

Introduction

1. Do you like a good story? Most people do. Do you like thrillers? mysteries? biographies? novels?
 - a. Jesus was a great story-teller and his favorite form of story-telling was the parable.
 - b. Daniel Akin notes, “Parables make up 35 percent of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels (Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 87).
 - c. In his response to the teachers of the law Jesus “. . . began to speak to them in parables” (Mk 3:23).
 - d. He told three short parables of the Divided Kingdom, Divided House, and the Strong Man’s House (cf., Mk 3:24-27).
 - e. Parables are short stories cast in images familiar to the hearers that communicate a deeper meaning than seen on the surface with the intention of changing the lives of the hearers.
2. Warren Wiersbe writes, “A parable is a story or figure placed alongside a teaching to help us understand its meaning. . . . A parable begins innocently as a *picture* that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as we study the picture, it becomes a *mirror* in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look by faith, the mirror becomes a *window* through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 50).
3. Mk 4:1-35 contains a series of five parables of Jesus centered on the topic of the kingdom of God.
 - a. Remember Jesus’ central message from the beginning of his ministry has been “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15).
 - b. Even as Jesus healed and cast out demons in the first three chapters of Mark, his primary focus was on teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the coming of God’s kingdom.
 - c. James Brooks states, “Mark frequently indicated that Jesus taught, but he gave comparatively little of the content of Jesus’ teaching. . . . Two major exceptions to this practice are the parable discourse of chap. 4 and the eschatological discourse of chap. 13” (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 76).
 - d. The five kingdom parables in Mark 4 are:
 1. Parable of the Sower Mk 4:1-20
 2. Parable of the Lamp Mk 4:21-23
 3. Parable of the Measure Mk 4:24-25
 4. Parable of the Growing Seed Mk 4:26-29
 5. Parable of the Mustard Seed Mk 4:30-34
 - e. We will examine the Parable of the Sower and its meaning related to the coming of God’s kingdom.

4. Read Mk 4:1-20.**A. Teaching in Parables (1-2)**

1. Once again Jesus “began to teach by the lake” (1). We have grown familiar with this pattern of Jesus teaching beside the Sea of Galilee and retreating to a “lonely place” for prayer and rest.
2. As usual, a large crowd gathered around Jesus and pressed him to the edge of the water.
 - a. In a previous time of teaching by the lake in Mk 3:9, Jesus “because of the crowd . . . told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him.”
 - b. The need for a boat was not so much as a vehicle for escaping the crowd as it was to aid His teaching ministry as seen here in Mark 4.
 - c. Jesus “. . . got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake . . .” (Mk 4:1).
 - d. From the boat he was able to teach the large crowd on the shoreline so that all could hear him.
3. Jesus “taught them many things by parables” (Mk 4:2).
 - a. We briefly examined the definition of parable in the opening above.
 - 1) Our word parable is a compound Greek word *parabole* which literally means “throw alongside.”
 - 2) Brooks notes that “. . . the parables of Jesus are not related to Greek parables but to the *mashalim* of the Old Testament. The word *mashal* has a variety of meanings: *comparison, proverb, allegory, riddle, fable, oracle, ethical maxim, wisdom saying, byword, taunt, type, mystery, aphorism, simile or metaphor, similitude*, etc. Therefore one should not expect all of the parables of Jesus to represent the same oral or literary form, and that is certainly the case” (Brooks, 77).
 - 3) A parable tells a story or evokes a familiar image in the physical world that in turn sheds light, for the spiritually aware hearer, on something of a related nature in the spiritual realm.

