

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1

“1 And again [Jesus] began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. 2 Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; & the birds of the air came and devoured it. 5 Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. 7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 8 But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred." 9 And He said to them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" 10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, "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, 12 so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.' " 13 And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. 16 These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. 18 Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, & it becomes unfruitful. 20 But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, & bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, & some a hundred." 21 Also He said to them, "Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? 22 For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

"Jesus Teaches with Parables"

This morning we will consider the Lord's use of parables in His earthly ministry and why they are included for our benefit in the Gospel Accounts. As we have taken our brief look at the Gospel According to Mark, we have considered the Disciples of Jesus, the demons who confronted Jesus and the various healings that Jesus performed.

- In the midst of all this we are reminded that Jesus has come to save His people from their sins!

Mark tells us right up front that Jesus came preaching the Kingdom telling His people, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: Repent and believe the Gospel!"

So here in the fourth chapter we are told that the large crowds continue to gather: Jesus puts off in a boat and begins to teach them many things by parables.

Two obvious questions come to mind:

- What is a parable?
- Why did Jesus use them?

The parables of Jesus are very famous and much has been written about them down through the years.

Thus I think it is very important that we be good Bereans when it comes to what people say, including me, always taking it back to the Scriptures! And just as a quick reminder for the children: We use that phrase, “good Bereans” because it was in Berea where the people listened to the Apostle Paul & then went to the Scriptures to see if what he said was true.

Let me give you two examples of being ‘Good Bereans from our morning text: After Jesus presents the parable of the sower we read in verse 10: “But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. 11 And He said to them, "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, 12 so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.'"

You find this or similar comments about the parables from Jesus in all three of the synoptic Gospel accounts. Jesus then gives us an interesting bit of information about the parable of the sower in verse 13: “And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”

Now it should be pretty obvious that Jesus teaches that some things in the parables will be hidden from those with hardened hearts AND that He thinks the parable of the sower is a key of sorts to all the other parables. Now as your pastor I am NOT going to pretend that I can give you an exhaustive explanation of what either of these two points mean for us today.

However, as we consider the parable of the sower this morning or others in the course of my preaching, you would be good Bereans if you questioned me when I taught something that did not agree with these texts: For example, if I got up one Sunday and said that I thought the parable of the Pharisee and the publican was THE most important parable, you could rightly ask, “what about the parable of the sower, did not Jesus say it was the key to all the others?

Or if I taught on the parable of the prodigal son and said it was so plain that EVERYONE can understand what is being taught, you could again ask, did not Jesus say that He taught in parables so some would not see or hear what was being taught?

- That is what it means to be a good Berean... Respectfully of course!
- So with that in mind, I think the best way to answer the first question is to let the Bible determine what a parable is since it goes out of the way to identify them as we saw in our text this morning.

You will find lists of the parables ranging from 29 to almost 50. These lists always include the ones where the Scripture says something is a parable, like the parable of the sower and those where Jesus says, the Kingdom of God is like and gives examples such as the mustard seed or the pearl of great price.

There are a few that are subject to some debate: Many include the story of Lazarus and the rich man which I would strongly argue is a real event rather than a parable: It is not identified as a parable AND there is no other parable on any of the lists where an individual is named.

Many also include the illustration of the candle being put on a lampstand rather than being hidden under a bushel, but I would argue this one is just a straight-forward teaching about the light of the Gospel going forth into the world.

Next we come to the question of why Jesus taught in parables and here I am going to have to criticize an old friend. I have here my Open Bible, which is a study Bible that as you can see I have used for many years. It has many great study helps and I have strongly recommended its use over the years!

When I began to prepare for this week’s message I rightly assumed that it would have a section on the parables of Jesus, but boy was I disappointed.

I am still going to recommend this Bible but I want to use it this morning as a very practical example how we are to be 'Good Bereans' as we discussed. The Open Bible begins their review of the parables like this: "When Jesus wanted to get a spiritual truth across to ordinary men and women, He used the vehicle of the parable." They go on later to say that these parables were "part of the Master's strategy for getting under men's defenses – for winning men's hearts by catching their resistant and self-satisfied minds off guard."

➤ Anyone see a problem here?

Yes, it runs contrary to what Jesus said about the parables. In fact, Jesus points out that it was a fulfilment of what the Prophet Isaiah said and it is carried on in the rest of the New Testament in the Epistles of Paul.

Listen to what he told the Saints at Corinth: I Corinthians 1:17: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The message of the cross is not foolish because it is not wise, it is foolish to those who have rejected right wisdom! That is the point that Paul goes on to make to the Corinthians & one he also gives in great detail in his address on Mars Hill or the first chapter of Romans.

[sad that so many pit these important passages against each other, but that is a sermon for another day.]

So not only is it important to let the Bible determine what a parable is... It is also important to use them as Jesus intended them to be used: They are there for the instruction of His people to help them understand the truth about His Kingdom & its enemies.

Thus I think we should pay special attention when Jesus says that the Parable of the Sower helps us to understand all the other parables: This brings me to my final complaint about the Open Bible's study section on the parables: They go on to give a brief summary of twelve of the parables saying, "Those selected for inclusion here are among the best loved for their perennial beauty and value. They are as pertinent to the people of the 20th Century American as they once were to those who first heard them in Galilee." However, the Parable of the Sower is NOT included:

➤ Does anyone see a problem here?

