

Discipleship According to Mark

The Purpose of Parables (Mark 4:1-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 15, 2026

Introduction

- ❖ We're entering into a chapter of Mark's Gospel a bit different than the rest. This is a longer teaching section. Most of Mark's Gospel is fast-paced and action-oriented. Chapter 4 is one of the few places where Jesus just sits down and teaches for an extended period of time.
 - **What we're introduced to is Jesus's favorite teaching method—the use of parables.** Now Mark doesn't record nearly as many of Jesus's parables compared to Matthew or Luke. But there are four of them in chapter 4. This morning, we'll just look at the most well-known of the four—the Parable of the Sower.

- ❖ Before we jump into it, it's important to understand what a parable is. Is it a creative illustration? Is it an allegorical story? Is it just an extended metaphor? **What is a parable?** It's derived from the Greek word *paraballo*, which means to set something side by side, for the sake of comparison. Many times the comparison is made in the form of a simple story with one point of connection—like how Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed that grows into a massive tree (vv30-31). Sometimes it's not even a story but just a simile. Like when Jesus compares himself to new wine or to a patch of unshrunk cloth (2:21-22).
 - **But sometimes his parables are longer stories and allegorical in nature, meaning they have multiple points of connection.** And listeners are to make those connection between this character or that object in the story to something or someone else. That's how the Parable of the Sower is to be read, especially since Jesus goes on to make those connections for us in a private conversation with his disciples.

- ❖ **Now Jesus didn't invent this teaching tool. There are parables in the OT.** He was relying on an ancient form of communication highly effective in his day. **You have to understand that ancient Jewish culture was a high-context culture.** This language is becoming more familiar in our church. At our recent Council Retreat, Alice Ho gave a great presentation on the differences in communicating in a high-context versus low context culture.

- ❖ **In a high-context culture, communication relies heavily on implicit understanding. By reading the context and not just relying on explicit words being spoken.** In a high-context culture, you're expected to read between the lines. To pick up the context. And high-context cultures tend to be collectivist cultures with a strong group orientation. **That collectivist mindset assumes everyone has a significant amount of shared knowledge.** So when people in high-context cultures communicate, there's little need for direct explanation. Messages are more subtle, relying on your ability to pick up context clues.
 - **This is especially effective in communicating hard truths in collectivist cultures that tend to be non-confrontational.** Where saving the other person's face is a deep concern. High-context forms of communication—which I'll argue that parables are a perfect example—allow you to say hard things indirectly and impersonally. And yet a high-context listener will still get the message.

- ❖ **This is in contrast to low-context cultures where there's a greater reliance on explicit, direct communication.** Where you mean exactly what you say. Where you're not expected to read between the lines or to rely on context clues. That's why it's a *low-context* culture.
 - And when you have to say hard things in this culture, kindness and tactfulness is still appreciated. But no need to beat around the bush. **Just tell me directly.** Hopefully we can talk it out or at least agree to disagree.

- ❖ **Now American culture, like most Western cultures, is a low-context culture.** Americans tend to say what we mean. Just read the words on the line. No need to read in between. I'll *tell* you what I think. **In low-context cultures, good communication is considered direct and clear.** While indirect speech or ambiguous speech is considered poor communication.
 - **But East Asian cultures are examples of high-context cultures.** Where indirect speech and impersonal forms of communication are often preferred. Especially when you have to say something hard because it allows you to save the other person's face.

- ❖ So here's Jesus, speaking into a high-context culture. Now even then, he could still challenge his high-context audience with a direct rebuke. That happens. **Think of those times where Jesus speaks a word of rebuke, clearly and directly, towards the Pharisees.** In Matthew 23, he calls them *children of hell* (v15), *blind guides* (v16), a *brood of vipers* (v33). There are times that Jesus speaks it all on the line. Leaving nothing to read in between.
 - **But then, there are times when Jesus takes an indirect approach by telling a parable.** Maybe he's trying to rebuke or to correct his listeners. But the rebuke or correction is embedded and concealed within a narrative centered around characters and plot lines. So that it doesn't land on you directly. **You'll have to read the context or else you'll fail to recognize that the parable is about you.**

- ❖ That's how you read and interpret parables. **Now for those of you who grew up overseas in a high-context culture**—or you grew up here in a high-context immigrant home with parents who communicated this way—you've been prepped to read parables. You're used to reading between the lines and picking up on indirect speech.
 - **But those of us more accustomed to low-context forms of communication are not at a loss.** We just have to make an adjustment and try to place ourselves in the shoes of Jesus's original audience. To try to think like a high-context communicator. Which is an important step anytime you study the Bible. You always try to place yourself in the mindset of the original audience.

