

# TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

## MARK: THE SOWER PARABLE

MARK 4.1-20

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1. Today we come to Jesus' parable of the sower. Now we should probably call this the parable of the soils; that would be more precise, but I may describe it both ways. Of course a sower is a farmer who plants seeds to harvest a crop. A parable is usually either a story or an illustration which pictures some spiritual truth.

2. Now this is a unique text so I want to work through it by posing and answering 3 questions: First: What does the Parable of the Sower mean? Second: Why does Mark include this story in his Gospel? Third: Why does Jesus use parables? Next time, we'll consider some applications from this text. So let's start by answering the first question.

### **WHAT DOES THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER MEAN?**

1. What does the Parable of the Sower Mean? Jesus tells us in v13-20. The seed that the sower is sowing is the word. Remember that at this point in the Gospel "word" refers specifically to the message about God's kingdom breaking into human **history in the person of Jesus. It's the message Jesus preaches.**

2. And the four soils onto which the seed is cast are four different kinds of people. The first soil seems to be no soil at all; it's a hard path beside the soil where penetration is impossible. The seed just lies there, so the birds see it and gobble it up. The birds here represent Satan who prevents the word from penetrating this person's heart and so they remain unfruitful. That's the first soil.

3. The second soil is shallow soil, a little dirt with solid rock beneath. The seed that falls on this soil springs up quickly, which represents the person who initially receives the word with excitement. They start to bear fruit but then the sun comes out and scorches them and they wither away and die, ultimately fruitless. In this

image the sun represents persecution or affliction which occurs because this person is devoted to the Message of the Kingdom; they show themselves to be shallow and temporary; they fall away. That's the second soil.

4. The third soil is thorny soil. The seed there tries to spring up but the thorns choke it out and it becomes unfruitful. This represents the person who initially receives the word, but the worries of the world, deceitful riches, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word in that person's heart; they too are ultimately unfruitful. That's the third soil.

5. Last you have the fourth soil. This is the one good soil of the bunch. The seed here bears fruit and produces a bountiful crop. This represents the person who receives the word, avoids the pitfalls experienced by the previous kinds of people, and bears kingdom fruit, produced by faith and obedience to the kingdom word! So that's a basic idea of what the Parable of the Sower Means. Let's ask now why Mark included this story where he did.

### **HOW THIS PARABLE FITS INTO THE NARRATIVE**

1. At this point in Mark's Gospel we have already seen an impressive amount of conflict; we have also seen evidence that many are failing to receive Jesus' word and bear fruit. Now I want to tell you this would be a very great surprise for Jesus' disciples, and the Jews in general. As far as the Jews were concerned, at the coming of Messiah the mountains would flow with wine and the trees would clap their hands and Israel would enter the End Times Golden Age, promised for centuries in the OT prophets. The amount of opposition and unfruitfulness already apparent in Jesus' ministry would be cause for alarm.

2. Now we the readers already know part of the reason for this: Mark already showed us Satan's effort to stop Jesus in chapter 1; the human opposition to Jesus in Mark's Gospel, along with the fruitlessness, ultimately results from the ongoing opposition of Satan.

3. However, there is another important angle from which to understand the opposition and fruitlessness. And our text today is giving us the view from that angle. The Parable of the Sower is about the in-breaking of God's kingdom, God's saving Rule, into our wicked world. What the Parable reveals, and what the Jews didn't know, is that when God's kingdom comes in, it does not achieve 100% success from the moment it arrives!

4. On the contrary, the word of the kingdom, like seed scattered on different soils, is often misunderstood, rejected and abandoned. Satan often prevents its fruitfulness in a human heart. People are wishy-washy and they fall away after a time. People are greedy and worldly and they eventually cool off in their zeal for Jesus, and fail to bear fruit. The coming of the kingdom includes a great deal of opposition to and rejection of the word of the kingdom.

5. And so what Mark is doing is showing, that Jesus said the kingdom would come this way. It doesn't show up and take over in 60 seconds flat! It comes in slowly and quietly, with much waste and much defeat, but with a steady success in finding those patches of good soil which receive the word and bear fruit.

6. In this vein one writer says that the common supposition of the day was that the kingdom meant: Harvest, judgment, consummation, all together and at once, following hard upon each other's heels. The Jews believed this, the disciples believed this, even John the Baptist believed this. Only Jesus knew the true itinerary, and he expressed it multiple times, often in parables.

