

Responses to the Gospel

Mark 4:1-20

©Copyright February 26, 2023 by Rev Bruce Goettsche

As you went through school you undoubtedly had some teachers that you called good and some you called “not-so-good.” Of course, your evaluation doesn’t make the evaluation true. Mostly, the good teachers were those who connected with you. Perhaps they were big on hands-on learning, or they had the ability to relate subjects to modern life, or they were great with analogies or illustrations that made the foggy clear. Perhaps you are like me in saying there are some subjects you never did get excited about largely because of the teacher.

Jesus was a master teacher. The Bible tells us that people listened to Him because he spoke as one who had authority, not like the Teachers of the Law who merely quoted authorities! This morning we are going to look at one of the most popular of Jesus’ parables, the Parable of the Sower, sometimes called the Parable of the Seeds. It is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Before we get into the parable itself let’s look at the verses in the middle of the account that explain why Jesus taught so often in parables.

¹¹ He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secret of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables for everything I say to outsiders, ¹² so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

‘When they see what I do,
they will learn nothing.
When they hear what I say,
they will not understand.
Otherwise, they will turn to me
and be forgiven.’” (Mark 4:11-12)

Why Did Jesus Tell Stories?

On first hearing, it sure sounds like Jesus is saying to his disciples, “I want you to understand the Kingdom of God, however, I want to keep everyone else confused.” I hope you immediately recognize that this is not at all what Jesus was saying. However, the question is, “What IS He saying?”

When I was in Seminary working on my Christian Education degree it was drilled into me the importance of what was called discovery learning. It is the truth that a person will learn things faster and in a more lasting way if they are active in the learning process. Let me give you an example: do you learn to drive best by watching videos or listening to instruction or by driving? You do not learn a skill in your favorite sport by watching a video, you need to do that skill! This is what is called “discovery learning.” People learn faster and longer what they have discovered over what they were merely told.

I believe this is what Jesus was doing. Jesus told stories that required you to dig and think to learn. His point is: the people who really want to learn about God, those that are hungry to know Him, will think about a parable and work to find its meaning. Those who have a superficial interest in the Kingdom of God will only hear a story and they won't understand its deeper meaning.

Parables were the opposite of the dictation method of teaching that was so common then (and now). Parables were indirect and required an investment of the mind and imagination to understand. They required a person to be engaged in the learning process. Jesus was always trying to whet the appetite of people to get them to think more deeply. It is still the best way to teach (even though in a sermon we are talking and you are listening!)

The Parable of the Sower

In some ways this parable is two parables in one. The first thing we focus on is the Sower. We know seed is expensive. You want to utilize every single little seed if you can. So, we are surprised when we learn the Sower was throwing his seed and some of it landed on the hard path, some in shallow ground, and some in ground that would choke out the seed. It seems like quite a waste. One commentator wrote,

Simply put, it is the kind of farming the Israelites practiced in the ancient world. At that time and place, the land was not cleared of stones and plowed before the seed was planted. The common way of planting was to go out and scatter the seed, then plow. In fact, the term plow has little relation to what we think of as plowing today. In ancient Israel, a plow was little more than a pointed stick with which one broke up the soil a little so that some seed would sink in."

The point that we should take from this is the importance of sowing seed widely. The seed in this context is the message of the Gospel. We know that not everyone is going to respond to the seed that was sown, but we want everyone to have the *opportunity* to respond. We may miss some of the supernatural work of God if we only sow the seed of the gospel to the people who seem most likely to receive it. The best approach is to tell EVERYONE you meet about Jesus. Some will welcome the message; some will turn away from it. Our job is not to determine who is *worthy* to receive the message, our job is to "go into all the world and preach the gospel."

In other words, we don't need to tell only other church people about Jesus, or only people like us economically or racially. To do this is to fail in the command the Lord has given us. We should tell the jocks as well as the castoffs, we should tell the wealthy as well as the poor, the healthy, and the addicted. The message is for everyone. ANYONE who puts their trust in Christ will be saved. It is not our job to determine who "anyone" should be. We are to scatter the seed widely and then watch for God to work expectantly.

Different Responses to the Seed

The second lesson in the story is the different kinds of soil that receive the seed. Fortunately, this parable is interpreted by Jesus Himself at the end of the text. Let's jump right to the interpretation.

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "If you can't understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?" ¹⁴ The farmer plants seed by taking God's word to others. ¹⁵ The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message, only to have Satan come at once and take it away. ¹⁶ The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. ¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, ¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced. ²⁰ And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

I believe Jesus is cautioning us not to judge too quickly how someone has responded to the gospel. We hear it regularly, someone went forward at a meeting, responded to an altar call, or they said a prayer asking Christ to come into their lives with a friend or family member and when this happens, we announce they are "saved." We are understandably ecstatic.

We know we are saved by trusting Christ as our Lord and Savior. We know there is nothing we must bring to our salvation. However, we have met too many people who seemed like "rent-a-Christians." They were excited about Christ for a period but then they seemed to lose interest and walked away from the faith. Some of these people concluded it didn't matter what they did because they "received Christ." In this parable, I think Jesus is explaining they never really received Him at all.

There are four types of soil. The first is that hard path (or we would say the sidewalk). The seed on this path did not do anything and was likely just eaten by the birds. It never got beneath the surface. These are the people who hear the message of the gospel and then turn away, rejecting the message. They are not interested in the slightest. We KNOW these people are not saved. They could be saved sometime in the future if they give up their disinterest and embrace Him as their Savior and their Lord.

