

An Explanation That Demands an Explanation  
Mark 4:1-20

## OUR GOSPEL REQUIREMENT

There are four parables recorded in Mark chapter four that are there for a reason. The reason is not only that Jesus gave them and therefore they fit into biographical narrative of His life. They are recorded in God's word first of all because each of them has a message of gospel hope and life for those who have ears to hear. They are also recorded for us because all of them together have a message for those who have committed their lives to following Jesus: **offering the world an invitation to the hope and life that comes only through the gospel.**

Together these four parables layout Christ's requirement for Christians, for those who truly follow Jesus. **It is the requirement of new life to share the gospel with the world, or, using the metaphor of the first parable in the series, to sow the seed of the word into the hearts of people living in the world.** No matter who they are, where they live, or the conditions of their heart, God has good news for people. The gospel we have received, the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come from God to rescue us from the peril presented by our sin; the news that through Christ's death on the cross in our place on our behalf we can find forgiveness of sin and freedom from guilt; **that news is to be spread by the followers of Jesus throughout the whole world.**

What comes of the gospel in any individual life is inherent in the nature of the gospel. Results are in the hands and heart of God. Paul writes in Romans 1:

*I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Romans 1:16 (ESV)*

The gospel, the good news of Jesus whom He came to live and declare is the power of God to change hearts and lives, and through changed lives, change the world.

The good news of God's saving grace through Christ is like a lamp that is made to shine, like a seed that grows without the farmer's assistance, and like a seed that grows beyond all expectations. **The responsibility of each Christian, as they live their life of faith in the world and before God is to faithfully proclaim the gospel in word and deed in every situation, at every opportunity.** The harvest belongs to God. The sowing belongs to us.

With that big picture of our calling to personal gospel ministry in mind, we're going to look at each of these parables individually, starting with the parable of the four soils.

## EIGHT CHARACTERISTICS OF PARABLES

Parables are unique expressions of God's truth. As Jesus used them they have eight (8) characteristics worth keeping in mind:

1. Parables provide insight into the nature, coming, growth, and consummation of the kingdom of God. They give us pictures of this kingdom that "has come near"

(1:15).

2. Parables are by design provocative and surprising.
3. Parables are used to stimulate thinking and cause the hearer to contemplate what they are hearing.
4. Parables use everyday objects, events, and circumstances to illustrate spiritual truth, usually with a new twist.
5. Parables reveal more truth to those with receptive ears, and they hide truth from others. This is critical to understanding 4:10-12.
6. Parables make up 35 percent of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels.
7. Parables usually, but not always, focus on a single truth. We should not allegorize them seeking a meaning for every detail.
8. Parables in the Gospels ultimately draw attention to Jesus as God's Messiah and call us to make a personal decision concerning Him.

*Akin, D. L., Platt, D., & Merida, T. (2014). Exalting Jesus in Mark. Nashville, TN: Holman Reference.*

Did you take note of number 5: Parables reveal more truth to those with receptive ears, and they hide truth from others. When we come to the parable of the soils, Jesus provides an explanation of the parable to His disciples, but, in his explanation he makes a statement that demands an explanation. It is that statement we want to draw your attention to this morning.

### **AN EXPLANATION THAT DEMANDS AN EXPLANATION**

Since Jesus explains the parable of the soils to His disciples, I am very happy to let His explanation stand:

***<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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." Mark 4:13-20 (ESV)***

Each soil type in the parable represents the potential condition of the human heart relative to the word of God, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. Christ sows the word of God and people encounter the life-giving, life-changing word in one of four ways. They resist the word. They receive the word lightly. They receive the word unfruitfully. They receive the word productively. The comparison that conveys Christ's point is between fruitful hearers and those in whom the gospel is fruitless. The implied questions are, "Which one are you?" and "Wouldn't you rather have a fruitful heart?"

In between Jesus' telling the parable and interpreting the parable to His disciples is the explanation that demands an explanation. The disciples come to Jesus and ask Him about the parable. Jesus responds like this:

*<sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." Mark 4:11-12 (ESV)*

## ESSENTIAL Q & A

Here's the question we want to answer: "Why? Why does Christ want the people to not perceive, not understand, not be forgiven?" The key to answering this question resides in the comparison Jesus makes between His disciples, to whom has been given the secret of the kingdom, and "those outside." What does Jesus mean by "those outside"? In terms of the parable, He means the hard, rocky, thorny hearted people, but let's take a closer look at what it means to be "outside."

Let's start by going back to the beginning.

