

Results May Vary

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[0 : 00] This is the parable of the sower. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding 30-fold and 60-fold and 100-fold.

And he said, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Father, we are so grateful to have your word. And we are so grateful that the teaching of Jesus in the form of parables has been preserved for us. And coming off of our last series where we focused in so much on some opponents, some people who crept in unnoticed and began to deceive the church, leading them astray into ungodliness. Oh, what a contrast this is for us to now hear the pure words of Jesus. And telling these stories, helping people to listen and to understand who you are, what your kingdom is like, and what are your expectations for your people.

Father, would you please help us as we now give our attention to the preaching of your word? Would you please help me and keep me from saying anything that would be in error, anything that would be foolish, anything that would be distracting, and take away from what you want to say to us today?

[2 : 05] We do want to hear from you as we turn our attention to your word. So would you please speak to us from your word?

Holy Spirit, please come and help us to understand the things that are written here. Help us to believe and to obey. We ask this in Jesus' name.

For your glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and for our good. Amen. You can turn in your Bible to Mark chapter 4.

That's where this parable is recorded. Have you ever heard a child say, please tell me some data before I go to bed tonight?

Of course not. Children don't want data before they go to bed. What do they want? Stories. They want to hear a story.

[3 : 10] And adults are not different. I think this is why there are thousands of documentaries. And it seems like all the more all the time. We love stories.

If I said to you, today we're going to learn three facts about the Nile River. I doubt any of you lean in with curiosity.

But if I said, I'm going to tell you three stories from ancient Egypt, suddenly your ears perk up at least a little bit.

Stories give shape and color to facts. Stories. They're the difference, if you will, between an obituary and a eulogy.

One is about the facts. And one is about the story. Stories help us remember what matters most.

[4 : 13] Stories are compelling. They pull us in. Storytellers transport us to a world that they have created for us to live in for a little while.

And while we're there, while they have captured our attention, they entertain us, they inform us, and maybe even they move us to action.

And so we tell stories. And Jesus told stories, too. A lot of them, in fact.

35% of the recorded teaching that we have from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ is in the form of stories.

We call them parables. Parables. I was taught that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

[5 : 11] Anybody else remember hearing that? I think that's not wrong. But I also think that's not quite enough. Parables are not just clever illustrations or, you know, spiritualized versions of Aesop's fables.

Parables are stories Jesus told to make people think. He used parables not just to entertain or inform, but to stir the conscience and to change the heart and to bend the will towards obedience. By capturing our imaginations with a story, with a parable, Jesus invites us to answer this question. Where do I stand in relation to God and his kingdom?

I hope this is a question that we can answer as we work our way through this series. Where do I stand in relation to God and his kingdom?

Today's parable, parable that Emily read for us, the sower, is an especially significant parable. Here's why. It's the first major parable in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. [6 : 38] It is one of only three parables that Jesus gave an extended explanation for. It's one of only two parables that are given a title in the text.

And this is an important parable because, as we're going to see, it's a parable about the parables. It's a parable about how we are to understand all of the other parables.

Jesus is teaching beside the sea. He's likely using the shoreline as a kind of natural amphitheater. You all are perhaps seated on or standing on the shore, and Jesus is on the edge of the beach. But as this crowd continues to grow, listening to Jesus, he steps into a boat, and he goes out just a little ways into the water so more people can fill in where he was standing.

Mark chapter 4 and verse 1. Again, he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea.

[7 : 57] And the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables. And in his teaching he said to them, Listen!

Behold, a sower went out to sow. Jesus begins his story with a scene that would have been immediately, instantly familiar to the people he was speaking to.

A sower, a farmer, going out and scattering seed, planting a crop. Now, most of us are not farmers, so let's just sync up with their world for a moment.

If you plant an apple seed, what do you expect will grow from that apple seed? Apple tree, which will result in apples, right?

The same thing would be true if you plant some kernels of wheat in the ground. You are expecting to get some grain from that. If you plant pumpkin seeds, you're expecting to get pumpkins.

[9 : 08] Now, the point here is not, I'm not trying to make a point about what kind of fruit you're getting from these seeds. The point that I'm making is that when you plant seed, you expect it to grow.

That's the assumption. Soil plus seed, some time, some sun, some rain, fruit at the end. That's what we expect. But Jesus' parable challenges our assumption.

He disrupts our expectations. In his story, soil plus seed does not lead always to fruit.

It does not always lead to a harvest. In fact, the results may vary. Look at verse number four. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path.

And the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where it did not have much soil. And immediately it sprang up since it had no depth of soil.

[10 : 20] And when the sun rose, it was scorched. And since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns.

And the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold.

And he, Jesus said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

The sower scatters the seed. And the seed falls on four distinct types of soil. Some seed falls along the path.

Hard, compacted, dry ground. And that seed has nowhere to go. It just sits there, exposed on the path.

