

He who Sows  
Mark 4

Isaiah 6

John 8:31-47

Congregation, Isaiah 55:6-11

Today we are going to launch into Chapter 4 which is the parable of the sower. Up until this point Mark's record here has been more of a quick summary hitting high points and highlights of Jesus' early ministry. But here in Chapter 4 Mark gives us an account of Jesus teaching. There are only a few other places throughout the book of Mark that he diverges from his narrative style and spends time recording some of Jesus' teaching.

As we read this account this morning we will once again see a scene that is all too familiar in the book of Mark. Jesus and his disciples are by the sea of Galilee and a multitude of people have gathered around. And just like we read in chapter 3 when he requested a small boat so that he would not be crushed by the crowd that was pressing to get to him. This is much the same here, and once again as we see that this large multitude gathering actually an obstacle just as it is an opportunity. It is not recorded exactly where Jesus was at this time, but I thought it was interesting to note that there is an area along the sea of Galilee that is known as the Bay of Parables, which is an area that slopes down toward the sea creating a natural occurring amphitheater. Scientists have done experiments in this area and have found that it is entirely possible that someone standing on the shore could be heard by 1000's of people. Even though there is no way that we can know for sure if this is where Jesus was at this time I just found it interesting that this place exists making the teaching of 100s if now 1000's of people possible without any artificial amplification.

throughout all of the new testament we see that Jesus' teaches using parables, and that this was his preferred way of teaching the multitudes. This method of teaching actually was not a new method but something that was used quite commonly by the Jewish Rabbi's from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and there are even some Greco-Roman stories that resemble the parable style. So this type of teaching was not anything new, using examples of everyday things to explain something of a higher understanding. We use this type of teaching still today using examples and parallels in an attempt to make something complicated more understandable. But as we will see this is actually not the full intent of why Jesus chose to teach in parables.

There are 60 such recordings of Jesus' parables recorded throughout Matthew, Luke, and Mark, and the most common subject of his teaching while using parables was the kingdom of God, by using things such as fishing, or farming, or family life to teach a much higher spiritual truth. This type of teaching style does not require the hearers to have any prior knowledge of the subject to be able to understand, but the subject matter upon which Jesus teaches is not easy to understand, so as we see even by his disciples those who hear them come away just as confused, if not more so than before they heard his teaching. This has the effect of causing the listener to question, to think about what is being said challenging how and what we think.

Jesus' teaching was done in such a way that his teaching was heard, but not really understood as we will see in our passage this morning, when asked by his disciples about this parable that it was given to them to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, those of the nameless multitudes it is masked behind parables and impossible to understand so that seeing they may not perceive and hearing they may not understand. Lest they should turn and their sins be forgiven.

What we see here is the reason and purpose that Jesus taught in such a way. Unlike the common use of examples and parables to try to bring the teaching of something difficult to understand down to a more understandable level, which is in a part what Jesus was doing, but it also served the purpose to cause confusion and misunderstanding to mask the teaching so only to those it was given would hear. Using parables has much the same effect that the cloud that was put between the Israelites and the Egyptians that we see in Exodus chapter 14, lets turn there and read from verse 15-20. This cloud that was placed between them, was the same cloud yet it was darkness to the Egyptians, and Light to the Israelites. These parables of Jesus has the same effect, they are understandable, and light to those God who are God's children and given the ability to understand, but they are confusion and darkness to those look from the outside.

It is passages like this that make me wonder how those with a free-will understanding of salvation understand such things. Even Jesus himself taught in such a way to not be understood by anyone except those who God had given understanding too. So this word, this gospel truly is a 2 edged sword, for some it is the breath of life, and for others the stench of death. These parables serve the purpose of instruction to those with ears to hear, and condemnation to those outside. One author likened parables to a stained glass window. It can be seen from the outside and at one level understood, but to truly get the full beauty and understanding of it one must be inside to see the light shining through. That is true about these teachings of Jesus, one can hear them and take from them some knowledge, some logic but to fully understand one must first believe that Jesus is who he says that he is, and it is only then, by this light of understanding granted to those who are inside can we see these pictures, or examples that Jesus paints for us in his parables to their fullest.

