

Called to Respond

August 31, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Jonah 1:1-3; Mark 4:3-9,13-20

Session Outline

1. The Call to Sow (Mark 4:3-9)
2. Are We Obedient? (Jonah 1:1-3)
3. What Soil Are You? (Mark 4:13-20)

Theological Theme

We are all called to sow seeds of the gospel wherever we go, trusting God with the response.

Call to Action

Who have you decided *not* to share the gospel with? Is this an indication that you have predetermined how the Holy Spirit will or will not or can or cannot work?



Leader Guide

Called to Respond

Introduction

Did you know that you can grow an avocado tree from an avocado pit? Stick toothpicks in the seed, put it in some water and, after about eight weeks, roots will begin to grow, then a sprout. Once the seedling grows enough leaves and roots, you can transfer the pit to a pot to continue its journey as your future guacamole supplier, conveniently located in your backyard.

But there is a catch. Growing an avocado plant from a seed can take thirteen years or more before your first avocado harvest. Depending on how long you live in your home, if you began this process today, you might not even be around to see (and eat) the fruits of your labor.¹

The same is true for the eternal garden God has called us to labor in. When we sow seeds of the gospel, we won't always know when and if our efforts bear fruit. In fact, if we are obediently sowing seeds of the gospel, we won't know the full impact this side of heaven, and that's okay. Preston Perry, a modern evangelist, says, "God wants to raise up a generation of evangelists who are OK with not seeing the fruit of their work."²

Our job isn't to change hearts and make the gospel bloom in someone's life, that's God's job. Our job is simply to sow. Today, we'll explore this idea as we study the parable of the sower and discuss what it means for us in 2025.



How was the gospel "sown" in your life? How long did it take for the fruit of the gospel to come about?



Who do you know who has built a legacy of sowing gospel seeds?

Session Summary

In the parable of the sower, the sower scattered seeds indiscriminately—even in areas where it doesn't seem like a plant would be likely to thrive (a path, rocky ground, among thorn bushes). Similarly, we are called to plant seeds of the gospel indiscriminately, wherever we go, even if it doesn't seem

like the recipients might be open to the message. Our job is to sow; it's the Lord's job to change hearts.

We have a choice: We can be obedient, working in God's field as sowers, or we can be disobedient, sowing no seeds as we go.

1. The Call to Sow (Mark 4:3-9)



What action and reactions do we see throughout this passage?



What stands out to you about the sower in these verses? How might this apply to us?

The parable of the sower (also known as the parable of the soils) is one of the most well-known parables in the Gospels. Our account today is from the Gospel of Mark, but it is also recorded in Matthew (Matthew 13:1-23) and Luke (Luke 8:4-15). Some scholars believe Jesus likely taught this parable many times as He traveled throughout His ministry, so the disciples were familiar with it.³

If Jesus did, in fact, teach this parable many times, we can gather that it is important. Either way, we know Jesus wanted to emphasize this teaching as He began with “Listen!” (v. 3) and ended with “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen” (v. 9). Let's see what we can learn.

Jesus opened by telling His audience that a sower went out to sow seeds. As the sower went, he tossed the seed indiscriminately. First, he tossed some seed on the path. A path doesn't seem like a good place for plants to grow, but the sower scattered seed there anyway.

Next, he tossed seed on rocky ground, where there wasn't much soil. Rocky ground is also not the ideal setting for growth, yet the sower scattered seed there anyway. He tossed some seeds among the thorns. This also doesn't seem like a good place to plant, and yet, the sower scattered seed there anyway.

Lastly, the sower tossed some seed on good ground! Now this makes sense! If we were sowing seed and wanting it to flourish, we would focus on this type of area, right? But that is not what the sower in Jesus's parable did. Why?

If the sower's goal was to toss seeds where they are most likely to grow, he or she is not very good at his or her job, right? It doesn't make sense to expect seeds to grow on a path, or on rocks, or among thorns. Something

The Soils Lived Out

The parable of the soils provides a framework for interpreting responses to Jesus's message. Jesus's preaching evoked (1) the disciples' obedient following (1:18, 20; 2:14); (2) the crowd's amazement; (3) His family's suspicion of insanity (3:21); (4) the Jewish leaders' opposition (2:7, 16, 24; 3:6, 22). As Mark's story unfolds, a rich man has his opportunity to follow Jesus “choked” by love of wealth (10:17–25; see 4:18–19). And the crowds “who received the message with joy” (4:16) join Jesus's opponents in time of persecution (14:43; 15:15). Beyond Mark's conclusion, the disciples—like seed sown on good soil—come to maturity in which they endure persecution (see 13:9–13) and bear much fruit.

might grow in rare instances, but this seems to be a poor strategy for a successful harvest, and your average farmer must be strategic to be successful.

