

## RUF Large Group Bible Study

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### The Parable of the Sower, Mark 4:1-20 (Matt 13, Luke 8)<sup>2</sup>

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! 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."

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? 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."

We're beginning a new series tonight. The first semester here at OU, I taught on Conversations with Christ in order to try and show those of you who were here (and there weren't many at the time) that Jesus really got into it with people, that he isn't all nice and cuddly like we sometimes think. We haven't come back to Jesus' life and teaching because I've been trying to give a breadth of the Bible, showing you how the gospel is in each and every part. But we need to return now and then to the Savior's own words. I pray that you would listen anew to these teachings and stories you have heard over and over again. They are not as bland as you may remember.

Specifically, my plan is to focus on the words and deeds of Jesus. To do this, we'll be looking at his parables and miracles, and we'll toggle back and forth between them to see what Jesus taught and what Jesus did.

#### *On parables*

First, let me talk about the nature of parables. I picked this one because it actually discusses that very thing. Jesus teaches the crowd that had gathered this parable about the sower and the soils, and this parable is in Matthew 13, Luke 8 as well as our passage here in Mark 4. Then, in the Matthew account, the disciples ask him straight out, "*Why do you speak in parables?*"

That's what we're asking: Why did Jesus speak in parables?

The first and easiest answer is that parables are easy to listen to stories that have a deeper point. You can think of Aesop's fables and how each of the characters and actions reveals something about human nature or morality. Parables can be remembered easily, so they can be an effective way of communicating in a short way. In this sense, parables then are longer similes and metaphors that give us images instead of straightforward teaching. Your love is like a red, red rose. Your beauty is like a summer day, but thou are more lovely and more temperate. We use them, the ancients used them too. We call a whole book Proverbs, but it could also be translated "Parables." I use them in my teaching and sermons but call them illustrations. They are to show you the point or principle in a different way, in a lived-out way.

But that's not how Jesus answers their question. His answer is far more mysterious and cryptic. He says that he teaches in parables so that some would understand and so that others wouldn't understand. In other words, parables have the purpose of *revealing* and *concealing* the kingdom. Huh?

In verses 10-12 in Mark 4, Jesus says this: 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.*"

John Piper explains this this way: "This is a shocking word. To those whom Jesus has chosen, the mystery of his kingdom is opened and he gives them the gift of understanding. Verse 10a 'To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.' Understanding the kingdom of God is a free gift of God for those whom Jesus has chosen as his disciples."<sup>3</sup>

You see, that Jesus taught only the first part of the parable to the crowd. Now we have to assume that there were some who could understand. The Word of God is often described as a seed in the Bible (though most often in the New Testament to be sure).<sup>4</sup> But you got the real goods, the real explanation if, and only if, Jesus pulled you aside and explained it.

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<sup>2</sup> My sources are: *The Parables of Jesus*, D. Wenham; *Interpreting the Parables*, C. Blomberg; *Matthew Commentary* (NAC), Blomberg; *Matthew Commentary*, DA Carson; *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at desiringgod.org; *The Parables of Jesus*, JM Boice; *The Parables*, S. Kistemaker;

<sup>3</sup> Piper sermon

Thus for those who were close to Jesus, they got further teaching and greater insight.<sup>5</sup> For those who were there just to listen to his words but not to know him, they actually received judgment from their hearing. There is a revealing and concealing nature of Jesus' teaching, of the gospel, of the preached and taught Word of God. If Jesus had wanted to, he could have remained silent. He didn't have to say anything. But he spoke. He taught. He preached. And that had the two results he intended. For some it brought life, but for others it confirmed the nature of their hearts and brought condemnation.

