

The Gospel of Mark – D-Group

Content for Fall 2021



Session #1: “A Parable – Soils and Seed (Mark 4:1-20) ... Hearts Receptive to the Word”

An Opening Note about the D-Group Process

Over the course of the next several weeks (11 in all, counting this first one), we’re going to journey through Mark’s Gospel. For each session, there will be a portion to read so that we make our way through the whole book by the end. Guides will be available in the same basic format as this first one; they will contain some additional reading as well as some questions for reflection. Instead of providing an overview of the whole section that has been read, the guides and the D-Group conversation will typically focus in on a specific portion. We do encourage every member of the group to do these steps – *especially the reading of the text itself* – in preparation for that next session. The design of this overall process builds on the concept that we all benefit as each person contributes to the conversation. Of course, that typically requires investing a bit of effort to be prepared 😊. We’re glad you have joined us for this journey and look forward to the road ahead.

A Brief Introduction to Mark’s Gospel (for those who are curious)

This week, we’re going to introduce briefly the Gospel of Mark and then look at a text that is a great starting place for our journey. Most of us may be familiar with the word “GOSPEL.” It’s the word we use to capture the announcement of what God has done for us through Jesus; at its root, the word means “GOOD NEWS!” This is the essence of our Christian faith: we have not earned our way to God, but because of His love shown to us in Christ, He has graciously made a way for us. “GOSPEL” is *also* the word we use to describe the opening 4 books of the New Testament. There is, of course, overlap between these two uses of the word. After all, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the story of Jesus – specifically, who He is as God’s Son and what He has brought about through His life and ministry, culminating in His death and resurrection.

In many ways, the word “biography” is inadequate for describing these Gospels. After all, only Matthew and Luke provide *any* details of Jesus’ earthly life prior to His ministry years – and even those are sparse. Further, there is a great deal that happened in Jesus’ three years of ministry that never even makes it into the Gospels themselves. Yet, each one does tell a complete story about Him, culminating with His death and resurrection. In that way, each of these 4 writers tells the story, providing a slightly different **PORTRAIT** of Jesus. That’s a good word because each writer’s goal is to capture something specific about who He is – within each Gospel, there is an overarching narrative, but one that has a specific theological purpose. Indeed, these 4 portraits are not in any way contradictory; but, each one does capture the same Jesus just from a slightly different vantage points. (*Matthew, Mark and Luke are called “Synoptic” Gospels because of their similarities; and yet, even each of these has a different specific emphasis.*) In this way, they each contribute something to our overall understanding of who Jesus is.

That brings us to the Gospel of Mark itself. Traditionally, it has been understood that Mark (also known as the John Mark we see occasionally in the New Testament story) was a companion of Peter, even writing down Peter's teaching and preaching in the form of this Gospel. As the church expanded, Mark recorded this message to help tell Peter's eyewitness story about Jesus as a reminder of who He truly was and is. With that also came the opportunity to declare what His Kingdom is about and clarify what it means to follow Him in discipleship. Among the 4 Gospels, scholars have long noted some unique characteristics of Mark: for example, this book is filled with "fast-moving narrative" with a frequent use of the word "immediately" – it's a Gospel of action. Part of that is the rather limited amount of concentrated teaching sections compared to elsewhere (we do see some in chapter 4 and 13). Some have also noted how Mark presents "the most human and down-to-earth" portrait of Jesus. Even as the Messiah and Son of God, Jesus' humanity is regularly on display, even as "the Suffering Servant" who ironically brings salvation through His sacrificial death on the cross.

We will be making our way through this Gospel over the course of 11 weeks. One great way to get a feel for the overall story and theme (this is true of *any* book of the Bible) is to read through it in a single setting. That can be challenging for us; and yet, it's a great way for us to get a good sense of the story as a whole as Mark records it. Just an encouragement as we begin this journey.

A Good Place to Start – Jesus' Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1-20

As we begin this journey, it's seems fitting to start with a portion of Mark's Gospel that involves our response to the Word, the message about Jesus and His Kingdom. We start with a well-known parable from Mark 4 about a sower, seed and soils. As we prepare to work our way through this Gospel (from here on, we'll be working our way from beginning to end), it's a good reminder of how much it matters the way we receive God's Word.

Before going further, go ahead and READ the parable itself in Mark 4:1-12 (even if you're already familiar with it) – vv. 10-12 provide clarification as to *why* Jesus uses parables in His teaching as He does.

As you read the story, what stands out to you initially?

While there is much about this scene that seems odd from our contemporary understanding of farming and agriculture, this is how it worked in the 1st century. A sower/farmer would take a bag of seed and toss it out rather randomly. This seems crazy to our concept of carefully planting seed in well-defined rows within the confines of a field with soil that is well-designed for crops. Yet, this is how it worked. As a result, the possibility of seed landing on 4 separate kinds of soils would have been quite normal. In the end, where the seed lands makes all the difference.

