

Lenten Study Week 1: The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20 RSV)

¹Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ²And he taught them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³“Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; ⁶and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” ⁹And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” ¹⁰And when he was alone, those who were about him with the twelve asked him concerning 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; ¹²so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven.” ¹³And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown; when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown in them. ¹⁶And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

Study Questions

1. What is a parable? Why do you think Jesus chooses parables as his method of teaching?
2. Imagine yourself as one of the crowd on the seashore. What do you make of Jesus' teaching? Would you be curious enough to ask him some questions if you didn't understand something?
3. What do you think “the secret of the kingdom of God” is? Would you like to know?
4. In Jesus' interpretation of the parable, the soils represent states of the human heart. What kind of soil is your heart? If it's not “good soil,” what can you do to become good soil?
5. Jesus is very explicit that some will hear his words but not understand, and thus not experience forgiveness. Do you feel like this sometimes? What separates an honest seeker, someone like the third case where the soil is good enough to grow but gets choked by weeds, from someone whose heart is hard? What parts of our hearts could use some aggressive weeding this Lent?
6. Why do you think Jesus says this parable is the key to understanding all the others? If an answer doesn't immediately come to mind, we will put the principle to the test in next week's study of four parables about the Kingdom of Heaven!