

## “The Parable of the Sower” (pt. 1)

Mark 4:1-20

This morning, we're in the fourth chapter of Mark, and we'll read beginning with verse 1 in just a minute. Imagine how boring and dull the world would be without stories. I mean just try to imagine explaining something in your life without story. There's something about story that is woven into the fabric of our humanity. And you can't say the word 'history' without also saying 'story.' But what makes a good story?

Good storytelling is more than just simply relaying facts. It engages the mind, stirs our emotions, and leaves a lasting impression. The greatest stories include key elements like a relatable character. Someone the audience can identify with, sympathize with, or understand. The character has both strengths and weaknesses. I think of how we can identify with Old Testament characters like Joseph and David, or New Testament characters like Peter and the disciples. It resonates with us because we see ourselves in their struggles and failures.

Something else about good stories are that they have a clear goal and direction. The main character is pursuing something, or having to overcome an obstacle, attempting to accomplish a mission. And there is usually some conflict or tension that is driving the story. This tension keeps the audience keeps listening because they want to know what will happen next. Will the character succeed? How will the conflict be solved?

Good stories also contain vivid details that help the listener enter the scene. And those details appeal to the senses—we see, we hear, we smell, and we can taste. To illustrate, compare these two statements: “A man was tired.” That's simply stating the facts. Nothing wrong with it, but it does not quite capture us on

an emotional level. Now, here's the second statement: "The dust of the road clung to his face as he staggered toward the village." We get the same idea that the man is tired, but the details are vivid and filled with the weight of emotion. The facts may inform, but emotion connects. Good stories evoke emotions like joy, fear, and surprise. People often forget statistics but remember how a story made them feel.

Something else found in a good story is what's known as a turning point. This is a moment when everything changes—a truth is revealed, a decision is made, rescue arrives, and so on. And this turning point in the story leads to the resolution of the tension as the conflict finally reaches a conclusion. You're not left hanging. The best stories end with a statement, "And they all lived happily ever after." A resolution provides satisfaction and closure.

The Bible is one grand story that contains all the essential elements of effective storytelling. Its central character is God, working through people made in His image, while humanity's greatest need is reconciliation with Him. The conflict begins with sin entering the world in the garden of Eden and unfolds throughout history as man experiences the consequences of rebellion. The tension builds through God's promises, covenants, and redemptive acts, reaching its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Him, the great 'turning point' of human history occurs as sin and death is defeated and salvation is provided. The story moves toward its ultimate resolution when Christ will return and God ushers in a new heaven and new earth. And so the Bible isn't merely a collection of stories but one unified story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration in Christ. Remembering this is important as we deal with the various individual parts of the Bible such as we find in Mark 4.

Jesus was the master storyteller. Even people today who are not believers know what is meant by a ‘prodigal son’ or a ‘good Samaritan.’ And much of our language today has been shaped by these references—leaving the 99 to find the one, the blind leading the blind, or building on sand. I hear people frequently using these expressions in our day without even recognizing that they come from the words of Jesus. The stories that Jesus told are known as ‘parables.’ You will find the word mentioned by Mark some eight times beginning in 3:23 and throughout this fourth chapter. And the first parable that Jesus tells here in Mark is known as the parable of the sower. (Read)

In verse 1, we’re told that Jesus once again began to teach beside the sea. He got into a boat that was just offshore as a large crowd gathered along the shoreline. The unique geography of the Sea of Galilee provided a natural acoustic setting that helped His voice carry to a large audience in a day without modern amplification. Now, if you’ve ever been down beside the shoreline at a lake, you’ve experienced it as you turned around to say something to those who were above you. Water projects your voice as the sound waves travel efficiently across the smooth surface of water, and it allowed Jesus’ voice to carry farther than it would on land alone. The shoreline often formed a natural amphitheater. Many areas around the Sea of Galilee slope upward from the water’s edge. The crowds seated or standing on these inclines could hear a speaker below them more easily, like spectators in an outdoor theater. So the surrounding hills enhanced acoustics. Archaeological and acoustic studies around the Sea of Galilee have demonstrated that certain coves and slopes can carry a human voice remarkably well so that it can be heard at a good distance.

