

THE SEED PARABLES

Mark 4; Proverbs 2:1–6; Amos 4:13

PAGE 28 OF YOUR MARK STUDY BOOK

A couple years ago, I received a message from a reader who had just finished my first book. She wrote to thank me, explaining that my book had helped her to heal her marriage. I was grateful, but also a little confused. My book had not addressed anything remotely related to that!

Not long after, I received a message from another reader, expressing her own gratitude. My book had helped her to grieve a terrible loss, and while I was again honored, I was also perplexed. My book had nothing to do with grief.

What I was experiencing was a phenomenon that every writer, every preacher, every evangelist, and every human being who speaks the Word of God to another has experienced. So long as we proclaim God's Word, He will use it to communicate what He wants. What matters more than our message is the soil.

This is the principle Jesus illustrates in Mark 4 with the parable of the sower. We don't know much about the seed, or the talent of the sower. We simply know that he scattered it generously, and the soil determined the rest. For us, this means two things:

First, this parable challenges our notion of talent and its importance for the purposes of God. It's easy to assume that the most talented writers, teachers, preachers, or social media influencers set the bar for ministry effectiveness. But that is not at all what Jesus is saying here. Instead, Jesus implies how little control we exercise over what a person hears. We can articulate the gospel as clearly and brilliantly as possible, but if the soil is bad, the seed will not take root. Likewise, we can communicate a teeny tiny, mustard seed of truth, but what people hear is different—and sometimes much more powerful!—than what we intended to say. This frees us from the insecurities and self-doubt that often inhibit obedience.

The second takeaway from Mark 4 shifts away from our role as the sower to our role as the soil. Many of us are only willing to receive God's truth from certain sowers. We cannot learn (or will not learn) from preachers whose styles we do not prefer or whose theology is not quite in sync with our own. While we should certainly be discerning about false teaching, Jesus challenges us to search ourselves and the state of our heart's soil because the Word of God is always good seed. If it bounces straight off of our ears, then perhaps we need to examine our soil before blaming the sower.

Jesus exemplified both of these principles by teaching in the form of parables, which were deliberately opaque. If ever the soil could blame the sower for scattering the seed badly, parables would be it! But Jesus was driving home the truth that our preaching has less power than our faithfulness. "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen" (Mark 4:9): Be obedient, and trust the Holy Spirit with the rest.

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