

Mark 3:20-4:20
June 25, 2023

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Transition:

BOOK:

Jesus and Beelzebub

²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

²³ So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. ²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house. ²⁸ I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. ²⁹ But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

³⁰ He said this because they were saying, “He has an evil spirit.”

Jesus’ Mother and Brothers

³¹ Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”

³³ “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.

³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

The Parable of the Sower

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

⁹ Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ 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 ¹² so that,

“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven!” (Isa 6:9-10)”

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

This parable helped the disciples understand why Jesus was not impressed by the large crowds that followed Him. He knew that most of them would never produce fruit from changed lives, because the Word He was teaching them was like seed falling into poor soil.

The seed represents God’s Word (Luke 8:11) and the sower is the servant of God who shares that Word with others (see 1 Cor. 3:5–9). The human heart is like soil: it must be prepared to receive the seed before that seed can take root and produce a harvest. Like seed, the Word is alive and able to produce spiritual fruit, but the seed must be planted and cultivated before that harvest will come.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 120-123)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

He Established a New Family (Mark 3:20–21)

Our Lord's friends were sure that Jesus was confused, and possibly deranged! The great crowds they saw following Him, and the amazing reports they heard about Him, convinced them that He desperately needed help. He simply was not living a normal life, so His friends came to Capernaum to "take charge of Him." Then his mother and "brethren" (Mark 6:3) traveled thirty miles from Nazareth to plead with Him to come home and get some rest, but even they were unable to get near Him. This is the only place in the Gospel of Mark where Mary is seen, and her venture was a failure.

History reveals that God's servants are usually misjudged by their contemporaries, and often misunderstood by their families. D.L. Moody was called "Crazy Moody" by many people in Chicago, and even the great Apostle Paul was called mad (Acts 26:24–25). Emily Dickinson wrote:

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'Tis the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur—you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.

Our Lord was not being rude to His family when He remained in the house and did not try to see them. He knew that their motives were right, but their purpose was definitely wrong. If Jesus had yielded to His family, He would have played right into the hands of the opposition. The religious leaders would have said, "See, He agreed with His family—He needs help! Don't take Jesus of Nazareth too seriously." Instead of giving in, He used this crisis as an opportunity to teach a spiritual lesson: His "family" is made up of all those who do the will of God. Our Lord's half-brothers were not believers (John 7:1–5) and Jesus felt closer to the believing publicans and sinners than He did to James, Joses, Judah, and Simon, His half-brothers.

Our Lord was not suggesting that believers ignore or abandon their families in order to serve God, but only that they put God's will above everything else in life. Our love for God should be so great that our love for family would seem like hatred in comparison (Luke 14:26). Certainly, it is God's will that we care for our families and provide for them (see 1 Tim. 5:8), but we must not permit even our dearest loved ones to influence us away from the will of God. When you consider the importance of the family in the Jewish society, you can imagine how radical Christ's words must have sounded to those who heard them.

How does one enter into the family of God? By means of a new birth, a spiritual birth from above (John 3:1–7; 1 Peter 1:22–25). When the sinner trusts Jesus Christ as Saviour, he experiences this new birth and enters into God's family. He shares God's divine nature (2 Peter 1:3–4) and can call God "Father" (Rom. 8:15–16). This spiritual birth is not something that we

accomplish for ourselves, nor can others do it for us (John 1:11–13). It is God’s work of grace; all we can do is believe and receive (Eph. 2:8–9).

He Announced a New Kingdom (Mark 3:22–30; 4:1–34)

The crowds hoped that Jesus would deliver the nation and defeat Rome. Instead, He called twelve ordinary men and founded a “new nation,” a spiritual nation whose citizens had their names written down in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 3:20). The crowds wanted Jesus to behave like a loyal Jew and honor His family, but Jesus established a “new family” made up of all those who trusted Him and did the will of God. The crowds also expected Him to restore the kingdom and bring back Israel’s lost glory; but His response was to announce a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom.

“Kingdom” is a key word in this section (Mark 3:24; 4:11, 26, 30). John the Baptist had announced that the arrival of the King was near, and he had warned the people to prepare to meet Him (Mark 1:1–8). Jesus took up John’s message and preached the Good News of the kingdom and the necessity for sinners to repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15). But what is this kingdom like? If the Lord was not going to restore Israel and set up a political kingdom, what kind of kingdom was He planning to establish?

