

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 26** and ask **Question #1: If you could become an expert in any field, what would it be?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 27** to the writer's comments about the characteristics of influential teachers.

SAY: "Today we will look at Jesus, the ultimate Teacher, who knew His subject matter perfectly, exuded passion, and cared deeply for people."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 27: Obeying Jesus' teachings leads to fruitful living.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to teach us so that His Word is implanted in our hearts and produces what He intends."

SESSION 2

JESUS TEACHES



The Point

Obeying Jesus' teachings leads to fruitful living.

The Bible Meets Life

The Bible gets a lot of respect in America—at least superficial respect. Eighty percent of adults consider the Bible a holy book (<http://www.americanbible.org/features/state-of-the-bible>), but few read it. Even among Christians,

only 11 percent read the Bible daily, and 34 percent rarely read it (<http://lifewayresearch.com/2013/11/15/bible-engagement-in-churchgoers-hearts-not-always-practiced-2/>). Many of us pay lip service to the Bible but miss out on the joy and abundant life that comes from applying its truth to our lives.

The Passage

Mark 4:1-9

The Setting

After calling four disciples by the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:14-20), Jesus continued His ministry in the surrounding area. While His preaching and miracles attracted crowds, Jesus' activities also troubled the Jewish religious leaders. By reaching out to "the unreachable" members of society and rejecting much of the contemporary interpretations of Jewish law, Jesus threatened the existing establishment (3:6). He also redefined His "family" as those who do the will of God (vv. 31-35).

Mark 4:1-2a

1 Again he began to teach by the sea, and a very large crowd gathered around him. So he got into a boat on the sea and sat down, while the whole crowd was by the sea on the shore.

2a He taught them many things in parables,

KEY WORD: Parables (v. 2)—The Greek term translated *parable* literally means “placed alongside” (a comparison). For Jesus’ audience, parables would have resembled ancient Jewish wisdom literature.

Verse 1. Scripture makes it clear that God plays no favorites (Acts 10:34-35). By sending Jesus into the world, God the Father was affirming His love for every person. The opportunity for a new and vital relationship with Him is available to all. This is the starting point for really understanding the message behind Jesus’ parable of the soils.

The **very large crowd** that gathered around Jesus created a logistical problem for Him as He taught. Jesus resolved this issue by turning the Sea of Galilee into His personal amphitheater. It was the custom of Jewish teachers to sit as they taught, so that would not have been unusual. However, sitting in a **boat** in the lake to teach may have been a bit unusual. Being in the boat provided Jesus more space between Him and the crowd. (The large number of people at these gatherings wanting to be near Jesus at times almost crushed Him. See Mark 3:9; Luke 8:42.) In addition, the water would have resonated His voice like a natural amplifier and allowed everyone **on the shore** to hear His teachings easily.

1 ▶ Verse 2a. Everyone loves a good story, which is what makes a parable such a powerful teaching tool. Jesus taught in parables in part because stories using familiar themes from the everyday lives of the listeners can be captivating and can make difficult concepts more understandable. One definition of parables is “stories, especially those of Jesus, told to provide a vision of life, especially life in God’s kingdom.”¹ Jesus used stories from nature or everyday life primarily “to illustrate spiritual truth.”²

While Jesus’ use of parables could make His teachings more understandable, the parables could also obscure the same teachings for those whose hearts were not tuned in to the message. So, while Jesus made His teachings available

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 4:1-2a



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 28.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Mark 4:1-2a.

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORD** on this page and **PSG page 28** to explain the word *parables*.

GUIDE: Encourage group members to keep four things in mind about the parables of Jesus (**PSG, p. 29**):

1. A parable is a story with a plot.
2. A parable refers to a real-life scenario that would have been familiar to Jesus’ audience.
3. A parable is for the purpose of instruction, not entertainment.
4. A parable teaches one truth. It is not an allegory with many truths hidden inside of it.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** on page 29 and this page to provide more explanation about Jesus' use of parables.