7. In reality, God did not plan to accomplish Harvest, Judgment, and Consummation one after another. God planned an unforeseen delay between the initial coming of Jesus, and the end of this age. When I say unforeseen, I mean the Jews of Jesus' day didn't know about it. Of course God knew about it.

8. Another NT expert says about this that the mystery of the kingdom was this: The kingdom came into the world prior to its End Times manifestation. In other words,

the Jews simply expected the Kingdom to come, but it turned out that the Kingdom came before it came! The kingdom arrived into the world before the world was ready to come to an end!

9. Imagine a woman whose husband is serving as a soldier in Iraq, and he won't return for 18 months. She loves her husband and longs for the day he will return; for her, that will be the great day of all days, the day when her grief and loneliness over his absence will come to an end.

10. But then suppose a week later her husband walks in the door! She rejoices and celebrates and wants to throw a Home Coming party. There's only one problem: He's not actually finished with his deployment. He made a surprise return in advance of his final coming to take care of some important business. This is only a brief visit to arrange a few matters; he's actually leaving again in a few days and then she won't see him until the 18 months have elapsed.

11. In other words, he comes before he comes. Likewise with Jesus and the kingdom. As far as the people of God knew, the coming of Messiah signaled the end of the world. God didn't tell us Jesus had to come to arrange a few matters **prior to the end of the world. Although now that he mentions it, it's a good thing** he did it that way because if he didn't, none of us could actually enter the Golden Age. Jesus had to make a surprise trip to shed his blood or else the kingdom wouldn't include any of us!

12. So the mystery of the kingdom, perhaps the deepest mystery, is simply that the kingdom comes in a tiny, secret, incipient way prior to its actual, worldwide, cataclysmic arrival. This is why, by the way, if anyone asks whether the kingdom is actually here, the answer is Yes and No. Yes, it has come in a mustard seed sort of way, small and secret and steadily growing, but No, it is not here in its fullest manifestation, as it will be when Christ returns. This is called the Already and the Not Yet; in a sense the end of the world has already come, but of course we wait for its finalization.

13. So how does this Parable fit into the story Mark has told so far? It fits in by clarifying why it is that the glorious kingdom Jesus has brought is experiencing less than stellar results with the Jewish people. And it also reveals a big secret which the Jews, even the good ones, didn't see coming: Namely, Kingdom Delay. The Kingdom comes before it comes. Let's go on now to our third question.

### **WHY DOES JESUS USE PARABLES?**

1. Why does Jesus speak in Parables? Luckily, we aren't the first people to ask that question. The disciples asked Jesus and he gave his answer in v11-12. By the way, you may have noticed by now that today's text is another Markan Sandwich. The first piece of bread is Jesus telling the Parable, from v2-9. The bologna is Jesus' explanation about parables in v10-13, and the second piece of bread is Jesus' explanation of the Sower Parable in v14-20. Like I said last time, when Mark does this he is at least comparing the bread to the bologna, and inviting us to make the comparison and draw a conclusion. In this case it's obvious that the bologna gives the key for understanding Jesus' purpose for speaking in Parables. So let's examine that purpose.

2. I'll just mention to you that studying this question over the last few days gave me a run for my money, the likes of which I haven't had for some time. It was fun. Let that be a preface to say that understanding the purpose of Parables is no small task. In the explanation that follows I am simply going to say this: The purpose of Parables is to Conceal, and to Reveal. Jesus speaks in Parables to Conceal Truth, and to Reveal Truth. So let's dig in.

3. In v10 the disciples ask him about the parables; apparently they asked why he uses them, based on his answer; also, in Matthew's version the disciples specifically ask why he speaks in parables, not merely what they mean. So why does he speak in parables?

4. Quite simply, Jesus says in v11 he speaks in parables because the crowds have not been given the gift of understanding the kingdom of God. In other words, the parable is a way for Jesus to mask the truth from the crowds; or you can say Jesus is hiding saving revelation from the crowds. Why would he do this?

5. Because, according to v12, Jesus wants to make the crowds hear without hearing. He wants them to hear what he says but not perceive the meaning. He hides the meaning to prevent them from returning to God in repentance, and thereby receiving forgiveness. Yes, you heard me right: I just said Jesus speaks in parables to keep the crowds from being saved.

