

Mark 4 • The Working of the Word

Introduction

To be sure, the Parable of the Sower is central to Christ's teaching and referred to many times in many ways throughout the Epistles; but we need to exercise caution and not just study it by itself but in context with the other parables and events Mark provides. These parables, and the event they would later in the day experience on the Sea of Galilee, are all parts of an overall teaching about the working of God's Word. This is actually a kind of "life cycle", if you will, of the complete working of God's Word as it is first planted in us and changes us to the point that we in turn are planting the Word on His behalf.

¹He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. ²And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ³"Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; ⁴as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. ⁶And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." ⁹And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

¹⁰As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. ¹¹And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, ¹²so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN."

¹³And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. ¹⁶In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only

[Read v.1-20]

Q: Is this parable talking about fate? Is it merely by chance that a person happens to be one of the soils listed?

A: This is not about fate. Each type of soil is expressing a different condition of the heart. The only difference between the "good soil" and the others is a heart that is willing to not just hear the Word but become a doer of the Word. Luke's rendition of the good soil makes this clearer:

*"But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word **in an honest and good heart**, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.*

Luke 8:15

Point: Unless our hearts are prepared to receive the Word, we cannot grow spiritually.

Q: What are the forces which fight against the seed of God's Word bearing fruit?

1. The devil snatches the seed from hardened hearts. (v.4 & 15)
2. The flesh produces only a temporary response in shallow hearts. (v.5-6, 16-17)
3. The world smothers growth in crowded hearts. (v.7, 18-19)

Point: Both James (James 4) and Paul describe the three enemies of the Christian as the world, the flesh, and the devil, all of which are seen actively working against the Word from the moment it's sown.

*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked **according to the course of this world**, according to **the prince of the power of the air**, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in **the lusts of our flesh**, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*

Ephesians 2:1-3

Q: Is it enough for the good soil to merely receive the seed – for a heart to merely acknowledge the Word? What is the criteria for success making it different from the rest?

A: It produces a harvest.

Q: Is the harvest the same for every patch of good soil?

A: No. Having received and cultivated the Word, the seed produced a harvest in varying degrees.

temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.¹⁸ And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word,¹⁹ but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.²⁰ And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Point: *This parable summarizes Christ’s repeated teaching that a true Christian is identified by their fruit (or “harvest”) and is responsible to produce in direct proportion to that which has been given to them (as in the parables of the minas and talents). As we sow the seed via our preaching, teaching, and witnessing, we must not become discouraged...*

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.

Galatians 6:9

...because God will use His Word as He sees fit and will ensure that it is not wasted...

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
Isaiah 55:8-11*

Application: *Is it possible that people reject God’s Word while their spiritual condition mimics the bad soils until they’re ready to receive it from a willing heart? How does this speak for how we should pray for others to receive the Word? How does this speak to our own spiritual successes and failures?*

²¹And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? ²²For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. ²³If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”

²⁴And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. ²⁵For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”

[Read v.21-25]

Q: The word “hear” is used over a dozen times in this chapter. What is the biblical definition of what it means to “hear”?

A: It refers to receiving God’s truth in the inner person in the same manner the soil received the seed. Just as the soil is proved fertile by allowing the seed to take hold and produce a harvest, “hearing” is proven by the person putting the Word into practice and being obedient to it, not just merely listening.

Q: So how is the working of the Word comparable to a lamp?

A: It reveals everything, even those things we keep hidden. Our responsibility is to then address and resolve every issue that is exposed.

Q: Why are we supposed to “take care what you listen to”?

A: This determines what we have to share with others.

Point: *We don’t receive the Word solely for our own benefit, but to share it just as a lamp provides light for the whole house.*

Q: What is the implication in the “standard of measure” cited here?

A: We can only grow personally in the Word only to the degree we put the Word into practice, and we can only be effective sharers of the Word only to the degree that we’re responsible to plant at every opportunity.

Mark 4 • The Working of the Word, Page 2 of 4

Both our internal and external effectiveness is governed by the quality of our personal obedience to the Word.

Application: *How is the Parable of the Lamp an extension of what was started in the Parable of the Sower? Why might it be difficult to ask God to allow us to preach to large groups when we've ignored the opportunity to do so one-on-one? Do you see that rightly handling God's Word is the most important factor when it comes to success or failure of a ministry or outreach? How does that compare with your church's current strategies?*

²⁶And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; ²⁷and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. ²⁸The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. ²⁹But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

[Read v.26-29]

Q: What are the four actions which summarize this parable?

1. Sowing (v.26)
2. Sleeping (v.27)
3. Growing (v.28)
4. Reaping (v.29)

Q: What is this teaching in regard to planting the seed of God's Word?

A: All we can do is sow and reap the seed; only God alone can cause growth.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

1 Corinthians 3:6-7

Q: So what is our task limited to?

A: Sowing the seed and being prepared when the harvest is ready. How the seed grows is something we can't do, something that's actually a complete mystery to us.

"Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor."

John 4:35-38

Q: What is the act of sleeping referring to?

A: It probably means several things, including patiently living an obedient life in the interval between planting and harvest.

Point: *The Parable of the Sower describes the process of the Word being planted by Christ within us, the Parable of the Lamp the working of the Word in both our walk and ministry, and now this parable extends the cycle by depicting us as now becoming sowers on behalf of Christ.*

Application: *What is our responsibility when it comes to God's Word? What does it say of a Christian who doesn't participate in the planting or perhaps the harvest? What are the pitfalls of trying to induce growth? How does it speak personally to you that a harvest is something that is seasonal and for which one must wait?*

³⁰And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, ³²yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR CAN NEST UNDER ITS SHADE."

³³With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; ³⁴and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

³⁵On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side."

³⁶Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him.

³⁷And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. ³⁸Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

³⁹And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. ⁴⁰And He said to them, "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?"

⁴¹They became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

[Read v.30-34]

Q: How does this fully complete the cycle of God's Word begun by the previous parables?

A: Ultimately the proof of whether or not we're a doer of God's Word becomes visibly evident by whether or not we love our neighbor as our self. We become effectual doers of the Word where the world itself is concerned.

Point: *God's Word isn't limited to what it does just inside us, nor to just putting it into practice in ministry, or even to just planting it in others, but in changing our behavior towards others, expressing the biblical definition of love.*

Application: *What might be wrong if our love is only shown to those in the church? Or to just those who love us? What can we learn from this example of providing something to others (the birds) who provide no return benefit to us (the large plant)?*

[Read v.35-41]

Observation: *Whenever you see a boat mentioned in Scripture, the Spirit is trying to teach us something about the church. Boats represent issues being worked out within the church.*

Q: How do we know that there's something greater going on here than just fear of physical danger from the storm?

A: Because Jesus' exhortation to them is not about earthly fear, but spiritual lack of faith. The literal storm represented some kind of greater spiritual situation.

Q: What is supposed to be the tangible result of meeting the biblical definition of "hearing" the Word of God?

A: It's supposed to increase our faith.

*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.
Romans 10:17*

Q: What might be significant about how Jesus "rebuked" the storm? How might this tie back into the first Parable of the Sower?

A: The word "rebuked" is the same word Jesus used when dealing with demons. In other words, the physical storm is also a spiritual storm. It's an attack by the same enemies represented in the bad soils: the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Point: *At every point in the cycle of God's Word, the enemies of the flesh, the world, and the devil will make every effort to render us ineffective where God's Word is concerned to prevent the building up of our faith in His Word.*

Application: *Why are attacks, hindrances, or difficulties NOT a sign to withdraw from receiving, planting, or harvesting God's Word? Why is it that we should actually expect them? How are these things a test of faith?*