At this point, Mark introduced a new word—*parables* (see Mark 3:23; 4:2, 10–11, 13, 33–34). Jesus explained the kingdom, not by giving a lecture on theology, but by painting pictures that captured the attention of the people and forced them to use their imaginations and think. Our English word *parable* comes from two Greek words that mean “to cast alongside” (*para*—alongside; *ballo*—to throw or cast). A parable is a story or figure placed alongside a teaching to help us understand its meaning. It is much more than “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” and it certainly is not an “illustration” such as a preacher would use in a sermon. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and compels that listener to make a personal decision about God’s truth and his or her life. So penetrating and personal are parables that, after they heard several of them, the religious leaders wanted to kill the Lord Jesus! (see Matt. 21:45–46)

A parable begins innocently as *a picture* that arrests our attention and arouses our interest. But as we study the picture, it becomes *a mirror* in which we suddenly see ourselves. If we continue to look by faith, the mirror becomes *a window* through which we see God and His truth. How we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? His disciples asked Him that very question (Mark 4:10–12; and see Matt. 13:10–17). A careful study of His reply reveals that Jesus used parables both to hide the truth and to reveal it. The crowd did not judge the parables; the parables judged the crowd. The careless listener, who thought he knew everything, would hear only a story that he did not really understand; and the result in his life would be judgment (see Matt. 11:25–30). The sincere listener, with a desire to know God’s truth, would ponder the parable, confess his ignorance, submit to the Lord, and then begin to understand the spiritual lesson Jesus wanted to teach.

Jesus placed a great deal of importance on *the hearing of the Word of God*. In one form or another, the word *hear* is used thirteen times in Mark 4:1–34. Obviously, our Lord was speaking, not about physical hearing, but about hearing with spiritual discernment. To “hear” the Word of God means to understand it and obey it (see James 1:22–25).

Our Lord gave several parables to help the people (and that included His disciples) understand the nature of His kingdom.

The strong man (vv. 22–30). Jesus healed a demoniac who was both blind and dumb (Matt. 12:22–24), and the scribes and Pharisees used this miracle as an opportunity to attack Him. The crowd was saying, “Perhaps this Man is indeed the Son of David, the Messiah.” But the religious leaders said, “No, He is in league with Beelzebul! It is Satan’s power that is at work in Him, not God’s power.”

“Beelzebul” (or “Beelzebul”) is a name for the devil, and it means “master of the house.” Jesus picked up on this meaning and gave a parable about a strong man guarding his house. To plunder the house, one must first overcome the strong man.

Jesus exposed both their bad theology and their faulty logic. If it was by the power of Satan that He had cast out the demon, then Satan was actually fighting against himself! This meant that Satan’s house and kingdom were divided and therefore on the verge of collapse. Satan had been guarding that man carefully because the devil does not want to lose any of his territory. The fact that Jesus delivered the man was proof that He was stronger than Satan and that Satan could not stop Him.

Jesus did much more than answer their false accusation. He went on to explain the seriousness of what they had said. After all, our words reveal what is hidden in our hearts (Matt. 12:35), and what is in our hearts determines our character, conduct, and destiny. We sometimes say, “Talk is cheap!” But in reality, what we say can be very costly. Jesus warned the Jewish religious leaders that they were in danger of committing an eternal and unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:32).

When you ask people, “What is the unpardonable sin?” they usually reply, “It is blaspheming the Holy Spirit” or “It is the sin of attributing to the devil the works of the Holy Spirit.” Historically speaking, these statements are true; but they do not really answer the question. How do we *today* blaspheme the Spirit of God? What miracles is the Holy Spirit performing *today* that might be carelessly or even deliberately attributed to Satan? Must a person see a miracle in order to commit this terrible sin?

Jesus made it clear that God would forgive *all* sin and *all* blasphemy, *including blasphemy against the very Son of God Himself!* (Matt. 12:32) Does this mean that God the Son is less important than the Holy Spirit? Why would a sin against God the Son be forgivable and yet a sin against the Holy Spirit be unforgivable?

