

The Parable of the Soils

Mark 4:1-20

Jesus is the most famous teacher in the history of the world, and parables are his most famous teachings. Parables include sayings, proverbs, epigrams, riddles, and stories (3:23; Prov. 1:6; Ez. 17:2). They are figurative, set alongside actual people and events, and applied in different ways, often meaning more than they appear to. But they aren't just descriptive. Parables reveal, confront, and compel action (2 Sam. 12:1-15). They are small sayings with big consequences for those who hear (vv10-12; cf. Is. 6:9-10). Hearing a parable is an opportunity to change or continue as your character. This is why prophets use them, and about a third of Jesus' teaching consists of parables. So we have to pay close attention, understand what is meant in the original context, then apply it to ours (vv3, 9). This parable in particular is the key to all parables (v13). It's about hearing and doing the word, or not.

1. No Soil

The first seed is sown onto the path but immediately the birds snatch it up. The word is taken away by Satan (vv4, 15). Seeds are the spice of life and will attract birds. We've seen Jesus opposing the devil and quieting his servants who oppose, confuse, or mute his word. Someone will always go to war with the gospel of peace, to snatch it before people hear.

2. Rocky Soil

Other seed falls on rocky ground with little depth, which is why it pops up and withers quickly (vv5-6). When trouble or persecution arises on the account of the word, these seeds are immediately *scandalized* (v17). This happens frequently in part due to the preaching of a shallow gospel. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life—if you consider persecution part of a wonderful life (2 Tim. 3:12). True evangelism tells people to count the cost (Lk. 14:28). God's claims are total.

3. Thorny Soil

Thorns are not persecution, but worldly desires (v7). In this parable, rocks come from without; thorns from within. This seed stays in the ground, grows, but fails to come to fruition because of cares of the world, deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things all get in the way (v19). These seem like petty and stupid trade-offs, and they are—almighty God for some money, his kingdom for your hobbies—but we are petty and riches are *deceitful* (Mk. 10:29). It's easy to get caught up in the cares of the world and forget about the word. What is keeping you from greater fruitfulness?

4. Good Soil

In stark contrast to the other seeds, those that fall into good soil bear fruit thirty, sixty and a hundredfold (v20). The word is received immediately, deeply, and exclusively. These seeds increase but they also augment (v8). They get bigger and more mature.

- i. See the big picture. The Father is replanting Israel in New Covenant restoration (Jer. 31:27-28 cf. Hos. 2:23; Ez. 36:9). There are four soils here, but six seeds, three exceedingly fruitful.
- ii. See the wonder of growth, God's work of transformation that happens beneath the soil. This is all of God. See it in your own life, and rest in it (Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22-23).
- iii. Since you have ears, hear the Word the Father is sowing. Prepare your soil, order your life, to hear Jesus and bear much fruit (Eph. 2:10; Rom. 12:1). All who seek Jesus find him.
- iv. The sower sows indiscriminately, and so should we. Sowers are called to be faithful, not successful. God adds the increase (1 Cor. 3:18).

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Mark 4:14-20

14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Questions

1. In Jesus' parable, who is the sower and what is the seed (verse 14)?
2. What causes those seeds on the rocky ground to fall away (verse 17)?
3. What do the thorns represent in Jesus' parable (verse 19)?
4. Jesus tells us to receive the Word, which means we trust in him—his death and resurrection. When we do, what does this seed do (verse 20)? Draw a picture of a seed sprouting deep roots, budding and bearing fruit.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." -Mark 4:20