The goal of Jesus's sower seems not to be sowing only where he thinks he can reap the most but rather sowing everywhere he goes. The sower went on the path, so he sowed there. The sower went to rocky ground, and even though it didn't seem like there was much soil there, he sowed there. The sower passed by the thorns, so he sowed there. The sower walked through good ground, and he sowed there too.

Jesus is the true Sower of the gospel message. None of us receive the message of salvation apart from Him. As those who have received his message, we now act as His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and "co-sowers" of the gospel message. Whatever your "job" is, all followers of Christ are called to be sowers of the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20). In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations, and in the parable of the sower, Jesus presented an example of a sower with a similar goal—sowing everywhere he went. In the Great Commission, Jesus didn't say "Go but only talk to the people you think will want to hear the good news." No, we are called to sow the seed of the gospel indiscriminately, even in places that may not make sense to us.

Our job is to sow wherever we go. It's the Lord's job to change hearts. In the parable, the seed doesn't prosper in the places that aren't ripe for growth, but the beautiful reality is that the Holy Spirit can work to change hearts even on the path, the rocky ground, and among the thorns.

There are countless stories of people who seemed unlikely to accept the gospel message who ultimately placed their faith in Jesus because someone was willing to share with them. Our goal is not to determine or control the outcome. Our goal is to share obediently.

We're called to sow indiscriminately, everywhere we go.



Application: What does it look like to sow seeds of the gospel in daily life?

2. Are We Obedient? (Jonah 1:1-3)



What was the call for obedience in this passage?



How did Jonah respond? Why are we prone to respond similarly to the call to go and share with others, especially those we have conflict with?

The Lord had a mission for Jonah: go to Nineveh and preach. God had taken note of Nineveh's wickedness and was calling them to repent by sending His prophet, Jonah, to speak on His behalf. Jonah, however, did not share the Lord's compassion for the city (Jonah 4). When God charged Jonah with going to the gentile city of Nineveh, Jonah hopped on a ship headed in the opposite direction to Tarshish, hoping to flee the Lord's presence.


To connect this to the parable of the sower, if there was ever a location that seemed thorny—consumed with pride, wealth, and power, and therefore an inhospitable recipient of the Word of God—Nineveh would be it.

You may remember the story from here (and from our study a couple of weeks ago). God sent a storm to Jonah's boat, and Jonah was thrown out into the sea and swallowed by a fish. Jonah was eventually vomited back out and, when God came calling again, Jonah went but not with a submissive heart. Jonah delivered possibly the worst sermon ever: "In forty days Nineveh will be demolished!" (Jonah 3:4). Yet, God used it to bring the people of Nineveh to repentance, and God spared them.


This is a perfect example of God working in all circumstances, even when our words are not the most convincing, or our hearts aren't quite in the right place, but He can do much through us when we are willing and obedient.


The book of Jonah acts as a mirror for us hold up and see ourselves honestly. Do we see ourselves in Jonah? When God tells us to do something, are we obedient and submissive, or do we flee in the opposite direction?

Jesus commanded us all to tell others about Him. Are we listening and responding?

 Application: Where might you be responding to God like Jonah? How can we seek heart change in these areas?

3. What Kind of Soil Are You? (Mark 4:13-20)

 What stands out to you from Jesus's explanation of the parable?

 How does Jesus explain the different soils represented in the parable? How have you seen others respond to the gospel message in some of these ways? How have you responded in some of these ways to the gospel message?

We looked at this parable from the perspective of the sower earlier, and now we'll look at it from the perspective of the soil. Jesus explained what this parable means: In some instances, when the good news is shared, Satan interferes, and it doesn't take root; persecution or hardship drive some to abandon Jesus; and wealth and power push some to pursue their own desires over following Jesus. These are the three soils that ultimately don't receive the message and grow.

However, some hear the good news and welcome it. They embrace Jesus and live for Him, and when they do, they join in the work of sowing the seed and the good news of the gospel is multiplied.

Consider your heart. If you don't yet know Jesus, what type of soil might be represented by your heart? Will you shut out the good news or embrace it? Are you open to learning more about Jesus and hearing more about what salvation means? We would love to talk to you more about this.

If you already know and follow Jesus, are you bearing the kind of fruit Jesus described in verse 20? Are you living out the Great Commission? Are you sowing seeds of the gospel everywhere you go?



Application: Assess your heart today. How are you responding to the gospel? How can you seek to be honest with others and with God, seeking tenderness to the gospel message?

