

**Mark 4:1-34, The Parables (vv.1-20)**  
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**Overview**

1. Follow Greg Fay's chiastic analysis (CBQ 51 [1989] 65-81) (except for 13, see Standaert 203 n.1):
  - a) Setting 1-2a 33-34
  - b) Agricultural Parables 2b-9 26-32
  - c) Discourse on Method 10-12 21-25
  - d) Interpretation of Soils 13-20
  
2. Note further development of the "us-them" division:
  - a) 1-2a, the boat to separate him from the crowds
  - b) 3-9, Focus of the major parable on the different kinds of soil.
  - c) 10, withdrawal with the disciples
  - d) 11, insight given only to a few
  - e) 25, selective revelation and exclusion
  - f) 34, contrasts public teaching with exposition privately to disciples

**A. 1-2a, Intro**

1. Note again the priority of teaching: "He began again to teach by the sea side." "Again" takes us back to 2:13, where he did succeed in teaching by the sea, and 3:7, where the press of the crowd demanding healings kept him from teaching.
2. This time the boat prepared in 3:9 comes to the rescue, and serves him as a pulpit.
3. 2a, Key characteristic of his teaching: it was "in parables." The first were in 3:24-27. This chapter explains how and why they are used. It contains parables about parables, along with an explanation.

**B. 3-9, Parable of the Soils**

1. Begins (3a) and ends (9) with exhortation to pay attention. Truth doesn't come easily. College students know that even worldly learning poses a challenge. How much more difficult is it to learn spiritual truth, to which the natural man is intrinsically opposed (1 Cor. 3:14).
2. Components:
  - a) The Sower (definite). Not identified explicitly, but will be explained as sowing the Word (v.14), and the disciples know that they have been set apart for this purpose (3:14). So we may understand this instruction as preparing them for the work they will do in 6:7ff. He is one such sower. They are others.

The task of the sower, the one appointed to sow, is to spread the Word of God.

- b) The Seed. Two later parables will enlarge upon this theme (vv.26-32): its relative insignificance, its intrinsic power, and its ultimate greatness.
- c) The Soils. This is the main burden of this parable. The soils are ordered from least receptive to most. In each case we have to distinguish
  - 1) the location where the seed falls,
  - 2) the threat to which it is exposed there (except in the last case),
  - 3) its subsequent growth (except in the first case).

In each case except the last, the condition of the soil does not directly kill the seed, but makes it liable to some external threat.

### 3. 4, The Wayside

- a) Location: the wayside, the road's edge. Not the middle of the path (the sower is not that careless), but along the edge, where the soil was compacted by an occasional footstep, so that the seed cannot settle into the earth.
- b) Threat: the birds peck it up.
- c) No discussion of subsequent growth. The seed has no chance even to germinate.

### 4. 5-6, Stony Ground

- a) Location: stony ground. Not bare rock, but a place where the soil is shallow over the underlying bedrock, as we are told 3x ("not much earth," "no depth of earth," "no root").
- b) Threat: the hot sun. NB: The same sun is necessary for the growth of seed in the good ground! Circumstances in the world are not uniformly good or bad; much depends on the context in which we encounter them.
- c) Result: The seed germinates, but the tender plant is scorched and dies before it brings forth fruit.

### 5. 7, Thorn Patch

- a) Location: ground where there were thorn seeds. Note that these grow up after the grain has been sown. Again, the sower is not wasting seed by casting it into the brambles, but the soil is contaminated with a rival species.
- b) Threat: the thorns, which grow faster and shade out the grain.

c) Result: The seed germinates, and this time is not killed, but it can never bear fruit.

#### 6. 8, Good Ground

a) Location: the good ground, free from the characteristics of the other three.

1) Unlike the wayside, it is plowed up.

2) Unlike the stony ground, it is deep.

3) Unlike the thorny ground, it does not favor weeds.

b) In this case no threat is able to compromise it.

c) Result: Not only germination, but maturity to bear fruit that is abundant, though varying in degree.

