

SESSION 2

JESUS TEACHES

▶ ***The Point***

Obeying Jesus' teachings leads to fruitful living.

▶ ***The Passage***

Mark 4:1-9

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

Think back to a favorite teacher: elementary school, high school, college, or on-the-job training. You probably enjoyed that instructor so much because he or she fell into one or more of these groups: teachers who know their subject inside and out, teachers who love the subject and are passionate about it, and teachers who truly care about their students. Many of us got into a particular profession because just such a teacher motivated us to pursue that field. And many teachers became teachers themselves because other exemplary teachers inspired them. Learning isn't always easy, but great teachers help us develop the desire to learn.

Jesus taught with all three of these characteristics. During His earthly ministry, Jesus certainly knew what He was talking about, He taught with passion, and He genuinely loved those He taught. But Jesus' teaching has another vital element: His teaching is life-changing. In fact, as we'll see when we continue in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' teaching is eternally life-changing, and it leads us to fruitful living.

▶ ***The Setting***

After calling four disciples by the Sea of Galilee (see Mark 1:14-20), Jesus continued His ministry in the surrounding area. While His preaching and miracles attracted crowds, Jesus' activities also troubled the Jewish religious leaders. By reaching out to "the unreachable" members of society and rejecting much of the contemporary interpretations of Jewish law, Jesus threatened the existing establishment. (See 3:6.) He also redefined His "family" as those who do the will of God. (See vv. 31-35.)

What does the Bible say?

Parables (v. 2)—The Greek term translated “parable” literally means “placed alongside” (a comparison). For Jesus’ audience, parables would have resembled ancient Jewish wisdom literature.

Hear (v. 9)—The proof of genuinely listening to Jesus’ teachings is living a life of obedience to His commands.

Mark 4:1-9

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! Behold, 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.”



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Mark 4:1-2a

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. ^{2a} And he was teaching them many things in parables,

READ: Mark 4:1-2a on page 23 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

GUIDE: Use the first paragraph from the Commentary to help group members understand Jesus’ decision to hop in a boat while teaching.

RECAP: Read aloud the second-to-last paragraph on page 23 of the PSG in order to give group members a firm grasp of parables:

One key way Jesus taught was through parables, which are short stories designed to teach a meaningful point. The Greek word for “parable” carries the idea of something being laid alongside something else for the purpose of comparison. It’s often hard for a Western audience to understand why Jesus chose to teach important truths in parables rather than just coming out and explaining what He meant, but the people of Jesus’ day were familiar with this method of communication.

GUIDE: Further supplement your group members’ understanding of parables by encouraging them to read through the numbered list on page 24 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 23 of the PSG: **“What are the benefits and challenges of using stories to reveal truth?”**

Note: Encourage group members to talk about the benefits and challenges of using stories today, in addition to what the benefits and challenges may have been during Jesus’ day.

TRANSITION: Having established the importance of parables in Jesus’ teaching, lets jump to an actual parable in verses 2b-7.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

How have you benefited from the practice of teaching within the church?

Mark 4:1-2a Commentary

[Verse 1] The **very large crowd** that gathered around Jesus created a logistical problem for Him as He taught. Jesus resolved this issue by turning the Sea of Galilee into His personal amphitheater. It was the custom of Jewish teachers to sit as they taught, so that would not have been unusual. However, sitting in a **boat** in the lake to teach may have been a bit unusual. Being in the boat provided Jesus more space between Him and the crowd. The large number of people at these gatherings wanting to be near Jesus at times almost crushed Him. (See Mark 3:9; Luke 8:42.) In addition, the water would have resonated His voice like a natural amplifier and allowed everyone **beside the sea on the land** to hear His teachings easily.

[Verse 2a] Everyone loves a good story, which is part of what makes parables such powerful teaching tools. Jesus taught in parables in part because stories using familiar themes from the everyday lives of the listeners can be captivating and can make difficult concepts more understandable. One definition of parables is “stories, especially those of Jesus, told to provide a vision of life, especially life in God’s kingdom.”^{*} Jesus used stories from nature or everyday life primarily to illustrate spiritual truth.

While Jesus’ use of parables often made His teachings more understandable, the parables also obscured those same teachings for people whose hearts were not tuned in to the message. So, while Jesus made His teachings available to everyone, He knew those in the crowds would receive and respond to His words in different ways. Some would hear just a nice story, but listeners who were engaged and ready to go deeper would recognize the personal application involved—Jesus’ call to belief in and obedience to Him and His teachings. As one commentator notes: “Jesus did not speak in parables for the purpose of withholding truth from anyone; but the result of his parables, the rest of his teaching, and even his miracles was that most did not understand and respond positively. He did speak in parables to provoke thought and invite commitment. . . . [Jesus’ parables] constitute spiritual tests that separate those who understand and believe from those who do not.”^{**}

Jesus acknowledged this in the verses following the parable of the soils. He noted that those closest to Him—those who would be instrumental in spreading the message of the kingdom—would understand the deeper meanings of the parables, while others might not. The difference would be the condition of one’s heart. Reflecting back on God’s call to the prophet Isaiah, Jesus reminded the twelve disciples that not all who look really see and not all who hear really listen. (See Mark 4:10-12.) Those who rejected the message would remain stuck in darkness, while those who received it would find true life.

* Peter Rhea Jones, “Parables” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. ed. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 1215.

** James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 83.

Mark 4:2b-7 Commentary

[Verse 2b-3] To encourage His audience to strive for a deeper understanding, Jesus encouraged them to **"Listen!"** This imperative indicated that the truths of Jesus' parable might not be self-evident and required listeners to think so as to gain insight and understanding.

