

## **A Survey of the Soils**

Scripture: Mark 4:1–20

Code: 41-17

Open your Bible now to Mark chapter 4. Mark chapter 4. And this morning we come to one of the extensive teaching sections in the Gospel of Mark, and there really are only two. This is an action-packed Gospel, kind of the newspaper edition of the record of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and Mark doesn't spend a lot of time on the detailed teaching of our Lord except here in chapter 4 and once again in chapter 13. There are other sections of teaching scattered throughout, but not nearly to the degree of the other three Gospels.

So, when we do land on a teaching section, we know that Mark has invested it with great significance. An certainly that is the case in this passage. In fact, the teaching of our Lord here extends all the way down to verse 34 as He gives several parables. Just one of those parables goes down to verse 20; it is the very familiar parable of the soils, sometimes called the parable of the sower, sometimes called the parable of the seed, but it really is the parable of the soils.

Now, this is a critically important parable. This is kind of a paradigmatic parable. This gives you an overview as to how to understand the age in which we live from an evangelistic perspective. In other words, this is a parable that divines how people will respond to the Gospel and why.

Nothing could be more important for us than this because, after all, we only have one responsibility. Don't we? The Great Commission can be summed up as "Go into the word and preach the Gospel to everybody." Since this is our primary calling and the divine mandate that the Lord has given to us, it is critical for us to understand the responses that we will meet. All the other elements of commands and instructions that relate to Christian obedience are only to produce in us a kind of lifestyle, a kind of manifest holiness that makes the preaching of the Gospel believable. As the German philosopher said, "Show me your redeemed life, and I might be inclined to believe in your Redeemer."

Everything drives toward the responsibility of evangelism. What could be more important than to understand what we should expect in terms of responses? It seems to me that there are many people who have missed altogether the significance – even the straightforward significance - of this parable as they live under some illusions about responses to evangelism. There are people, you know, who think that if the sower is clever enough, if the sower is culturally acute enough, if he's savvy enough, he can overcome consumer resistance by his sheer cleverness and result in mass conversions.

I remember it wasn't a few years ago that I was in a meeting with some people who were developing a strategy to raise money for their organization. It was a very large, well-known, Christian organization, and the strategy was intended to go toward people who were extremely wealthy. And the appeal was this, "For every million you give us, we'll give you back a million converts to Christ; we know the strategy." It was bound up in the cleverness of the sower, and it was bound up in the modification of the seed, creating some kind of a synthetic seed that people wouldn't be as resistant to as the straightforward Gospel. Had they never read this parable? Did they not understand what to

expect?

One thing, I think, that was very hard for the followers of Jesus to understand was that so few of the Jews were believing in Him. This was very difficult for them. Why? Because the nation was dominated by messianic expectation. They knew what Isaiah wrote. They knew that the promise of Isaiah 9 was that the Messiah would come, “A Son would be born, and He would be the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and of the increase of His government there would be no end.”

In other words, “He would come and establish a glorious, unending kingdom” – Isaiah 9. They also could read in Isaiah 45 how the Messiah would not only be embraced by Israel, but He would be embraced by the nations of the world, that He would come to the Gentiles as well as to Israel. Messianic fever was running high in Israel. John the Baptist had drawn out to him at the Jordan River all Judea, if you will, to be baptized in preparation for the Messiah’s arrival.

That messianic expectation was there, and we saw it reach its fruition or its high point on the day that Jesus walked into Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, and they were ready to hail them as the son of David and the Messiah. There was a tremendous amount of messianic expectation and hope. And John the Baptist had set that in motion. And Jesus had certainly escalated it, because there was never anybody who denied His miracles. They didn’t deny that He had power over disease, demons, and death. They saw that He had power over nature. They saw that He could create food. They were aware that He could read minds. They saw a kind of power in Him that nobody could withstand when by Himself he cleansed the temple of all of the riffraff of the religious establishment there who had set up their businesses to make money at the expense of the beleaguered people.

It was pretty evident to everybody that Jesus was a miracle worker, that nobody could do what He did unless He had power from God; that seemed obvious. The religious leaders tried to change that mentality. They didn’t want that. So, they knew there was one other supernatural source in the universe, and that was Satan.

