

Mark 4
The parable of the Sower who sows: hearing more accurately

By Chip M. Anderson
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He began to teach again by the sea and such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow...

I have had enough, and I can't take it anymore! If I hear one more time that the parable of the Sower in Mark 4 (and Matthew 13) is about me and my heart, or about the different types of hearts in sinners, I am going to scream!

Can you tell I am bothered a slight bit regarding this rather simplistic and erroneous interpretation and application of this all-to-familiar parable? Well, I am. And you should be, too. If for anything, this particular parable is important to get right, for it comes with a caveat, a caution:

And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, SO THAT WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY NOT HEAR AND UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN" [Isaiah 6]. And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?" (vv 9-13).

Don't dismiss "hearing" for superficial word-play

The preacher or Bible study leader or Sunday School teacher misses the mark when we are told that this text reveals the human psychology, implying that the parable asks, "What kind of soil are you?" The Word of God from this most important parable is sacrificed upon the altar of popular sermonizing. Good exegesis, even a rough cut exegesis of this text, is dismissed for the superficial attraction to word-play: Soil is the human condition, the type of soil is the human heart. This is not only poor exegesis, it misses the word God wants us to hear and our application will move us away from obedience to the parable's intended purpose. We miss an opportunity to further our discipleship. And reflecting on the caveat in vv 9-13, I fear what we, as Christians and a Christian community, lose.

There are plenty of verses and passages that reveal the nature of man. The parable of the Sower in Mark 4 (and Matthew 13) is not one of them. Popular, flippant interpretations of this text are worse case examples of turning a text on its head: a worse case example of spiritualizing and making an allegory out of a metaphor. This method of interpretation is all too common from the pulpit and among popular Bible studies. It is dismissive of the total parable and the Markan context, and is revealing of our own hard hearts and the misunderstanding of the nature of discipleship.

This **Rough Cut** will seek to re-listen to this familiar parable and *hear* the emphasis of its context, so we may heed Mark's point of including the parable in his Gospel.

Mark doesn't hide his purpose for writing

Right away, in his introductory remarks, Mark informs us of his intent, that is, why he writes and what we are to hear, to understand:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1).

The parable of the Sower affirms Mark's declarative, introductory statement and further helps the reader to understand the nature of discipleship and our relationship to the mission of Jesus. Just *listen* as Jesus commands in 4:3:

“Listen to this! Behold, the Sower went out to sow.”

And then, listen again as Jesus interprets his own parable:

"The sower sows the word" (v 14).

This parable is about the Sower (i.e., “Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” 1: 1) and about His sowing the Word (i.e., spreading “the gospel of the kingdom of God,” 1:14-15; cf. 1:1). Although we learn about the realities of the mission field and the potential responses to the sowing of the seed, the parable in Mark 4 focuses our attention on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the arrival of the Kingdom of God (cf. 4:11), and the reality of discipleship.

First off, soil can't be commanded to change

Jesus describes, metaphorically in parable form, four places in which His seed is sown and then gives His interpretation of those places. I refrain from calling the places “soil” at this point in order to help move the emphasis off the “soil” and on to the sowing (the point and emphasis Mark gives).

In vv 3-4, Mark records Jesus' words:

"Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing...

The metaphor

Jesus' interpretation

...some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up (v 4).

These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them (v 15)

Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil, and after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away (v 5-6).

In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away (v 16-17).

Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop (v 7).

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful (vv 18-19).

Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (v 8).

And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (v 20).

The soil in the parable is passive. It is what it is: shallow, rocky, weed/thorn infested, or good. And it should be noted that there is no command, “Soil, change what kind you are!” Nor is there any hint that Mark or Jesus is asking the question, “What kind of soil are you?” You can look all you want, but this text does not explicitly nor does it beg this question about soil or your heart or the heart of the sinner, i.e., those to be evangelized. Plainly, the text simply implies that the Sower is sowing his seed on these four soils, and he is doing so indiscriminately, lavishly, almost carelessly. All the while it looks unpromising, as if there is little potential for growth, until the end where a bountiful—three-fold—harvest is realized.

