

August 28, 2011

## THE SOWER, THE SOIL, AND THE SEED<sup>1</sup>

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The last time I spoke, we discussed portions of Mark 4 related to the mystery of the Kingdom of God; that is, we studied what Jesus Himself had to say about the mystery and why He taught in parables. Do you remember why Jesus hid His teachings in parables? Was it because He didn't want people to understand what He was saying to them? No, of course not! He wanted people to *investigate* what He was saying! But there is another aspect to this as well. The truth is that we can't handle the truth—at least, not all at once. God reveals Himself and His truth little by little as we are able to bear it in much the same way as we turn up the lights little by little after a long spell of darkness. That's what the mysteries and the parables do: they guide us to the truth a little at a time, because the full truth is so bright that it seems harsh to our untempered minds.

I'm so glad we have four gospels because the combination of the four gives us a fuller dimension of Jesus' life than one gospel alone. We know from Mark and in conjunction with the other gospels that the day Jesus told these parables we are going to examine today was the first time He ever taught by parables. Up to this time, He talked to people directly. He had given, for example, the Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew chapters 5-7. But over time, people turned off their listening skills and came to Jesus for their own agendas. They came to be healed, or perhaps entertained by watching others being healed, but fewer and fewer came to listen to what Jesus actually had to say. That is why, in this chapter, Jesus begins to teach through parables. He partially concealed the truth so that the people might, through curiosity, investigate and find the truth. Jesus made it clear that God's mysteries are meant to be discovered!

Jesus' very first parable is introduced in Mark 4:3–9. Let's read it together, shall we?

<sup>3</sup> *Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:*

<sup>4</sup> *And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.*

<sup>5</sup> *And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:*

<sup>6</sup> *But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.*

<sup>7</sup> *And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.*

<sup>8</sup> *And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.*

<sup>9</sup> *And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

Jesus begins with an audio cue—"Hearken! Listen!"—and a visual cue—"Behold! Look!" He's a master teacher appealing to diverse learners long before twentieth-century research told us to do that! It's not hard to imagine Him doing some motions here for our kinesthetic learners as well.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is unedited.

Back when Jesus taught this, the usual method of sowing seeds was to plow up a field, hoist a bag of seed over one's shoulder, and then toss the seed to disperse it over the area. You can imagine a man walking along in his field flinging the seed. And who knows? It may be that somewhere near to the lake that morning, there was a farmer out doing just that—walking along, dispersing seed. The point is that it's a very concrete image.

There are several things in this parable that are related to the spiritual truth Jesus is teaching. Let's list them:

- A sower
- Seed
- Wayside
- Birds
- Stony ground
- Sun
- Thorny ground
- Good ground

We have, then, eight elements that all relate to the truth Jesus taught that morning, and each element is important. In fact, at the end of it all, Jesus said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, "This is important! Think this over!" Jesus later indicates that this parable is the key to understanding all His other parables—it's *that* important! Let me qualify that statement for you. Let's look ahead now to verse 13:

<sup>13</sup> *And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?*

Jesus' disciples and some others had asked Jesus, "What does this parable mean?" They didn't understand, but they wanted to understand. We talked about those verses last time so I've skipped ahead to verse 13. Here Jesus says, "You don't understand this parable? How will you understand the rest of them?" In other words, understanding this parable is the key to understand the rest. Folks, if that's true, then we ought to make sure we understand just as Jesus carefully explains.

There are some commentators or preachers who will tell us, "Don't read too much into the parables. Get the big picture and move on." But Jesus Himself tells us there is truth in each element of the parable. Let's see how Jesus defined the eight elements in this parable. Each one stands for something. Let's take Jesus' explanation a verse or two at a time, starting in verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> *The sower soweth the word.*

First, there is the sower. This may sound tautologous but the simple fact is that the sower here is one who sows. The sower is anything or anyone that disperses the seed. God has many ways and means of sowing seed, but His favorite and best means is His people. Jesus was a sower, Paul was a sower, the disciples were sowers, and we are to be sowers. Sometimes the sower may be something like a Gideon Bible in a prison cell or a hotel room; it might be a gospel tract left on a table at a restaurant with a generous tip tucked inside. But those Bibles and those tracts don't move themselves. An agent—one of God's children—has been involved at some point.

Next is the seed, which Jesus clearly says is the Word of God. I love the picture of the Word of God as

seed because the seed may not look like much, but there is a living power inside. It is transformative. It is alive. That Bible you have at hand this morning may not look alive, but I assure you that it is. The old word for “alive” is “quick.” Hebrews 4:12 describes the Bible as “quick and powerful,” or, as the Amplified Bible says, “alive and full of power [making it active, operative, energizing, and effective].”

That Word is the life-giving element which can change the whole situation and bring enrichment and harvest into a life. Therefore the moment of the sowing of the Word is a magic hour. It is a time when the opportunity to be changed is present.<sup>2</sup>

Next Jesus lists four kinds of soil and two agents that act on the seed: birds and sunshine. I used to think that the soil was the condition of the human heart at the point of decision about salvation; but notice that the Jesus does not limit the parable in that way. In other words, our own heart’s condition can be one of these four soils at any time that we are exposed to the Word of God, yes, even as Christians. Look, just because you’re a Christian doesn’t mean your heart is always ready to receive the Word of God! Can I get an “Amen”? Look at verse 15:

*<sup>15</sup> And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.*

Jesus describes the wayside soil and the birds. The wayside is a path near the field, or perhaps running through it, where the passing of many feet and hooves have packed the soil very hard. The seed lies open and exposed on that hard ground. It cannot penetrate, and it never has a chance to try. The birds, Jesus tells us, represent Satan and his minions. When the Word of God falls on a hard heart, it is very easy for Satan to cause him to forget what he’s heard because his heart rejects God’s Word. The heart is hard and calloused. It does not want to be penetrated. The church at large is absolutely full of people with these hardened hearts. They come to church, not to hear the Word and respond in obedience, but for other reasons. Maybe they feel it’s the “right thing to do.” Maybe they come for the social aspect. Perhaps they come as a means of showing how good they are. But in any case, they have no intention of letting the Word of God make a difference in the way they live. I call these kinds of people “church people.” They’re not Christians, at least in the sense of having a Christ-like attitude. They are rather religious but hard-hearted people who keep up certain appearances but resist allowing God’s Word to work in their lives.