Conclusion

In the parable of the sower, Jesus painted a picture of someone sowing seeds in places not primed for growth. The sower scattered seeds on a path, on rocky ground, and among thorns, even though common sense tells us a harvest isn't likely to be plentiful there. But the sower's goal was not what we might think. The sower's goal wasn't to only sow seeds where they were likely to flourish, his goal was to sow seeds everywhere he went.




In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20), and in the parable of the sower, He presented us with a model of what that looks like. Like the sower who scattered seed indiscriminately—on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil—we are to sow seeds of the gospel indiscriminately. We sow even in the places that don't make sense to us, rather than choosing who we think might respond positively.

It's our job to sow seeds of the gospel wherever we go; it's the Lord's job to change hearts.

Just as we are faced with a choice of whether to share the gospel today, the prophet Jonah was faced with a similar choice. At first, Jonah chose disobedience and fled in the opposite direction of God's call. He didn't think the Ninevites deserved God's mercy, and he didn't want God to relent!

Does this sound familiar? Is there someone you have chosen not to share the gospel with because you don't like them or think they would reject it (and you)? Jesus has commanded us to tell others about Him. Are we being obedient and submitting to and trusting God's plan, or are we disobedient, headed on a metaphorical boat in the opposite direction?

If we don't know Jesus yet, we are called to respond to the message of the gospel. If we already know Jesus, we are called to obedience. Will we be like the seed sown on fertile ground, spreading more seeds and planting more plants wherever we go? What choice will we make today?

-  Have you ever hesitated to talk to someone about Jesus because you didn't think they would respond positively? When have you been surprised by a person's response in your own experience or the shared experience of another?
-  How can we support one another as a group seeking to sow the seeds of the gospel everywhere we go?
-  Who is God calling you to share the gospel with now? How can we pray for you as you pursue talking with them about Jesus?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for preserving the teachings of Jesus in the Bible. Ask for God's help submitting to His will obediently. Ask that He would walk with you and show you the way. Pray for the specific individuals the members of your group hope to share the gospel with. Ask God to open doors and help you walk through them.

Memory Verse

"Still other seed fell on good ground and it grew up, producing fruit that increased thirty, sixty, and a hundred times." —Mark 4:8

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Mark* by Daniel Akin
- *Be Diligent* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk* by Eric Redmon, Bill Curtis, Ken Fentress

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Mark

Purpose

Mark's Gospel is a narrative about Jesus. Mark identifies his theme in the first verse: "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That Jesus is the divine Son of God is the major emphasis of his Gospel. God announced it at Jesus's baptism in 1:11. Demons and unclean spirits recognized and acknowledged it in 3:11 and 5:7. God reaffirmed it at the transfiguration in 9:7. Jesus taught it parabolically in 12:1–12, hinted at it in 13:32, and confessed it directly in 14:61–62. Finally, the Roman centurion confessed it openly and without qualification in 15:39. Thus Mark's purpose was to summon people to repent and respond in faith to the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1, 15).

Author

The Gospel of Mark is anonymous. Eusebius, the early church historian, writing in AD 326, preserved the words of Papias, an early church father. Papias quoted "the elder," probably John, as saying that Mark recorded Peter's preaching about the things Jesus said and did, but not in order. Thus Mark was considered the author of this Gospel even in the first century.

The Mark who wrote this Gospel was John Mark, the son of a widow named Mary, in whose house the church in Jerusalem sometimes gathered (Ac 12:12–17) and where Jesus possibly ate the Last Supper with his disciples. Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10), and he accompanied Barnabas and Paul back to Antioch after their famine relief mission to Jerusalem (Ac 12:25). Mark next went with Barnabas and Paul on part of the first missionary journey as an assistant (Ac 13:5), but at Perga, Mark turned back (Ac 13:13).

Setting

According to the early church fathers, Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome just before or just after Peter's martyrdom. Further confirmation of the Roman origin of Mark's Gospel is found in Mark 15:21 where Mark noted that Simon, a Cyrenian who carried Jesus's cross, was the father of Alexander and Rufus, men apparently known to the believers in Rome.

Because Mark wrote primarily for Roman Gentiles, he explained Jewish customs, translated Aramaic words and phrases into Greek, used Latin terms rather than their Greek equivalents, and rarely quoted from the OT. Most Bible scholars are convinced that Mark was the earliest Gospel and served as one of the sources for Matthew and Luke.

Special Features

Mark's Gospel emphasizes actions and deeds. Jesus is on the go—healing, casting out demons, performing miracles, hurrying from place to place, and teaching. In Mark everything happens "immediately." As soon as one episode ends, another begins. The rapid pace slows down when Jesus enters Jerusalem (11:1). Thereafter, events are marked by days, and his final day by hours.