- ❖ So let's try to do that as we study Mark 4:1-20. **I think the Parable of the Sower is a key parable—in that it unlocks the key to reading all the other parables.** That's what Jesus says in v13, "*Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?*" **If you understand this particular parable, you'll understand the rest.** That's because the Parable of the Sower epitomizes the purpose behind Jesus's preference to teach in parables. Let me explain what I mean. **The parables of Jesus are doing four things. Parables reveal. Parables divide. Parables warn. And parables invite.**

Parables Reveal

- ❖ The first thing I want to show you is how parables reveal. What do they reveal? **Parables reveal who is actually listening with faith.** Chapter 4 begins with Jesus teaching beside the sea to a very large crowd. So large that he had to get into a boat—a floating pulpit—in order to be heard by the entire crowd. So there are lots of people present. **Lots of people can hear his voice. But not everyone is listening to it.**
 - That’s the concern. That’s why the Greek word for “listen” (*akouo*) appears 13 times in this chapter. And it brackets the parable. Look in v3. Jesus begins with the command to “*Listen!*” And then look in v9. He ends the parable by saying, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” It’s the same Greek word.
 - It’s all about listening to Jesus. **The thrust of the parable is about whether or not people are truly listening to Jesus’s words.** Are you listening? Are your ears open to hear his voice? If they are, then hear it in this parable.

- ❖ The parable itself is easy to understand. A sower went out to sow seeds. He scattered the seed broadly. He scattered it indiscriminately. **So in all, seeds fell on four types of soil.** The **first type of soil** is described in v4 as “*the path.*” Essentially, there is no soil, so the seed lays bare and is quickly devoured by birds. The **second type of soil** is described in v5 as “*rocky ground.*” A plant immediately springs up, but without much soil, without taking root, once the sun rises and scorches the plant, it withers away.
 - The **third type is thorny soil.** The plant grows up among thorns, gets choked, and yields no grain. It’s fruitless. But the **fourth type of soil** is “*good soil.*” And good soil produces grain, increasing and “*yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.*”

- ❖ As Jesus later explains to his disciples, the seed represents the word of God. **Picture Jesus as a sower and his teaching as the seed.** The four soils represent four types of people who are hearing his voice as he teaches. **And how you respond to Jesus’s teaching reveals what type of person you are—what type of soil you represent.** That’s what parables do, particularly this one. **They don’t just educate; they expose.** They reveal your true nature.
 - The first three soils represent the kinds of people in any crowd who audibly hear Jesus’s words—whether it’s being read or taught or preached—but they fail to truly listen. **Now they might differ among themselves in their level of receptivity. But their commonality is that, in the end, they all proved fruitless.** There’s no transformation from seed to fruit. And it’s because they failed to listen with faith.

- ❖ That’s what Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples. To those who, like good soil, listen to his words with faith. Who accept his word by faith. They’re the ones who have ears to hear. They’re the ones who are truly listening to Jesus.
 - **And to those who are listening with faith, Jesus reveals more of himself and his kingdom.** Look at v10, “*10And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.”*”

