

# The Gospel of *Mark*

## The Servant Leadership of Jesus

### The Servant's Ministry in and around Galilee (cont) (1:14 – 9:50)

#### A Period of Popularity: *The Parable of the Sower* (4:1-9)

**4:1** Once again, Jesus and His disciples were by the Sea of Galilee <sup>Mark 1:16, 2:13, 3:7</sup>. As He taught, the crowds became so large He got into a boat <sup>Mark 3:9</sup>, and continued to teach the people on the shore.

Jesus “sat” in the boat either because it was the typical position for rabbinical teaching or to steady Himself from the rocking of the boat in the water.

**2** At this point in His ministry, Jesus began teaching the mass of people using parables <sup>Matthew 13, Luke 8</sup>.

From this time forward, Jesus taught in parables to the large gatherings of people, and only explained them in private to His disciples. The reasons will be given later in this chapter <sup>v.10-12</sup>.

The word parable is from the Greek *parabolē*: to put near (lit), comparison, illustration.

In this chapter, there are two parables (the sower <sup>v.3-9</sup> and the mustard seed <sup>v.30-32</sup>) that are a sub-set of the seven parables <sup>Matthew 13:3-52</sup> given in Matthew concerning the Kingdom of God.

**3** Jesus began His first parable with an encouragement to hear His story of a farmer throwing out seed.

The essence of the parable of the sower <sup>v.3-9</sup> is the depiction of the teaching of the gospel throughout the world and the various responses of the people to the gospel message.

Mark is the only Gospel writer who notes that Jesus introduced this parable with “Listen!” (reminiscent of Charles Stanley who precedes many of his key points with a similar plea).

**4-8** The story involves four types of soil the seed fell upon and the results of those circumstances:

1. Some of the seed thrown out by the farmer fell on the path, but was quickly eaten by birds.
2. Next, seeds fell into rocks with little soil, grew quickly, but with no roots, also died quickly.
3. The third set of seeds fell among choking thorns, resulting in plants that produced no grain.
4. The rest of the seed landed onto good soil. Those plants grew and yielded a bountiful harvest.

An eight-fold harvest was average, so a hundred-fold harvest was considered unbelievable.

**9** In all three Synoptic Gospels, the parable of the sower ends with this expression <sup>Matthew 13:9, Luke 8:8b</sup>.

The phrase: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” is also found at the end of each of the seven letters from Jesus to the churches in Revelation 2-3 <sup>Revelation 2:7,11,17,29, 3:6,13,22</sup>, as well as

seven times in the Gospels <sup>Matthew 11:15, 13:9,43, Mark 4:9,23, Luke 8:8, 14:35</sup>. The phrase emphasizes this fact: when people have an honest desire, they will be given the ability to hear/know truth.

### A Period of Popularity: *The Purpose for the Parables* (4:10-12)

**10** Being both confused by Jesus suddenly speaking in parables and perplexed by this specific parable, the Twelve and others came to Him, asking for His help in understanding more about both issues.

Using the phrase: “the Twelve and the others around him” was Mark’s way of describing all of the close disciples of Jesus who were following Him at this time <sup>Matthew 13:10, Luke 8:9</sup>.

**11-12** Jesus began by assuring His disciples they had been given the secret of the kingdom of God. Jesus then announced that from then on, He would keep the truth from “those on the outside” (obstinate nonbelievers) by speaking in parables. In Matthew’s account <sup>Matthew 13:10-17</sup>, Jesus quoted Isaiah’s full statement <sup>Isaiah 6:9-10</sup>, but Mark used his normal summary approach to Jesus’ discourses.

The word “secret” is a Greek word (*mustērion*) that is often translated “mystery”, which is something previously hidden, but then revealed by God (two examples: the mysteries of the marriage of Jesus and the church <sup>Ephesians 5:32</sup> & the rapture of the church <sup>1 Corinthians 15:51-52</sup>).

The “kingdom of God” (“kingdom of heaven” was used 31 times in Matthew e.g., Matthew 3:2, 7:21) refers to the sphere of God’s sovereign rule over all people and nations <sup>Daniel 7:14, Romans 14:8</sup>.

When Jesus expressed “the kingdom of heaven is near” <sup>Matthew 4:17</sup>, He was teaching that His presence brought the heavenly kingdom (God’s sovereignty) to the earth. Jesus First Coming brought the Kingdom spiritually; His Second Coming will bring it literally <sup>Isaiah 9:6-7, Luke 1:31-33</sup>.

