

## Who is this man? Jesus in the Gospel of Mark He Taught Them in Parables March 14, 2010

We are in our fourth week of this series and we've been going through the Gospel of Mark and asking the questions, "Who is Jesus?" and "What does his life have to do with our lives today?" As we answer these questions we are looking at different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. Last week we looked at Jesus' healing ministry and today we are going to look at Jesus' teaching ministry.

Jesus had a distinctive style of teaching, which was to teach in parables, so we're going to look at parables - what are they and why Jesus chose this method of teaching? Then we're going to look at the most famous of Jesus' parables in Mark, the parable of the sower. We'll look at what this parable tells us about Jesus and how it applies to our lives.

### What are parables?

The four gospels include about 60 different parables. The word "parable" comes straight from the greek and it means "to throw something along side". When someone is teaching in parables, they will take an idea or concept or reality that is complex or difficult to understand and throw a simile or metaphor, sometimes they're analogies, sometimes they are allegories, and sometimes they almost feel like riddles, along side of it to help the hearer understand. It's a comparison thing. Jesus compares something difficult to understand with something from everyday life that is easy to understand.

Usually, the object of Jesus' parables is the "kingdom of God". He wants people to understand what it is like when up there comes down here. And it isn't like one of these metaphors describes all there is to the kingdom, but it describes some dimension, some aspect. The kingdom of God is in some way like....So Jesus would say that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, something that can start small and become so large that birds make homes in its branches. He said the kingdom is like a city on a hill, it's light shines and everyone around can see it. He said the kingdom is like a little bit of yeast in the dough...and that little bit affects the whole batch. He said the kingdom is like a valuable pearl, worth giving up everything else in order to gain. These are simple illustrations from everyday life that people understood.

But there is a statement from Jesus that seems to be the exact opposite of this and he says that within the context of the story we are going to look at today. So I want us to take just a minute and look at this troubling passage. Jesus disciples' asked, "Teacher, why do you talk in parables?"

In **Mark 4:11-12** TNIV, Jesus answers that question in a very confusing way. Let's take a look at his answer...

***When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <sup>1112</sup> so that,***

***" 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'***

This is a very perplexing scripture and scholars debate what Jesus might have meant because Jesus is seeming to say that he doesn't want people to understand, that he doesn't want them to get it, that he doesn't want them to be forgiven. That doesn't line up with what we know about Jesus and his mission from the rest of the Gospels. Jesus clearly does want people to get it, he wants people to experience God's forgiveness...that is what drove him to the cross.

So what do we do with this? Some say that there is a textual error and an important word is missing and when you add this word it all makes sense. That may be so, but that same word is missing from Matthew and Luke's versions of this story as well.

The answer to this, I think, is that sometimes the parables could be a little more complex, a little more like riddles, and the challenge in them is to think about them, talk about them and unearth what deeper meanings could be there. Jesus once said that the Kingdom of God was like new wine that has to be put in new wine skins. What does that mean? Well, just like old wine skins cannot expand to accommodate the new wine, sometimes old traditions must be broken so that God can accomplish new

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things. See, sometimes, parables are easy and simple, but other times we are meant to ponder them, wrestle with them and interact with them. But even when we have to think about them, they are accessible to anyone, even those without an education. The illustrations are such that anyone could think about it for awhile and say, "ah, I think I see what he's saying about that."

I think Jesus was noting that there were many people who were coming to Jesus and they wanted him to give them the cliff notes version of God. And Jesus says that there is no shortcut, no bullet point list. When it comes to faith, you have to think about it, engage your mind and your heart in pursuit of God. You have to put something in to get something out. And that's how the Christian faith is.

On the one hand it's very simple...it's about trusting God and in God's mercy that comes through our relationship with Jesus. Living in his love and living it out accordingly. It's as simple as "Jesus loves me, this I know". And on the other hand it's kind of complicated. Jesus calls us to engage our whole being in the pursuit of God...of following Jesus. Jesus wants us to ponder, to think, to converse and engage. And if you're not willing to do that then the likely hood is that you are hearing without understanding, seeing without really perceiving, and you are going to find yourself getting lost.

So really it's a challenge...and it was a challenge to his disciples who didn't always understand. Will you take the time to think about these things, to ponder them and engage your mind and heart, to stretch and grow and seek? And that's why Jesus uses the parables.

