



LESSON 9

Jesus teaches the parable of the soil

MARK 4:1-20



Entering the kingdom of God depends on how you receive the word of God.



“But those that 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” (Mark 4:20).

Supporting Truths

1. The parable of the soils is about God's kingdom.
2. The way into God's kingdom is by God's word.
3. Many hear God's word the wrong way.
4. Some hear God's word the right way.
5. Parables show the truth to some and hide it from others.

Objectives

1. Define the kingdom of God.
2. Count how many times Jesus says “word.”
3. Explain the first three soils.
4. Explain the fourth soil.
5. Be careful how you hear God's word.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

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Lesson Summary

After the Pharisees and most of the Jews refused to trust Jesus as their Messiah, Jesus began to speak to them in parables. By not explaining what the parables meant, Jesus hid the truth from those who had rejected the truth. This reality is illustrated by the parable of the four soils: many heard God's word, but few accepted it. Jesus' message is clear: pay careful attention to what you hear, so that God's truth is not hidden from you.

Spotlight on the Gospel

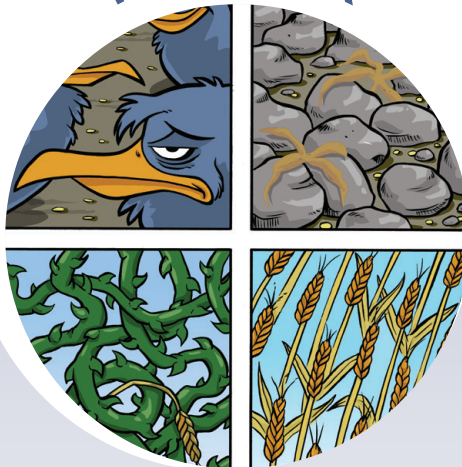
When Jesus explained the parable to His true followers, He said the secret of the kingdom of God had been given to them: those who hear, understand, and receive God's word will know what God's kingdom is all about. They will come to Jesus, know God, and receive eternal life. Entering God's kingdom depends on how you hear and respond to God's word, and you will know when you have rightly responded when you see lasting fruit in your life.

LAST WEEK



Jesus rebukes the Pharisees
Matthew 12:22–37

THIS WEEK



Jesus teaches the parable of the soil
Mark 4:1–20

NEXT WEEK



Jesus demonstrates His authority
Luke 8:22–39

JESUS' MINISTRY IN GALILEE

Lesson Commentary

Entering the kingdom of God depends on how you receive the word of God.

Why didn't they believe? Jesus had taught with great power and authority (Mark 1:22). He had cast out demons and healed many diseases (1:34). He had even forgiven sins (2:5). It was clear that Jesus was truly the Son of God (1:24; 2:7; 3:11), but the Pharisees called Him Satanic (3:22) and plotted to kill Him (3:6), while most of the other Jews also refused to repent (Matt 11:20). Even Jesus' own family members thought He was crazy (Mark 3:21). So why did so few believe? The parable of the four soils shows us that it all has to do with how a person hears and responds to God's word.

Listen to the parable of four soils (4:1-9)

Jesus told this parable to a huge crowd (4:1). Unfortunately, this crowd came only to see Jesus do amazing things, not to hear and receive His message. So Jesus sat in the boat, turned to the crowd on shore, and said, "Listen!" (4:3). Jesus wanted them to really hear what He was saying. He knew that many people were hearing His words with their ears but not accepting them with their hearts.



THINK ABOUT IT

Many people who go to church are just like this crowd: hearing the words, but not accepting the message.

So Jesus told a story that is both clear and unclear. This kind of a story is called a **parable**. A parable is a simple word picture that illustrates a profound spiritual truth. Parables are easy to remember, and in one sense, they are easy to understand.

Even little children in the crowd understood this parable, because they saw it happen all the time. Each year, right after the early rains began to soften up the soil, the ground was plowed and the seed was sown. The sower would carry a sack of grain and use his hand to toss the grain over the ground. Some seeds would land on the paths that crisscrossed the field. Other seeds would land in soil that concealed a layer of solid rock (often limestone) just beneath

the surface. Other seeds would land in dirt that had weed seeds hidden in it. Finally, other seeds would land in good soil.

It's no surprise what happened to these seeds. Seeds on the path would lie on top of the hard soil, an easy meal for birds and rodents. Seeds on stony ground grew well at first, but their shallow roots could not sustain them during the scorching summer months. Seeds among the thorns might manage to grow, but they failed to produce any crops because the thorns crowded out sunlight and sucked away water and nutrients. But seed in good soil produced a crop, ranging from a decent crop of 30 times more than what was sown to an extremely good crop of 100 times more. All this would have been very familiar to Jesus' listeners.

