the general response was disbelief and animosity. The religious leaders accused Him of being demon possessed. The crowds ignored His message. They fulfilled the prophecy foretold by Isaiah.

Consider also the context of the parable. The Sower, Who is first and foremost Jesus, wasn't being stingy. He was casting seed all over, just as Jesus was spreading His message in many places.

So, it's not that God doesn't want to forgive certain people. But, *if they won't repent*, then they will perish. Later, in Luke 13, Jesus says it outright twice: "Unless you repent, you will *all* perish."⁹ Later, in Revelation 2, the Lord says to churches, "Unless you repent," then lists deadly consequences.¹⁰

And then we have the situational context where Jesus shared this parable, then later the disciples come in response, they follow up on what was revealed, they seek God's truth, and the Lord says, "Because you've done this now you get a gift from God: The secrets of the Kingdom."

Secrets here is that word used many times in the New Testament: Mysteries.¹¹ Paul used it 21 times himself. In the New Testament, "mysteries" are things that can only be known if they are revealed by God, *but* they are open to anyone who *wants* to know them and come to God for them.

God wants *everyone* to be saved. In a different parable, we see a Master who puts on a feast and by the end of the story he's invited everyone: Friends and neighbors, strangers in the streets, alleys, highways, and hedges, to join him. The only people that *don't* are those that *won't*.

Verse 10 is a real-life demonstration of what was described in the parable. You had the large crowd, but only *some* responded to the preaching. It wasn't only the 12 - there were others who believed there, too. This moment showed the difference between those who *listened* the way Jesus commanded them, and those who didn't.

You parents have seen this. You ask your kid, "Why didn't you do that thing I told you?" They say, "I didn't *hear* you." "But we were in the car and we were making eye contact and you said, 'Ok.'"

Verses 10 through 12 aren't about an unfair God. They're a further differentiation between the *crowd* and real *disciples*. A theme Mark has been developing for a few passages now. Remember, in our last passage there was a dramatic picture of those *around* Jesus, *in* the house, and those standing *outside* the house because they *would* not believe and refused to come in.

Mark 4:13 - ¹³ Then he said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand all of the parables?"

⁹ Luke 13:3, 5

¹⁰ Revelation 2:5, 22

¹¹ EBC

Understanding parables is an important part of the Christian life. They are unique lessons about Christ, His Kingdom, and His way for life. When we ask, "What is this about?" it must always point back to the Lord. *But*, as we receive the parables, we most of all must ask, "What is my response?"

Jesus tells us to consider the parables thoughtfully. Because the truth is: We *also* can misunderstand the Lord. We also can be a little numb to His words. Our hearts can start to harden or become distracted. *These* disciples were struggling with their understanding, so we can, too.

To counteract that, we should continually apply this parable and keep our hearts conditioned to respond. We want to perpetually keep ourselves in verse 20. Because this story is *not* just about the moment you get saved, but a whole *life* of bearing fruit as the Lord sows His word into your heart.

In John 8, Jesus said real disciples *continue* in His Word. And James tells us that Christians must continually receive the implanted word.¹² So now, let's hear Jesus' explanation of this parable.

Mark 4:14 - ¹⁴ The sower sows the word.

Like a seed, God's word contains *everything* necessary for life, growth, and fruitfulness. A tomato seed contains what is necessary for the plant. Yes, of course, that seed is unlocked by soil and water and sunlight, but *in that seed* is what you need. The same is true of God's word. *All* we need for life and Godliness is found in it. It *grows* in us if we participate and prepare ourselves for it.

Mark 4:15 - ¹⁵ Some are like the word sown on the path. When they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown in them.

This first soil is a heart where the word of God makes no impact. They are surrendered to *another* god, who is a devourer and destroyer.

There really is a Devil out there and he really is our adversary. He wants to stop the work of God and the spread of His word. Now here, the soil is presented as somewhat culpable for the failure to receive the seed. But, what can I do if a bird swoops down and gobbles the grain up?

We've got a dog at home. I know that if I leave my plate of food on the table, she's going to come over and eat it. I have to protect that food. Christians: We need to be on guard against the schemes of the Devil. How can I possibly hope to win that fight? We don't have to. Our *Savior* overcame him. He rejected every temptation. And now, we live in *Christ's* power to overcome temptation. If we resist the Devil, he will flee from us. Endeavor to protect your connection with God in your life.

Mark 4:16-17 - ¹⁶ And others are like seed sown on rocky ground. When they hear the word, immediately they receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root; they are short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately fall away.

¹² John 8:31, James 1:21

This heart soil is quick to be excited about the good news, but underneath those emotions the heart is still hard. There's stone below the surface. Their mind isn't really inclined to *God*, but to how they feel in their circumstances. When the going gets tough, they move on to the *next* new thing.

Our hearts must be rooted in Christ, not in circumstances. Colossians 2 tells us to be rooted in *Him*, built up in *Him*, established in our *faith*, not our feelings. Now, your faith *should* feel joy and peace and expectation and excitement but about *the Lord*, not about our temporal circumstances. *That's* how a Christian can sing worship songs while in a dungeon. A heart plowed deep for God's work.

Mark 4:18-19 - ¹⁸ Others are like seed sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the worries of this age, the deceitfulness, of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.

In *this* example, the plant has grown. You can see stem and leaves and roots - *but no fruit*. It's too distracted, too consumed with other pursuits, and so it is unproductive. Useless to the farmer.

There are a *lot* of Christians who are living season after season of fruitlessness. The word is sown into their lives at church or their own devotions, but it doesn't produce change, it doesn't produce ministry, it doesn't produce obedience. But God *wants* fruit. There are other parables that speak specifically about this: A master coming and finding no fruit and saying, "This is not ok."

The Pharisees were plants with no fruit. They had *libraries* of knowledge about the seed, but nothing grew in their lives but weeds and thistles.

Mark 4:20 - ²⁰ And those like seed sown on good ground hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown."

Again, we see a personification in the soil - that it has responsibility to hear the word, *welcome* the word, and allow it to do its work. When a heart does that, something miraculous happens.

At the time, an average harvest might be 7 or 8 fold. A great harvest would be 10.¹³ God wants our lives to be superabundant with His spiritual fruit.

That fruit, like all fruit, will have seed *in it*. The soil of your life producing a variety of fruit each season whose pit and core is always the word of God, which then spills out for a new crop.

So now we've heard this chief parable. What is our response? What is the state of my heart? Is it hard? Is it soft? Is it distracted? Is it unproductive? Is it attentive? God sows so *that* we can grow and be a part of His miraculous harvest. He can handle the birds. His seed can withstand less-than-ideal conditions. Are we preparing our hearts, cultivating our lives to receive what He wants to plant? Are we allowing Him to plow and soften us? Are we giving the nutrients of our lives to *His* seed rather than the weeds of this world? Are we bearing fruit? Do I respond? What sort of soil am I tonight?

¹³ James Brooks *Mark Vol. 23. The New American Commentary*