

Mark 4:1-20

Parable of the Soils

1

Introduction

Though the nation of Israel had longed for the coming of Messiah to deliver them from Roman oppression, when Jesus arrived the majority of the nation rejected Him.

This must have seemed strange to the Disciples who had seen Him heal all types of disease, cast out demons, and even raise the dead. How could so many reject Jesus, and why did others turn away after initially following Him?

To help the disciples, and us today, Jesus used a common agricultural illustration of how different people respond to Him. Evaluate where you are in this illustration.

2

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. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.

⁷ And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ 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."

⁹ And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.*'"

¹³ And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. 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. ¹⁶ These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ 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. 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."

3

The Parable about Soils

Mark 4:1-2

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. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching:

In this passage, Jesus has return to the wilderness and a great multitude had come out to Him. In order to address the entire multitude, Jesus put some space between Himself and the crowd by getting into a boat which was pushed just offshore. In typical rabbinic style, the Jesus sat down to teach while the crowd listened from the beach.

4

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From this point on, parables would be Jesus' primary means of teaching the multitudes (cf. Matt. 13:34). The purpose of parables was to clarify truth to believers and hide it from unbelievers. In that sense they were both a blessing and a judgment. The term "**parable**" comes from two Greek words and carries the idea of placing something along side something else for the sake of illustration or explanation. Parables used familiar practices or objects to illustrate spiritual truths.

5

The Parable about Soils

Mark 4:3

"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

As Jesus introduced the parable of the soils, He began by saying to them in His teaching, "**Listen!**" The command to heed His words underscored the importance of what He was about to say. Many of His listeners knew from firsthand experience, what it meant for the sower to go out to sow his fields.

Everyone was well acquainted with the analogy Jesus used. Grain fields covered the landscape of Galilee. A man hoisting a seed bag over his shoulder and scattering seed as he slowly traversed his field would have been a familiar sight.

6

The Parable about Soils – Hard Ground

Mark 4:4

And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it.

Scattering seed by hand meant that some of the seed inevitably fell on various kinds of poor soil. Some seed was bound to fall beside the road, a reference to the narrow paths that crisscrossed the landscape, separating fields and providing both farmers and travelers access through the countryside. Such paths were dry and unprotected from the hot, arid climate. Due to repeated foot traffic, roads were hard packed, almost like pavement, making it nearly impossible for any seed that fell there to penetrate the ground and take root. Because seed that fell beside the road lay exposed alongside the dusty path, it was not long before the birds came and ate it up.

7

The Parable about Soils – Stony Ground

Mark 4:5-6

Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away.

Other seed fell on stony ground where it did not have much soil. Israel is a very rocky land, with much of the rock invisibly lying beneath the surface. Though farmers always removed the loose rocks from their fields prior to planting, there were inevitably places where underlying bedrock, usually limestone, was covered by only a shallow layer of soil. When seed landed in these areas and germinated, immediately a plant sprang up. Because it had no root, it quickly withered away. Without an adequate root system, the plant could not get the moisture it needed to bear fruit.

8

The Parable about Soils – Thorny Ground

Mark 4:7

And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.

Some seed fell among the thorns. Though this ground looked good after it had been tilled, it was actually infested with thorns. As the grain began to sprout, a crop of weeds grew up with it, overwhelming the good seed until its life was squeezed out. The thorns sucked water and nourishment away from the good plants and choked them so that they yielded no crop.

9

The Parable about Soils – Good Ground

Mark 4:8

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.”

In contrast, some seed fell into the good soil. When seeds landed on this soil, they grew up and increased, so that they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. In ancient Israel, farmers could usually expect a six-to-eightfold yield at harvesttime. A crop that yielded tenfold would have been well above average. When Jesus spoke of crops that produced harvests of thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold, His listeners would have been stunned. Those kind of results would have been unheard of.

10

The Purpose of Parables

Mark 4:9-12

And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" ¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.*'"

Jesus concluded His parable with "**He who has ears to hear, let him hear!**" Not everyone would understand the analogy. When the disciples were alone with Jesus, they asked about the parable. Jesus explained that believers were given the meaning of the parable and the "**mystery of the kingdom of God**". However, it was hidden to those who were outside the Kingdom of God. Jesus then quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 showing how prophecy had stated that the nation's heart would be hard and unwilling to turn so their sins could be forgiven.

11

The Meaning

Mark 4:13-14

And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" ¹⁴ The sower sows the word

Although this parable is popularly known as the "parable of the sower," the sower is not the focus of Jesus' analogy. No details about the sower are given.

