**THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

February 10, 2013

Mark 4:1-20

Key Verse: 4:20 “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

In the past, only a few monks possessed the Bible and studied it. Now we live in an information age and there are many Bible references in the internet and everywhere. So our common sense is that people should know better. But the reality is that people are very ignorant of the Bible. The same thing is true for mathematics and science. There are all kinds of books and materials in the bookstore and internet and yet students’ overall performance is not better. How can we explain this phenomenon? The reason is that people have easy-going and pleasure-seeking mentality. It is true that there are many information on the Bible out there but there are much, much more information on how to have fun, such as pornography, games, etc. One’s natural tendency is to follow them. Jesus challenges the listeners, saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Jesus told them the parable of the sower so that those who had a right and absolute attitude toward the word would understand the meaning of the word, and those who do not have a right attitude would not understand. Here again we see that in this information age, the best way to teach the Bible is through one to one Bible study so that we can help each individual person to think and apply the word of God to their lives.

**First**, why Jesus taught the crowds in parables (1-8). Jesus faced mounting opposition to his gospel ministry. The religious establishment called him demon possessed. Jesus could not teach in the synagogues any more. However, Jesus did not back down from teaching the word. Jesus had a clear life purpose in God to teach the word of God. When the synagogues closed, Jesus went to the lake. When Jesus began to teach, a large crowd gathered. They were thirsty for the word of life. They came to Jesus, one needy person at a time, two by two, in families, and by groups from communities, until they formed a large crowd. All kinds of people were there: professionals, laborers, paralytics, the athletic types, single mothers, pious Jews, lawbreakers, tax collectors, ladies of the night, and the demon possessed.

Look at verse 2. “He taught them many things by parables...” Jesus taught in parables. What is a parable? A parable has been commonly defined as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Parables are stories from everyday life that teach spiritual truth. Until now, Jesus had preached, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” But here Jesus begins to use parables. They were familiar stories but only those who make an effort to understand would understand. Jesus spoke the parables to illuminate the truth of God. But in so many eyes he saw a dull incomprehension. He saw so many people blinded by prejudice, deafened by wishful thinking, too lazy to think.

After telling the parable of the sower, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” It was the end of Jesus’ message. Put yourself in the place of a person in the crowd that day who heard this parable for the first time. It sounds like a story about a farmer sowing seed and no more. Someone might have traveled long distance, skipping work and hiring a babysitter to come and hear this parable. They might have thought they made a mistake in coming. Yet Jesus challenges his listeners to understand that there is more to the parable than they might think at first. Fortunately, Jesus explained everything to his disciples. Look at verses 10-12. “When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” Jesus spoke in parables to veil his truth from those on the outside. Those who refuse to acknowledge God cannot understand the parables at all. To them, the parables are simply short stories. They hear them and do not know their meaning. They see and do not perceive. God will not be mocked. Those who are proud before his words are sent away empty. They hear the parable that can give life to their souls, but they do not receive its benefit. But notice that the Twelve and the others around Jesus took the initiative to ask Jesus about the parables. Jesus did not volunteer the explanation until he was asked about it. Jesus wanted to interact with his disciples, rather than teaching them one-sidedly. We must learn from Jesus’ disciples. When we don’t know what Jesus is talking about, we must ask Jesus for help.

**Second**, Jesus explains the parable of the sower (13-20). Jesus went on to explain the parable to his disciples. But first he rebuked them. Look at verse 13. “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?’” Jesus expected them to have keener spiritual insight, a stronger spiritual desire, and to grow in thinking power. Jesus also revealed that the parable of the sower was basic to the understanding of all parables. In explaining this parable, Jesus lays the groundwork for interpreting all parables. Let’s listen to Jesus’ explanation.

Verse 14 says, “The farmer sows the word.” Jesus compared himself to a farmer. As a farmer sows seed, Jesus sows the word. In this image we can learn something about Jesus. In those days farmers used a “broadcast” method of sowing. They spread their seed generously and it fell on all kinds of soil. In the same way, the word of Jesus is going out all over the world in various ways. As a seed has the potential for life in itself, the word of God has life in it. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active...” When the word of God is shared in a message or testimony, it continues to work by its own power, long after it was delivered. In verses 15-20, Jesus compares soil to human hearts.

