

Mark

Lesson 5

Chapter 4

Leader Guide

Leader Guide Bible Studies

David R. Steele

This lesson is a free download from Leader Guide Bible Studies and is not for resale.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®
NIV®

Copyright © 1973 1978 1984 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Teaching in Parables

Mark 4, Lesson 5

Opening Prayer

Introduction

After Mark completed his introduction of Jesus as the Son of God and Son of Man, Mark begins the teachings of Jesus through parables. Speaking in parables was one of the hallmarks of being a prophet from God and attests to Jesus' divine authority, "I spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions and told parables through them." (Hosea 12:10).

Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven through parables as he traveled through Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. The gospel writers organized them in different ways to illustrate various themes in Jesus' teaching. Mark includes only a few of Jesus' parables from two settings; by the lake early in his ministry and in the Temple courts before his arrest. John used the "I am" illustrations in his gospel account but did not include the parables. Matthew included many parables and organized Jesus teachings into five great sermons:

1. 1. Mt 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount, a contrast of life under the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law.
2. 2. Mt 10, the Sending of the Disciples and instructions for ministry.
3. 3. Mt 13, the Sermon on the Lake, a collection of parables on the kingdom of heaven
4. 4. Mt 18-20, teachings in Judea, another collection of parables on the kingdom of heaven.
5. 5. Mt 24-25, teaching in the Temple – parables concerning the end of the age

In this lesson, we will read the parables from the "Sermon on the Lake" that includes two of Jesus' most familiar illustrations found in all three gospel writers, the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Read Mark 4:1-20, Parable of the Sower

Mk 4:1 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.

Mk 4:2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

Mk 4:3 **"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.**

Mk 4:4 **As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.**

Mk 4:5 **Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. Mk 4:6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.**

Mk 4:7 **Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.**

Mk 4:8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

Mk 4:9 Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Mk 4:10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

Mk 4:11 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 parables¹² so that, ““they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’ ””

Matthew adds [Mt 13:14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ““You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

Mt 13:15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

Mt 13:16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

Mt 13:17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

Mk 4:13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?

Mk 4:14 The farmer sows the word.

Mk 4:15 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.

Mk 4:16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. Mk

4:17 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.

Mk 4:18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;

Mk 4:19 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.

Mk 4:20 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.”

1. Why did Jesus teach in parables?

Teaching in parables fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy, ““You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” People in Isaiah’s time rejected God by worshipping idols and the false gods of neighboring nations. Isaiah’s preaching hardened their hearts against God in the face of their judgment. Likewise, Jesus taught in parables to expose the hard hearts of the Pharisees who plotted to murder him. But parables were not meant to excluded people from God’s kingdom; Jesus promises to be found by all people who seek him and to create a new heart in them.

2. What is the seed being sown?

The seed is the word of God – the Gospel message.

3. Describe the manner the farmer sowed his seeds. How is this a picture of God's grace?

The farmer sows generously and everywhere – in good soil, on the path, and the rocks so that all might hear his word. The people in the rocks and along the path are not seeking God's word, but it comes to their lives through God's grace.

4. What does the seed on the path represent?

The path represents people who hear God's word but don't believe because Satan takes the truth away. Like the hard soil in the path, the hearts of these people are hard and unresponsive. The Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus' day are examples of whom Jesus referred.

What are some of today's distractions that harden people's hearts and cause them not to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and their Savior? I think many people have a false sense of self-sufficiency and a notion that faith is naïve and unsophisticated. Others might be disillusioned by their church experience or by a loss in their life and blame God.

a. How have you experienced seeds on the path in your life?

Unfortunately, in too many ways! Once my Uncle Stanley was visiting and was too ill to attend church. When I got home, he asked me about the sermon, and I drew a complete blank – I had no recollection of what I heard. The birds had snatched up every seed!

b. What actions have you taken to cultivate the seeds sown in your life?

Answers vary but include taking notes, regular Bible Study and devotional time, joining a small group, prayer, service, and charity.

5. What do the seeds among the rocky places represent?

The rocks are hardships and trials in life. People hear the word and accept it with joy but fall away when trials and difficulty test their faith.

a. During trials, are you more likely to experience doubt or spiritual strength and growth?

Personal reflection.

6. What do the seeds among the thorns represent?

The thorns are men's worries of life and love of materiality that choke out the word and make it unfruitful. Wealth does not exclude faith. Abraham, David, and Solomon were wealthy men, but first, they were men of faith. Wealth is a trap when it makes us prideful and self-reliant rather than causing us to acknowledge it is a gift from God. Luther saw the lure of prosperity as the most dangerous for the Church.

7. How are “blessings” often confused with thorns? How do you distinguish the two?

We usually think of wealth and material gain as a blessing providing comfort, opportunity, recreation, and security. Material goods can also bring a burden – “the tyranny of things” – more taxes, more maintenance, more storage, more, etc. One way to distinguish between material blessings and thorns is by how willing we are to share them or give them away. In his book "The Treasure Principle," Randy Alcorn wrote that God distributes wealth unevenly so that his children can redistribute them more evenly.

8. What has helped you in your struggle among the “thorns” of life?

I have steadily learned the value of stewardship in my life. I have never missed anything I have given away. After riding the stock market through the '80s and '90s, it was clear that giving away the gains was much more gratifying than watching it disappear in market readjustment.

Giving should bring joy and a sense of satisfaction that the gift is making a significant difference in the world or the life of someone. One of the greatest blessings I have ever had was supporting a Bible Translator in Ethiopia who has since retired. I wish I could have given more, but he had all he needed. Once a year, the couple returned to the US and visited their donors to say thank you and to tell how God was at work in their mission. I always looked forward to their visit, and the church set aside time in worship to hear their testimony. Year after year, they recounted miracles of lives saved, healings, demons cast out, and divine guidance in answered prayer. The translations of the gospel were bearing fruit by 100's and 1000's.

