



SESSION 2

JESUS TEACHES

The Point

Obedying Jesus' teachings leads to fruitful living.

The Passage

Mark 4:1-9

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, but few read it.¹ Even among Christians, only 11 percent read the Bible daily, and 34 percent rarely read it.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 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).

1. <http://www.americanbible.org/features/state-of-the-bible>

2. <http://lifewayresearch.com/2013/11/15/bible-engagement-in-churchgoers-hearts-not-always-practiced-2/>

What does the Bible say?

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.

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

Mark 4:1-9 (CSB)

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.**

² **He taught them many things in parables, 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.**

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.”**

Mark 4:1-2a Commentary

Verse 1: 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 (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.

Verse 2a: Everyone loves a good story, which is part of 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 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 verses following the parable of the soils. He noted that those closest to Him—those 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.

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.

Mark 4:2b-7 Commentary

Verses 2b-3. The image of a farmer sowing seeds would have been familiar to Jesus' audience. Many first-century Jews made their livings as farmers. The farmer planted his crop by hand, first sowing the seeds. 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 (1:14-15). It could also represent Jesus Himself. "The word sown would therefore be the people's response to Jesus: would they accept him or not?"⁴

Verse 4: The first kind of soil mentioned was the path, a well-worn walkway through the field made of ground that was virtually impenetrable. The seeds that landed on this path had no chance to take root. They simply sat on top of the ground, making them easy pickings for birds looking for a quick meal. Jesus later identified the path as representing a hardened heart that was completely closed to the Word (v. 15). The message of the gospel is heard, but it doesn't penetrate the heart in such a way as to be truly understood. The enemy (Satan) easily steals it away (Matthew 13:19; Mark 4:15).

Verses 5-6: The next soil mentioned was the rocky ground, bedrock covered by a thin layer of topsoil. The seed that fell on the rocky ground had no space to truly take root. Although it sprang up quickly, when harsh conditions created by the sun and a lack of water followed, the plant withered away. 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); they have no spiritual roots (Mark 4:16-17). 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 (Matthew 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; Philippians 1:6).]

Verse 7: The next soil was ground covered with thorns. While things could grow in this dirt, the thorns that grew in this soil choked the plants, keeping them from producing any fruit. Jesus compared the thorns to the numerous distractions presented by the world. This type of "soil" choked out the power of the Word through the worries and the desires related to the things of the world (Mark 4:18-19).

Mark 4:8-9 Commentary

Verse 8: 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. 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. However, the true meaning of the parable does not rest only in numbers. Rather, the main emphasis is on the soil’s ability to produce. As with Jesus’ parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the emphasis is on making the most of what was provided. In the parable of the talents, the faithful servants increased what they were given. Similarly, in the parable of the soils the seed sown in good ground reproduced itself on a wide scale.

Jesus identified “those like seed sown on good ground” as those people who “hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit” (Mark 4:20). Such people not only hear the Word of God, but understand it and thereby bear fruit (Matthew 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.

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.

Verse 9: Just as Jesus had opened His parable with an exhortation for the crowd to listen (v. 3), He ended with the words, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.” Jesus’ words were both a challenge to the crowd to examine their hearts (what type of soil were they?) and an invitation to follow Jesus by answering His call and becoming one of His disciples.⁵ While everyone in the crowd would have literally heard the words of Jesus’ parable, only those who responded to Jesus’ call 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 in the crowd, who followed Jesus for any other reason, 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.

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

5. *Ibid.*, 67.

