

Jesus Tells Stories -  
Mark 4:1-20

by Pastor Matt Wolfington

As we began the New Year we started learning about this journey and what I titled as an undeniable life of Christ. As we look at this life of Jesus I want to look at the stories told by Jesus. Not necessarily the story itself but rather why and how he told the story. Jesus tells these stories to stimulate our thinking about our faith and he wants them to work in our hearts to expand our ability to receive all God has in store for us. These stories are often referred to as parables.

We are going to look at the stories in Mark, chapter 4 today and I think as you read, listen and begin to understand the meaning of the stories you will have a spiritual awakening or a new spiritual awareness that you did not have before.

Jesus begins many parables by saying LISTEN! How do I know it was Jesus who said, "Listen!"? These words in the Bible are written in Red Letters and as I always say whenever there are red letters in the Bible, I pay close attention because Jesus is talking. "LISTEN!" When Jesus says "LISTEN!" he is not just telling us to hear his words but to put these words into action, trust and obey.

You know what I like about the teachings of Jesus? He wasn't afraid to tell it like it needed to be told. He wasn't afraid to try new ways of teaching. Before now, Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue but now he new he needed to reach beyond the walls of the church building and get out to where the people were. There was nothing wrong with the synagogue teaching. It was necessary. But there are people outside the walls of the church that need to hear the word of God as well. . Hmmm, sort of sounds like what I have been saying lately.

John Wesley, the father of Methodism himself renowned for preaching outside the church, was at first turned off by such a thought. He even made the comment that at first he thought it "almost a sinful act to be saving souls outside the church" until he saw where the souls were that needed to be saved. Jesus was leading a new way of saving souls and he needed a new method. The new Method was parables. Why parables? Well, I think because they are relational. I think because they can be fun and intriguing. I think because, like a riddle, there is an adventure inside of them that we tend to want to work at unlocking and reveal the meaning. Jesus was a marketing genius. Thousands of people gathered to hear these teachings! People were also used to these types of stories from what we know as the Old Testament. So all in all it was a win-win situation for Jesus. "Listen!" And put these words into actions in your heart and in your life.

Now here is what Jesus said about these parables in general: <sup>10</sup>When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup>He told them, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables <sup>12</sup>so that,

" they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,

and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!<sup>[a]</sup>

This mystery does not mean something that is complicated but rather something that is unintelligible to the person who has not been initiated into its meaning but perfectly plain to those who have been initiated into its meaning. This is not to say that God made us so dull and dense that we cannot understand what he is telling us, but rather WE have made ourselves so dull and dense that we cannot understand what he is telling us. Jesus knew when he looked into the eyes of people that they were dulled or dense from prejudice, wishful thinking, misguided thoughts, desires and choices as well as just mentally lazy. He saw that many people had no desire to learn about the heart of God but simply wanted the essence of God handed to them in short bursts. Jesus even reminded the disciples what Isaiah said when Isaiah himself brought the message of God to the people of Israel that they were so non-understanding that you would have thought God SHUT their minds instead of opened them. Here Christ warns those who refuse to see Him as their savior will be forgotten by the Father.

Jesus says this not in anger but in a tone that is longing for change, wishful of a change in heart and passion, and out of a loving heart of a man who had the perfect gift of life to give yet people were too blind to just take. I feel the same way today of the world. The church has life to offer but because the world is so jaded by circumstances that they shun the church. Sadly, oftentimes it is the church that caused them to be that way.

So knowing that Jesus used the parables to stimulate the mind, to draw people into the story, to initiate them into the desire for understanding, and longed for their participation lets briefly look at this parable of the sower to just get an idea of how this worked. Even the idea we put a title on it is silly because it is the parable of the sower, the parable of the seeds, or the parable of the soils? Whichever it is it was told in a way the people would understand. In an agricultural community this planting seems backwards to us, but to them in the story it is correct. They scattered the seed and then came back and “plowed” it in or covered it up. That is how the different soils got involved.

There is the “Path Soil”, the “Rocky Soil”, the “Thorny Soil”, and the “Good Soil” Let me note to you that despite the fact that 3 of the 4 soils are very unpromising for growth, nevertheless the parable ends victoriously with a great harvest! That is good news for you and me and for the church!

If this is a parable about the sower it is about you & me sowing the seeds of faith and love unconditionally.

If this is a parable about the soil it is about the hearing of (or listening for) God’s word.

If this is a parable about the teller of the story then it is about the story of Jesus’ experience.

If this is a parable about the harvest then it is about doing our best for God and trusting in the future harvest.

I personally think it is about All of them depending on where we are in life when we hear the parable. That is the cool thing about the parable. I could have heard this story as a new person of faith and seen it from the perspective of the soil aka the hearer of the Word. Later in life, as a more mature Christian I see the point of the sower and what I

should be doing for Christ. As a student of the Bible I like to see it from the perspective of the Jesus, the teller of the story and his experience. As your pastor I see from all the angles and now include the portion relating to the harvest knowing that everything we do will be fruitful but we may not always see the production of that fruit.

For argument sake let's analyze the symbolism of the soil:

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Many people do not come to church to worship or to store up the word of God in their heart for discernment or study. Many people do not want to really hear what God has to say to them. Therefore these people are like a highway of concrete or asphalt. No matter how much seed is thrown upon it nothing will ever grow. Oh certainly it might rest upon the mind and be banter for a conversation over lunch, but beyond that the seed disappears.

<sup>5</sup>Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

These people hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; but have no root in themselves, and so the Word lives in them a short while but, when affliction or persecution comes their way, immediately they are broken and have no resolve.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

The reality here is this soil is actually decent because it does sustain life. Here is where the Word of God is planted along side the deception of all things evil. Here is where I think many "Christians" reside. I call this the "I want my cake and it too" soil. The seed is planted, the word begins to grow in our life and we look down and see this other tiny little plant that doesn't belong and we think: No problem – I can out-grow that. Then as time marches on the thorny bush of evil grows among the goodness of the word and begins to slow down God's growth, even sucking the nutrient from us. It seems we will survive the attack of the choking thorns because we are persevering but refuse to pull up the thorny plant. By the time it is over with we have grown but the thorny bush has cut off our supply of vital nutrients not allowing us to do anything but just survive but never bear fruit.

<sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

Remember – One soil in four types is only called "good soil." Let me talk to you about this soil. I do not think that Jesus intended for us to see this soil as naturally good. Farmers prepare the soil before planting. There are all sorts of preparations that take place prior to planting. Church, hear me. We are not made good by nature we are made good by grace. God plows us with conviction, plants his word in us, offers us living water to give us life and then we bear fruit, which spreads the seed to others.

So you see a parable can be a mystery according to the word of Jesus Christ himself but it is not an unsolvable mystery. To unlock the mystery you must be willing to seek the heart of God in it and LISTEN! Let it change your life. In this parable, one avenue you have to explore is which soil you are going to be. You have to decide which soil you are going to be before you ever begin to seek the understanding of the other teachings of Jesus Christ.

Are you hardened, are you rocky, are you thorny or are you good by God's grace?