Listen! Hear!

It has already been noted, there is no command related to the soil or any command for you or those to be evangelized to change soil type. The only commands are found in verses 3 and 9:

V 3: “Listen to this!”

V 9: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

These commands are, not for the soils (i.e., those who are the objects of the sowing), but for the disciples, followers of Jesus, the Sower. Apparently “hearing” this parable is important to discipleship. The parable is framed with bookend commands to “hear” (vv 3 and 9). The disciples are commanded to *listen*, to hear the parable (“he who has ears to hear, let him hear”). In fact, Jesus’ caution and quote from Isaiah centers on the importance of “hearing” (vv 9-12). The Isaiah context is also worth noting: these words were given to the Israelite community, confronting their idolatry and disobedience.

Borders of the sea

The “**sea**” forms the borders in chapter 4. Mark commences this teaching pericope with “He began to teach again by the **sea**” (v 1) and ends it with the story of Jesus calming the “**sea**” (vv 35-41). Jesus begins in a boat and ends in a boat. Chapter 4 opens with Jesus in a boat, pushed off slightly from shore, as a Master-teacher, preaching to the crowds who had gathered on shore; Mark 4 ends depicting the Master-teacher commanding the elements. At the end, His disciples, who didn’t “understand” the parable (vv 10-11), see the wind and the waves obey Jesus’ command and, then, raise the question,

“Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (v 41).

This helps Mark’s listening and reading audience (i.e., “us”) to know that the contents of the chapter and the parables are about Jesus, the Master-teacher, the Master-Sower, the One in control.

Put the parable in its context—the narrative flow of thought

As discussed in previous **Rough Cuts**, keeping the text under consideration (in this case Mark 4) in its context is of utmost importance for hearing and understanding a text. This is especially true of the Gospels. Isolating the stories, parables and teachings from their place in the narrative flow of thought can lead away from the storyteller’s intentions. Although with much that is similar, we know that each Gospel writer was selective of the topics, stories, vignettes, and

teachings for each of their Gospels. We also know that, although there is some basic historic-chronological order to each of the Gospels, the writers also choose where and when the vignettes and teachings appear in his narrative flow.

Simple word studies are not sufficient, especially within a Gospel narrative. Exegeses of the text (i.e., the parable) must include particular attention to narrative flow (which is inspired by the way) and the text's juxtaposition to other texts in order to hear God's Word through the text. The author gives us markers—rhetorical clues—to help us know his intention and to hear his particular emphasis. Catching these clues will shed amazing light on the text and offer fresh ways to hear—hopefully—the original intentions of the writer.

We start with the obvious: Mark begins his story with a thematic assertion, a declaration:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (v 1).

As mentioned above, this declarative statement underscores Mark's intention for writing. Unlike the other synoptic Gospel-writers (Matthew and Luke), Mark cuts to the chase, leaving out the birth and genealogical settings of Jesus' entrance into the world. A theological statement (i.e., "it is written") and Jesus' baptism follow this poignant opening declaration. This gospel of Jesus Christ is somehow connected to God's purpose and is a fulfillment of God's promise to show up (in person). Mark briefly mentions the wilderness story, probably to further connect his Gospel to the Isaiah reference of a "voice crying in the wilderness" quoted above (cf. v 3). In verse 14, Mark begins a ministry thread with a summary announcement:

"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (v 14c).

Mark starts his narrative with a declaration that what we are about to read concerns the beginning of the Gospel (v 1). And then, prior to beginning his section on Jesus' ministry, Mark offers a summary of Jesus' preaching and mission. This is the obvious: Mark's Gospel narrative is about the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a description of what Jesus preached (i.e., the content of His Gospel and its accompanying activities).