And so, they come up with the idea that He does what He does by the power of Satan. You’ve got to have some source for supernatural power. If it’s not God, it’s got to be Satan. They decided it would be Satan, and they made that their mantra, and they dogged the steps of Jesus and kept telling the crowd, “He does what He does by the power of Beelzebub.”

And the people were caught somewhere between wanting to believe in Jesus and following the religious leaders, who basically were the architects of the religion they all adhered to. Phariseism dominated Judaism, and it was the Pharisees and the scribes who came up with that mantra to explain Jesus’ power.

The crowds were huge. It was the greatest show in town. It was the greatest show that it had ever been in town – in any town. Never in history had there been a miracle worker like this. And Jesus essentially banished illness from Israel for the duration of His ministry. Demons screamed, when He came into their presence, and gave up their clandestine hiding place in the bodies of men and women, and fled at His behest.

They had never seen anything like this. They’d never heard anybody teach the way He taught.

Messianic fever was high. And for those who believed, for those who were surrounding Jesus, He describes them in the end of chapter 3 as “My mother and brothers. And those are the ones sitting around Me. Those are the ones who have a relationship with Me.” And He moves from a human relationship – His mothers and brothers coming, His actual physical ones coming to find Him – He says, “These people have a real relationship with Me because they do the will of God.” And the will of God, according to John 6:40, is to believe in Him.

There was a little flock. He calls them a little flock. There were the few who came through the narrow gate and onto the narrow way. But it always seemed so difficult for them to get it. And why so few, when Jesus is so unmistakably divine, when His power is so unmistakably from God, when His teaching is so unmistakably superior to anything we’ve ever heard, when His life is so impeccably perfect.

The crowd can be fascinated. The crowd can be attracted. The crowds grew and grew. And everywhere He went, some would drop off as He relocated, and more would come. And this shifting, ebbing crowd followed Him relentlessly and everywhere, and numbered in the tens of thousands. The crowds were, however, superficial and exploitive, and they were a hindrance; though, at the same time, they were an opportunity. True believers were this little group of 12 apostles and other believers who, when all was said and done, after the resurrection, only numbered 500 in Galilee and 120 in Jerusalem. It raises the question why so few?

In Luke chapter 13, one of those disciples, I am sure on behalf of all the rest, who probably had conversations about this very often, came to Jesus and said, “Lord” – verse 23, Luke 13 – “are there just a few being saved?” Are there just a few being saved? Well, that’s what Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount, “Few there be that find it; maybe there be that go in the broad road.” Are there just a few that are being saved?

It was hard for them to understand, because once they had come to believe in Jesus Christ, and their faith had taken root and become the real thing, and they had entered into the kingdom of God, Christ became all the more wonderful, all the more wondrous, all the more glorious, all the more lovely, although the more attractive. And when the thought was introduced - “Will you go away?” – they said, “Where are we going to go? You and You alone have the words of eternal life” – that at the end of John when some of the superficial followers left.

So, there was this little group of people who were His spiritual mother and brother; they had a real relationship with Him. And for them, it was very difficult to believe that crowds could be so exposed to His teaching, so exposed to His miracle power, so exposed to His person and never make a genuine commitment to Him. Oh, there were a lot of superficial commitments. There were a lot of part-time followers. Still are.

It is in the context of that kind of issue that Jesus tells this parable. And it’s a critical parable for us to understand if you want to get a handle on why people respond the way they do, and where it comes from. And it is not primarily a parable about a sower, because nothing is ever said about the sower. And it is not primarily a parable about the seed, because there’s only one statement made about the seed. It is a parable about soil. And there are six different kinds of soil: three bad and three good. Three in which nothing of any fruit is produced, and three in which significant fruit is produced. And this is a picture of the patterns of response to the Gospel, both in that time and throughout this age. Rich, rich teaching.

In fact, this teaching is so important that if you drop down to verse 13, I'll give you a little bit of a hint. "Jesus said to them there, 'Do you not understand this parable?'" And then He added, "How will you understand all the parables?" In other words, if you don't get this one, you won't get the rest. If you get this one, you'll get the rest. You get this parable in your mind, and you will understand the other parables.

For example, if you just go back to Matthew 13, where this parable is also recorded, you notice there that in Matthew 13, our Lord gives many parables. But the key that unlocks all of them, and the first one, is the parable of the soils. If you understand that, you will understand the parable of the wheat and tares, and you will understand the parable of the mustard seed, and you will understand the parable of the dragnet. They all follow.

