



**“And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred” (Mark 4:20).**

### **The Other Side of Responsibility**

**Central Truth:** Each person is responsible to God for how he responds to the gospel.

**L555. Date:** April 1980. **Text:** Mark 4:3-10, 14-20.

**Topic:** Christ: Parables of; Gospel.

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. This week's study deals with a parable of Jesus concerning the response of men to the witness of the gospel.

The parables of Jesus are beautiful illustrations drawn from nature to make clear spiritual truths. They were spontaneous and unrehearsed. In this week's study, Jesus was teaching a crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He looked off to the side and saw a man sowing seed in his field. He saw that act as an illustration of spiritual truth and said to them *“Behold, there went out a sower to sow”* (Mark 4:3). That is the way Jesus' parables commonly developed.

The use of parables teaches that God is revealed in nature. In the words of Romans 1:20, *“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.”*

Parables are intended to convey one great truth. They are not like allegories where every detail has a special meaning. In a parable one great truth leaps out to teach a spiritual lesson.

What idea flashes into one's mind when he hears the parable of the sower for the first time? He would be taught that the gospel message will bring different response in different people: there will be no harvest at all in the lives of some hearers, but there will be great harvest in the lives of

others. Pause here and read the lesson text again, then read the comments.

## I. THE SOWER

*“Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow”* (Mark 4:3). Who was that sower? No one knows the name of the man whom Jesus probably saw sowing his field and used the occasion for the parable. His name is not important, for he was but an illustration. The Sower indicated in the spiritual meaning of the parable is not indicated by Mark. His name is important, for there is great spiritual truth related to Him.

Jesus gave another parable set in an agricultural scene in which He described a sower spreading the seed and an enemy opposing it (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). It is called the parable of the tares. There He pictured a farmer sowing just as He pictured in the parable of the soils, which is the lesson text for this study. His interpretation was fuller in Matthew 13 than in Mark 4, so the one parable helps explain the other.

Jesus said, *“He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man”* (Matthew 13:37). Beautiful! Jesus is the “sower” who broadcast the seed in the world.

Jesus is not the only sower, however. He commissioned His disciples in all generations to be His witnesses so the gospel could be heard in all the world, in every nation, by every individual. Christian witnesses are “assistant sowers” of the Lord Jesus.

## II. THE SEED

*“The sower soweth the word”* (Mark 4:14). *“The good seed are the children of the kingdom”* (Matthew 13:38).

What is the seed that is sown? The two Scripture references given above suggest a contradiction. In one parable the seed represents the Word of God; in the other the seed represents the children of God. But there is no contradiction. The seed is the truth of the Christian gospel, whether expressed by word or by the example of believers in Jesus Christ.

Christians are sinners who have been *“born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever”* (1 Peter 1:23). It can be said of every Christian, *“The word of God abideth in you”* (1 John 2:14). The child of God cannot be separated from the Word of God because it is the Word which produces harvest in his own life.

A spiritual harvest is possible when the good seed of the Word of God is sowed in the hearts of men by the children of God.

### III. THE SOILS

There are four types of soil mentioned by Jesus in the parable of the soils. He spoke of hard ground, rocky ground, thorn-infested ground, and good ground. What did He mean by the different kinds of soil?

As Jesus interpreted the parable, He explained the types of soil with the expression, "These are they . . ." (verses 15, 16, 18, 20). That indicates He was speaking of persons. In the parable of the tares, He explained, "*The field is the world*" (Matthew 13:38). The four different soils represents four types of persons who hear the gospel, each responding according to the character of his own heart. Matthew's account of the parable substantiates this interpretation. Jesus said, "*Then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart*" (Matthew 13:19). William Hendricksen (*New Testament Commentary*, "Mark," Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976, page 155ff) has suggested the four soils indicate an unresponsive heart (Mark 4:15) an impulsive heart (verses 16, 17), a preoccupied heart (verses 18, 19), and a good, responsive, or well-prepared heart (verse 20).

The parable teaches that the result of hearing the gospel always depends on the condition of the heart of the person who hears it. "The character of the hearer determined the effect of the word upon him" (Ibid, page 156).

*A. The hard-beaten pathway refers to the unresponsive heart* (verses 4, 15). Some hear but never heed. They permit Satan to take away the Word that is sown. They are not excused by the fact that it is Satan who takes away the Word. They consent in the will as the Evil One does his work. The spirit of indifference in them is the sin for which they will be judged in the last day. Christian witness makes no impact on some people, not because they are hostile to it but because they are indifferent. That lack of interest clouds the importance of hearing and heeding the Word of the gospel.

*B. The rocky ground refers to the impulsive heart* (verses 5, 6, 16, 17). These are people who act without aforethought. "Immediately" is used twice by Mark to describe them: "immediately" they accept the Word, and, "immediately" they fall away when difficulties arise.

What causes the impulsive person to draw back from allegiance to the faith he has declared? Jesus said "affliction" (pressure from the non-Christian environment) and "persecution" (suffering brought about by the enemy) cause the apostasy. Perseverance is the mark of a true believer. The Christian cannot follow the crowd or the impulse of emotion. His allegiance must be to Christ alone.

C. *The thorn-infested ground refers to the preoccupied heart* (verses 7, 18, 19). They are so concerned about affairs of the present world that they have neither time for nor interest in spiritual matters. Possessions, power, and pleasure are the great concerns of their lives. They have forgotten that, “*All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world*” (I John 2:16).

“The people here indicated cannot be richly blessed nor can they be a blessing. The word as it affects them cannot be fruitful. There is nothing wrong with the sower. Also, there is nothing wrong with the seed. With these people, however, everything is wrong. They should ask the Lord to deliver them from corroding cares and dream-world delusions, so that the kingdom message may begin to have free course in their hearts and lives” (Hendricksen, page 159).

D. *The good ground refers to the responsive heart* (verses 8, 20). Such people hear because they want to hear. They accept the message, act upon it, live by it, and share it with others. Therefore, they bear fruit.

There are differences of fruitbearing according to one's spiritual gift and personal ability. It is enough that every one bear whatever fruit he is capable of bearing under God (John 15:5).

The Christian witness can be greatly encouraged by the parable of the soils. He need not be discouraged when some of the seed he sows never sprout, or spring forth with promise only to produce no harvest. Some of the seed will fall on “good ground.” It will produce.

“That is how the disciples were feeling, when they saw Jesus banished from the synagogue and regarded with suspicion. In many places his message seemed to have failed, and they were discouraged and downhearted. But this parable said to them, and says to us, 'Patience! Do your work. Sow your seed. Leave the rest to God. The harvest is sure'” — William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, “The Gospel of Mark” (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), page 97.

1. What is a parable?
2. How does Romans 1:20 explain the power of parables?
3. How is Mark 4:1-20 related to Matthew 13:1-24, 36-4?
4. In what sense is the Bible the “seed” of the kingdom?
5. How does I Peter 1:23 show that the seed is the Word of God?
6. What are the four kinds of people illustrated by the soils?
7. How would one witness to each of those kinds of people?
8. What kind of fruit does the good ground produce?

9. How can you be good ground for the Lord?

10. How can you share Christ with someone this week?