

The Parable of the Soils: Mark 4:1-20
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, May 9, 2010

We continue our study in the Gospel of Mark this morning, and our passage today contains a familiar parable. It is the parable of the soils, also known as the parable of the sower. But the emphasis in the parable is on the different kinds of soil that either receive or reject the seed. So we'll call it the parable of the soils.

Mark is a fast-paced Gospel, as you may have already seen. The word "immediately" shows up quite a bit. The story moves quickly from one scene to the next. This Gospel account is driven by the narrative of Jesus' ministry and in only two places does it press the pause button on that narrative to record longer teaching sections. Chapter 4 is one of these places. We have in verses 1-20 the parable of the soils, and then following this are three more parables. The other extended teaching section is the Olivet Discourse in chapter 13.

Here in 4:1-20 we have this profound and paradigmatic parable. It is profound in that it reveals to us some deep realities about the true nature of salvation. And it is paradigmatic in that it shows us the purpose of all the parables. As Jesus says to the disciples in verse 13, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all parables?" In other words, if you get this one, you'll get the others. If you don't get this one, you won't get any of them.

Last week we studied Mark 3:20-35, which is a story within a story. There is the story of Jesus and His family, and sandwiched in between is the story of Jesus interacting with the scribes and warning them about the eternal sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Our passage this morning has a similar structure. There is the parable and the explanation of the parable, and sandwiched in between are Jesus' words about the purpose of the parables.

I want to tell you at the outset that this is a chilling passage. Jesus speaks about weighty things. He communicates realities that may be disturbing to us. This parable, as we study it together, may challenge certain assumptions that you've had about salvation. And it is of tremendous importance that we understand what Jesus is saying here. In case you haven't noticed, Jesus is not a lighthearted communicator. He is not a comedian. He is not speaking to entertain or amuse. He is definitely not trying to make people feel good about themselves. He boldly preaches the truth—about Himself and about us. And for those who heed His call, it is the greatest news imaginable. For those who reject Him, though, there is judgment. So as you sit here today let there be a reverence

and awe in your heart toward the words of Jesus. Let there be fear and trembling as we sit under the authoritative Word of God. Heaven and hell are at stake here. Eternal consequences are on the line. And Jesus wants our attention. Ten times in this chapter He speaks of listening, hearing. He wants us to pay attention to this. So let's pray that our attentiveness and our reverence will match the gravity of what we're studying. And let's pray that God will give us ears to hear.

I'm going to read our passage, and then pray. And then what we're going to focus on this morning is the purpose of the parables, which Jesus explains in verses 10-12. And next week we'll study the 4 different types of soil that Jesus describes in this parable: the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, and the good soil.

The passage begins by describing the setting. Jesus is beside the sea, that is, the Sea of Galilee. We're not told exactly where, but it's interesting to know that near Capernaum there is a natural amphitheater that extends up from the water. The land slopes upward in such a way that the acoustics are excellent. They call this the "Bay of Parables," and Israeli scientists have verified that a person could speak effortlessly in this place and be heard by thousands of people sitting in this natural amphitheater.¹ This could have been the place, where on this occasion, Jesus got into a boat and spoke to the immense crowd.

Verses 3-8 record the parable itself. Jesus told a lot of parables, and the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record about 60 of them. None are found in the Gospel of John. The word parable literally means to set something alongside something else. The Greek word is *parabolē*. *Para-*, like parallel. It is to place something alongside another thing. And the purpose is to make a comparison that will be instructive in some way. Jesus, of course, is the greatest teacher who has ever walked this earth, and He used these illustrations and analogies with amazing skill. Jesus used images here that would have been very familiar to his listeners. They knew about sowing seed, and they knew the kinds of results one would get from different kinds of soil. In His explanation of the parable in verses 14-20, Jesus shares exactly how this story of the sower and the seed and the soils illustrates spiritual realities, but in verses 3-8 He doesn't give any indication as to the meaning of the parable. He simply tells the story and then ends it in verse 9 by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." The first word in verse 3 and the last word in verse 9 is the same word in the Greek. It's the same command. Listen! Hear! Jesus demands our attention at the outset, and concludes by exhorting us again to hear and heed what He is saying.

¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), page 126.

But what Jesus is about to say in verses 10-12 makes it clear that not everyone has ears to hear. Some are already hardened, like the scribes in the previous passage who said that Jesus was demonic. They don't have ears to hear. Their ears are closed. And that prepares us to understand what Jesus says in verses 10-12 about the purpose of the parables.

The Purpose of the Parables

The scene changes here in verse 10 to sometime afterwards when Jesus was alone with the disciples. The crowd is not in the picture now. It's just the 12 disciples and "those around him." That phrase, "those around him," is the same phrase that was used in 3:34 where Jesus looked about at those who sat "around him," and He said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." It's a similar group in this scene. It's those who are following Jesus, those who are His true family, those who are doing the will of God.

This group of followers ask Jesus about the parables. The story itself was easily understood. Everyone who heard it would have identified with what Jesus was talking about. But the spiritual reality that Jesus was laying it alongside of was not understood. Nobody could discern that. So the disciples ask Him about this privately. In Jesus' response He makes a clear distinction between two kinds of people. In verse 11 He says, "*To you* has been given the secret [mystery] of the kingdom of God, but for *those outside* everything is in parables."

The first group is greatly blessed. They are the ones who have been given ears to hear. They have been supernaturally and sovereignly drawn to Christ. The eyes of their hearts have been opened to see that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. They have been granted the willingness and the desire to repent and believe in the gospel. They have been granted the humility to be teachable, to be attentive to Jesus' words, to seek further understanding. They are being changed into individuals who do the will of God. To these followers Jesus gives the amazing privilege of illumination. He explains the parables to them. Later in the chapter, in verse 34 it says, "He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything." What a privilege! What a blessing!

And here in verse 11 it says, "*To you* has been *given* . . ." That's a divine passive. God is the One who has given this gift, this revelation, this illumination. It's not something they went out and obtained on their own. They do not have this knowledge because they're really smart and were able to figure it out. It's not

something they worked for and earned. It was given to them. It was God's pleasure to reveal this to these individuals.

The Secret of the Kingdom of God

And what is it that He revealed: “the secret [mystery] of the kingdom of God.” When we encounter this word “mystery” in the New Testament we have to realize that we're not talking about an unsolved mystery or a mystery novel where you have to search for clues and once you've gathered enough information you can finally connect the dots and expose the truth. *Mystērion* in the New Testament refers to something that is concealed and revealed by God. And it has to be revealed by God. It's not something we can figure out on our own, no matter how smart we are or how hard we try. Because it's not about gathering facts. It's not merely about have the right evidence. It involves a spiritual transformation. It requires regeneration. God has to do a work in our hearts to make us willing and eager to see the truth. Because in our sin the truth can be staring us in the face and we'll refuse to acknowledge it.

To the true followers of Jesus, this mystery has been graciously revealed. And this mystery has to do with the kingdom of God. It has to do with the fact that the Messiah has broken onto the scene of history in a glorious, yet unexpected way. He has inaugurated the kingdom. He has come in power and authority, with new teaching and miracles. And yet He has also come in a humble and lowly way, not as a political ruler, not as a military force. He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises, but not in the way that the people were anticipating.

Tom Schreiner, in his *New Testament Theology*, says, “The Jews expected the kingdom to arrive in apocalyptic power, sweeping away all opponents. But this parable reveals that the message of the kingdom does not operate initially in this manner. In and through the preaching of Jesus the kingdom is successful only in some hearts. The whole world is not changed dramatically, and yet the kingdom is at work; it is operating in the world, transforming hearts through the message of the kingdom. Still, some people resist the message of the kingdom and refuse to believe. This parable communicates the secret of the kingdom: it is already here through the preached word, but the day of judgment is reserved for the future.”² So the mystery or secret of the

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), page 60. See also William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), page 154-55: “The coming of the Kingdom of God is thus presented in comprehensive terms which call attention both to its present and to its future aspects. A common supposition—shared apparently by John the Baptist, Jesus' disciples and the multitude—was that the Kingdom of God meant harvest, judgment,

kingdom of God has much to do with this idea of the already / not-yet. The kingdom has already been inaugurated in the person and preaching and power of Jesus, but it has not yet been consummated. It didn't all happen at once, like the Jews were expecting. Rather than coming in all of its fullness and glory, the kingdom came as a seed. It came like a mustard seed, as we'll look at later in this chapter. These are the things that confused and perplexed the multitudes. And these are the things that were revealed to the disciples.

