

SOWING THE WORD – REAPING THE HARVEST

Mark 4:1-20

Introduction:

It's seven weeks since we left our study in the Book of Mark. We are going to return there this morning for a few minutes before we move into the communion service to remember our Lord's death.

It is very easy, when reading through the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, to lose track of the actual chronology of his life. I would like to try to outline very briefly some of the key elements of the timeline of his years of ministry. His total ministry was just over 3 years.

It is broken down in the Thompson Chain Reference Bible as the year of inauguration, the year of popularity and the year of opposition. The exact starting point for those years is debatable, but the easiest division is by the celebration of the Passover in the spring of the year.

The first Passover (John 2:13) occurred very soon after the beginning of Jesus ministry. It launches the first year of Jesus ministry – the year of inauguration. Most of this year is spent in the region of Galilee, healing and performing miraculous signs, calling people to follow him.

The second Passover (John 5:1) introduces the year of popularity. Jesus ministry remained mainly in Galilee, as he continued to perform miracles, healing the sick and lame, casting out demons and carrying out other miraculous signs. He also spent much more time teaching and preaching, preparing his followers for ministry as well.

The third Passover is not specifically mentioned in the gospels, but it would begin the third year of Jesus' ministry. During this year, Jesus found himself increasingly at odds with the religious establishment because of the things he was doing and teaching.

Of course, it was at the time of the next Passover, at the end of that year of opposition, that Jesus was taken into custody, hurriedly tried before Pilate, and condemned to death. Slightly more than three years had passed since he was first introduced by his cousin, John the Baptist.

When you see this chronological layout of the years of Jesus' ministry, you realize that most the events the gospel writers include occur in the last year or even the last few weeks of Jesus' life and ministry. The choosing and appointing of the twelve apostles, for example, (Mark 3:13-19) does not occur until sometime in his second year of ministry.

The teaching we are looking at this morning, from Mark 4, takes place in the latter half of the second year of his ministry. We are already into the second half of his brief time of ministry here on earth.

With all that introduction behind us, we now need to settle down for a few minutes on Mark 4.

The Kingdom of God in Parables

Mark 4 contains several parables Jesus told about the kingdom of God. So what is a parable. I found this brief definition on line:

"A parable is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse, which illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles... A parable is a type of analogy."

Another simple definition: *"a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."* Parables are usually employed to make a single point or to teach a specific lesson. Unlike an allegory, it is not necessary or even advised to try to make every element of a parable have some significance. There is just one main idea to a parable. Jesus often used parables to illustrate a point he was making in his teaching.

As I have said – these parables are about the kingdom of God. Compare to the other gospels – Matthew 13, Luke 8. Luke has only two parables in this teaching regarding the kingdom; Mark has 4, Matthew has 9.

I need to take a moment here to talk about the subject of these parables – the kingdom of God (Matthew – kingdom of heaven). This is not to be confused with the messianic kingdom, when Jesus Christ will return to establish a kingdom where he will rule in righteousness on the earth. This is something which had me confused for years.

We don't have time to go into this in detail, but just let me say this: What Jesus is speaking about in the gospels is an internal kingdom. It is really about the establishing of his rule in the hearts of people during

the church age. Remember that when Jesus was teaching while he was on earth this kingdom, the church, was still in the future.

So, why does Jesus use parables in his teaching? That is precisely the question his disciples asked – Mark 4:10. In Matthew 13, the specific question is given – “Why do you speak to them in parables?” See the answer in vv.11-12...

A “mystery” in the NT refers to something previously hidden and unknown but revealed in the NT. In this context, the subject of the mystery is the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus communicates in the form of parables. Thus, the mystery is revealed to those who believe, yet it remains concealed to those who reject Christ and his gospel. “...those outside...” are those who are not followers of Christ. They are restricted from seeing because of their unbelief.

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed

Well that brings us to the first parable. We read it earlier. Once Jesus was alone with the disciples, he explained the parable to them to be sure they did not miss the significance of it. Of all the parables Jesus told regarding the kingdom of God, (9 in the book of Matthew) only two are explained for us. This is the only one that is explained in all three synoptic gospels.

Read vv. 13-20 – there you have it. We are not going to spend time this morning looking at the details regarding the various soils on which the seed falls. It is my intention to focus on that next week. Today I just want to wrap this up with a few thoughts about the sower and the seed.

v. 3 – “*Listen! A sower went out to sow.*”

v. 14 – “*The sower sows the word.*”

v. 20 – “*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.*”

There is a clear correlation between sowing and reaping. I don’t need to tell you that. You know it – farming background. But I want to draw your attention to a couple of Bible passages that speak to this connection between sowing and reaping:

Gal. 6:7,8 – “*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for **what-ever one sows, that will he also reap.** For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*”

You reap what you sow. You cannot plant barley seed and expect to get wheat in return. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells another parable about wheat and weeds – good seed and bad seed (weed seeds). If your seed is good you will reap a good harvest.

2 Cor. 9:6 – “*The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*”

You cannot be stingy with the seed and expect to reap a generous harvest.

Application – Sowing and Reaping

So how do we apply this to us today?

The seed is the Word of God. The sower is the one who spreads the Word of God. It is the truth of the Word that will grow and produce a harvest.

This brings to our attention a few important truths:

1. We are responsible to sow the seed. *Discuss sowing in Jesus day – scattering the seed.* Today I have a spreader for grass seed or for fertilizer. When it is used, the seed falls in many different places – rocks, sidewalks, dry hard areas and productive areas. When we sow the Word of God, the same thing happens. Not all of it will take root and produce fruit. That is what Jesus was saying in this parable. (We will look more at that next week.) But we are responsible to get the seed out there.
2. We are not responsible for the results. Some of the seed will grow and some will not. Some will produce an abundant crop and some will not. But that is not our responsibility. It is only God who can make the seed produce results.

Next week we will look at the results, but for now I want to look at the promise and focus on our responsibility in the matter of sowing.

Conclusion

As the seed is sown, we are given the assurance that there will be a harvest. The seed will produce a crop. *Read v. 8*. The level of production will vary, but there will be fruit.

So where do we fit into this? We are called to sow the seed, to plant the Word of God whenever and wherever we can. Yes, some of it will fall on ground that is not prepared, some will fall where it will never germinate. But that is not our call. We do not determine whether a heart is ready, whether the conditions are right for the seed to sprout and grow. We are to scatter the seed.

Looking back over my life and ministry – there are many times when I kept the seed to myself, instead of sowing. Many reasons for that, none of them good. I'm not big on New Year's resolutions, but one of my goals this year is to try harder to sow the seed of God's Word more faithfully. God has promised that when we sow the seed there will be a harvest.

Psalm 126:5-6 – "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."