The phrase “those on the outside” refers to nonbelievers who are not sincerely seeking truth (prime examples of those people were the Pharisees, Sadducees and the scribes) <sup>Ezekiel 12:1-2</sup>.

The supreme importance of the the Isaiah passage <sup>Isaiah 6:9-10</sup> is illustrated by its reference in all of the Gospels as well as in the book of Acts. The passage is summarized in Mark <sup>v.12</sup>, Luke <sup>Luke 8:10</sup> & John <sup>John 12:40</sup>, while the complete statement appears in Matthew <sup>Matthew 13:14-15</sup> and is quoted by Paul in the book of Acts <sup>Acts 28:26-27</sup>. However, there are two confusing aspects about the concepts in this Isaiah passage:

1. The first part indicates those who were resistant to believing, but came close to Jesus, would see the miracles He performed with their eyes and their ears would hear the truth He taught, but they would never fully appreciate the purpose of His miracles, the completeness of his teachings, nor where they originated from – God the Father.
2. The second part makes Jesus seem callous and uncaring, but in fact it is an indication of both His judgement and mercy: judgement, because it allowed them to stay in the

darkness they loved <sup>John 3:19</sup> and mercy, because having already rejected the light, any exposure to added truth would only increase their eventual condemnation <sup>Luke 12:47-48</sup>.

**A Period of Popularity: *The Parable of the Sower Explained* (4:13-20)**

**13** Jesus made the point that comprehending this parable was vital to their understanding of the rest of the kingdom parables, as well as all of the remaining parables, so He chose to explain this one.

The Gospels indicate Jesus did not give an explanation of all of His parables <sup>e.g., v.26-29, 30-32</sup>.

**14-20** Jesus explained the meaning of each of the four types of soil the seed fell on:

**Symbolism – birds: Satan & his evil ministers; seed: the word of God <sup>Luke 8:11</sup> (“message about the kingdom” <sup>Matthew 13:19</sup> /Gospel of salvation <sup>Ephesians 1:13</sup>); ground/soil: human heart. Sower?**

1. The seeds on the path signify people who hear the word that is taken away quickly by Satan.

The path represents a hardened heart to the Gospel, allowing it to be easily removed. A hard heart <sup>Romans 1:18-32</sup> must be plowed up <sup>Hosea 10:11-12</sup> before it can receive the seed.

2. Seeds thrown onto the rocky soil both grow & fade quickly, because the growth lacks roots.

The rocky soil portrays a shallow heart that has no depth, and lacks an established and secure foundation <sup>Ephesians 3:16-19, Colossians 2:6-7</sup> to sustain it. People with a shallow heart are dominated by emotions/experiences. They do not have a full understanding of how, let alone a willingness, to pay the cost <sup>Luke 14:25-33</sup> to be a genuine follower of Christ.

3. When the seeds fall among the thorny weeds, the plants are not able to grow properly and be productive <sup>Jeremiah 4:3</sup>.

God’s word touches the strangled heart, but the person does not truly repent and take advantage of God’s help (through the Holy Spirit <sup>John 14:25-27, 16:13</sup>) to rid their life of all of the worldly things that weigh them down <sup>Matthew 6:24-34, 19:23, 1 Timothy 6:9-10, 1 John 2:15-17</sup>.

4. However, seeds that fall on good soil, grow into healthy plants as designed and are fruitful.

The good soil of the open heart readily hears, accepts and responds to God’s word. The result is a changed <sup>2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:19-24</sup> & fruitful <sup>John 15:8, Colossians 1:9-14</sup> life.

The three enemies of Christians <sup>Ephesians 2:1-3</sup>, as illustrated in this parable, are as follows:  
a hard heart ⇒ Satan; a shallow heart ⇒ flesh; a strangled heart ⇒ world.

So, who was/is the sower? Ultimately, He is Jesus Christ. However, all of His genuine followers are also sowers <sup>Matthew 28:18-20, John 20:21</sup>. Christians are always called to sow the “seed” with passion/joy <sup>Psalms 126:6</sup>, perseverance <sup>Galatians 6:9</sup> and abundance <sup>2 Corinthians 9:6</sup>.