

The parable of the sower

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 February 2016

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] You've got a lot of explaining to do, young man.

I don't know if any of you have had those words directed to you. You could change the gender if you wish. Well, I don't know. If you have, you will probably remember that even the best of explanations that you managed to offer didn't get you out of trouble.

That expression does usually suggest that something has been done that ought not to have been done. When it comes to the parables of Jesus, Jesus has a lot of explaining to do.

Not because he's done anything wrong, of course, or is in any kind of trouble. It's just that parables aren't that easy to understand, some more than others.

But the genre itself is often difficult to understand. We need an explanation. And we need an explanation really on two levels.

[1 : 10] And the passage before us provides us with this dual explanation. There is, in the first place, an explanation of parables in general and the purpose of parables, all parables.

We have that, especially in verses 10 to 12. In between, the parable of the sower as it's recorded and then the explanation of that particular parable.

There's this bit in the middle where Jesus explains the purpose of parables more generally. And it's a somewhat difficult explanation to understand what it is that he's saying.

But we do have an explanation. And we want to think about that explanation. But then in the passage, we also have an explanation of a given parable. In this case, the parable of the sower.

And we want to think about these two explanations that we have in the passage. First of all, Jesus explains the purpose of parables generally.

[2 : 18] We'll just remind ourselves of what he says in verse 10. And it's worth noting here that though in the order in which Mark has recorded it, this little section from verse 10 to 12 is sandwiched in between the parable and its explanation, it must have been the case that this was something that Jesus explained to his disciples on a different occasion.

In the chapter, it's clear that as we see at the beginning, Jesus is in a boat in the lake, the lake of Galilee. And the crowd are there on the shore hearing him teaching.

And as we go through the chapter, we find that he's still there. And there in verse 35, that day when evening came, he said to his disciples, let us go over to the other side.

Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along just as he was in the boat. So where he was at the beginning of the chapter is where he still is towards the end of the chapter. But this little section, it begins in verse 10, when he was alone.

The crowds aren't there. So whether it was the following day or some other occasion, Mark has inserted it into the account at this point, because it seems a suitable point at which to record this teaching of Jesus.

[3 : 32] Well, that's by the by. The point is that these verses do give us this more general explanation of the purpose of parables. And let's just read the verses and remind ourselves what Jesus says.

When he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. It's general. He told them, The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

But to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, never hearing but never understanding. Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven.

Crucial to our understanding of the purpose of the parables is to understand that the parables are directed to two distinct audiences.

And Jesus is quite explicit in acknowledging that as he teaches in parables, he knows that before him there are two audiences. There are those we might call who are on the inside and those who are on the outside.

[4 : 41] Indeed, that's the language that Jesus himself uses. Certainly, the language of those on the outside. There on verse 11. Implicit that there are also those on the inside.

So, the parables are delivered, but among the audience, there are those on the inside and those on the outside. What we need to do is to think of each group separately.

Identify who they are, who belongs to each of these groups, but also then try and understand what the purpose of the parables is for these two distinct groups.

Different purpose for one than for the other. The parable is the same, but the purpose is different.

Let's start with those on the inside. Who are they? Well, we're told there in verse 10, just before Jesus gives this explanation, when he was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

They're the ones who are given this explanation, the twelve, twelve disciples, but not just the twelve, the others around him. And I think we can legitimately identify those others around him as being the same people, the same group of people, certainly, as those spoken of by Jesus in the previous chapter in verse 34.

[6 : 11] In chapter 3 in verse 34, we were noticing this last week, when the family of Jesus appear, and he's being told, well, your family is looking for you, and he responds to his questioners with these words.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, here are my mother and my brothers. Last week we were noticing the same idea of those outside and those inside.

And those on the inside are then the disciples and those around him. The disciples are those who were, you might say, unilaterally chosen by Jesus.

To be his disciples. But then you have these others who, in a sense, are self-selected. We know in the overall sovereign purpose of God, God chose that they be there, but there's a sense in which they're self-selected.

They've chosen to be there. They want to ask questions. They're not content with simply hearing the parable and going home thinking, well, I'm not sure what that was about. No, they approach Jesus, and they're near to Jesus, and they're quizzing Jesus.