This is the great paradigmatic parable. And since all of us have been given this Great Commission, and everything works toward that Great Commission, it's essential for us to understand what we're dealing with and understand the responses that we're getting. Really critical. The setting is in the opening two verses.

He began to teach again by the sea. This is the Sea of Galilee, as it was called – really a lake. It's a lake into which the Jordan, flowing out of the mountains of Lebanon, dumps at the north end of Israel, in the region called Galilee. It runs down through the Jordan Valley, the Jordan River. And the Jordan River then ends in the Dead Sea and has no outlet there. It is in that lake up in Galilee, the lake that dominates Galilee, that Jesus made His headquarters, most likely in the town of Capernaum, maybe even in Peter's house, which was located there. And He traversed the regions of Galilee, all around that Sea of Galilee, and very often was teaching by the sea. A familiar place we have seen in there in chapter 1, verse 16, 2:13, 3:7 here again. And it says there, in verse 1, such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down. And this was not unusual. If you go back to chapter 3 and verse 9, on an earlier occasion, it says there in verse 8 a great number of people heard what He was doing and came to Him, and He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him because of the crowd so that they would not crowd Him. The only thing He could do, as they pressed Him toward the water, was get in a boat and push the boat off into the water so He could create some distance between Himself and the crushing crowd.

The crowd could be so relentless, and so dominating, and such a hindrance that as it says back in chapter 3, verse 20, the crowd gathered again to such an extent they couldn't even eat a meal. I mean they would have starved Jesus to death by never letting Him escape to get to some food. They were so demanding, and they were there with all the people who were sick, and all the people who were deformed, and all the who were obsessed and possessed, laying their demands on Him. Was it an opportunity? Sure it was an opportunity. But it was equally a hindrance. And they're pressing so hard that He had to get in a boat and go off the shore into the water. It would have helped Him be heard by the massive crowd, with the hills in the background, a little bit of an amphitheater, and His voice bouncing off the water so they could hear Him. This is the usual scene by the lake: crushing crowd of people wanting more miracles. They endured the teaching to get to the miracles really.

And on this occasion, He was teaching them many things in parables. He was teaching them many things in parables. This is not new. Chapter 3, verse 23, "He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables."

Now, let me help you with parables so you don't get too technical. Parable – simply *parabolē* in the Greek, *para* alongside, parallel. It means to lay something alongside something else. *Parabolē* means placing one thing alongside another for comparison. It's simply a way to make a comparison. I'm giving you a spiritual truth. To help you understand that spiritual truth, I'll give you something that compares to it. That's all it is. And in fact, if you go back to chapter 3, where it says that He was speaking to them in parables, in verse 23, His immediate statement is, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom can't stand. A house divided against itself will fall." That doesn't sound like a classic parable; it only sounds like a comparison. Well, that's what a parable is; it can be as simple as a logical truism or axiom such as that, or it can be as complex as a long, involved story, even as long and as involved this one, or, for example, Luke 15, a tale of two sons. Any kind of analogy, any kind of illustration, any kind of comparison fits into the broad category of a parable.

And by the way, Jesus didn't invent parables. You'll find parables in the Old Testament; you'll find a parable, for example, in Ezekiel 17, the opening ten verses for an illustration. My favorite parable in the Old Testament stated to be a parable; David had just sinned with Bathsheba, had sinned against Uriah, had Uriah basically killed and took his wife, after committing adultery with her.

And Nathan the prophet comes to David and says, "David, let me tell you a parable." And he tells him a parable about a man who had a whole lot of sheep, and a poor man who had one sheep, and the rich man didn't want to use any of His sheep; so, he stole the poor man's sheep.

David was outraged, and David said, "That man ought to be killed."

And Nathan said, "You're that man."

That was a parable. You would never know what the parable meant unless it was laid alongside the story of David. And when He said, "You are the man," then David knew what the parable meant.

Old Testament rabbis used parables in the Old Testament era. Pagan teachers used parables. You know, and I've often said this, people say to me, "How can you tell, when you meet somebody, whether they're going to be a good teacher or not?"

And I would usually say there are a lot of ways to tell, but I think the first thing that you look for in discerning whether someone is going to be an effective communicator and teacher is if the naturally speak in analogies; people who speak in parables, people who speak in analogies, people who make comparisons. They don't have to look them up. They don't have to find a book to locate them. It's part of their communication style to give you something alongside something that helps you understand that something. When you see somebody with that kind of communication as a natural expression, you got somebody who has potential to be an effective teacher.

