

Parable of the Sower - Mark 4:1-20

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July 31, 2010

Please bow your heads with me for prayer. The parable of the sower. This is probably one of the most well-known parables. It was actually in a series of parables given by Jesus in what is known as the Sermon by the Sea. According to Mark 4:1 Jesus was teaching "a great multitude" "by the sea". This was most likely where the Plain of Gennesaret and the Sea of Galilee came together. It was a very scenic area.

Our Scripture passage today is rather lengthy. It is at least twice as long as our previous stories. So, the length of our sermon will correlate with the increased length of our scripture. So, we should be finishing around 1:00 PM. I hope you brought a snack with you. (Don't worry, I'm not being serious!)

I'd like to begin by calling your attention to Mark 4:2. It says, "Then He (Jesus) taught them many things by parables." Because of certain circumstances Jesus initiates a change in His teaching method. He begins to clothe truth in a disguise. Instead of saying, "Some of you are rejecting your Messiah," He says, "Some seed fell by the road, and the birds ate it up." Why does Jesus now begin using parables to convey His message? Well, notice what Mark 4:11 & 12 says. (Read) Since Jesus began His ministry He had been preaching about the kingdom of God. He had been announcing that He had come to set up God's kingdom in people's hearts. But many had been rejecting His message, so He refers to the kingdom of God as a mystery. It was something that many did not understand, because they didn't like this type of kingdom. So, now "all things come [to them] in parables." Those who want to understand will "know the mystery of the kingdom of God". But those who have been fighting against it, will see without perceiving and hear without understanding. And as a result, they will be less offended and cause less trouble for Jesus and His ministry. I'm sure Jesus also hoped that these parables might disarm their prejudice. Maybe unconsciously the truth would find a way to their hearts through these stories.

Let's now read a summary of the parable itself:

A sower went out to sow seed. Some of the seed fell by the road and was eaten up by the birds. Other seed fell on stony soil. It grew immediately, but soon withered away in the hot sun. Still other seed fell among thorns, which choked it and kept it from yielding a crop. Last of all, some seed fell on fertile soil and produced an abundant crop.

As we consider this parable, we will answer two questions. Our first question is, "What did this story mean to the Jews?" The Jewish society in first century Palestine was an agricultural society. So, the sight Jesus pictures of a man sowing seed was a very common sight. It would have been like seeing a tractor in a cornfield in Ohio. Many Jews were farmers. They didn't have combines. They just took a bag of seed and walked through the fields, throwing out the seed by hand. The season in which Jesus told this story was most likely autumn. At this time harvesting and planting would have been taking place simultaneously. The spring crops were ready for harvest. And the winter crops were just being planted. So, it was a busy time of year for the farmers. Jesus mentions in Mark 4:3 that the sower "went out" to sow. Most people at this time lived in city walls. This protected them from outside dangers. But in the morning they would leave the protection of the city walls and go out to work in the fields.

So, the story Jesus told in the parable of the sower pictured a very common scene that people would have been very familiar with due to their agricultural society. But they were also familiar with the use of this

analogy from the Old Testament. I invite you to turn with me to Hosea 10:12, 13. This is a message from the Lord to Israel through the prophet Hosea. (Read) The Lord uses the analogy of farming in this passage just as Jesus does in Mark. He speaks of the sowing righteousness, reaping (or harvesting) mercy, breaking up the fallow (or untilled) ground by seeking the Lord, and the raining down of righteousness. He also refers to plowing wickedness, reaping iniquity (sin), and eating the fruit of lies. Now turn with me to Isaiah 55:10, 11. This is a message from the Lord to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. (Read) Once again the Lord uses the analogy of farming to illustrate a spiritual point. He says just as the rain (or snow) comes down and waters the earth, so His word comes down to the earth. Just as the rain causes the earth to produce fruit before returning back to the atmosphere through evaporation, so the Lord's messages accomplish their purpose before returning to Him. There are other places in the Old Testament that use the analogy of farming to illustrate God's work in our hearts. So, when Jesus used this analogy in Mark, the Jews should have immediately made the connection: "Oh, He's talking about God's word being sown in our hearts." Notice what Jesus says in Mark 4:13. Jesus wonders how the disciples could not understand this analogy. It had been used so frequently in the Old Testament, it should have been easily understood. So, Jesus says, "How then will you understand the other parables?" There were other parables whose meaning wasn't as obvious, since they were not already a part of the Jewish culture, like the analogy of farming. If the disciples couldn't understand the parable of the sower, how would they understand the other ones? So, the analogy that Jesus uses in the parable of the sower had a lot of meaning to those who first heard it. It spoke to their agricultural society. It also echoed an analogy used often in the Law and the Prophets, which was the foundation of their culture.