Jesus said to His disciples: "'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" So lets take just a few moments to review this important parable and to see how it relates to many of the others. Let me begin by asking the children the most basic question: How many types of soil did Jesus describe in this parable...

➤ That's right four!

Now just about everyone agrees on the meaning of the first and last soils...But there is often confusion when it comes to those in the middle.

Obviously the hard-pan on the pathway represents a hardened heart that will not even consider the Word. The good soil produces a great harvest from regenerated hearts, where God has given ears to hear and eyes to see... Those who as Paul tells us, "are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Here you find various levels of fruitfulness: Some thirty, some sixty and some a hundredfold. But what about the soils in the middle: The stony soil & the weed infested soil?

➤ Do these soils have regenerated hearts because they believe?

Well, if in your theology you think that people can lose their salvation then you might argue that they are.

However, we know from the Bible and our reformed traditions that those who were called from before the foundation of the world to be saved from their sins by Jesus and taken to glory in the end, cannot be lost.

- They are given to Jesus by the Father and He promised that He would lose none of them!

So what is very important to remember when considering the four different types of soil presented in the parable of the sower is that three are lost in the end and only one bears fruit. And among that good soil we see various levels of production just as we would expect among Christians.

I think something that can be helpful is to try and relate people we find in the Scriptures to this parable and discuss which soil they represent: Again, the ones on either end are pretty easy: The Scribes and Pharisees that Jesus encountered would certainly be examples of the hardened hearts in the New Testament and the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Pharaoh was the greatest example in the Old.

When it comes to good soil, we can think of Abraham, or Joseph or Moses or Joshua or King David in the Old Testament. You would look to the eleven disciples we studied a few weeks ago or Steven and Paul in Book of Acts as New Testament examples.

Can anyone think of some examples that would fit the stony ground: Someone who was quick to believe but deserted the faith in a time of persecution?

- Think of King Saul in the Old or how about Judas Iscariot in the New.

How about the weed-infested soil? Someone who is so enamored with the cares of the world that the Word is choked out...

In the Old Testament, how about those who wanted to returned to the riches & comfort of Egypt or Eli's sons? Certainly the rich young ruler who could not give up his possessions would be a New Testament example.

In closing I want to briefly consider why Jesus said that understanding this parable was a key to the others. I will not pretend that I am doing anything but scratching the surface of this question and it is one that we can meditate on for our entire lives! When we started this series I made the case that the Gospel can be simply stated as Jesus has come to save His people from their sins. The result will be seeing the Holy Spirit use His Church to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus...

- Is this not what is pictured here in this parable?

Think about looking down on a great farm from the sky [like flying into Sacramento!]

-- You can see roads and paths here and there among the large fields.

-- You can see small sections, usually near the roads or maybe a creek or river, where the ground is too rocky to support the plants.

-- And there may even be some areas where the weeds have taken over.

- BUT, as you look at the entire farm, you see the vastness of the field where the good soil is bringing forth a grand harvest!

When we see the parable of the sower as this BIG picture of the Kingdom, we begin to see how so many of the other parables enhance our understanding of it.

With the parable of the wheat & tares we are reminded that God cares so much for His fruit that He has the workers wait until the harvest to destroy the weeds, so the wheat is not harmed. Thus it should not surprise us to see many wicked in the world today while the Kingdom of Jesus grows.

Jesus reminds the Disciples, and all of us about the great mystery of just how the Kingdom grows by immediately telling them the parable of the seeds after the parable of the sower saying:

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, 27 and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. 28 For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

- **Parables like the mustard seed or the leaven remind us that God’s Kingdom will grow to fill all the earth.**

There are many like the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the ten virgins or the talents that remind us how God uses His servants to build His Kingdom and that we must be patient, knowing that it will be built on God’s timetable and not ours!

I am sure there is much more to what Jesus said about this important parable... But I trust some of this will help us to better understand the parable and to think further about its significance, as we learn to love it and ALL the other parables of Jesus!

And finally, it is always important to ask what all of this means for us today. Last week we saw how difficult it was to put the healings of Jesus into neat little boxes, and yet we learned how significant they were for us and much of modern medicine today.

I trust that our brief encounter with the parables of Jesus this morning shows that it is the same with them! We tend to want them in nice neat boxes or on convenient lists... But much like the Book of Proverbs they are vast wells of knowledge intended to instruct those who love and follow Jesus.

So I would pray that we would see two very important results here at Church of the King: We must strive to read and meditate on the parables of Jesus as the Holy Spirit uses them to instruct us today.

- **We must ask, and desire to know, what they mean for us and for our children.**

Our covenant children should grow up not only knowing these parables well, but being molding by them as well. And finally, toward that end we must strive to be those who bring forth the greater harvest in God’s Kingdom.

- **Our constant prayer should be that God would use us to bring forth the hundred-fold harvest as we desire to be those who hear AND do the teachings of our Savior Jesus.**

Communion Meditation: Psalm 25

**“4 Show me Your ways, O Jehovah; Teach me Your paths.
5 Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; On You I wait all the day. 6 Remember, O Jehovah, Your tender mercies and Your lovingkindnesses, For they are from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; According to Your mercy remember me, For Your goodness' sake, O Jehovah. 8 Good and upright is Jehovah; Therefore He teaches sinners in the way. 9 The humble He guides in justice, And the humble He teaches His way. 10 All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.”**