

## ***The Parable of the Soils (Part 1)-Mark 4:1-20***

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at [dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church](mailto:dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church).]*

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 4:1-20...

Why did Jesus teach in parables? Depending upon who you asked, you may get a different answer. Some suggest we should do away with the didactic expositional preaching model and adopt a more storytelling format based on Jesus' teaching in parables. Is this true, or is it a flagrant mistreatment of Jesus' parables? Thankfully this is one of those topics we don't have to speculate over because Jesus has plainly given us the answer. And that's what we'll focus on this morning.

Here are our three points over the next two Sundays:

### **I. The Display of the Parable (4:1-9)**

### **II. The Design of the Parables (4:10-12)**

### **III. The Decoding of the Parable (4:13-20)**

Let's reread verses 1-2. This has been the pattern thus far in Mark's gospel. Jesus draws a large crowd due to, no doubt, his miraculous gifts, and authoritative presence. This was before the microphones and sophisticated sound systems. Therefore, Jesus leverages what he has access to teach this large crowd. He gets on a boat in the sea, and we're reminded why he's come out. Verse 38 of chapter 1 tells us Jesus has come out to preach the gospel of the kingdom. And in verse 2, we're reintroduced to this idea of parables. Perhaps you remember when Jesus was charged with casting demons out through witchcraft, he responded to the scribes with parables. Well, again, Jesus is teaching many concepts in parables to this large crowd. And since Jesus interprets his parable for us this morning, we'll end this first point by simply reading the parable. Let's reread verses 3-9.

Let's transition to our second point this morning, **The Design of the Parables**. I'll preface this point by stating that most scholars agree that this is one of the most

challenging passages in Mark's gospel. This morning, we could spend the rest of our time on verses 11-12. With that said, this isn't meant to be an exhaustive treatment of this subject or passage; in that case, we could spend multiple weeks on any passage in Scripture because God's Word is inexhaustible. However, I pray that I can teach this passage clearly and show how it applies to us today. Let's start by reading verse 10.

When Mark writes that Jesus is alone, he isn't being literal, as the passage clarifies; he's merely stating that the large crowd of verse 1 has gone home. And now we have the same group mentioned in verse 34 of chapter 3. Do you remember how Jesus responded when he was told his mother and brothers were looking for him?

*<sup>34</sup> And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."*  
-Mark 3:34-35

So, this group includes more than just the twelve apostles but all those who have responded to Jesus' initial call in verse 15 of chapter 1.

*"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* -Mark 1:15

So, this is his audience. Let's continue to verse 11. Notice the phrase "has been given." God is the author of the verb in this text. In other words, God is the giver. I don't mean to get technical here, but the passive voice suggests that the subjects, i.e., the disciples, didn't initiate the action. Rather, it was God who initiated the revelation of the secrets, or "mysteries," of the kingdom of God. Now what's missing is the verb "to know," which seems implied in this text. "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom" (paraphrased). So how should "to know" be understood? Are Jesus' disciples provided cognitive information about the kingdom that those outside are not privy to? In other words, is Jesus merely referring to the interpretation of these parables? Or something deeper together? I believe it's the latter.

The Bible's concept of "knowing" involves more than mere mental assent. If I were to say I know that  $2+2=4$ , that would be a different kind of qualitative knowing than if I were to say I know Samuel Kommu. The first is purely referring to cognitive knowledge. There's not a relational aspect involved. However, knowing another person does indeed involve relational complexities. So, there's an ontological difference. Similarly, the "knowing" that separates the insiders from the outsiders is a salvific inward transformative knowledge, not merely access to the correct interpretation.

How does Jesus respond to Peter's correct confession in Matthew 16?

*17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. -Matthew 16:17*

One can have the correct confession concerning Jesus, and it not be salvific because it wasn't God who revealed it to them. Jesus affirms that Peter's confession is not only correct, he doesn't merely check the right box, but it has been inwardly revealed to him by God the Father, meaning he has been transformed into the right confessor because of God's initiating work. Consider what Paul writes to the church at Corinth.

*14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. -1 Corinthians 2:14*

So, what's cognitively understood by outsiders is judged by them as foolishness. So, this text isn't saying that a non-believer is unable to interpret the Bible correctly. That's not Paul's point here. His point is that the natural person cannot submit to the truths in the Scriptures; therefore, they don't truly understand them.

It's like getting into a sports debate. Someone will acknowledge the facts about an individual player and then not esteem them as highly as they should, showing me that they don't truly understand the facts. If you understood the facts, your opinion concerning said player would change. So often, the behavior will show whether or not you truly understand something.

