

Mark – The First Gospel

008 – The Main Parable – Mark 4:1-20

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

Mark wrote that Jesus’ ministry was about proclaiming the gospel and casting out demons. This was what his disciples were also to observe and do. Up to this point Mark has described many stories of healings and exorcisms, but nothing about the content of Jesus’ teachings. Chapter 4 contains an exemplary collection of his teachings. Another collection will appear near the end of the gospel account, in chapter 13.

Thus far in Mark’s Gospel we have learned that the kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ teaching and activity (1:15), and we have seen Jesus the exorcist, the healer, and the sage in action. We still do not know much about what he means by the kingdom of God, and what his role in it is. That is the purpose of his discourse in 4:1-34.¹

Mark 4:1-34 is this collection of teachings and related material. This entire section is to be read and understood as a single unit. However, due to its length we will take the first half this time and examine the second half during the next session.

The material is arranged chiastically.

Table 1: Chiastic Arrangement, Reading Mark, 4:1-34

A	Narrative introduction (4:1- 2)	
B	Seed parable (4:3- 9)	(public teaching)
C	Statement about hiddenness (4:10- 12)	(private teaching)
D	Allegorical explanation of parable (4:13- 20)	(private teaching)
C’	Statements about revelation (4:21- 25)	(private teaching)
B’	Seed parables (4:26- 29, 30- 32)	(public teaching)
A’	Narrative conclusion (4:33- 34)	

Mark seems to regard the parable of the seeds as the most vital because he includes the following at the top of the explanation section, “And he said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?’” (Verse 13, ESV)

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4180.

The parable of the seeds (or soils, or sower) is such a well-known teaching that there are many, many interpretations, explanations and applications that have been given to it over the centuries. It is found in Matthew (chapter 13) and also in Luke (chapter 8). For us as we study Mark, the questions we need to keep in mind are: Why did Mark choose this one as the primary representative of Jesus' teachings? How did this speak to Jesus' circumstances? How did this speak to circumstances of Mark's contemporary audience? How does this parable relate with the text that came before and what comes after?

Parable of the Seeds, Soils, and Sower

In the previous unit Jesus had gone from a miracle worker attracting curious crowds to a pariah in the eyes of the Pharisees and the scribes. His ministry was through the region of Galilee, in synagogues, houses, and in the outdoor places. He had called and appointed disciples. In the final periscope he defined what it meant to be inside and outside his family: The disciples are inside (although they do not yet understand what it means to be in the family), the crowd is curious and to some extent are also inside. His blood relatives, the scribes, and the Pharisees are outside. The same proclamation and demonstrations of the Kingdom invasion result in multiple different responses. It is in this context that this unit on teaching through parables begins.

The author of Mark uses the parables and sayings of Jesus to explain why the proclamation of God's reign is meeting with resistance and to assure the audience that despite the apparent lack of progress, God's reign will eventually burst forth in amazing fruitfulness.²

4:1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (ESV)

1. Key cultural background details on agricultural practices

... The sowing action here is that of ancient Palestinian agriculture, the sower walking through a field and throwing seed by hand over the ground, which was then plowed to bury the seed. This explains how seed in the parable seems to go everywhere. It was not put in neatly prepared furrows, as in modern agriculture; thus, the seed that fell on the path (4:4) or on rocky ground (4:5) or among thorn bushes (4:7) was not deliberately placed there but fell on these places in the scattering over the broad field. In an actual field, of course, comparatively little of the seed

² Reading Mark, 4:1-34.

would land in such places. So, even though much space is devoted to listing these places, this does not imply that the bulk of the work of the sower is wasted.³

The parable of the sower is faithful to the life situation of Palestinian agriculture, in which plowing follows sowing. The sower is not careless when he scatters the seed on the path or among the thorns or on ground which has no depth of soil. He does so intentionally, for the path on which the villagers have trodden over the stubble and the thorns which lie withered among the fallow ground will be plowed up to receive the seed. The seed that fell upon the rocky ground was scattered intentionally also, for the underlying limestone thinly covered with topsoil does not show above the surface until the plowing exposes it. The detail that plowing follows sowing is important for the correct interpretation of the parable; it serves to caution the interpreter that less attention is to be given to the various types of soils, and more to the central act of sowing.⁴

