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 Title: "The Sower went out to Sow"  
 Text: Mark 4:1-20 (Gospel parallels – Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:1-15)  
 Theme: "The word does not leave abiding impressions upon the minds of men, because their hearts are not duly disposed to receive it." (*Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on Mark 4:1*)

### **The Problem:**

All three Gospels contain the story, but not all of them place it in the same position. It appears that Jesus used the illustration multiple times in various locations and for different occasions.

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

Second Cycle - Later Galilean Ministry (3:13 – 6:29)

- The challenge to His ministry (3:1-6)
  - The choosing of the 12 apostles (3:13-19)
- Beginning of THE BUSY DAY (3:20-5:20)
- The charge of demonic activity (3:20-30)
  - The characteristics of God's family (3:31-35)
  - The clarifying of His kingdom (4:1-34)

- The parable of the soils (4:1-20)
- The parable of the lamp (vv. 21-25)
- The parable of the seed (vv. 26-29)
- The parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30-34)

### **Introduction:**

From 3:1 and following there is a deliberate distinction drawn between those who choose Jesus and those who reject Him. This parable explains why there is a difference in those who accept and those who reject. It is all an issue of the heart. This parable continues to explain why some accept and others reject.

"The very essence of the parables is that they were spontaneous, extempore and unrehearsed. They were produced by the demand of the occasion and in the cut and thrust of debate. They were, in the first instance, not meant to be read but to be heard. That is to say, in the first instance, no one could sit down and study them phrase by phrase and word by word. They were spoken not to be studied at length and at leisure, but to produce an immediate impression and reaction. Therefore what we must look for in a parable is not a situation in which every detail stands for something but a situation in which one great idea leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning. It is always wrong to attempt to make every detail of a parable mean something. It is always right to say: 'What one idea would flash into a man's mind when he heard this story for the first time?'" (William Barclay, *Mark*, 89, 90).

**Questions:**

1. How does this parable advance the storyline of Mark's gospel?
2. How are we to understand the story of the soils in light of the larger context?
3. What are the obstacles to believing?
4. What is the responsibility of the sower?
5. Why are some soils more productive than others?
6. What conclusions might be drawn if a soil does not produce fruit?

**To Know:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to know Jesus as our only King.

**To Choose:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose Him and become a citizen of His kingdom.

**To Feel:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of becoming a citizen of His kingdom.

**Its Eternal Value:**

Embracing a false view of Jesus and what He brings is ultimately unfruitful in saving the soul. What you believe about Jesus is absolutely non-negotiable as it relates to the saving of one's soul.

Recently I was approached by a false form of professing Christianity. The individual wanted to engage me in dialogue about the end times. I refused to enter into dialogue with him and said, "You and I do not agree on the person and work of Jesus Christ." He responded by saying, "We believe Jesus set for us an example to follow." I responded by saying, "Herein is our difficulty. You believe He is an example and I believe He is the redeemer." If we add to or take from the person and work of Jesus for the saving of His people from sin, we will lose our souls forever.

**The Present Danger:**

There is always confusion in the storyline when we fail to see the present paragraph in light of the previous thought. It behooves us to always place the story in the larger thought.

**The Storyline:**

The kingdom of God is sown like seed. It will be resisted, but ultimately it will be received and fulfill its purpose. The parable gives us understanding as to what this looks like. The kingdom of God will be openly resisted by some. And because of a misunderstanding of the true program of God, others will initially receive it with joy but in time will abandon it because of failed expectations. Only a remnant will receive it with joy and see enduring fruit. This parable explains what is happening. In Mark 1 the authority of the King is established. In chapters two and three there is open resistance to the authority. Now in chapter 4 why this is true is explained.

## The Outline:

### I. The introduction (vv. 1, 2)

“In this section we see Jesus making a new departure. He was no longer teaching in the synagogue; he was teaching by the lakeside.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 84).

What we have noted already in our study is still true. The crowds were pressing and the need to find safety in the provided boat was necessary (v. 1). The ship is probably the one mentioned in 3:9. Again, He is teaching a very definable and distinct body of truth. There is a core that formed His “doctrine.” I believe it is still identifiable by Mark 1:14, 15.

### II. The illustration (vv. 1-9)

Verses 3 and 9 form bookends to the story. “Let him who has ears to hear, hear.” “This suggests that its meaning may not be self-evident. Alert minds are needed to comprehend its truth.” (Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” in EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 8:648). In between the two bookends is the story itself. Of the four soils that received the seed, only one produced fruit.