The seed that is sown is the word of God, the biblical message of salvation (cf. Luke 8:11). Therefore, the sower refers to anyone who shares the message of the gospel.

Jesus' main emphasis was on the types of soil. According to Matthew's account, the soil represents the hearts of those who hear the gospel preached to them (13:19). The message of salvation is received differently by different people.

The Lord was preparing His disciples, and all subsequent generations of Christian evangelists, to expect four basic responses to the preaching of the gospel: the unresponsive, the superficial, the worldly, and the receptive.

12

The Meaning - The Hard Ground

Mark 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.

The **hard soil represents the unreceptive heart**. They are so calloused by their unbelief that the seed of the gospel is unable to penetrate at all. The reason such people fail to receive the gospel is not due to any deficiency in either the skill of the sower or the power of the seed but rather to their own willful unbelief. Their calloused animosity toward the truth is so great that, when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. Refusing to believe, they remain enslaved to their sin. **Satan** (the “evil one,” Matt. 13:19) is the god of this world who has **blinded the minds of the unbelieving**, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4).

13

The Meaning - The Stony Ground

Mark 4:16-17

These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness;¹⁷ 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.

When the seed fell on the stony ground, it penetrated the soil and even sprouted quickly but soon died. **The stony soil, then, represents people who, in spite of their initial excitement, ultimately reject the gospel because their faith is not genuine**. Their feelings were affected, but their hearts were not transformed. Consequently, they have no firm root. Beneath the thin veneer of outward enthusiasm lies an impenetrable layer of unrepentant unbelief, like a ribbon of bedrock that is not immediately visible.

The superficiality of their commitment is evidenced when affliction or persecution arises because of the word. Forced to count the cost of following Christ, the true nature of their interest in the gospel becomes evident. Rather than enduring suffering for the sake of the gospel, their faith collapses at the first sign of self-sacrifice and trouble.

14

The Meaning - The Stony Ground

Mark 4:16-17

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The Greek term translated “**stumble**” means to offend or cause to stumble. When their faith is put to the test, these false believers stumble and fall on account of the persecution they face. **Because their faith in Christ lacks a genuine sorrow over sin, a sincere repentance, a heartfelt hunger for righteousness, and a deep love for the Savior, it has never truly taken root.** Inevitably, when the going gets tough, they abandon their superficial commitment to Christ. True believers, by contrast, possess a faith that endures persecution and even martyrdom for the sake of following Christ (cf. Luke 9:23–25; 2 Tim. 3:12).

15

The Meaning - The Thorny Ground

Mark 4:18-19

Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ 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.

The ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns **look good on the surface, but underneath the ground is contaminated by dormant thorns and weeds.** When the seed begins to grow, a thorny weed sprouts alongside it, eventually choking out the good plant so that it cannot bear fruit. **The weed-infested soil represents the ones who have heard the word, 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. Those represented by the thorny soil are **double minded.** Rather than possessing a singular love for Christ, their hearts remain captivated by a love for the world.

16

The Meaning - The Good Ground

Mark 4:20

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.

Jesus contrasts the three types of poor soil with the fertile soil of true belief.

Their hearts have been prepared by God so that when they hear the word,

they accept it. The truth of God's Word takes deep root in them. Neither

Satan nor the world can stop the saving effect of the gospel when it is deposited in a heart prepared by God to receive it. By including the good

soil in His parable, Jesus sought to encourage His disciples and, by extension, all other believers who proclaim the truth of His gospel. **Though**

many hearers will reject the gospel due to hardness, shallowness, and worldliness there will always be some whom God has prepared to receive

the good news of salvation (cf. Isa. 6:8–13).

17

The Meaning - The Good Ground

Mark 4:20

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.

True believers, those characterized by the good soil, do not merely accept the gospel mentally, they are transformed by it through the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, they will bear fruit. Some will bear fruit some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.

18

So What ...

All believers are called to be witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 28:18–20). They are not to tamper with the seed, nor can they cultivate the soil. Rather, they are to faithfully cast the gospel message.

As they do, they can expect the responses they receive to fall into one of these categories. Some will reject outright, due to hard-heartedness.

Others will demonstrate a superficial interest, only to fall away when hardship comes. Still others will profess a love for Christ while simultaneously nurturing a deadly affection for the world. Finally, there will be some who genuinely receive the gospel. They will turn from their sins and embrace the Lord Jesus as their Savior and King. The genuineness of their profession will be demonstrated by the abundant fruit of their transformed lives, as they walk in obedience and faith.