But imagine what Jesus' audience was thinking when the parable ended: "Nice story, but what's the point?" Even though the story was simple, the point is impossible to understand without an explanation. Jesus challenged them, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (4:9), because this parable was designed to teach those who want to hear and understand. But for those who do not want to understand, the parable hides the truth.

Accept the reason for parables (4:10-12)

Jesus explained this privately to His true followers when they asked him why He spoke in parables (4:10). First, He encouraged them by saying the secret of the kingdom of God had been revealed to them. In coming to Jesus for an explanation, these followers showed that they had ears to hear.

Second, Jesus explained that the parable was about a "secret" (Mark 4:11). The word "**secret**" means something that you can only know if God reveals it to you (cf. Dan 2:47). In other words, the "secret" was not designed to be hidden forever. It was designed to be revealed (Mark 4:22). But it is a "secret" because it's up to Jesus to decide who is able to know (Matt 11:27). Because this knowledge is revealed only by God, the only people who receive it are those who depend on God (11:25), like the true

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THINK ABOUT IT

It is possible to know a lot about God and God's word, but still not truly know God.

19:16–17, 24–25). But more specifically, it describes the perfect reign of God Himself on earth with His people forever (Rev 21:1–22:5). But what was so secret about the kingdom of God? Hadn't the prophets spoken of this often? Yet despite all the prophecies, most Jews did not understand the true nature of God's kingdom. They had seen clear evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, yet they refused to accept that Jesus Himself was the King, and that the kingdom was present with Him (Matt 12:28). They refused to accept that the kingdom was really about knowing God, and that a person can only know God through Jesus (11:27).

Why didn't they understand? Was the message too complicated? No, they did not understand because they did not want to believe what Jesus was teaching. So they kept watching Jesus' miracles and listening to Jesus' words, but they did not take it to heart (Mark 4:12). Because they refused to believe what was clear, Jesus spoke in parables to make things less clear (Isa 6:9–10). How a person receives God's word is what makes all the difference.

Understand the four kinds of hearers (4:13–20)

In fact, that is what this first parable is all about. The seed is God's word, and God's word is spread to every kind of person, so that all have opportunity to respond and receive life (1 Pet 1:23). But how each person responds depends on the condition of his heart, just as the growth of grain depends on the condition of the soil. The first soil represents people who are totally unwilling to hear God's word. Their hearts are hard and they do not want to listen. So Satan quickly snatches away whatever knowledge was revealed to them (2

followers of Jesus who asked about the parable.

Third, the secret was about the **kingdom of God**. The kingdom of God involves spiritual life, eternal life, and salvation (Matt

Cor 4:4). This first group lacks the humility to even open their ears.

The second soil represents people who initially hear God's word with enthusiasm and emotion but are not truly changed. Even though God's word sounds good to them, they are unwilling to endure persecution by those opposed to God, and they are unable to endure the hardship that comes with being a Christian. Ultimately, this second group lacks faith.

The third soil represents people who seem like genuine believers at first. However, as time reveals, they come to Jesus for the things He gives, not to get Jesus Himself. They do not love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). They are divided in their loyalty. Because they still love possessions (Matt 6:24) and the things of the world (1 John 2:15–17) more than God, they get distracted from the only One worth loving. They bear no fruit, because they lack true love.

The fourth soil represents people who truly hear, understand, welcome, and trust Jesus' message. These are the only true believers, for they are the only ones who bear fruit (John 15:5–8). They are the only ones who persevere and do not fall away from Christ (8:31). What makes the difference between this fourth group and the other three? They listened with humble hearts (Matt 11:25).

So when you hear God's word, be careful how you hear and consider carefully what you hear (Mark 4:24). If you listen to God's word, but do not care for it, trust it, or love it, then God will make it even harder for you to understand His word (4:25). But if you listen well, seek to understand, and take Christ's message to heart, then He will teach you more and more, even things which you could not understand at first. In the end, Jesus will gather you into His kingdom like a farmer gathering in his crop.

THINK ABOUT IT

What kind of "soil" is in your heart?



Lesson Outline

Entering the kingdom of God depends on how you receive the word of God.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



Choose to hear God's word because . . .

1. If you don't want it, you will die like seed by the path (4:3–4, 14–15).
2. If you don't trust it, you will die like seed on stony ground (4:5–6, 16–17).
3. If you don't love it, you will die like seed among thorns (4:7, 18–19).
4. But if you want, trust, and love God's word, you will live like seed in good soil (4:8, 20).



AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE

1. Listen to the parable of four soils (4:1–9).
 - Jesus twice urged the crowd to listen (4:1–3a, 9).
 - Seed along the path is eaten by birds (4:3b–4).
 - Seed in rocky soil sprouts quickly but withers in the sun (4:5–6).
 - Seed among thorns is choked so that it produces no grain (4:7).
 - Seed in good soil grows and produces grain (4:8).
2. Accept the reason for parables (4:10–12).
 - Parables show the kingdom of God to those ready to receive it (4:10–11).
 - Parables hide the kingdom of God from those unwilling to receive it (4:12).
3. Understand the four kinds of hearers (4:13–20).
 - This parable is the key to understanding God's word (4:13–14).
 - The hard path: people who immediately reject the word (4:15).
 - The rocky soil: people who reject the word after pressure (4:16–17).
 - The thorny soil: people who reject the word because they love other things (4:18–19).
 - The good soil: people who welcome the word and bear fruit (4:20).



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

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Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

- 1. What was the first soil, and what did it represent?**
The first soil was the hard path. The seeds couldn't get into the soil, and birds ate them. That is like people who do not even want to understand God's word.
- 2. What was the second soil, and what did it represent?**
The second soil was the dirt with rock underneath. The plants died when the temperature rose. That is like people who like the good news but don't trust God when life gets hard.
- 3. What was the third soil, and what did it represent?**
The third soil was thorny soil. The seed grew but produced no fruit. That is like people who love other things more than Jesus.
- 4. What was the fourth soil, and what did it represent?**
The fourth soil was good soil. That is like people who welcome God's word and bear fruit. They will be harvested into God's kingdom.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

- 1. Why was there such a big crowd?**
The crowd came to hear and see interesting things, but not to believe.
- 2. What did Jesus call the crowd to do several times?**
Listen. Truly hear and accept His words.
- 3. What is a parable?**
A parable is a simple word picture that explains a spiritual truth.
- 4. Why did Jesus not explain His parable to the crowd?**
Jesus spoke in parables because most people rejected the truth He had already taught. His parables hid the truth from unbelievers.
- 5. Do parables only hide the truth?**
No. Jesus used parables to teach the truth to those who wanted to hear and understand.
- 6. What is the main point of this parable?**
The four soils show that people respond to God's word in different ways.
- 7. What difference does it make how you respond to God's word?**
How we respond to God's word determines whether we enter God's kingdom or not.
- 8. Why is the fourth soil the only one that represents true believers?**
True believers persevere (continually trust) and they bear spiritual fruit.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



ON TARGET

While the sowing of seeds was a common metaphor in the first century, it is foreign to many today. Give the children an opportunity to be the “farmer” who is trying to sow his seed in the best possible soil. Use a sheet of construction paper to create a field with a section of good soil, surrounded by weeds and thorns, and hard soil. Have the children scatter their seed and count how many fell in the various types of soil.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS

Hold up objects to solicit different responses from the children: a piece of candy, a picture of a puppy, a can of green beans, and a pair of socks. Talk about the different ways the children responded to each object. Next, hold up your Bible and see how the children respond. Tell the class that today we are going to learn about four ways people respond to the message of salvation contained in God's word.



READ AND RESPOND

Break the class up into four groups, one for each of the different types of soil. As you read each part of the lesson, have the children make their noise and action. For the pathway, have the children make a bird noise and flap their wings. For the stony soil, have the children clap their hands once and say “ouch.” For the thorny soil, have the children make a choking sound and hold their throats. Finally, for good soil, have the last group say, “aaaaaah” and pretend that they are growing big and tall.

SEE THE SOIL?

Bring in some seeds and a plant. Explain that the type of soil in which the seeds are planted will make the difference whether the seeds will grow and produce fruit. Illustrate this by bringing in four clear containers filled with the four different types of soil: (1) Hard path: empty container (seed fell on path, not soil), (2) Rocky soil: soil with rocks, (3) Thorny soil: soil and weed plants, and (4) Good soil. Bring in other props for gardening: trowel, fork, gardening gloves, watering can, etc. Explain that each of these soils determine if the seed will grow.



EARS TO HEAR

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheet, construction paper, glue, scissors, and crayons.

Directions: Make a headband out of construction paper for each child that fits his or her head. Give the students the “Ears to Hear” craft page. Students may decorate their headband and ears. Have them cut out the two ears and the Scripture verse and tape the ears to the sides of the headband. Finally, have the students tape the verse card to the front of the headband.

*Ears to Hear
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1*



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AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

A MODERN PARABLE

A parable is a simple story with a lesson. Jesus taught many spiritual truths about God in parables. To introduce the children to this concept you may want to read a modern parable at the beginning of class and then ask them what the story teaches us. A good example would be “Twice Mine” by Paul Hinton, a book from the Adam Raccoon series.

