

# A Parable On Parables

Mark 4:1-20

- 1 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.' " , Isaiah 6:10
- 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."

I'm so glad God didn't make the sixty-six books of the Bible only packed with thesis statements. Instead, God has spoken to us in a variety of ways: narratives,

stories, poetry, songs, prophecy, apocalyptic, etc. One Jesus' favorite ways to teach God's truth is the parable. Mark introduces the word parable to us in verse 2, **"Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching."**

Today we're going to look in depth at what a parable is, and I think that is necessary in order that we understand both this first parable, and the three other parables that we will study in the following weeks. As we study this parable, there are a number of lessons in this passage of Scripture, and that means that it's going to take us two weeks to get through it.

Now Mark's gospel, as I hope you've learned so far in our studies, is a gospel of action. In Mark, Jesus is an 'action man'! Mark tells more about the works of the Lord Jesus than the words of the Saviour. Mark records eighteen miracles and only four parables. Remember that Mark is showing us that Jesus is the action man of service. Our key verse in Mark is 10:45, **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."** In Mark, Jesus is the Servant of the Lord on the way to the cross, and He calls us to be His disciples, to follow Him to the cross and the way of the servant. Now when He comes to give His first parable He gives His disciples an instruction, a lesson in how they can expect to serve the Lord - how they will see God work as they go in service in the lives of men and women.

Think about the context of this parable. We have already seen so far in Mark diverse responses to Jesus' preaching the message of the Kingdom. You may remember that many of the common people and sinners accepted Jesus and followed Him (2:15). But some of the religious leaders had already rejected Jesus and were even plotting to kill Him (3:6). They accused Jesus of being in league with Satan (3:22). Even His own family and friends were beginning to doubt Him and say that He was out of His mind (3:21). These were some of the many responses that people had to Jesus and the message of the Kingdom of God.

So what the Lord Jesus is doing in this first parable is to give a lesson as to what He and His disciples could expect when they went out to sow the seed of the Gospel, the word of God.

Now the structure of verses 1-20 is this: First Jesus gives the parable of the sower and the seed. Second, He explains the purpose of parables. And third, He then returns to give the meaning of the parable. This parable, if you like, as I have entitled this message, is a parable on parables - it is given to us to understand how people receive and respond to the Gospel.

This parable is about how people respond in their hearts to the word of God. Now since these verses, and the next number of verses we'll consider are parables, I want us first to answer two questions. The first is: What is a parable? The second is: Why did Jesus use them?

Let's answer the first: what is a parable?

**What is a parable?** Our English word comes from two Greek words that mean "to cast alongside." A parable is a story or a figure placed alongside a teaching to help you capture its meaning. A parable is a story designed to teach a lesson through comparison. When you hear the story, you can relate it to your own life. It is like an illustration for the points in a sermon. It conveys its message of truth through analogy, through comparison or contrast.

All of you have heard of Aesop's fables. After you tell a child a fable, you point out the moral of the story. A parable is like a fable in that it also has a moral or message behind the story. But parables are true to life. The power of a parable comes from the fact that you recognize that "that's the way it is in real life."

Parables are great because they tell a story that is easy to remember. How many of you can tell me the story of the three little pigs or Goldie Locks and the three bears? Most of you. How many of you studied those stories this morning before you came to church? It is not like a bunch of principles we try to memorize and soon forget.

A parable is much more than an illustration. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and then compels that listener to make a personal decision about God's truth and how it relates to his or her life. A parable begins as a *picture* that arrests your attention and arouses your interest. As you contemplate the picture, it becomes a *mirror* in which you suddenly see yourself. If you continue to look at it by faith, the mirror becomes a *window* through which you see God.

Originally parables were meant to be heard, not read. Now we read them, of course, because we've got the record of the life and ministry of our Lord in the Bible. And we've got time to study it -- but the people who were originally hearing these stories, they heard and had to make an instant split-second appraisal of what Jesus was saying. They didn't have Bible commentaries, they didn't have concordances to compare with another verse in the Old Testament - they had to get the message.

