

It's All About the Dirt

Mark 4:1-20

“And again, He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. Then He taught them many things by parables and said to them in His teaching: “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

(Mark 4:1-9)

Jesus often taught in parables.

In this parable, because the people were of an agrarian or farming culture, the Lord took something which all present should have understood on the one hand to teach a spiritual truth. All present had ears but not everyone there present understood what the Lord was teaching.

Think about it.

Jesus went out into a boat and facing the crowd on the shore who had come to hear Him speak because they knew of His reputation as a miracle worker and teacher he began to talk about farming.

The Goal of the Lord's Parables...

Please note, there is no explanation given to those on the shore – they simply hear about the sower, the seed and the soil and that's it. As we know, a parable is an illustrative comparison to something else but in this parable, it was the something else which was not identified – Jesus did not identify, unpack or make application concerning this parable to the general audience in that moment. He did so later but He only told those who with the disciples (v.10) came and *“asked about the parable.”* This is important because by this time in the Lord's ministry there were a few factions afoot – those who out and out rejected Him and meant Him harm, those who were uninterested and unresponsive to the spiritual truths He taught only following Him for their *“bellies sake”* because of His miracles and those who pursued Him because of who He was.

In [v.11-12] Jesus prefaces His answer to those who came asking for an explanation of the parable saying,

“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, 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.’”

The way Luke tells it, Jesus' explanation is hard to accept; it is as if He who desires *“none to perish but all to come to repentance”* was intentionally keeping people in the dark concerning spiritual truth and thereby keeping them condemned of God. His statement is rooted in passages like (Isa.6:9-10) but rather than intending to blind and deafen the hearer to the truth the Lord's intention was to reveal those who were blind and deaf; those who had hardened their hearts towards God.

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For clarity, consider for a moment the explanation found in the parallel account of Matthew [13:13-15] as Jesus answered the question: Why do you speak to them in parables?"

“Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 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; 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.’”

The purpose of the parable was to awaken those whose *hearts had grown dull* – actually the word is **pachunō** (GK) and it means hard, callous or thick; *their ears hard* – the word is **barēōs** (GK) meaning heavy or dull and their eyes of understanding were shut to truths by which, if they would open their eyes, ears and hearts and understand would lead to the healing of their souls by the Lord.

Thus, by His parables, Jesus was trying to create a hunger in His audience. What did He say in His beatitudes?

***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”***
(Matthew 5:3–6, NKJV)

In my mind, a message like the one Jesus led out with from the little boat to the big crowd should have caused all to ask Him to explain it, the fact that most did not illustrates their dullness to the truth of God.

Grasping the Lord's Parable...

To those who, as Mark says (v.10) ***“later came and asked Him about the parable”*** the Lord gave the rest of the story [v.14-20]:

“The sower sows the word. 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. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 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. Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 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. 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.”

Id like to spend our remaining time today on the Lord's explanation of the parable and I'd like to begin by identifying the main “actors” in the story:

Who was the sower?

You may have assumed that the sower is Jesus because it was Jesus who at the time was calling the people to repentance and faith saying [Mark 1:15] ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”***

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Not only that, but it was Jesus who even then as He was speaking from the boat was casting seed to soil. Nevertheless, the sower is NOT identified either in this passage or the parallels in (Matt. 13 or Luke 8).

In my mind, the sower is Jesus (and all who follow Him in His labor). The sower was faithful. No matter which way he cast the seed, it was with the same determination that the sower sowed – he expected a harvest.

What was the seed?

The sower sows the word, the logos and specifically [Luke 8:11], “*the word of God.*” The seed was (and is the gospel) as Jesus told it – “*the kingdom of God had drawn near to you, repent and believe*” (Mark 1:14-15) but it is also the gospel of Jesus Christ by whom through faith in His Name entrance is made into the kingdom of God. It is the testimony of God’s grace to us and the Lord Jesus’ labor to make God’s grace our reality; it is the testimony of our natural condition and the supernatural way in which Almighty God intervened through His Son (John 3:16) for our sakes – it is good news. The quality of the seed is consistent – this seed, the seed which the sower sows is pure and perfect and full of life.

But what was the soil?

The Lord and those who follow Him sow the Word of God into what – the ground? The soil is representative of the hearts of those to whom the seed is cast. It is in our hearts that we think (Matt. 9:4; Mark 2:6; Luke 24:38; Heb. 4:12) plan (Prov.19:21), choose (Rom. 6:17; Col. 3:15) and react (John 14:1; Rom. 9:2; John 16:22). It is from the heart that we speak (Matt. 12:34) and it is within our hearts that the seed of the gospel is either received, resisted or rejected. A seed is received into the soil and there it takes root – words are heard with the ear and take root in the heart – we are to hear – to receive God’s word in our inner person. (Wiersbe) Thus, this parable is not about the sower or the seed it is all about the dirt.