Jesus' ministry-activities & preaching vs. reactions

The next section of the narrative helps us see how Jesus and His message (i.e., the sowing) fared in its first, beginning stage. Quickly Jesus moves into his Galilean ministry, portrayed as a teacher-healer. Between 2:16-3:12, Mark's storyline focuses on Jesus' activities and audience reaction and responses. At this point it is good to visualize the reactions of his audiences:

1:16-20: A good start

His call, "come follow me," is good enough: "Immediately they left their nets and followed him...Immediately He called them; and they left their father...and went away to follow Him" (vv 18-20).

1:21-28: A good response; spreading everywhere

Jesus teaches and the crowds "were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v 22). He casts out demons

and “They were all amazed, so they debated among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority!’” (v 27). And, Mark tells us that “Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee” (v 28).

1:29-45: Very popular

Jesus heals and continues to cast out demons. “Whole” cities gather to hear and see this new rabbi-teacher-healer (v 33). In a short while “Everyone” is looking for Him (v 37). Jesus’ popularity has risen so much that he “could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas” (v 45b). Nonetheless, the crowds keep coming to Him “from everywhere” (v 45c).

2:1-13: The good beginning takes a turn for the worse

After returning home and hearing He has arrived, “many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door” (v 2). Note Jesus is “speaking the Word” (v 2c) to them, that is the Sower is sowing His seed. Jesus forgives a paralytic. Some of the scribes in the crowd ask in their hearts, “Why does this man speak this way?”, accusing Him of blasphemy (“only God can forgive sins,” v 7). Although the crowds still seek to see and listen to Jesus, the seeds of doubt are beginning to sprout.

2:14-27: The religious leaders question everything Jesus does

The crowds continue to find Jesus appealing, but the fact that He heals lepers and eats with tax-collectors (i.e., “sows His seed”) begin to trouble the scribes of the Pharisees (the one’s originally charged with knowing the word, i.e., the seed of the Old Testament). They see Jesus *sowing His seed* with “the sinners and tax collectors” (i.e., bad soil?) and ask His disciples, “Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?” (v 16). Apparently they didn’t like the soil on which Jesus was sowing His seed. Afterward, the Pharisees are disturbed that Jesus’ disciples didn’t fast (v 18). And then to make matters worse, Jesus and His disciples eat grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees point out, “why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” (v 24).

3:1-12: Those who should be sowing the Word have hardened hearts

Jesus’ popularity has ebbed away, especially among the religious leaders, to the point He knows they are just waiting to accuse Him of everything from blasphemy to law-breaking. The warm reception that began in chapter 1 has melted, finally leaving Jesus “grieved at their hardness of heart” (v 5). Soon the “Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians [who were normally their opposition and religious enemies] against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (v 6). Yet despite the antagonism, the multitude from Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem continue to follow Jesus, and even those from “outside” Jerusalem, that is “Idumea, beyond the Jordon, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon” [places of historic-anti-YHWH sentiments, and “outsiders”].

One long section that gives us a clue for understanding

The divisions of verses and chapters, sometime forced on the text, can make us fragment the Gospel narrative into small parts, where the vignettes and individual teachings (and parables) can

take on a life of their own, often lifted from the context and unrelated to the flow of the narrative. The tendency to see and read the Gospels in this fragmented way makes the individual stories and teachings disjointed and unconnected to their larger context. “Hearing” the Gospels this way can cause us to miss hearing God’s Word through the Gospel narrative.

It is important to note, Mark probably wanted his listening and reading audience to hear 1:1-3:12 as one long and related section.

1:1: “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” |-----| 3:11: “You are the Son of God”

It begins with the announcement that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God” (1:1) and ends with *unclean spirits* (i.e., demons) acknowledging, “You are the Son of God” (3:11). We’re let in on the secret. The demons knew it. The disciples apparently did not. The crowds enjoy the spectacle of a new teaching-healing Rabbi, with new authority, *sowing His seed* (i.e., preaching the gospel of the Kingdom), especially among “outsiders.” And as a result, those who are supposed to be on the “inside” begin to be threatened.

