

Mark Chapter 4

Verses 1-34: Jesus extends His influence by His teaching.

In (verses 1-20), is the parable of the sower. A “parable is a brief story that makes a comparison. It typically uses an illustration from everyday life to bring out a spiritual truth.

Mark 4:1 "And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land."

“Sat”: The typical rabbinical position for teaching; and more practically, Jesus may have sat because of the rocking of the boat in the water.

Once before, Jesus had called for a ship to come so that He could get away from the multitude of people on shore. This multitude was so great that He was to get into a ship and cast out just a little way to minister. There are a number of reasons why this is good. One reason is that the voice carries better across water, and Jesus' voice would be magnified with the water, so this huge group could hear.

Mark 4:2 "And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine,"

“Parables”: A common method of teaching in Judaism, which Jesus employed to conceal the truth from unbelievers while explaining it to His disciples (verse 11; see note on Matt. 13:3).

“Doctrine” refers here to the act of teaching, as well as to the content.

We see here, that this doctrine was of Jesus. Jesus was teaching in parables so that people could not receive His message in their minds but through their spirits. The Holy Spirit teaches the Christians all truths.

Verses 3-8: This parable depicts the teaching of the gospel throughout the world and the various responses of people to it. Some will reject it; some will accept it for a brief time but then fall away; yet some will believe and will lead others to believe.

Mark 4:3 "Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:"

"Hearken" means give me your full attention. "Behold" here, was telling those in attendance (and us, as well), to see with our inner man. He in essence was saying, "You must look beyond what I am saying literally and look into the spiritual to understand what I am about to tell you".

Notice also, the simplicity of this message. These people were all familiar with growing things and could easily relate to someone sowing seed.

Mark 4:4 "And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up."

“By the way side”: Either a road near a field’s edge or a path that traversed a field, both of which were hard surfaces due to constant foot traffic.

Jesus is the great sower of the seed (Word of God). Not all who hear this Word will receive it. This is an explanation by Jesus about the different way the world and its people receive the Word of God. The sower is the same in all cases (Jesus). The seed (the Word of God), is the same in all cases.

It is in the way it is received that is different. Jesus Himself would come back and explain in detail what this parable meant, and it will help us in other parables to look for the hidden meaning. Not all who hear the gospel receive it. Satan is depicted as the fowl of the air. Satan has come to steal and destroy the Word.

Mark 4:5 "And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:"

“Stony ground”: Beds of solid rock, usually limestone, lying under the surface of good soil. They are a little too deep for the plow to reach, and too shallow to allow a plant to reach water and develop a decent root system in the small amount of soil that covers them.

Mark 4:6 "But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away."

All of us who have been in church for any length of time have seen the type of person who is indicated above. An evangelist comes through town, and he is so thrilled with the message he goes down front and makes big commitments to God.

In a few days when his friends have laughed at him and he runs into hardships, he falls by the wayside. On fire for God for a few days, but his fire went out.

Mark 4:7 "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit."

“Thorns”: Tough, thistle-bearing weeds that use up the available space, light, and water which good plants need.

These are people who are trying to keep one foot in the world and one in church. They still lust for the things of the world while claiming to be Christians.

Mark 4:8 "And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some a hundred."

“Increased ... some a hundred”: An average ration of harvested grain to what had been sown was 8 to 1, with a 10 to 1 ratio considered exceptional. The yields Jesus refers to are like an unbelievable harvest.

We see here, Christians who receive the truth and live daily upright lives. These Christians are in for all of eternity. Troubles and lust of worldly goods will not turn their heads. They will follow Jesus whatever the cost. These are fruit bearers, messengers who tell others of Jesus and add to God's kingdom to the best of their ability.

Some of them just get a few saved, but some of them get hundreds saved. Perhaps, the different amounts have to do with where they are located and how many they have opportunity to witness to.

Mark 4:9 "And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear”: On the surface, this is a call for the listener to be attentive and discern the meaning of His analogy. Yet more than human understanding is necessary to interpret the parable, only those who have been redeemed will have the true meaning explained to them by the divine Teacher.

Jesus was telling them here, to open the ears of their understanding; the inner ears. He was saying, receive these words inside of you and think about it until you understand. These messages in parables are not for the world to understand, but are to be understood within us from the teachings of the Holy Spirit.