So with that in mind, let's look at our parable for today. I want to share something pretty cool that I learned in preparation for this message, and that's the geographical setting for this story. Most scholars place this story at a place now called the "bay of parables". It's along the sea of Galilee near Capernaum. Mark says that Jesus went out on the water in a boat to get some breathing room from the crowd. If you've been boating you know how the water also carries sound.

The crowds would gather in an area between the road and the sea. Studies documented in Biblical Archeology Review estimate that 5000-7000 people could fit and hear very well in the space in between the road and the sea and that twice that many could hear in the area above the road.

Also notice that right here in sight of everyone who heard him tell this story, we have a road, some rocky soil, and some good soil. OK, let's read the story of the parable of the sower, also known as the parable of the soils.

#### **The four soils: Mark 4:1-9 TNIV**

***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. <sup>2</sup> He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: <sup>3</sup> "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."***

***<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."***

As we listen to this story, we are meant to ask which of these types of soil am I? Now there is a sense in which Jesus is acknowledging something that he is noticing about people as they hear his message. What he sees is that people have different reactions to what he has to reveal about God and their reaction varies from minimal response to fruitful response. He's also telling his disciples that the same thing is going to happen to them. Not everyone who hears the good news that they will share is going to respond in the same way. That's just the way it is...some are going to follow, some are not and that's just the way it works. He's saying, "It happened to me, it's going to happen to you." It's not just Jesus, or the disciples, or the preacher, but all of us cast the seeds of the gospel out into the world as you tell your friends about Christ or invite them to church. Some of them respond, some of them don't. Some of them listen, some of them are not interested. That's the way it is. It happened to Jesus, it will happen to us. We are called to cast the seeds of the gospel....the response of others is not in our control.

What is really amazing about this parable is that it is a story of vision and hope. Jesus doesn't focus on the three types of soil that don't produce a harvest, he says when there is that one person

where the gospel takes root, it bears a harvest, 30, 60 or 100 fold. That one that lives it out will have significant impact and the world will be a different place because of the fruit of their lives. And many of you are those people! And instead of berating those who don't take his word to heart, he celebrates what God will do through those who do.

Now I'm not much of a gardener, but I've had enough experience to get a handle on what Jesus was saying...that's the beauty of a parable. The types of soil represent our hearts, our lives and how open and receptive we are to the good news or to God's grace. And the first type of soil is a path. In the ancient world, they all understood path. The soil is packed down by all the foot traffic and seeds cannot even penetrate the soil.

We know what path is like as well, but another comparison might be clay. You know about this too...there's a fair amount of it around and you probably find it when you plant a tree. A few years ago, I needed to dig 30 feet of trench from my house out to our garage to put in a new water line. And I had two good friends come help me do it. The digging was easy for the first six inches or so, then we hit the hard, dry, clay.

Maybe you've tried to plant a garden and clay was what you had to work with. Then you know that there are things you need to do to make this soil produce a harvest. You have to pulverize it, or break it open, then you have to add organic matter, like manure.

There are people I know, people I care about, people I pray for and their hearts are like this. They are not open to hearing about God. They may come to church once in awhile, but they are really not listening. They have hardened hearts. And the sad thing is that when someone has a hard heart, the only thing that opens that heart up is pulverizing and manure. We call it the "hard knocks of life" for a reason and those are the times when manure happens, right?

It's those hard things that raise questions and make us look for hope in places that we weren't open to before. I don't believe that God makes those hard things in life happen to us, they just happen, sometimes as a consequence of our own making. When they come, that's when the hardened heart reaches out, finally, and turns to God. That's when the heart becomes soft and it's able to receive the good news. And that manure, the stuff you wish wouldn't happen, somehow it even serves a purpose in your life. When you allow these things to be used by God, they become something that produces life in you. So there's hope, even for the hard soil.

The second soil Jesus mentions is the rocky ground. I picture this being a shallow layer of topsoil covering bedrock. There's enough soil there that the seeds will sprout, but the roots don't go deep, so when you stop watering and the sun comes out they get scorched; or when the wind blows, they fall over. Do you remember those 60 mile per hour winds we had last spring? Some trees toppled over roots and all and another tree right next to it was standing strong. You know the tree still standing has some strong, deep roots!