DISCUSS: **Question #2** (PSG, p. 29): **What are the benefits and challenges of using stories to reveal truth?**

(Alternate: What important lessons have you learned through stories?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses we will see how Jesus used a parable about seeds and types of soil to teach people a spiritual lesson."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 4:2b-7



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Mark 4:2b-7.

to everyone, He knew those in the crowds would receive and respond to His words in different ways. Some would hear just a nice story, but listeners who were engaged and ready to go deeper would recognize the personal application involved—Jesus' call to belief in and obedience to Him and His teachings. As one commentator notes, "Jesus did not speak in parables for the purpose of withholding truth from anyone; but the result of his parables, the rest of his teaching, and even his miracles was that most did not understand and respond positively. He did speak in parables to provoke thought and invite commitment [Jesus' parables] constitute spiritual tests that separate those who understand and believe from those who do not."³

Jesus acknowledged this in the parable of the soils. Those closest to Him—followers who would be instrumental in spreading the message of the kingdom—would understand the deeper meanings of the parables, while others might not. The difference would be the condition of one's heart. Reflecting back on God's call to the prophet Isaiah, Jesus reminded the twelve disciples that not all who look really see and not all who hear really listen (Mark 4:10-12). Those who rejected the message would remain stuck in darkness, while those who received it would find true life. ◀

Mark 4:2b-7

2b and in his teaching he said to them:

3 "Listen! Consider the sower who went out to sow.

4 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 didn't have much soil, and it grew up quickly, since the soil wasn't deep.

6 When the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.

7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it didn't produce fruit.

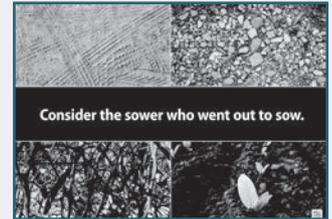
2 ▶ **Verse 2b-3.** Think about a congregation—or a Bible study—gathering on any given morning. In that crowd, some will walk away different than when they arrived. Others will walk out the door as essentially the same people they have been for as long as they can remember. The individual’s spiritual condition makes all the difference. In the parable of the soils, Jesus described the various spiritual conditions of the heart that can either keep people from or allow people to experience spiritual transformation through a relationship with Him.

To encourage His audience to strive for a deeper understanding, Jesus encouraged them to **“Listen!”** This imperative indicated that important information was about to be shared—and that Jesus possessed the authority to share it. It also reminded His listeners that the truths of this parable (or any of His parables for that matter) might not be self-evident. The parables required listeners to think so as to gain insight and understanding. In the broader context of the passage, Jesus’ admonition served as a fitting bookend with His challenge at the end of the parable for His audience to have “ears to hear” (v. 9). It also stands in contrast to the Israelites described by Jesus’ quotation from the prophet Isaiah in verse 12. Although everyone in Jesus’ audience would hear the same parable, they would not all listen in the same manner.

Jesus invited His listeners to **“consider the sower who went out to sow.”** The image of a farmer sowing seeds would have been familiar to Jesus’ audience. Many first-century Jews made their livings as farmers and many more would have enjoyed the benefits of the farmers’ work through the markets of the cities and villages of Galilee. The farmer planted his crop by hand, first sowing the seeds. Wearing an apron which held the seeds, he would broadcast the seeds by hand throughout his fields. After this, he would have plowed the seeds under. The description of the different types of soils in the parable reflects the variety of soil conditions that would have been found in the typical field of first-century Galilee. ◀

In His interpretation of the parable for the twelve disciples (vv. 10-20), Jesus identified the seed as “the word” (v. 14). “The word” could represent the good news of God which Jesus had been proclaiming in Galilee: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15). “The word” could also represent Jesus Himself. “The word sown would therefore be the people’s response to Jesus: would they accept him or not?”⁴

LEADER PACK: Display **Item 3: Four Soils** to help group members visually connect with the different types of soil mentioned in Jesus’ parable. Encourage volunteers to share places where they might find each type of soil in your community.



SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** to give background on:

- *the different types of people represented in any audience.*
- *the imperative to “listen” to the message of Jesus.*
- *how a farmer in the first-century would broadcast seeds by hand.*

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG pages 30-32**, to discover truths about three types of unproductive soils:

- *Hard soil*
- *Rocky soil*
- *Thorn-infested soil*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** to provide insights into the hard-packed soil on a path or walkway.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** on this page and page 33 to provide insights into the rocky ground, where topsoil covered a rocky layer of limestone just below the surface.

GUIDE: Refer group members to the story on **PSG page 31** about the man seeking help for addiction who exemplifies the rocky soil.

Verse 4. In explaining the nature of the four soils, Jesus began with the negatives—focusing on the soils in the farmer's field that turned out to be unproductive. This lack of productivity was to be expected. No matter how much effort the farmer exerted to prepare the ground for the seed, some parts of the field were bound to be problem areas. And since broadcasting seed resembled a kind of "shotgun approach" to planting, some of what the farmer pitched was bound to land in soil that could not produce a crop.