Mark 4:10 "And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable."

The twelve do not grasp Jesus' meaning. Mark does not glorify the Twelve; they often lack understanding or are out of step with Jesus. This is part of what gives Mark its ring of genuineness, since a story embellished by the later church would surely paint more complimentary portraits of the apostles.

One thing we need to realize here, is that the disciples at this time, had not been filled with the Holy Spirit. You remember what happened to them on the day of Pentecost. Some of them had not been with Jesus very long, and perhaps, were not even really familiar with the books of the law.

We know that there were more than just 12 disciples. There were 70, and by the time of Pentecost, there were 120. These 12 were the closest to Jesus and were actually the foundation of Jesus' outreach ministry.

Mark 4:11 "And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all [these] things are done in parables:"

“Mystery ... parables”: A “mystery” in the New Testament refers to something previously hidden and unknown but revealed in the New Testament (see notes on 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:4-6).

In context, the subject of the mystery is the kingdom of heaven (see note on Matt. 3:2), which Jesus communicates in the form of parables. Thus, the mystery is revealed to those who believe, yet it remains concealed to those who reject Christ and His gospel (see note on Matt. 13:11).

“But unto them that are without”: Those who are not followers of Christ.

In the New Testament, a “mystery” is not a decipherable puzzle but a profound spiritual truth, which God is just now revealing to whomever He chooses. The Twelve are evidently regarded as being receptive to the deeper meaning or application of the parable just related. In this sense the parable has a positive aim: to reveal a mystery of God’s working.

On the other hand, the parable obscures its meaning to those who are outside, who evidently lack the spiritual responsiveness for Jesus to divulge His story’s full import.

The secrets of God are just revealed to the believers. Those that seek will find. The Bible is written in such a manner that just casual reading does not reveal the great mysteries of God. You can read the same Scripture 20 times, and each time God will reveal just a little bit more to you.

I have spent many years studying the Bible and even in doing these lessons, I have seen things that I never saw before. I believe the Lord reveals as much as you can handle at the time. I have said this before, but it bears repeating. God does not want us to accept Him with our minds. He wants our hearts. He wants us to have faith in things we cannot see with the physical eye.

Verses 12-20: Jesus interprets the parable. The four soils represent four kinds of people who hear the gospel.

- (1) Unresponsive people, “they by the way side,” fail to respond to the seed or “work” (gospel) sown, so “Satan” quickly removes it lest they be saved (Luke 8:12).
- (2) Impulsive people, the “stony ground,” are those who “immediately receive” (verse 16), the gospel, but not counting the cost, “have no root” (spiritual reality), “in themselves” (verse 17). They believe for a while (Luke 8:13), but soon are “offended” (verse 17; defect from the truth), because of “persecution”. Their rejection of the gospel is as speedy as their reception of it.
- (3) Preoccupied people, those “among thorns,” allow legitimate matters (“cares of this world”), and illegitimate matters (“deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things”), to take priority over the gospel, and
- (4) Some people, “good ground, hear” and “receive” (take to heart), the gospel, which bears the fruits of faith, obedience, and fidelity in them.

Mark 4:12 "That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and [their] sins should be forgiven them."

“That seeing” (see note on Matt. 13:13). Unlike Matthew, which specifically quotes (Isa. 6:9-10), Mark quotes Jesus as giving the substance of what Isaiah wrote in that text.

“They may see, and not perceive”: The implication is that unbelievers do not want to turn from sin (see notes on Matt. 13:3, 13).

You see, if everyone could fully understand the Scriptures, many would repent and come to God because it is the practical thing to do, and not because they love God. This is not what the Lord wants. He wants to be our Savior, but He also wants to be Lord of our lives. He must be the center of everything, or He will not be anything.

Religion of the mind is lukewarm religion. Jesus said He will spew us out of His mouth if we are lukewarm. We must be on fire for God to please Him.

Mark 4:13 "And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?"

“All parables”: Understanding the parable of the sower was to be key in the disciple’s ability to discern the meaning of Jesus’ other parables of the kingdom (verses 21-34).