“A parable is literally something thrown beside something else; that is to say, it is basically a comparison. It is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Something on earth is compared with something in heaven, that the heavenly truth may be better grasped in light of the earthly illustration.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 85).

“Even as he talks Jesus sees a sower busy sowing seed in the fields beside the lake. He started from a thing that was happening at that moment on earth in order to lead men’s thoughts to heaven; he started from something which all men could see to get to the things that are invisible; he started from something which all men knew to get to something which they had never as yet realized.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 86).

“Jesus finds in the common things of life a countless source of signs which lead men to God if they will only read them aright.” (William Barclay, *Mark*, 84).

Before we leave this thought, and although it is secondary to the primary idea, I believe we must persistently stress how God is in the details. Your understanding of this idea will determine how you read the following statement.

## GODISNOWHERE

Depending on your perspective you will either read it as, “God is no where,” or “God is now here.” Jesus saw everything as a shadow of a greater substance. He could speak the truth of God in the sowing of seed. Regardless as to where you are at, “God is now here.”

### III. The explanation (vv. 10-20)

Verses 10-13 form an introduction to the explaining of the story. Only those who have ears to hear will know the meaning of the kingdom mystery. These three verses present an interesting dilemma. First, what is meant by “the mystery of the kingdom of God?” And second, was the intent of the parable to keep people from believing?

#### A. The meaning of “the mystery of the kingdom of God”

Jesus speaks of the parable as unfolding “the mystery of the kingdom of God” (v. 11). He also speaks of how the uninitiated will not understand and how the meaning is only known to the initiated. If we continue using kingdom language, it is only those who are citizens of the kingdom of God that will know the meaning of the parable. Those who are still citizens of darkness will not know the meaning of the parable.

Yet we still need to ask what is meant by “mystery”?

“The word translated ‘secret’ (v. 11) is *mysterion*. Although it occurs only here and in the parallels in the Gospels, Paul uses it frequently in his epistles (twenty-one times); and it is found in the Book of Revelation four times. In the NT it does not mean something only for the initiated few. The emphasis is on God’s disclosure to man of what was previously unknown. It is proclaimed to all, but only those who have faith really understand.” (Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” in EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 8:648).

A biblical mystery is something that is unknown but is now being made known. There is a mystery to the kingdom of God. The Old Testament writings spoke much of a kingdom that was present and still yet future. Yet there is an aspect to this kingdom truth that was hidden or unknown. What is the mystery? The mystery side of the kingdom of God is who the Messiah, the Anointed of God would be, how His reign will be exercised, and what this inaugurated kingdom will look like?

“The basic ‘secret,’ common to all the kingdom parables, is that in Jesus, God’s rule (kingdom) has come into human experience in a new spiritual form.” (John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 119).

There is another mystery that our present text explains and it is this, “Why do some believe Christ and others reject Him and seek to destroy Him?” Herein is the mystery being referenced and explained.

At this point in time there were many “mysteries” or unknowns about the kingdom. However, in our text and immediate context I believe the issue is, “Why do some believe Christ and others reject Him and seek to destroy Him?”

## B. The purpose of the parables (vv. 11, 12)

Was the purpose of the parable to keep people from repentance and forgiveness? Speaking in parables is a distinct literary style. Parables are not allegories. Parables are more like metaphors or similes whereby ideas are illustrated or made more concrete and tangible. Parables can be stories or even proverbial statements, however their purpose is to illustrate and explain. Thus the intent is not to obscure, but to manifest. It is not to hide, but to reveal. In light of this, how are we to understand the statement in verses 11 and 12?

Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9, 10. In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah receives a call and responds in faith to carry out the Lord's bidding. He is to preach a message to a people who are destined for destruction. Although some will respond in faith a significant majority will reject the message of hope, healing, and wholeness brought by the prophet. It is not the message that hardens their heart. Their hearts are already hardened. The nation of Israel will fall to the Assyrians during the days of Isaiah, and Judah will be threatened with the same. God, in grace, continues to appeal to the nation for repentance and forgiveness. This they refuse.

The same scenario is presenting itself in the days of Jesus. God working through Jesus preaches a message of hope, healing, and wholeness. The significant majority rejects His message and continues in their hardness of heart. These are the ones who are guilty of an eternal sin; blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, in Mark 3:28 and 29. Their non-response and open rebellion tell us that their hearts are represented by the three bad soils. Only those whose hearts are good receives the Word and produce the fruit.