DA Carson sums this up well in his commentary on Matthew: "Matthew has taken up these themes in greater detail because he wishes simultaneously to affirm that what is taking place in the ministry of Jesus is, on the one hand, the decreed will of God and the result of biblical prophecy, and, on the other hand, a terrible rebellion, gross spiritual dullness, and chronic unbelief. This places the responsibility for the divine rejection of those who fail to become disciples on their own shoulders while guaranteeing that none of what is taking place stands outside God's control and plan."<sup>6</sup>

"The hidden aspect of Jesus' parable is thus both a cause and a response to people's unwillingness to follow Jesus."<sup>7</sup>

We can apply this same principle today, whether we're talking about parables or not. We are talking about the preached Word of God. "This teaches us something very important about preaching. Even when preaching the Word of God does not soften and save and heal, it is not necessarily ineffective. This preaching of the Word may be doing God's terrible work of judgment. It may be hardening people, and making their ears so dull that they will never want to hear again. There is a judgment in this world - not just in the world to come (Romans 1:24) - and oh, how we should flee from it. Which in this text means: take heed how you hear! Don't be cavalier in the hearing of God's Word week after week. If it is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling (see 2 Corinthians 2:16)."<sup>8</sup>

### ***On the Kingdom***

Now, if that is why Jesus teaches in parables, what is it that he is talking about with his parables? That gets us to the topic of most parables and the topic of this one in particular. Jesus is almost always talking about "The Kingdom." The Kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus. And he goes on to explain the ins and outs of the kingdom, the values of the kingdom, the way you enter the kingdom, the nature of the kingdom and so on.

Let me talk about the kingdom and its attributes and then we'll talk about the soils and make application to that part of the parable.

Like I said, this is a parable about the kingdom. You see, Jesus didn't just come to forgive sins. He did come to do that, but not only that. He came to inaugurate the Kingdom. What does that mean?

Most people thought that when the Son of God came, that he would come like other kings. He would come by force, by war, by horses or armies, by rhetoric. It would be like Alexander the Great's army sweeping through and you would definitely know if you were in the kingdom or not. If you were alive, you were in. Death came to those who resisted. Isn't that how kingdoms come?

Jesus says that that's not how his kingdom comes. He says, "It comes by sowing seeds." He says, "It comes by hearing." Hearing? Not talking, not persuasion, not swagger, not cool factor. Listening.

Now what do you make of that? We've heard the parable enough times but have you really *heard* it? Jesus says straight out that this is what this parable is about. He says in verse 9: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*"

It truly is remarkable, and it truly is counterintuitive.

We're going to look at the different soils here in a second, but let me posit that some of you are unhappy and frustrated with God because He doesn't act like kings should. Like you expect kings should act.

Here is the question: If Jesus cares so much about people's salvation, then why doesn't he just pop up during the middle of an OU game that is on ABC? That would do it wouldn't it? He could perform some sort of miracle and then voila, we'd have mass conversions. Or Jesus Himself could be the street preacher outside of Dale Hall for a day. He could heal people and be invisible for awhile and walk on water and people would come to faith.

Or how about something even more practical? If Jesus is so real and powerful, why can't he do something for me? Why can't he make me beautiful or smart or rich or successful? That would help me believe in him!

Huh? Huh?

Fair enough questions. But to answer them, you have to see that Jesus is telling us that that's not how his kingdom works. He is the one who gets to decide how his kingdom works, not us and he says that it's never worked that way and never will. Why not? Because a seed has more power than a boulder. Think of a field.<sup>9</sup> You can change the field in two ways. The first is to take a boulder and smash the field with it. To scrape and move and make it look all different with the boulder's power. The second is to plant seeds.

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<sup>4</sup> The word:

James 1:21	Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.
1 Peter 1:23	You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.
Col. 1:5-6	the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing...
Acts 6:2	it's not right to "neglect the ministry of the word of God to wait on tables." [more on next page's footnotes]
Eph. 6:17	the sword of the Spirit
Hebr. 4:12	pierces the human heart, challenging and changing it
Ps 33:6	By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry hosts by the breath of his mouth
Is 55:11	So is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty by will accomplish what I desire.

<sup>5</sup> "As in [Matthew] 11:25-30, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are carefully balanced. Verse 11 [of Matthew] introduces an undeniably predestinarian note. Certain privileges are reserved for Jesus' followers that are not available to everyone else."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Carson, p. 309.

<sup>7</sup> Blomberg commentary, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> Piper sermon

<sup>9</sup> Illustration by Keller in his sermon on this passage.

Seeds take more time. Seeds grow. Not fast, but they grow. And when they germinate and grow, they have a power. An oak tree can be contained within a seed. Given time, a seed planted in good soil can crack a boulder or tombstone on top of it. It has the power within it to do great things. You see, seeds can not just change the look of a field, but they can transform a field into something else.<sup>10</sup>

If you are struggling with this, then you need to realize that your problem is not one of power or complaint, but of theology. You just don't understand who God is and how he works. If you're saying, "Hey, I'm a Christian, why is my life going so wrong?! Why isn't God getting me out of these messes?! Why do I hurt so much?" then you don't understand the way the kingdom works.