The answer lies in the nature of God and in His patient dealings with the nation of Israel. God the Father sent John the Baptist to prepare the nation for the coming of their Messiah. Many of the common people responded to John’s call and repented (Matt. 21:32), but the religious leaders *permitted* John to be arrested and eventually killed. God the Son came as promised and called the nation to trust Him, but those same religious leaders *asked for* Jesus to be killed. On the cross, our Lord prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and demonstrated God’s power in many convicting ways. How did those same religious leaders respond? By arresting the Apostles, ordering them to keep silent, and then *killing Stephen themselves!* Stephen told them what their sin was: “Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). They had sinned against the Father and the Son, but had been graciously forgiven. When they sinned against the Holy Spirit, they had reached “the end of the line” and there could be no more forgiveness.

People today cannot commit the “unpardonable sin” in the same way the Jewish religious leaders did when Jesus was ministering on earth. The only sin today that God cannot forgive is rejection of His Son (John 3:16–21, 31). When the Spirit of God convicts the sinner and reveals the Saviour, the sinner may resist the Spirit and reject the witness of the Word of God, but that

does not mean he has forfeited all his opportunities to be saved. If he will repent and believe, God can still forgive him. Even if the sinner so hardens his heart that he seems to be insensitive to the pleadings of God, so long as there is life, there is hope. Only God knows if and when any “deadline” has been crossed. You and I must never despair of any sinner (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

The sower and the soils (4:1–20). This parable helped the disciples understand why Jesus was not impressed by the large crowds that followed Him. He knew that most of them would never produce fruit from changed lives, because the Word He was teaching them was like seed falling into poor soil.

The seed represents God’s Word (Luke 8:11) and the sower is the servant of God who shares that Word with others (see 1 Cor. 3:5–9). The human heart is like soil: it must be prepared to receive the seed before that seed can take root and produce a harvest. Like seed, the Word is alive and able to produce spiritual fruit, but the seed must be planted and cultivated before that harvest will come.

As in that day, so today, there are four kinds of hearts, and they respond to God’s message in four different ways. The *hard heart* (Mark 4:4, 15) resists the Word of God and makes it easy for Satan (the birds) to snatch it away. Soil becomes hard when too many feet tread on it. Those who recklessly “open their hearts” to all kinds of people and influences are in danger of developing hard hearts (see Prov. 4:23). Hard hearts must be “plowed up” before they can receive the seed, and this can be a painful experience (Jer. 4:3; Hosea 10:12).

The shallow heart (vv. 5–6, 16–17). This heart is like thin soil on a rock, very typical to Palestine. Since there is no depth, whatever is planted cannot last because it has no roots. This represents the “emotional hearer” who joyfully accepts God’s Word but does not really understand the price that must be paid to become a genuine Christian. There may be great enthusiasm for several days or weeks; but when persecution and difficulties begin, the enthusiasm wanes and the joy disappears. It is easy for fallen human nature to counterfeit “religious feelings” and give a professed Christian a feeling of false confidence.

The crowded heart (vv. 7, 18–19). This heart pictures the person who receives the Word but does not truly repent and remove the “weeds” out of his or her heart. This hearer has too many different kinds of “seeds” growing in the soil—worldly cares, a desire for riches, a lust for things—and the good seed of the Word has no room in which to grow. To change the image, this person wants to walk the “broad way” and the “narrow way” at the same time (Matt. 7:13–14); and it cannot be done.

The fruitful heart (vv. 8, 20). This heart pictures the true believer, because fruit—a changed life—is the evidence of true salvation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:19–23). The other three hearts produced no fruit, so we conclude that they belong to persons who have never been born again. Not all true believers are equally as productive; but from every genuine Christian’s life, there will be some evidence of spiritual fruit.

Each of the three fruitless hearts is influenced by a different enemy: the hard heart—the devil himself snatches the seed; the shallow heart—the flesh counterfeits religious feelings; the crowded heart—the things of the world smother the growth and prevent a harvest. These are the three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3).

Grassmick, J. D. (1985). *Mark*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 116-120) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

C. *The Beelzebub accusation and Jesus' identity of His true family (3:20–35)*

This section has a “sandwich” structure in which the account concerning Jesus’ family (vv. 20–21, 31–35) is divided by the Beelzebub accusation (vv. 22–30). This deliberate literary device is used several times by Mark (cf. 5:21–43; 6:7–31; 11:12–26; 14:1–11, 27–52) for different reasons. Here Mark pointed out a parallel in the charges made against Jesus (cf. 3:21 and 30) but at the same time made a distinction between general opposition to Jesus and a distortion of the Holy Spirit’s work through Him.

