

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL STORIES and SIGNS

JESUS THE STORYTELLER

The Sower and the Soils

As we continue our chronological study of the New Testament, we will now move from the specific chronology of His life to study the stories of Jesus for six weeks and then the signs of Jesus for seven weeks.

The stories of Jesus are expressed in the form of parables. So, what is a parable? I have always liked to simply describe a parable as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. However, the parables of Jesus go much deeper than that. The Greek word for parable literally means ‘a laying by the side of’ or ‘casting alongside’; therefore, a parable is a ‘comparison or likeness.’ A familiar custom or incident is used to illustrate some truth less familiar. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and compels that listener to make a personal decision about God's truth and his or her life. So penetrating and personal are parables that the religious leaders after they heard some of them wanted to kill Jesus!

Let's make sure that we don't just focus on the ‘pictures’ drawn in Jesus' stories to the point of missing the main message of what Jesus was saying! Jesus could turn people's ears into eyes through His teaching! Some of His parables were one-liners that appealed to the imagination. He used phrases such as “salt of the earth” and “casting your pearls before swine.” Many of Jesus' parables centered on life in God's kingdom; some illustrate the nature of God.

We recently studied how Jesus was rejected in the synagogue of His own hometown of Nazareth. He is no longer teaching in the synagogues. In this passage we find Him sharing His message by the lakeside from a boat.

Read Mark 4:1 (ESV)¹ *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.*

Since the shore raised gently from the water's edge, it would make a kind of natural amphitheatre where the crowd could stand and hear very clearly what the Lord was saying. It was ‘unorthodox’ for Jesus to teach from a boat. He had first taken the ‘orthodox’ approach by going to the synagogue and was rejected there. It was time to use unusual methods to sow the seed of the Word of God. Jesus was prepared to use new methods in His day. His message did not change, but the method by which He presented His message did. Are we willing to follow the example of Jesus and use possibly ‘unorthodox’ methods to reach others with the old story that we love?

His disciples asked Jesus why did He speak in parables. Let's read His explanation.

Read Mark 4:10-12 (ESV) ¹⁰ *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.”*

Jesus used parables both to hide the truth and to reveal it. The crowd did not judge the parables; the parables judged the crowd. The careless listener, who thought he knew everything, would hear only a story that did not make sense and the result in his life would be judgment. Jesus prayed in **Matthew 11:25 (ESV)** ²⁵ ... *“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.* This allowed Jesus to provide spiritual food to those who hungered for it while preventing enemies of the true Kingdom of God from trapping Him before His mission was complete. When the disciples did not understand the parable, they asked Jesus. This is a good example for all of us. When we don't understand the meaning of a biblical teaching, we should ask the Lord to reveal its meaning to us.

Many have explained the parable of the soils. But, no one explains it better than Jesus! Today's parable was first spoken to the entire audience while the explanation of the parable was provided later to the disciples. As we go through the verses, we will divide each specific portion of the parable and immediately connect it with the explanation Jesus later provided.

This parable is about both the sower and the available soils. The soil pictures human hearts. There are four kinds of hearts and they respond to God's message in four different ways.

Soil #1 – The Hardened Heart.

Read Mark 4:2-4 (ESV) ² *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.*

Read Mark 4:14-15 (ESV) ¹⁴ *The sower sows the word.* ¹⁵ *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.*

Some fell along the path. A path is a walkway. I grew up on 60 acres of land and there were many paths through those fields where people had walked over the years. My mother was always saying to me, “Stay on the path so you won't get chiggers or step on a snake!” We may consider the hardened path through a field as safe but a hardened heart is dangerous. The hardened heart resists the Word of God and makes it easy for Satan, pictured as the birds in the parable, to snatch it away.

Even if a person's disbelief in the Savior may seem so firm you feel there is no need to continue to sow the seed of God's Word in a hardened heart, keep sowing, watering, cultivating. When the birds steal the seeds, just plant more! The sower in Jesus' story did not sow selectively. The sower just sowed! Even hardened ground can become fruitful.

Soil #2 – The Shallow Heart.

Read Mark 4:5-6 (ESV) 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.*

Read Mark 4:16-17 (ESV) ¹⁶ *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.*

Rocky places are not necessarily places covered with rocks. Instead rocky places in Palestine are where the soil covers a stratum or layer of rock – the soil typically being about two or three inches deep. The shallow heart is like thin soil over rock. There is no depth, whatever is planted does not last because it has no roots. A shallow heart is found in the emotional hearer who joyfully accepts God’s Word but does not really understand the price that must be paid to become a genuine Christian.

We had enormous rocks on certain sections of our land. Daddy hated the rocks because those areas were unfit for pasture land. However, those were the places where the wild plum trees, ferns and moss grew. Should a sower “waste seed” on a field that has rock underneath? Jesus said of the seed cast on rocky ground: *And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.* However, God’s Word also tells us in **Psalm 121:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.* We are to plant the seed even on rocky ground since the LORD provides what is needed for harvest! Different soils produce different crops. We are not to judge the soil – we are to sow.

Soil #3 –The Distracted Heart.

Read Mark 4:7 (ESV) ⁷ *Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.*

Read Mark 4:18-19 (ESV) 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.*

On that same property in our yard of all places there was what we called a thorn tree. It was a huge tree where the thorns grew out from the trunk and thorns fell in the yard. And once again, that tree brings a warning memory from my mother – “don’t go barefooted or you will get a thorn in your foot.” While playing in the thorny yard, I needed shoes to protect my feet. As followers of Christ, we are the feet that bring good news even in thorny places. **Isaiah 52:7 (ESV)** ⁷ *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”* The pain of the thorns can hurt even the sower, but the pain is only for a moment. **Psalm 30:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *... Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

The distracted heart pictures the person who receives the Seed of God's Word but it is being crowded out because too many other things are growing in the distracted heart. And yes, we should continue to plant seeds in distracted hearts – calling those hearts to return to their 'first love.'

The question regarding this type of ground is, "Are those who grow in the thorny ground unsaved" or "are they people who just do not bear fruit in their Christian walk?" Jesus said *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***. I believe the distracted heart often belongs to those who have genuinely accepted Christ as Savior but fall short of making Him Lord of their life. Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 3:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ *If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

Soil #4 – The Fruitful Heart.

Read Mark 4:8-9 (ESV) ⁸ *And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.* ⁹ *And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

Read Mark 4:20 (ESV) 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.*

On our land even among the thorns, the rocky places and the hardened paths, there was also good soil. Soil that provided grass for our cattle – those were the beautiful fields. It is such a blessing to plant in the good soil – the soil that responds quickly and begins to bear fruit but with our human eyes we can't always determine the good soil and for that reason not everyone will reap the same amount of fruit. Jesus said in **Matthew 9:37-38 (ESV)** ³⁷ ... *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*

The Sower is Jesus whose death and resurrection initiated an ongoing harvest. **John 12:24 (ESV)** ²⁴ *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* The sower also represents God's people when we die to self for the purpose of sharing the Word of God.

The difficulty we face as "seed sowers" is that we have no idea whether or not we are sowing in hearts that will be receptive. Naturally, we want to plant on fertile ground. However, that is really not our concern. Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* We need to always remember that the good news of God is for everyone – our calling is to be seed sowers by whatever method the Lord has called us to plant His seeds.