There is an underlying issue as to the innate condition of the human heart and how bad soils can become good, but we will save such a study for a latter time. Let us now consider the meaning of the parable.

## C. The meaning of the parable (vv. 13-20)

In explaining the meaning of the parable we must remember that the story must not be overanalyzed or forced to walk on all fours. There is a big idea and that is what we must be after. However, there is information given that does provide for us some of the details. Jesus is speaking from real life, and His audience is fully aware of the illustration and now the application.

### 1. Who is the sower? (v. 13)

Those who promote the spread of the Word of God are the sowers.

### 2. What is the seed? (v. 13)

The seed sown is the Word of God.

### 3. What are the soils?

The soils are the various recipients of the Word of God.

### 4. What are the two soil types referenced in the parable (vv. 15-19)?

There is significant theological discussion as to whether or not the soil is representative of believer and unbelievers or if it is only referencing believers. Personally, I believe the context forces us to see it as explaining why some receive the Word and some do not. Up to this point, the issue is whether or not you are part of His family or not, whether you are a citizen of His kingdom or not, whether you are in or not. I believe it is possible to argue that only the fourth soil type, the good soil, the good heart that produces fruit is identified as citizens of His kingdom. It is only the fourth soil that is described as good. This appears to be consistent with the statement made in 3:35.

Grassmick identifies the first three soils as unbelievers. (John D. Grassmick, "Mark," in *BKC*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983], 119, 120).

I am not so foolish as to think this answers all of the theological questions raised by this text, but I do think that the text in its context does give us some direction as to who are represented by the soils. There are two soils represented by the details. These two soil types are explained using four examples.

- a. The non-compliant, non-receiving, citizens of darkness, non-family members.
  - Open resistance, no response (v. 15).

Satan is indicated in this scenario (v. 15). Paul echoes this same thought in 2 Corinthians 4: 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, <sup>4</sup> in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:3, 4).

Satan is actively working to keep people from believing.

- Initial response, no endurance (vv. 16-19).

Two actions are noted. First, affliction and persecution rob the seeds effectiveness (vv. 16, 17). Second, "The worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word" (v. 18, 19).

"It is easy to pack life with such a multiplicity of interests that there is no time left for Christ." (William Barclay, *Mark*, 96).

b. The compliant, receiving, citizens of light, family members.

“Some seed does fall on good soil and is productive. The kind of person spoken of here is open and receptive to the word of the kingdom. He is neither hard, shallow, nor preoccupied.” (Walter W. Wessell, “Mark,” in EBC, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 8:651).

- Initial response, enduring fruitfulness (vv. 8, 20).

We would be in error if we failed to see the connection between what Jesus says in verses 8 and 20 with that of 3:35. Those who do the will of God are those who bear fruit, and those who bear fruit are marked as good soil.

If we remember at the beginning of the study we noted how there is a big idea in the parable and it is this big idea that we need to see, hear, and feel. In light of all the opposition to the person and work of Jesus, “the fact remained that at the end of the day there was a splendid harvest. This is the parable to end despair. It may seem that much of our effort achieves no result; it may seem that much of our labor is wasted. That is how the disciples were feeling, when they saw Jesus banished from the synagogue and regarded with suspicion. 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, *Mark*, 97).

An unfortunate problem exists when we place the production of fruit on the soil. If the soil is good, fruit will be produced; how much fruit the good soil produces is entirely up to the Lord of the Harvest. The purpose of the parable is not to get the good soil to produce more fruit. Such production is inevitable. You cannot be a part of His family, His kingdom, and not produce fruit. Our tendency is to become fruit inspectors when we are to simply abide in the vine. If the seed is sown and the soil is good, then a harvest is unavoidable. If the soil is not good, then no enduring fruit will be forthcoming.

It is in the face of open opposition and constant kingdom conflict that our Lord assures His audience that God wins!

APPLICATION: (What’s the NEXT STEP?)

1. Are you resting in God’s victory?
2. Are you a citizen of His Kingdom?
3. Perhaps you have developed a very judgmental spirit toward those whose fruit production is very different than yours. Maybe you need to put off the critical spirit and embrace God’s victory in the life of His people.
4. How are you handling the application of this passage as it relates to Christian ministry?