

And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat *in it* on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: ³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ⁵ Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ⁷ And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ But other *seed* fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." ⁹ And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" ¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ And He said to them, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, ¹² so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And *their* sins be forgiven them.'" ¹³ And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. ¹⁶ These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; ¹⁷ and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. ¹⁸ Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept *it*, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." ²¹ Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? ²² For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." ²⁴ Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. ²⁵ For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him." ²⁶ And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." ³⁰ Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? ³¹ *It is* like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; ³² but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade." ³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear *it*. ³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

Introduction

To understand Chapter 4: v. 1-34 we need to focus our attention on verses 33-34.

In these verses we are told that Jesus used mainly parables for His teaching. However, when He was alone with His disciples, He explained the full meaning of His parables.

We also need to notice why Jesus spoke in parables and for what purpose?

verse 10-12.

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Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah Chapter 6: v. 9-10 in order to support the method of His teaching.

The first question we need to ask is “what is a parable?”

A parable in simple terms is a story that is told about what people can understand in order to point them to a spiritual truth.

Very often a parable is a comparison between a simple earthly picture and a single spiritual truth.

We are told that they are intended for “hearing” and not “reading”.

So the best way to understand a parable as a teaching tool is to speak it aloud and then ask, “What is the simple single truth that Jesus is teaching in this parable?”

Jesus mainly taught the crowds in open fields in the countryside.

Jesus used word pictures from the natural setting to illustrate kingdom principles. (Spiritual Principles)

One of the many reasons why Jesus chose this method was to avoid controversy with the scribes and Pharisees.

Parables can appear to have many meanings; they are not direct and can't be easily discerned.

Therefore, the enemies of Jesus would find it difficult to oppose His teaching and accuse him of wrong doing.

Perhaps the main reason for Jesus teaching in parables was a way of awakening the minds of those people who were really willing to begin a “search and discovery” mission after the truth that Jesus was teaching.

In other words, Jesus was trying to reach into the hearts of those people who were “really interested” in knowing spiritual truth.

Many people came to Jesus for what they wanted to receive in physical terms, like healing etc. but they had little interest in the main reason why Jesus came to this earth from the glory of Heaven.

In the passage that I read there are three parables and an application.

Mark has made it very easy for us to understand this section, so there is nothing complicated in these verses.

1. Parable of the Sower – v. 1-20.

Mark makes it very easy for us with this first parable.

He records the parable and then he tells us Jesus's explanation of the parable.

Jesus was out in the open, teaching from a boat to avoid getting crushed by the crowd.

There were fields all around him.

These fields were very open without fencing or gates.

Between these fields were pathways of very hard earth that were used to divide the ground into sections so that people knew which part of the field was their own ground.

This hard ground was called the “wayside”

Jesus starts His parable by telling us that a farmer went out to sow some seeds and some of that seed fell on the hard ground of the “wayside”.

There was no chance that this seed would ever grow. It was easy pickings for the birds. They enjoyed the meal.

Jesus then says that some of the seed fell on stony ground.

If you know anything about sowing seeds or planting small flowers, you will know that the first thing you must do is to remove stones from the ground if you want your seeds to have room to grow.

Jesus explains that the seed suddenly sprang up and a plant started to grow, but there was no way for the plant to take root and get nourishment from the soil.

The stones were in the way.

Jesus tells us that some seed fell among the thorns.

However eventually the thorns choked the plant and it yielded no crop.

Finally, Jesus tells us that some seed fell on “Good Ground” and it grew well and produced a wonderful crop.

If you didn't know the meaning of this parable you would think that Jesus was giving you a lesson in agriculture.

You might think that if I wanted to get a good crop from any seed that I sow then I had better make sure that I clear all the weeds and stones, and dig the earth so that it is nice and soft.

If you thought that, you would be right, it is a good lesson in how to sow seed to produce a good crop.

However, if that is all you learnt, you would miss out on the spiritual meaning of this parable. Today we don't have to miss out on the spiritual meaning; Mark explains to us what Jesus told His disciples.

We are told in v. 14 that the seed is the word of God, the Bible.

The various situations presented to us are the reactions of people when they hear God's word. There are 4 hearers in these verses.

1. The hearer that is not interested. He allows Satan to immediately remove the benefit of God's word from his mind and his heart. This person will block out from their mind everything that would benefit them in a spiritual way.
2. The hearer with his own personal agenda. In the context of the situation this would include people who came to Jesus for healing and were willing to follow Him provided it didn't cost them anything. This applies to people who fail to really understand the truth of the Gospel message.
These people are attracted by something in Christianity that they like but they are not drawn by the Holy Spirit and under conviction of sin. They don't see the worth of the death of Jesus on the cross.
They are not touched by the sacrifice of Jesus for their sins.
When these people hit hard times they drift away because they lack the experience of the New Birth.

John clearly tells us about the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who become real Christians.

John Chapter 16: v. 5-15.

⁵ "But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?'
⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. ¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³ However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you.

A true believer will know the reality of sin, righteousness and judgement. A hearer with a personal agenda is not really aware of these three important things as a personal reality in their lives.