3▶ The first kind of soil mentioned in the parable was the hard-packed ground on the **path** through the field. This would have been a well-worn walkway through the field made of ground that was virtually impenetrable. The seeds that landed on this path would have simply sat on top of the ground, making them easy pickings for birds looking for a quick meal. The seeds would have had no chance of taking root before being gobbled up.

Later in His interpretation, Jesus identified the hard soil as representing a hardened heart that was completely closed to the Word. When the truth concerning the Messiah and salvation through faith in Him hits such an unreceptive heart, that truth is heard with the ears, but it is not received with the heart in such a way so as to be truly understood and so cannot take root. As a result, the enemy (Satan) easily steals it away (Matt. 13:19; Mark 4:15). The Word has no potential for creating spiritual transformation because it cannot penetrate such a hardened heart. Such individuals would fall in James's category of hearers of the Word instead of doers of the Word (Jas. 1:22-24). ◀

4▶ **Verses 5-6.** The next form of unproductive soil was the **rocky ground**. While this soil initially looked better on the surface, the seed that landed on the rocky ground really fared no better than the seed that fell on the hard pathway. With this type of ground, the topsoil covered a rocky layer of limestone just below the surface. Of course, the farmer would have removed as many rocks as possible while preparing the field for sowing, but he would not have been able to do anything about the bedrock.

As a result, when the farmer put out his seed, the portion that fell on the rocky ground had no space to truly take root. Although it sprang up quickly, because the plant was unable to take root its growth was stunted. When harsh conditions created by the sun and a lack of water followed, the plant withered away.

In His interpretation Jesus later identified this type of ground as representing those who initially receive the good news of the gospel with joy, but fail to let the Word sink deeply into their hearts (and lives) (Mark 4:16-17). Truly taking the Word into one's heart is the only way to ensure the kind of life change that yields the obedience and perseverance that characterizes the Christian life. The seed that fell on the rocky soil represents individuals who have no spiritual roots. "When distress or persecution comes because of the word," their true condition is revealed as "they immediately fall away" (v. 17). The initial reception of the Word is short-lived. The societal pressures and hostilities associated with being a follower of Christ are too much for this type of individual, so they stumble and fall away (Matt. 13:21). [Note: The types of people symbolized by the seed falling on the rocky soil and the seed falling among the thorns were never true Christians. This parable is not suggesting that a true believer in Jesus Christ could lose his or her salvation. Once a person places his or her faith in Christ and is saved, through the grace of God that person will persevere in his or her faith throughout this life until he or she goes to be with the Lord in heaven (John 10:27-30; Phil. 1:6).] ◀

5 ▶ Verse 7. The final unproductive soil was ground covered with **thorns**. In a sense, this dirt was the most "productive" of all the unproductive soils. Unlike the first two types of soil, this ground turned out to be very fertile. But while things *could* grow in this dirt, the soil did not yield a crop beneficial to anyone. The thorns that grew alongside the plants from the farmer's seeds choked the plants, keeping them from producing any fruit.

In sharing the meaning behind this image, Jesus compared the thorns to the numerous distractions presented by the world. "The worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). Unlike the rocky soil, which represented those who rejected the Word due to the persecution and hardships related to the Christian life, this "soil" choked out the power of the Word through the worries and the desires related to the things of the world. Instead of focusing on Jesus, His teachings, and extending the kingdom of God, the people symbolized by the seeds planted among thorns allowed the prevailing culture and its trappings to define their priorities (vv. 18-19). ◀

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** to provide insights into the soil covered with thorns. Note the distractions that choke out the power of God's Word to transform our lives.

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 32): **How do you see each of the three soils on display in our culture?**

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 32): **When have you experienced one of the three soils in your own life?**

(Alternate: What obstacles have hindered you from incorporating God's truth in your life?)

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Display rocks, brambles, and potting soil. What rocks make our hearts shallow so God's Word doesn't take root? What thorns choke out the growth of God's Word in our lives? What can we do to cultivate healthy soil where God's Word can thrive?

TRANSITION: "Most of us have experienced the realities of the unproductive soils in our lives. Now let's take a look at the characteristics of productive, fertile soil."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 4:8-9



15 minutes

READ: Read Mark 4:8-9.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 33** to discover truths about the good soil.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** to point out something Jesus added that may have caught His audience by surprise: The good soil produced an unusually abundant harvest.

GUIDE: Refer members to the following paragraph on **PSG page 33:**

Interestingly, Mark recorded this parable of the soils before he wrote of Jesus' other parables. This parable provides a key to Jesus' other teachings, because it addresses our hearts. It's not enough simply to know what Jesus said; what makes a difference is what we do with that truth.

