

Mark 4:1-25 ~ Scripture Verses

The Parable of the Sower

¹ Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ 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 ¹² so that,

'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!' " [Isaiah 6:9,10]

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. 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. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

A Lamp on a Stand

²¹ He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

²⁴ "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

Mark 4:1-25 ~ Discussion Questions

1. This is one of only 6 parables (out of 46) recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). What does that tell you? What is a parable?
2. Why would a farmer allow precious seed to land on the path, or rocks, or among thorns? Is he an irresponsible farmer scattering seeds at random?
3. What happened to each group of seeds?
4. How did Jesus conclude his parable? What did he mean by that? How much of the parable did the people understand? How much did the disciples understand? (4:9-13)
5. Why didn't the people or the disciples understand this parable? By quoting Isaiah 6:9 did Jesus desire that some people would not understand the parable?
6. Did Jesus design his parables to have trick meanings, hidden meanings, or more than one basic interpretation? Why do some listeners discover the truth in a parable and others do not?
7. Why do you suppose that this was among the first parables (#11 of 46) that Jesus told?
8. What kind of people today might be represented by the seed that fell on the path? (4:4, 4:15)
9. About the seed that fell on the shallow soil with rocks underneath. Why couldn't those who received the word with joy stay faithful? (4:5-6, 4:16-17)
10. According to Jesus, the people represented by the seed that fell among the thorns were choked by what? What other things (or people) might the thorns represent? (4:7, 4:18-19)
11. To the description of the good seed producing a large crop, Luke says in 8:15, "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." Instead of "persevere," other Bible versions say "enduring" or "patiently." Why is perseverance or patience necessary for all who receive the Word? How long did it take for you to understand the gospel of Christ?
12. In Jesus' parable about the lamp, what does the lamp stand for? (4:21-23, John 8:12)
13. Who did Jesus intend to disclose the hidden meanings of his parables? (Mark 4:22, Luke 11:33-36, Luke 12:2) Do you think this applies to us?
14. Mark 4:24-25 seem like somewhat strange verses. What exactly do they mean?

Mark 4:1-25 ~ Leader's Guide

1. This is one of only 6 parables (out of 46) recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). What does that tell you? What is a parable?

A parable repeated three times yells out for us to Pay Attention!

Parables used familiar scenes making them easy to remember especially if the scene was some sort of exaggeration or something seemingly silly. The earliest use of parables or fables seems to date back to 2200 BCE in the Akkadian Empire in Sumer (Samaria) and widely popularized 1,600 years later by Aesop, a slave and story-teller who lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 560 BCE.

Jesus' parables were not quite as fictional as the earlier ones (fewer animals, more people) and they all had two or three levels of meaning. A very short parable might be simply a metaphor or analogy.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. That is, a metaphor is language that directly compares seemingly unrelated subjects. For example, "You are my sunshine." Another: "He has the foot of a wild stag."

An analogy is the inference that if two things agree with each other in some respects, they will probably agree in others. For example, "shells were to ancient cultures as dollar bills are to modern culture." An analogy is often used to make a difficult idea or an archaic subject easier to understand. For example, the URL of a web site is like the title on the tab of a file folder.

A fable or parable is an imaginative short story (or allegory) with one definite moral. Fables tend to be longer than parables, and although many fables have similar meanings to OT Biblical and Jesus' parables, others present good advice that is not at all Biblical, for example, you can't please everybody, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, if words don't suffice then blows must follow, or misery loves company.

2. Why would a farmer allow precious seed to land on the path, or rocks, or among thorns? Is he an irresponsible farmer scattering seeds at random?

In Eastern farming practice, the seed was generally sown first and the field plowed afterward. Roads and pathways went directly through many fields, and the traffic made some of the surface too hard for the seed to take root. Obviously, Jesus is taking some poetic license here, but that's the way of a parable.

3. What happened to each group of seeds?

4. How did Jesus conclude his parable? What did he mean by that? How much of the parable did the people understand? How much did the disciples understand?

He concluded by saying, “Let him who has ears hear.” This was effectively a challenge for listeners to understand the deeper message and appropriate it for themselves. In this case, it appears that neither the disciples nor the people understood the parable.

5. Why didn't the people or the disciples understand this parable? By quoting Isaiah 6:9 did Jesus desire that some people would not understand the parable?

In the New Testament, the word “secret” (4:11) refers to something that God has revealed to his people. The secret, or that which was previously unknown, is proclaimed to all, but only those who have faith can understand it. In this context, the secret seems to be that the Kingdom of God had drawn nearer in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Remember back in Mark 1:14-15, we read, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

The quotation from Isaiah of course is not a wish that some people would not understand, but simply states the sad truth that those who are unwilling to receive Jesus' message of the good news will find other truths hidden from them. Isaiah more or less said the same thing: some people will hear his message and follow him but others upon hearing it would reveal their hardhearted resistance to God's warning and appeal.

