

# Mark 4 – Parables & the Secret Kingdom

## An Outline

- I. The Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1-20)
  - A. Jesus tells the Parable of the Soils (Mark 4:1-9)
  - B. **The key to the parables (Mark 4:10-12)**
  - C. The Parables of the Soils Explained (Mark 4:13-20)
- II. A Series of Parables (Mark 4:21-34)
  - A. The Parable of the Lamp with Explanation (Mark 4:21-23)
  - B. The Parable of Measures with Explanation (Mark 4:24-25)
  - C. The Parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)
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- III. **Narrative Commentary on Jesus’s Use of Parables (Mark 4:33-34)**
- IV. Jesus Calms the Storm (Mark 4:35-41)

## Issues for Discussion

1. **Parables** – Recognizing the natural acoustic advantage of the Galilean terrain, Jesus spoke from a boat a little offshore on the Lake of Gennesaret as the crowd of people listened along the water’s edge. He taught them **by parables**. This is something new and represents a major change to His ministry. Now that the leaders of Israel have rejected Jesus as Messiah, committed the unpardonable sin by blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30, see previous notes on this), and were singularly intent, even aligning with their traditional enemies, on finding every means to kill Him (Mark 3:6), Jesus changed His ministry tactic. He would still preach to the crowds, but He would do so through ambiguous stories and obscure analogies (i.e. parables) so that the rulers could not easily find a basis for accusing Him. Remember, they tried to trap Him in His words, and at His trial they could not find any two to agree on what Jesus meant in the stories He told. Parables were a strategic tool by Jesus to communicate His message about the Gospel and the kingdom without giving occasion to his premature death.

On a side note, Jesus did not speak in parables so that we can follow the “example of the Master Teacher” and do the same, as some have tried to propose. He had a very strategic purpose in using parables when He did. Unless we have that same purpose, there is no reason to mimic Him in this.

Parables were designed to obscure truth, not elucidate it. That is why Jesus told His disciples, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables” (Mark 4:11). Those on the “inside” were His believing disciples. Those on the “outside” were everyone else, and especially the religious leaders, who were stubbornly entrenched in their unbelief. To these leaders Jesus would not speak a message of salvation but a message of judgment and vindication of God. This is why Jesus cited Isaiah:

They may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding,  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven! (Isaiah 6:9,10)

Isaiah was not commissioned to preach a message of salvation to the unbelieving Israelites but a message of oncoming judgment and to vindicate the LORD for bringing this judgment. The Jews of Isaiah's day were hardened in their unbelief just as the religious leaders of Jesus's day.

On a side note, missionaries like to quote Isaiah's obedient response to God's "Whom shall I send?" call from this passage: "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). This is good and fine provided missionary candidates understand the nature of this call. The call in Isaiah was not to bring a message of salvation but a message of judgment. It was not to see people come to faith but to confirm their unbelief and vindicate God's just judgment. This might moderate some of the excessive enthusiasm surrounding the use of these words.

Because the leaders were so stubbornly refusing to believe, they would not be given the insight (i.e. the explanation of the parables), which would normally lead to faith and salvation. Even if they could not pinpoint every meaning of Jesus's parables, however, they would sometimes perceive that some of the parables were "against them" (Mark 12:12). Consequently, while Jesus kept the unbelieving people and murderous religious leaders in the dark, He revealed the meaning of all His parables to His disciples:

He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything" (Mark 4:34).

His trusted inner circle of disciples were the only ones privy to the "secret of the kingdom of God."

On a side note, while the disciples got all the explanations for every parable Jesus taught, every explanation is not given to us in Scripture. Consequently, we should not be dogmatic about any parable that does not have an explanation, including famous ones like the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I know of whole ministries wrapped around this one parable.

2. **The Parable of the Sower** – Some have suggested that a better name for this parable is "the Parable of the Soils" because there is more attention given to the soils than to the farmer; however, I believe it is appropriately named when one understands that the soils are not a matter of human free will but God's sovereign grace.