Now, Jesus used parables and analogies and illustrations all the time. There are over 60 different ones, or 60 that are located in the New Testament, mostly in Matthew and Luke, a few in Mark, and actually none in John. Now, the only way that a parable is going to be really effective is if it's explained and if it's simple. So, Jesus' parables are not allegories. They are not complex; they don't have hidden mystical meanings; they don't have alternative meanings. They are simple stories that

are intended simply to be laid alongside a spiritual truth to make that spiritual truth more understandable.

The stories themselves are simple and clear. They don't need unique knowledge. They don't need mystical ascent. You don't have to be some kind of an elevated gnostic. These are not secret stories with hidden meaning. They are simple, earthy stories.

However, if you don't know what they illustrate, they are riddles. An illustration without knowledge of what it illustrates is a riddle. They have to be explained. So, the same parable is an opportunity to make clear and an opportunity to make obscure. When Jesus tells a parable, to those to whom He never explains it, there's no knowledge. To those to whom He explains it, there is knowledge.

Parables, then, are designed to reveal and conceal. Okay? Parables are designed to reveal and conceal. Therefore, parables act in a two-fold way. They are a work of grace to make clear to the believer spiritual truth, and they are a work of judgment to obscure truth from a nonbeliever. The popular image of Jesus is that Jesus was a rather benign, somewhat simplistic spiritual teacher, sort of unloading His lessons for everybody to learn. That is not true. When Jesus told a parable, on the one hand, to those who believed, it was a revelation of grace to make spiritual truth clear. On the other hand, to those who did not believe, it was an act of judgment to hide the truth from them.

When we think of the ministry of Jesus – I've thought about it a lot lately, because I've been doing a lot of radio interviews for a new book on *The Jesus You Can't Ignore*, which looks at Jesus' interaction with the leaders of Israel and how hostile He was toward false teachers, but as I've been thinking about that, obviously thinking about how many times He engaged in an act that could distinctly be viewed as judgment – going in with a whip and throwing everybody out of the temple, that was an act of judgment. Calling the leaders of Israel whited sepulchers, vipers, snakes, producers of sons of hell; pronouncing judgment on them and on their whole system when He said, "Not one stone will be left upon another; the whole thing's coming down," statements of judgment.

But parables were also statements of judgment. They were acts of judgment. Grasping the laws and the experiences of the material world that He had made, He wielded them with precision as an instrument to both hide and reveal. His language is precise, with an economy of words. There is an exclusion of any wasted verbiage. The story is simple, unmistakable; it's meaning is totally obscure to those to whom it is not explained. That is a judgment.

Hiding the truth now becomes as important to Jesus as revealing it. Why? He's been at it long enough. He had a ministry in Judea for nearly a year. He's had a ministry in Galilee for over a year, every day, in every town and village. The truth is out. The message of the kingdom is out. The proof has been replete. And like the leaders who are concluding that He does what He does by the power of Satan, there are people who, under the influence of those leaders, may have bought into that, or may have been drawn to that, but at least we know they weren't responding to Christ in faith, and now it's time to seal that judgment.

Genesis 6:3, to the pre-flood civilization, God said, "My Spirit will not always strive with man." It's a frightening thing to think about the fact that an unbeliever can reach a point where His judgment is final, even in this life.

So, verse 3, “Listen” – listen – a good word for us. By the way, that word in the Greek – the Greek form of that word is used ten times in Mark 4. Ten times. In this chapter, the Lord has something to say; you need to listen. And for those of you who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, good news, folks, you’re going to understand what it means. This is not judgment; this is revelation. This is not concealing; this is disclosing.

Well, at least we’ll begin with the story. “Behold” – look – “the sower went out to sow.” Maybe as he said that, they looked at the fields and saw that going on. It would have been all over the place in the flat lands that rose from the lake before the mountains. “The sower went out to sow.” They would plow rows just like they do today; plow them with an animal or by hand. And then they would walk up and down the rows, and they would have a bag over the shoulder, and that bag would be loaded with seed, and they would use the broadcasting method. Do you think “broadcasting” was a word that came into being with radio? No. Radio stole that from the agrarian cultures of the past, scattering. Very, very common scene in that agrarian society; needed no clarification. A sower walks up the row, down the row, up the row, down the road, back and forth, scattering seed over the ground.