So, Jesus' followers "know" more than just the content of Jesus preaching. They know and trust. They know and have repented. They know and have followed Jesus. They know, and their life reflects transformation. They know that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the eternal and unique Son of God who has come to establish his kingdom! This doesn't mean that there is a full understanding. As we know, the disciples didn't quite grasp the full implications of Jesus as Messiah, namely that he had to die at the hands of sinful men. However, like the psalmist, whenever doubt and confusion arise, it nevertheless ends with faith. What a great gift from God!

To be clear, when Jesus speaks of "secrets" or "mysteries," he's not referring to some esoteric knowledge. As in the rest of the New Testament and Jewish apocalyptic literature, this term refers to something that was once hidden in the past but has not been openly made known. So, God has granted the disciples salvific knowledge of the kingdom, which was once hidden but is now being revealed through the Lord Jesus. Let's continue in the text.

Jesus' statement regarding "everything" is hyperbolic in the sense that Jesus didn't only use parables when teaching outsiders. The hyperbole is helpful because of the nature of the term "parable," which leads us to verse 12 as to why Jesus taught in parables. Let's reread verse 12.

Here Jesus gives the reason as to why he's teaching in parables. He's quoting a text in Isaiah, so to understand his usage of this verse correctly, we need to revisit the original context of the Old Testament passage. Please turn with me to Isaiah 6.

Allow me first to set the scene. The first five chapters of Isaiah depict God charging Israel with unfaithfulness to the covenant between them. We catch a glimpse of what Israel failed to do in the positive commands God gave them in Isaiah 1:16-17.

*<sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. -Isaiah 1:16-17*

The Lord accuses them of being no different from the nations he hadn't revealed himself to. And instead of repenting at the sound of rebuke and judgment from the mouths of the prophets, the people despised and rejected them, which was really a rejection of God himself. And be not deceived; you cannot reject God's Word and accept God simultaneously. He so identifies with His Word that rejecting him is rejecting His Word because His Word is an extension of Him. This is what the Israelites were doing, and it's a common practice among many today. Do not fall into the trap of the devil! He'll have you thinking it's perfectly okay to reject the Bible's teachings when it doesn't align with your belief system. Don't you hate playing a game with someone who swears they know the rules, and even when you show them the rule book, they stick to believing they're correct? You show them that a royal flush beats a pair, but they remain hard-hearted. This is the hubris of humanity, thinking they can say God has it wrong. Or what of the husband who ignores his wife and tells her, "It's you I love, not your words." That's not going to go over well. Israel didn't fair so well by rejecting God's Word.

So, besides the occasional moments of hope, the first five chapters of Isaiah are gloom and doom. And then, we get to chapter six, where Isaiah stands before the Lord of glory. Let's read verses 8-10.

*<sup>8</sup> And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." <sup>9</sup> And he said, "Go, and say to this people:" "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive." <sup>10</sup> Make the heart*

*of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” -Isaiah 6:8-10*

Recall two weeks ago when I preached on the unpardonable sin. I said that the way we see this sin in practice today is whenever individuals continue to reject the gospel presented to them, there comes the point where God will no longer allow them to repent. Hence the reason why I implore those who have steady access to the gospel not to continue to reject it. There is coming a time when God will not allow you to repent. It's the devil who tells you that you have more time, so you can keep putting off responding to the gospel.

This is what's happening with Israel. As we see in this text, God is sending his Word to Israel, not to soften their hearts but to harden them! This is a proclamation of judgment against those who have persistently rejected God's message through the mouth of his prophets. Therefore, God has already judged this nation by giving them over to their sin, and now the proclaimed Word is meant to seal their fate. And don't think that the Word is failing because they aren't accepting it; hardening is actually one of the functions of the Word. Let's keep it in the context of the same book:

*<sup>10</sup> “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,<sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. -Isaiah 55:10-11*

God's words always act according to the Spirit's will, even in the act of hardening. So, this is the context of Isaiah 6:10, the text that Jesus references. Let's flip back to Mark 4. Let's reread verses 11b-12 once more.

You'll notice some striking similarities between the setting of Isaiah 6 and Mark's presentation. Not just a prophet has been sent, but *the* has been sent to the nation of Israel. The one in which Moses said God would send a prophet like me that the people should listen to. And just as the people of Israel rejected the prophets in Isaiah's day, people rejected Jesus during his earthly ministry. Therefore, he speaks to them in parables as a judicial response to their stubbornness of heart. So once again, the Word is preached as a judgment against those who have repeatedly rejected Jesus as Messiah and have even gone so far as to say that he casts out demons by the work of Satan!

