



STORIES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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 Mark 4:1-20
 Eleventh Message
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The fourth chapter of the gospel of Mark introduces a dramatic shift in the ministry of Jesus. Opposition toward him has escalated and stiffened. Our text last week (3:20-35) formed the capstone to the controversy between him and the religious authorities. By now, Israel's leaders had totally rejected him by attributing his saving work of casting out demons to Beelzebul, the chief ruler of demons. What will he do now that the die of the opposition is cast? How do you respond when you share the gospel with people you love and they are firmly entrenched against it and actively oppose it? Jesus' response is very instructive.

Let us look at what Mark says happened. Chapter 4, verses 1-2:

And He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very great multitude gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables,

Jesus responds to the opposition by changing both the arena and the method of his teaching. He leaves the synagogue and goes out into the open air to teach. His pulpit is a boat. Perhaps it will serve as a vehicle of escape, too. But, more importantly, the water's surface will amplify his voice in the face of the surrounding hills, which created a natural amphitheater. Bargil Pixner explains, "The bay lies halfway between Tabgha and Capernaum. The land slopes down like a Roman theater around the bay. Even today, this natural formation possesses astonishing acoustics, which have been scientifically investigated by the Israelis. It has been proven that Jesus' voice could have carried effortlessly from the floating pulpit to a crowd of several thousand people on the shore."¹ Rejection has placed Jesus outside the synagogue, yes, but it has opened up an even wider sphere of ministry. In the 1700's, George Whitefield, England's greatest preacher, was banned from many of the established churches in both England and America. He, too, took to the open air, and revival followed in the open fields of both countries.²

Secondly, in the face of opposition, Jesus not only changes his arena of teaching, he also changes his method. He now begins to teach in parables. What he started to do in the last controversy story (3:23) now becomes his standard practice. As a student of the Scriptures, I have always wondered why Jesus taught in parables. They are difficult to interpret. They seem terse, cryptic, and densely packed with mystery. I have never been

satisfied with popular interpretations, which explained them as mere "timeless illustrations of eternal truths," or single-point sermons set in ancient metaphor. In our Lord's ministry, parables had a much greater purpose than mere illustration. According to Mark, they had a very specific context: they were the direct response of Jesus to rejection and life threatening opposition by the leadership in Israel. "Parables flow directly out of the open repudiation of his exorcisms by the Jerusalem Scribes" (Rikki Watts).

In recent years, there has been a wealth of scholarship in the field of parables.³ I have been greatly helped by several New Testament scholars. I believe they have unearthed the original intention and impact of parables. This morning, from the fruit of their research, I want to give you a number of basic keys to interpreting the parables. We will examine the first of four, the account of the sower and his seed.

Our text has three parts: First, the parable of the sower; second, the explanation of the mystery of the parable; and third, its interpretation.

The parable of the sower (4:2-9)

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; and it came about that as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. And other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. And other seeds fell into the good soil and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Upon first reading, this little story seems absolutely harmless. It speaks of a familiar agricultural scene. In fact, every element of the account was in direct view of its hearers as they took their seats in this natural amphitheater on the north shores of Galilee. As the crowd listens intently to the words of Jesus while he commands them (the word "hear" frames the parable), doesn't it seem odd that the parable does not contain one word of theology, not one quote from the Torah, no prophetic

oracle of judgment, not even an ounce of controversy? Who would take issue with nature, which in absolute silence grants a sower's seed four radically different destinies, based on the quality of the soil into which it is sown? This kind of thing happens all the time. What is this but simple farm talk? And what kind of response is this by Jesus in the face of allegations that he is possessed by Beelzebub? This is like using a children's story for a closing statement in a law court.

A story can be a very powerful thing, however. When at last they are in seclusion, away from the crowd, Jesus reveals to his followers the divine secrets of the parable.

The purpose of parables: To reveal and to conceal (4:10-12)

And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return and be forgiven."