Mark 4, after the parables, ends with a question that brings us back to Mark’s introductory statement (in 1:1) and the demon’s acknowledgement (in 3:11). After watching Jesus “hush” the storm and calm the waves on the sea, the disciples ask:

"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (v 41).

Mark continues his theme that he began in 1:1. Remember, as readers of the story we know what the disciples and religious leaders did not know. We know that the natural answer to the disciple’s question is

“This is Jesus Christ, the Son of God...the teacher-healer Rabbi, the Sower of the parables...”

Appointing the twelve future “sowers” and a little wasted seed

Mark 3:13-35, the section before Mark 4, introduces the chosen twelve who will make up the apostles, the sent ones, who are charged with carrying on and repeating the mission and message of Jesus (i.e., the future “sowers”). This is significant because Jesus appoints the twelve to be with Him (i.e., indicating a discipleship relationship) in order to send them out to preach (i.e., the sowing; cf. 1:14-15). Judas Iscariot, the one who betrays Jesus, is also among the chosen twelve (3:19). We know the story too well, and as a result we gloss over this as we read the names of the twelve apostles (for we know them by heart). The reference to Judas as the one “who betrays Him” is a harbinger of the parable where the sower appears to waste his seed on ground that will not produce fruit. Some of the seed Jesus sows will indeed be wasted!

“Outsiders” and “insiders”

Finally, we read that in Jesus’ own hometown and among His own family, there is disappointment, accusations, and charges of satanic possession. The groups who oppose Jesus and who are making the accusations are made up of “His own people” (3:21) and “scribes” (v 22). The “scribes” ought to have been “insiders” who were responsible for sowing (the OT

Word of promise), but instead have hardened hearts, opposing the Sower and are now cast as “outsiders.” And there is no doubt, Mark has placed even Jesus’ own family (i.e., “His people”) among those who are “outsiders” who do not get—that is, understand—His mission. Mark is setting us up for the forthcoming warning that follows the parable of the Sower who sows: First he let’s us know Jesus’ own family came to “take custody of” Jesus because they thought “He had lost His senses” (v 21) and, then, in vv 31-35, he defines *family*:

Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing **outside** they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are **outside** looking for You.” Answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

We are being prepared to hear the parable of the Sower who sows, and, as well, Jesus’ caveat, the warning and explanation to those who are supposed to be His “insiders”:

As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, **but those who are outside get everything in parables...**” (vv 10-11).

Further tension and conflict is set in motion as Jesus, the Master-Sower defines who is “inside” and who is “outside.” The preliminary qualification and dividing line is “Whoever does the will of God,” these are in “inside.” And in the parable, one’s standing is further defined: *the who understands the parable of the Sower and His sowing, which is the mystery of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.*

And to make matters more tense, Mark actually indicates there is the potential that even the “disciples” can be “outside.” Even among His own “insiders” there is the potential for “wasted seed,” poor, unproductive soil. This is a warning to the listeners and readers of Mark’s gospel story: we need to evaluate whether we are “outsiders” or “insiders.” Insiders do the will of God; outsiders do not. Insiders, like the Master-Sower, understand and sow the Word of the Gospel of Kingdom of God; outsiders do not.

The reality painted in the parable

In the story thus far (chps 1-3), Mark has made it plain that his narrative revolves around three interrelated themes:

- 1) Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 3:11; cf. 4:41);
- 2) His Gospel (i.e., the Word about the Gospel of the Kingdom of God; 1:1, 14-15; cf. 4:11);
- 3) His activity (i.e., His sowing the Word of the arrival of the Kingdom of God; 1:16-3:12).