[7 : 23] They are, together with the twelve, those on the inside. And there's a purpose in the parables for them in particular, those who belong.

And what is the purpose of the parables for them? Well, Jesus tells us there in verse 11. He told them, those on the inside, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.

Remember when Jesus began his public ministry, as it's recorded for us by Mark himself, he began by announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, where it is clear it's coming, the coming of the kingdom of God, is in the person of Jesus, the king.

The kingdom comes in the person of the king, of King Jesus. So when Jesus says here to those on the inside, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, he is really at heart saying, I have been given to you.

I'm the king of the kingdom, and I have been given to you. And the parables that the king teaches, the parables will help to explain to those on the inside, to those who in some measure have acknowledged Jesus and are seeking to follow Jesus, the parables will explain to them who the king is, what the king is like, what the kingdom is, how the kingdom operates, how the kingdom is established, what the citizens of the kingdom are called to be.

[8 : 59] All of these matters that relate to citizenship of the kingdom of God, all of these matters that relate to the identity of the king, they will be made known to those on the inside by these parables.

But you need to be on the inside to get the parables. The kingdom of God, as it is ushered in by Jesus, is so unlike any comparable earthly kingdom that you just won't get it from the outside.

Of course, that was the reality. Those on the outside looked on and they didn't have a clue what Jesus was talking about. It made no sense. You need to be on the inside to understand the meaning of the parables.

In fact, and you could say this also, and even more crucially, that you need to be on the inside to get Jesus. Never mind the parables. To get Jesus, you need to be on the inside.

The parables then serve to instruct citizens of the kingdom in matters of the kingdom. That's their purpose for those on the inside. But the parables are also directed to those on the outside.

[10:17] And we need to identify, well, who are they? Jesus speaks very explicitly about them. They're in verse 10. But to those on the outside, sorry, in verse 11, everything is said in parables.

Who are they? Well, again, a backward glance to chapter 3 will help. Those on the outside, as we saw last week, are, among others, the religious leaders who were marked by a brutal hostility to Jesus.

But they were also members of his family, but who hadn't yet understood who Jesus was. Who were still on the outside trying to set the agenda for Jesus.

trying to determine what Jesus should or shouldn't do. His own family members, but still on the outside. And we could add to them, of course, the crowds.

Certainly the majority of those in the crowds, they're also on the outside. They listen to Jesus, they hear the parables, but they don't follow Jesus. They're on the outside.

[11:21] The outside group is a varied group, it's a disparate group. Some are hostile to Jesus, some are maybe far from hostile. They maybe are very drawn to Jesus, but they're still on the outside.

That's the one characteristic that unites them. They're all on the outside. Well, they're also taught parables. And what's the purpose of the parables for them?

Well, Jesus tells us. And what he says sounds distinctly uninviting, harsh, we might even say cruel. What does he say? There from the second half of verse 11, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that, purpose, the purpose of this, so that they may be ever seeing, but never perceiving, and ever hearing, but never understanding, otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.

And we notice there at the foot of the page that Jesus is quoting there from the prophet Isaiah. We're not going to focus on the significance of that. We just noted. What do we make of these words of Jesus concerning the purpose of parables as directed to those on the outside?

Are we to understand that the purpose of parables is to keep people out of the kingdom? A simple reading would seem to suggest that. Are parables intended to obscure rather than to reveal?

[12:46] And if that is the case, why would Jesus want to exclude or obscure? Does Jesus not want people to turn and be forgiven to use the very language of the prophet?

Well, he does. So what's going on? Jesus is explaining that while somebody, indeed anybody, remains on the outside, they will never understand either Jesus or his parables.

This isn't about Jesus not wanting them to understand. He's simply stating the reality. They can't understand. Where they are precludes them from being able to understand.

An outsider can't understand. Can't understand Jesus and can't understand his parables. A precondition for understanding is being on the inside.

In the absence of fellowship and friendship with Jesus, there can be no genuine understanding of Jesus and his parables. Remember how in the previous chapter when we were thinking about the call of the disciples, we discovered that being on the inside involves being with Jesus, being sent by Jesus.

[14:10] Or as Jesus says when speaking about those who are members of his family, they are those who do God's will. That is what characterizes those on the inside. Such can understand.