- **To those revealed to be his disciples, Jesus reveals the secret of the kingdom of God.** Here he's referring to truths about God's kingdom—about his loving rule and reign over us—which is now at hand, which is now breaking into this sin-darkened world, all because Jesus is now here.
- ❖ The Greek word for “*secret*” (*mysterion*) is where we get the English word *mystery*. But in speaking of the secret or mystery of the kingdom, Jesus doesn't have in mind something esoteric, something unknowable except to a select few. **No, this word refers to a truth that was previously hidden but has now been divinely revealed.**
 - It's like Jesus's own identity as the Son of God. In a sense, his identity is a secret. Jesus keeps telling the unclean spirits to be quiet when they scream about him being the Son of God (1:24; 3:11). It's a secret. **But it's an open secret since Mark starts off the Gospel identifying him as the Son.** But this secret is to be revealed—not by demons—but by God himself as he opens the eyes and unclogs the ears of disciples.
- ❖ Notice Jesus tells his disciples that the secret of the kingdom “*has been given*” to them. **He means that true understanding is not something you solve like a riddle but something you receive as revelation.** That needs to be stressed.
 - **Jesus's disciples are *not* the ones who are smart enough or clever enough to figure out his parables.** It has nothing to do with being more adept at high-context communication. Regardless of our cultural context, we're all sinners whose ears have fallen deaf to God's word. Our sinful hearts are more like one of the first three soils.
- ❖ So if you *are* listening to God's word with faith and you *are* bearing spiritual fruit, then praise God! **Your response to the word reveals your converted nature.** It reveals that you have a new heart with good soil in it. **But you have no reason to boast.** You're not better than those revealed to be one of the other three soils. **You are who you are because God, in his grace, has opened your heart to truly listen to Jesus's words with faith.**
 - Later on, in chapter 7:31-37, Jesus heals a deaf man, literally by opening his closed ears. Which is a perfect illustration of what he does for anyone who is good soil. We have nothing to boast in but grace alone. We are the undeserved beneficiaries of God's gracious work of healing and revealing.

Parables Divide

- ❖ So Jesus's parables reveal. They reveal those who listen to his word spiritually with their hearts from those who merely hear audibly with their ears. And in so doing, parables divide. **Parables divide the world into insiders and outsiders.** Now I realize that kind of language is polarizing and turns people off. But that's Jesus's language. Look at v11 again, “*To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.*”
 - He speaks of explicitly of outsiders, which implicitly means that those who are given the secret of the kingdom are insiders. And notice how Jesus says that he purposely uses parables to speak to outsiders. For those outside everything is in parables.

- ❖ And he explains why in v12—why he only speaks to outsiders in the form of parables, “so that “*they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.*”” He’s quoting **Isaiah 6:9-10**. In that chapter in Isaiah, the prophet is being commissioned by God to go and prophesy to his own people with the understanding that they will not listen. And their refusal to listen has nothing to do with the prophet’s communication skills. It has everything to do with the hardness of their hearts.
 - The people’s inability to understand Isaiah’s prophecies was an indictment against them. **It was an expression of divine judgment on an unrepentant people whose hearts had grown dull.** So by making reference to Isaiah 6, Jesus is suggesting that the outsider’s inability to understand his teaching is a form of judgment. Jesus doesn’t expect them to understand.

- ❖ **And that’s why parables fit the occasion if you’re speaking to a spiritually mixed crowd. Some listeners will understand. Some will not.** If Jesus just speaks plainly without parables, then everyone will likely get his point and understand his message. Which would defeat his purpose. **If Jesus’s purpose was to *confound* some while *enlightening* others, then communicating through a parable accomplishes that task.** A parable enables you to reveal and conceal at the same time. To confound some while enlightening others.

- ❖ **This divisive effect—where the same parable could have such polarizing reactions—reminds me of a scene in C.S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*.** There are these dwarfs who were previously deceived by a false Aslan, and they respond by hardening their hearts and swearing to never be fooled again. In one of the last scenes, Lucy and the others have entered this stable, which, in the story, represents the doorway between death and eternal life. So on the other side of the stable door is Aslan’s true country (the new heaven and new earth).
 - **But when these dwarfs enter the same stable—instead of enjoying the brilliant light, the fresh air, the open country—they’re convinced they’re in a dark and dirty shed.** Lucy tries to offer them rich food and wine, but they taste only stale hay and water. The children hear Aslan’s low growl and they rejoice. It strengthens their faith and sense of security. The dwarfs hear the same growl and shudder. It reinforces their fear and confusion. They have eyes but do not see; ears but do not hear.
 - Lewis’s point is that these dwarfs remain outsiders—not because the truth was withheld from them or opportunities were denied them. **Their blindness was not due to a lack of evidence but a lack of openness.** Their hearts were closed. Their deafness to Aslan’s voice was self-imposed, self-inflicted. They have no one to blame but themselves.