1. THE CONCERN OF JESUS’ FAMILY FOR HIM (3:20–21)

3:20–21. These verses are unique to Mark. After **Jesus entered a house** (in Capernaum; cf. 2:1–2), such a large **crowd** demanded His attention **that He and His disciples** had no time **to eat** (cf. 6:31). **When His family** (lit., “those with Him,” a Gr. idiom for kinsmen, not “friends,” KJV; cf. 3:31) **heard** that His ceaseless activity prevented proper care for His needs, **they** came (probably from Nazareth) **to take charge of Him** (*kratēsai*, a word used for making an arrest; cf. 6:17; 12:12; 14:1, 44, 46, 51) **for** (*gar*; cf. “for” in 1:16) the people kept saying **He was out of His mind**, a mentally unbalanced religious fanatic (cf. Acts 26:24; 2 Cor. 5:13).

2. JESUS’ REFUTATION OF THE BEELZEBUB ACCUSATION (3:22–30) (Matt. 12:22–32; Luke 11:14–23; 12:10)

3:22. Meanwhile a delegation of Law **teachers** (scribes) **came down from Jerusalem** to investigate Jesus. They repeatedly charged (a) that **He was possessed by Beelzebub** (demon-possessed; cf. v. 30), and (b) that **He was driving out demons** through a power alliance with **Satan, the prince (ruler) of demons** (cf. v. 23).

The spelling “Beelzebub” came into English translations from the Latin Vulgate which derived it from the Hebrew “Baalzebub” meaning “Lord of the flies,” the name of an ancient Canaanite deity (cf. 2 Kings 1:2). But the spelling “Beelzeboul” (NIV) has better Greek manuscript support. It reflects the later Hebrew “Baalzebul” (not used in the OT) meaning: “Lord of the dwelling place (temple),” that is, of evil spirits in the New Testament contexts (cf. Matt. 10:25; Luke 11:17–22).

3:23–27. **Jesus** summoned His accusers and refuted their charges **in parables** (short proverbial sayings, not stories). He dealt with the second accusation first (vv. 23–26) by showing the absurdity of their underlying assumption that **Satan** acts against **himself**. He used two illustrations to make the self-evident point that **if a kingdom or a house** (household) **is divided against itself** in purpose and goals, it **cannot stand**. The same applies to Satan if it is assumed that **Satan opposes himself and his realm is divided**. This would mean that **his end has come**, that is, his power, not his personal existence. Clearly this is false, for Satan remains strong (cf. v. 27; 1 Peter 5:8). So the charge that Jesus’ exorcisms were due to Satan’s power was false.

The analogy in Mark 3:27 refuted their first accusation (v. 22) showing **in fact** (lit., “on the contrary”) that the opposite was true. Satan is **the strong man**. His **house** is the realm of sin, sickness, demon possession, and death. **His possessions** are people who are enslaved by one or more of these things, and demons are his agents who carry out his diabolical activity. **No one can enter** his realm to **carry off** (*diarpasai*, “plunder”) his possessions **unless he first binds the**

strong man (shows he is more powerful). **Then he can rob** (*diarpasei*, “plunder”) the realm, releasing the enslaved victims. At His temptation (cf. 1:12–13) and through His exorcisms Jesus demonstrated that He is the Stronger One, empowered by the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:29). His mission is to confront and overpower (not cooperate with) Satan and to deliver those enslaved by him.

3:28–30. In light of the preceding charges Jesus issued a strong warning. The words, **I tell you the truth** (lit., “Amen [truly], I say to you”), are a recurring formula of solemn affirmation (13 times in Mark) found only in the Gospels and always spoken by Jesus.

Jesus declared, **All the sins and blasphemies** (derogatory words vs. God) **of men** (generic, “people”) are open to God’s gracious forgiveness (cf. 1:4) with one exception—blasphemies **against the Holy Spirit**. In light of the context this refers to an attitude (not an isolated act or utterance) of defiant hostility toward God that rejects His saving power toward man, expressed in the Spirit-empowered person and work of Jesus. It is one’s preference for darkness even though he has been exposed to light (cf. John 3:19). Such a persistent attitude of willful unbelief can harden into a condition in which repentance and forgiveness, both mediated by God’s Spirit, become impossible. This person **is guilty** (*enochos*, “liable to, in the grasp”) **of an eternal sin** (the ultimate sin because it remains forever unforgiven; cf. Matt. 12:32). Judas Iscariot (cf. Mark 3:29; 14:43–46) proved the reality of these words.