And now our second question: "What is Jesus calling attention to?" In the parable of the sower Jesus is seeking to call people's attention to the condition of their own hearts. He does this by identifying four types of soil. They represent four different responses to Jesus' teaching. The first soil experiences no response at all. In Mark 4:15 Jesus states that the birds gobble up the seed that is sown by the wayside. They are given a chance to snatch the seed, since the hard ground didn't allow it to germinate. In the same way Satan snatched Jesus' teachings away from the hearts of those who did not respond to them. Next Jesus identifies a second type of soil in which there is an emotional response. Jesus identifies in Mark 4:16 & 17 the stony ground. This would have been areas where some bed rock lay right below the surface, making the soil very shallow. As a result the sun quickly heats up the soil and results in a quick germination. But with no depth of soil the sun quickly withers the plant. The quick germination represents an immediate response to Jesus' teachings based solely on emotions. There is no inner change. The "rock" of self is not removed and becomes a barrier to a heart conversion. Third, Jesus identifies a choked response. Jesus identifies this response with the soil in which thorns grow up (Mark 4:18, 19). I remember pulling weeds in our garden as a child. The thorns were always the hardest ones to pull up. I don't remember us wearing gloves. We had to reach down below the soil and pull up on them where there were no spines to prick us. This soil represents the heart of someone who accepts Jesus' teachings but they do not cultivate or maintain their Christian experience. Their relationship with God gets put on the back burner. It is made subordinate to worldly pursuits. The busyness of life distracts them and soon their Christian experience is lost. Last of all, Jesus calls attention to a transforming response in Mark 4:20. According to the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary a typical yield for wheat in the United States is 15 fold. However Christ identifies the harvest from the good soil as 30, 60, or 100 fold. These are those who "hear, accept ("receive near" or "delight in"), and "bear fruit". It's a simple response, but it results in a supernatural experience. One seed is transformed into 30, 60, or even 100 seeds. When one sinner accepts Jesus' teaching with all their heart, they are transformed into a child of God who reflects the very fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19).

In the crowd that Jesus taught by the Sea of Galilee every soil was represented that day. The hearts of the scribes and Pharisees were represented by the soil by the wayside. They refused to accept any of Jesus'

teachings. On the other end of the spectrum the apostles' hearts were represented by the good soil. They had accepted Jesus' teachings and were being (albeit slowly) transformed into the likeness of God Himself. And then there were others in that crowd who were somewhere in between, represented by the stony and thorny ground.

What about us? What is the condition of our hearts? This is what this parable is all about. This is why this parable has been preserved for close to two thousand years – so that we might know the condition of our hearts. If we are not experiencing transformation, we can know that our hearts must be represented by the hard, stony, or thorny ground. I remember a time in my own experience when I was very frustrated. I was doing everything I knew to do as a Christian. And yet I experienced no transformation in so many areas of my life. Looking back I can see that the problem was the condition of my heart. It is possible to be a Christian and still have the experience of the hard, stony, and thorny ground. Let's say I hear a sermon or am rebuked by someone in the church. Instead of benefitting from the message, I am offended and reject it. This response is represented by the hard ground by the wayside. And Satan comes and snatches the message away. The blessing God intended is lost.

When the Lord started showing me the condition of my heart, I now had a choice. I could surrender the hardness in my heart and receive the heart given me by Jesus that is filled with fertile soil. And as a result I have experienced transformation by the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. I would like to close with the words of Romans 12:2. (Read) Don't be conformed. Be transformed. Don't let your sinful DNA decide how you respond. Don't let the world determine how you respond. Don't let Satan snatch away the message God sends to you. Don't be conformed. Don't become a product of your sinful nature or your environment or your enemies. Be transformed. Ask God to show you the condition of your heart. Ask Him for a heart of fertile soil. And you will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Your life will be filled with supernatural experiences. You will come to reflect the very likeness of God.