2. Does the above change in any way how you interpret and apply the parable?
 - a. What is new or different now in how you read the text?
 - b. Imagine yourself in the setting by the sea as Jesus tells this parable
 - c. Assuming this was the first time you heard this parable and you have never heard any of its interpretations, what is it saying to you?
3. "Listen" (3) and "Let him hear" (9) bookend the parable
 - a. Emphasizes the importance of this parable
 - b. But why is it so important?
 - c. In some ways perhaps, the reader is being treated to the confusion that the disciples faced when they first heard this parable
4. The parable discusses two types of soil
 - a. Unproductive – 3 subtypes
 - i. Path, rocky, weeds
 - b. Productive
 - i. Thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold
5. There is danger in over-allegorizing and over-interpreting parables, or carrying an interpretation of a symbol over from one parable to a different one

The Purpose of Parables

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." 13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" (ESV)

³ UBC: Mark, 4:1-9.

⁴ NICNT: Mark, 4:3-9.

1. The disciples ask about the parables – what specifically did they ask? We can infer from the response given
 - a. What is the purpose of parables?
 - i. To describe the kingdom of God
 - ii. To reveal the kingdom of God
 - b. Why do you speak in parables?
 - i. So that only those *inside* will comprehend the secret of the kingdom of God
 - ii. So that those *outside* will not comprehend, even though they hear
 1. So that those *outside* will not repent and be forgiven(?!)
 2. An allusion to Isaiah 6:9-10
2. According to verse 13, understanding this parable is the key to understanding all the parables
 - a. The entirety of Jesus’ ministry from beginning to end is a parable
 - i. The gospel itself is a parable
 - ii. The *secret* of the kingdom is participation in the invasion of the kingdom
 - b. Jesus’ ministry requires a response, a judgment, from the people who hear and see
 - i. Some judge correctly, other choose to judge incorrectly
 1. The earlier unit has already given examples of this
 - ii. Responses build on each other (c.f., 4:24-25)
 1. Correct judgment enables further revelation
 2. Incorrect judgment blinds, and eventually to the unforgiveable sin (c.f., 3:29)
 - iii. Even the disciples sometimes give wrong responses (c.f., 8:14-21)
 1. Yet they do eventually come to understand – so deafness and blindness aren’t necessarily permanent conditions
3. Back to: *but for those outside everything is in parables, so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”*
 - a. “So that” – Gk., *hina*

The first problem in verse 12 comes with the Greek conjunction *hina*, which is translated as “in order that” by the NRSV. That suggests purpose. However, in koine Greek *hina* can designate result. The issue is whether *hina* refers to the cause (purpose) or the effect (result) of Jesus’ teaching in parables.⁵

- b. Matching C’ section (4:21-25)
 - i. 4:22 For nothing is hidden except to [*hina*] be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to [*hina*] come to light.
- c. In other words, Jesus’ teachings are currently not being understood, but there will come a time when they will be revealed
 - i. Recall that Mark views the Passion and Resurrection as the keys to understanding

⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4396.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, what causes blindness and deafness is the paradox of God's will made manifest in Jesus' death on the cross (8:31–38; 10:45; 14:36). Mark insists that we do not really know Jesus or the kingdom of God unless we confront the mystery of the cross and the paradox of Jesus as the suffering Messiah. Perhaps this difficult passage makes its best sense when read in the broader context of Mark's theology, rather than in isolation.⁶

- d. Some are being "chosen" in this early part of the kingdom invasion to be given the *secret* so that they can be part of the greater force that goes out into all the world when the gospel is fully revealed
 - i. This concept of being "chosen" follows the OT model: e.g., Abraham, Jacob
 - ii. They were chosen to be representatives of God who would receive special revelations so that they could then offer this to the rest of the world and become a blessing to all nations

Mark 4:11–12 is properly understood only in the context of the contemporaneous situation set forth in Ch. 3, where unbelief and opposition to Jesus is blatant...

Ch. 4:11–12 distinguishes two classes of people confronted with a single event, the significance of which is entirely different to each class... The parables are, accordingly, an aspect of the mission of Jesus. Unbelief makes every phase of that mission a riddle, something wholly alien to the perspective of man...

In verse 11 Jesus called attention to the contemporary situation of belief and unbelief, of revelation and veiledness; in verse 12 he cites the text from Isaiah, not to explain why he speaks in parables, but as a commentary on the contemporary situation in which the purpose of God was coming to fulfilment...