3. The hearer who allows the distractions of the world to choke his faith. There may be many reasons why these hearers fall away. The main reason given here in v. 19 is the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches.
Some people profess to be believers in Jesus Christ but eventually the things of this world become more important to them. They drift away and let the things of this world be their main focus.
4. The hearer with an open and prepared heart.
This is where a person's heart is prepared in advance by God's Holy Spirit.
This person accepts God's word for what it says.
They don't argue about it or try to change it to suit themselves.
They agree with it and try to obey it.

Their lives bear fruit and they display the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

We don't need to say very much about this parable as it is explained to us.

The main thing for us is to make sure that our hearts are always open to receive God's word as it is spoken to us as we read and hear the Bible.

The next parable is the parable of the growing seed in v. 26-29.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus emphasizes the part of the hearer in receiving the seed of the gospel.

If we are not careful we can think that Salvation is all about the hearer and his good works.

Over the last 100 years many Christians have emphasized two opposite spiritual truths.

One group has pushed the angle of human responsibility for Salvation. They have focused all their energies in this area.

On the other hand, another group have gone to the other extreme and said, "God doesn't need you, He can work without you."

Taking both of these views to an extreme will end up in heresy.

This is why Jesus brings in the parable of the growing seed in order to balance up the parable of the sower.

There are two points to note in this parable.

1. Truth grows beyond man's knowledge.

In v. 27 we are told that man doesn't know how God's word operates in the spiritual realm. Nobody really knows how a human seed operates.

We know we put it into the ground but we are not really sure how it actually grows.

Many preachers and teachers of God's word try to work out methods and ideas of how God's word operates and then they try to manipulate God's word to get results.

The result is that often you get human results, and not spiritual results.

Often the Holy Spirit is by-passed and human persuasion influences people, and they fail to get born again.

We need both. We need man to proclaim the truth of God's word, but we also need the Holy Spirit to work through God's word.

Over 30 years ago at Bible College I read a book called "God among the Zulus"

It is a book written by a German author called Kurt Koch who used to investigate "revivals" to discover if they were true or not.

He tells the story about an evangelist who went from town to town preaching the gospel in big tent missions.

Many people came forward at the meetings and wanted to become Christians. The evangelist thought that his missions were a great success.

A few years later he went back to these towns to discover how these new Christians were getting on.

In nearly all of the cases they had fallen away and were back in worldly ways and did not attend Church.

The evangelist was so upset that he asked God what the problem was.

God told him that he, the evangelist, was the problem.

God said that you are getting converts through human persuasion and it is not the genuine work of my Holy Spirit.

The evangelist went away and fasted and prayed for many days. After this at his first mission in Zulu Land a Revival broke out and some amazing things happened.

Many people genuinely became Christians, people were set free from demons, people were healed of incurable diseases, and even one woman, who was pronounced dead, was raised to life like Lazarus.

The difference with this mission was that God was at work through His Holy Spirit.

God got the glory and the evangelist became a channel for God to work through.

There is power in human persuasion, but we don't want that. We need the genuine work of God's Holy Spirit.

This is what Mark is trying to tell us here in these verses.

2. Truth goes beyond man's control.

In v. 28 we are told that the earth yields crops by itself.

Once a seed has been planted into good soil, man has no more influence upon that seed.

Of course the sun needs to shine, and you need rain, but man can't make the sun shine or make it rain.

So the idea here is to try and balance up human responsibility with God's work of blessing His word in prepared hearts.

I tell people that my Christian theology is like a train that runs on two rails. One of those rails is called, "Human responsibility" and the other rail is called "Divine Sovereignty".

If you take one of these rails away, then the train crashes and you are in a bit of a mess.

So the parable of the sower and the parable of the growing seed are side by side in order to balance our thinking on the subject of God's word and its influence and impact upon people.

We have a responsibility to present God's word, and God has a responsibility to operate in prepared hearts.

The final parable is the parable of the mustard seed in v. 30-32.

The purpose of this parable is "encouragement".

We are told that the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds that you can grow, but when it is fully grown it is a very large plant.

This parable encourages us to persevere in our seed sowing of God's word to prepared hearts.

Growth takes time, and we are not always around to see the blessing of that growth.

Once we stop sowing God's word, we can't expect to see anything happen.

So we need to continually go forth weeping as the Psalmist says and one day we will rejoice, that God has worked through His word. (Psalm 126: v. 6)

Many years ago there was a little children's club.

Only one little boy professed faith in Jesus Christ.

The Teacher was disappointed.

However, the little boy's name was Billy Graham, and later on the teacher might well have thought about this parable of the mustard seed.

It is "always" worth sowing God's word.

We need to ask God to direct us to prepared hearts.

Finally, there is the passage in v. 21-25 about light under a basket.

The purpose of a light or a lamp is to shine in the darkness.

This section is an encouragement to pass on and share God's word.

The Bible is not just for private Bible studies in Churches, it is for sharing with people who are not attending Churches.

This week on Monday night and Tuesday afternoon I had the privilege of sharing God's word at the wake and funeral of Hiroyuki Nishimura.

It was a wonderful opportunity and I am trusting God to use His word to produce something in the hearts of the people who came.

Let us pray for God to do His work in the hearts of people, through His word.

Most of the people who we need to reach with God's word are not found in Churches on a Sunday.

Therefore, we need to go out and find them and present God's word to them.

May God help us to do that this spring.