- ❖ In the same way, the Pharisees hear the same teaching from Jesus and see the same miracles performed, but their response is diametrically opposed to the disciples. They remain outsiders, but their blindness and deafness are also self-imposed and self-inflicted. **They remain on the outside of the kingdom. But the door on their side has a handle, and it remains unlocked.** But in their hardness of heart, they refuse to open it.

- ❖ Friends, the same is true for any of our non-Christian friends and family. They remain outsiders to the kingdom of God. **But their exile is just as much self-imposed as it is a form of divine punishment.** If they would just respond to Jesus like a disciple, they would be insiders. **The only difference between insiders and outsiders is that insiders are not indifferent to Jesus and his Word.** Notice how, in v10, after hearing his words, Jesus's disciples drew near to him and sought to be around him, to learn and understand more. Which is a posture available to anyone who wants it.
- ❖ Later in chapter 10, we read of blind Bartimaeus, crying out to Jesus in faith while, v46 says, he, "*was sitting by the roadside.*" By the path! **Based on our parable, you wouldn't expect much from a blind beggar along the path.** The seed should've immediately been devoured by birds. But that's not what happens. His sight is restored, and he becomes an insider.
 - **Outsider is not a fixed category in the Gospel.** By God's grace, an outsider can always become an insider by drawing near to Jesus and seeking to understand.

Parables Warn

- ❖ So parables reveal, parables divide, and parables also warn. **They warn against that which makes you bad soil.** If you don't want to be an outsider anymore, if you want to be an insider, then you'll do well to heed Jesus's warnings in this Parable of the Sower.
 - So let's take a closer look at Jesus's explanation to the disciples who gathered around him. Look in v14. The seed represents the word of God, and as we said, the soils represent the type of person listening to the word. Whether the soil of their heart is hospitable or inhospitable to the seed determines their fruitfulness or fruitlessness.
- ❖ **Now the first soil, the path, is inhospitable and unreceptive to Jesus's word.** It's describing people generally indifferent when they hear the gospel. In Mark, it describes the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians. They hear Jesus and their immediate response is to conclude he's mad; he's demon-possessed; he needs to be destroyed.
 - But the reaction doesn't have to be *that* extreme. In our context, this describes anyone who has heard the gospel—that message about the Son of God who became a Son of Man; that he might die for our sins and rise for our new life; that whosoever believes would become God's adopted sons and daughters—**people representing the path hear that good news and remain indifferent.** It goes in one ear and out the other.
- ❖ If this describes you—if Jesus's words and warnings don't move you—don't think you're immovable. That you're steady in and of yourself. **Be aware that someone is still moving you.** Jesus warns, in v15, Satan is the one who is manipulating you. Immediately swooping in to snatch the gospel from you. I hope that startles you. Don't be a passive pawn in Satan's plans. Grab the good news that's preached to you and devour it before the devil can.
- ❖ **The second soil, the rocky ground, is initially receptive to Jesus's words.** It says they, "*immediately receive it with joy.*" But without any root, they wither once "*tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word.*" **This describes anyone who previously showed interest in following Jesus, but after chafing at the cost of discipleship, they fell away.**

- ❖ **Revealing that, despite initial appearances, their hearts are filled with inhospitable soil.** They're not the good soil we assumed them to be. Now, sadly, many of us know friends and family who fit this profile. Who once seemed receptive to Jesus but have since fallen away.
 - **But be encouraged that, as long as breath is in their lungs, there's hope.** For even the disciples, by the end of Mark, fall away as tribulation and persecution arises on account of the word (14:50). When under pressure, Peter adamantly denies even knowing Jesus. And yet, Peter and the apostles repent and return to Jesus. So don't write off anyone who has fallen away. Their story is not over. Hope remains.