Time to listen and go back to the drawing board.

### ***The Kingdom comes by hearing the Word***

"The point of the parable is the importance of responding wholeheartedly to Jesus and his message as the one in whom the kingdom has come... It is specifically about listening to Jesus the King through whose words alone we can experience the kind of transformation and growth God desires for us. It is only by listening to Jesus' words that we become subjects in God's kingdom. The parable tells us that God's rule is accomplished through the teaching of Jesus."<sup>11</sup>

So the Kingdom comes by hearing. Take heed how you hear. "At the end of verse [9] Jesus makes sure we got the point about hearing, and says, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' That means it's not enough to have ears on the side of your head. Everybody has those. But there is another kind of ear that only some people have. And those can hear. 'He who has ears to hear let him hear.' There is a spiritual ear, or a heart-ear. There is an ear that hears, in the preaching of the Word, more than mere words. There is a beauty and a truth and a power that these ears hear as compelling and transforming and preserving. That's the kind of hearing Jesus is calling for. That's what this text is about."<sup>12</sup> Are you hearing the word of God with spiritual ears? Let's look at what that would look like.

I must warn you that this is the scary part. Jesus' teaching isn't all lovely dovey and gooey. It is hard to hear, but we need to process it.

Jesus says that the farmer sows the Word. He says that the soil is our hearts. There are two main responses, one of acceptance and one of rejection, but the rejection can take different forms.

The **first soil** Jesus shows us "*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.*" This soil is hard, packed down. These seeds need to get into the soil in order to germinate. They need to dig in deep and be fertilized but that isn't allowed to happen.

Here's our first application. Remember that these people are actually being sown the Word. We're not even talking about those who "haven't heard." In view here are people who either grew up in church and didn't ever "get it." Or who have come tonight or go to church on Sundays and don't get it. This isn't the person who openly rejects and scoffs at the Word. It has been sown.

All around you in the dorms are these people. They grew up in church, they went to youth group, they went to Falls Creek camp, they were baptized and walked the aisle, they nodded their heads in sermons. But the Scriptures, the Word of God, never gripped their souls. It never got down in there. Their hearts are hard.<sup>13</sup>

And yet you go back to your hall or house and they say, "Don't judge me. I'm a Christian." Are they?<sup>14</sup>

You tell me. This passage says that faith is directly related to the relationship you have with the Word sown in your heart and the soil of your heart. This passage says that birds, or Satan, will snatch this sort of ungerminated understanding of God in a heartbeat.

What can you do with these friends of yours or if you recognize yourself here? What can you do with your own heart? You have to sow the Word. We'll come back to what needs to happen, but inviting these people to get over themselves and get to RUF or church and hear the Bible is essential. If you have no desire to hear the Word clearly and excellently taught, then you should seriously question your faith. The Bible teaches this.

The **second soil** Jesus describes this way: "*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.*"

Who are these people? These are your friends who have a "glorious conversion." Maybe it was in jr. high or high school. Maybe in college. They are "on fire for Jesus." They have all kinds of passion all over the place. They love worship songs and sing them all the time. They do all sorts of stuff for the kingdom.

But they don't last. They snuff out. They fade away. There aren't any roots. When things get hard, when they stop getting what they want, when "the feelings fade," when the crowd isn't there to cheer them on – they are exposed as a pretender or a poser.

I planted some grass last Spring. I believe it was red fescue, and it came up great guns. It looked great, was spreading and I was so proud. That lasted until the middle of June. When the sun got hotter and more direct, it burned up the whole patch. Nothing

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<sup>10</sup> "Sowing is, on the one hand, something that seems quite weak and unimpressive at the time, and the seed is very vulnerable. On the other hand, the sowing of seed is the initiation of something of the greatest importance and power. Jesus' ministry was such a sowing: apparently ineffective, certainly vulnerable to rejection, yet still the initiation of the Kingdom of God." Wenham, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, from Redeemer's Mark Bible Study.