Now what's my point? Well, while there are several truths interpreted from this parable, and some other parables have numerous truths weaved throughout them, generally - as far as parables are concerned - there is one main point that the Lord Jesus wanted people to grasp. When you study the parables, when you read in your daily devotions and so on, don't get too bogged down with the details of a parable and then miss the main point. Sometimes the details are very important and they have great meaning. But if you will first get the main point, you'll more easily see then how the other details are related to it.

Well, that's what a parable is, it's not an allegory, it is a comparison with mainly one truth being communicated.

Now the second question, did the Lord Jesus use parables?

### **Why did Jesus use parables?**

We could probably come up with several reasons why stories like Jesus told are a good communication tool. Parables catch the attention of the listener.

Remember where Jesus is as He teaches. Mark tells us in verse 1, "**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.**" Jesus' audience was a moving target, people in the open air who could stay or leave at will. Jesus knew that the way to connect with people was often to tell them a story. It caught their attention.

Secondly, the people of Jesus' day were familiar with parables. The Jewish leaders would have recognized them, some parables are in the Old Testament - some of you might remember that when David was caught in adultery, God

brought Nathan to him, and he told the parable about the man with the pet lamb. The rabbis used parables themselves in their own writings and teachings, so the people were familiar with them. He was using language that they worked with in the past.

It caught their attention, they were familiar with parables, and then thirdly: Jesus was making abstract ideas concrete. It is difficult to teach an abstract idea like beauty, or loyalty, or faith. So a story brings the idea to life. When the New Testament talks about faith it talks about a man, Abraham. So faith becomes flesh, and from the experience of this man we see, not in abstract but in concrete form, personified what faith is in life. A parable does that.

Also a parable compels the people to think for themselves. The worst way to help a child with their homework is to do the homework for them, right? Because they'll never learn! Truth hidden within the parable had a double impact, in that the person felt they had discovered the truth themselves when they worked it out! Jesus is encouraging them into an active pursuit of the truth. He lays the responsibility on them. In other words, 'Here's the message, and if you have a heart after God, and you're seeking after God, and a heart that is good soil, you will see it -- but if you're hard in your heart, you'll be closed, and you'll say 'That's a lot of nonsense, I haven't time to think about that!'. Do you see what the Lord is doing? He's compelling people to think about their souls.

Now, let's see how He does this in this parable. We will deal with three things in the time that remains: first, **He delivers the parable in verses 1-9**, look down at it; then **He defines a parable in general in verses 10-12**; and then He **decodes the parable itself that He gave in verses 1-9, in verses 13-20**.

So first of all He delivers this parable, the sower, the seed and the soil. Jesus says in verse 3, "**Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.** " In verses 3-4 He says some seed fell by the wayside, and that ground was too hard for the seed to penetrate. The wayside was the place where people walked between the fields. The tramp, tramp, tramp of their feet made the ground hard, and so the seed just fell and lay there, and then the birds of the air came and snatched the seed away and ate it. That's the wayside soil.

Then in verses 5 and 6 there is the stony ground. That was ground that had a thin layer of dirt covering a bedrock. The shallow soil just above the rock would be warmer than the rest of the field. The seeds sown there would quickly germinate, but their roots had nowhere to go and the plants would be easily scorched by the sun.

Then in verse 7 we read of the thorny ground - there's the wayside soil, the stony ground, and the thorny ground. The thorny ground had weeds, or thornbushes that cut the seed off from nourishment, and the sunlight from getting in and causing it to grow. So literally the seed and the little sprout was choked by the weeds and the thorns and the thistles.

The wayside soil, the stony ground, the thorny ground, and then in verses 8 and 9 the good ground - and this was deep, fertile soil with conditions that were favorable for growing. We read that some produced thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.