After Jesus has shared the parables from the boat, he withdraws from public view. Then his followers and the twelve begin to question him about the "why?" of the parables. Jesus explains that their purpose is to make a clear distinction between those who are *inside* and those who are *outside* of the kingdom. Moses had written, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deut 29:29). Now Jesus redefines who the *true* children are. He quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10, the occasion when the prophet received his commission. At first glance, this text seems to speak of harsh and arbitrary predestination. Why would God have a prophet preach for the purpose of blinding, confusing, and hardening? A closer look at the context of this passage, however, reveals a very different picture. Rikki Watts explains:

In Isaiah, God holds court with his people (2:13), and complains as their Father against his rebellious sons that they fully lack understanding. He invites them to "reason together" with him, offering salvation if they but repent. The offer, however, seems to fall on deaf ears. The Lord laments the faithlessness of his people, especially the rebellion of its rulers, concluding in verses 1:24-31 with an avowal to purge the city and "separate between the righteous and the wicked."

The constant theme in the midst of these allegations is Israel's idolatry, choosing idols that are blind and deaf over the living God. In response, Yahweh, their maker, will now confirm them in their decision by recreating them, as it were, in the image of the gods they have chosen. So Isaiah's preaching is "to make the heart of this people fat, their ears heavy, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and turn and be healed." That this blinding and

deafening is an ironic judgment upon the nation's idolatrous condition appears confirmed when her salvation, characterized by restoration of sight, hearing, and understanding, involves a concurrent rejection of idols.

This very same judicial response is now happening through Jesus, to leaders who have already refused the message, and now confirms them in their logic and consigns them to the consequences of their choices.⁴

The parables serve the dual purpose of hardening hearts that are already hard, while at the same time revealing the mystery of the kingdom to those on the inside. Thus, the parable was an ingenious method of disclosing a message that was extremely subversive and dangerous. "Israel's history is moving towards its climax, but it is not happening the way it was expected" (Tom Wright). Jesus is doing nothing less than replacing Israel's world view and its nationalistic hopes and dreams. This truth had to be veiled; if it was stated plainly, a riot would have resulted.

How then does the parable draw the hearers to listen? The answer is, through stories and images that were familiar to Israel. The stories told by Jesus drew his hearers into a world familiar to them; then, once they were captivated by the familiar, Jesus added surprising new twists at the end. His parables were designed to break open and then shatter the prevailing world view, replacing it with a new one. In this sense, these stories articulated a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel's hope in Jesus. Thus they were essentially secretive and subversive. "In his use parables Jesus was not a 'universal teacher' of timeless truths, but the originator of a movement which was to grow like an unobserved seed turning into a plant before anyone had realized."⁵

Such an artful presentation of truth is badly needed today. Oftentimes when we encounter rejection of the gospel by a family member, colleague, or friend, we become defensive and insist on repeating the same old dogmas, only with more volume or emotion. But this merely serves to drive the hearer even farther from both the message and the messenger. Truth is precious. Jesus did not cast his pearls before swine. Instead, he taught in parables.

Now that Jesus has explained the nature and necessity of parables, he interprets the parable of the sower.

The interpretation of the sower (4:13-20)

And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. And in a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places,

who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

What familiar imagery is Jesus alluding to as he draws his followers into this parable? Again, the answer comes from Isaiah. In 55:10-13, the prophet foretells a coming Messianic age in which God’s word will be like seed abundantly sown in the earth, establishing a whole new creation in the process:

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth,
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.
For you shall go out with joy,
And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.**

Borrowing this image, Jesus declares that that new age has arrived in himself. He is the faithful sower, bearing that bag of seed, teaching wherever he goes. He is the word from God, divinely powerful, and that word once sown will not return empty. But now the image of an abundant harvest is qualified. The seeds that are sown bear different results, resulting in four different destinies. But, according to Jesus, the reason is not because the seed lacks power. No. It is due to the condition of the soil in present day Israel.