But those on the outside, while they remain outside, simply don't get it. So for outsiders, parables serve two purposes. They confirm unbelief.

They don't create unbelief. The purpose of parables isn't to make an unbeliever out of the hearer. He hears and he doesn't perceive. No, he's already an unbeliever and his unbelief is confirmed by his inability to understand the parable.

So parables confirm existing unbelief. But parables also invite the unbeliever. The unbeliever who can't understand, who's incapable of understanding, by the very fact of acknowledging his inability to understand is being invited in.

Do you want to understand? Well, come inside. You're not being excluded. I want you to understand, but if you want to understand, you need to come inside. Because if you remain on the outside, you'll never understand.

[15:30] You'll never get me, says Jesus, and you'll never get my parables. And this really takes us to the heart of the gospel. The gospel is about knowing Jesus and listening to Jesus and following Jesus.

And you can't get Jesus from a distance or from the outside. You need to take that step of faith and put your trust in him to get Jesus.

And so too, get and understand his parables. Just a couple of things we need to say before we move on to this particular parable, just to avoid any possible misunderstandings.

Those on the outside, we've tried to identify them on the grounds of what Jesus himself says. On the outside, incapable of understanding parables, and I've just said this, but I want to emphasize it, they are welcome to come inside.

This circle of which Jesus speaks, those sitting in a circle round about him, this is not a closed circle. Indeed, all of those spoken in verse 10, those we've described as being on the inside, the twelve and the others around him, all of them had been on the outside, but now they're on the inside.

[16:52] So if you're on the outside, you're invited to come in. Indeed, in chapter 3, when we meet some of his own family who are identified as being on the outside, we know that in due course, subsequently, certainly some of them came inside.

They were outside, but they came inside. So that's very important. Yes, there are two groups, but they're not two permanent, immovable groups.

You can be on the outside and move into the inside. Somebody's suggested that one way of, in some measure, understanding how parables fit into this inside-outside distinction is comparing parables to stained-glass windows.

In an ancient cathedral, you can imagine some very magnificent ancient cathedral with magnificent stained-glass windows, and yet from the outside, those stained-glass windows can appear very dull and lifeless.

they're not designed to look beautiful from the outside, but when you come inside and the sun is streaming through, they take life. They're brilliant and radiant.

[18:05] But using that illustration, what I must stress is that the doors of the cathedral are wide open. If somebody's looking at those stained-glass windows from the outside and say, well, that's not very impressive, somebody could say, well, come inside.

Come inside and have a look. And so with the parables, come inside that you would understand Jesus and his teaching and his parables. The other thing that we just need to say to clarify this matter is that being on the inside, the twelve and the others round about Jesus who are on the inside, being on the inside does not guarantee crystal clear understanding.

Jesus is very clear on that, and what he says to those on the inside in verse 13. He's speaking to the twelve and the others round about him, and Jesus said to them, don't you understand this parable?

How then will you understand any parable? And he's speaking to those on the inside, and he acknowledges that the level of their understanding is still limited. They have the potential to understand, they have, you might say, the capacity to understand, but they're still not really understanding fully this particular parable, and Jesus' fear is that as a result they won't understand any of his parables.

And that reality that even those on the inside don't understand fully makes sense when you appreciate that the heart of getting the parables is getting Jesus.

[19:37] The more you get Jesus, the king, the more you know him, the closer you are to him, the deeper the relationship with him, then the more you'll understand the parables about his kingdom.

The more you know the king, the better you'll understand the kingdom. And that's what the parables are about. They're about teaching, explaining, concerning the kingdom of God. Well, that's the first big explanation that we have, and that is about the parables in general.

But then Jesus explains the meaning of a parable, of this parable. And here it's going to have to be very much a broad brush strokes, and summary of the explanation that we find.

But notice that this parable is not just any parable. You might even call it the parable. Notice that Jesus seems to grant to this parable a particular status.

Indeed, in the very verse that we've just quoted, in reference to the lack of understanding, even of the disciples, Jesus said to them, don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

[20:42] And in these two questions, he does seem to be granting to this parable a particular status, the parable upon which there is all the others.

And you can understand the others in the light of this parable. We're not going to develop that, but it's an interesting way in which Jesus expresses himself. But what does the parable mean? That's what we want to briefly consider.