Mark explained that Jesus **said all this because they** (the Law teachers, 3:22) kept **saying He** was demon-possessed (v. 22b). Jesus did not actually say the scribes had committed this unpardonable sin; but they came perilously close by attributing His exorcisms to satanic power when they really were accomplished by the Holy Spirit. They were close to calling the Holy Spirit “Satan.”

3. JESUS VS TRUE FAMILY (3:31–35) (Matt. 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21; 11:27–28)

3:31–32. The arrival of **Jesus’ mother** (Mary; cf. 6:3) **and His brothers** (cf. 6:3) resumes the narrative suspended in 3:21. **Standing outside** the house, **they sent someone** through the **crowd ... around Him**, requesting a private conversation in an attempt to restrain His activity.

3:33–35. Jesus’ rhetorical question (v. 33) was not a repudiation of family relationships (cf. 7:10–13). He was highlighting the far deeper issue of a person’s relationship to Him. It is qualitative in force: **“Who are the sort of people who are My mother and My brothers?”** Then looking (from *periblepomai*; cf. 3:5) **at those seated in a circle around Him** (His disciples in contrast with those standing outside, v. 31), Jesus asserted that their kinship went beyond natural family ties.

Jesus broadened the reference beyond those present by stating that **whoever does God’s will is** a member of His family. The words **brother and sister and mother**, all occurring without an article in Greek (thus qualitative), figuratively denote Jesus’ spiritual family. Doing God’s will (e.g., 1:14–20) characterizes those who are Jesus’ spiritual kinfolk.

D. Jesus’ parables depicting the character of God’s kingdom (4:1–34)

This group of parables constitutes the first of two lengthy units in Mark’s Gospel devoted to Jesus’ teaching (cf. also 13:3–37). Mark selected these parables (as implied in 4:2, 10, 13, 33) from a larger collection to depict the character of God’s kingdom (cf. 4:11 with 1:15).

They were given in a climate of growing hostility and opposition (cf. 2:3–3:6, 22–30), but also enormous popular acclaim (cf. 1:45; 2:2, 13, 15; 3:7–8). Both responses showed people’s failure to grasp who Jesus really is.

“Parable” is a transliteration of the Greek *parabolē*, “comparison.” It can designate a variety of figurative forms of speech (e.g., 2:19–22; 3:23–25; 4:3–9, 26–32; 7:15–17; 13:28). But usually a parable is a short discourse that conveys spiritual truth by making a vivid comparison. The truth to be taught is compared to something in nature or a common-life experience. A parable usually expresses a single important truth, though occasionally a subordinate feature expands its total meaning (cf. 4:3–9, 13–20; 12:1–12). A parable draws its hearers to take part in a situation, evaluate it, and apply its truth to themselves. (See the list of Jesus’ 35 recorded parables at Matt. 7:24–27.)

1. INTRODUCTORY SUMMARY (4:1–2) (Matt. 13:1–2).

4:1–2. Once again (cf. 2:13; 3:7) **Jesus** was teaching a large crowd **by the lake** (Sea of Galilee). **The crowd** was **so large that He** was forced to sit in **a boat ... out on the lake** and teach those who lined the shore. This time **He taught them many things by parables**.

2. THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS (4:3–20)

a. *Jesus’ statement of the Soils Parable (4:3–9) (Matt. 13:3–9; Luke 8:4–8)*

Both before and after Jesus told this parable, He urged the crowd to listen carefully (cf. Mark 4:3, 9, 23).

4:3–9. As **a farmer** (lit., “one who sows”) scattered **seed** over his unplowed field, **some fell along the** well-trodden foot **path** (cf. 2:23). **Some fell on rocky places** having no depth of **soil** because limestone was close to the surface. **Other seed fell among thorns** (ground containing unearthed thorn plant roots). And **still other** seeds **fell on good soil**.

Not all the seed produced a crop. **Birds ... ate** the seed that fell on the path (4:4). **The sun ... scorched** the tender plants that **quickly** (*euthys*; cf. 1:10) sprouted in the **shallow** rocky soil **and they withered** (4:6). Thorns **grew up and choked** other **plants**, making them unproductive (v. 7).