In one case, Satan, like a swift raven, snatches the seed off the hard ground. This may be a veiled reference to the scribes, who accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. In another case, the seed is sown in soil that lacked depth. A thin layer of topsoil lay upon the rocky shelf, and as the sun heats the soil, the seed sprouts immediately. Some people receive the word with joy, but they are rootless. When affliction and persecution strike, they fall away. Jesus was never impressed with people’s initial emotional responses. What counts is deep roots that endure. Then there are those among whom seed was scattered. They heard and re-

sponded, yet the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choked the word. It had fallen among thorns. That was how Jeremiah described rebellious Israel in his own day: “This is what the Lord says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns’” (Jer 4:3). Anyone with a sensitive ear would understand that Jesus was equating Israel’s current leadership with those of Jeremiah’s day, whose hardened hearts and persistent idolatry led them off to exile on Babylon.

So far, things are looking fairly bleak for this farmer. But then there is the good soil which receives the seed. Deep, rich, and fertile, the soil receives the seed, which becomes well rooted, and bears bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. One out of the four hearers is truly lasting. But what fertility: bearing fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold! In contrast to the other hearers, “the good hearers welcome the word immediately, so that Satan cannot snatch it away. They welcome it deeply, so that persecutions cannot induce them to apostatized. They welcome it exclusively, so that other concerns do not stifle it...And by its abundance, the threefold success of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold more than cancels out the threefold failure of the seeds that fell on bad soil.”⁶ Jesus’ vision for the kingdom of God looks far past initial responses and the threefold failure, to the faithful remnant.

Thus was our first parable very instructive to the disciples, and so it should be to us.

Implications of the parable of the sower

A. Humility of spirit

The first impact of this parable on the disciples was to endow them with a deep sense of humility. Why were they chosen to be given the mysteries of the kingdom, when the rest of Israel was blinded and hardened through disobedience? Why were they chosen when, in fact, they were just as blind, and it would take a divine miracle for them to see? (Mark 8:22-26). This was a gift of pure grace. And so it is with us. These parables ought to capture us in awe and wonder that we were chosen to be the recipients of such divine grace, especially when we learn of the terrible judgment of those who refused to see. Why are we so blessed with sight?

B. Confidence in the word of God

The second thing this parable did for the disciples was to elicit in them confidence and outrageous optimism. A huge bag of seed had fallen from heaven and it would not return to God empty, without accomplishing what he desired. A seed once embedded in the soil can crack the hardest stone when it sprouts. The sowing of this seed into the earth would create a new cosmos so that, as Isaiah wrote,

**“The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands,
Instead of the thornbush the cypress will come up;**

And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up”
(Isa 55:12-13).

Wherever we find Jesus in the gospel of Mark he is teaching the word. The apostles followed his example, and so should we. Our task is to follow in the footsteps of the sower, casting seed faithfully and methodically wherever we go. The thing that motivates us to share it is that we know its power. Woe to us if we fail to expound the word and replace it with the tarnished opinions or anemic homilies of men!

C. Realistic Expectations

The third thing this parable did for the disciples was equip them with realistic expectations. The word is powerful beyond human comprehension. It is the key to the new creation. But the establishment of this new creation is not without resistance. The New Exodus may not be quite the “occasion of unalloyed joy” (Watts), but failure of result is not due to any lack of power inherent in the word, but, rather, to the condition of the soil. And, just as Jesus sowed within the context of a rebellious, idolatrous nation, so too do we. We live in a world where there is a ravenous enemy, the devil; where there is rampant worldliness in the deceitfulness of riches; and where the flesh resides in every human heart. Though to the human eye rejection may be the prevailing pattern, the future is not governed by the those who reject the seed, but by the faithful, who are fruitful beyond number. May God grant us the faith to keep our vision focused on the faithful, since they hold the future. Amen.

1 See Bargil Pixner, *With Jesus through Galilee, according to the fifth gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishers, 1992) 41.

2 The best treatment on Whitefield is the outstanding two volume work by Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, Ill.: Cornerstone Books, 1970).

3 Tom Wright has provided the theological context in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress); Ken Bailey, the cultural context, in *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans); and Rikk E. Watts, the Isaianic background to the parables here in Mark, in his book, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

4 Watts, 191-208.

5 I am indebted to Tom Wright for the thoughts of this entire paragraph, whether paraphrased or directly quoted.

6 Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 207.

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