The first soil was the path. Look at verse 15. “Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.” These people are hardened like a path and the word does not penetrate into them at all. It just lays there until Satan comes and takes it away. Sowing the seed is a spiritual battle against Satan. It has been this way since the time of Adam and Eve (Gen 3). Satan takes away the word of God and in its place he puts his lie. God tries hard to help people by sowing the word generously. But they become the prey of Satan. It is not God’s fault. Something is wrong with them. Then how do people become so hardened? In a field the soil gets hard when it is walked on many times. People can become hard soil under many difficult situations. They are hard pressed by the world, and their hearts become hard. Just as a seed cannot grow unless it penetrates the ground so the seed of God’s word cannot grow unless it can penetrate the heart. Farmers can remedy this problem in their fields by plowing them. The plow breaks up the hard ground so that when the farmer plants the seeds will be able penetrate the soil. Just like those farmers some of us need to plow the soil of our hearts so that God’s word can enter in. We need to prepare our hearts to receive the word of God. If our hearts become hard, we must cry out for God’s help. Ezekiel 36:26 says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Look at verses 16-17. “Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.” These people heat up in an instant and they cool off in an instant. Some have labeled them “impulsive” people. More than 20 years ago, at one prayer meeting, Dr. Samuel Lee announced, “Let’s pray for the raising of 561 full time American shepherds.” One young man was moved and said in his testimony the next week, “Don’t pray for 561, but for 560, because I am one. I will be a full time shepherd for America.” Less than one month later, he disappeared. What is the problem with such people? They have no root. Taking root is something unseen. It happens under the surface. It happens through deep personal struggle with the word of God during times of trouble and persecution. It happens when we learn to live by the truth instead of by our feelings.

Look at verses 18-19. “Still others, like the seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” They were lazy. He cut off only the top of the weeds; and the field looked clean. But below the surface the roots were still there; and in due time the weeds revived in all their strength. They grew with such rapidity and vigor that they choked the life out of the seed. They are those who love God. And at the same time they love the world. In order to make money, they work hard. They think they would be happy if they make enough money for themselves and for their children. In the matter of time, the word in their hearts is overpowered by the things of the world. When the word of life is choked by the things of the world, strangely, anxiety occupies their minds and hearts. They worry in the morning. They worry in the evening. They worry during the sleeping time. They believe they could serve God and at the same time make a lot of money. It is a great mistake. Thistles and thorns overpower the seed of the word in their souls. They cannot have the word of life in their hearts, making it unfruitful.

Look at verse 20. “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.” The good soil people are different because they accept the word. They not only hear it, but they accept it. They accept it as the word of God to be obeyed and put into practice. God told Father Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing...and all nations on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). Father Abraham accepted this promise and trusted God with his life. He obeyed God’s command to go to a new land. At various times in Abraham’s life the word of God came to him. Each time, Abraham obeyed the word of God immediately. God made him a blessing to all peoples on earth.

Look at verse 20 again. “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.” The point of this parable is that even though many seeds never grew, at the end of the day, there was an abundant harvest. When our efforts to teach the Bible seem wasted on deaf ears, we are discouraged and despair.

After teaching the Bible for many years, when our Bible students remain the same, we feel like a failure. After preparing my message diligently and delivering it on Sunday, when some students cannot say clearly what they learn, I feel like a failure. The disciples must have felt the same: Jesus worked hard to teach the Bible, even skipping meals. But many religious leaders accused him of blasphemy. Many people in the crowd heard Jesus’ message, but it did not have any impact on their lives. But Jesus is saying, “Be patient. Sow the seeds diligently because the abundant harvest is sure.”

Everyone has a potential to be a good soil. When we cultivate our minds to be good soil, as Jesus said, we can bear much fruit to glorify God. May God help us to cultivate our hearts every day, removing stones and removing thorns through repentance, so that the word of God may grow and take root and bear fruit. May God help us not be discouraged but diligently sow the seed of the word of God in our Bible students so that it may bear fruit.