Jesus explained that the seed is the Word of God, and each of the four soils represents the condition of the human heart. Some have suggested that all the soils represent "saved" people with the last one being optimal. Here's the problem. The parallel in Luke 8:12 clearly says that the first soil referred to those who did not believe and were not saved:

Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, **so that they may not believe and be saved.**

Furthermore, all the parallels reveal that the first soil did not keep the Word. It was snatched away. And the parallel in Matthew says that the first soil, while hearing, did not “understand” it (Matthew 13:19). Therefore, at least the first soil referred to those who rejected God’s Word. Could Jesus have had the religious leaders in mind here?

What about the second soil? Matthew and Mark says that this person “endures” for a while but then “falls away” (Matthew 13:21; Mark 4:17); however, Luke writes that this person “believes for awhile” and then “falls away” (Luke 8:13). I am reminded of this Scripture in Hebrews:

But My righteous one will live by faith; and if he shrinks back, I will take no pleasure in him.” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Hebrews 10:38-39).

The second soil represented someone who did not have enduring faith. One has to question whether this was a true, saving faith. The first hint of tribulation and persecution, they rejected their faith according to Matthew and Mark. They fell away from their faith in the face of temptation according to Luke.

As for the third soil, Luke writes that the person’s fruit “does not mature” (Luke 8:14) while Matthew and Mark write that the person becomes “unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19). This person might be saved, but one wonders if James had these people in mind when he wrote, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

Only the last soil was fruitful, though with different measures, thirty, sixty, or hundredfold. This soil represented the person who heard, understood, accepted, and held fast to it. Luke’s account suggests that only this soil produced any fruit from an honest, good and patient heart (Luke 8:15) while Matthew and Mark write of different amounts of fruit (Matthew 13:23; Mark 4:20).

As a concluding refrain, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Mark 4:9) Only with this parable and in the Book of Revelation is this expression used. Since every person has ears, was Jesus simply saying the obvious, namely, everyone should listen? I think in view of the context before and after this expression, Jesus had something more in mind. Just like the different soils, people would not all hear the same. Some would hear and believe while others would not. Also, in the following verses Jesus explained that the secret of the kingdom was not to be revealed to everyone but only to His close disciples. This leads me to understand the expression to mean (1) not everyone has ears to hear and (2) this hearing has to do with the hearing that leads to faith and salvation.

### **Parable of the Lamp under a Bushel**

After the explanation of the parable, Jesus told another parable and invoked the expression again (Mark 4:23). This suggests that Jesus was still teaching the same principle.

Following up on His teaching about hidden truth spoken through parables, Jesus said that what was hidden was not meant to be hidden and would not stay hidden but made plain for all to see (Mark 4:21-23). Jesus would only speak in parables for a limited time, but the plain truth would

come out in time, and those with ears to hear would hear and be saved.

He taught them to be careful how they heard. Again, Jesus was likely contrasting the hearing of faith versus the hearing of unbelief. He warned them as to the “measure” they used to hear. To those who had something to show for what they heard, more would be given. To those who had nothing to show, even what they had would be taken away. In the Parable of the Sower the only one with something to show was the person represented in the last soil, who heard, understood, accepted and brought forth fruit.

This is the language of Jesus’s Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and his Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27). In these parables, the master gave his servants either talents or minas in differing measures. In each case those who showed fruitfulness were given more favor and responsibilities; however, those who had nothing to show for what the master had entrusted to them, even what they were given was taken away, and they were thrown out into darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth, a representation of final judgment (cf. Matthew 8:12; 13:41-42; 22:11-13; 24:48-51). If the message of each of these parables is related, as I believe they are, then we can surmise that while the Word was given to all kinds of people, only those who responded in fruitful faith were truly saved. This was the hearing faith that Paul wrote about in Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

Yet, there was one lingering question, which Jesus would answer, though without explanation, by giving two more parables, the Parable of the Growing Seed and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The first parable appears to answer the question about how the kingdom of God grows within the person. The second appears to answer the question about how the kingdom of God grows to other people. Absent a clear explanation, we cannot be dogmatic.

### **Parable of the Growing Seed**

Jesus taught that the planted seed grew in mystery and obscurity and without human effort or manipulation. The seed grew by itself. If related to conversion, Jesus basically taught that work of salvation in each heart was a mystery. Jesus said the same thing to Nicodemus when He explained how the Spirit brought about new birth:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:8).