#### C. 10-12, Method

1. The Setting: the Lord is "alone," that is, away from the multitude of "followers," but still associated with two other groups: the twelve ("apostles," those being prepared for sending out), and others with them. In Matt and Luke, these are explicitly called "disciples." Thus we see clearly the main line of division, between (superficial) followers and (saved) disciples and apostles.

2. The Question: they asked him for the parable, i.e., for the explanation. (Thus *erwtaw* with acc, as in MT. "About the parable" translates the genitive, which is the minority Egyptian reading.) "Please give us the parable." Implies two things, which are brought out in the questions preserved in Matt and Luke, and both answered in the following vv.

a) They want to know the meaning. Brought out explicitly in Luke, "What does this parable mean?"

b) Without an explanation, a parable conceals. Thus Matt's "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

3. 11-12, The Answer: makes an explicit contrast between "You" (the disciples and apostles) and "Those without" (the Jewish leaders and mere "followers").

a) "You" stand in a privileged position with regard to the Kingdom of God. The Lord will explain the parable to them.

1) It is a "mystery," which in the NT always refers to something that is inaccessible to human reason, only knowable through divine revelation. A cautionary note concerning not only worldly philosophy, but fleshly approaches to the understanding of Scripture.

2) They are the designated recipients of that revelation:

"Unto you it is given to know." In a few vv the Lord will be their interpreter. In this age, this function is fulfilled by the HS whom he has sent to be "another comforter" like himself, 1 Cor. 2:9-13.

- 3) *Application*: We must always remember that God's word does not yield to human investigation, but must be catalyzed by the Holy Spirit. Neither works by itself; both are needed.
- a> Cannot gain spiritual understanding by the Word alone without the Spirit; this rules out the scholastic emphasis of the seminary.
  - b> Nor should we expect the Spirit himself to teach us without the Word. This is the fatal flaw of the charismatic or the modern Quaker movement.
- b) "Them that are without" have access only to parables, without explanation. The Lord explains the purpose for this restriction by quoting Isa. 6:9,10. God excludes some from knowledge of the truth--not, however, by withholding the truth from them, but by presenting it in a form that their sin-blighted minds cannot comprehend.

*Application*: Parables are NOT an aid to understanding, but a hindrance! NOT easier for children to understand, but harder!

#### **D. 13-20, Interpretation of the Parable of the Soils**

1. 13, The Challenge. This parable is the key to all the others. If they do not understand it, how can they understand the others? For it describes how reception of the Word depends on the hearer, and if they do not understand it, are they the right kind of hearers? This sort of imagery should not have been new to them; cf. Jer 4:3, "For thus saith the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns," which in turn is an elaboration of Hos. 10:12.
2. 14, Dismisses for now the Sower and the Seed: we are speaking of the preaching and teaching of God's Word.
3. 15, The Wayside
  - a) The hard-packed soil is unplowed, "fallow" (Jeremiah and Hosea). These people have not been prepared for the sowing of the Word of God. Here we find the Jewish rulers, who are absolutely unresponsive to the word that the Lord brings.
  - b) From such soil, the birds (Satan) can snatch away the seed before it has a chance to germinate, so that nothing comes of the sowing.
  - c) *Application*: Gospel preaching rarely brings results at first. The ground must be plowed before it can receive the seed. Do

not be discouraged if initial trials are unsuccessful. One sows, another waters; God gives the increase.

#### 4. 16-17, Stony Ground

- a) The stony ground represents those who "have no root in themselves." The word does not penetrate deep into their beings; it lies on the surface and produces a superficial response (they "immediately" respond with joy), but cannot bear the test (just as "immediately" they fall away). Here are the mass of "followers." Lk 8:13 even characterizes their response as "belief," but only "for a while."
- b) The burning sun is explained as "affliction or persecution for the word's sake." By comparing this to the sun, the Lord implies that such affliction is essential for the growth of a healthy plant! But it is fatal to those whose faith is superficial. NB: Perseverance in trial is an essential proof of the Christian. "You shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life," Rev. 2:10.