[11 : 22] You know what happens if you leave seed exposed on a path? Exactly what Jesus says. The birds will come and they will treat it like bird seed. Some falls on rocky ground.

There is some soil there, but not a lot of soil. The seed sprouts quickly, but then the sun rises in the sky.

And as the sun beats down on that little tiny seedling, those shallow roots can't hold. The plant is scorched. And it withers away.

Some seed lands in soil that is full of weeds. And if you've gardened, you know this fact.

I don't even think it's a truism. It's just plain a fact. The weeds will always grow faster than whatever it is that you are trying to grow in your garden. And those weeds are more hardy.

[12:25] They seem not to need any water at all. But the fact is, they're just sucking up all of the resources that your plants need. And that's what happens in Jesus' story.

These weeds grow very quickly. And they choke the life out of everything else that is planted near them. But, Jesus says, some seed falls on good soil.

It takes root. It takes root. It grows. It increases. And it produces a harvest. A great harvest.

30, 60, 100 times more than what you planted in the ground. What should we notice here?

Same sower. Same seed. Different results. Why? Why? Because the outcome depends on the condition of the soil.

[13:37] You've probably seen ads with that tiny, fine print that says, results may vary.

Like an ad for a 24-hour gym. With a guy just shredded with six-pack abs who says, I got ripped in 30 days at my gym.

And then along the bottom in fine print, you see, results may vary. Or maybe a hair growth commercial. Someone who is as bold as me in the before picture, then suddenly in the after picture has this thick, flowing locks.

And then you see along the bottom, well, your results may vary. Or a toothpaste ad, and you can get teeth so white that you're going to blind your friends when you flash your smile at them.

You know, I think maybe you can go from coffee stained to off-white beige or something like that.

But let's just be real. Your results may vary.

[14:47] Here's the point of Jesus' parable. It's the same sower. However, it's the same seed, but it's different soils. And so the results may vary.

Some seed is snatched by birds. Some sprouts very quickly, but is then scorched. Some grows, but it's alongside weeds and just gets choked out.

But some yields an incredible harvest, 30, 60, 100 times what was sown. The difference is not the sower.

The difference is not in the seed. The difference is the soil. Now, Jesus is going to explain this parable to us.

At this point, we should be rolling this around in our head. What does this mean? What am I supposed to understand about this story?

[15:51] Why does it matter? Why did he tell this story in the first place? Before Jesus explains the meaning of the parable, Mark gives us a little glimpse behind the scenes, a private moment with Jesus and several of his disciples.

This is in verse number 10. And when he was alone, those around him with the 12 asked him about the parables.

And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. But for those outside, everything is in parables.

So that they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

When the crowds had gone, and Jesus was alone with his disciples, and perhaps several others, they asked him about these parables.

[17:00] Why do you use parables to tell these, to communicate truth to the people? And I think Jesus' response is both clarifying, and maybe just a little bit unsettling.

Verse 11, he says, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom. Some translations may say mystery there.

But this is not like a riddle. This is not like a puzzle, you know, that only the clever people can work out. The word means revelation.

Something that was hidden, that now God is choosing to make known. To you, Jesus says, is given the revelation of the kingdom.

Those on the outside, those who follow Jesus, receive this revelation. But those on the out, did I say outside? Those on the inside, those who follow Jesus, receive this revelation.

[18:05] But those on the outside, Jesus says, everything they get, is in parables. Why? Verse 12, So that they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand.

Now, when we read that, at first glance, it kind of sounds like Jesus doesn't want people to understand his message. message. But if that was his goal, then I think we should ask ourselves,

why bother to teach at all?

You know? Like, if his goal is that nobody understands his mission, who he is, who the father is, what the kingdom, if his point is, I don't want anybody to know, then why not just stay silent?

Why speak? We need to read this verse, with the context in mind. And here's a bit of context.

Before it, in Mark chapter 3, and verse 23, Jesus calls out to his opponents, the religious leaders. He calls out to them. He summons them, to hear a parable, and to change their thinking. And after this text, in verse 33, it says that Jesus spoke the word as they were able to hear it.

[19 : 27] In other words, he tailored his teaching to what the people were able to take in. So when Jesus says to those outside, everything is in parables, it's not about withholding truth from them.

It's about how people respond to what they're hearing. Jesus teaches in parables, much like the prophets before him.

Not to conceal truth, but to provoke hearing. And where there's a willing response, a willingness to hear, a willingness to ask, tell me, what does this parable mean?

Then further explanation, further revelation follows. But when there is no response to the parable, then the preaching is lost.

Jesus quotes here from Isaiah 6, not to say that he's hiding the truth from the people, but to show that true hearing is more than just sound waves bouncing off your eardrums.

[20 : 52] Hearing is a discipline of the heart. Parables are not meant to confuse.

They are intended to confront, to expose the posture of our hearts. They challenge our assumptions. They shake up our expectations.

They push us to rethink what we believe about God and his kingdom and his call on our lives.

Parables are ironically provocative.