There are also differences and ambiguities between Isaiah's setting and Mark's. In the book of Isaiah, the people, and leaders rejected God and his Word. In Mark, this isn't

the case quite yet. Jesus' family is a good example. We shouldn't place them in the same category as the Jerusalem scribes, considering his family eventually repented. However, Jesus makes a conscious decision to make clear that until they responded, they were on the outside, so he spoke to them in parables and not plainly. So for the hard-hearted who openly rejected Jesus' gospel, hence making their decision concerning Jesus, these parables were meant to serve as a judgment that would keep them from repenting. And for those less hostile, such as Jesus' family, these parables would serve as a warning that although they hadn't accused Jesus of having a demon, they were still spiritually lost.

With that said, let's consider a few applications of the Word for us this morning. Firstly, don't think that because you aren't hostile to God that you're spiritually safe. Jesus went so far as to employ these parables to remind people of this very truth. Hell will not only be filled with those who walk into churches intending to kill Christians, or those who spend all their days seeking to disprove the Bible, or those who make sitcoms and movies, or even dress up in drag to mock the Lord Jesus and his death on the cross. It'll also be filled with law-abiding citizens who attended church but never committed, who heard the gospel continually but never surrendered their lives to it, who on the outside sees Christianity and Jesus as a moral good and a source of human flourishing, and yet have not repented and placed their full trust in Jesus and his finished work on the cross.

Perhaps that's you this morning. Often we can be pacified by the fact that generally speaking, we aren't that bad. If you don't understand yourself to require aid, then the gospel isn't for you. The gospel is the best news for bad people. Jesus has come for the sick and not the healthy. This is why Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. You must acknowledge that you're spiritually impoverished. Don't compare your goodness to those you deem worse than you because that's not the standard God uses. He compares us to his own holiness, and despite your friendliness with the gospel, until you submit, you stand condemned. We see this picture of the gospel in Isaiah 6. Therefore, dear friends, I urge you to repent of your sins and place your trust and hope in Jesus and his completed work on the cross. Don't trust in your friendliness with God or his people as a pass.

Second application point: Jesus had a clear indication, and even separation if you will, of who's in and who's out. Church membership should function in the same way. And this isn't new, by the way. God has always had a clear-cut way of distinguishing between his covenant people and those who aren't. In the Old Covenant, it was circumcision, the Sabbath, dietary laws, and a land with borders. The God of Israel was very intentional in distinguishing his people from the foreign nations in the land. And to become a part of God's covenant community, you had to proselytize and follow these laws. Imagine an Egyptian and Assyrian informing Israel, "I'm an Israelite now, a

follower of Yahweh, but circumcision of my flesh is taking it a bit too far. I mean, I'm circumcised in my heart; that's what really matters. And dietary laws, that's a bit too heavy of a commitment." The Israelites would explain God's intent in marking off a people from the world so that everyone may know who is in and who is out. In other words, who belongs to God, and who doesn't?

Fast forward to the ministry of Jesus; once again, we find God making a clear distinction between who's in and who's out. In other words, who belongs to him and who doesn't. Those whom he spoke to plainly, were insiders. Those who received parables were on the outside. There's a clear distinction. Now that Jesus has ascended unto heaven, how will a landless, borderless kingdom like Jesus mark off its citizens since he's not here to make the distinction himself? Through the local church.

*<sup>18</sup> Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."*  
-Matthew 18:18-20

And this is the example we see in the Book of Acts and the New Testament epistles—active formal membership. The normative experience for those responding to the gospel was to be received into local churches. What was that process like? See Matthew 18. But we've come a long way from a New Testament understanding of membership and even a historically Baptist understanding of leadership. Nowadays, we want to erase as many boundaries as possible from formal membership, often for the sake of inclusion. Many churches pride themselves in this approach, stating that they want individuals to belong before belonging. Beloved, if we erase these borders, we depart from a historical understanding of membership and make membership meaningless.

If nothing changes from not being a member to becoming a member, then there is no membership. And I want you to understand that this approach is more cultural than Biblical or historically Baptist. The picture we get in the Scriptures is every believer submitting to a particular local church to be discipled and held accountable by that specific church. The idea of someone claiming Christ apart from submission and membership to a local church is foreign to the Scriptures. Therefore, we must make clear whom the church has used the keys of the kingdom on to affirm their gospel citizenship. Fight against the cultural urge to want to erase this line. If there's no distinction between who's in and out, then this renders the keys of the kingdom useless. So, there's prudence, and again just a historical Baptist practice, in clarifying who are

members are and whom we have affirmed as gospel citizens. Let's maintain our cookout tradition.

Third and final application: God acts through his Word by his Spirit, as we've seen the functions of both softening and hardening; therefore, we must make the Word of God central to our gatherings. If I were to ask you, "What grows a church?" How would you answer? Perhaps you would point to the dynamic personality of the leader, the attractational music, or maybe even the ambiance of the building. Does the Bible speak at all to this issue? Or are we free to develop differing answers based on our context and audience?

