

16

Mark 4:1-20 The Parable of the Sower

**Discussion:** Do you remember from childhood any nursery rhymes or fairy tales that had a hidden moral lesson to them (e.g. Aesop's Fables), or books and films such as *Animal Farm*?

Mark 4	Matthew 13	Luke 8
<p><b>The Parable of the Sower</b>  <b>1</b> Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.  <b>2</b> He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:</p>	<p><b>The Parable of the Sower</b>  <b>1</b> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <b>2</b> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. <b>3</b> Then he told them many things in parables, saying:</p>	<p><b>The Parable of the Sower</b>  <b>1</b> After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.  <b>4</b> While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:</p>
<p><b>3</b> "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <b>4</b> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.</p>	<p>"A farmer went out to sow his seed. <b>4</b> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.</p>	<p><b>5</b> "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up.</p>
<p><b>5</b> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.  <b>6</b> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.</p>	<p><b>5</b> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.  <b>6</b> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.</p>	<p><b>6</b> Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.</p>
<p><b>7</b> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.</p>	<p><b>7</b> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.</p>	<p><b>7</b> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.</p>
<p><b>8</b> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."</p>	<p><b>8</b> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.</p>	<p><b>8</b> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."</p>
<p><b>9</b> Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."</p>	<p><b>9</b> Whoever has ears, let them hear."</p>	<p>When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."</p>

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

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We noted in the previous session that often when proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Jesus has begun to speak in parables (Mark 3:23). This is the first time, however, that we hear a substantial block of this teaching.<sup>1</sup> Mark uses the Parable of the Sower to introduce us to this style of teaching, where we hear the words that Jesus spoke to the crowds. Afterwards, in a private meeting with the disciples, Jesus provides a detailed explanation of the parable's meaning and also explains the importance of using this form of teaching with the crowds.

### Comparison

- The Parable of the Sower appears in all three Synoptics, following an identical structure where 1) Jesus tells the parable, 2) explains why he is using parables, and 3) then explains the parable itself.
- Mark and Matthew inform us that Jesus is just offshore in a boat, from where he speaks to the people who are standing at the water's edge. Matthew says it was the same day.
- In Mark, Jesus opens with a summons to "Listen!"

### Context

- The characteristics of a parable are that:
  - it is a brief, simple story where personal details are omitted,
  - it typically uses a setting from ordinary life that everyone could relate to, and
  - it doesn't have any *grey areas*; parables cause the listener to ponder the options and come to a decision.

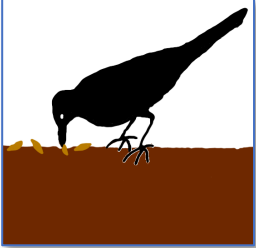
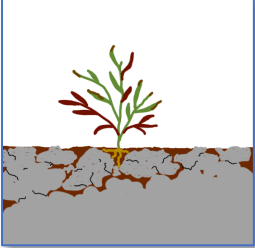


### Key Points

- Key elements of this parable are 1) the farmer, 2) the seed sown, 3) the four types of soil (the path, rocky ground, among the thorns, and good soil) onto which the seed falls.
- In this parable, it seems the farmer plays the least significant part at the start of the story. It is not about his action, but how the seed is received by the different types of soil and the yield it gives. A better title, perhaps, might be "The Parable of the Soils"<sup>2,3</sup>
- The seed falling on the path (road) becomes easy prey for birds, while the seed falling on rocky ground fails to develop roots as the soil is so shallow; the plant withers in the sun.

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

- The seed growing among the thorns competes and struggles for nutrients and light so the plant cannot produce any grain.
- However, the seed falling on healthy soil can, no matter how tiny, produce a significant harvest, with some seed even more bountiful than others.<sup>4</sup> That is where the farmer comes in, able to help the plant grow and develop and produce an astonishing harvest.<sup>5</sup>
- The command to “Hear!” at the end of this section is informing people that there is more to this story than it first seems. The second use of the word “hear” actually means “to heed”.<sup>6</sup> To some of the crowd, whose hearts are not receptive, the parable will remain unintelligible, but those with receptive hearts will recognise a deeper meaning.

**Discussion:** In the chart below, complete part **A)**. We shall come back and do part **B)** later.

<b>A) What does the seed represent?</b> <span style="float: right;"><i>See the Appendix for answers</i></span> <b>What does the soil represent?</b> <b>Who is the farmer?</b>				
When the seed fell	... on the path	... on rocky soil	... on thorny soil	...on good soil
				
<b>WHAT</b> happened to it?				
<b>B) WHAT</b> happened to it?				
Did these people <b>HEAR</b> the message?				
How did they <b>RESPOND</b> to what they heard?				
<b>HOW LONG</b> did it last and why?				
What was the <b>OUTCOME</b> ?				