<sup>12</sup> Piper sermon

<sup>13</sup> Boice puts it this way: "Here we see both halves of the circle; sin leads to a rejection of God and God's truth, and the rejection of God's truth leads to even greater sin." Boice, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> They come to hear, but they remain bewildered and stupid and they do not even taste the Word. They are hardly different from stocks and stones, and it is no wonder if they slip away." Calvin, p. 71.

was left except brown, nasty, used-to-be grass. It wasn't the right soil for that seed. It didn't have a root that could take the heat. It's gone.

You've seen these people too, or you may be one. They are all excited about everything except the Bible. Except good Bible teaching. You see, the farmer sows the Word. Not worship music. Not programs. Not even discipleship or evangelism. Not Perspectives. He sows the Word. It has to be foundational in our weekly schedule. And you can go to churches that have a sermon time that has only a slight connection with the Bible. This can fool you. That is not sowing the Word in your heart. That is not helping you understand what the Bible says. It may be fun to go to those kind of churches but you need to stop and find somewhere that truly and faithfully preaches the Bible in an expository way.<sup>15</sup>

Your friends who are all excited about the cool group on campus or the cool church in town – are they excited about the Bible and hearing it preached and taught and applied in their lives? When things get hard, when tribulation or persecution arises, are they still around? Do they still go to the Word with joy and expectation?

The *third "bad soil"* Jesus paints for us is *"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."*

This is the scariest of the four soils. You see, these are the people that are the hardest to distinguish, and they are also the unhappiest. So many of you are hear. If you're soil one or soil two, you aren't struggling. You've ditched your faith whenever it got hard. If you're soil four, then you are definitely a Christian bearing fruit, even in tough times. But soil three is the soil of the divided heart.

This kind of heart takes in the word. There is actually growth and fruit there. Time passes long enough, where the no-root people who show joy at first but give up are gone, this person remains. But there are thorns choking the Word and it eventually proves unfruitful. This person is wanting to be a Christian and yet wanting not to be a Christian at the same time. He or she believes the message of the Savior, but doesn't want that message to make an impact in the way he or she lives. It's a divided loyalty, a divided heart.

You know these friends or you may be there yourself. They go to church now and then, or they may legalistically go every Sunday. They feel guilty for their sins because they know that the Bible is true. But they don't want to stop sinning either. They are conflicted with their sexuality, knowing God's good rules but giving themselves to others who aren't their spouses. They know about pornography and drunkenness and lying and jealousy, but they can't seem to stop themselves either. They know that God wants us to have a simple life, one in which we fulfill our calling, and yet there is so much out there – grades, promotions, titles, positions, money, cars, boyfriends – that we want more than the Word, more than Jesus.

Are you there? Are your friends there?

Jesus gives us some hope by saying that there is *a fourth soil*: *"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."*

These are the people that hear the Word and understand it. They are teachable. They ask questions. They know that they don't know. They see that they don't see. They want more. They ask for it. They make time for it. They prepare for it. They take it into their lives and see it bear fruit. And this is shown over time. "What counts is not profession of faith, but perseverance in faith. To be sure, all true Christians will persevere, but only by observing who perseveres can we determine who those true Christians are."<sup>16</sup>

It's not our profession that makes us Christians. There are many people who claim to be Americans when it is convenient for them. Their claim does not make it so. They need signed and sealed citizenship papers. So it is with us. "The one thing that we must understand is that none are partakers of true faith save those who are sealed by the Spirit of adoption and who sincerely call upon God their Father. And as the Spirit is never extinguished in the godly, it is impossible that faith should vanish and perish when once it has been engraven in their hearts."<sup>17</sup>

Are you one of these people? Have you taken heed of how you hear?

There are always excuses of course. If I only was living at the time of Jesus and could have been a part of this crowd, I would have made the time, I would have been a disciple. The 12 plus Doug Serven, the thirteenth disciple.

But that is a fallacy. You have all that you need. You certainly have enough time, but you waste it. And you have the Word available to you – some people would give anything to be around the Bible teaching that is offered on this campus and in this city every week. You've grown callous to it. Your friends don't think they need it. They are anorexic to the Word. They look in the mirror and see themselves as fat, but the reality is that they are starving. They need to eat or they will die. You have to intervene.