And so the setting here would have been ideally suited for communicating to a large crowd. There is also a practical lesson in the scene. Jesus used the

places available to Him as a platform for His ministry. The boat became His pulpit, the sea became His sound system, and the hillside His auditorium! It is another example of how the Lord often used ordinary settings—a mountainside, a house, a well, a fishing boat, a seashore—to proclaim extraordinary truth. It shows us how even the Sea of Galilee became an effective instrument through which the Word of God was heard by the multitudes. Given modern technology and the tools we have at our disposal now, how are we committed to getting the gospel out to people? I think that is a good question to ask ourselves. Now, as Jesus is in the boat preaching and teaching, verse 2 says He was teaching them many things in parables. And if you look down in verse 33, Mark says, “With many such parables He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable.” His choice way of teaching involved parables.

When you add them up, there are roughly 39 parables that Jesus told which are recorded in the New Testament. We can find Jesus’ parables in the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You won’t find them in John. There are only six of them in Mark, and four of them are found right here in this chapter. And so for that reason, it is important that we understand some things about parable as a literary device before we look at the parables themselves.

### **1—The DEFINITION of a parable (4:1-2a)**

*“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. And He was teaching them many things in parables...”*

What is a ‘parable,’ and why did Jesus use them? Those are two questions that we need to understand before we look at these parables here in Mark. It has been said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And while that might be a simple description or helpful way of understanding it, it really isn’t the best definition.

**“Parable”** —*the word comes from two Greek root words (παρα) which means beside, and (βαλλω) which means to throw; to place alongside*

At its most basic level, a ‘parable’ is a story of comparison that uses an illustration to help listeners move from familiar reality to a deeper understanding of an important truth. It is a figure of speech for the sake of comparison, and for the purpose of teaching a spiritual lesson. A parable might be long, such as the prodigal son which consists of 22 verses. Or it might be short, like the parable of the leaven which is only a brief sentence. A parable might involve just a word picture of some kind. But it always makes a comparison that applies to spiritual truth. At times, the comparison is obvious. For example, Jesus might say, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.” But at other times, the comparison is more involved. Such is the case with the parable of the sower. Jesus begins with characters who are doing something, and then as He tells the story, the comparison of sowing seed that falls on different types of ground helps us understand how the gospel often works in human hearts.

And so think of it this way—a parable is a word picture that is drawn from what is familiar, used to powerfully illustrate what is unfamiliar. Jesus starts with something we can see in order to help us see kingdom truth. Of course, we need to keep in mind that understanding only comes through the power of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the person who has faith. Because Jesus didn’t simply use

parables to reveal truth to His disciples, but to also conceal it from those who refused to see through unbelief.

Now, to answer the second question, why did Jesus use parables? A commentator by the name of William Barclay mentions four reasons, and I think these are very helpful. Let me share them with you.

- First, it caught the attention of the listener.

While you and I are now able to stop and carefully read the parable in our Bibles, when Jesus originally taught it, it was a spoken parable. He doesn't have a congregation sitting in pews or in the synagogue. He has a moving target, a crowd of people in the open air who would come or go at will. And so the parable caught their attention, and Jesus knew that the way to keep people was often to tell them a story. It caught their attention. Those who speak or teach on a regular basis will tell you how this is still the case.

- Second, the people of Jesus' day were familiar with parables.

Jesus didn't invent the use of parable, but He did perfect it. The Jewish leaders would have recognized them, for some parables are in the Old Testament. Think of David caught in adultery, and remember that God brought Nathan to him to convict him. Nathan told the parable about the man with the lamb. Jewish rabbis used parables themselves in their own writings and teachings, so He was using something that they were familiar with. It caught their attention, they were familiar with parables, and then:

- Third, Jesus was making abstract ideas concrete.

What I mean is that He is taking concepts that are ideas and is fleshing them out in real time. It is not always easy to grasp abstract ideas. Most people think in

pictures. For example, we could talk about 'faith.' Well, what is it and what does it look like? We need a picture, don't we? The New Testament does this, when it talks about faith, it talks about a man, Abraham. So faith becomes flesh, and from the experience of Abraham we see, not in abstract but in concrete form. He personified what faith is in life. And that is what a parable does. Jesus was the master teacher, He knew that people's minds could not relate to purely abstract ideas, so He put them in stories so they might understand. There's something in that for those of us who communicate God's Word on a regular basis!