I argue that the Bible does indeed speak on this issue. God grows his churches through the Word of God. Now some of you may be saying, "Now wait, Pastor, I've seen many churches grow that didn't so much focus on a Word-driven ministry but were very attractational in their approach, and now they have thousands in attendance." I would respond to this claim in two ways. First, this doesn't consider the many churches that have moved away from Word-centric gatherings, resulting in the church dying. There are more than a few examples of this.

Secondly, how are we measuring growth? In other words, is all growth created equal? As a high school student, I was a skinny kid. I was this height but weighed about 150 lbs. Sick and tired of the thin jokes, I joined the gym. I got a membership at the 24-hour fitness not far from me and began working out consistently. I also would eat anything in front of me. I certainly had a faster metabolism back then compared to now; however, I wasn't putting on pounds correctly. One of my friends, a football player, informed me that the pace and way I gained weight and muscle were just as important as the ultimate goal. You see, I was gaining weight, but not in a healthy way. I had to learn that not all gaining was healthy.

Similarly, not all "church growth" you see is healthy, even though the result is often quicker. We have to decide what we will trust to grow as a church. Much like the ultimatum Joshua presented before Israel, will we fall victim to the Western popcorn consumeristic culture that trusts in the bells and whistles? Or will we trust that God's Word will do the work? Because I'll tell you, the latter takes trust, the former doesn't. Pragmatically speaking, we know what could happen if we compromise the truth a bit and be less Bible packed in our gatherings. And again, that's not even a guarantee because we've seen that backfire. Or we can walk in faith, knowing that God's Spirit through the Word creates and builds churches organically. The other method may lead to rapid growth, but does it lead to supernatural conversions by the Spirit of God? Does it lead to people growing in sanctification through the eternal truths of Scripture? Or are



the people present because of the bells and whistles and not because of the Word of God? That's one of the advantages of not being so flashy.

Celebrities with fortune and fame have often lamented that it's hard knowing whether or not someone loves them for who they are or what they have. Often in movies, you'll have a rich person acting like the middle class so they can ensure their spouse would be with them without all of the cars, fortune, and fame. This isn't a promotion of intentionally sabotaging our gatherings or doing anything without excellence because that, too, would be a form of manipulation. However, when we focus purely on the Word and not any gimmicks, we can rest assured that people are sticking because we offer the best coffee, have the dopest sound system, or flashing lights during singing. They're sticking because of the proclaimed unadulterated Word and the congregation's love. And that's how we press forward with healthy growth.

This takes time. It's as simple as that. This method and approach to the gatherings take time to produce growth. But that's the persistent picture that we find in the New Testament. We are the faithful farmers waiting for a harvest. Seeds yield their fruit slowly. Rain feeds a crop slowly. And so the Word works slowly, which I know can often be a hard pill to swallow in our on-demand popcorn culture. We have seen explosive growth due to faithful preaching; the Great Awakening would be an excellent example. However, often God chooses to work slowly through the faithful serving of the Word in local churches through preaching, teaching, and evangelism. Churches are not factories; they're temples of the living God.

William Carey, the missionary to India, baptized his first convert after seven years of gospel preaching! By the way, if he didn't have a biblical understanding of conversion, I'm sure this would have driven him mad! You've heard me quote this more than once, but when asked about the secret to his success in ministry, Martin Luther said, "I did nothing; the Word did it all." He knew what we should know, that the Word creates and sustains churches!

We don't need to read any books on church growth. We just need to be a faithful people with the Word as the centerpiece in our gatherings, in our lips as we meet with each other throughout the week, and pouring forth from our mouths as we evangelize unbelievers. We should expect growth to be slow; however, the good thing is that good growth is likely lasting growth. Although this isn't referring to church growth, the principle remains the same,

*<sup>11</sup> Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.  
-Proverbs 13:11*

I like what Jonathan Leeman says,

“You *can* build a church around generational tastes in music and décor. Around an ethnicity. Around a choir program. Around a denominational identity. Around opportunities for young mothers, or a lively singles program, or even the personality of a preacher. And often building your church around these things will produce immediate, visible results. It will require less patience...Calling out with the voice of Jesus means the church’s ministry of the Word must be primary and central.” -Jonathan Leeman

Patience is necessary! This is what Paul told Timothy.

*<sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. -2 Timothy 4:2*

Jesus’ Word was powerful. It both hardened the hearts of those who rejected him, sealing their fates as reprobates. And it softened the hearts of those to whom he granted salvation. The Word is powerful. Let’s trust it in our local churches. Next week we’ll consider the different responses we will receive to the Word of God proclaimed.

Let’s pray.