The citation of Isa. 6:9f. does not mean that "those outside" are denied the possibility of belief. It indicates that they are excluded from the opportunity of being further instructed in the secret of the Kingdom so long as unbelief continues. That the Kingdom has come in an initial phase in the presence of Jesus can be discerned only through faith, which is to say by the grace of God. Jesus' presence, therefore, means disclosure and veiling; it releases both grace and judgment.⁷

- 4. The "rebuke" found in verse 13 is not to be seen as a failure on the disciples' part⁸
 - a. Part of the cultural tradition was that important teachings could only be explained by an authorized teacher
 - b. The student was not expected to fully comprehend
 - c. The student was supposed to be puzzled over the teaching – it stimulates thinking
 - d. Jewish apocalyptic literature contains examples where an authorized agent from God has to further explain the teaching to the recipient of the teaching

⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4409.

⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 4:11-12.

⁸ *Reading Mark*, 4:1-34.

- e. Thus it should be seen more as a gentle observation of what is obvious, rather than a rebuke of the disciples' failure to comprehend

Parable of the Sower Explained

14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." (ESV)

1. There is a minority group of scholars who take this not as Jesus' actual words but as a "sermon outline" used by early Christians
 - a. The specifics of the problems listed seem to fit with troubles and persecution events
 - b. Mention of these problems don't seem to fit well into Jesus' early ministry (later, yes)
 - c. Misplacing words into Jesus' mouth has examples (e.g., John 3:16f)
2. All the Synoptics include the parable and its explanation
 - a. They took the example of Mark and/or "Q"
 - b. Or it is authentic words of Jesus
 - c. Ultimately we cannot know for certain
 - d. We have to go with the value it brings to the rhetoric as a means of understanding the broader text, and with its help in explaining the early Christian expectations and understandings
3. Is this explanation descriptive or parenetical (exhortation, warning)?
 - a. It is often taken to be parenthesis –
 - i. That we're to cultivate and weed the soil
 - ii. That we're to strive to be fertile soil
 - iii. That we're to avoid being one of the unproductive soils
 - b. But does it better fit the overall context and rhetoric as description?
 - i. Explanation why the same gospel proclamation produces such different responses in different people
 - ii. Explanation that when people reject the gospel, or turn away after what appears to be acceptance, it should not come as a surprise
 - iii. Explanation that our duty is to sow without worrying about whether it will do any good or not
 - iv. Explanation that the success of ministry is not tied to numbers
 - v. Explanation that the grace of God offers the gospel to all, even to those that choose to reject it

- vi. An explanation of the full lifecycle of true discipleship: hearing, receiving, and bearing fruit
 1. Notice the progression of the soils – not even a sprout; sprouts and dies; sprouts and grows, but bears no fruit; sprouts, grows, and bears fruit

... The allegorical interpretation is not parenetic in character... Neither seeds nor soil can change their nature, and the failure of the seeds to take root, or to flourish once they have taken root, is attributed to the influence of Satan, as we have seen. The Markan Jesus is not warning the disciples to be good soil; rather, he is warning them (and the overhearing audience) that even as the reign of God takes root and flourishes in some quarters, it will provoke opposition, persecution, and seduction from the forces of evil. It is the nature of the reign of God to provoke opposition; it cannot be otherwise.⁹

How Do You Read It?

The parable is given an explanation in the text, but is it the only “right” one, even if we take the position that it was Jesus’ own interpretation? Is it the most relevant one for Christians in the 21st century?

There are two more parables that follow with *seed* as their themes. *Reading Mark* suggests that these are three parables to be read and interpreted together. So a “final” interpretation must wait.

Some observations that we can make at this time:

1. The parable is about sowing – less about the soils, even though there is great detail on them
2. The seed is identical in all cases – there is no bad seed
3. In this part of the world at the time, cultivation followed planting
4. The seeds are intended for places where they are to grow, yet some fall in places that don’t naturally support sustained growth and fruiting
5. Hearing and seeing are important motifs
6. The gospel itself is one big parable
7. The parable describes the state of gospel acceptance during Jesus’ time
8. The parable describes the state of gospel acceptance during Mark’s time
9. The parable is a *secret*, a *mystery* that is being revealed to just a select few
10. The *secret* is the kingdom of God in which the few have been invited to participate
11. But this *secret* is not meant to remain with just a few, but to be revealed to all
12. This revelation will occur as the crucifixion and resurrection events of Jesus are proclaimed
13. More revelation is only given as the hearer responds with correct judgment
14. It does not answer the question of whether the unproductive soils are doomed to remain that way or not – but the inference we can draw is that this is a snapshot in time and that in different seasons, the soils that were once unproductive could become productive
15. This parable was not primarily given to be parenetic

⁹ *Reading Mark*, 4:1-34.