Mark 4:8-9

8 Still other seed fell on good ground and it grew up, producing fruit that increased thirty, sixty, and a hundred times."

9 Then he said, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen."

KEY WORD: Listen (v. 9)—The proof of genuinely listening to Jesus' teachings is living a life of obedience to His commands.

Obeying the truth will produce fruit.

6 ▶ **Verse 8.** In His parable, Jesus made it clear that not all the farmer's ground was useless. When seed fell on **good ground**, the crop was incredibly fruitful. Such seed multiplied itself well beyond the initial investment of the farmer. The return the good ground yielded was **thirty, sixty and a hundred times** the amount of seed planted.

The extent of the harvest in the parable was more than anyone in Jesus' audience would have expected. For a farmer in first-century Galilee, the average return he could have expected would have been seven or eight times the amount of seed sown, with a bumper crop being around ten times. So, the yield enjoyed by the farmer of the parable would have been staggering. It would also have provided the farmer with a substantial amount of seed for the next year's planting, which in turn would have provided the opportunity for an even greater harvest to come. The impact of the harvest from the seed that fell on good soil would have resounded for years to come!

However, the main emphasis is on the soil's ability to produce. The seed sown in good ground reproduced itself on a wide scale. Jesus identified the seed sown on good soil as those people who "hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit" (Mark 4:20). Such people hear the Word of God, understand it and bear fruit (Matt. 13:23). These people take the truth to heart, giving the Word a place to take root and grow. The implication of this includes obedience to Jesus' teaching, which leads to fruit.

Jesus fleshed out this concept of bearing fruit in another agricultural metaphor in John 15:1-8. He noted that believers are like branches connected to the life-giving, true vine of

Christ. Those connected to this vine produce fruit. Those disconnected from this vine end up withering and being discarded as useless. Like the seeds and branches that bear fruit, obedient believers fulfill their purpose for the kingdom by proclaiming the good news of salvation in His name.

When the farmer of the parable went out to sow his seed, he would have known that some of the seed would fall on soil that would yield no harvest. In the same way, when the Word of the gospel is proclaimed, the reality is that there will always be some hearts that will not be receptive to the truth. But just as when the condition of the soil is right the yield will be an abundant harvest, so too when the hearts of people are open to the gospel the Word will yield an incredible spiritual harvest for the kingdom! ◀

7▶ Verse 9. Just as Jesus had opened His parable with an exhortation for the crowd to listen (Mark 4:3), He ended with the words, **“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.”** The crowds of people that surrounded Jesus throughout His ministry “followed” Him for many reasons. Some were curiosity seekers who sought Him out as a teacher and miracle worker. Others came to Him seeking only miraculous cures for their physical ailments. Others were vehemently opposed to Him, and came seeking to test and discredit Him in the eyes of the people. Others were true disciples, those who heeded Jesus’ message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15). While everyone in the crowd would have literally heard the words of Jesus’ parable, only this last group, those who responded by placing their faith in Him as God’s Messiah and obeying His teachings as His disciple, were those who had **ears to hear**. All of the others could not truly hear Jesus’ message because of the condition of their hearts. They were like the bad soils in the parable that yielded no harvest.

Jesus’ words were both a challenge and invitation to the people in the crowd. Jesus *challenged* the people to evaluate the condition of their own hearts—what kind of “soil” were they for the Word of God?⁵ Were Jesus’ words falling on healthy, fertile soil or were they coming to rest on one of the types of unproductive soil? To the individual willing to examine his or her heart, Jesus’ words were an *invitation* to respond to that evaluation by turning to Jesus in repentance and faith, becoming a disciple obedient to His teachings. ◀

1. Peter Rhea Jones, “Parables” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. ed. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 1215.

2. James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 77.

3. *Ibid.*, 83.

4. Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, vol. 2 in *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 68.

5. *Ibid.*, 67.

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORD** on page 34 (**PSG, p. 33**) to provide additional explanation to the word *listen*.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 7** to give further insight to Jesus’ conclusion, including His admonition for the crowd to listen.

DISCUSS: **Question #5 (PSG, p. 34):** How do we cultivate good soil in our lives in order to produce a bountiful harvest?

(Alternate: What kind of “fruit” should be evident in our lives when we obey Jesus’ teaching?)

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity **“Soils: Which One Describes You?”** on **PSG page 34**.

LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:** **Obeying Jesus' teachings leads to fruitful living.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 35)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Encourage group members to take to heart the words of Jesus. Pay attention to His words and consider the condition of the soils of your hearts.

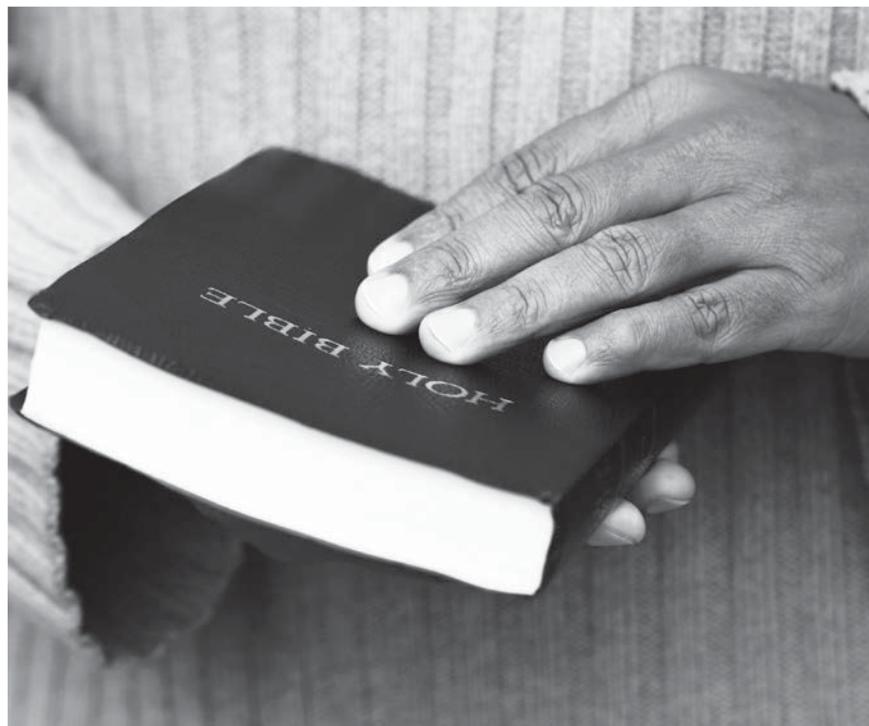
PRAY: "Father, may your Spirit work in our lives to cultivate soil that is productive, that will produce a bountiful harvest."

LIVE IT OUT

What do you need to do to obey God's Word? Consider taking one of these steps:

- ▶ **Weed.** Think about your own personal obedience to God's Word. Are there any things in your life that hinder your ability to obey Him? Pray and give those things to God that are keeping you from fully trusting Him and wholeheartedly following Him.
- ▶ **Water.** Make Scripture reading a daily part of your life. Each day, note what God says in His Word and consider what you need to do to obey Him.
- ▶ **Sow.** Create a plan for sharing what God is teaching you through His Word. Use social media to tell others. Meet someone for lunch whom you can encourage to read Scripture and obey God's teaching.

Doing these things will cultivate soil that is fertile and productive.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Arab farmer plowing in rocky Judean wilderness soil.

The Lord promised Moses Israel would find “a land flowing with milk and honey” when they left Egypt (Ex. 3:8). “For the land you are entering to possess is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated by hand as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are entering to possess is a land of mountains and valleys, watered by rain from the sky” (Deut. 11:10-11).

Jesus described typical Galilean farming practices in His parable of the sower and the soils (Matt. 13:1-9). Seed was sown by hand, scattered over plowed ground.

Liberal amounts of seed would fall on a variety of soil conditions. With a second plowing, most of the seed would then be sown into “good soil” (v. 8), the deep basaltic soils that customarily supported grain crops. A good portion of the seed would fall on shallow ground covering the basalt rocks. Jesus’ reference to the threat of the scorching sun (v. 6) may indicate a summer crop since winter crops were harvested by mid-May. Inevitably, some seed would be folded into ground harboring weeds, the perennial pest of all farmers. Some seed would even be lost on the footpaths that divided farm plots. Exposed seed was prime bird feed (v. 4; see 6:26!). Although Jesus did not include in His parable the essential element in successful farming—rain—His description of the sower and the soils conformed to common knowledge.

The excerpt above is from the article “The Soils of Israel” (Winter 1996), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Life is rich and full as we obey the teaching of Jesus, and our first act of obedience is to trust Him as Lord and Savior.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

**GROUPS
MATTER.**

Grow with other group leaders at the [Groups Ministry blog](#).

LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry