

The Parable of the Soils

Mark 4 v 1-20 - Littlebourne - 30th May 2021

Where are we in the story of Jesus' life? Jesus has shown himself to possess great power, he's healing people, performing miracles, teaching to crowds of people. The religious leaders couldn't accept that His power was from God, though it's clearly supernatural, so last week we saw them accuse Jesus of being in league with Satan, chapter 3 verse 22 - "He is possessed by Beelzebub and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons".

Last week we also saw that Jesus' own family weren't following him. But the week before we saw Jesus call the twelve disciples, who did follow him. So there are very mixed opinions about Jesus and his message has been received very differently by those who have heard it.

This next chapter of Mark contains one of the two larger sections of teaching in Mark's gospel, the major departures from the fast paced narrative of Jesus' movements and actions.

Matthew and Luke have more long teaching sections and more parables, John has long sections that break from the narrative, but Mark has only this section and chapter 13's Olivet discourse. To have included only these two sections of longer form teaching in his gospel, Mark must have thought that what Jesus said here was important.

And it starts familiarly, with a large crowd gathered and Jesus teaching them.

v1

Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

We saw two weeks ago Jesus was by the sea with a boat ready, lest the crowds crush him, and this week he's got into the boat to teach the crowds, which was just on standby back in chapter 3.

v2

And he was teaching them many things in parables, ...

What is a parable?

The word parable comes from the Greek παραβολή (parabolē), literally "throwing" (bolē) "alongside" (para-), fundamentally a comparison. It takes something more obvious or understood and compares this to a truth that is harder to understand. This parable is a sort of classic parable that we think of when we hear the word, but Jesus comments last week were similarly comparisons: "How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. A house divided against itself will fall." That's a short parable.

And parables aren't invented by Jesus. In the old testament there are parables. Think of when Nathan tells David a parable where a rich man steals a poor mans sheep. David is outraged at the thought, then Nathan says that man is in effect you, David. Nathan has used a parable to illustrate David's sin and it was effective.

It's when Nathan points out that David is the rich man in the story, that the penny drops and the parable takes on meaning for him. So parables can reveal truth, but unexplained or misunderstood can conceal truth.

v2-8

And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

This is sometimes called the parable of the sower, sometimes the parable of the seed, sometimes the parable of the soils. Each element is important - but the four different soils that the seed falls on are the distinctive part of the analogy - they are what makes the parable meaningful.

In the agrarian society of the first century, this process of sowing seed would have been well understood. But the process used then was a bit different than the process a farmer in 21st century England would use.

Today, a farmer ploughs, tills and plants seeds in his hedged off or fenced off field. Back in the first century, it was apparently common to scatter the seed first, then plough it into the ground. The field would be divided more likely by natural landmarks or by paths which formed the edge of the field.

The seed landing on the paths, the hard ground that has been compacted, would either be intended for ploughing up or would be the edge of the field. The rocky ground with the shallow soil would not appear to be rocky until the plough had been put to it, the thorny ground might have had the roots of thorns buried beneath the surface, not yet visible.

So, what we see at first glance as a very careless sower, is in fact a sower who is sowing seed that he doesn't yet know will bear fruit or not. When the plough comes along, the quality of the soil will be revealed.

What would also have struck the listeners in that crowd would have been the yield that Jesus says will occur.

v9

And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus makes clear that there is more to this than at first glance, careful listening is required. Jesus starts the parable with 'Listen, Behold'. This is important to hear. But it wasn't easy to interpret, as those closer to Jesus wanted Jesus to explain it:

v10-12

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."

This aside, away from the crowds that he is talking to until verse 34, is just with his closer disciples. In verse 34 we'll see that Jesus speaks to his disciples plainly - 'he explained everything' - whilst he speaks to the crowds in parables.

The disciples asked him about the parables. It doesn't say what exactly they asked, but it's possible that given Jesus' response, they were asking why he spoke in parables. Why would Jesus be cryptic about the truth? Doesn't he want people to understand?

The disciples are possibly wondering why there is not more fruit from Jesus' teaching. Why aren't people listening?

At this time, the messianic expectation was all around, people were looking for the messiah to save Israel from the Romans, for a fulfilment of prophecy. But since Jesus doesn't fit their expectations, people aren't seeing Jesus clearly.

But Jesus will explain that it is not that the sower, or the seed, that is at fault when there is not fruit, but the soil.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 puts it like this:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Paul writes in the verse before that this (v2):

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Paul makes clear that he is presenting people with the truth, God's word not tampered with. And it still fails to make an impact on some people, not because the word is ineffective, but the minds of the unbelievers cannot see it.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians chapter 2 (verses 15-16):

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

The same word produces different results, depending on the listener.

Matthew's parallel account says this:

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" 11 And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

The parables give more to those that already understand, and take away understanding from those that do not understand. Mark will put it similarly next week.

v13

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

This parable is used to explain parables in general. This parable itself explains why some are receptive to Jesus' teaching and some are not.

v14

The sower sows the word.

Jesus sets up the whole explanation, by making clear to us what it is that is sown. The parable is about spreading God's word, telling people about Jesus. We would call it evangelism. Matthew calls it "the word of the kingdom". It's not just any word, it is God's word, that ushers in his kingdom.

It's important to note that the sower and the seed or the evangelist and the word are not the determining factor in the result. A sower that sows, and the correct seed of the word are necessities, but the yield is down to the soil.

I think this is important - the response to God's word, the fruit produced, is not going to be based on how flashy your presentation is, how masterfully you throw the word out there. It's what is sown that determines the type of fruit, and the soil that it lands in that determines the result. There's no secret to the sowing that makes the seed take root and flourish.

v15

And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

The path is soil that is compacted and impenetrable. The seed cannot take root, but is snatched away before a plough can be brought to it. These are hardhearted persons.

Matthew's parallel account (Matthew 13:9) says this is "the one who does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart".

Luke's account adds that those seeds that were not taken by the birds were trampled underfoot by those walking on the path.

These are those who hear God's word, but don't take heed. They read scripture, but don't let it affect them. This is like the Pharisees we've seen. They hear but they don't let the word penetrate. They resist it.

v16-17

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

In that area of the world, there are places where the soil is a shallow layer above underlying limestone. There's places like this all over Israel.

When the seed hits the soil, it can penetrate, it can grow a bit, but then when it hits the hard rock beneath it has nowhere to grow down to. Such plants immediately spring up - they can't go down, so all their energy is used in going up. There's all the appearance of growth, but no roots.

The superficial soil would be quickly dried out by the heat - Luke's account adds that the plant dies because there is no moisture - and the plant withers as quickly as it sprang up.

This sort of person might be like the crowds that met Jesus with jubilation at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. A few days later, the mood in Jerusalem has turned and those crowds are calling for Jesus' death. Maybe it's like those people we've seen in proceeding chapters that come to Jesus for healing, but after that are not interested.

v18-19

18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

These seeds do penetrate the soil, they do have space to take root, they do grow some roots. But they don't grow alone.

This might be like Judas. A close disciple like him could not have avoided some growth in understanding of God's word - the seed could grow. But ultimately, Judas' sin, his worldly desires, led him to betray Jesus.

The ground cannot be shared by the good seed and the bad. The sin in someones heart must be rooted out.

Ephesians 4 (verse 22-24) says this:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

We are told to remove those deceitful desires that we see in verse 19, so that holiness and righteousness can flourish.

v20

20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

This is good ground, deep soft soil cleared of thorns. This soil when planted bears fruit, and greatly.

Notice also, that this soil bears fruit in differing amounts. It's again not that the seed was different, or that the sower had a special technique that he applied to one patch of soil over another. But the whole reason we know that the soil is good, is because it bears fruit, regardless of the quantity.

Conclusion

So we've seen that parables are used to reveal and conceal.

To those who understand, parables make a point more understandable than just stating the plain truth. Metaphor helps us to understand an issue. But to those who do not understand, parables can be a confusion.

We've seen a progression - first the hardened heart does not accept the seed. Next, the shallow heart that accepts the seed, but has nowhere to grow. Then the divided heart that has capacity to grow the seed, but competing priorities.

Finally, the heart that can grow the seed and let it take over. It's the heart that makes the difference.

We don't know the state of men's hearts - we sow all over.

In this parable, the first of several strung together that tell us of God's kingdom, we see that the kingdom of God appears through the sowing of seeds - from tiny things comes something big, God's reign is identified with a fragile seed. The coming of the Kingdom is not equally visible to all, although it comes with power. Those outside the kingdom have unreceptive hearts, unable to hear the truth. Those who God chooses, with ears to hear, this parable reveals the mystery of the spread of God's kingdom. God's kingdom has begun to penetrate.