This is clear from the bookend references to Jesus as the Son of God in 1:1 and 3:11. The summary of Jesus' mission in 1:14-15 affirms this theme and, at the same time calls the reader to further understand our discipleship relationship to Jesus and our commitment to His mission:

Now after John [the Baptist] had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Mark clearly sets out his narrative of Jesus' activity, moving from popularity to potential arrest, and even His own family thinking He had "lost His senses" (3:21). In the end, we are left with the supposed "insiders" of the Jewish world declaring Jesus to be possessed of Satan. The reality of Jesus and His mission being painted for us is, to say the least, not productive and at best, failing. Then we move into a series of strikingly similar parables of failure and mysterious growth (chp 4). We are disposed not to see the similarities because we isolate the parables from their place in the narrative and treat them as independent, containing their own word. But once returned to the context, these parables amplify Mark's theme.

Furthermore, rather than concentrating on the soils as ends in themselves, they are simply the places where the Sower sows his seed—where Jesus proclaims His Word of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. One would think that the Master-Sower would be wise and know something about farming, about sowing seed. But that is not the picture painted by Jesus and recorded by Mark. No. The Sower is seen as lavishly spreading His seed, almost carelessly, in places that appear to be unproductive and produce poor results. Why is He not more careful with His seed? Why is some wasted on the beaten-down paths? Why is He spreading seed on rocky and thorny ground? He looks unwise, unskilled. He should know better than to waste His seed. Three-fourths of the places where the Sower sows His seed offer only a failed crop. But what looks like an unpromising beginning is vindicated by the three-fold, bumper crop of fruit producing "thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (vv 8, 20).

This parable paints the reality of discipleship and the disciple-sower's shared mission in the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: obstacles will arise, God will seem unwise in how He works, the mission will appear a failure, yet there is the promise that vindication will come, a plentiful harvest will eventually emerge.

But there is more to "hear"

The parable is not only about trusting in the Master-Sower and the promise of a plentiful harvest, it is also indicative of the nature of Jesus' mission and the nature of discipleship. The disciples—those with "ears to hear"—are expected to carry on the same mission in the same way: disciples are to sow the Word of the Gospel indiscriminately, lavishly, even on ground that is shallow, rocky and thorny. Disciples are to follow the Master-Sower into places where, by all appearances seem improper and unripe for a plentiful harvest. The lamp of the light of the Gospel is not to be put under a basket (4:21). We are to *hear* that nothing is hidden (i.e., the mystery of the Gospel), but that it will eventually be revealed (i.e., the promise of the plentiful harvest, the victorious Kingdom of God).

Careful what you “listen to”

Following Mark’s rhetorical and narrative clues, hearing the parable of the Sower who sows and heeding the warnings should cause our ears to perk up at the restatement of “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” in 4:23. Jesus is repeating his caveat, His warning. In light of our interpretation of the parable of the Sower who sowed, we should hear the warning in 4:24-25 with a new, profound respect:

And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him” (24-25).

The command to “listen” (to “hear”) is repeated (v 24). The reference to “measure” links us back to the farming and sowing metaphors. He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly. In other words, the one who hears this parable will sow lavishly; the disciple-sower will measure out more seed to spread, carelessly, abundantly, without regard to where He is sowing. The more the disciple-sower measures out his seed, the more will be given (harvest?; reward?); and the one who does not spread seed lavishly will come up deficient, lacking (“outside?”). Perhaps, even unforgiven (see warning in v 12), for the warning is not for the “soils,” but for those who are to “hear” the parable and following the Master-Sower.

The remaining two parables

The remaining two parables in chapter 4 support this interpretation and understanding of the parable of the Sower who sows. The first follow-up parable describes the Kingdom of God like a man who casts seed (his responsibility), but yet discovers that seed sprouting and growing and producing a crop outside of his control. Mark records Jesus’ words:

And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come” (vv 26-29).

The nature of the Kingdom of God is further portrayed and its significance to discipleship is enhanced in the last parable in chapter 4:

And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; SO THAT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR CAN NEST UNDER ITS SHADE” (vv 30-32).