It may be that you’ve had a conversation with someone about the Lord, and their thoughts have finally turned to those higher spiritual things—and just then, the phone rings. The moment is over. Satan just snatched away the seed. It may be that you’ve heard a sermon at church or on the radio, and the Lord has impressed your heart to do something you’ve put off doing for God, or to repent of some sin; but soon after, perhaps you have an argument with a family member—and the urge to do that thing for God disappears. The devil knows how to snatch a seed.

Consider with me the stony ground in verses 16–17:

*<sup>16</sup> And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness;*

*<sup>17</sup> And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word’s sake, immediately they are offended.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Stedman, “Seed Thoughts.” 10 Nov. 1974. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/seed-thoughts>.

The stony ground is soil without depth. It is shallow, and therefore the roots of the seeds that grow are shallow. Growth starts, but quickly ends. Some people hear the Word of God and are moved to action by it—for a while. As long as it's exciting, as long as it's fun, they're excited to be a part of it. Perhaps they drift from one church to the next, or drift in and out of the same church as the mood takes them. One day they're excited about a Bible study and the next week you can't get them to come back. Their interest is very shallow, and they give up at the first sign of trouble. Maybe someone at the church said something that hurt their feelings, or maybe they found that someone respected in the church isn't perfect, or maybe some of their unsaved friends mocked them. Whatever the case may be, they simply are too shallow to grow.

Let's examine the thorny ground in verses 18–19:

<sup>18</sup> *And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,*

<sup>19</sup> *And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.*

Apparently there's more than one kind of thorn or weed that can grow in the garden of your heart. Jesus lists three here that will strangle a person's spiritual interest. The first is worry. Do you ever worry? I think we all do from time to time. We see only our problem, and our problem seems so big that we never look behind the problem to see how much bigger our God is! While we all worry from time to time—needlessly, I might add, as a way of preaching to myself—for some people worrying becomes an obsession. All they do is worry; and their minds are so wrapped up in earthly problems that they have no time or energy to consider spiritual things.

Then there is another weed, the deceitfulness of riches. Oh, what a weed! It acts itself out in a couple of ways. First, it can be evidenced by a life of seeking pleasure or thrills, spending our time and energy on heaping up toys and luxuries, on travel and activities. Second, it may be evidenced by viewing money as our sense of security. If our faith is in money, it will show. We'll be fearful of losing it for one thing, and anything that threatens our supply or surplus of money will get a strong reaction. It will be evidenced by failing to keep our promises and defrauding others. It will be shown by a lack of faith to be obedient to the Lord in our giving tithes and offerings. Look, you can make all kinds of pious-sounding excuses not to do right with money, but it all comes down to a lack of faith in God and instead having faith in money. My friends, that is a way to guarantee failure and worry. Let me read you Proverbs 23:5, first from the King James Version and then from the New American Standard Bible:

*Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.*

*When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings like an eagle that flies toward the heavens.*

Something needs to be said here: either the weed will grow, or the seed will grow. You won't have both, my friends. If we want this church to grow, this is a weed that's going to have to be removed. There is in this church an underlying attitude of trusting in riches; and if we don't root it out, we're in trouble. God has given us two chances already to drop our trust in money, thinking that money will solve the church's problems; I don't think we'll get a third chance.

The third weed is the lust, or desire, for “other things.” Essentially this is a restlessness, a wandering from one interest to the next. There may be an interest in God’s Word, but it is only a passing interest, soon replaced by the problems and delights and activities that this world has to offer. The Word of God is never given priority, and so is choked.

The final soil Jesus mentions is the good soil, open to receiving God’s Word. Would you look at verse 20 with me?

*<sup>20</sup> And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.*

When our hearts are ready to hear and receive and respond to God’s Word, when we let it enter and grow, then and only then will it transform us and become fruitful. God doesn’t force entry into your heart, my friend. You are a real person with eternal significance, and your choices are real and eternally significant. When you choose to respond to God’s Word in obedience and faith, God’s Word will grow and produce fruit in your life. There is simply no other way. There is no shortcut. There is no room for weeds or stones. We want this church to grow—but what about ourselves? Do we *personally* want to grow? I submit to you that the two are inseparable!

Friends, on any given day, at any given moment when God’s Word touches our hearts, we need to consider the condition of our hearts at that moment. Do we reject and shut out the Word, as the hardened wayside? Do we say to ourselves, “Yes, I believe that’s true,” but then fail to follow through, as stony-hearted folks? Do we let worries and thoughts of money or restless desires supplant what God is telling us? Or do we respond in faith and obedience, allowing the Word of God to work its way through us and transform us and make us fruitful? I beg you today, as fellow Christians, to let God have His perfect way! And if you’re not a Christian today, will you respond to Christ’s love for you this morning, and receive the seed of God’s Word as good soil?