

SESSION FOUR

The Teachings of Jesus: *The Meaning of True Discipleship (Mark 4:1-20)*

“Obedience is the only reality. It is faith visible, faith acting, and faith manifest. It is the test of real discipleship among the Lord’s people.” ~J. C. Ryle

I. Overview

Jesus’ earthly ministry consisted of performing miracles and teaching. Mark devoted little attention to the latter activity. However, the Gospel writer took a break in his fast-paced narrative to record one of Jesus’ best known parables—the “Parable of the Sower.”

A parable can be defined as a comparison, or a parallel, by which the common (e.g., every day activities) is used to illustrate the profound (e.g., Kingdom of God). Indicative of first-century teachers, Jesus utilized parables as a common didactic tool. Approximately one-third of Jesus’ teaching recorded in the Gospels were comprised of parables!

It is not very surprising that Mark included this parable, as all four Gospels recorded the “Parable of the Sower.” The intrigue of this particular recording centers upon the “why.” Why did Mark bring the narrative to a near screeching halt in order to highlight this particular teaching? In keeping with Mark’s purpose, this study will seek to answer why Mark devoted considerable time to this theologically-rich parable.

II. The Content

A. The Parable of the Sower (4:1-9)

vv. 1-2 - The setting of the parable took place near Capernaum. Because of the size of the crowd, Jesus utilized a boat as His pulpit.

v. 3 - The call to hear, which was echoed in v. 9, becomes the crucial point of the parable. The way in which an individual hears the word becomes the distinguishing factor between insiders and outsiders (cf. v. 12, 15, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24).

Of the three major elements of the parable (i.e., sower, seed, and soils), the sower was the least significant component.

vv. 4- 8 Four groups of seeds:

Group One - seeds fell on a path through the field or a worn trail beside the field.

Group Two - seeds with a weak root structure failed to withstand the heat. The Gospel of Luke highlighted that these seeds lacked moisture because of the shallowness of its root system (8:6).

Group Three - seeds germinated but were robbed of nourishment from the weeds.

Group Four - seeds that fell on good soil. These were the only seeds profitable to the farmer because they ultimately yielded grain.

Two important things to note:

There is a threefold verbal description of what happened to the seed: fell-came-devoured (4:4); fell-sprang up-was scorched (4:5-6); fell-grew-up-choked (4:7); and fell-gave-bore (4:8).

There also appears to be a progression with the length of each seed's survival. Stein writes, ". . . the first seed never germinates; the second seed germinates and dies shortly afterward; the third seed germinates, but at harvesttime it does not bear fruit; the fourth seed germinates, grows, and bears much fruit at harvesttime." (*Gospel of Mark*, 199).

v. 8 - The yield most likely refers to the number of grains per plant, not the number of bushels. A hundred grains or more per plant was considered a good yield in the ancient world (cf. Gen 26:12).

v. 9 - The parable ends echoing verse 3 and indicates that proper "hearing" of the parable entails obedience. The exhortation served as a general call to the entire crowd; it was not intended exclusively for the disciples.

B. The Purpose for Teaching in Parables (4:10-12)

v. 10 - The disciples' desire to learn illustrated the opportunity for anyone to approach Jesus. Accessibility to the "secret" was available to all (cf. v. 25; 3:35).

Note that the disciples inquired about parables in general. The "Parable of the Sower" functioned as an example of Jesus' wider parabolic teaching (cf. v. 2).

v. 11 - There was no deciphering of the Kingdom. Rather, as aptly noted by R. T. France in his commentary on Mark, "A secret is that which is not divulged—but once known it need not be hard to grasp. It is privileged information rather than a puzzle." (p. 196). The mystery speaks of something hidden in the past but now has been openly disclosed. Mark has beautifully illustrated this revelation in the first portion of his Gospel (i.e., 1:1-4:9)!

v. 12 - Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10 to equate the hearers of Isaiah's ministry with the hearers of His own earthly ministry. The wider context of Isaiah, in particular Isaiah 55:10-11, shaped the theology behind Jesus' declaration. Similar to Isaiah, Jesus declared the importance of God's word. In so doing, both Isaiah and Jesus were bringing judgment upon those who had refused to accept God's word. While at the same time, both Isaiah and Jesus were calling for abundant fruitfulness to those who did respond to the message.

C. The Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (4:13-20)

Chapters 2 and 3 illustrate the various responses to the "Word." Notice that the issue was not that they heard, but in *how* they heard (vv. 9, 23, 24-25, and 33).

v. 15 - Failure was immediate. The ultimate cause was rooted in Satan's opposition to the purpose of God (cf. 3:22-27).

w. 16-17 - Even though the enthusiastic response appeared to be promising at first glance, it proved to be short lived in reality. The initial response of joy proved insufficient. Action must accompany attitude.

w. 18-19 - Jesus warned against the dangers of earthly concerns (i.e., “worries,” “deceitfulness,” and “covetousness”) as they hinder true spiritual growth.

v. 20 - Thankfully, there is no standard for perfection in the Christian life (i.e., 30, 60, or 100 times). The important point is that the Lord calls His followers to be productive.

III. The Intersect

- A. The Word of God is ultimately victorious despite the refusal by many individuals to listen and obey its teachings. We need to remember that success or failure was related to the soil, not the seed!! Our task is to share that seed—the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Colossians 1:24-29 -

- B. It is good to “take a soil sample” of our own life. Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in and through us? In what ways are you trying to nourish the spiritual “seed” God has planted in you?

Galatians 5:22-25 -

- C. We can take comfort in the “in order that’s”! Jesus’ explanation of the parable demonstrates the sovereignty of God’s plan. Jesus’ rejection was part of the divine mystery, for it was the will of God that He gave His Son to serve as a ransom for many (10:45).

Proverbs 19:21 -

“You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.” ~ 1 Peter 1:23