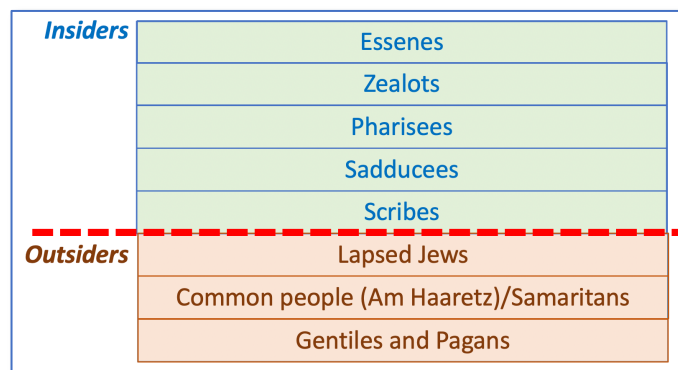
*Figure 13: The Parable of the Sower*

## Insiders and Outsiders: Jesus Explains Why He Uses Parables

Mark 4	Matthew 13	Luke 8
<p><b>10</b> When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <b>11</b> He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables</p>	<p><b>10</b> The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” <b>11</b> He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ...</p>	<p><b>9</b> His disciples asked him what this parable meant. <b>10</b> He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,</p>
<p><b>12</b> so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”</p>	<p><b>13</b> This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.</p>	<p>“though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’</p>

In the previous session we heard that Jesus’ family had arrived, but didn’t enter the house and were instead calling him to come *outside*. In response, Jesus asks the question “Who is my family?” and points to the followers who are seated around him. Those who are *inside he calls* his true family.<sup>7</sup> This picture makes uncomfortable reading, especially in the light of the 5th commandment, as if Jesus is dismissing family ties.<sup>8</sup> Commentators on Mark 4:10-12 agree that Jesus is developing further his theme of *insiders* versus *outsiders*.<sup>9</sup> Those

listening to Jesus in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine would have thought this was beyond any further debate. In their mind, the Jews were the ‘Chosen People’, making them *insiders*, as they were favoured by God. But even within this there were divisions. The Zealots would condemn their fellow Jews as not being zealous enough in their



**Figure 14: Jewish view of who were the “insiders”**

adherence to God’s word and were therefore insufficiently holy. The Essenes tried to achieve even higher standards of personal holiness, separating themselves off (males only) into remote holy communities. It was clear to all, however, who the *outsiders* were; Gentiles (which means anyone who is not a Jew) in particular were emphasized as being excluded from God’s favour, such as the Samaritans, and the Romans (for their worship of pagan gods).<sup>10</sup>

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

Jesus overturns everyone's perceptions in Mark 4:10-12. The outsiders and insiders correspond to the bad and the good soils. Suddenly, some of whom thought they had guaranteed favour before God (as a result of their Jewish faith or decadency) could find themselves excluded, while those who

Outsiders	Insiders
Essenes	Essenes
Zealots	Zealots
Pharisee	Pharisees
Saducees	Saducees
Scribes	Scribes
Lapsed Jews	Lapsed Jews
Common people, Samaritans	Common people, Samaritans
Gentiles and Pagans	Gentiles and Pagans

had been taught there was no place for them

**Figure 15: The true "insiders" and "outsiders"**

in God's kingdom are offered hope of inclusion. Salvation is available to the entire human race and all that is required is to hear in faith and believe.

Verse 12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 (also reflected in Ez. 12:1-2, Dan. 12:8-10) that hearts which reject God will become hardened.<sup>11</sup> Notice that the disciples themselves didn't understand the parable, so a lack of understanding does not imply a hardened heart, but calls us to ponder the deeper meaning. There is some debate about how this verse has been translated, as it could imply Jesus is trying to avoid outsiders repenting and finding salvation. Some commentators assume Jesus is using sarcasm because the intention is at odds with:

**1 Timothy 2:3** *This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, 4 who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

The journey Jesus wishes us to make is clearly from being outsiders to that of insiders. And, as the good soil, the secrets of the Kingdom of God will start to make sense. We will produce a harvest for the Kingdom, maturing in faith and bearing fruit.<sup>12</sup> From this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus continues to reveal details of God's Kingdom plan by means of parables.

The Parables are stated openly by Jesus for all to hear but they can only be understood at a superficial level by those with a hardened heart, their deeper meaning remaining hidden and the truths they contain appearing a foolishness to many.<sup>13,14</sup>

Mark 4	Matthew 13	Luke 8
<b>13</b> Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"	<b>18</b> "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:	<b>11</b> "This is the meaning of the parable:

## Bible Study of Mark's Gospel

<p><b>14</b> The farmer sows the word. <b>15</b> Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.</p>	<p><b>19</b> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.</p>	<p>The seed is the word of God. <b>12</b> 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.</p>
<p><b>16</b> Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. <b>17</b> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.</p>	<p><b>20</b> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <b>21</b> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.</p>	<p><b>13</b> Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.</p>
<p><b>18</b> Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; <b>19</b> but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.</p>	<p><b>22</b> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.</p>	<p><b>14</b> The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.</p>
<p><b>20</b> Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”</p>	<p><b>23</b> But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”</p>	<p><b>15</b> But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.</p>

### Comparison

- All three are quite similar, except where the writer refers to Satan, the evil one or devil.

### Key Points

- Here, Jesus explains the barriers that cause a person to remain as “bad soil”. It is how mankind often responds when confronted with the word of the Kingdom of God.<sup>15</sup>
- This is the introductory parable that explains how to interpret all those that follow.<sup>16</sup>
- God can produce an abundant harvest from good soil.

**Discussion:** Go back and update part **B)** of the chart with any additional information that is provided by Jesus' explanation. *(see Appendix for completed chart)*