- ❖ **Now like rocky ground, the third soil, the thorny ground, is initially receptive to Jesus's words.** Things look promising at first. But like a plant among thorns, they prove fruitless in the end. Revealing that, all this time, their hearts were filled with inhospitable soil.
 - **But because these individuals don't wither and fall away like the rocky soil, they're harder to detect.** Because they very well could still be in church every Sunday. In your community group. They haven't fallen away. But they're fruitless. They're being choked by "*the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things.*" They give a formal nod to Jesus, but they ultimately put their faith and reliance on other people and other things in this world.
 - In Mark's Gospel, Herod represents this type of soil. He hears the word gladly (6:20), but in the end, he cares more about his honor and the opinion of man. The rich young man in chapter 10 also fits this category. Showing interest to follow Jesus, but in the end, showing more concern for his riches.

- ❖ Friends, take all of this to heart. **Parables are here to warn.** To alert us on what to look out for. **To help us discern our hearts—to see if we fit the profile of one of these three inhospitable, fruitless soils.** Though some are more receptive to Jesus's words than others, none of the three soils are presented positively. If you're thorny soil, don't comfort yourself with the thought that at least you're not rocky soil or not the path. That's not the point.
 - **The point is that none of these soils are good.** For anyone in these categories, their hearts are not hospitable soil for the gospel to flourish into saving faith. Nothing will grow and blossom on the path, the rocky ground, or the thorny ground.

- ❖ But then you might wonder why the sower would waste his efforts scattering seed on such soils, knowing they're not good and not hospitable. **Why wouldn't the sower be more selective and more careful about where he sows the seeds?** Why so wasteful?
 - I'm sure that question was on the mind of the Pharisees as they listened to Jesus tell this parable. **Pharisees would've only sowed seeds on what appeared to them to be good soil.** They would've restricted their efforts in sowing the good news of God and would've avoided the sinners and tax collectors of society.

- ❖ But Jesus sows the gospel lavishly. **Because he knows that you can't tell what kind of soil a person is until after they've heard the word and after they've responded.** So Jesus scatters the seeds of the gospel far and wide, to anyone who will listen.

- ❖ He knows that some of that seed will be devoured, some will wither, some will be choked. Meaning some will reject, some will fall away, and some will remain fruitless. **But some will reap a mighty harvest of salvation.** Jesus knows there is good soil out there.
 - We need to trust him; to follow his lead; and to sow the seeds of the gospel lavishly. Never limiting to whom we share the gospel. Never prejudging or pre-selecting who is good or bad soil. We simply don't know until they hear and until they respond to God's Word. **The mission of the church is to faithfully scatter and sow the gospel far and wide, to the ends of the earth.**

Parables Invite

- ❖ That leads to the final purpose of parables. Parables reveal; parables divide; parables warn; and parables invite. **They invite you to accept Jesus and his gospel like good soil.** That's the primary purpose for why Jesus told this parable or any of his parables. To invite us to receive his word like good soil. To not just hear with our ears but to accept with our hearts.
 - Look v20 and how it says that the good soil "*are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit.*" That's the key difference compared to the other soils. These people don't just hear the word, they accept it. They hear with faith—accepting Jesus's words as the words of eternal life (Jn 6:68).
- ❖ Again the difference between good soil and bad soil—like the difference between insiders and outsiders—is not about being smarter or holier or a harder workers than others. The difference is that, **unlike the first, the good soil hears and accepts the word *immediately*.** Not allowing Satan to snatch it away. **And unlike the second, the good soil hears and accepts the word *deeply*.** Letting it take root to become the foundation of their lives. **And unlike the third, the good soil hears and accepts the word *exclusively*.** Not being choked by the cares and concerns of other people and other things.
- ❖ But I think it's instructive when you notice how Jesus went into great detail telling us how to avoid being bad soil. He explained, in three different ways, what makes bad soil bad. **But he never explains how one becomes good soil.** He offers no instructions on what you can do to make yourself good soil.
 - That's because the gospel of the kingdom that he preached was a gospel of grace. **The focus is not on improving yourself, on making yourself a good person.** There's only one command in this passage and it's *not* to become good soil. It's to listen. To listen with faith. Hearing and accepting the gospel in your heart.
 - **Don't focus on trying to make yourself good soil. Just focus on listening to Jesus's words.** Hearing with your ears. But more importantly, accepting with your heart.