WELCOME TO THE FARM

Come to class dressed like a farmer. Ask the children: “Did you know that your Sunday School teacher is like a farmer who sows seeds? Each week when your teacher tells you about God’s Word, he or she is planting seeds (God’s Word) in your heart. What type of ground do you think the seed is falling on? Today you will hear the lesson Christ gave about seed falling on different types of ground and what resulted when the plant started to grow.



ILLUSTRATE

SEEDS AND THE SOILS

In preparation for this week’s lesson, place lima beans in plastic bags between wet paper towels. Leave them in a warm place such as a windowsill. Once the plants have begun to sprout, place them into each of the situations from the lesson. For the seeds by the road, place the sprouting lima bean in some gravel. For the stony soil, pebbles could be used. For the thorny soil, use pipe cleaners or wire to show what a vine choking the plant may have looked like. For the good soil, use a rich, dark potting soil. Allow the children to observe the different environments. Which do they think will provide best soil for the young plants?

HOW DOES THAT FIT?

Jesus’ parables were somewhat like a set of puzzle pieces which became clear as they were fitted in place. Today’s lesson could be taught along similar lines. A picture of a farmer could be cut into a number of pieces and pasted randomly on the board. As you progress through the lesson, begin to position the pieces in the correct place until, at the end, the children can clearly see what is being depicted.



APPLY

PARABLE PINWHEEL

See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheet, pencil, thumbtacks, scissors, and crayons.

Directions: Have students cut picture from craft sheet, cutting around the outside square only. Color the pictures of each of the four soil types and responses on the left side of each triangle that go along with the Scripture reference (explain the right side of each triangle will be folded up to the center of the pinwheel). Students should turn the square each time they complete a picture so that the Scripture reference is facing up when they complete their drawings. After students illustrate all four sections, instruct them to cut along the solid lines to the end points. Model how to fold corners one through four to the center point (in order), and attach to the pencil with a thumbtack. Encourage the students to take their pinwheel home and place it in their yard to remind them of the lesson taught by the Parable of the Sower.



Parable Pinwheel
See Year 3 Craft Book, Book 1

AGES 9–11

**BLIND, DEAF, OR BELIEVING**

Select three children. Blindfold the first, place earplugs in the second's ears, and allow the third to both listen and watch the story. Read an unfamiliar story (with pictures) to the three children while the class observes. After reading the story, have each child retell the story in his or her own words. Ask the class to judge which child retold the story most closely to the original version. The third child should come closest to an accurate retelling, as his or her vision and hearing were not hindered. Use this game to introduce the concept that Jesus taught in parables so that only believers would truly understand the meaning behind the lesson. Explain that the two children with the blindfold and earplugs represent people whose hearts are hardened to Jesus' message.

MAKE AN ANNOUNCEMENT

Make an announcement in another language and wait for the children to respond. Repeat it a few times and watch their reactions. After a few minutes give them instructions they understand. Then talk about what happened. Explain what it means to hear but not to understand, and when you do not understand you cannot do what you are asked.

**HEY, I WANT TO SEE TOO**

Jesus explains that the purpose of teaching in parables was so that spiritual truth could be revealed to some, while hiding it from others. This concept could be incorporated into your teaching time by starting to teach the lesson to the whole class and showing pictures to them all. Midway through, the teacher can gravitate to one portion of the class and show the pictures in such a way that the others cannot see. The class will quickly object that they cannot see. This will provide the perfect opportunity to explain why Jesus taught in parables.

SPIRITUAL FRUIT

The seeds sown in the good soil bore fruit (Mark 4:8). So also those who have heard and accepted God's word (4:20). Illustrate the reality of spiritual fruit by sharing about the person or persons whom God used to bring you the message of salvation. Ask the children to name someone instrumental in leading them to salvation. Finally, ask the children if they have ever shared the message of salvation with any family or friends.

**WHICH ONE?**

Which soil best represents your heart? Are you unwilling to even consider what Jesus has to say in the Bible, through your Sunday School teachers, and pastor (pathway)? Are you willing to listen to God's word, but afraid of what others may say if they found out you believed it (rocky soil)? Have you heard the Gospel and made a profession of faith, but find yourself consistently choosing to do, say, and think things you know the Bible says are wrong (thorny soil)? Finally, have you accepted Jesus as your lord and Savior, welcoming His word into your life (good soil)? If so, can you identify any spiritual fruit in your life? Are you striving to obey your parents and teachers? Do you spend any time reading the Bible? When is the last time you told someone about Jesus?