This parable enlarges how we are to understand the Kingdom of God and the mission of sowing. Jesus draws upon an Old Testament text from Daniel that described the protective nature of

God's rule and how the king of Babylon's kingdom was to parallel that same protectiveness for its citizenry. This parable of the seeming small, modest appearance of the work of the Kingdom of God parallels and is similar to the wasteful, seeming careless spread of the seed (spread of the Word). Then, like the plentiful three-fold harvest, the portrait of the Kingdom here is one of expansiveness, far-reaching. The spread of the Kingdom, although small in appearance, will eventually encompass many who will find protection, safety, and nurture within its domain.

Wasteful sowing, bad soil, and surprising harvests (Mark 5)

Keep reading. Listen to what comes next after the sowing parables. Chapter 5 offers a continuation of the "sowing" theme, that is, the spreading of the Gospel of the Kingdom through Jesus' own activities. We leave the sowing parables with the disciples asking, "Who is this that commands the winds and the waves?" Mark leaves the question unanswered, but readers know the answer:

The One who "hushes" the elements is the Son of God, the miracle-working Teacher, the Master-Sower.

Knowing this, we are moved to the other side of the "sea" (5:1ff). This chapter contains three vignettes, highlighting Jesus' ministry: the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (as summarized in 1:14-15). The chapter 5 stories portray the Master-Sower sowing the Gospel, and doing so in what appears to be bad, unpromising soil.

Immediately after the parables and the unanswered question of the disciples (v 41), Jesus and His disciples are confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. This man and the place where he comes from represents, no doubt, very bad soil: Gentile territory, pig farming (which is anathema to the Jews), dwelling among the dead (i.e., "among the tombs," v 3), and demon-possessed. Nothing geographically, culturally, or demographically indicates good soil. Yet, the seed through Jesus' presence and authority is made known and, to our surprise, there is a harvest. The man is healed, and publicly seen as "clothed in his right mind." (Could this be a rhetorical slight to those who think Jesus both possessed and out of His mind as portrayed in 3:20-27?). The once demon-possessed man is now called to be an "insider" to "report the great things the Lord has done" (v 19); the former man of the tombs is now a sower of seed. Yet, there are "outsiders" who present obstacles to further sowing, demanding that Jesus "to leave their region" (v 17). Nonetheless, sowing continues through the new "insider" (v 20).

The remaining two stories (seed, planting, soil, and growth) are concerned with a dead child whom Jesus raises and a woman with a hemorrhage who touches Jesus in order to be healed. Both stories are encounters with things unkosher, bad soil—death and disease. Jesus, the Master-Sower, who continues His sowing activities, touches the unclean and the unclean touch Him.

Placed in the flow of Mark's narrative flow, these accounts of Jesus' ministry become more clear as to their purpose. They show the nature of Jesus' mission and the activities of His sowing—that which the disciple-sowers are now called to understand and imitate.

What is its to “hear” the parable of the Sower who sows

Simply put: the one who “hears” *the parable of the Sower who sows* becomes a disciple-sower. We are called to waste a little seed, no, a large measure of seed on all types of ground. The “soils” are not for us to determine. We will be surprised that good soil will be found in places where seed is wasted on ground that appears bad, potentially unproductive. “Outsiders” who have harden hearts will not join in the sowing, especially any sowing on ground that looks to be infertile. “Insiders” sow in places where “outsiders” live, encountering untouchables, death, and disease, in places that are culturally and demographically challenged. “Insiders,” those who “hear” the Master-Sower’s call, will intentionally consider sowing on what appears to be bad soil as Jesus did (Mark 5). “Outsiders” will seek to protect their territories and protect their established religious and political systems that ensure their appearance as “insiders,” but, in reality, they are not. “Those who have ears to hear” respond to Jesus’ call of discipleship, namely a commitment to the Master-Sower and to imitate His sowing activities as disciple-sowers.

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