By contrast, the seed on the good soil took root, **grew, and produced** an abundant harvest. It brought yields up to **30, 60, and even 100 times** (v. 8) the seed sown, depending on the fertility of the soil. Back then a yield of 10 to 1 was considered a fine crop.

b. *Jesus’ explanation for teaching in parables (4:10–12) (Matt. 13:10–17; Luke 8:9–10)*

4:10. The change of scene here is significant. Verses 10–20 occurred later (cf. vv. 35–36; Matt. 13:36), but Mark put them here to illustrate the principle stated in Mark 4:11, 33–34, and thereby show the importance of parables. **When Jesus was alone with the Twelve and the others around Him** (other true disciples; cf. 3:34), they **asked Him about the parables** in general, and the Parable of the Soils in particular (cf. 4:13).

4:11–12. These verses must be viewed in the context of unbelief and hostility (cf. 3:6, 21–22, 30). To those who believed, **to you** (emphatic first position in Gr.), the disciples, God had **given the secret of the kingdom of God** (cf. 1:15). **But to those on the outside** (of the circle of disciples, the unbelieving crowd) **everything**, His whole message and mission, was stated **in parables**. The word “parables” here has the special sense of “enigmatic speech.” The crowd did not really understand Jesus.

Both groups were confronted by Jesus and His message (cf. 1:14–15). God enabled the disciples to see in Him the “secret” (*mystērion*) about the kingdom. This refers to the disclosure

of God's *present* kingdom plan which is to be an Age of "seed-sowing" (cf. 4:13–20; 13:10). It was previously hidden to the prophets, but now was revealed to people of His choice (cf. Rom. 16:25–26).

The basic "secret," common to all the kingdom parables, is that in Jesus, God's rule (kingdom) has come into human experience in a new spiritual form. The disciples had believed in Jesus. God had already given (*dedotai*, them this "secret," though so far they understood little of its full impact).

On the other hand those blinded by unbelief saw in Jesus nothing but a threat to their existence. They rejected Him and did not come to know the "secret" of God's kingdom. Jesus' parables served to conceal its truths from them.

They were like the Israelites in Isaiah's day (Isa. 6:9–10). Isaiah said that this spiritual blindness and deafness that comes to people is God's judgment. He particularly referred to Israel as a nation (cf. Mark 6:9, "this people") for rejecting God's revelation, especially as expressed in Jesus. They would see or hear the imagery of a parable, but they would not understand its spiritual meaning. **Otherwise** (*mēpote*, "lest perhaps") **they might turn** to God (repent) **and be forgiven** by Him.

Jesus' audiences were not denied the opportunity to believe in Him. But after they persistently closed their minds to His message (cf. 1:15), they were excluded from further understanding of it by His use of parables. Yet even the parables, which veiled the truth, were meant to provoke thought, enlighten, and ultimately reveal it (cf. 12:12). They uniquely preserved people's freedom to believe, while demonstrating that such a decision is effected by God's enabling (cf. 4:11a).

c. Jesus' interpretation of the Soils Parable (4:13–20) (Matt. 13:18–23; Luke 8:11–15)

4:13. The two questions here emphasize the importance of the Soils Parable. If Jesus' disciples did not **understand** (*oidate*, "intuitively comprehend") its meaning, then they would not **understand** (*gnōsESTE*, "comprehend by experience") **any** of the kingdom parables.

4:14–20. **The farmer** (sower) is not identified, but the context indicates he probably represents Jesus and all who sow (proclaim) **the Word** (message) of God, which is the **seed** (cf. 1:15, 45; 2:2; 6:12). In 4:15–20 a change occurs: the kinds of soil represent various types of hearers in whom the **seed** is sown.

Many **people** give one of three negative responses to Jesus' message. **Some ... hear the Word** with hardhearted indifference. **Satan** (like the birds) **comes** immediately (*euthys*; cf. 1:10) **and takes it away**. In effect, there was no response.

Others ... hear the Word with a hasty (*euthys*), enthusiastic, but shallow profession of acceptance. However, **they last only a short time** because the Word takes **no root** in them. **When trouble** (lit., "hardships") **or persecution comes** (like a hot sun) on account of **the Word**, **they quickly** (*euthys*) **fall away** (*skandalizontai*, "are repelled"; cf. comments on 14:27). Their profession proves not to be genuine.