#### 5. 18-19, Thorns

- a) The thorny soil is polluted with weed seeds. It represents a person who tries to believe without first repenting; who does not turn from the world in following Christ. Jas 4:4, "the friendship of the world is enmity with God."
- b) The weeds are defined in three stages. The first seems relatively harmless, but leads to the second, which in turn tangles us in the third. Note that these "enter in," one after the other, to render the word fruitless.
  - 1) "The cares of this world," permitting oneself to worry about temporal security. "I would have you without carefulness," 1 Cor. 7:32. Preoccupation with worldly cares, failure to trust the Lord in such matters, seems passive, but leads naturally to ...
  - 2) "The deceitfulness of riches," thinking that material security is the answer to such cares. We become open to this allurements when we hearken to worldly cares. "The love of money is the root of all evil," 1 Tim 6:10. If we listen to this deceitful promise, we become entrapped in ...
  - 3) "The lusts of other things," an active desire for things we do not yet have, which become our priorities and keep us from pursuing godliness. Thus these three weeds choke out any hope of fruitfulness in the Christian life.
  - 4) The sin is not in "other things" themselves, or in "riches," but in a failure to trust the Lord that leads us to seek these substitutes in place of Him.

6. 20, Good Earth: three actions toward the Word, contrasting the good earth with the three previous soils.
- a) Unlike the wayside, they "hear it."
  - b) Unlike the stony ground, they "receive it" deep into themselves. In Gk, a different word from that in v.16; implies welcoming it, accepting it as a gift, in contrast with just coming across it as a novelty. The contrast is in the depth of their acceptance.
  - c) Unlike the thorny ground, they "bring forth fruit." There are differences in productivity, but all bear witness to the life within by the production of fruit without.
7. *Application*: Where is each of us in this picture?
- a) Probably not the wayside, or we wouldn't still be here to give attention to the Word. Here are the Jewish leaders.
  - b) But enthusiastic reception alone does not mean true spiritual life, if the roots don't reach to the heart. The proof will be whether our faith endures in time of persecution and affliction. Here are the mere "followers."
  - c) The good earth clearly corresponds to the disciples, those who cleave to the Lord and bear fruit for him.

*What is the salvation status of the thorny ground, where worldly cares choke out the fruit the Lord desires? Deserves a section to itself.*

#### **E. Excursus: The Thorny Ground**

What about the thorny ground? Are they followers or disciples? saved or not? Explore the answer in two ways: antecedent use of the "thorn" metaphor in the OT, and subsequent teaching about lack of fruitfulness in the NT.

1. Thorns in the OT. See "thorns.lst" for search criteria and raw data. Of 59 vv using these terms "thorn, brier, bramble, thistle, cockle" (often together), 45 are in the OT, thus providing a rich foundation for the Lord's teaching.
  - a) Thorns were absent in Eden (Gn 3:18) and will be absent in Paradise (Isa 55:13). They are a characteristic of this present sinful world order, something that makes man's work more difficult.
  - b) Thorns are an obstacle to the slothful, but cleared away by the diligent:
    - 1) Literal: Pr 15:19; 22:5; 24:31

- 2) Metaphor: it's not sinful to have to cope with thorns.
  - a> Ezekiel, Ezek 2:6
  - b> Paul, 2 Cor 12:7
  
- 3) Key example, Num 33:51-55. If the Israelites will not drive out the inhabitants of the land, these will become "thorns in [their] sides," depriving them of the blessing that the Lord has intended for them. After they fail to drive out the inhabitants, the Lord then turns this to a form of judgment, making them unable to drive them out (Jos 23:13; Jud 2:3).
  