- 4) C.H. Dodd defines a parable as “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 5).
- b. Jesus was not the first or last teacher to teach using parables.
 - 1) The Old Testament contains many important parables.
 - a) Nathan confronted David with his sin using the Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man (2 Sam 12:1-4).
 - b) Isaiah confronted the people with their sin using the Parable of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7).
 - c) Amos confronted Israel with her sin using the visionary Parable of the Plumbline (Am 7:8-9).
 - d) These are only a few of many examples of Old Testament parables.
 - 2) Other Jewish rabbis as well as other ancient writers (e.g., Homer – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) used this form of story-telling to communicate truth.
- c. Jesus utilized parables in his ministry to:
 - 1) convey the unknown through the aid of the known,
 - 2) communicate the truths of His person and ministry especially related to the kingdom of God, and
 - 3) confront hearers and prompt them to think and act on what they heard.
- d. The subject matter of Jesus’ parables focuses on various themes related to the kingdom of God.
 - 1) Establishment and growth of the kingdom of God (e.g., Parables of Sower and Seed, Wheat and Tares, Death of the Grain, Mustard Seed, Great Supper or Banquet
 - 2) Grace in the kingdom of God (e.g., Parables of Laborers in Vineyard, Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son, Two Debtors
 - 3) Participants in the kingdom of God (e.g., Parables of the Tower Builder, Going to Battle, Hidden Treasure, Pearl of Great Price
 - 4) Crisis of the kingdom of God (e.g., Parables of the Barren Fig Tree, Ten Bridesmaids, Wicked Vinedressers)
- e. How should we interpret the parables of Jesus?
 - 1) For centuries, the parables were interpreted allegorically, which is perhaps not the best method.
 - 2) Contemporary interpreters determine a point of correspondence, which in most of Jesus’ parables in some way relates to the kingdom of God.
 - 3) Parables generally have one central truth but may also contain other sub-points and applications.

B. Parable of the Sower (3-9)

1. This parable may also be titled as Parable of the Soils.
 - a. The sower is certainly an important character in the story.
 - b. However, the soils and their response to the seed are also of interest.
 - c. William Lane summarizes the importance of both the sower and the soils. “The emphasis in this parable falls upon the central act of sowing; the emphasis in the interpretation falls upon the kind of reception which the proclamation of the Kingdom experienced” (William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 163).
 - d. Akin writes, “The kingdom of God, through the preaching of the gospel, will break into this world like seed being sown by a farmer. It will fall in various places, receive various responses, but eventually experience a tremendous harvest” (Akin, 87).
2. Jesus began his parable with a command to his audience—“Listen!” (Gk., *Akouete*) – This command to listen, to really hear, is an imperative whose importance is renewed at the end of the parable (Mk 4:9) and in the interpretation which Jesus gives privately to his disciples (Mk 4:12).
 - a. One could hear and relate to the physical story and entirely miss its spiritual meaning.
 - b. Jesus wanted his hearers to get more than the entertainment of a good story. He wanted them to understand important things about God’s kingdom and their place in it.
 - c. Wiersbe writes, “This parable helped the disciples understand why Jesus was not impressed by the large crowds that followed him. He knew that most of them would never produce fruit from changed lives, because the Word He was teaching them was like seed falling into poor soil” (Wiersbe, 53).

3. The physical-spiritual parallels of the parable
 - a. The parable follows the familiar pattern of agriculture in Palestine in Jesus' day. The sower broadcast seed on the ground which was then plowed to work the seed in. This is actually how I planted my grass last fall!
 - b. The "farmer" is the servant of God who shares the word of God with the world. God is the ultimate source of the word but Jesus most likely speaks of Himself as the farmer. Soon, his disciples, including you and me, will be farmers sowing the seed of God's word.
 - c. The "seed" represents God's word, the gospel, the good news of the coming of God's kingdom.
 - d. The "soils" represent various types of hearts of the hearers of the Word of God and the ways in which they receive that word.
 - 1) Pathway Soil (4) – This soil is hard-packed from foot traffic and the seed cannot penetrate into the soil at all. It lies vulnerable and exposed on the path.
 - 2) Rocky Soil (5-6) – This soil is shallow most likely with rock underneath a thin layer of soil. The soil allows the seed to germinate but the root structure is stunted by the lack of water and nutrients. The young plants coming from the seed cannot withstand the heat of the sun.
 - 3) Thorny Soil (7) – This soil is good but contains other seed of thorns. The more robust and faster growing thorns choke out the young plants from the good seed.
 - 4) Good Soil (8) – This soil is good (i.e., not hard, not too shallow, not infested with thorn seed) and the seed germinates, grows to maturity, and reproduces abundantly. This type of reproduction (30x, 60x, 100x) would have been unheard of in Jesus' day. It is supernatural!
4. Jesus ended the parable with the command "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (9).
 - a. Jesus wanted the hearers to be like the good soil and allow the seed of the gospel to take root and grow to maturity.
 - b. However, Jesus knew that most of his hearers were like the pathway, rocky, thorny soil. They would hear his story but never discern its meaning related to the kingdom of God.