What Jesus is saying some people have hard hearts, and others get excited at first. God loves me, great. Jesus died for me, great! I get eternal life, great. God is my bff! Great! But they don't take the time to think, "Wait, there's more to this." Their faith is an inch deep and a mile wide. They have all these experiences on the surface, but they don't take them down deep. And Jesus is saying that we can't grow strong this way, we can't have a sustainable faith this way. We will never grow a harvest because the soil is too shallow, too superficial.

If we have a faith like this and things get difficult or challenging, then we turn away...God didn't deliver. Faith suddenly seems hard to come by and so we walk away from what we most need.

Jesus wants us to put our roots down deep. We should spend time studying and pondering God's word, that's why we ask you to join us in reading the Bible everyday. We put roots down when we pray, spend time searching God's heart and allowing God to search ours...we build a relationship with God that sustains us through dark times. We put down roots when we build relationships with other Christians and allow them to encourage us, and bless us, and guide us, and challenge us. We put roots down when we give our time and energy to serve others for Jesus' sake. This are the ways we grow deep. Jesus tells us that superficial faith will not carry us through life.

Jesus says that there's another type of soil, and you've seen this. It's filled with weeds and thistles and crabgrass. Do we have any gardeners in here? I keep a very small vegetable

garden...that's it. Here's what I find fun about gardening. I like turning the soil and getting the bed ready. I like planting. I like harvesting. Those are the fun things. Less fun for me is watering. And totally un-fun is, you want to guess, weeding!

Have you ever left your garden for a few weeks and you come back and you think, "Where did my onions go?", because they are swallowed up by weeds. Weeds suck up all the nutrients. Let your weeds get out of hand and the next thing you know you have dwarf pepper plants and you're pulling up baby carrots! If you want the veggies to grow, you have to do the hard work of pulling the weeds.

Jesus was recognizing that many of us have the cares of the world and many other things we want to pursue in life. And we think we can do all this along with the Gospel, that we don't have to do any weeding out in life. So the gospel is one among many things. But it doesn't work! All these other things we pursue, not that any of them are bad in and of themselves, suck away our energy and time and heart for pursuing the kingdom of God.

The thing about this soil is not so much that it kills the plant, because the plant keeps living among the weeds. So if this is your heart, you can be spiritually alive in some sense. It's not that the weeds kill the plant, the weeds affect the harvest! The point is that you can live, you can exist in this soil, but you cannot thrive. You cannot become the person God created you to be, your life will not have the purpose and meaning God intends until you clear out the clutter and give the kingdom of God room to grow in your life.

Jesus talked about this in the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel when he said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness (right relationship with God)". Then, Jesus said, all this other stuff will take its right place in your life. Lots of things can be #1 in our lives, but when lots of things are, we miss out on the real #1.

Finally, we have the good, rich and fertile soil. This soil is filled with the stuff of life and seeds that are planted here grow to produce something that is amazing! One seed of the good news, planted in the heart with good soil, will produce an amazing result, up to 100 times of the initial investment.

You know this from your gardening! My in-laws have a great garden. They know what they are doing, they enjoy doing it and they know that the soil makes all the difference. They receive this amazing amount of harvest from their garden. That's great with us, because they share it with us.

I basically plant peppers and tomatoes. I am always amazed how much fruit tomato vines bear. From one tiny seed a plant grows and it will produce dozens of tomatoes that all have dozens or hundreds of seeds.

I don't know how you are with your garden, but this is how I am. We plant the garden in the spring and water when needed and we get excited when we notice growth. Then the first flowers form and I'm like, we have blossoms! Then the tiny tomatoes appear and I get all excited, anticipating all the yummy that is to come. Then they grow big and begin to turn and then I'm really excited. Then comes that day when we pick our first ripe tomato of the season. I'm like, isn't it beautiful! Now let's slice this baby up and make some BLT's!

It may be a bit corny, but I think God gets excited in a similar way when our hearts are good soil, and we not only receive the good news, but we water it and tend it and allow it to grow in our lives, and then it begins to bear fruit into the lives of other people. God loves it that we are not just living, but we are thriving and we bear fruit and we experience the life that really is life. Then those seeds of faith we plant in other people take root and grow and bear fruit in other lives. And so this one bit of good news planted in the good soil of your heart grows and impacts countless lives around you, often in ways that you will never know, and those lives change the lives around them and this is how we change the world one life at a time. And this, Jesus says, is what the Kingdom of God is like.

So I want to turn Jesus' question back to you today to answer for yourself. Which soil best describes your heart today?

### **How is your heart....where is your life?**