It's like telling a child, no, you cannot have that fudge bar before dinner. And now what? All the child can think about is the fudge bar, right?

It's like the wet paint sign for all of us adults. It's the wet paint sign. And as soon as you see it, you think, I just have to touch it. I just have to be sure. I got to know, is it still wet?

[21 : 54] Parables are like that. They're ironically provocative. You hear it and you go, I got to know what that means. I need to understand what that story is really about.

Parables provoke curiosity. And the story compels you to wrestle with its meaning. And so Jesus looks at his disciples and he says, do you not understand this parable?

This one is foundational. If you miss this one, then you're going to miss all of the other ones too.

And so how kind and gracious and good of Jesus to walk us through this parable piece by piece, so that we get it.

So that we understand the truth that he communicates. Same sower, same seed, four different soils, four different responses.

Verse 13. He said to them, do you not understand this parable?

[23 : 18] How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word.

And these are the ones along the path where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan immediately comes and snatches away the word that is sown in them.

And these are the ones sown on the rocky ground. The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.

And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. And then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word.

[24 : 26] And it proves unfruitful. But those who were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Some hear the word, but their hearts are hard. The word bounces off like bullets off of Superman.

They hear, but they don't really listen. And the word never sinks in to their hearts. Others hear and they respond quickly, even joyfully, but without repentance.

Their response is shallow. And short-lived. Their hearts remain rocky. And when life gets hard, that little seedling is scorched.

Scorched by suffering and persecution. Others hear and it seems like the seed is growing, but their priorities are disordered.

[25 : 49] They're consumed by the cares of this world. lured in by the deceitfulness of wealth, tangled up with all kinds of competing desires.

And the word gets choked out. But some hear the word and accept it and they bear fruit and the harvest may look a little different for each one.

some yield thirty, some sixty, some a hundred, but wherever the seed finds good soil, the word produces fruit.

So here's the question that this parable compels us to wrestle with. what kind of soil am I?

Or if we're going to make that a little more personal, what is the condition of my heart? See, Jesus didn't tell this parable so that we could identify four types of people out there.

[27 : 09] He told this parable so that we could look in here. I wonder, has your heart become hard?

This can happen through sin and this can also happen through suffering. Perhaps you've grown callous to God's word.

perhaps you are tuning out the spirit's conviction. Maybe cynicism has dulled your desire to hear from God.

Or maybe your heart is shallow. You hear a sermon like this and you feel something. Something stirs inside of you. Maybe you're inspired.

Maybe you're excited to hear it. But then you walk away unchanged. No root.

[28 : 25] No repentance. Just a surface level response to the word. or maybe your life is just crowded.

When you go to church once in a while you read your Bible now and then because truthfully you know you know that you need a little bit of Jesus in your life.

love. But everything else in the world is so loud. And you're tangled up with all kinds of other priorities.

And you are pulled away by other loves. And the word that you hear just gets choked out. This is the good news of the gospel.

Soil can change a hard heart can be softened. A shallow heart can be deepened and a cluttered heart can be cleared.

[29 : 36] By God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit your heart can be made ready ready to hear ready to receive ready to believe ready to bear fruit.

If you feel convicted by this parable that's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. That's grace. That's the Spirit of God doing his work in you.

Pouring in some fresh topsoil. Turning it over and over and over. Pulling out the rocks. Getting rid of the weeds. So that that seed of the word goes down deep.

finds root. Begins to sprout and blossom and flourish and grow so that it bears fruit.

Considering the great crowd that gathered to hear Jesus teach in the boat that day, it should be clear to us. Hearing with our ears only is never enough.

[30 : 57] Many who heard Jesus preach this parable walked away unmoved, unchanged.

some of you have sat under preaching for your entire lives. You know the gospel inside and out.

You can give someone else the gospel. You knew this story before I even started preaching about it. And yet you remain unconverted.

You have not been born again. you've never trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus died so that you could live.

He laid down his life like a seed going down into the ground so that you could enjoy the fruit of salvation. Jesus says as much in John chapter 12.

[32 : 01] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Two of the three soils that failed to produce fruit describe people who initially respond favorably to the word.

Some hear the word with joy and yet their response is superficial. Some spring up quickly, but their growth is choked out by distractions and worries and priorities.

Craig Keener put it bluntly, the only conversions that count in the kingdom are those confirmed by a life of discipleship.

When it comes to hearing the word, results may vary. Not because the word is weak, not because the sower is careless, but because the condition of the heart matters.

[33 : 26] an initial response doesn't prove true hearing. Only a fruitful harvest reveals a heart that is like good soil.

So what is the condition of your heart? Parables are stories that Jesus told to make people think. they challenge our assumptions. They shake up our expectations. They press us to consider what do you believe about God and his kingdom and his call on your life?

Where do you stand in relation to God and his kingdom? Let's hear his word. Let's accept it. Let's believe and obey it.

And by God's grace, let's bear fruit. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen.

[34 : 33] Let's pray.