*Genesis 1:26-27 (ESV) <sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." <sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

When God created human beings He created them in His image, in His likeness. That means He created them to bear His character, His moral existence in the world. They were to be like Him in holiness and love and justice and righteousness. They were love to and manifest God's glory in the world, as the physical representation of God's own heart among creation. Those who looked at humanity were to see in the creature the moral and spiritual likeness of the Creator.

But, then comes Genesis three and human sin and God's curse. And then comes the startling revelation of Genesis 5:3,

*When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.*

Adam begets progeny in his image, like him, not like God. Sinners, not saints. Cursed, not blessed. Everyone born of Adam bears Adam's moral image. Everyone after Adam bears Adam's sin and guilt, by nature and by choice. That's why Paul can write, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We are all like Adam whose image we bear.

Look at the course of human history. From Adam to Noah sin does not correct itself through human development and sociopolitical proliferation. Instead, left to their own sinful nature, humanity goes from bad to worse. As God reviews humanity in the days of Noah we find,

***<sup>5</sup> The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup> And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Genesis 6:5-6 (ESV)***

Can you just imagine the corruption and decline that must have been present to go from “And God saw that it was very good” to God saw “the wickedness of man was great,” to go from resting in from His creative work in satisfaction to destroying His creation in grief?!

When Jesus speaks of “those outside” who will not perceive or understand or accept the forgiveness of God offered in the parables, He is not speaking of innocent hearts just waiting for a Savior. He is speaking of those whose thoughts of the heart are only evil continually. These are those who, like Jeremiah exclaims, have hearts that are “desperately wicked.” These are they of whom Paul reminds us in the third chapter of Romans:

***<sup>9</sup> What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, <sup>10</sup> as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” <sup>13</sup> “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” <sup>14</sup> “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” <sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup> in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they have not known.” <sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:9-18 (ESV)***

Jesus is not saying He desires people to perish. Remember our illustration of the escalator of life? Every human being rides the down escalator on account of the sin and guilt we inherit from Adam and actuate on our own. We are already perishing. When God saves some and not others, it is not as though we are all on the up elevator of innocence headed for glory, then God steps in and affirms some but relocates the rest to the down elevator of destruction bound for hell. No, we are already perishing when God saves us!

We are all riding the down escalator AND most of us, by nature, want to be there. Sin and death are not only our nature, they are our choice. What God does is rescue some and turn them around, through the gospel, the word sown in their hearts, through faith in Jesus, so that their life journey is now away from the coming condemnation. He turns them around to head up the down the escalator.

Jesus use of parables does not specifically represent a desire that people not perceive truth, not understand, or not be forgiven. That desire would violate John 3:16,

***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.***

Jesus’ use of parables simply highlights the spiritual reality that accounts for the four soil types

we hear of in the parable of the soils. In this world, the majority of people will not respond productively to the gospel, BUT SOME WILL! **The parable of the soils and the other three parables urge us, if we understand this truth, to love the gospel and be productive.**

### **IF ISAIAH SIX THEN ISAIAH FIFTY-THREE**

Jesus uses Isaiah 6:9-10 in His explanation as a means of showing He is the fulfilment of prophecy, He is the One through whom, if any are to be rescued, rescue will come, when they embrace the gospel.

Take heart. If Jesus is the fulfilment of one Isaiah prophecy, He is the fulfilment of all Isaiah prophecy related to Messiah. That means He is not only the fulfilment of Isaiah 6:9-10, but of Isaiah 53 as well:

*<sup>1</sup> Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*

*<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? <sup>9</sup> And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

*<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. <sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.*

*<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was*

*numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:1-12 (ESV)*

The good news for sinners perishing in sin and guilt is that God has sent for us a Savior, Jesus Christ, God's Son. Jesus has borne our sins in His body to the cross. He has carried our sorrows and endured in Himself the justice of God rightly poured out in death. He has been pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, chastised to gain us peace, and wounded that we might be healed. Through Christ and through Christ alone many will be accounted righteous, as they put their faith in Him, and He shall bear their iniquities.

Do you have ears to hear today? Is the soil of your heart hard, rocky, thorny? Or is your heart ready to receive the good news of God's saving mercy and grace in Jesus?

*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (ESV)*

The end for a hard heart, a stony heart, a thorny heart, unless repentance and faith come to change them, their end is death. But God freely gives eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Confess your sins and turn from them. Trust God's promise in Christ to forgive your sins. Seek God's forgiveness. Gain gets promise. Let the gospel sown today in your life, bring forth its harvest of mercy and new life.

Christian, the world perishes. There is seed to be sown that will change the lives of many. **You have received the word of God sown in your life, now be faithful, be productive, sow the seed into other lives.**