The Grace of Divine Revelation

Let's just pause for a moment at this point and marvel at the fact that God has revealed these things to us. If you are believing in Christ, if you delight in Him and cling to Him and follow Him, that is all owing to the grace of God in your life. You didn't figure that out on your own. You didn't solve the mystery with your cleverness. You didn't uncover the secret through your diligent study. Your knowledge and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is a miracle that God performed in you. He gave you ears to hear. He gave you eyes to see. And if we ask, why do I believe and my neighbor doesn't?, it makes us think again of the grace of God. He has given us the secret of the kingdom. And we should pray that He will grant that knowledge to those around us, too. We should pray that those on the outside will be drawn into the true family of Jesus. We may wonder, why do I read the Bible and find sustenance for my soul, while others read the Bible and scoff at it? Why do I find clarity in the Scriptures and a unified message, while others find contradictions and confusion? He who has ears to hear, let him hear. If you can hear the message of the Gospel, if the Scriptures in some measure make sense to you, praise God for that!

God would be entirely just to let us continue in our hard-heartedness and rebellion. He does not owe us anything. But He has been pleased to give us this revelation so that we might praise Him for it. Let's do just that! Let's praise God for what He has revealed to us. And if you're here this morning and you feel like certain things about Christ have become clear to you but many other things are still mysterious, don't be discouraged by that. Thank God for what He has shown you, and pray for more understanding. And if you feel like you're still on the outside, but you have a desire to be a follower of Christ, even if that desire feels so small and weak, thank God for putting that desire in your

consummation. What Jesus taught through the veiled means of the parable of the sower was the relationship between the coming of the Kingdom in his own person and proclamation, and the delay of the end, the harvest, the consummation."

heart. There is hope. God can change you and bring you to Himself. Don't give up hope. Don't let go of that desire, and put yourself in a place where that desire can grow and flourish. Spend time reading and studying the Bible. Spend time talking to God about your soul. Spend time with people who love Jesus and whose lives have been changed by Him. Sit under the preaching and teaching of the Word and take these times very seriously. Avail yourself of all these means of grace, and pray for God to put your feet on the rock.

What an awesome thing it is that God has made Himself known in the Word, Jesus Christ, and in the written Word of the Scriptures. And we praise Him that He has revealed Himself clearly and gloriously and that He has given us ears to hear. So let us hear! Let us not take this revelation for granted, but cherish it and heed what it commands.

Grace and Judgment

There are those who have ears to hear, and then there are those who are outside. And in the second half of verse 11 Jesus says, "but for those outside everything is in parables." There are the insiders and the outsiders. There are those who have been drawn to Jesus and have been given ears to hear. And then there are those who have rejected Jesus and have hardened their hearts to Him and are not able to hear. Jesus had preached openly and clearly and boldly, but they refused to heed His commands. Jesus was preaching, as it records in 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." That was not a parable. That was pretty clear. And in 1:22 the people "were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." And verse 27 says they were all amazed and said, "What is this? A new teaching with authority!" Jesus had spoken openly and clearly, but the vast majority of people rejected Him. The scribes said He was demonic, His own family thought He was insane, the crowds were mainly interested in His miraculous powers.

And therefore the parables serve as a judgment upon those who have refused to heed the clear call of the gospel. The parables have a dual function. They function in one way for those who follow Jesus, and they function in a different way for those outside. The parables both reveal and conceal. They are a means of both grace and judgment. Jesus uses the parables to reveal truth to His disciples, because He explains the meaning to them. But for the outsiders the parables conceal meaning. They become riddles and are thus a means of judgment. The parables are like stained glass windows in a great cathedral. For those inside they are vibrant and glorious as the light streams in. But for those outside they are dull

and meaningless. This is what Jesus was doing in telling these parables. He was graciously enlightening those on the inside, while at the same time judging those on the outside by concealing the meaning from them.

