

III. The Parable of the Sower in Mark's Gospel

1) The Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:1-9) NRSV

⁴Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ²He began to teach 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 on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, 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. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."⁹And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

2) Purpose of Parables (Mk 4:10-12)

⁴¹⁰ When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret/mystery (μυστήριον) of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹²in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'" [cf. Isaiah 6:9-10]

[Isaiah 6:6-13 ("the oracle of doom")]

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" ⁹And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."¹¹ Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; ¹²until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. ¹³Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled."
The holy seed is its stump.]

3) Jesus' Interpretation (Mk 4:13-20)

⁴¹³ And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?"

¹⁴The sower sows the word. ¹⁵These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive

it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Meaning of Jesus’ Parables in four time periods

OT	1.JC	2.Gospels	3.Church History	4.Today
-----	(parable)	-----	(narrative)-----	(sermon, commentaries) -----?

1. Meaning in Jesus’ ministry

- Sowing seeds is an easy-to-understand symbol of producing life in agricultural Palestine.
- Jesus’ interpretation suggests an allegorical reading of the parable.
- This parable is about his word on the kingdom of God. He is the sower who goes out to preach the life-giving KG.
- The way he sows the seed shows God’s generous and indiscriminate love. All sorts of soil receive the same gospel, even as they respond differently.

2. Meaning in Mark’s Gospel

- Mark seems interested in the soils. Only 1/4 bear fruits. Why do the majority reject Jesus’ word?
- Jesus explains why. Like the rebellious forebears in Isaiah’s time, most are “outsiders” of God’s Kingdom.
- Only those who accept Jesus’ word and bear fruit can understand the secret of the kingdom of God. Faith leads to understanding (Christology).
- Isaiah 6 is also cited to warn against Jesus’ followers who do not understand the meaning of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mark 8:17-18). Mark urges his readers to keep faith (under the threat of Roman army around 70AD) and stay inside of God’s kingdom (discipleship).

3. Meaning in Church History

3.1 Early Church

- Most church fathers followed Mark to focus on the meaning of the four kinds of soil.
- All used allegorical method and all agreed that the sower is Jesus Christ and the seed the word of God, but they interpreted the soils slightly differently.
- Mark: four soils represent four responses to Jesus.
- Chrysostom: represent four kinds of virtue.
- Augustine: represent four kinds of Christian.

3.2 Mideval Church

- Interpreters found four layers of meaning:
 - (1) literal or historical: only good soil bear fruits.
 - (2) allegorical or mystical: good soil represents believers who accept Jesus’ word and follow it.

(3) moral or topological: for the seed to grow well and bear fruits, one needs to become good soil.

(4) anagogical or eschatological: only the good soil can bear fruits and receive blessings in the final judgment.

3.3 Reformed Church

- One major debate was how one can be sanctified after justification? By faith and Spirit? Or by Christian virtue and spiritual formation?
- Augustine urged Christians to pursue spiritual life so that they may become good soil that can grow out of the seed and bear fruits.
- Calvin insisted that, just as we are justified by faith through God's grace, sanctification is also by faith and the Spirit, not by and "good work" of human effort.

4. Meaning for Today

4.1 German historical approach: divine reality

- Focus on the sower, the main character of the story, who preaches the coming of the kingdom of God.
- *Die Sache* is the divine reality about God's lavish and indiscriminate love for all people.

4.2 American literary approach: human existence

- Focus on four soils that represent four kinds of human existence
- The path: indifferent, not serious
- Rocky ground: quick response, not enduring
- Among thorns: uncommitted, easily tempted
- Good soil: hear, accept, mature, bear fruit

4.3 Gospel narrative approach: discipleship

- Interpret the parable in Mark's narrative contexts
 - Mark shows Jesus has two groups of audience: large crowd and those outside (4:1, 11) vs. followers and twelve disciples (4:10).
 - Mark emphasizes understanding the parable of the sower is key to understanding other parables (4:13).
 - Mark suggests allegorical interpretation is a proper method of finding the meaning of Jesus' parables (4:14-20).
- Mark wanted readers to understand why only a few people accept Jesus' message to bear fruits of the kingdom of God. They need to be good soil.
- Jesus mentions "trouble or persecution" (4:17). This would make Mark's church think of their suffering under the Roman oppression around 70AD.

4.4 History of Effects contextual approach

Chrysostom (Homily 44 on Matthew)

- "All Christ's parables aim at producing virtue shown forth in works. For of doctrines, He seldom speaks."
- [4] "Now these things He said, manifesting that He discoursed to all without grudging. For as the sower makes no distinction in the land submitted to him, but simply and indifferently casts

his seed; so He Himself too makes no distinction of rich and poor, of wise and unwise, of slothful or diligent, of brave or cowardly;

- but He discourses unto all, fulfilling His part, although foreknowing the results; “that it may be in His power to say, What ought I to have done, that I have not done?” (Isaiah 5:4)
- What could this be to show? That obedience now will be quick and easier, and will presently yield its fruit.”
- [5] “But this parable He speaks, as anointing His disciples, and to teach them, that even though the lost be more than such as receive the word yet they are not to despond.

Augustine (Homily 23 on Matthew)

- [3] “Accordingly I yesterday addressed the wayside, I addressed the stony ground, I addressed the thorny places; and I said, Be changed while ye may: turn up with the plough the hard ground, cast the stones out of the field, pluck up the thorns out of it.
- Be loth to retain that hard heart, ... But be ye the good ground. I said yesterday, and I say again today to all, Let one bring forth a hundred, another sixty, another thirty-fold. In one the fruit is more, in another less; but all will have a place in the barn.”

Calvin (Commentary on Matt 13:18-23)

- “The general truth conveyed is, that the doctrine of the Gospel, when it is scattered like seed, is not everywhere fruitful; because it does not always meet with a fertile and well cultivated soil. He enumerates four kinds of hearers: the first of which do not receive the seed; the second appear, indeed, to receive it, but in such a manner that it does not take deep root; in the third, the corn is choked; and so there remains a fourth part, which produces fruit.
- “Even where it (Gospel) is preached, the mere words will not convert hearers into God’s children, but only their faith, the work of the Spirit. In the parable of the sower, some seed fell on the wayside, some on stony ground, and some among thorns, for not all have been endowed with eyes and ears so as to understand.
- “Bear fruits 30 time, 60 times and 100 times”: “Those three gradations are absurdly tortured by Jerome, to denote virgins, widows, and married persons; as if that produce which the Lord demands from us belonged to celibacy alone, and as if the piety of married persons did not, in many cases, yield more abundantly every fruit of virtue

Summary of Messages for Today

- 1. God: God loves all people, Jewish and Gentile, rich and poor, man and women. Everyone can hear Jesus’ word and bear fruits, as long as they accept it and obey it.
- 2. Human Nature: Just as there are four different soils, there can be four circumstances, four characters, and four consequences.
- 3. Discipleship: How to be good soil? Other metaphors of bearing fruits in the NT suggest:
 - 1) Abide in Jesus (John 15:5): “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”
 - 2) Live by the Spirit (Gal 5:22): “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”