Of course, in the end, Jesus' point is not agricultural at all. Parables use symbolism to tell a story that truly teaches a spiritual truth. In this case, Jesus uses the familiar reality of agriculture to teach something about how people respond to the Word. Frequently, as part of the analogy, Jesus is going

to use COMPARISON and CONTRAST to make His point. So it is here in Mark 4. It makes sense that we typically view this as 4 separate soils; after all, that's how Jesus tells the story. We don't want to miss the specific differences within the first 3, but neither do we want to miss the broader point Jesus is communicating. Really, **there is a basic contrast between the first 3 soils as a group and the last one.** *When you look at the story in this way, what is the main difference?*

In agriculture, it's always about the yield – the crop produced in the end. The point of sowing seed is what comes at harvest time. With that in mind, it's easy to paint the contrast in this way: ***the first 3 soils (with all of their unique realities) fail to produce the right result while the 4th yields a bumper crop ... 30, 60 or 100 times is a rather big increase!*** Only the good soil ends up being FRUITFUL as the Creator has designed it to work; the other soils – each for its own reason – are FRUIT/less in the end. In other words, the SEED is the same and will do what it's intended to do, but the right crop is produced only when the soil allows for it to be properly planted. The major difference is the end result of how the seed is received!

This overall agricultural point becomes a frequent metaphor for spiritual fruitfulness as well (*e.g.* see Psalm 1 or John 15; even the imagery of “the fruit of the Spirit” emphasizes this same theme). That's what we see in this story as well. In fact, this is the direction in which Jesus goes as He continues. We do not have to *guess* at Jesus' point; He flat-out tells us the point of the imagery in this story.

READ Jesus' explanation of the parable in Mark 4:13-20

Big Picture Point #1: Through Jesus and other means, God's Word is spread widely like seed (it is “scattered” in the story); it contains the potential power for bearing fruit. There are many ways that Scripture describes the power of God's Word. This is not one of the first descriptions we might think about, but even within this parable, we see something significant about the message God has revealed. *Like a seed*, it has all kinds of life-transforming power that can spring up and bear fruit in the right context. This is a theme that is present in Isaiah 55:10-11 as well – God's Word has all the potential needed for producing a harvest. Here's how one writer has described its power:

“The WORD of God is the single most powerful agent for transforming a life. ... Reading and studying the Bible will transform each of us into someone truly beautiful – for the Bible ignites the character of Christ within us.

*(After telling a story of one individual so changed by God's Word – a drastic change)
“This kind of thorough transformation isn't humanly possible. Only God can bring it about. And He can bring it about in our lives as well!”*

“The Word of God is a living seed that germinates in our souls and sends its roots deep down, transforming our whole being.”

There are two specific connections we can highlight as we compare the Word of God to a seed: it's the agent of life and a catalyst for growth. We can see this same imagery in Psalm 1 even.

What does this analogy of a seed emphasize to you about God's Word and its power?

Big Picture Point #2: It matters how receptive we are to God’s Word because only when we receive it properly can it produce its intended fruit in our lives. Again, this is an important reminder for us as we come to this study of the Gospel of Mark as well as whenever we come to God’s Word more broadly. Let’s spend some time reflecting on these 4 soils; remember, the first 3 are really grouped according to the same fruitless outcome.

TYPE of SOIL	TYPE of HEARER	What happens to the seed/word?	OUTCOME
Hard Soil	Unresponsive Hearer	Stolen Word	All FRUITLESS
Rock Soil	Superficial Hearer	Scorched Word	
Thorny Soil	Worldly Hearer	Squeezed Word	
Cultivated (good) Soil	Fruitful Hearer	Successful Word	FRUITFUL

These descriptions are taken from a study on the book of Mark from Life Church Open Network.

Reflect on these various types of soil; consider which one describes you (recognizing that a different description might be true of each one of us at different points along our journeys).

What about the descriptions in the text (see Mark 4:13-20) stands out to you about these different types of soils and what happens to the seed in them?

In the end, this parable calls for a response. It may not be as obvious as it is in some parables, but there’s certainly a key take-away: be the kind of soil that receives God’s Word properly! Notice the dual words in verse 20 – it’s those who HEAR *and* RECEIVE (much like in Matthew 7:24-27 where it’s about those who HEAR *and* DO what Jesus teaches). When we look at it through that grid, here’s how we can package this parable’s teaching:

Guard against hard-heartedness that prevents God’s Word from penetrating into your heart and mind; soften your heart so that it can receive what He wants to plant.

Guard against superficiality and shallowness that cause God’s Word to wither as quickly as it was enthusiastically embraced initially; instead of just an instantaneous emotional response, give time for roots to go deep inside of you.

Guard against a pre-occupation with the things of this world that will quickly choke out God’s Word (*Jesus specifically identifies “the worries of this age” + “the deceitfulness of riches” + “the desire of other things” ... these are a great starting point as representative of a number of things in this world that can do this*); instead, weed out the things that are preventing God’s Word from taking root and accomplishing its purpose in you.

Cultivate a right heart so that when the word is planted, the power of God’s transforming Spirit can be at work in bringing about the fruit He desires as you receive and obey it.

How do you need to respond to Jesus’ parable so you can properly receive His Word?