This mysterious working of the Holy Spirit and the mysterious growth of the seed (the Word of God) may be related, so that the mystery of faith and salvation in the human heart was in view. Just as the Spirit brought about new birth, so the Word produced fruitful faith. Hearing faith, therefore, was a work of the Spirit and the Word, such that the Spirit provided the right soil, which would both understand and accept the Word (1 Corinthians 2:14), and the Word grew of itself in this soil to produce the fruit of working faith. This is consistent with the message of passages like Titus 3:5, which taught that we “were saved through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” and Ephesians 2:8-9, which taught that the whole work of our salvation, which is by grace through faith, was a gift of God.

This answers the lingering question, “Where does hearing faith come from?” of which Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”. Hearing faith came from the LORD: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word (lit “decree,” Gk. *rema*) of God” (Romans 10:17 *NKJV*). In Romans 10, Paul argued that while people heard God’s Word, they did not believe, and they did not believe because they did not have hearing faith (“ears to hear”), which came by God’s decree, that is, by His sovereign election (cf. Romans 9:6-29).

### **Parable of the Mustard Seed**

What is more, just as the working of the seed to produce fruitful faith in the human heart was part of the mysterious working of God, so was the expansive growth of the kingdom, which would begin like a mustard seed and then grow to become the largest of all the trees in the garden. Again, what was hidden and secret would be made plainly and unavoidably known.

My explanations of these parables, which Jesus did not explain, need to be taken with a grain of salt. While Jesus spoke only in parables from this point forward in His public ministry and always explained their meaning to His disciples, we are not given all of those explanations in the Gospels.

## **Discussion Topic: Election**

In class we had an extended discussion about God’s sovereign election. We argued that while “choice” is biblical, “free choice” or “free will” is not with respect to salvation. The Bible teaches that prior to the working of the Holy Spirit, we were “dead in our trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) and “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). According to our free will, we ALL were ONLY sinful and ALWAYS turning away from God (Romans 3:9-18; Isaiah 53:6). We did not have the spiritual capacity to understand, accept, and believe the Gospel. The Holy Spirit enabled us to choose God and to believe the Gospel (1 Corinthians 2:11-14). That is why there is no place for us to boast in our salvation. The whole work of salvation, both God’s work of grace through Christ and God’s work of faith in us, is by God’s sovereign election (Ephesians 2:8-10). As in the days of Noah, we were all running headlong to self-destruction. If free will, our autonomy, our independence from God, should teach us anything, it should teach us that apart from God’s gracious intervention, we would destroy ourselves in violence, immorality, and all manner of wickedness. That is certainly what biblical history teaches us. It is only our arrogance to think that we had anything meaningful to do with our salvation or to suggest that God’s salvation is limited by the freedom of our wills. Such is the theology of “Bruce Almighty,” but it is not biblical theology. Even to suggest that God has to give everyone equal opportunity to believe is an arrogant notion, not a biblical one. We think too highly of ourselves. Paul reminds us that we are simply clay in the Potter’s hands.

But if we do believe, as the Bible teaches, “He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it” (Philippians 1:6), how powerfully encouraging that is! It does not depend upon my fickle faith because He has given me unshakable faith. Who’s to say that I may not reject Him in my later years as Solomon did when he worshiped the idols of his Canaanite wives? Would I then lose my salvation? Did Solomon lose his? If salvation is the work of God from first to last, then there is no chance that I can lose my salvation. Nothing can take me out of the hands of my sovereign Lord and God (John 10:28-30)!

I raise this topic because Jesus's Parable of the Sower is often taught with the focus on our hearts (or our ears) rather than a focus on the Lord who grants us a right kind of heart (or ears). If we think that we can cultivate a heart of faith, I think we will miss the point of this parable. If we instead thank God for giving us the right heart and ears to hear, then I think we are truly grasping the point of this parable. But this is a discussion topic, so I would like you to prayerfully search the Scriptures and explore this topic of election. Is the Parable of the Sower meant to be *prescriptive* (i.e. try hard to have this kind of soil or not have these kinds of soils) or *descriptive* (i.e. these are the kinds of soils that exist/God has given)? What are the implications of believing in God's sovereign election (God both sacrifices and gives faith) in salvation versus thinking that salvation is a cooperative act involving God's sacrifice and our (not God-given) faith?