- c) Thorns as an evidence of God's judgment. If we are not diligent to root them out, God will confirm their presence!
  - 1) Jos 23:13; Jud 2:3; cf. Num 33:51-55.
  - 2) 3x in Isa 7:17-25, "thorns and briars" is an emblem of the state of the land under the judgment of the king of Assyria. The invasion makes it impossible for people to maintain the land, and the thorns and briars replace the vineyard (23), fields (24), and terraces (25).
  - 3) Others: Isa. 5:1-6; 32:13; 34:13; Hos 9:6; 10:8; Hos 2:6
  
- d) The destiny of thorns is to be burned as fuel for fire: Ex 22:6; Jdg 9:15; Ps 58:9; 118:12; Ecc 7:6; Isa 9:18; 10:17; 27:4; 33:12
  
- e) *Application*: It's not wrong to have to contend with thorns, as Ezekiel and Paul did. However, our responsibility is to root them out. Israel failed in this responsibility, given them in Num. 33:51-55, and as a result these became instruments of God's judgment on them. Cf. Rom. 1, in which God gives people up to their own lusts. Don't compromise with thorns!

## 2. Fruitfulness in the NT

- a) There are two fundamentally different metaphors concerning fruitfulness in the Bible. They differ in whether the believer is viewed as the field (as with grain) or as the plant (vines, trees). Burning the field is a mechanism of purging; burning the plant, a sign of judgment.
  - 1) Isa 5:1-6 is an example of believer-as-plant. The carefully prepared vineyard is the nation Israel; the plants are the men of Judah, and the discussion focuses on the diversity of *plants*, why some are fruitful and others not. While the limitation on the field makes this a particularly OT image, it is continued in some NT passages, where fruitless trees and vines are destined for burning (Mt 3:10; Jn 15:6) and eternal darkness (Jude 1:12).
  - 2) The parable of the soils introduces the metaphor of believer-as-field, where the seed is consistently good but the soil is much more varied; particularly suited to proclamation of the gospel among the gentiles. This is the

focus in the two NT passages that we consider now.

- b) Heb 6:7,8 compares believers who are stunted in their growth (5:12) with earth bearing "thorns and briars."
    - 1) Recall the argument of the passage.
      - a> 5:10-11, I want to discuss Melchizedek with you.
      - b> 5:12a, You've been believers long enough that you ought to be able to understand.
      - c> 5:12b, However, you need someone to teach you the first principles.
      - d> 6:1-2, nevertheless, we will not go back to those first principles (starting with repentance)
      - e> 6:4-6, reason: it's impossible for a saved person to go back to repentance (and all the others). That would be to deny the effectiveness of the finished work of Christ.
      - f> 7:1, so let's go on to talk about Melchizedek.
    - 2) 6:7-8 compares such stunted believers to earth that bears thorns. Such earth is "nigh unto cursing" and deserves burning (perhaps the same purging fire promised in 1 Cor 3:15; it is, after all, the thorns that are burned, not the soil itself).
  - c) 2 Pet 1:5-9 shows that one who "was purged from his old sins" can become "barren [*argos*, 'idle'] and unfruitful" unless he adds certain things to faith. vv.10,11 urge us to "make [our] calling and election sure" lest we "fall."
  - d) *Application*: We must "follow ... holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). As we have seen so often, while it is faith and not works that save us, saving faith always produces works. The thief on the cross is no exception: his faith produced words of reverence toward the Lord, in contrast with the blasphemy of the other thief.
3. So, what shall we say about the thorny soil? Is it follower or disciple? Saved or lost? Answer: the question is ill posed. The thorny soil is not included to comfort carnal believers that they will go to heaven, but to instruct us that even with the seed of the Word of God growing within us, we must contend with thorns and press on to fruitfulness. Otherwise, like Israel, we may find the thorns turned into the Lord's rod of discipline against us. Like the readers of Hebrews, we may find ourselves nigh unto cursing and ready to be burned.