So with this understanding of the parable teaching style, let us dive into this starting at verse 3-20. Jesus starts off by imploring those who have gathered around him to listen, to pay attention to what he has to say. This imploring of his listeners to listen up, to pay attention informs his listeners that he is going to give them important instruction. This parable of the farmer is something that those in the area could relate to, for the area around Galilee is rocky and farming would be difficult. In this parable we see a type of sowing seed that was not typical of the Jewish practices. Jewish farmers were instructed when sowing seed to do so with intent and purpose, to be methodical and not wasteful. Yet this sower that we see in Jesus' parable is not doing so. He is tossing seed everywhere not being overly concerned on where it is landing.

This is exactly what we see in Jesus' teaching here is it not? He is standing on a boat, spreading the seeds to truth and the gospel to all those who are there, not being selective but teaching all. And then we see in verse 11 and 12 that not all who see perceive, and not all who listen hear. Some of that seed is thrown by the wayside and has little to no affect. Yet we see where the hearts of those who have been prepared by God to receive the word of Christ it yields a crop far exceeding the sowers expectations. And those who God has not granted the ability to hear, wither and die, or completely turn away disregarding the gospel completely.

Usually a lot of time is spent explaining this different soils and how they relate to the different reactions to God's word. Doing so I think takes much of the focus off of the sower and shifts it either to the seeds themselves, or to the soil that they land on, and doing so takes some of the focus away from Jesus himself and his ministry and makes the soil's, or the hearts of men that which is of upmost importance.

This parable is a picture of the Kingdom of God in which Jesus is the one who is the sower of

the gospel. Keeping this in mind we can see the importance of the detail of the sower indiscriminately throwing seeds caring little upon which ground it falls. One application we can take from this is that this method is actually the same for us as we share the gospel. We are to have little concern as to who we share it with, we are not to judge who we determine to be worthy or not, but rather we are to share the gospel with all for the gospel is for all men, Jews and gentiles.

While we are going about sharing the gospel to all peoples, having little concern whether or not it will be accepted we can be confident in knowing that God has prepared some to hear and to sprout forth a bountiful harvest. This shows that the harvest, or the effect of the gospel has little to do with our wills, or our efforts and it is more about God who prepares the hearts. Just as we see here throughout the life of Jesus and his ministry, or even the ministry of the apostles, despite all the opposition that arises God's word still goes forth, and is still effective no matter how hard those who oppose it are trying to silence those who share it.

In the next few following verses, 10-13 we see as I mentioned Jesus purpose for teaching in Parables. This creates an interesting dynamic between the indiscriminate sowing of the gospel, and those who respond. The gospel is shared to all, yet only effective in some. We see in verse 10 that Mark points out that after the multitudes have left, and in the privacy of the small group of Jesus and his devoted followers they ask him to explain the meaning of the parable. In verse 11 we see once again that there are 2 groups of people. Those inside, and those outside, those who God has granted understanding, and those who hear the words but do not understand.

So we see that knowledge, belief, and understanding is something that is given, and not something earned or attained. This mystery of God can only be understood by those who God has revealed himself to be understood, and the irony here is that Jesus is the fulfillment of this ministry but people do not see it and reject him because as John chapter 8 said that we read this morning, they do not believe because he tells them the truth. The very truth that is the saving gospel, doubles as a stumbling block to those not given understanding by God. It confounds the wise, that God would send his Son in the form of a man, from a lowly birth to be the savior of the world. God has chosen to reveal himself in this veiled and mysterious way so that it is only by faith one could recognize the Son of God in this lowly man Jesus of Nazareth.

As we see with Jesus teaching his disciples the meaning of this parable that the keys to understanding this mysterious God is only through his Son, it is not due to wisdom, or intelligence of the individual but only through God's revelation. James Edwards argues that this is the whole purpose and intent of this parable of the sower. He says that the providence of God being effective in Jesus to produce a fruitful harvest is the central point of this teaching.