Then comes the important part, “As he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came up and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it didn’t have much soil, and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; because it had no root, it withered away.

“Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and hundredfold.” Wow, that’s a – more than remarkable result.

Now, it’s a simple story. A sower – very common. Probably everybody in that crowd was very familiar with it. Most of them had done it. Seed - equally familiar with that. Different kinds of soil – equally familiar with that. But let’s look at the story and just kind of pick it apart a little bit.

First of all, in verse 4, “As he was sowing, some fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up.” Now fields in Israel weren’t fenced. They weren’t walled in. There were walls on the hillsides because they terraced the hillsides to create flat ground for the vineyards.

In the ancient times, as even in modern times, vineyards were on the hillsides, and grain was planted in the flat land. So, they didn’t put fences or walls around; they rather bordered their fields with paths, and that’s how they traversed the field. That’s how they moved – moved around. That’s how they traveled from one place to the next, from one town to the next, one village to the next.

Those roads, those pathways would be about three feet wide, accessible to any traveler. In fact, this probably the kind of path the Lord was walking through with His disciples on the Sabbath back in chapter 2 – remember? – when they plucked some grain and ate the grain, and the Pharisees accused them of violating the Sabbath.

But the paths were uncultivated. They were dry. They were beaten as hard as pavement by the feet of those who walked on them, in a very arid place where the sun was very hot. Seed falling on them may as well have fallen on concrete for all the chance it had to burrow its way into the soil and produce anything.

Birds – a very familiar problem to any farmer. You know that, don't you? That's why there are scarecrows. Birds follow those who sow seed. And they would be flying behind, and at the appropriate moment, whatever seed was easily accessible to them, they would go down and pluck it up, hovering in the air until the back of the sower was turned. They would then dive in and get their meal. Luke also adds, in his account of the parable, that what the birds didn't get was crushed and trampled under the feet of the those who walked. Everybody would understand that.

Then He goes on to another kind of soil that people who sowed seed had to confront. "Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it didn't have much soil. And immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil, and after the sun had risen it was scorched, and because it had no root, it withered away." They would all understand this.

Now, when it talks about rocky soil, it's not talking about soil with a lot of pebbles in it and a lot of stones in it. No, the farmer would get those out. There would be instrument, like some kind of a rake, where you would get all of that out of the soil. What we're talking about here is limestone bedrock below the level of the plow. The plow goes in, but below that there's limestone bedrock. That stuff exists all through the land of Israel. It is – in fact, the rabbis used to say that when God dumped the rocks on the earth, He made a mistake and dumped all of them on Israel. It is a very, very rocky place, and much of that rock lies below the surface, below the plow. And what happens is the seed goes in; it finds the soft soil. It starts to get life. The ground is warm; there's moisture and water there, and it starts to grow. The roots can't go down because they hit bedrock.

And so, whatever nutrients are there, whatever elements of life are there shoot the plant upward. And that's why it says it immediately sprang up. It didn't go down; the roots didn't go down. They couldn't go down. So, everything came up. But after the sun had risen, it was scorched because it had no root. It couldn't go down into the water table, down into the moisture, and it couldn't survive.

And everybody would understand that. They had all sowed a field, and then later looked at the field and seen one section of the field where the plants were up higher than all the other plants, and that would not be a good sign; that would be a sign that they couldn't go down, and that soon they would die. Spring rains had ended. By the time the seed was in the ground summer was really hot, and moisture was quickly drawn out of the superficial soil, and all the promise died. And Luke even adds, in his account of the parable in Luke 8:6, "It had no moisture." They would be very familiar with that.

A third kind of soil, verse 7, "Other seed fell among the thorns or the weed, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop." This is deceptive soil, no rock bed underneath. It looks good, looks clean, looks ready, but down in the soil lie the fibrous roots, ready to spring to life again.

Hey, we've all weeded the garden. Right? And the worst thing that can happen is you break the weed off at the top, because you know it's coming back stronger than ever. You got to get the whole thing out. And everybody know, in a fallen world, weeds grow better than anything – faster, taller. Good seed and dormant weeds competing together, not good for the seed. The weeds squeeze out the life of the good seed. That was a very familiar situation. The thorn roots or the weed roots restrict the good seed, drink its moisture, veil its sunlight, and the good seed dies.