Jesus says the second soil represents,
 those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word.

These people have a **shallow heart**. They respond to a message, sometimes swept up in the emotion of the moment. Sometimes they want to be part of the group. Some are in a time of

crisis and need help (like an illness or impending divorce or legal issues) and they are willing to turn to God to get help for their problems. Some believe responding to the message will give them some special material benefit (as in the prosperity gospel).

Jesus says because these people don't have deep roots, they don't last very long. Because they don't really understand what or whom they are responding to, the thrill of commitment is short-lived. They may wake up even the next morning and repudiate everything that happened the night before. Or the crisis may pass, and they no longer believe or they don't "need" Jesus anymore. Others fall away when they have problems or find following Jesus difficult. They did not think that is what they were signing up for, so they walk away.

These people have a shallow and emotional response to Christ that never penetrates their entire heart. They are like those who are excited about swimming in the ocean but only stick their toe into it. They can say they swam in the ocean but they did not. Though they never really trusted Christ they may later tell everyone that they tried Christianity and "it didn't work."

The third group is described this way.

¹⁸ The seed that fell among the thorns represents others who hear God's word, ¹⁹ but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things, so no fruit is produced.

These are those with a **Divided Heart**. These people are excited (it appears) about Jesus at first. They may become active in the church and tell everyone about their faith. But then the novelty wears off. They become interested in other things. Things like: politics, escalating financial growth, being a super parent, social issues, job advancement, or the ever popular success. Unfortunately, these are irreconcilable loyalties.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. (Matthew 6:24)

This is like the heart of the girl to whom a young man once proposed. He said, "Darling, I want you to know that I love you more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I'm not rich. I don't have a yacht or a Rolls Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart." She thought for a minute and then replied, "I love you with all my heart, too, but tell me more about Johnny Brown."¹

We have all known someone who has looked like a believer for a period. They may even have been celebrated as a believer and gave their testimony to others but then they seemed to just

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 108.

drift away. Often these people fall far away from God. They did not lose their salvation, they never actually had it!

In 1 John, the Apostle John wrote,

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. ¹⁶ For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. ¹⁷ And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever. (John 2:15-17)

WE all have to live in the world but the person who has faith in Christ is not just a fan of Jesus, they are a follower. They are betting their life and eternity on Him.

The point is: sometimes it takes a while before you can discern who is genuinely trusting Christ and who is not. But the real issue is not where other people stand . . . the issue is where we stand!

The fourth seed fell on fertile ground. They are the **Fruitful Heart**

²⁰ And the seed that fell on good soil represents those who hear and accept God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

Jesus is not saying only the good people are saved. We don't do anything to earn salvation; we don't have to change before we become part of His family. However, when a person truly turns to Christ as their Savior and King, the Holy Spirit enters their life. The person who has the Holy Spirit will begin to change because the Kingdom of God will start to become a reality in them. There is no such thing as a truly secular Christian.

The person who is saved is one who is bearing fruit. Some of that fruit involves our character (Galatians 5:22,23), and some of that fruit will show in our eagerness to share the message of the gospel with others and to get to know God more intimately. The Holy Spirit will also give us endurance so that we will hang on and trust even in the hardest times of our lives.

I don't know if there is any deep significance to the different amounts of fruit. The point is, the true believer will reveal their belief by the fruit they bear through the work of the Holy Spirit in them.

Conclusions

Let's draw some principles from this parable for our own lives. **First, and foremost we need to ask if our own commitment to Christ is genuine or merely "social."** In other words, have we surrendered to Him or are we merely fitting in with the people around us? Is this a faze or is this our life? Look at your life and see if you are bearing fruit and growing in Holiness. The

question is not whether you had some experience. The question is: Does Christ have your heart and life?

We must make sure our roots are deep. In other words, work at growing in your faith and understanding. Learn as much as you can. Keep working at prayer. Put into practice what you are learning. Constantly work to keep Christ as the center of your life. Don't risk shallow roots that Satan or one of his false teachers could exploit. It is not about information, it is about a relationship.

Don't be stingy in spreading the seed of the gospel. Tell everyone you see about the Good News of Jesus. Recognize that many (maybe even most) will not respond but keep scattering the seed, nonetheless. People need the Lord. God does not call us to be successful . . . He calls us to be faithful. We scatter the seed; He is the One who brings people to faith. He often acts in surprising ways.

Don't abandon a new believer! We are sometimes so focused on getting people to "receive Christ" (which generally is about getting them to say a prayer for forgiveness) we fail to follow through and help them get their feet on the ground. We must instruct new believers. Let's make sure they understand the nature of a commitment to Christ. If we do not, we may leave unsaved people who think they are right with God.

Recommend books, and passages in the Bible, invite them to Bible Study, and teach them the important truths of the faith. Help them understand who Jesus is and why He is the only One who can save us.

When someone responds to the invitation of the gospel and someone asks if they are now saved, the best response is to say, "We'll see." The call to follow Christ is not merely a decision, a prayer, a walk down an aisle, or an experience of baptism or speaking in tongues. It is not about church attendance or how much you know. It is something much deeper and much more pervasive. The call to follow Christ is a summons to a new life; a better life; eternal life. It is to fall in love with Jesus and want to follow Him wherever He leads us.

This is a good warning for all of us. We must guard ourselves from the distractions that surround us. We need to keep strengthening our root system. We must constantly remember that our home is not in this world, but the next. This is the good news! May God help us to bear rich fruit as His trusting children; give us a settled assurance that we belong to Him; and give us a passion to share His truth until everyone has heard.