Jesus delivers this parable, and then we read in verses 10-12 that when the disciples were with Him alone, the disciples asked the Lord: 'Master, why do You

speak in parables?'. Here is a quote from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. It is the key to understanding why Jesus begins using parables. The quote from Isaiah 6 is, **"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."**

In Isaiah's day the nation of Israel had closed their eyes and ears to God; they had allowed their hearts to grow dull to God. They had hardened their hearts against God. As a result, God would temporarily judge them: He would send Isaiah to preach, but they would not understand or respond to Isaiah. They were headed for a time of judgment at the hands of the Gentiles.

It is of profound significance that Jesus quotes these words from Isaiah at this point in His ministry. Jesus had been preaching to the Jews, announcing the kingdom of heaven on earth. But the Jewish leaders had hardened their hearts against Him. In chapter three they called Him "Beelzebub," the ruler of demons. Just as in Isaiah's day, they closed their eyes and ears to God.

So when Jesus comes, He comes as God's ultimate revelation, He is bringing the truth of the Kingdom of God in Himself. So He says to His disciples, in verse 11, **"To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God."** Jesus is telling them that those with receptive hearts are those that are permitted to know the mysteries of the Kingdom. So in other words, God reveals His family secrets to those whose hearts are open to Him.

Only those with receptive hearts were permitted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God - that's the meaning of the parable.

However, the converse of that is also true. The mystery of the Kingdom is hidden from those who reject the light given to them. Look at verse 11 again: **"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 '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.'"**

Now that might seem harsh, what the prophet Isaiah is saying and what the Lord Jesus is quoting - that people should see, and yet not see; should hear, and yet not truly hear; should conceive in their mind, and yet not really understand with their heart what the Lord is saying, what God's word means. But you've got to keep this in the context of the whole of not only this gospel, but the whole of the Old Testament, this is being spoken about the Jewish people who had had the great privilege of the oracles of God, and the prophets of God, and the priests of God, and they have rejected the Messiah of God who had now come to them in the Lord Jesus - and because they had spurned the Light of the world, Jesus is saying they will not see the light of the word.

It's related to what we learned about the unpardonable sin, that it was a hardening of heart to everything that God's Spirit had been saying. So when the heart is hard, when it is unresponsive, not receiving, not wanting, it gets harder and the seed is snatched, withered or choked. But when the heart is open it receives not only what God is saying, but receives more, and more, and more of light.

Jesus says down in verse 24-25, **"Then He said to them, 'Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to**

**you who hear, more will be given. For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."**

So a parable has two opposite effects. On the one hand it makes truth more clear to those who are willing to hear. Yet on the other side, it makes truth more obscure to those who lack spiritual concern. The best way to summarise it is the way the Lord did in verse 9: **'He that has ears to hear, let him hear'**. A parable tests the spiritual responsiveness of the soul.

How do you receive God's word? Does it cause you too long for more, or do you shut your heart? The more you close your heart and harden your heart, the less light, the less word, the less truth you'll be able to receive and respond to.

Finally, Jesus decodes the parable. He has delivered it, He has defined what a parable is, what it's for, and now He decodes the actual parable that is given here in verses 13 to 20. Next week we will go into the details of the explanation of the parable -- but basically Jesus said that some people's hearts are hard, some people's hearts are shallow, some people's hearts are crowded by other things, and some people's hearts are ready to bear fruit. We'll dive into that next Sunday.

This morning I want us to get the main point of the parable. The main point is: those who have an open and honest heart shall be given more, those who harden their heart shall have less. Those who cover up light will lose the little knowledge of God that they have.

Now listen, please, if you're involved in the service of the Lord, you need to hear this as loudly as the early disciples heard it from the Lord Jesus. Because things don't always go your way, and it's not a revival every day of every week, and people aren't falling around us here getting saved - so what do we do? Despair? Say 'God's word doesn't work any more, the Holy Spirit has gone to sleep'? Galatians 6 and verse 9 tells us: 'Let us not grow weary in doing good: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not' - that means literally, 'If we do not lose heart'. Now you will lose heart if you don't understand the various responses that people can have to the sowing of the seed. Jesus had different responses as He sowed the seed, He told the disciples: 'You will have different responses as you sow the seed', and we will experience the same. Unless get that truth we're bound to get discouraged in the Lord's work.