Finally, there's three other kinds of soil in verse 8, "Other seed fell into the good soil" – and these are



all good – “and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” They all would know that not all dirt was the same. There would be some soil the nutrients in that soil would be superior to other soils. One would produce a certain relative crop, and the other would produce a superior crop, and the other would produce the most superior crop. Good soil is deep, and soft, and rich, and clean. It’s not competing; there’s plenty of softness to go down to where the water rests. Seed gains entry, finds nourishment, grows to an abundant harvest. And just to give you perspective on this, this would have been a shocking element. Jesus always threw a shocking element into virtually every story He told. And the shocking element in this story is a crop of “thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

Now, most of the things that I’ve read would suggest that an average crop would be 7.5 percent, not even 10 percent. Ten percent – tenfold – would be a massive, massive harvest. So, the Lord really blows the lid off their thinking when He says 3,000 percent – not tenfold – 6,000 percent, 10,000 percent. So, we’re talking about a kind of power in the plant that’s way out of sync with what they would normally think.

Now, again, some people look at the story and wonder, “Well, what does it mean?” And if I don’t explain it to you, if Jesus didn’t explain it to us, you wouldn’t have any idea what it meant; it would just be a story, and you’d say, “Okay. I know that; I’ve seen that. I understand seed falling on hard ground doesn’t germinate; it gets eaten by birds and crushed. I understand that seed falling on rocky soil doesn’t – it germinates for a little while, but it can’t get any water. When the sun comes out, it can’t get down to where the moisture is. So, it withers and dies. I understand that weeds and thorns choke out good plants. I understand that. I understand that seed falling into good soil is going to be productive and relatively it will differ based upon the nutrients and the components in that given soil. I get it. But so what? What’s the meaning of it? Well, before I tell you the meaning of it, let’s go to the second point. The first was the parable; the second the hearers.

The hearers, verse 9, “And He was saying, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” That phrase appears eight times in the New Testament, a couple of times in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 29:4, Ezekiel 12:2. It’s just a call to heed. “Listen! If you can listen, listen.” Wow. This is a judgment. Not all will, not all can. But for you that can, listen.

Verse 10, “As soon as He was alone” – we don’t know the time gap there. We don’t know how long it took to dismiss the crowd. We don’t know how long that story stuck in their minds without any meaning – even the disciples and the apostles. But it wasn’t until He was alone with His followers, along with the Twelve, that they began asking Him to explain the stories. These are the ones who have done the Father’s will in the language of verse 35 in chapter 3. These are the ones who were truly related to Jesus Christ: His followers and the apostles.

What does this mean? And in the private place, when the crowd is gone, the parable sits in their minds like a judgment. It’s not for you to know. It’s not for you to know. You are sealed in your unbelief. You have had the opportunity; you have had the full disclosure; you have had the full revelation. And if you do not believe, you cannot believe.

But, “As soon as He was alone with them” – in verse 11 – “He was saying to them, ‘To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables.’”

I might add unexplained parables. They go away scratching their heads, “What did He mean? What did He mean?” But they aren’t getting any more revelation, because they have rejected the revelation that they have received, which was sufficient. It reminds me – doesn’t it? – of Hebrews 2, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation which was spoken to us by the Lord and by those who were with the Lord?” If you neglect it, the day will come when judgment sets in and you can’t receive it.

“But to you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God.” The mystery of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a sphere of salvation, and the mystery is that which is hidden and is now revealed mustērion. The mystery is that which is hidden and now revealed. In Matthew 13, the parables that fill up that chapter, which are paralleled here, are called the mysteries of the kingdom. Simply explaining the current age, explaining the way things are currently in the kingdom. This is how it will be in this era with regard to the kingdom.

Those on the outside, they will only get riddles. And that’s consistent with Isaiah 6:9 and 10, which is referred to in verse 12, “So that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; while hearing, they may hear and not understand. Otherwise, they might return and be forgiven.” You don’t know who those people are in some cases. Here you would know because Jesus identified the crowd that He sent away.

