



Mark 4

An OCF Bible Study

Mark 4

Jesus is speaking in parables. What is a parable? An earthly story with a spiritual meaning.

Parables were a common form of teaching in Judaism. Jesus didn't invent them. He wasn't the first to use them. The religious teachers of Jesus' day used parables extensively, so Jesus' hearers were familiar with this rhetorical style.

Why did Jesus talk in parables? He was addressing two groups of people—those who have ears to hear and those who don't (v. 9). The use of parables would allow Him to identify true seekers. The spiritual condition of the people would be revealed by the way they responded.

The disciples and other believers asked Him to explain the meaning of the parable (v. 10). The unbelievers and skeptics just turned away and left. This action had the impact of concealing the truth from the unbelievers. They didn't hang around long enough to hear the end of the story. Jesus is not withholding the truth from some; by virtue of the unbelievers' response, the truth is hidden. They are responsible for not receiving the truth.

One other reason He used parables was so His enemies could find no direct statements to use against Him. When He said to the paralytic who was lowered on the mat, *Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven (Matthew 9:2)*, they accused Him of blasphemy. On the other hand, talking in parables about soils, lamp on a stand, mustard seed, etc., doesn't provide any ammunition. It disarms the enemy.

The parable of the Sower (vv. 2-20)

- What does the seed represent?** The Word (truth) of God.
- Who is the farmer/sower?** Anyone sowing the seed (including us as believers).
- What do the soils represent?** The heart of the listener/recipient.

There are four different kinds of soils. What happens to the seed when it falls on the different soils?

Soil #1— Hard soil found along pathways. The birds ate the seed lying on it. **Spiritual meaning?** Unprepared soil (hard heart). Not cultivated. Symbolizes a spiritual battle that Satan wins easily. Low hanging fruit for Satan.

Soil #2—Rocky places. Soil is shallow, unable to establish roots. **Spiritual meaning?** These hearers receive the Word of God with a flash of enthusiasm that quickly burns out. They give up quickly when trouble and persecution strike and it becomes difficult to follow Jesus.

Soil #3—Among thorns and weeds, which crowd out the plants. **Spiritual meaning?** For these listeners everything else soon begins to crowd out/overtake the word of God: the things of this world, the worries of life, activities, wealth, etc.

Soil #4—Good soil: cultivated, prepared to receive seed. **Spiritual meaning?** Some people are like the good ground—they accept the word and bear fruit. Fruit bearing is a mark of good soil, a right heart, a true believer.

The seed is going to respond in a variety of ways depending on the condition of the soil. The Word of God is going to have a variety of impacts depending on the condition of the heart of the recipient. This parable should most likely be called The Parable of the Soils.

What do we do with this nice story? Any practical meaning to us? What kind of soil do I represent?

As believers, in the parable we identified ourselves as the sower. In that capacity, what is our role/responsibility? Our job is exclusively to sow the seed—proclaim the good news, tell everybody about Jesus Christ. Don't focus on the soil. Don't worry about where the seed falls. The condition of the soil is not the responsibility of the sower. God's job is to prepare the soil. Once we have sown the seed, our job is done and God takes over. He is responsible to cause the seed to germinate and grow.

Parable of the lamp. What does the lamp represent (v. 21)? The Word of God /truth. **What is the spiritual meaning of this earthly story?** Jesus just lit the disciples' lamp by explaining the parable of sower. He gave them knowledge of the truth. Now He is telling them, "Don't bury it, don't hide it, don't keep it to yourselves but proclaim it. Tell the world about me." Let the light of the lamp (Word of God) shine so people can see the truth.

What does He mean by the hearing/measure principle (v. 24)? Consider carefully what you hear/listen to. If you're hearing the right stuff—the more you hear, the more you learn; the more you understand, the more you grow and experience God's blessings. This snowball effect starts from listening.

We need to be intentional about hearing/listening. What are some ways we can "hear" right things?

Parable of the growing seed (v. 26). A farmer scatters some seed. Over time, day and night, the seed sprouts and grows all by itself and produces a crop. The farmer doesn't know how the growth happens. He can't see it growing. How exactly the seed grows is a mystery to the farmer.

Spiritual meaning—what does the seed represent? Word of God. **Who is the man spreading the seed today?** Believers including us. **What happens when we spread the seed?** New life. Growth of the seed. Fruit. **How does it work?** We can't see the Word of God working. It works in a way that it invisible to our eyes and unexplainable. The Word of God will bring forth fruit by itself.¹ *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).*

The Bible isn't just an instruction manual or a list of rules to follow. It has supernatural power to change lives.

Parable of the mustard seed (v. 30). A mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, is planted and grows into a huge tree.

Spiritual meaning—what does the mustard seed represent? Word of God. **Tiny mustard seed grows into a huge tree. What does the tree represent?** Kingdom of God. The contrast is between the Kingdom of God's small beginnings and how it will eventually become something very large and beneficial. When Jesus came He planted the seed in twelve men. Look at the Kingdom now!

Jesus and His disciples are in the boat. A big storm swamps the boat. What is Jesus doing (v. 35)? Sleeping!

What does that tell us about Jesus? He is not worried. He knows His life is not in danger; it will not end prematurely. The fact that Jesus could sleep in such a storm reflects one indication of His humanity. He's exhausted.

How did the disciples react? Did they breathe a sigh of relief and thank Him for saving their lives when the wind calmed down (v. 41)? They were terrified. They didn't understand.

As you look at the terrified reaction of the disciples, what observations can you make about them and their faith? They still didn't "get it." They didn't fully understand the truth of who Jesus is.

Any take-aways on handling the storms of life? Jesus can control the natural circumstances of life. Storms come even when Jesus is in the boat with you. He doesn't always calm the storm because often there is a purpose to the storm.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®) copyright ©2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

This is copyrighted material provided by Officers' Christian Fellowship (OCF). Permission is granted for use in local groups. For more information about OCF: www.ocfusa.org.

¹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Mark, 2014 Edition* (published by Sonic Light, www.soniclight.com), pp. 70