The soil represents for the most part the hearts of multitudes of people who will never produce fruit (even among professed followers of Christ) through changed lives because their hearing is not mixed with faith and action.

1. Hard hearted [v.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.*” These are the bitter enemies of God who have either decided that they would not receive the gospel likening it to “*foolishness*” (1 Cor. 2:14) or who have by continual sinning and disobedience resisted the word and will of God like Pharaoh in (Ex. 4:21, 8:15,32; 9:34, 10:1) who hardened his heart to the Lord; or like the Israelites who were known to the Lord as a “*stiff necked or stubborn people.*” Such a heart must be plowed (Hosea 10:12) before it can be planted.
2. Shallow hearted [v.5-6, 16-17] “*These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 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.*” These are emotional receivers of the truth; they hear it, it sounds good, they like it but they don’t think about it and they don’t apply it. Soon, under pressure to leave it or suffer for it they abandon it. These folks “*love their lives*” (Rev. 12:11) and will apart from repentance gain the whole world and lose their souls (Mark 8:36). I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that even your timidity to cast the seed identifies you to be such a person – “*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*” (Mark 8:38, NKJV)

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3. Distracted (heart) [v.18-19] ***“Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 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.”*** This person is a carnal receiver of truth – too many other things crowd out the seed of faith in their lives. These hearers seem diligent, perhaps some of them take notes in church writing down all that they can from the message they hear on Sunday morning; they have notebook upon notebook full of sermon notes. They are like the women whom Paul spoke about to Timothy in [2 Tim 3:7] ***“Always learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth.”*** The distractions that the world has to offer, the delusion that wealth will make one happy and is all that matters in life; and desires for whatever else it may be literally choke out the seed – it took root but it did not produce.

In each of these cases, it is not the seed which is defective but the soil. This parable is not about the sower or the seed – it is about the dirt and in the case of the first three types of soil mentioned by the Lord the seed did not germinate within them – by extension, the seed of the gospel did not fully come alive within the hearts of such people – they are NOT born again! They never had spiritual life. Only one type of soil produced fruit – the good ground is illustrative of truly born-again believers; their lives having been changed by the word they heard. The other three types, because they produced nothing are representative of those who are not born again.

The Lord mentioned one more type of soil:

4. Humbled, fruitful heart [v.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.”*** These are those who hear the word and truly receive it into their hearts which is transformed and changed by it. They are true believers. In a way unlike anything known in nature – the seed changes the soil. Good ground is pliable, submitted to the work being done in it; it is cultivated and nutrient rich – the Word of God will produce much fruit under such conditions; a person characterized by the ***“good ground”*** hears the word, receives the word, grows in the word and produces fruit in the word.

By now, you may have asked the question I did, ***“How can dirt produce fruit?”*** This is where we must go back to what the dirt represents – it represents our hearts; that central place of our morality and intellect from which we speak, think, plan, choose and react. When the seed of the gospel is planted and takes root it begins to transform our thoughts, plans, choices and reactions – the seed changes our hearts.

More broadly understood, the word of God, mixed with the trials and challenges that afflict our hearts can bring forth even more fruit within the believer – more transformation, more growth, greater spiritual maturity, deeper faith.

What is the fruit to which Jesus referred? All of it is internal but outwardly observable:

“But also, for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.” (2 Peter 1:5–9, NKJV)

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These outwardly observable, internal changes lead to another kind of fruit being produced – others see and want to hear about what it was that changed you which may lead them in turn to receive the Savior of the gospel into their lives as well.

There are some other outwardly observable things which distinguish the believing kind from the other kinds of hearts which Jesus named in this parable. Let these evaluate the condition of your spiritual soil:

Do you hunger for God's word?

Do you have a concern and conviction about your sin – are you grieved about your sin?

Do you confess it?

Do you fight against your desire to sin?

Are you concerned about the souls of them who do not know Jesus?

If any of these are lacking in you – you need to ask yourself the question in light of what Jesus taught and you heard today: *“Am I truly a born-again believer in the Lord Jesus Christ?”*

A hard-hearted person will become so angry that this question is being posed to them that they will dismiss it without thought – that is Satan pictured as the birds by the wayside taking the seed which can change their life away.

A shallow hearted person will be struck by the implication of those words even to the point of tears and then go home to continue life just as if they had never heard a thing about it.

A distracted person will take the notes, research the scriptures and perhaps even confess their carnality only to return to it the very next day.

But one who takes it to heart, a humbled person will hear those words and will be cut to the heart by them and will respond in a way that produces abundant life within them that will be outwardly observable to everyone and one who already has this heart will praise God for it and pray that others would as well.

The bottom line here as one man expressed it is this – *“however faithful the preacher”* or follower in sowing the word and *“howsoever pure his message, the effect of the preaching of the word depends upon the state of the hearer's heart.”*