And as we consider what it means, we have the material of the parable itself as it's recorded, but then of course we also have Jesus explaining the parable.

As we consider all of that material, let me suggest three layers of meaning, or three sequential stages in the fulfillment or application or meaning of the parable.

I think the parable speaks to us in the very first instance about the mission of Jesus. It also speaks to us of the response of Jesus as hearers, and then by extension it speaks to us of the mission of those who hear and receive.

[21 : 51] What about the mission of Jesus? I think this is foundational. Any explanation of the parable that ignores this aspect I think is deficient. The mission of Jesus is to announce by word and deed the good news of the kingdom of God.

And the parable presents to us Jesus as the one who declares, proclaims by his words and by his life the kingdom of God. Jesus is the sower. He sows the seed of the gospel.

He sows the word. In verse 14 in the explanation, the seed is identified with the word. And the word, the logos, is synonymous with the gospel.

Jesus has and is God's word for the world. And he sows the word. He sows the good news extravagantly. All are welcome to hear.

And what do we find? What does the parable point to? Well, it points to the reality and history confirms it, that Jesus' word and mission meets with a mixed response.

[22 : 58] Indeed, to an outside observer, his mission is a failure. If this man has come to establish a kingdom, kingdom, then anybody looking on while Jesus lived and fulfilled his mission, they would look on and say, well, what kind of kingdom is he establishing?

This is a joke. This is no king. Look at him. But the parable also recognizes that Jesus' mission will ultimately be spectacularly successful.

The parable speaks of a huge harvest. But like a seed sown, the harvest will be seen in due course. Indeed, in that regard, today we are still seeing the harvest of the seed that was sown by Jesus in life and word and deed.

But the parable also points to the response of Jesus as hearers, and especially as we move on to Jesus himself explaining the parable.

In verse 14, there's an intriguing shift or development in what the seed represents. If we were thinking about what is said in the parable itself, indeed, even as Jesus begins to explain, we say, well, the seed is the word.

[24 : 18] That's what it is, isn't it? The seed is the word. Well, that's true, but then it becomes the hearers. Notice there in verses 14 and 15, the farmer sows the word. Very clear, the seed is identified with the word.

Some people are like seed. Whoa, whoa, what's going on? Some people are like seed. So, the seed is the word, but then, without any introduction, the seed becomes the people.

And I think in this way, Jesus is shifting the focus on the people, the hearers, and how the hearers respond to the word that is sown. And what Jesus does is, and what the parable does, is recognize that there are two types of hearers.

It really corresponds to what we've already said about the reality of those on the inside and those on the outside. There are those who hear, but who don't receive, who don't produce.

And in the parable, different reasons are given. Satan takes away the word. The word does not take root, so lasts only a short time. The word is choked by competing priorities, and so is unfruitful.

[25 : 24] We're familiar with the parable. So, they hear, but they don't receive, and they don't produce fruit. There is a progression in the hearing of these three subgroups.

The seed is taken away. It doesn't even take root. There's a seed that fails to take root. There's a seed that does take root, but doesn't produce fruit.

There's a plant there, but no fruit. And so, though there's a progression, they're all united in this one characteristic. They hear, but they don't produce.

They're fruitless. But then there's also, of course, those who hear, who receive, and who produce fruit. And there is a telling change in the tense of the verb to hear in this passage, especially in the explanation that Jesus gives.

In the first three instances where Jesus speaks of people hearing the message that is proclaimed, the tense used is a tense that speaks of a one-time action.

[26 : 28] So, on a given occasion, they hear the message, and the effect is as the parable describes. But when he turns to the final group, those who hear and receive and produce, the tense changes, and it speaks of a continuous hearing.

So, there are people who not only hear on a given occasion, but who continue to hear and listen to understand in a continuous way. And they are the ones who hear, receive, and produce.

And the fruit or harvest in these people, presumably, in the first instance, is in their own lives. As they become citizens of the kingdom who think and act more and more like their king.

In Christian discipleship, true hearing is almost equivalent to obeying. This connection is seen in a curious linguistic quirk that connects two verbs in Greek.

The verb to hear, that's used in this parable, and the verb to obey. The verb to hear is akuein. And you can see the connection with acoustics in terms of the root of that verb.

