

Parables



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 4:1–34, James 1:21, Isa. 6:1–13, Ps. 104:12, Dan. 4:10–12.*

Memory Text: “Then He said to them, ‘Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.’ ” (*Mark 4:24, 25, NKJV*).

This week's study is on the parables in Mark 4. The Gospel of Mark has the fewest parables of any of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

For many years scholars have argued over the meaning and interpretation of Jesus' parables: How to interpret what they mean, why Jesus used them, what kind of lessons they were intended to reveal, and how literally they were to be taken, or whether they were purely allegory, and so forth.

Obviously we are not going to solve all these issues in this week's lesson. Instead, we are going to look at them and, by God's grace, come away with an understanding of the points Jesus made through these parables.

Mark 4 has just five parables—the sower, the lamp, the measure, the growing seed, and the mustard seed. The majority of the chapter revolves around the parable of the sower. This parable is told first, followed by the reason for parables, and then the interpretation of the parable. This three-step pattern will be the focus of the studies for Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. Then the other parables will be the subject of study on Wednesday and Thursday.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 27.

The Parable of the Sower

Read Mark 4:1–9. What are the different soils like, and what happens to the seed that falls on them?

When reading the parables of Jesus in the Gospels, people often want to jump quickly to the interpretation. After all, is that not the point of these stories—to teach some spiritual truth for Christian life? Yes, but sometimes, other than in brief comments such as “The kingdom of God is like,” or “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” Jesus does not explain the parable.

Consequently, it is good to slow down and simply analyze the story itself in order to catch the direction its various narrative characteristics point toward. Doing this with the parable of the sower yields a variety of ideas. The seed is the same in each case but falls on four different types of soil. The type of soil greatly influences the outcome for the seed. Instead of one continuous story, the parable is actually four individual stories told to completion in each setting. The length of time for completing the story lengthens with each successive story.

The seed that falls on the road is eaten immediately by the birds. “ ‘And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it’ ” (*Mark 4:4, NKJV*).

The seed that falls on the rocky ground takes a few days or weeks to reach its failed outcome, which included being scorched by the sun.

The seed that falls on the weedy soil takes longer still to reach its unproductive end, choked as it was by thorns.

The seed that falls on the good soil takes the longest of all, presumably an entire growing season, as is the normal pattern for a crop.

Three of the stories are about failure; only the last is about success, a good abundant crop. The length of the stories, the longer and longer period of time for each successive story, and the fact that only one story is about success, all point to the risk of failure but the abundant outcome of success.

The parable seems to point to the cost of discipleship and the risks involved, but it also highlights the abundant reward of following Jesus.

What are some other spiritual lessons that we can learn from nature?

Jesus' Interpretation

Jesus was done with the parable and gave no immediate explanation. According to the text (*Mark 4:1*), Jesus spoke it before “a great multitude.” Only later, with a smaller group (*Mark 4:10*), did He explain what the parable meant.

Read Mark 4:13–20. How did Jesus interpret the parable of the sower?

Jesus interprets the parable by identifying the items external to the story that a number of the details in the story stand for. The interpretation indicates that the story is a loose allegory with references to the real world, not necessarily a reference for every single detail.

Jesus identifies the seed as “the word.” This would refer to the Word of God, particularly as preached by Jesus. James 1:21 states, “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (*ESV*).

The different soils are different types of listeners. In Jesus' interpretation, everyone hears the Word; that is, all the types of soil have seed sown on them. But the reception is different. Path soil is hard, and the birds snatch away the seed. Jesus links this to Satan's taking away the truth. Rocky soil has little depth. Jesus links this to people with shallow commitments; they have not counted the cost of discipleship. Weedy soil chokes the seed sown on it. Jesus explains that this stands for the cares of life and riches that choke out the Word. But the good soil stands for those who hear the Word and receive it so that it grows and produces an abundant crop.

The longest explanations are for the rocky ground and the weedy ground. In describing the rocky-ground hearers, Jesus points to contrasting elements—they receive the Word with joy but are temporary disciples. When persecution comes, they fall away. The weedy-ground hearers are a contrast. They do not fall away because of hard times but because of good times—their focus is on the things of the world instead of the kingdom of God. Their cares and concerns revolve around what the world has to offer.

Consider your own life. Are any characteristics of the path, the rocky ground, or weedy ground creeping into your experience? This could happen more subtly than you realize. What choice can you make to change, if need be?

