

Responding to Jesus Part II: What Will You Do With the Seed?

Mark chapter 4 is basically one story after another. And three of them are farming stories. Who doesn't love a story? Which reminds me of the story about a man driving down an old country road when he sees a farmer with a huge flock of sheep. So, he stops his car, gets out and says to the farmer, "Great lookin' flock of sheep there. Say, I'll bet you a hundred dollars against one of your sheep that I can tell you the exact number of sheep in your flock."

The farmer thinks it over; it's a big flock so he takes the dare.

The man says immediately, "473." The farmer is astonished. The man was exactly right. So, the farmer says, "Okay, I'm a man of my word, so take an animal." The man picks one up and starts back to his car. At which the farmer says, "Hey, wait. Give me a chance to get even. Double or nothing that I can guess your exact occupation."

The man thinks it over and says, "Sure."

The farmer says, "You're an economist for the Federal government."

The man says, "That's amazing! How did you do that?"

The farmer says, "Well, put down my dog and I'll tell ya."ⁱ

To begin our examination of Mark chapter 4, we're going to look first at verses 10 through 12, because there Jesus gives us...

I. The Purpose of Parables.

The purpose of Jesus' parables was to teach truths about His Kingdom. In two of the parables in this chapter today, Jesus prefaces them by saying, "*This is what the kingdom of God is like.*" That's the simple purpose of His parables.

Now, after Jesus told the parable of the soils, the disciples asked him to explain why he told these stories. In verse 11 Jesus says:

The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" (Mk. 4:11-12)

Now, what is Jesus saying here? At first glance, it sounds like He's saying that He's telling parables to hide the truth from certain people so that they won't be saved. Is that what this sounds like to you?

This is one of the most difficult passages to understand in Scripture, but it is understandable if we apply the right tools of interpretation. Pay attention because Jesus is giving you here some very important tools for understanding His Word. **The first tool is: Other Scripture.** Jesus quotes Is. 6:9-10 to explain what He has just said about parables. We've said it before but here we see Jesus doing it Himself; He's using Scripture to interpret Scripture. This is as common a tool for interpretation as a hammer is to a carpenter. You need to use this tool every day.

Now, before we use Isaiah 6 to help us, we need to ask if there are any other Scriptures that speak of whether God purposely hides the truth from people so that they won't be saved. There are many but let me point out one, II Peter 3: 9, which says,

He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

So, this Scripture tells us Jesus can't mean that He's hiding truth so that people won't repent because He and His Father want everyone to repent. So, what IS He saying?

Well, this leads us to the second tool to use here which is the tool of Original Languages. There are actually four languages involved in this passage. Jesus spoke these words in Aramaic, He quoted Hebrew from the Old Testament and all of this was translated first into Greek and then into English. Do you think maybe something could've gotten lost in translation? I believe something was. It's complicated, but in a nutshell, the early Christians translated Hebrew passages into Greek from older manuscripts than we have access to today. That translation is called the Septuagint. Listen to the English translation of this Isaiah passage from the Septuagint:

Ye shall hear indeed, but ye shall not understand; and seeing, ye shall see, and not perceive. For the heart of this people has become gross, and with their ears they hear heavily, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Mark 4:12, Septuagint)

Do you see the difference? In this version the cause of the people not understanding is clearly their own. They have closed their own eyes and ears because their hearts are "gross." This is why we say in our church's statement of faith that we believe that the Bible is "...without error in the original manuscripts..."

But there's a third tool of interpretation demonstrated here. It is the tool of Prayerful Logic. What exactly did Jesus say about the parables? He said that genuine Followers had the "secret" of the kingdom already, but those "outside" needed the parables. So, from the grammar and the logic of His argument, Jesus is really saying that, far from the parables' preventing people from understanding the truth, in fact, they will reveal truth to them. Those who already have the Spirit of God don't need the parables. They can take Jesus' teaching as straight doctrine. But the "outsiders" need the help of truth being covered with the parable. It's like this: why did your mother smother the vegetables she wanted you to eat with cheese sauce? Because when you were a little kid, you weren't mature enough to eat what was good for you. All you would eat is what tasted good! Jesus, for the sake of the immature, smothered His truth with parables, not to HIDE the truth, but to help them digest it because their hearts were hard.

Three tools of interpretation unlock the real meaning of this passage: Scripture interpreting Scripture, Original Languages and Prayerful Logic. With practice, you can learn to use these and other tools to understand any passage of Scripture. Now, let's see...

II. What Does This Parable Mean?

Because Mark recorded Jesus' explanation, the meaning of this parable is actually the easy part. The "seed" is the Word of God, the different soils are people's

hearts or, we might say, their attitude towards the Word of God. The birds are Satan and the thorns are the “worries of this life.” Let’s watch this quick re-telling of the parable:

[Show video: The Seed and the Soils, 1:17 min.]

Now, with all parables we must be careful not to try to make them do too much. Generally, Jesus is making a single, large teaching point with each story. So, trying to find a spiritual lesson from each image in the story is going beyond Jesus’ intention. For example, studying the anatomy of birds to learn about Satan because Jesus says in this parable that the birds represent Satan - that’s going too far. Warren Wiersbe calls these four soils the Hard Heart, the Shallow Heart, the Crowded Heart and the Ready Heart.

So then, what IS Jesus’ main point? Well, He’s saying that His Word is being spread throughout the world and it grows best in a ready heart, represented in His story by “the good soil.” Other soils can receive the Word of God and even see it begin to grow, but none of the other three soils will produce the fruit that the Word of God is intended to produce. Only the soil of the “ready heart” will do that.