6. Did Jesus design his parables to have trick meanings, hidden meanings, or more than one basic interpretation? Why do some listeners discover the truth in a parable and others do not?

Some parables had hidden meanings, yes, but tricks, no. As I mentioned earlier, there is a simple surface story that can be taken at face value. In some cases, it actually has a meaningful lesson, if not very deep. Putting new wine in old wineskins, keeping watch for the return of the master, or allowing the weeds to grow up with the wheat for example.

Many parables had a second level of meaning aimed at the particular audience, which may have been Pharisees, disciples, or ordinary people. Some even specifically had in the story those who it was aimed at, for example, the Pharisee and the tax collector praying (Luke 18:10-14) or the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). But most required the listener to figure out who the characters in the story represented and draw conclusions from that.

The third level of meaning is how the parable applies to us today. Is there a direct parallel to the audience on Biblical days or is a new interpretation required?

There is no difference then and now in discovering the truth in a parable. The truth comes as a revelation from God and if you have been receptive to the good news from Jesus, you will understand most parables. You may have to pray,

consult with other, perhaps more mature Christians, but the meaning will not be hidden from you.

7. Why do you suppose that this was among the first parables that Jesus told?

Roughly the first ten parables have the message: “There is a new message in the good news being brought to you by Jesus Christ.” This is the 11th parable and takes the idea of a new message one step further in saying that it will be received in different ways. This is a somewhat longer parable than the preceding ones and is the first one that Jesus explained to his disciples.

8. What kind of people today might be represented by the seed that fell on the path? (4:4, 4:15)

The seed that fell on the path never sprouted at all. It’s like my saying something in a group while several people are watching out the window. The word (seed) is there but there is no soil so the word is immediately snatched away by Satan.

9. About the seed that fell on the shallow soil with rocks underneath. Why couldn’t those who received the word with joy stay faithful? (4:5-6, 4:16-17)

It’s an immediate joy like cheering your football team when they get a touch-down or clapping for a wonderful performance. However, it is a momentary joy, not a joy that comes from having deep roots. Think of the difference in joy from a sports win or great concert compared with watching your son graduate from high school.

The kind of belief represented by the seeds on shallow soil is superficial and similar to what James called a “dead” or “useless” faith. (James 2:17, 20, 26)

10. According to Jesus, the people represented by the seed that fell among the thorns were choked by what? What other things (or people) might the thorns represent? (4:7, 4:18-19)

Jesus said the thorns represented the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things. Luke 8:14 says simply, “life’s worries, riches, and pleasures.” However, the thorns could also represent other temptations that we give in to. Or they could represent the people around us who might be pulling us away from God.

11. On the description of the good seed producing a large crop, Luke says in 8:15, “But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Other Bible versions say

“by enduring” or “with patience.” Why is perseverance, endurance or patience necessary for all those who receive the Word? How long did it take for you to understand the gospel of Christ?

The day you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior is an important day, but it is just the beginning of your walk with God. Every day of your walk, you learn more and gain a better understanding of God, his word, and his plan for your life. To stay on this narrow way, you need perseverance, endurance, and patience.

12. In Jesus’ parable about the lamp, what does the lamp stand for? (4:21-23, John 8:12)

As a lamp is placed to give light and not hide it, Jesus, the light of the world, is destined to be revealed and seen.

John 8:12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

13. Who did Jesus intend to disclose the hidden meanings of his parables? (Mark 4:22, Luke 11:33-36, Luke 12:2) Do you think this applies to us?

Although Jesus put much of his message in parables, he intended that his disciples (all his followers, not just his apostles) make the truths known as widely as possible (explained more fully in Luke 11:33-36). It is the destiny of the truth to be made known (Luke 12:2). The disciples were to begin a proclamation that would become universal.

Luke 11:33-36 – ³³“No one lights a lamp and puts it in a place where it will be hidden, or under a bowl. Instead he puts it on its stand, so that those who come in may see the light. ³⁴Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. ³⁵See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. ³⁶Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you.”

14. Mark 4:24-25 seem like somewhat strange verses. What exactly do they mean?

In telling the disciples to consider carefully what they hear, Jesus was saying that they should listen not only for themselves but for the people to whom they would minister. Truth that is not understood and not appropriated (taken possession of) will be lost but truth that is used will be multiplied.

Verse 25: The more we appropriate truth now, the more we will receive in the

future; but if we do not respond to what little truth we know already, we will not profit even from that.

In other words, those who seek spiritual gain in the gospel for themselves and others will become richer, while those who neglect or squander what is given to them will become impoverished, losing even what they have.

Mark is the only one of the three synoptic gospels in which these two verses appear together; the other gospels split them up. Mark 4:24 is found as Luke 6:38 and Matthew 7:2; Mark 4:25 is found as Luke 8:18 and 19:26 and as Matthew 13:12 and 25:29. Since Mark was essentially repeating what he heard from Peter's sermons, it is likely the Luke and Matthew record Jesus' sequence of words more correctly.