

## The Parable of the Sower MARK 4:1-20

**Note:** We're dividing this portion of Mark 4 into two sections: the teaching of the parable, verses 1-12, and then the meaning of the parable, verses 13-20. For each section we'll look at a couple of background notes, one doctrinal point and a practical application.

### Section 1: The Parable of the Sower Taught

Mark 4:1-12 – *“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. <sup>2</sup> Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: <sup>3</sup> “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. <sup>7</sup> And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”*

*<sup>10</sup> But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. <sup>11</sup> And He said to them, “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, <sup>12</sup> 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.’”*

### **Background Notes**

When teaching this parable, the Lord used a boat near the shore of the Sea of Galilee as His platform. The crowd would have been gathered along the shore and spread out along the hillside. The reason the Lord was sitting (rather than standing) in the boat was not for stability. In that day, the appropriate position of the rabbi, or teacher, was to be seated. The Lord taught the people in parables (v2). Parables are common, ordinary, earthly stories, but they have a deeper spiritual meaning. When the Lord gave the “Parable of the Sower,” it’s possible that a farmer was right there within sight, sowing his seed in a nearby field.

You might wonder why the sower in the parable didn’t sow all his seed on good ground. Why would he sow some on the wayside, some on the stony ground, and some on the thorny ground? Why not sow all the seed on good ground? What was this farmer doing? There are two things we should know about the background of this parable. The Lord was not picturing modern-day farming, with seed planted in rows. In that day the seed was carried in a shoulder-strap bag, and the sower reached into the bag and flung the seed out by the handful. The seed was scattered by hand, as we might do with grass seed today. So some of the seed would scatter or blow onto the wayside, or onto stony or thorny ground. Another background point is that, unlike modern farming methods, in that day the seed was sowed before the ground was

plowed. The seed was scattered first, and then it was plowed in. So the sower wasn't always aware of where the ground was stony or thorny.

## Doctrinal Point

**The Lord taught in parables to reveal and conceal truth.**

*"And He said to them, '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 [and now He quoted Isaiah 6] '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 Lord used parables to reveal truth to His followers, but also to conceal truth from the unbeliever - the "outsiders" that are mentioned in verse 11. The particular truth that was revealed by the parables was "the mystery of the kingdom of God" (v11). What's that? A mystery, by definition, is something that was concealed in the Old Testament but was revealed in the New Testament. What aspects of the Kingdom of God were concealed in the Old Testament but revealed in the New? Was it that the kingdom of the Messiah would come with power and glory? No - that certainly was revealed in the Old Testament. The mystery that was concealed in the Old Testament was **the present form that the Kingdom would take**. The Kingdom is here, but the Kingdom still has not come in power and glory. And that's the mystery – the present form of the Kingdom. The word of the Kingdom was going out, like a sower sowing seed, but only some people were receptive to the word. And the kingdom of earthly power and glory is yet to come in the future.

All the truth contained in the parables was concealed from the unbeliever. It was purposely concealed. Why? Because those who reject obvious truth are not given deeper truth. That's the basic meaning of what the Lord was saying in verse 12. That's the way it works in God's moral universe – if you reject what's obvious, you won't be given more to reject. The religious leaders of that day were rejecting His obvious credentials as the Messiah, and therefore no more truth was revealed to them.

And it's the same way today. Take Creation, for example. When you look at the beautiful world around us, it's obvious that there must be a Creator. But if a person deliberately rejects that clear and obvious truth and chooses to believe a theory that we all came from nothing, then further, deeper, more precious truth about the Kingdom of God will certainly be concealed from that unbeliever. However, if a person responds to the truth that God has revealed, more truth and deeper truth is revealed to that person. Light received brings more light. **The Lord taught in parables to reveal and conceal truth.**

## Practical Application

**Let's not cast our pearls before swine!**

In (Matthew 7:6 our Lord said, *"Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces."* Let's not "cast our pearls before swine." As the Lord Jesus did

not share the deeper truths of His Person and His program with the people who refused to believe in Him, so we need to be careful about sharing the great deep and precious truths of the things of God with unbelievers. For example, it's probably not a good idea to share the great truth that the Church is the body and bride of Christ with people who openly reject God and defiantly refuse to consider the claims of Christ. They will simply trample on that truth. They'll not only trample it under their feet, but they'll turn and attack as well! Let's continue to preach the gospel to these folks, as Christ did, but **let's not cast our pearls before swine.**

## **Section 2: The Parable of the Sower Explained**

**Mark 4:13- 20** – *And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.”*

### **Background Notes**

When the disciples asked the Lord about the meaning of the parable, He gave them a mild rebuke: *“Do you not understand this parable?”* The Lord said two things about this parable in verse 13. First, He said that it really wasn't very difficult for a believer to understand. But to be sure that the disciples (and we) would get the meaning, the Lord explained this parable. He didn't give the meaning to all the parables, but He certainly gave the meaning to this parable.

Second, our Lord said, *“How then will you understand all the parables?”* Understanding the Parable of the Sower is basic to understanding the other parables of the Kingdom of God. These are basic truths of the form that the Kingdom would take at the present time - the Word would go out, but in most hearts it wouldn't bear fruit. It's only effective in the hearts that prepared by the Holy Spirit – the “good ground” hearers.

### **Doctrinal Point**

**The different soils represent different conditions and responses of the human heart to the Word of God.**

The seed is the Word of God (v14). The hard wayside soil represents hard-hearted hearers, indifferent and insensitive hearers, the in-one-ear-and-out-the-other type hearers. Notice that Satan, like the birds, is very effective in his dealings with hard-hearted hearers. He's able to snatch the seed away before it can germinate.

The rocky ground represents the shallow heart. There's emotional enthusiasm at first, but no depth or commitment. Some people accept the church and the church program into their hearts with enthusiasm, but they don't truly turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. When the least form of persecution comes, they disappear. I've seen young people get involved in Christian ministries because of their friends or the fun and excitement of the programs. Some of them even come with enthusiasm to Bible studies - but they never make a real commitment to the Lord. But there's no fruit in their lives, and with the slightest opposition, they're gone. True faith perseveres.

The thorny ground represents the strangled heart—spiritual strangulation. The anxieties and cares of this world, and the love of money or success or other interests choke off the growth of the seed. As a result, there is no fruit – there is no evidence of true faith. True faith perseveres, and true faith bears fruit.

Finally, the good ground represents the receptive heart - soil prepared by the Holy Spirit. The proof of the good ground is the growth and fruit or harvest that results: some thirty-fold, some sixty, and some a hundred. Why not all one hundred-fold? Let's answer that question with our practical application.

## Practical Application

### Watch out for the “big three” fruit reducers!

As Christians, we're to be involved in fruit production - not fruit reduction. What are the big three fruit reducers? Verse 19: “the worries and cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things.” The cares or worries or anxieties of life, the deceitfulness of riches - the love of money, or the desire for other things – the pleasures of this world, or material things – or even good things.

“Wait a minute,” you say, “that sounds like the thorns that choke out the growth of the seed. Didn't the thorns choke off the effect of the Word of God so that the person never became a Christian in the first place?” Yes - but those *very same thorns also keep a Christian from becoming a 100% fruit producer*. They're the three big fruit reducers.

Look at your own life. As a Christian, are you a 100% fruit producer? If not, why not? Chances are it's because you're overly entangled in one (or more) of those fruit reducers – the worries and anxieties of life, or the desire to be wealthy and successful, or the desire for other things – such as material possessions, or worldly pleasures - or even good hobbies or activities! We all need to be more disciplined in these areas. Watch out for the three big fruit reducers - and make your goal to be a 100% fruit producer!