- Fourth, it compelled the people to think for themselves.

The worst way to help a child with their homework is to do the homework for them, right? Because they'll never learn! Truth contained within a parable had that kind of impact. In the use of parables, Jesus is encouraging people to active pursuit of the truth. He didn't want to make people's minds lazy. He didn't want to take away responsibility from people, but lays responsibility on them. In other words, it is as if He says, "Here is the message! He who has ears to hear, let him hear." If you have a heart for God, and you're seeking God from a heart that is receptive like good soil, you will understand. But if you have a hard heart, you'll be closed off to the truth, and it will seem as nonsense to you. And so do you see what He is doing? He's compelling the people to stop and think about their soul.

There is a sense in which every sermon ought to have this very same aim! Biblical preaching ought to do more than inform a person's mind. It should awaken the conscience and bring people face-to-face with the condition of their soul before God. Like Jesus' parables, preaching ought to interrupt the routines of life and force listeners to consider eternal realities they might otherwise ignore. It holds up the mirror of God's Word so that people see themselves as they truly

are—not merely as they appear before others, or as they think they are, but as they stand before a holy God. Faithful preaching exposes sin, reveals the deceitfulness of the human heart, magnifies the beauty and sufficiency of Christ, and presses upon hearers the urgency of their need before God. So that they consider the question, “Am I truly converted? Have I received God’s Word? What am I living for? Where will I spend eternity?” Friends, when God’s Spirit attends the preaching of God’s Word, people are compelled to stop, examine their lives, and be confronted with the state of their soul. That’s what Jesus is doing in the parable of the sower.

And so we have the definition of a parable. Then notice:

## **2—The DETAILS of a parable (4:2b-9)**

*“...and in His teaching He said to them: ‘Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as He sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 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. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.’ And He said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”*

One thing to keep in mind when you are studying parables is that there is one main point that Jesus wants us to grasp. One main truth illustrated by various details. A parable is not allegory, which is a mistake a lot of people make when they try to interpret these stories. What’s an allegory? An allegory is a symbolic story where every symbol represents something, like the Pilgrim’s Progress by

John Bunyan. A parable is not an allegory, which means each symbol in a parable doesn't necessarily have to represent something. Sometimes they do, but not always. We can get easily sidetracked by the symbols and miss the main point of what Jesus is saying. As the saying goes, don't miss the forest for all of the individual trees. Don't press the details so much that you lose sight of the main point. Because if you get the main point, you'll see how the other details are related to it.

**William Barclay** — *“Therefore, what we must look for in a parable is not a situation in which every detail stands for something, we must look for a situation in which one great idea leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning. It is always wrong to attempt to make every detail of a parable mean something, it is always right to say ‘What one idea would flash into a man’s mind when he heard this story for the first time?’”*

The most important thing in every parable is the central lesson, and in those cases where the symbolism is more complex (such as the parable of the soils and the parable of the tares), Jesus almost always explains the symbolism for us. The details which have great spiritual significance are explained for us by Jesus.

While we won't get into these details today, I do want to show you what they are and why they're important. What are the main details in this parable?

- **The sower**

Jesus says in verse 3, “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.” The repeated emphasis should get our attention. He says we are to ‘listen’ and ‘behold.’ Now that our attention is given, He paints the familiar picture of a sower who goes out to scatter seed. It is an agricultural picture that those in the first century knew quite well. Now, I wonder perhaps as Jesus is teaching, if maybe off in the

distance there is this farmer who is doing this very thing. And Jesus uses him as an object lesson for the crowd. Jesus says, “Look there! A sower went out to sow!” And so that’s the first major detail.

- **The seed**

The sower does not go out empty handed. Rather, he is scattering precious seed. Those who scatter no seed reap no harvest. If you don’t sow, you can’t reap. And in those days if you couldn’t reap, you couldn’t eat! And so sowing was a matter of living and dying. It is the same way now, even in our age of convenience. Ask your children where a loaf of bread comes from and see how they answer. “Well, mom or dad goes to the grocery store!” Where does the grocery store get it? Not from amazon...

