

Study notes on Mark 4:1-34  
by Neil Short

Although the Parable of the Soils appears in all three Synoptic Gospels, I'm particularly impressed with the presentation given by Mark. Mark explains very clearly the real purpose behind Jesus' teaching in parables. Mark's presentation highlights the responsibility an individual has for his own salvation. We shall see, therefore, how the chapter when taken as a whole refutes Calvinism.

4:1-9

Who heard this parable?

A very large crowd (4:1).

4:3 begins with "listen!" (KJV - "Hearken; Behold..."). Is there a lesson?

After thinking about it (or not), note that we'll come back to it later.

Notice also, vs 9.

4:10-13

4:10 – Who asked about the parables?

The 12 plus some others.

Why the secrecy?

Was Jesus really trying to hide something?

4:13 indicates that understanding the present parable is key to understanding all the parables.

4:14-20

Working backwards,

The good soil clearly represents a Christian, bearing fruit.

What is "bearing fruit" in this context?

At least, it is the ability to contribute to the scattering of more seed (preaching).

The weedy soil is also a Christian; but an unproductive Christian!

What makes a Christian unproductive/ineffective? Do I see that Christian when I look in the mirror?

The shallow, rocky soil is... a Christian! but one who falls away. What "trouble" will cause a Christian to fall away?

The hard soil is the only soil that represents a non-Christian.

4:21-25

4:21-23 indicates that this teaching was intended to be understood – not hidden!

4:23 indicates that the message is for those with ears to hear – that is, receptive ears.

Some hearers were spiritually deaf.

4:24 is *THE KEY* to this whole passage. The hearer is supposed to *give* something! He is supposed to peer into the message for its meaning. He is supposed to ask about it. In this context we can see that 4:13 is not a criticism at all but a commendation for asking!

4:25 is a familiar saying in the Gospels. Here, it applies to learning. The more effort a hearer puts into understanding, the greater his understanding will be; but the one who doesn't even try will see his meager ability to understand shrink to nothing.

Returning to 4:3, 9 – what does Jesus mean by “Listen!” and “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

This parable is meant to be understood – with a little effort.

4:26-29

Another parable, not to be confused with the Parable of the Soils.

Nobody really farms (or ever farmed) this way. Farmers tend their crops throughout the growing season. This parable points to the fact that the fruit bearing belongs to God, not to the person who scatters the seed.

Since this is a parable about the kingdom of God, we see that it is God's work to bring on the kingdom, not ours.

4:30-32

Another “seed growing” parable about the kingdom.

A mustard plant is a common garden herb grown in the Near East. It grows to be about nine feet tall – tall enough for birds to build nests in its branches.

God's work (bringing on the kingdom) is the work of small things. It is God's business to grow it.

Don't despise the day of small things (Zechariah 4:10).

Don't try to hurry the work of God.

We like BIG things in the church (e.g., Rick Warren's programs).

Is God quietly working now?

4:33-34

As they were able to hear it...

Does this statement imply a parable was intended to hide something?

Note also how understanding basic parables leads to understanding the more difficult parables (see 4:13 – how will you understand all the parables?)

To whom did Jesus explain “everything?”

The 12 plus others (4:10).

Conclusions:

Note that the putting forth of effort is the key to understanding the Gospel. It isn't given only to those who are “unconditionally elected” but to those who work at it.

In Mark's context, isn't it clear that the individual Christian is in charge of determining the type of soil he will be?