

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

May 9, 2021 | *Parable of the Sower*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- What makes you receptive to an idea or claim?
- What makes you enthusiastic about an idea or a claim?
- Read Mark 4:1–20.
- Ask God to prepare your heart to receive the message of His Word.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Not everyone will be receptive to Jesus's message, but only those who are prepared to hear it.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Cultivate the soil of your soul to be open to the teachings of Jesus.

☒ MEDITATE

“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20).

GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your own life.*

Q: *What can cause something to not have its intended effect?*

Q: *How can some actions be beneficial even if they do not have the intended effect?*

Binoculars are remarkable inventions. Such a simple device can multiply our capabilities and allow us to gather information that would otherwise require much more effort or even be impossible altogether. But have you ever tried to use a pair of standard binoculars at night? The power of a pair of binoculars is nullified by the absence of light. A similar situation occurs in Mark 4:1–20. The message of Jesus can transform a person’s life but only if the person’s heart is able to receive the Word. The power of the Word is limited by hearts that cannot receive it.



Q: *How can you prepare your heart to be transformed by the Word?*

Q: *In what ways are you prohibiting or limiting the power of God’s Word in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – There may be a number of factors sabotaging the power of God’s Word in your life. Jesus covered several possibilities in this passage, which we will discuss in more detail below. One way you may be sabotaging the power of God’s Word is by failing to recognize it for what it is. God’s Word is the perfect revelation of His will. The message concerning Jesus Christ will impart life to your soul. If you treat the Bible, which is the Word of God revealed to us in written form, as an ancient artifact, just good advice, or one religious perspective among many, it will never have the intended effect on your life. Before going further in this study, make sure you are receiving His Word for what it is. Pray that God would create in you a heart of simple submission to His Word.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Mark 4:1–20 is sometimes referred to as “The Parable of the Sower.” A more fitting title may be “The Parable of the Soils” because in the parable Jesus used different soil types to illustrate the different ways people receive His message.

- 
- 
1. ILLUSTRATING GOD'S MESSAGE
 2. BE AWARE OF SATAN
 3. BE PREPARED FOR HARDSHIP
 4. BE READY TO SACRIFICE
 5. BE READY TO REAP THE GOOD FRUIT
 6. GUARDING GOD'S MESSAGE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate the four different soil types Jesus used as illustrations. We will also consider the purpose of parables.

1. ILLUSTRATING GOD'S MESSAGE

■ MARK 4:1-3

🔍: *How was Jesus's audience described when He preached in the boat?*

🔍: *How did Mark say Jesus taught the people?*

The Gospels tell us that Jesus attracted a very wide audience—men and women, children and adults, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor. Such a broad audience would be challenging for most teachers, but not for Jesus. He was wonderfully adept at illustrating the truths He was communicating by using parables. Parables can be considered extended metaphors. Jesus's parables are wide-ranging in terms of form and length. The key to understanding parables is recognizing the point the speaker is trying to illustrate. The pitfall to understanding parables is to overextend their analogies, that is, to assign meaning to more things than the speaker intends. For the parable covered in this lesson, Jesus created several points of connection between His story and the point of His teaching. We know this from the explanation He provided the disciples, who did not understand its meaning. In contrast to the parable of the soils, some parables only intend a single point of connection. Finally, although this section emphasizes the illustrative nature of parables, it is not the only reason Jesus used parables to teach His disciples. As we will discuss in the last point in this lesson, parables illustrate the truth of Jesus's message for some people but obscure His message for others.

Q: *How can Jesus's habit of using parables inform us when teaching Christian doctrine to others or when sharing our faith?*

Q: *What does Jesus's willingness to use parables say about His concern for His audience?*

APPLICATION POINT – As Christians, we are responsible for passing on our faith. This includes in smaller groups within your church, with your family members, and to unbelievers. When we are passing along our beliefs, we need to follow Jesus's example and consider our audience. We need to make sure we are effective at teaching our faith and able to illustrate the truths of the gospel with others. This week think of how you can illustrate the gospel through something you encounter in your everyday life. Share these illustrations within your group. Building up your repertoire of illustrations will better prepare you to teach your faith to others and to share your faith with nonbelievers.

2. BEWARE OF SATAN

■ MARK 4:4, 15

Q: *What happened to the seed that fell on the path?*

Q: *How does the path provide a perfect illustration for Jesus's point?*

Jesus's parable of the sower illustrates how people respond differently to the Word of God. Jesus illustrated His point by describing the sowing or planting of a field. Each type of soil in this parable represents a way to receive the good news of Christ, and the seed scattered by the sower represents the Word of God.