The Isaiah Quotation

The quotation from Isaiah in verse 12 shows that this is a judgment upon those outside. Verse 12 introduces the Isaiah quote with the word, “so that.” What is happening in the parables of Jesus is analogous to the ministry of Isaiah. And when we look at Isaiah 6 we see that Isaiah was given a very difficult ministry assignment. In that passage, as you may remember, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. And the seraphim were calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And Isaiah says, “Woe is me!” And then a few verses later the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah answers the call, “Here I am! Send me.” It’s a wonderful passage, a glorious passage. The Lord in His majesty and holiness, Isaiah in his humanity and sinfulness, the Lord making provision for Isaiah’s sin, and then the Lord commissioning Isaiah to speak to the people. And what might we expect to follow this? Isaiah is going to go out and turn the hearts of the people to God. After such an intense vision and a dramatic commissioning, we’re prepared for Isaiah to go out and be the spark that sets ablaze a national revival. But God had just the opposite in store for Isaiah. In the very next verse in Isaiah 6 the Lord says to him, “Go, and say to this people: Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” This was the terrible task that was allotted to Isaiah. He was to preach to the people a message that would actually harden them. It was a dreadful judgment, and it foreshadows the aspect of judgment that is present in Jesus’ ministry as well.

These verses from Isaiah 6 show up 6 times in the New Testament, in each of the 4 Gospels and also in Acts 28 and Romans 11. In each case it is in the context of hard hearts and judgment. The message of the Gospel is proclaimed, and for some it is life and for others it is death. For many it opens their eyes, and they are changed. For many others it blinds them from the truth and confirms them in their unbelief.

This is how Paul described it in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” And in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who

are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” This is the supernatural working of the Gospel message. For some it is the power of God. It is a fragrance from life to life. But for others, even though it is the same message, it is regarded as folly and functions as a fragrance from death to death.

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

This was the dual purpose of Jesus’ parables. They would enlighten the one group and harden the other. They would be grace and life to His true followers, and they would be judgment and death to those outside. It’s important to observe in this both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. These two points come up over and over in Scripture, and we would be wrong to choose between them. We would be wrong to pit the two against each other. Both are true, even if we can’t understand exactly how they fit together. The sovereignty of God is clear in these passages, in Isaiah 6 and the places it is cited in the New Testament, as well as the verses I read from 1-2 Corinthians. God determines who will believe and who will not. God predestines who will repent and who will continue in rebellion. God is completely sovereign over these things and is not limited in the least by our free will. That being said, we must also acknowledge that we are entirely responsible for our decisions and actions. The religious leaders and the crowds were culpable and were deserving of this severe judgment. They had rejected Jesus’ clear proclamations of the Gospel, and it was right for them to be punished with parables (which for them would be nothing more than perplexing riddles).

The interplay of divine sovereignty and human responsibility here is similar to what we see in the life of Pharaoh. The book of Exodus tells us on a number of occasions that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:8). And it also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. It’s both-and, not either-or. We also see this in a statement Jesus makes about Judas in Mark 14:21. This is at the last supper and Jesus says that one of the disciples will betray Him. And He says, “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him [in other words, God has predicted this and planned this to happen], but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed [that is, Judas is responsible for what he is about to do].” We also looked at this recently in Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, where he says to the Jews, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” To paraphrase it, God is sovereign over the death of Jesus, and you are guilty of killing of Him. And there’s no

philosophical contradiction in saying both of those things together. We have to submit our minds and our thoughts to the worldview of the Bible, rather than trying to manipulate the Bible to fit our presuppositions. God will have mercy on whomever He wills, and He will harden whomever He wills, as Paul says in Romans 9. And we will all be held accountable for whether we follow Christ or reject Christ. We are responsible for whether we heed the Gospel message or ignore it and scoff at it.