How does the seed grow? This parable doesn’t answer that question. The third story in this chapter speaks to the issue of how it grows. It tells of a man scattering seed again and then rather than focusing on the soils, it focuses on the seed itself. It says:

Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself (Greek – *automitay*, *automatically*) the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (Mk. 4:27-29)

So, the message of these two parables together is what? The Word of God is intrinsically powerful. Once it’s planted in the good soil of an open heart, it will produce fruit. It’s not up to the person whether it produces fruit or not. Automatically, “all by itself,” it will produce a crop. All the person has to do is provide a ready heart, good soil, an accepting attitude.

Which brings us to the main purpose of each of Jesus’ parables. The unspoken question at the end of every parable is this...

III. What’s Your Response?

There are 38 parables of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels. He actually told even more than that because Mark 4:34 says:

He did not say anything to them without using a parable.

This is further proof that His use of parables wasn’t to turn people away from the truth but to turn them TOWARDS the truth. And He always told parables in order to stimulate a response. So, what’s your response to these two parables today? I think we generally have one of three responses to any of Jesus’ parables. **The first response** we might have is simply, *“I don’t get it!”* *“I don’t know what He’s driving at.”* It’s like when someone tells a joke and everybody around you is laughing and so you laugh too, but you don’t really see what’s funny. If we don’t get a parable, according to this parable, what does that mean? It means our hearts are NOT ready; there’s no good soil. If you’re a gardener, what kind of soil is good soil for a seed? Good soil for a seed is prepared soil - soil that is tilled, soil that has the rocks removed, soil that is

fertilized. Have you ever left worship here after hearing a sermon and said, "I don't get it! I haven't the foggiest idea what he was talking about!" Let me ask you this: Before you came in, did you prepare your heart? Did you till the soil? Did you say, "Lord Jesus, remove the rocks in my soul. Remove the distractions so that my heart can receive what you want me to receive from your Word today." If your heart is not prepared, the birds, the thorns, the rocks, Satan, the cares of life or your lack of depth will steal the harvest of joy that God wants you to have. You've got to prepare your heart every week!

The second response we can have to a parable is, "Wow! That is one great message! I totally get it and I know exactly who needs that message today. That guy right over there! Boy, God's really speaking to him today!" In other words, we pick up on a message in the parable, but we think it's for somebody else.

Does every parable have a message for every person? We might think, for example, that the parable of the prodigal son only has a message for prodigal sons. Or we might think that the parable of the sheep and the goats only has a message for people who aren't sheep, aren't followers of Christ. But what did we say at the beginning was the purpose of all His parables? His purpose was to teach some truth about His Father's Kingdom. So, each of His parables is giving us another glimpse of what is true, period! Can't everybody, especially all followers of Jesus, benefit from being reminded of some truth about God's kingdom?

Let me make this suggestion: in most of the stories in Scripture, not just the parables but the historically true events as well, it's a worthwhile exercise to ask yourself, "Which character in this story is most like me? Whom do I identify with?" So, in the parable of the soils, which soil best describes your own heart? If we will respond personally like this to each parable, looking for which part is most like us, then we'll have the third possible response to a parable. We'll say, "Yes, I see myself in this story. Lord, at least in part, You've just described me!"

And when we've finally seen ourselves in the parable, what should we do next? We should worship! The Pharisees frequently saw themselves in Jesus' parables, but they refused to worship Him. They saw themselves and thought He was accusing them, judging them. It wasn't Jesus judging them, it was their own hearts judging them. They rejected the conviction of their own hearts and turned their fear and guilt on Him. If they had turned their fear and guilt OVER to Him, they could've been set free! But instead, they held onto their fear and guilt and walked away more guilty than when they came.

But some people heard Jesus' parables, saw themselves in them and were tremendously encouraged. Imagine if you had been doing what Jesus said to do – you were feeding the hungry, inviting strangers in, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison. Then when Jesus told the parable of the sheep and the goats and He said that the king would say to those who had done what you had been doing, ***"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you..."*** How would THAT have made you feel? Wouldn't you have broken into spontaneous praise?

Jesus is not the only prophet who told parables. Nathan came to David after he had sinned with Bathsheba and, at God's prompting, he told him a parable. He told King David of a poor man who had one little lamb that he loved like a daughter.

But one day, a traveler came to visit a rich man in town and though the rich man had hundreds of sheep, he took the poor man's only lamb, killed it and cooked it for dinner for his guest!

When King David heard this story he shouted, *"As surely as the Lord lives, this man deserves to die! He must pay for the lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."* (II Sam. 12: 5, 6) And Nathan said to David,

...You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?"

...Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin." (II Sam. 12:7-9, 13)

Confession is also a part of worship, isn't it? David did what the Pharisees should have done – he worshipped God through confession.

Let me ask you again, where do you see yourself in this parable of the Four Soils? What have you been doing with the Seed of the Word of God this past week? Have you had such a hard heart that the seed bounced off your heart and became easy pickings for the Enemy? Did you have a shallow heart, highly concerned about trivia, but with no concern for the things of God? Or, was your heart crowded this week? Were you so busy that you had no time to spend with the One Who died to free your soul from guilt? Or, was your heart ready this week? When the Word came to you through Scripture reading, or your Bible Study group, or listening to Christian radio or Internet teaching; YOU WERE READY!!! You drank it in like dry ground drinks in a sudden shower!! Which soil best describes your heart this past week?

Whichever one it is, the only right response is worship – Give thanks, give praise, confess, speak to Him, listen for His voice –

**Come, let us worship and bow down:
let us kneel before the LORD our maker.**

**For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Ps. 95:6, 7a KJV)**

Let's do this together right now. Right where you are. Here in the sanctuary, over in The Venue. We're one church in multiple locations and we serve One God. You may want to kneel. As the music begins to play softly, let's come, let's worship, let's bow down. Let's do it right now...