What we're talking about here is "the calling to hear the Word of God. And it is no small thing. The stakes are very high. There is a hearing that barely gets started and the Word is gone before you get out the door. There is a hearing that lasts until there is a

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<sup>15</sup> This sort... has a promise of fruitfulness at the outset, but their hearts are not worked on well enough or deeply enough to make them soft to nourish the seed. Of this kind also we see too many today. They embrace the Gospel greedily, but soon after fall away...For unless the Word penetrates the whole heart and puts down deep roots there will be no steady flow of moisture to make faith persevere. It is indeed praiseworthy to receive the Word of God with joy as soon as it is proclaimed. But let us realize that nothing is done until faith has gained a firm strength." Calvin's commentary, p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Blomberg commentary, p. 214.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin's commentary, p. 72.

hard time in life, and then one turns from God to other messages. There is a hearing that flourishes until the riches and pleasures of this life choke it off. And there is a hearing that defeats the devil, endures trial, scorns riches and bears fruit unto eternal life.”<sup>18</sup>

Let’s put it another way: “When hearing Jesus’ message, we must welcome the word immediately, so that Satan cannot snatch it away. We must welcome it deeply, so that persecution because of it cannot induce us to apostatize. We must also welcome it exclusively, so that other concerns do not stifle it. Although they didn’t always understand Jesus’ parables, the disciples seemed to have responded to them in all these ways. The reception of this message goes beyond intellectual assent. It results in changed behavior, commitment to devotion. We see real dangers in discipleship. Two great obstacles which confront us regularly are persecution and competition from the world for our hearts. Either may cause us shipwreck and we best not presume on our capacity to withstand these forces. Mark reminds us that Jesus’ message is not as convenient as aspirin nor some antidepressant. It is a declaration of war upon the power of evil. As is in any war, participation demands preparedness and sacrifice. The encouragement for listening carefully is the promise of significant change in our lives. Our lives will bear fruit. The flip side is that if we don’t see any change in our life we need to examine ourselves and ask if we are really numbered among those on the inside who are truly listening to his message. There is always the possibility that we are deceived.”<sup>19</sup>

In closing, let me point out that we have a dilemma. If the soil is our hearts, then what hope do we have? The Bible tells us that all of our hearts are desperately wicked and beyond hope. There is no way the seed of the World could possibly germinate inside our hard, deceitful hearts. And we’re soil. What can soil do? Nothing. Soil sits there.<sup>20</sup>

Ah, but soil depends on the gardener. And Jesus did say that there is good soil, and he did go and make his teaching clear to the disciples. There is hope. Hope in The Gardener. The one who tills the soil, adds nutrients, stirs it up, plows it, rakes it and plants the soil.

Do you see thorns in your life or the hot sun? The soil’s job is to take the seed. The Gardener’s job is to prune the branches, brush back the thorns, shield from the sun. You must allow him to do so. You must participate, to be sure, in this gardening process. You must cry out to Him and ask for a new heart, for good soil, for more Word sown in your life, for the fruit of the Spirit to be revealed, for true life and repentance to be shown to you, for perseverance in trials, for faithfulness when it’s hard.

You participate when you come eager to hear the Word of God taught and preached. When you have actually taken the time to prepare yourself beforehand. When you’re not dog tired on Sunday morning because you stayed out til 3 am on Saturday night (do that on Friday night). When you pray for your time and your preacher. When you’d rather hear good teaching than bad, even if it’s inconvenient to your schedule. When you invite others to come with you and taste and see what is good. When you reject the candy that’s being offered so that you can go and have a good meal instead. When your faith and teaching yields greater faith and teaching. When you come without grumbling and complaining about the person next to you or the community you’re in. When you forbear each other’s faults and forgive. When you come with a teachable spirit. When you aren’t so worried about how you look and are seen, but want to reach out to others who aren’t like you. When you desire the Word of God more than riches or food.

Psalm 19:10-11 says “More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

Proverbs 2:3-5 says, “If you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.”

You cannot do these things by yourself. You have to ask the Gardener. And he will grant it. May he produce in us a crop that is thirty, sixty and one hundred fold.

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<sup>18</sup> Piper sermon

<sup>19</sup> Keller, from Redeemer’s Mark Bible Study

<sup>20</sup> Boice makes this same point in his book, pp. 19-20.