



Mark 4:1-20 - “Of Sowers, Seeds, & Soils” - February 7, 2021

## OPEN

Farming is fascinating, and it has come a long way...from clearing the land and working with a horse team; to highly mechanized equipment, such as a massive air seeder; to the use of high tech digital field mapping and information systems utilizing GPS!



Today we are considering a story about seeds and soils. Mark wrote about the swelling crowds (3:7-12) and the calling of the Apostles (3:13-19) just prior to the **Sermon on the Mount**. Bear in mind, Mark was writing topically, not chronologically.

We are only considering the parable of the sower from **Mark 4:1-20**, but three more appear in Mark 4: **lamp stand** (vv. 21-25); **grain harvest** (vv. 26-29); **mustard seed** (vv. 30-34).

Mark 3:7 tells us that Jesus **withdrew with His disciples** from those who plotted against His life! Yet the crowds followed Him to Galilee. Mark 4:1 indicates this happened **again** – withdrawing even from family (3:31-35). And due to the crowd, Jesus put out in a boat and used it as a platform for His parables of the Kingdom (v.1).

There are over 250 parables in Scripture – see [All The Parables of the Bible](#).

The Jesus Film Project has nicely compiled [All The Parables of Jesus](#).

Mark indicated that Jesus taught “many things by parables” (v.2).

## DIG

Why did Jesus use parables? Consider three reasons.

### 1. *Parables penetrate...*

Parables are metaphors illustrating the truth about God’s Kingdom. As such, they have a way of penetrating hardened or proud hearts. Think of Nathan’s rebuke of King David see **II Samuel 12:1-14**. Jesus’ parables cut through the traditionalism of first Century Judaism. Please bear in mind that parables are not complex theological explanations. Rather, parables provide an opportunity for spiritual self-assessment. Do not think “lecture” but “mirror”.

### 2. *Parables protect...*

Jesus’ use filtered out false followers. Jesus’ intention was not to stir the crowd to insurrection but to **instruct His disciples**. Secrets (lit. “mysteries”) of the Kingdom were entrusted to the Apostles (v.11). Jesus even quoted from Isaiah’s commission that there would be both the responsive and unresponsive to God’s Word (v 12; see Isaiah 6:9-10). An **inappropriate positive** response to Jesus’ teaching would have been political rebellion. In Matthew 11:25 Jesus prayed, “O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike.” NLT

### 3. *Parables proclaim...*

Has God chosen only a select few **today** to be entrusted with secrets of God’s Kingdom? Proponents of the [New Apostolic Reformation](#) believe in self-appointed apostles and prophets who should wield authority and receive revelation from God. However, God’s selection of the Apostles was unique and for the launching of the early Church. In reference to Matthew 10:27, A. B. Bruce writes, “He was to make it His business to tell them in darkness what they should afterwards speak in the daylight, and to whisper in their ear what in after years they should preach upon the housetops.” (*The Training Of The Twelve*, Kregel, 1988, 30)

### What is the story in this parable?

Let us come back to the parable itself – see Mark 4:3-8. In his book *In the Steps of Jesus: An Illustrated Guide to the Places of the Holy Land* (Zondervan, 2006, 66-67; 71-72) author Peter Walker tells us that Galilee is a fresh water lake, supplied by snows on Mount Hermon and conveyed by the Jordan River. In the time of Jesus, Galilee had a thriving fishing industry.

Yet agriculture was also familiar – though there was a variety of landscapes surrounding the lake. As Walker suggests, though Jesus preached with great **authority** but also with great **accessibility**. The parable reveals one kind of see...but four types of soils.

- **Packed soil** – seed fell on the footpath and the birds came and ate it – v. 4
- **Rocky soil** – soil was shallow; seed sprouted shallow roots, wilted – v. 5
- **Thorny soil** – thorns competed with the tender plants; no production – v. 7
- **Fertile soil** – the seeds sprouted, grew, and produced a good crop – v. 8

### What is the significance of this parable?

Jesus gave the interpretation in verses 13-20. He explained that this parable is foundational for all other parables. It speaks to the way one responds to all the teaching of Jesus. *“If you can’t understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?”* (v.13 NLT)

But we must not ask the metaphor not to bear more weight that it was designed to bear! Parables help us assess our adoption of Kingdom values.

This parable helps us examine our response to the Word of God – see Mark 2:2 where Jesus was “preaching the word.” You see, Jesus has the lead role in the parable! He was the consistent seed-sower. Though the seed is the same, responses vary. Consider how Jesus explained these responses.

- **Packed soil** – people steeped in spiritual darkness such that Satan snatches see away – v. 15
- **Rocky soil** – initial acceptance but very little root structure so there is a falling away – vv. 16-17
- **Thorny soil** – acceptance but other pursuits, especially wealth, chokes out growth – vv. 18-19
- **Fertile soil** – acceptance with obedience leading to fruitfulness – v. 20

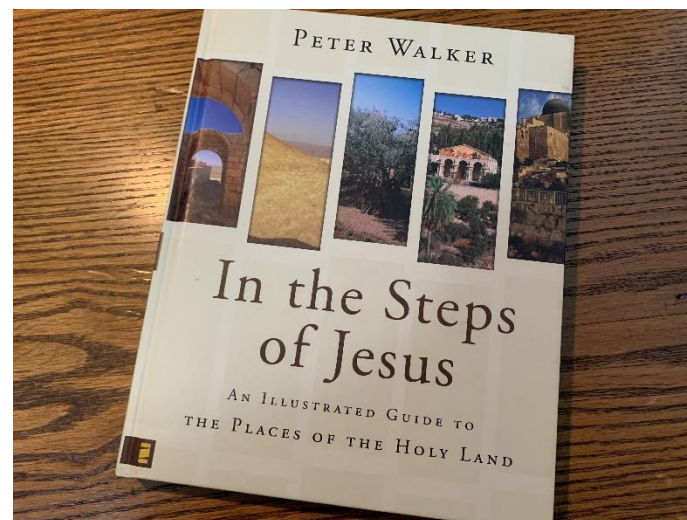
### REFLECT

On one level, the parable of the sower and the soils is “farm to table.” As Peter Walker writes,

*This very “earthiness” of Jesus’ teaching has sometimes caused people to conclude that his message was gentle. They miss the radical purpose for*

*which Jesus was using such imagery. They conjure up a picture of Jesus as a wandering philosopher, speaking harmless truth in homely imagery, pointing to a divine reality that made few demands. The truth is quite the reverse. He was proclaiming a radical new message – the kingdom of God.*

*Jesus himself was the King, the long-awaited Messiah. But if he spoke openly about this, the crowds would almost certainly have misunderstood him. So, Jesus spoke in parables and riddles, pointing clearly to the truth and only letting people into the secret gradually. Yet there was no doubting his intention. Jesus was calling his hearers to a radical obedience – to him....They were being called on a journey and he was the one they must follow. “Follow Me!” (72-73)*



This parable also begs the question: is poor soil simply **inevitable** or God's **intention**? In verse 9 Jesus invited **all**: *“Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”* (see v. 23; Matthew 11:15)

Think again about soil. Rocks and weeds can be removed. Soil that is acidic or alkaline can be **amended** by adding lime, manure, kelp and other materials.

As a result of amendments, soil that was once unresponsive becomes **fertile**. The Holy Spirit amends our hearts with the truth of Jesus Christ. Read about this work of the Holy Spirit in **John 15:12-15**.

What kind of soil are you?