Still others ... hear the Word but are preoccupied with the cares and riches of this life. Three competing concerns—distracting **worries of this life** (lit., "the present Age"); **the deceitfulness** (deceptive lure) **of wealth**; and **desires for** all sorts of **other things** in place of the Word—enter into their lives (like thriving thorn plants). These things **choke the Word, making it** (the Word, *not* the hearer) **unfruitful** (cf. 10:22), indicating they are not true believers.

By contrast, **others ... hear the Word, accept it** (*paradechontai*, "welcome it for themselves"), **and produce a crop**, or bear spiritual fruit. These are genuine disciples. In the

future harvest they will have fruitful yields of varying amounts: **30, 60, or ... 100** (cf. 4:24–25 with Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27).

Giving out the news of God’s kingdom is like sowing seed on various kinds of soil. At Jesus’ first coming and in the present Age the kingdom is largely veiled in the face of satanic opposition and human unbelief. But despite this, God’s rule takes hold in those who accept Jesus’ message and His rule manifests itself in spiritual fruitfulness. But God’s kingdom will be openly established on earth at Jesus’ second coming with a glory yet undisclosed (cf. Mark 13:24–27). Then there will be an abundant harvest. Thus the parable displayed God’s kingdom as both *present but veiled* and *future but openly glorious* (cf. 1:14–15).

Church, C.L. (1998). *Mark* In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (p. 432). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Mark 3:19b–35 is the first of the “sandwiches,” texts where Mark inserted one narrative—the “meat”—into another—the “bread”—to highlight their common emphasis. Here both accounts concern the legitimacy of Jesus’ ministry: Jesus’ family thought Him “out of his mind”; the Jerusalem scribes supposed He was in league with the “ruler of demons.” Jesus was the “stronger one” who had entered Satan’s world and was “plundering his possessions” through His exorcisms.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit involves a stubborn refusal to acknowledge God at work in Jesus and attribution of that work to Satan. Repentance and forgiveness are not possible for those who *consistently* reject God’s saving work in Christ. In the “top slice of bread,” Jesus redefined His family as the community of those who enter into a student-Teacher relation with Him (“those who sat around him,” 3:34; see 4:10) and who obey God’s will (see 1:20; 10:29–31).

PICTURES OF THE KINGDOM (4:1–34)

The parable of the soils provides a framework for interpreting responses to Jesus’ message. Jesus’ preaching evoked (1) the disciples’ obedient following (1:18, 20; 2:14); (2) the crowd’s amazement; (3) His family’s suspicion of insanity (3:21); (4) the Jewish leaders’ opposition (2:7, 16, 24; 3:6, 22). As Mark’s story unfolds, a rich man has his opportunity to follow Jesus “choked” by love of wealth (10:17–25; see 4:18–19). And the crowds “who received the message with joy” (4:16) join Jesus’ opponents in time of persecution (14:43; 15:15). Beyond Mark’s conclusion, the disciples—like seed sown on good soil—come to maturity in which they endure persecution (see 13:9–13) and bear much fruit.

Leavell, L.P. (1972). *Mark*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary* (pp. 621-622). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

In 3:20–27 we find the response of religious leaders and the comment Jesus made. His ministry was identified with the work of Beelzebub, “the prince of devils.” Jesus pointed out that Satan would not destroy his own house, yet Satan’s house was being destroyed.

In 3:28–30 Jesus speaks of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is sometimes called the unpardonable sin. This is refusal to accept obvious truth. It is apparent that a Christian cannot commit this sin.

In 3:31–35 we discover the response of Jesus’ family to his ministry. These were his mother and his half-brothers, and he used their coming to point out a basic spiritual truth. Kingdom citizenship does not depend upon flesh and blood, but rather upon spirit. This is the kindred spirit we possess in seeking to accomplish God’s purpose through faith in Christ.

Teaching by Parable (Mark 4:1–20)

The passage—In 4:1–35 Jesus taught by parable. This was a favorite method of his.

Some say there is no connection between these four parables. A close relationship can be seen when they are read and studied from the standpoint of the witnessing obligation of every Christian.

In 4:1–20 we have the parable of the sower and the soils. Interpreters generally emphasize one or the other, but not both. Neither should rule out the other. The sower has an obligation to sow faithfully, while the hearer is obliged to hear and respond. The Christian witness knows that all hearers will not respond affirmatively. The sower knew that all soil would not be productive. This did not deter him from faithfully scattering the seed. He broadcasts the same good seed regardless of the reception it might gain.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Mark 3:20-4:20. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.