The image of a farmer sowing seeds would have been familiar to Jesus' audience. Many first-century Jews made their livings as farmers. The description of the different types of soils in the parable reflects the variety of soil conditions that would have been found in a typical field in first-century Galilee.

In His interpretation of the parable for the twelve disciples (see vv. 10-20), Jesus identified the seed as "the word" (4:14). "The word" could represent the good news of God which Jesus had been proclaiming in Galilee. (See 1:14-15.) It could also represent Jesus Himself.

[Verse 4] The first kind of soil mentioned was **the path**, a well-worn walkway through the field made of ground that was virtually impenetrable. The seeds that landed on this path had no chance to take root, making them easy pickings for birds looking for a quick meal. Jesus later identified the path as representing a hardened heart that was completely closed to the Word. (See 4:15.) The message of the gospel cannot penetrate the heart in such individuals, which means it is never truly understood. The enemy (Satan) easily steals it away. (See Matt. 13:19.)

[Verses 5-6] The next soil mentioned was the **rocky ground**, bedrock covered by a thin layer of topsoil. The seed that fell on the rocky ground had no space to take root. Although it sprang up quickly, when harsh conditions created by the sun and a lack of water followed, the plant withered away. Jesus later identified this type of ground as representing those who initially receive the good news of the gospel with joy, but fail to let the Word sink deeply into their hearts (and lives); they have no spiritual roots. (See 4:16-17.) The societal pressures and hostilities associated with being a follower of Christ are too much for this type of individual, so they stumble and fall away. (See Matt. 13:21.)

[*Note:* The types of people symbolized by the seed falling on the rocky soil and the seed falling among the thorns were never true Christians. This parable is not suggesting that a true believer in Jesus Christ could lose his or her salvation. Once a person places his or her faith in Christ and is saved, through the grace of God that person will persevere in his or her faith throughout this life until he or she goes to be with the Lord in heaven. (See John 10:27-30; Phil. 1:6.)]

[Verse 7] The next soil was ground covered with **thorns**. While things *could* grow in this dirt, the thorns that grew in this soil choked the plants, keeping them from producing any fruit. Jesus compared the thorns to the numerous distractions presented by the world. This type of soil choked out the power of the Word through the worries and the desires related to the things of the world. (See Mark 4:18-19.)

Mark 4:8-9 Commentary

[Verse 8] When seed fell on **good soil**, the crop was incredibly fruitful. Such seed multiplied itself well beyond the initial investment of the farmer. The return the good ground yielded was **thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold** the amount of seed planted. For a farmer in first-century Galilee, the average return he could have expected would have been seven or eight times the amount of seed sown, with a bumper crop being around ten times. So, the yield enjoyed by the farmer in the parable would have been staggering.

However, the true meaning of the parable does not rest only in numbers. Rather, the main emphasis is on the soil's ability to produce. As with Jesus' parable of the talents (see Matt. 25:14-30), the emphasis is on making the most of what was provided. In the parable of the talents, the faithful servants increased what they were given. Similarly, in the parable of the soils, the seed sown in good ground reproduced itself on a wide scale.

Jesus identified "those that were sown on the good soil" as those people who "hear the word and accept it and bear fruit" (Mark 4:20). Such people not only hear the Word of God, but understand it and thereby bear fruit. (See Matt. 13:23.) These people take the truth to heart, giving the Word a place to take root and grow. The implication of this includes obedience to Jesus' teaching, which leads to fruit.

When the farmer of the parable went out to sow his seed, he would have known that some of the seed would fall on soil yielding no harvest. In the same way, when the Word of the gospel is proclaimed, the reality is that there will always be some hearts that will not be receptive to the truth. But just as when the condition of the soil is right the yield will be an abundant harvest, so too when the hearts of people are open to the gospel the Word will yield an incredible spiritual harvest for the kingdom!

[Verse 9] Just as Jesus had opened His parable with an exhortation for the crowd to listen, He ended with the words, "**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**" Jesus' words were both a challenge to the crowd to examine their hearts (what type of soil were they?) and an invitation to follow Jesus by answering His call and becoming one of His disciples. While everyone in the crowd would have literally heard the words of Jesus' parable, only those who responded to Jesus' call by placing their faith in Him as God's Messiah and obeying His teachings as His disciple were those who had **ears to hear**. All of the others in the crowd, who followed Jesus for any other reason, could not truly hear Jesus' message because of the condition of their hearts. They were like the bad soils in the parable that yielded no harvest.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 28 of the PSG. Encourage them to consider these steps in order to obey Jesus' teachings this week:



NOTES

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Weed.** What in your life is hindering your ability to hear and obey God's Word? Ask God to help you remove anything keeping you from fully trusting and following Him.
- ▶ **Water.** Make Scripture reading a daily part of your life. Start a journal. Each day, note what God says in His Word and consider what you need to do to obey Him.
- ▶ **Sow.** Create a plan for sharing what God is teaching you through His Word. Use social media to tell others. Meet someone for lunch whom you can encourage to read Scripture and obey God's teaching.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 28 of the PSG:

The idea of teaching others about Jesus may feel intimidating or even out of reach. But if you are willing to hear God's Word and obey His instruction for your life, He will guide you the rest of the way.

PRAY: Conclude by again expressing your desire not only to know Jesus' teachings, but to obey them each day. Ask God's Spirit to do His good work of producing spiritual fruit in your lives, in the lives of your group members, and in your community.

**GROUPS
MATTER.**

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