Jesus's explanation of the first soil type may catch many modern readers off guard. We are not used to thinking about Satan or His activities. In fact, many modern people do not even believe in the existence of the arch enemy of God. Yet, Jesus clearly warned His listeners that there will be some who hear the God's Word but never take it into their hearts because of Satan's evil influence.

It is difficult to understand in what way these hearers of the Word are under Satan's influence. It is unlikely that all of them would describe themselves as followers of Satan, but Jesus at least intends to show that they remain under Satan's dominion. They are under his rule as they go about their lives (Ephesians 2:2-3).

Q: *How can we protect ourselves from the influence of Satan and his allies?*

Q: *How can we differentiate between the influence of Satan and our own sinful desires?*

APPLICATION POINT – While biblically faithful Christians should believe in Satan's existence, we need to be cautious about too quickly identifying him as the source of every hostile act against God's creation. Oftentimes, we, as sinful human creatures, need little encouragement to act in astonishingly wicked ways. The key to resisting Satan's influence does not rest on differentiating between his wickedness and our sinfulness. The key is simply committing to love God more and ourselves less. Those who love God are not under the influence of His enemy. The other side of this coin is hating personal sin more. If we hate sin, we are not under the influence of God's enemy. This week, in an effort to resist the evil influence of the devil and flee to the majesty of God, make a list of three ways you could love God more and identify three personal sins to fight against. Put these actions into practice and reflect upon how well you have done at the end of the week.

3. BE PREPARED FOR HARDSHIP

■ **MARK 4:5-6, 16-17**

Q: *What was the problem with the seed cast onto the rocky soil?*

Q: *How does this soil type correspond to the reception of God's Word?*

Jesus described the next type of soil as rocky. Although the seed has a chance to germinate this time, it does not have the ability to take root. Since all the growth for these plants can be focused upwards, these plants often grow quickly. But without an adequate root system, it cannot survive. Jesus related the rocky soil to those who hear the Word and receive it gladly for a time, but they quickly abandon the faith when hardships arise. Just as the seeds sprouting up from the rocky soil are not deeply rooted, those who abandon God's Word at the first sign of hardship are not deeply committed to their faith.

In Jesus's mind, trials and tribulations are an inevitable part of the Christian life. His followers will live in a manner that either invites persecution from the outside or sets them apart from non-believers. In fact, Jesus tied these hardships to their acceptance of the Word! Receiving the Word means inviting hardship into your life, and when the hardships eventually come, those who are not deeply committed to their faith will not persist in their belief.

❓: *How can you deepen your commitment to Jesus Christ?*

❓: *How can you prepare yourself for facing the hardships that will come from your faith in Jesus?*

APPLICATION – The word “coasting” implies moving with as little effort as possible, often content to allow other influences to determine your direction and final destination. Students often feel as though they are coasting to the end of their semester once their major papers and exams are completed. As retirement approaches, some employees look to coast through their final few weeks or months by avoiding major problems and obstacles.

Many people apply this mindset to their faith. They want to coast through the Christian life attending church but never getting involved, owning a Bible but rarely reading it, giving a few dollars to the offering but never truly sacrificing. Churches are filled with coasters. They are the perfect example of the rocky soil Jesus described. They are not committed to their Christian faith, and when hardship comes, they will easily abandon it.

If you are coasting through your Christian life, even if you would never have described it that way, now is the time to commit deeply to your faith and to the ministry of your church. Pursue spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading, prayer, and evangelism. Seek out ministries of your church that you could serve in. Deepen your commitment to your faith and your church so that when hardships come, you will be firmly rooted in your beliefs.

4. BE READY FOR SACRIFICE

▣ MARK 4:7, 18-19

Q: *What keeps the seeds that fall among the thorns from bearing fruit?*

Q: *What did Jesus compare the thorny soil to?*

The next type of soil is described as thorny. It is not so much the quality of the soil but what the soil is producing that is the problem. The seeds thrown into this soil germinate and take root, but they cannot produce fruit because the thorns are depleting the resources of the soil.

Jesus used this soil type to describe people who are committed to their Christian faith but also committed to so many other things that they cannot bear the fruit He desires. In His explanation, He described the competing commitments in a variety of ways, but the one thing they have in common is that they monopolize the person's time to the extent that they cannot serve Jesus. Those who are like the seed scattered among the thorns love other things more than they love Jesus.

Q: *Are worldly concerns monopolizing your time to the extent that you cannot serve Jesus?*

Q: *How can you eliminate worldly concerns from your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many Christians have become so distracted by all the world has to offer that they can no longer serve Jesus in the way He demands. We work long hours, enroll in too many classes, sign our children up for too many afterschool programs and sports leagues. We fill our daily routines with task after task. When we finally reach the end of one day, we have to get ready for the next. If we are lucky, we might have a minute to unwind. Such a lifestyle can hardly bear the type of fruit Jesus desires. This week consider if there are any activities you need to back

away from in order to prioritize your relationship with Jesus. Serving Jesus and producing fruit take time. Unless you want to be choked by the “demands” of life, you need to learn to prioritize your faith.