6. Now before you either exit the building or reach for your carry piece, I beg you to suffer me a little further. Let's just start by noticing that in v12 Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, from Isaiah chapter 6. There God commissions the prophet to speak to sinful Israel. The problem is that when God commissions him he says something very strange. He actually tells Isaiah to speak to Israel, and by speaking to them, to make them spiritually insensitive, in order to prevent them from hearing God's rebuke, to ensure they will not return to God and be forgiven. God doesn't want them to return and be forgiven, so he sends Isaiah make them spiritually deaf and blind!

7. And how does Isaiah proceed to do so? Read the entire book and all you will get is predictions plus plain old preaching, page after page. Judging by the fact that the people end up in captivity, I assume Isaiah was successful in his mission to blind them and secure their destruction. This means in order to accomplish God's mission, all Isaiah did was preach the truth.

8. With Jesus it's a little different. Jesus actually tells Parables in order to hide the plain truth, and thus secure the damnation of some.

9. So, to sum up this first piece of the answer to why Jesus speaks in parables, the first part of the answer is Jesus speaks in parables to hide the truth from some people so they will be damned.

10. But there's another piece. Notice in v9 Jesus calls upon those with ears to hear. Jesus is calling upon the spiritually sensitive within the crowd to recognize the meaning of his parable and to respond accordingly. In other words, Jesus believes there are people in the crowd for whom the parable will not obscure the truth. These people will understand what the parable is saying, and they will receive its message.

11. As a further support for this idea, when Matthew records this same teaching in chapter 13, he adds one more purpose for Jesus speaking in parables, namely, to reveal things hidden from the foundation of the world. So we can be certain a parable is not just designed to conceal; yes, it's for that, but it is also designed to reveal. It all comes down to whether or not a person has ears.

12. What we need to get hold of here is the purpose of a parable is neither simply to illustrate a point, nor simply to damn some folks to hell. It's more subtle than that. The purpose of the parable is like the purpose of your screen door; it's to make sure the air gets in and the bugs stay out.

**13. The parable is a screen. As one writer says, it's a way for Jesus to preach without** throwing his pearls before pigs. The parable effectively keeps the half-hearted, the insincere, the culpable spiritual dullard at arms-length, while simultaneously drawing in the spiritually sensitive. And Jesus does all that in the same sermon! He is a highly skilled preacher! More to the point: He is a highly skilled Savior and Judge. With the very same teaching he both saves and condemns!!! I've heard the Puritans used to put it this way: The same Sunlight which melts the snow, hardens the mud.

14. Now no one is surprised to hear of Jesus working to save men. We expect that. The notion that Jesus would do anything but work to save men is alien to us. As if it would be wrong for Jesus to not work to save us. What's strange to us is this idea of Jesus working to prevent men from being saved, even working to condemn them. Why would Jesus speak in parables, partly to hide saving truth from men so they would be damned?

15. We must be balanced theologians here. There are two reasons. First I'll give you the shot of whiskey, then we'll chase it with some warm cocoa. The first reason Jesus hides the truth from men to damn them is because those men were not given the gift of v11. Saving truth is a gift from God, and he gives it to whomever he wills. He is obligated to give it to no one. Simply, God chose to give it to these men, and he chose not to give it to the others. You are looking at the Christian teaching of election. To put it another way: You are looking at the doctrine of Free Will. God's Free Will, that is. You will say to me then, God is unjust! No, he's not. Why not? Because the Bible says he's not. There's your whiskey.

16. Now for your cocoa-chaser: Remember Jesus' description of the bad soils? Did you notice how those soils were bad, and it was their fault? For example, the second soil fails to endure hardship for Jesus, and so falls away from Jesus? That's the fault of the soil, not the fault of the God who sowed the seed. Or remember how the third soil succumbs to worldliness and so fails to bear fruit? That's the soil's fault, not the sower's fault. In other words, there is an aspect to Jesus' damnation of these people which is simply punishment. They have refused to use their ears and eyes for God's glory so Jesus takes away their eyes and ears. That's only fair. Poetically fair.

17. This is all just to say men are damned both because of God's sovereign choice and also because of their own sinfulness, and neither one cancels out the other.

## **CONCLUSION**

1. Let's finish with a summary: Jesus describes the in-breaking of the kingdom with the Sower Parable, which shows there will be both negative and positive responses as the kingdom comes, and that the kingdom comes secretly before it comes fully. Jesus speaks in Parables in order to preach without casting pearls before swine; the Parable is a screen, keeping out the spiritual dullard while drawing in the spiritually sensitive. In this teaching we witness the parallel lines of God's absolute sovereignty and man's responsibility.