[27 : 45] The verb to obey in Greek, curiously, is chupa akuein, or hyper hearing. Isn't that interesting? To hear is akuein.

To obey is to hyper hear. It's to really hear. It's to really listen in such a way that you receive what you hear, and it produces change.

It produces fruit. There's a harvest in your own life when you're really hearing, when that hearing is accompanied with obedience. In fact, until we produce, there's no evidence that we've really heard at all.

Then finally, let's think of a third layer in which we can understand this parable, and that is the mission of those who hear and receive.

This is really an extension of the parable in time. And it identifies the sower with any preacher, any believer who sows the word.

[28 : 50] That's often how the parable is understood. It's understood as the preacher preaching, and some people believe, and some people don't believe. It's a legitimate way of understanding it, but it's not the central aspect of the parable.

But it does follow on chronologically. Jesus sows the seed. People hear it. They receive it. They produce. And these people, in turn, become soers. There's a progression there.

The hearers become soers. They're brought into the kingdom. They're brought into the family of God. And then they're sent out to sow the seed to those who are still on the outside. We don't stop hearing.

We have to carry on hearing and obeying and receiving. But in parallel, we're sent out to sow so that others would hear and others would respond. The more we hear and receive and produce in our own lives, the better we get at sowing in the lives of others.

And these hearers come soers. And that would be you and me if we're Christians. We produce a harvest. Just as the parable contemplates a bumper harvest, we must sow confidently and expectantly.

[30 : 02] And our little harvests are part of the one big harvest secured by the principal sower, the principal farmer. And we are the under-farmers.

We can coin a phrase. So the question is, when we go out to sow the seed, to proclaim the word, to tell the good news concerning Jesus to others, do we go out and do that with that confidence that there will be a harvest?

The harvest is guaranteed. Jesus guarantees it. Do we appreciate that inauspicious beginnings, when nothing seems to be happening and nobody seems to be listening and everything seems to be apathy and rejection, do we appreciate that those inauspicious beginnings, not unlike with Jesus in his own ministry, can produce astounding results?

Or do we give up way too soon? Well, that's a lot to digest. I guess if I had to leave you with one question to ponder on and grapple with, it would be about this matter of hearing.

Throughout the passage, this is the verb that most recurs. Indeed, at the very heart of the passage in verse 9, having told the parable, Jesus said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

[31 : 24] Hearing is central to all of this. And so I ask you one question, or leave you with one question, with regard to this matter of hearing. Where are you hearing from?

And how are you hearing? Are you hearing from the position of one who is on the inside, who has embraced Jesus, who has put their trust in Jesus?

Because if you're hearing from there, then you can understand. Your level of understanding will grow and mature and develop. There will still be things that you can't get or understand fully, and that's true of all of us.

But you're in the right place to hear. If you're on the outside, then you're not going to understand. You can hear the words, but you won't get them. You need to come inside. Where are you hearing? But also, how are you hearing? Is it this hearing of which the parable speaks that produces no result? Or is it that hearing that is equivalent to obedience?

[32 : 23] Or to use that curious Greek linguistic quirk, are you hyper-hearing? Are you obeying? Are you hearing, receiving, and producing fruit?

Parables only make sense when we hear them from the inside. And when we hyper-hear, when we hear, receive, obey, and produce.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the mission that he was sent to fulfill.

We thank you for the word that he proclaimed, the good news of God. We thank you for his teaching concerning the kingdom of God. And we thank you that you are the one who helps us to understand the teaching that he brings.

We pray that we would know what it is to be those who, through no merit of our own, but by your gracious invitation, have come in to the inside to be part of the family of God.

[33 : 34] And so in that place where we can begin to understand the teaching that he brings. We pray that if there be any who are on the outside, that they would realize that the invitation to come inside is an open one.

It is one that is extended by Jesus himself. Come to me. And that they would hear that call and that invitation and come to him.

We pray that as we hear, we would indeed be those who hear in a manner that is parallel to and combined with obedience. We would hyper hear, that we would obey, receive, and so produce fruit in our own lives.

And as we sow the seed in the lives of others, so see how others also are brought to faith and produce fruit of their own.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 41] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.