5. BE READY TO REAP GOOD FRUIT

■ MARK 4:8, 20

Q: *What does the seed falling on good soil represent?*

Q: *What is the result of sowing seed on good soil?*

The final type of soil is referred to as the good soil. The seed sown in the good soil germinates, grows into a healthy plant, and reproduces itself. The good soil represents those who hear and accept the message of Jesus. They receive the gospel, and it transforms their life so they grow and mature spiritually.

The good soil has implications far beyond the original seed. The plant that grows from the seed is able to reproduce itself thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. Accepting the gospel has implications beyond our own spiritual life. The transformation the gospel brings is missional. We carry the gospel everywhere we go and share it with others. The gospel can then have that same missional transformation in the lives of others if they are good soil, and they will become a gospel-bearing witness to the world. If you are not reproducing yourself, is it possible that your soil is not as healthy as it was when you first received Jesus Christ?

Q: *How can you keep up your “soil” so that your spiritual life continues to thrive?*

Q: *How is the missional element of the good soil currently reflected in your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – In agriculture, good soil does not always happen on its own, and good soil does not always remain good. It has to be actively tilled and cultivated or what once produced good fruit will not be able to produce anything. This is an appropriate extension of Jesus’s point. God is ultimately the one who prepares our

hearts for the gospel, but we need to make sure we are working to maintain our spiritual health throughout our lives. We need to continually cultivate our own soil. This is done by loving God more and more each day. Loving Him can express itself in a variety of ways, just as the health of a plant is evident in a variety of ways. For example, a strong commitment to missions is evidence of a healthy and growing spiritual life. Make sure that you are looking for signs of a healthy spiritual life and seeking ways to grow in your faith.

6. GUARDING GOD'S MESSAGE

■ MARK 4:9-13

Q: *What additional purpose of parables is emphasized in these verses?*

Q: *What determines whether a parable illustrates or obscures the truth of Jesus's message?*

The Gospels contain some teachings that are hard for believers to understand. We typically view the teaching of Jesus as open for anyone willing to listen. Jesus's use of parables is partly explained, however, by His desire to obscure His message. His message was not for everybody, but only those given the spiritual insight to understand. Even the disciples often failed to understand the meaning of Jesus's parables.

It can be challenging to define precisely how parables helped to obscure Jesus's message because the correlation between Jesus's parables and the spiritual truth He was teaching is easy enough for us to understand. The key is to remember that Jesus was teaching an audience unfamiliar with the points He was making, and the Gospel writers were writing for an audience far closer to the time of Jesus. Although the point of Jesus's parables may seem obvious to us, this may not have been the case for a typical person passing by where Jesus taught. To them, Jesus seemed to be telling a story about farming. Even if they had a hunch that He was talking about something deeper, they may not have been able to identify precisely what it was. As Christianity grew, some challengers may have claimed that the early Christians were distorting Jesus's message. By including Jesus's parables within the Gospels and an explanation for why He used parables, the Gospel writers showed the consistency between Jesus and the early Christian message.

Q: *How should we follow Jesus's example of reserving His message for those who will understand?*

Q: *If parables are meant to obscure the message of Jesus, how can we be sure we are truly understanding His parables?*

APPLICATION POINT – When discussing our faith with others, it is often tempting to compromise the teachings of the gospel to make our faith more appealing. This is the opposite of what Jesus did here. He made His message more challenging to understand. Jesus targeted people who would truly believe in the Christian faith. When we are trying to share our faith with others, we cannot compromise our faith to make it more appealing. Compromise will not make more Christians. It will only make more confused people who are still deeply lost in their sin. Compromise also makes us a poor witness for the gospel.

NEXT STEPS

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching His followers how to live for eternity. His teaching requires us to adopt some countercultural practices and mindsets. If we are living for the life to come, we cannot live like this life is all there is. If we are living for the life to come, we will hold strong to our Christian commitments even in the face of severe persecution. If we are living for the life to come, we will pursue righteousness instead of seeing how far we can run toward sin before falling into it. The broad principle to be adopted from the Sermon on the Mount is to live now in a way that prioritizes the life to come. Seek to put this principle into practice in your life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, prepare me to share your Word engagingly with others.

Father, keep me from coasting through the Christian life. Help me to be fully committed to serving you.

God, help me to see the worries and concerns of this life that are consuming me.

Jesus, help me never to compromise your message. Make me a faithful witness who bears much fruit.