Somebody has to work the land! Someone has to put their boots on, break up some ground, and plant some seed. It is a fundamental principle of life that we reap what we sow. And so the seed is a very important detail in this story, for it is the seed that is intended to produce a fruitful harvest.

- **The soils**

We call it the parable of the sower, but notice how much space Jesus gives to describing the different types of soil that the seed falls upon. It might very well be called the parable of the soils! You will notice that Jesus describes four different types of soil that the seed is scattered upon. Some of the seed falls along the path. Some of the seed falls upon rocky ground. Some falls among thorns. And some falls on good, fertile soil.

And then notice the instruction given in verse 9: “And He said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” He begins by saying, “Listen!” He ends by emphasizing

the importance of hearing. Which means this is a parable about hearing and responding to the Word of God. That is the main idea, and the details illustrate this main idea. Jesus explains the details to His disciples in verses 13-20.

### **3—The DISCLOSURE of a parable (4:10-12)**

*“And when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parables. 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, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’”*

After telling the parable itself, you will notice in verse 10 that there is detour as the disciples ask Jesus about why He spoke in parables. And we need to pay close attention to what He says to them, because a lot of people assume that Jesus spoke in parables to make the truth easier to understand. While there is a sense in which story helps to illustrate truth, that is not the main reason Jesus spoke in parables. He did so to reveal the truth to believers while, at the same time, to conceal the truth to those committed to their unbelief. Think of the multiple responses that we’ve seen people have toward Jesus so far in Mark’s gospel:

- The crowds have shown enthusiastic interest in Him because of the miracles
- The religious leaders have attributed His ministry to the power of Satan
- The disciples have embraced Him as the Messiah

Notice what He says to His disciples in verse 11, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” In other words, He explains to them that only those with receptive hearts were

permitted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. That's what He is saying here. Now a 'secret' or a 'mystery' in the New Testament is truth that was previously unknown, and can be only known by special revelation. So Christ has come as God's ultimate self-revelation. He is bringing the truth of the kingdom of God in Himself, and He is telling His disciples that only those with receptive hearts are permitted to know the mysteries of the kingdom. So in other words, God reveals His family secrets to those whose hearts are open to Him. He then quotes the Lord's words to the prophet Isaiah:

**Isaiah 6:9-10—“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”**

You might think that seems harsh. But you've got to keep this in the context of the whole of the Old Testament. This is being spoken about people who had the great privilege of the Word of God, and the prophets of God, the priests of God, yet they have rejected the Son of God who had now come to them. And because they had rejected the Light of the world, Jesus is saying they will not see the light of the word. Truth is concealed to those who reject the light that has already been given to them. If you reject the light that God has given, how could you receive anything additional?

Something to keep in mind is that this follows Jesus' words to the scribes who were attributing what He had been doing to the power of Satan. And Jesus warns them against the danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, or rejecting the One who has come to testify of Christ. They had hardened their hearts to God's Spirit. And when the heart is hard, when it is unresponsive, unreceptive, it gets

harder and the seed is taken away. But when the heart is open, not only does it receive what God is saying, but it receives more and more light.

Now, we have to stop here. We'll come back to this as we look at the parable itself. But for right now, let the Lord's words in verse 9 resonate with you—"He who has ears, let him hear." In other words, this is a story about how you hear and respond to the Word of God.

Let me leave you with one main point of application:

- ***Hearing is always a matter of the heart!***

The condition of our heart determines the benefit that we receive from God's Word. As we'll see next time, the same seed fell on four different types of soil, but only the good soil produced fruit. A person may hear sermons, read the Bible, attend church regularly, yet remain unchanged if the heart is hardened, shallow, or distracted. We must come to God's Word with humility, faith, attentiveness, and a willingness to obey. The danger is not only rejecting the Word outright. It is in hearing it casually, selectively, or superficially. Every exposure to Scripture either softens the heart or further hardens it. The Word of God is living and active, and we're accountable for what we do with what we hear. Therefore, we must be careful how we hear, because our response to God's Word has eternal consequences!

I wonder just where might you find yourself in Jesus' story? What is the condition of your heart before God? Is it able to receive the precious seed of His Word? Friend, hearing begins with the heart. Right now, ask the Holy Spirit to water the precious seed of the gospel and produce the fruit of Christlikeness in you!