C. The Meaning of the Parable (9-20)

1. Apparently Jesus withdrew to a quiet place with his disciples and a few other close followers after the time of public teaching. (10)
 - a. During this private teaching time, "the Twelve and the others around him asked about the parables" (10).
 - b. Jesus revealed that the central theme or message of the parable related to the "kingdom of God" (11).
2. Who hears the truth? (11-13)
 - a. Jesus noted that "those on the outside," those who were not his true disciples, only heard the parable story but failed to discern and apply its deeper spiritual meaning related to the kingdom of God.
 - b. The truth is "the mystery (Gk., *mysterion* – "secret") of the kingdom of God" – The secret is that the kingdom of God has drawn near in the coming of Jesus.
 - c. Jesus' words in v. 12 are a quote from Isa 6:9-10.
 - 1) These words are the words of God to the Prophet Isaiah as a part of his commissioning.
 - 2) They are not words of encouragement to the prophet, but they are the truth.
 - 3) The hearts of the people of Israel had become hardened, like the pathway soil in the parable, to the word of God.
 - 4) Even though the prophet spoke the very word of God to them, most of them did not hear it and did not respond with repentance. God sent the word through Isaiah and gave His people a chance to hear and respond before the time of judgment came.
 - 5) Jesus lived in a climate of unbelief and opposition in which the Jewish leaders conspired to kill him (Mk 3:6) and declared the source of his power demonic (Mk 3:22). Furthermore, those who came to him wanted healing more than to hear the truth He proclaimed.
 - 6) Jesus, like Isaiah, came with the very word of God knowing that most of the people would not hear and respond to the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. Yet he came!

- d. Unfortunately, Jesus' disciples were still more on the outside than on the inside. They had failed to hear what Jesus said and apply it to his message about the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus may have been frustrated with his dense disciples—"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (13)
- 1) This first parable is central to Jesus' teaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. If they don't understand this parable, then they will not understand any of the ones yet to come.
 - 2) However, Jesus showed more patience than frustration as he gave his disciples the deeper spiritual meaning of this parable. He was a teacher who wanted his students to get the message.
3. Jesus interpreted the parable for his disciples.
- a. Pathway Soil (4,14) – These hearers do not hear the gospel because their hearts are hard and Satan, represented by the birds, snatches away the truth before it can take root. This ground must be broken and plowed up before it is ready to receive the Word.
 - b. Rocky Soil (5-6,16-17) – Palestinian soil is often a thin layer over limestone rock. The rocky soil is not exposed until it is plowed. These hearers initially receive the Word with joy but do not allow the gospel to penetrate deeply into their hearts and take root. The truth of the gospel is destroyed and abandoned as they face trouble and persecution for their initial response to the gospel which has no lasting effect on their lives.
 - 3) Thorny Soil (7, 18-19) – These hearers make an initial positive response to the gospel but do not remove the sinful distractions of life, such as worries, wealth, and selfish desires, which spring up around them and choke out their initial response before it can grow to maturity.
 - 4) Good Soil (8,20) – These hearers truly receive the gospel and allow it to not only take root in their lives but to grow to maturity. They share the seed of the gospel with other hearers who also respond to it. This is the cycle of discipleship as the disciple becomes the disciple-maker. Not everyone is as fruitful but all produce fruit. Normally, a crop may produce 7x or 8x, but the productivity indicated here is supernaturally abundant.

D. Lessons for Us

1. When we read God's word, we must open our hearts to receive it and allow the Holy Spirit to apply it to us as needed for our discipline, encouragement, challenge, and growth.
2. What type of soil is your life for the gospel? Will you allow God's Spirit to break up the hardness of your heart; remove the stones and thorns of life's distractions that hinder your growth?
3. What is the productivity rate in your life? in the life of our church? What is hindering us from growing disciples at the supernatural rates described in this parable?
4. What does this parable say to you about your reception of the gospel? What provokes you about what you hear? How will you allow Jesus to change your soil and make you a more productive member of his kingdom?
5. What kinds of soils do we see not only in your life in the lives of those around you. How can you help break up that hardened soil and make it more receptive to the Word of God?
6. How can the soil of your life be more fruitful in producing more disciples?
7. Whatever good results we see belong to God. He is the one who supernaturally empowers us through his Word to bring in a super-abundant harvest.