The Reason for the Parables

Read Mark 4:10–12. Why did Jesus teach in parables?

A surface reading of these verses gives the impression that Jesus taught in parables to keep outsiders in the dark. But such a perspective does not fit with Jesus' actions elsewhere in Mark. In Mark 3:5, 6, Jesus is grieved by the hard hearts of the religious leaders. In Mark 3:22–30, Jesus takes the arguments of the scribes seriously and explains in detail why they are mistaken. In Mark 12:1–12, the religious leaders understand that Jesus' parable of the tenants is about them. It is actually a warning of where their plot against Him is heading and the terrible consequences to follow. If He had no concern for them, He would not warn them. Consequently, Jesus' words here in Mark 4 need a closer look in order to recognize what His point is. Jesus is paraphrasing Isaiah 6:9, 10.

Read Isaiah 6:1–13. What happens to Isaiah here, and what is the message he is given to take to Israel?

Isaiah sees a vision of God in the temple and is overwhelmed by God's glory and his own uncleanness. God cleanses him and commissions him with a shocking message. Just like Mark, it sounds out of step with the rest of Isaiah where there is much comfort for God's people.

In Isaiah 6 the message is meant to shock the people awake so they will turn from their evil ways. In Mark the key for understanding Jesus' words is found in Mark 3:35. To understand Jesus' words and teachings, one must do the will of God (*Mark 3:35*). This brings that person into the family of Jesus. Those who have already decided that Jesus is possessed by the devil will not listen.

The point of Jesus' quotation from Isaiah 6 is not that God is keeping people out but that their own preconceived ideas and hardness of heart prevent them from accepting the saving truth.

This truth is the overarching concept of the parable of the sower. Each one chooses what type of soil to be. All decide for themselves whether or not they will surrender to Jesus. In the end, we each choose.

Lamp and Measuring Basket

Read Mark 4:21–23. What is Jesus’ special emphasis in the parable of the lamp?

Houses in that part of the world in Jesus’ day varied in size and construction, all depending on location and wealth. The houses came to follow a Greek pattern of being built around a courtyard but with varying levels of sophistication. Or Jesus may be talking about smaller houses of peasants. Big house or small house, the issue is this principle: one day the truth about Jesus will be revealed.

Jesus asks two questions in Mark 4:21. The first one expects a negative answer—“The lamp is not brought to be placed under the basket or under the bed, is it?” The second question expects a positive answer—“It is brought to be placed on the lampstand, isn’t it?” Jesus presents an absurd, almost humorous scenario to make His point. Lamps are for giving light, or they lose their purpose. Mark 4:22 explains the parable by referencing the idea of secrets being made public. Anyone whose email or computer has been hacked understands the possibility of secrets being made public! But what Jesus is talking about is the gospel.

Read Mark 4:24, 25. What lesson is Jesus conveying with the parable of the measuring basket?

In many locations in the world, fresh produce is sold in open markets. Sellers typically have a device for measuring the product they are selling. It is a common practice of such sellers to add just a bit more to a sale to help the buyer feel he or she is being treated fairly. Jesus picks up on how good sellers treat buyers to make a point about openness to the truth. If one is open and follows the light, he or she will get even more. But if he or she rejects the light, even what they had before will be taken away.

How can we better understand the principle that with what measure you use, it will be measured to you? Think about it in all your dealings with others.

Parables of Growing Seed

Read Mark 4:26–29. What is the primary focus of this parable?

Most of the Gospel of Mark has parallels in either Matthew or Luke or both. But that is not the case with this parable. It is unique to Mark. The focus of this brief parable is the growing process. Jesus indicates that this is how the kingdom of God works. Humans have a part to play, but the real growth is the work of God. It is not an endless process. The story comes to an abrupt end with the maturation of the grain. Just so, the return of Christ a second time will suddenly bring an end to our world's history.

Read Mark 4:30–32. What is the important stress of the parable of the mustard seed?

This parable stresses how something very tiny grows into something remarkably large. Mustard seeds measure typically one to two millimeters in diameter (.039 to .079 inches). The plant described here is probably the black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), which has tiny seeds (more than 700 seeds in one gram). While not the smallest seeds in the world, they are quite small, especially in comparison to the plant they produce, which can grow as large as three meters (ten feet) tall. Jesus notes that birds even nest in the branches of the mustard plant. This last reference is an allusion to Psalm 104:12, with an allusion to Daniel 4:10–12, as well. Psalm 104 speaks of God's power in creating the world, and Daniel 4 represents Nebuchadnezzar as a great tree under which all the world finds shade and food.