Application

So how do we apply this? How do we process what Jesus is saying here about the purpose of the parables? What does it mean for us that Jesus reveals and conceals, that He is sovereign over who will understand and who will not and that we are also responsible for understanding and heeding these things? First we should take great comfort in God's sovereignty. He is just to harden hearts, which makes it all the more glorious that He is gracious to soften hearts and draw people to Himself. And He can soften the hardest of hearts! And He can do this because He is sovereign. He is powerful to overcome the stubbornness of the human will. Why would we pray to Him to change hearts if it was ultimately up to the person's decision? We can cry out to God to work in our lives and to bring unbelievers to a point of repentance and faith, only because God is completely in control of the human heart.

Now here's the danger for us. We will abuse the truth of God's sovereignty if we begin to presume that we know what God's sovereign will is in the lives of particular individuals. If we look at someone who is opposed to the Gospel and assume that there is no hope for them, then we are putting ourselves in the place of God. "So-and-so hates God; there's no hope for him, he's going straight to hell." Well, yeah, he will go to hell if he doesn't repent. But we don't know whether he's going to repent or not. So we should be telling him about the danger he's in. It's not for us to choose or to know who will be saved. God does that, and He acts in some very surprising ways! Think about Saul of Tarsus. He was about as hardened as a person could be against the Gospel. And then Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and changed his life. So don't assume that you know what God's sovereign plans are. It could be that the people in your life who right now seem to most hate the Gospel will become the ones who are most passionate for the Gospel. God's ways are not our ways.

And this applies not only to our assessment of others, but to our assessment of ourselves. Maybe you're listening to this and you're wondering, maybe I'm like Pharaoh, maybe I'm like Judas, maybe I'm like the scribes. Maybe God has hardened me and

there's no hope that I will ever understand or submit to the Gospel. Do not think that way. What a devious lie from the devil that is. Don't give up hope. Don't throw in the towel because you are discouraged or confused. As I said last week about the unforgivable sin, if you are concerned in your soul that you may have committed that sin, then you most likely have not. Similarly, if you are concerned in your soul that maybe you're beyond the possibility of being saved, then you're wrong. The very fact that you are thinking about these things is evidence that God is doing something good in your heart. So cling to the fact that God is sovereign. He is strong to overcome the sin in your life. He is mighty to save you! He sent His Son to die on the cross for all those who will repent and believe in Him.

And this leads to the second application of these truths, which is: take the commands of Scripture and the warnings of Scripture *very* seriously. Do not let your knowledge of God's sovereignty be an excuse for apathy. Shame on us if we take the Reformed theology that we act so proud of, and use it as an excuse for sin, an excuse for the status quo, an excuse for laziness and indifference. We may think, Oh, I'm totally depraved, and therefore what can I expect other than a life of sin. It must be God's will for me to be in bondage to anxiety or pornography or food or greed. It's the way God planned it and there's nothing I can do about it. That is a dangerous attitude to foster in your heart. It's wicked, and if fails to see the biblical emphasis on our moral responsibility to turn away from sin. We must choose holiness. We must exert our wills and pursue righteous living. We must decide to structure our lives on a day to day basis in such a way that our affections are drawn to Christ rather than the things of the world. We need to fight the fight of faith. No excuses. No theological rhetoric to minimize our responsibility. We need to take the commands and the warnings of the Bible seriously lest we be the ones, like the scribes, who know a lot about the Scriptures but reject Christ, lest we be the ones who see but do not perceive and hear but don't understand.

These are warnings to say, humble yourself. Be teachable. Don't assume that you know everything there is to know. Come and sit at Jesus' feet with a broken and contrite heart. Come to Him wanting to be changed and asking for Him to change you and trusting that He is powerful to do just that. Heed the command of Jesus to repent and believe in the Gospel.

I want us to be a people who embrace the biblical revelation of God's sovereignty and human responsibility, and I desperately want us to apply these truths in the right ways. As I said at the beginning, this is a pretty intense passage. It makes us grapple with some things that challenge certain assumptions we

may have had. And I pray that it will leave us feeling a great sense of gratitude for the revelation we've been given and great sense of gravity concerning the consequences for ignoring that revelation. Praise God that He has revealed Himself to us! He who has ears to hear, let him hear.