This is a very good question. The Bible itself, has hidden meanings throughout. It is the diligent student who does not mind digging who finds the treasures in the Word.

Verses 14-20: Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower, who is in fact Jesus Himself (Matt. 13:37), and anyone who proclaims the gospel.

Mark 4:14 "The sower soweth the word."

“The word”: (Luke 8:11), says it is the “word of God,” and (Matt. 13:19), calls it the “word of the kingdom.” It is the salvation gospel (see note on Matt. 13:19).

Mark 4:15 "And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts."

We see above again, that the Word of God never varies. It goes out for all to hear. The difference in the results comes about by those who hear the Word. We see here, in the first instance where the fowls eat it up. This message is never received. The message goes out, but the person is too calloused by things of the world to even receive it.

Mark 4:16 "And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness;"

“Receive it with gladness”: An enthusiastic, emotional, yet superficial response to the gospel that does not take into account the cost involved.

In the second instance above, the stony ground indicated a shallow person. He received the Word and may even come forward for salvation, but the very first sign of any problems, he drops out.

Mark 4:17 "And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended."

“Have no root”: Because the person’s heart is hard, like the rocky ground (see note on verse 5), the gospel never takes root in the individual’s soul and never transforms his life, there is only a temporary, surface change.

“Affliction or persecution”: Not the routine difficulties and trouble of life, but specifically the suffering, trials and persecutions which result from one’s association with God’s Word.

“Are offended”: The Greek word also means “to cause offense,” from which comes the English word “scandalize.” All those meanings are appropriate since the superficial believer is offended, stumbles, and falls away when his faith is put to the test (John 8:31; 1 John 2:19).

Mark 4:18 "And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,"

In the third instance, the thorns indicate to me, that this Word sown goes into an area where there are many worldly people. In fact, many of our churches fall into that category today. This person, instead of coming out of all this worldliness, gets caught up in it and importance in the community.

Mark 4:19 "And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."

“Cares of this world”: Literally “the distractions of the age.” A preoccupation with the temporal issues of this present age blinds a person to any serious consideration of the gospel (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-16).

“Deceitfulness of riches”: Not only can money and material possessions not satisfy the desires of the heart or bring the lasting happiness they deceptively promise, but they also blind those who pursue them to eternal, spiritual concerns (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

These things become more important than studying the Word. This person is finally overcome with lust for these worldly things. None of these people above produce any extra members for God’s kingdom. They bear no fruit at all.

Mark 4:20 "And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive [it], and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

“Hear ... receive ... bring forth fruit”: Three Greek present participles mark continuing action. Believers, in contrast to unbelievers, hear God’s Word because God allows them to hear it. They “accept” it, they understand and obey it because God opens their mind and heart and transforms their lives. The result is that they produce spiritual fruit.

We can easily see that this fourth person is what we all need to be. We not only receive the Word for ourselves, but go out and share it with others and lead them into full knowledge of God and His salvation.

Some of us may not come in contact with many people, and we may not produce but 30. Others who have an opportunity to witness to large groups may get a hundred saved. The important thing is to bring as many into the kingdom as you possibly can. Be a fruit bearer for God.

Mark Chapter 4 Questions

1. Why did Jesus enter into a ship to speak to the people?
2. What help is the water to the voice?
3. How did Jesus teach them?
4. Why did Jesus use this manner of teaching?
5. Who teaches the Christian all truth?
6. What does hearken mean?
7. What was Jesus saying with the word, "Behold", here?
8. Why did Jesus speak to them about sowing seed?
9. What happened to the seed in the first parable?
10. Who do the fowls symbolize?
11. What does the seed symbolize?
12. Who is the sower?
13. In the second example, where did the seed fall?
14. Why did it spring up immediately?

15. Why did it wither away?
16. Where did the third seed fall?
17. What happened to this seed?
18. In verse 8, the seed fell where?
19. What was the difference in the results?
20. What type of person does this represent?
21. What did Jesus tell them to do in verse 9?
22. Messages in parables are for who to understand?
23. When did the disciples ask Jesus what the parables meant?
24. Who is it given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God?
25. What has the author discovered about reading the Bible?
26. If God does not want our minds, what does He want?
27. Is it a different message that brings different results?
28. Which one of these four are you?