We should never be discouraged. Yes, some of the seed never grew, but some did - and eventually there was a splendid harvest! That's the message! This is a parable on parables, and it is a parable for the servants of God, for Sunday School teachers, to parents. It explains how God's Word will be received.

Irrespective of those whose hearts are hard, and those who believe and then fall away, those who are distracted by the world and temptation, there will be a great harvest! This is a parable to end all despair! How are you serving the Lord?

Now we mightn't see it right away, but it will come - it doesn't say when it will come or how it will come, but the harvest will come and so we need to sow!

Can I illustrate this great one point of truth by telling you a story I came across recently, with this I'll close. You'll know, most of you, that North Korea is one of the most Communist societies in the world - there are 22 million people

cocooned from birth to death in an atheistic nightmare. God is banned. Well, what you may not know is that R. J. Thomas was a missionary to China in the middle of the 19th century. He had a heart for Korea before Communism existed, but Korea, even back then in the middle of the 19th century, was a hermit kingdom - no one was allowed from a foreign land into the nation. So R. J. Thomas, because of his heart for the Korean people, went to China and he bided his time until it was expedient for him to go into Korea. So in 1865 the opportunity came that he had been waiting a lifetime for, and he went on an American ship called the SS General Sherman. That ship was going to steam up the Tai-dong River to the capital, Pyongyang, in the hopes of luring Koreans to the boat to trade with them - that's all the Americans were interested in. But Thomas bought a berth on that ship, hoping to meet some Korean scholars in Pyongyang who spoke Chinese, and so he brought Scriptures in the Chinese language so that he might give them to those scholars, that they might discover the truth of the gospel.

The trip of the SS General Sherman was ill-fated, because in port along the way to the capital some of the General Sherman's crew killed three Korean men in a barroom brawl. When they reached the capital in Pyongyang, the rumours had grown to such an extent that it was impossible for them to berth the ship, and the people of Pyongyang were convinced that these foreigners had come for their children to make soup out of their eyeballs! There was nothing for the ship to do but to turn around and head down the river, but they struck a sandbank. Seeing them stranded, the Korean defence lashed a series of small ships together, and set them on fire. They drifted to surround the General Sherman, which caught fire also, and everyone aboard had to leap into the river - and as they waded to shore, they pulled out their swords, but were all clubbed to death by the waiting Koreans. Thomas also jumped out of that boat to wade to shore, but before he could speak a club swung with murderous force and dashed his brains into the water. He never spoke to one Korean, but his killer noticed when his body emerged to the surface that he hadn't a cutlass in his hand, but he was brandishing a bundle of books. He wondered had he killed a good man, and he picked up a couple of the sodden books. Drying them off, he separated the leaves that he saw were nicely printed - he couldn't read Chinese, so he decided to paper the outside of his house with the pages, as was the custom of the time.

Maybe to everybody else his death was a mystery, but not to Jesus, the sower of the seed...

Now imagine a house papered on the outside with the Bible! You can imagine the astonishment as he returned from the fields day after day to find Chinese-speaking Korean scholars reading around his house God's holy word! One of those Korean scholars became a Christian by reading the gospel portions that were plastered on his house. A generation later that man's nephew assisted in the first translation of the New Testament into Korean. Thomas never lived to see the fruit, but was there fruit? Oh yes, there was fruit, because God's Word and God's honor depends on it! As that club swung toward his brow, what do you think he thought? The trip had been a waste, a tragic mistake, he dies, his life purpose unfulfilled, potential unrealized. Maybe to everybody else his death was a mystery, but not to Jesus, the sower of the seed.

Next week, in the will of the Lord, we'll look at the details of the parable, this parable on parables.