But Jesus said to His disciples on one occasion – do you remember this? – “Don’t cast your pearls before swine.” There comes a time when you don’t give them the message because they’ve rejected it finally. Now the judgment sets in. Those words taken from Isaiah 6:9 and 10 perfectly describe the unbelieving Jews of Jesus’ day. They describe the unbelieving Jews of Isaiah’s day, and that’s why there was a Babylonian captivity. Even when the prophet Isaiah went out and preached, they didn’t listen. You remember that. “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Isaiah says, “Here am I; send me.”

The Lord says, “Go. Oh, by the way, Isaiah, they’re not going to hear; they’re not going to understand; they’re not going to repent; they’re not going to turn.”

“Well, how long do I preach to that crowd?”

“Till there are no more cities and no more towns.” It’s an act of judgment.

And then He closes Isaiah 6:13 by saying, “There’s a remnant; there’s a tenth. There’s a holy seed.” The few.

Jesus’ parables were that kind of judgment on unbelief, on final unbelief. Those who would not accept His clear, straightforward teaching reached a point where they didn’t get any more clarity. It’s one of two judgments that appears in the New Testament on unbelieving Israel. Jesus speaks to them in parables which He doesn’t explain. And later on – later on – according to 1 Corinthians 14, He speaks to them in tongue which they cannot understand. I don’t know if you remember that passage. Tongues are for a sign not to those who believe, but to unbelievers. “You wouldn’t listen when I explained everything; now, I’m going to tell you riddles without an explanation. You wouldn’t listen when I spoke to you in your own language; now I’m going to speak in a language you can’t

understand.” Both judgments.

So, for the disciples, this is revelation. For the rest, it is judgment.

Now, verse 13 then, we commented on, “He said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable?’” Which they didn’t. “How will you understand all the parables?” Raising the stakes to motivate them to listen carefully. Do you remember He said, “Listen”? “And here I’m going to tell you why you need to listen, because if you get this one, you’ll get all the rest.”

Now that is the parable. The hearers. And now the explanation. But we don’t have any time for that unfortunately, except to just look at verse 14. This much I can tell you, “The sower sows the Word.” The sower sows the Word.

So, now we know what the sower is. The sower is anybody who sows the Word. And we know what the seed is: the Word. The Word. Anybody who sows the Word. Luke 8:11, in Luke’s account of the parable – Luke 8 gives the same parable, and Matthew 13 gives the same parable – Luke says, “The seed is the Word of God.” The message of God, the Gospel, the message of the kingdom. Anybody who gives the message of the kingdom is the sower.

You say, “Well, wait a minute. Doesn’t it say in the parable of the wheat and tares that He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man?”

It does say that, but you’ve got to be careful about pulling stuff out of one illustration and sticking it in another one. Here the sower is anybody who sows the seed. And since we’re all called to sow the seed, it incorporates all of us. Does it include Christ? Of course. He was the greatest preacher; He was the greatest seed sower, but we all follow Him.

Acts 9:15, the Holy Spirit said of Paul, “He’s a chosen vessel unto Me to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” And we’re all in the same wonderful calling. The sower? Anybody who sows. The seed? The Word, the message of the kingdom.

But please notice, folks, it doesn’t tell us anything about the style of the sower, and it doesn’t tell us anything about the seed other than that it is the Word of God.

It seems to me that, again, strikingly, so many times what we do is so simply defined in Scripture. We give people the Word of God. That’s why I preach the way I preach. I just open the biblical and tell you what it means by what it says. That’s what we do when we proclaim the Gospel. The Gospel as revealed in Scripture.

The seed has been created by God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, implanted in the Bible. You can’t produce a synthetic seed. Only God can create the seed that gives life. The truth is life, is it not? You’re begotten again by the Word of truth; you’re given life by the Word of truth. And so, we proclaim the Word. That’s our calling. And we expect negative responses and positive ones. And we’ll look at those in detail next time. Let’s pray.

Father, thanks again for a wonderful morning of fellowship and worship and abundant blessing. We

can't even begin to thank You for Your abundant grace to us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit and by the gift of Holy Scripture. Thank You for its sweetness to us, its clarity, its power, its truthfulness. How rich are we to understand all things that the world does not understand? It's been given to us to understand the mysteries of the kingdom. Wow. And we are unworthy servants so privileged, not because of any merit of our own, but because of Your grace.

Help us, Lord, to be faithful sowers of the true seed. We can't create the soil, but we can be faithful to sow the seed. That's why we're still here; it's why You've left us here and not taken us to heaven. Use us in that way we pray, for Your glory, amen.

END

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