In chapter 1 verse 27 in the account of Jesus casting out the demon they respond by asking what new doctrine is this? As we have seen in Jesus ministry nothing is as it seems, he is not the Messiah that the Jews were waiting for and these pharisees and scribes who thought themselves to be children of God, are actually numbered amongst the outsiders. So we can see that this idea of insiders and outsiders is represented as well in this parable of the sower, those who have faith are given the mystery of the Kingdom of God, and through the word of God produce fruit, some 30 fold, some 60 fold and some 100 fold. But those who hear, without faith, remain confused, and on the outside. But in Mark's record of the ministry of Christ, we see those who would be considered outsiders become insiders. We see this in the healing of the leper, and the paralytic, and the casting out of unclean spirits, making those who are outsiders to be insiders.

Here in verse 12 where Jesus is Quoting Isaiah chapter 6 that we read this morning it shows a stark picture of man's will and God's sovereignty. Just as God sent Isaiah to a people who would not hear, it is the same with the sower tossing seeds on the ground that will not bear fruit. And again we see this as Aaron pointed out a few weeks ago with the appointing of Judas as one of the 12, to be one of his closest followers. Even in this we see God's sovereign plan being played out.

Then quickly we see Jesus' response to his chosen followers. Verse 13, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? So that begs the question, what makes this parable so important? Why is this one seem to be a key to understanding all others? Well, as pointed out in the Pillar New Testament commentary on this passage this that this parable combines two elements that form the core of Mark's story that is necessary for understanding the gospel.

These final 6 verses of Jesus' explanation of the Parable shed more light and detail on it's meaning and purpose. As with most parables they are not a static one dimensional story only meant to point to one outcome, but rather are layered and have many lessons burried within that can be learned. There have been many books and sermons about these different types of soil that the seed falls upon. Equating each soil type to a different type of christian, but in doing so they are completely forgetting key verse to understanding this parable, verse 11. to you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, all things come in parables.

This isn't a list of different types of Christians, there are no stony ground Christians. As we have seen throughout this entire study of Mark there is a distinct difference between those who are outside and those who are inside, those who are the masses of a nameless multitude, and those who are the specific, chosen, personal, individuals that Jesus takes aside and instructs. I think it is really no different in understanding these last few verses as well. What we are seeing is a description of the different types of outsiders, even some who appear to have faith, and flourish but when trials, or temptations come they wither and die, leaving the faith. It isn't as though these people once had faith and then lost it, as we see with this parable there was no root, there was no real faith to begin with, it was all just a surface showing.

So instead of seeing these as different types of christians, I think it can be better understood as an parable about the ministering of the word. As Jesus says in verse 14, The sower sows the word, this is about the gospel and the one who shares it. I think that there are a few things that we can take from these verses with this understanding. 1, as I said earlier, the job of the sower, of the one spreading the word is not to be selective, witnessing to only those that they think deserve it, or have a better "chance" of understanding. We are to in fact just share the word to all, let it land where it lands and rely on God to prepare the heart for the receiving of it. We do not know which person who hears the word will respond, or how they will respond, whether it be complete rejection, acceptance but not true belief and understanding, or if it will truly take root and produce further fruit.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing that we can take from this encouragement. As we, disciples and ministers for Christ go about our day to day lives sharing the hope that is within us as we are given opportunity, we do so knowing and trusting that God has prepared furtile ground for the seeds of the word to take root. As we look at this ministry of Jesus here in Mark, and even the apostles, look at Paul in the book of Phillipians we went through, he was imprisoned, yet praised God for the opportunities to witness to the roman guards, and seeing fruit and growth within that ministry against what to mankind would be all odds. Despite trials and tribulations, despite how bad it may seem that society keeps falling away, God will always provide furtile ground for the seed of his word to grow into a bountiful harvest, he promises that his word will not return void.