9. What is good soil?

The good soil is the hearts of believers who are prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive the gospel with faith, understand it, and follow Christ whole-heartedly. The Holy Spirit is like the farmer using the Law to plow up and soften our hearts to make us ready to receive the Gospel seed. The believer’s love for God and compassion for others leads others to Christ.

10. As we are welcomed into heaven, we would all like to hear the words well done, good and faithful servant. Where is the Holy Spirit leading you now in your service?

Personal reflection.

Read Mark 4:21-25, A Lamp on a Stand

Mk 4:21 He said to them, **“Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”**

Mk 4:22 **For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.**

Mk 4:23 **If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”**

Mk 4:24 **“Consider carefully what you hear,”** he continued. **“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.**

Mk 4:25 **Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”**

11. We usually think of the lamp as visibly demonstrating our faith through our actions and words to our neighbors. Consider reading the lamp as God's word. What additional insights does this parable provide?

a. Verse 21

The scriptures are like a lamp on a stand –meant to be used, read, meditated on, and prayed over. Otherwise, it is just another closed book.

b. Verse 22

The scriptures convict and reveal sin. The word calls us to holiness and reassures us of God’s grace and forgiveness.

c. Verses 24-25

Scriptures bring wisdom and spiritual insight. The more it is applied, the more it is received.

Read Mark 4:26-29, The Parable of the Growing Seed

Mk 4:26 He also said, **“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.**

Mk 4:27 **Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.**

Mk 4:28 **All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.**

Mk 4:29 **As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”**

12. What do you think of when you think of the “kingdom of God” or “kingdom heaven”?

Jesus used these terms interchangeably when he taught about the kingdom of God. We typically think of eternal life in heaven as God's kingdom. Although God's kingdom includes heaven, Jesus taught that God's kingdom also rules in the hearts of all who believe that He is the Son of God, who seek after God with righteousness, and who care for others who need their help - the poor, hungry, homeless, and sick. God's kingdom is still advancing through the world, gathering people of all nations. He calls us to join him in extending his kingdom wherever we go and promises to be with us.

13. How is growing seed like the kingdom of heaven?

Christ’s disciples sow the gospel. God’s Spirit causes it to grow and come to maturity in the heart of the believer.

a. How do you interpret the harvest?

The harvest is the ongoing work of making new disciples from now until Judgment Day when the full number of believers has come to Christ.

Read Mark 4:30-34 and Matthew 13:33-35, The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Mk 4:30 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?”

Mk 4:31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground.

Mk 4:32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

Matthew adds, [Mt 13:33 He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Mt 13:34 Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.

Mt 13:35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”]

Mk 4:33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

Mk 4:34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

14. How are both the mustard seed and yeast like the kingdom of heaven?

The number of Christ's disciples are few and are like the seed and yeast that start small, but will impact the entire world. Consider the humility of Christ: he came to earth as a helpless child of poor parents but grew to redeem all humankind and now reigns in glory with the Father.

15. What do the tree and birds represent?

The birds are us – all believers who come to rest in God’s kingdom.

16. What do the birds find in the garden that we find in the kingdom of heaven?

We find rest in God, an eternal home.

The following parables are in Matthew 13:24-52 from the “Sermon on the Lake” and occur with the parables in Mark 4.

Read Matthew 13:24-43, The Parable of the Weeds

Mt 13:24 Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field.

Mt 13:25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

Mt 13:26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

Mt 13:27 “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

Mt 13:28 “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

Mt 13:29 “ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.

Mt 13:30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ”

The Parable of the Weeds Explained

Mt 13:36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

Mt 13:37 He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.

Mt 13:38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

Mt 13:40 “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.

Mt 13:41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

Mt 13:42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mt 13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

17. What simple truths does this parable teach about the existence of good and evil in the world?

The calling of Christians is to be fruitful in their environment. We are not isolated from the evil of men, the brokenness of creation, or Satan's work.

18. How is God active when the weeds are growing? Also, refer to the parable of the growing seed.

God continually nurtures our faith to maturity, equips us to withstand the evil that is around us. Brokenness in the world serves to test our faith and bring us to maturity.

Read Matthew 13:44-52 the parables hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net.

Mt 13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Mt 13:45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.

Mt 13:46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The Parable of the Net

Mt 13:47 "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away.

Mt 13:49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mt 13:51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied.

Mt 13:52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

19. What is Jesus asking the crowd to do in the parable of the treasure and the pearl?

The treasure, great pearl, and net are faith in Christ that leads the believer to most precious salvation, a new life in Christ, and eternal life to come. Paul described this treasure in Philippians 3:7-9, "But whatever gain I had [from his previous life as a well-respected, zealous Pharisee], I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For His sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

20. The parables of the treasure, pearl, and net teach us truths about our response to God's kingdom and the end of times on earth. They can also be read from a different perspective to teach us about God's love for us when we place Him / Jesus as the main character in search of us. You might read the parables this way:

God is the man who found the treasure (lost humankind) hidden in the field (the world). In his joy, he sold all he has to buy the field, i.e., He gave up His Only Son to redeem the field.

God is the merchant in search of fine pearls (people). He finds us (we were lost after all) and purchases us – having sold all he has (giving his One and Only Son for our redemption).

God throws the net into the sea and draws us (the fish) out at the end of time.

21. What might our lives look like if we deeply embraced the parables of the treasure and the pearl?

The treasure of God's kingdom is not measured in wealth or beautiful pearls but is a new life by our redemption through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises us an abundant life characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, patience, goodness, and more. These are the qualities I desire in my relations with others.

Closing Prayer and Blessing