The point Jesus makes is that the kingdom of God, which began very small, will become large and impressive. People in Jesus' day may have looked down on the dusty itinerant preacher from Galilee with His band of disciples, but time has shown that His kingdom of grace continues to expand throughout the world.

“‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’ ” (Matt. 24:14, NKJV). Consider what the “church” was like when Jesus made that prediction. Why is this such a remarkable and faith-affirming prediction?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sower Went Forth to Sow,” pp. 33–61, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*.

“True holiness is wholeness in the service of God. This is the condition of true Christian living. Christ asks for an unreserved consecration, for undivided service. He demands the heart, the mind, the soul, the strength. Self is not to be cherished. He who lives to himself is not a Christian.

“Love must be the principle of action. Love is the underlying principle of God’s government in heaven and earth, and it must be the foundation of the Christian’s character. This alone can make and keep him steadfast. This alone can enable him to withstand trial and temptation.

“And love will be revealed in sacrifice. The plan of redemption was laid in sacrifice—a sacrifice so broad and deep and high that it is immeasurable. Christ gave all for us, and those who receive Christ will be ready to sacrifice all for the sake of their Redeemer. The thought of His honor and glory will come before anything else.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 48, 49.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 “Love must be the principle of action. Love is the underlying principle of God’s government in heaven and earth.” How does the Cross reveal this amazing truth to us? In our lives, how can we reflect this kind of love? Why must we?
- 2 How would you respond to someone who insisted that Jesus told parables to keep outsiders in the dark? Why would Jesus, who died for every human being (*see 1 John 2:2*), deliberately keep in the dark people whom He had died on the cross to save?
- 3 A lamp is supposed to be on a lampstand, not under a basket (*Mark 4:21*). Apply this principle to your church’s engagement with your local community. How can you lift the light up higher?
- 4 Consider the parable of the growing seed (*Mark 4:26–29*). What part do humans play in helping the gospel seed to grow, and what part does God play? Though we obviously play a role, how can we still make sure we are totally dependent upon God? Could this attitude of total dependence perhaps be part of what we need to do in order to grow?

Sparks Over the Sabbath

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Father wasn't worried when Mother got baptized after attending Seventh-day Adventist meetings at their town schoolhouse in Armenia.

Father wasn't worried when his daughter, Anush, and her sister started going to Adventist summer camps. He even drove them to camp.

Father also wasn't worried when Anush, as a 17-year-old university student, decided to get baptized and join the Adventist Church.

But he was furious when the university called to complain that Anush was skipping classes on Sabbath. Students missed classes for various reasons, and the university didn't mind that Anush wanted to keep the Sabbath. The problem was that other students kept their reasons to themselves, but Anush unabashedly announced her absence as a matter of religious liberty.

"If she doesn't want to go to class, then she doesn't have to go to class," a university administrator told Father. "But why does she have to make a big deal about it? She is hurting the university's reputation."

Father was appalled. He felt like his daughter's faith was reflecting badly on the family. He reprimanded her when she came home.

"Why did you have to announce that at the university?" he asked. "If this is the way that things are going to be, I forbid you from going to church."

He also prohibited her from getting baptized.

"I'm responsible for protecting you," he said. "When you are older, you can make your own decisions. But for now, I'm your guardian."

Anush didn't argue. Armenia is a largely patriarchal society where a father's word is law. But she wondered where the line was between the fourth and fifth commandments. Could she go to church and honor Father at the same time? She had decided before God to get baptized, but she worried that Father might forbid Mother from going to church if she insisted. Mother suggested that Anush wait. She found support for a delay in Numbers 30:3–5, which says if a daughter makes a vow while living in her father's house, and her father approves, then God accepts it. But if the daughter makes a vow that the father overrules, then God releases the daughter from the vow.

"I think God supports the decision to wait to get baptized," Mother said.

Anush waited. It was a difficult four years at the university. She believed that Father was a good man who only wanted the best for her. But she also longed to go to church and get baptized. She found joy in the baptism of a classmate, a woman who had learned about the Sabbath when she refused to study on that day. The classmate became Anush's first soul for Christ.

Part of last quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering went to open a center of influence for families like Anush's in Yerevan, Armenia. Thank you for helping spread the gospel with your offerings. Next week: Father changes his mind about Anush's baptism.