Extended Commentary

Mark 4:1-20

4:1–20 Between the parable (vv. 3–9) and its interpretation (vv. 13–20), Mark places Jesus’s explanation for why he spoke in parables (vv. 10–12). For Mark, the parable of the seeds and soils is the key to understanding the rest of Jesus’s parables (v. 13).

4:1 Again recalls 2:13 and 3:1. The sea refers to the Sea of Galilee (see note at 1:16–18). He got into a boat to use it as a floating platform from which to teach.

4:2–3 The imperative listen calls for obedience to what is taught, not mere comprehension. The sower represents Jesus.

4:4–7 Three failures based on soil type and circumstances are pictured. The seed that fell along the path did not have time to germinate (profess faith) before birds (Satan) devoured it. The seed that fell on rocky ground ... grew up rapidly, meaning there was early evidence of faith, but it quickly withered away when the sun (pressure, persecution) came. The seed that fell among thorns (worries) was choked and didn’t produce fruit.

4:8 The seed that fell on good ground ... producing fruit that increased. Jesus pointed to the productive nature of the good soil versus the unproductive or transitory yield of the others. He reinforced this by specifying a bountiful increase (cp. Gn 26:12) of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times.

4:9 Let anyone who has ears to hear listen recalls his initial admonition (“Listen!”) in v. 3 and prepares his listeners for the important information in vv. 10–12 (cp. v. 23; 7:14; 8:18).

4:10–12 These verses, among the most difficult in the NT, give Jesus’s rationale for teaching in parables. Interpreters are divided as to their meaning. It may be that one of Jesus’s purposes in using parables was to deliver judgment against hard-hearted listeners.

4:10 Verses 10–12 were not part of Jesus’s lakeside teaching but were spoken when he was alone. This is the first mention of the Twelve since they were chosen in 3:14.

4:11 Jesus distinguished two audiences: you (pl) to whom revelation has been given (by God) and those outside. Outsiders only heard parables; insiders learned the secret. “Secret” is literally “mystery” (Gk *mustērion*). In the NT, *mustērion* refers not to esoteric knowledge or secret rites that are discoverable by human effort, but to truth that is hidden and can be known only if God reveals it (Dn 2:18–19, 27–30, 47). The secret relates to the kingdom of God, which is what Jesus came to announce (1:15) and what he will begin to explain in 4:26–32.

4:12 So that (Gk *hina*) can indicate purpose or result. Thus Jesus’s quotation of Is 6:9–10 either offers the reason for his teaching in parables or describes the result. Matthew 13:13 reads “because” (Gk *hoti*), and thus states the result of the hearers’ unwillingness, not its cause. Mark’s abbreviated quotation of Is 6:9–10 reverses the first two clauses, drops the first half of v. 10, and changes “and be healed” to and be forgiven. Turn back expresses repentance. “Be forgiven” is a divine passive, meaning “be forgiven by God.”

4:13–20 Jesus responded to the question of v. 10 and interpreted his own parable.

4:13 For Mark this verse is key: Whoever does not understand this parable will not understand all of the parables of Jesus.

4:14–20 In Jesus’s explanation, the seed sown (cp. 1Co 3:5–9) is the word (cp. 2:2); the birds become Satan; the sun and its scorching become distress or persecution (i.e., religious persecution); withered becomes fall away; the choking from the thorns is specified as the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things (i.e., from misplaced priorities, see Mt 6:24–34); and the good ground is identified as those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit. Clearly Jesus’s emphasis was on “the word” (Gk *logos*)—used eight times in these verses—and on hear—used four times. Those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce a crop are true disciples, even though they produce varying results (Mt 25:14–30).⁴

Jonah 1:1–3

1:1 Jonah in Hebrew means “dove.” His father’s name Amittai means “faithful [is Yahweh].”

1:2 Nineveh on the east bank of the Tigris River became the Assyrian capital after 705 BC, well after Jonah’s day. Its ruins are found in the northern part of modern Iraq, opposite the city of Mosul 220 miles northwest of Baghdad. For Jonah, Nineveh was an arduous journey of more than 500 miles to the northeast of Samaria. His probable route—first traveling north and then east—would have made the trip closer to 600 miles. God’s holiness is offended by sin. He showed himself judge of the world by holding these distant pagans accountable for their evil, though he also showed his mercy by commanding his prophet to warn them.

1:3 To flee ... from before the Lord’s presence is to attempt the impossible since God is everywhere, though people still try. (See 4:2 for why he fled.) Joppa on the Mediterranean coast just south of modern Tel Aviv was one of Israel’s few natural seaports. The location of Tarshish is uncertain. Its association with ships (1Kg 10:22) suggests it was near the sea. The “ships of Tarshish” used by King Jehoshaphat on the Red Sea were probably merchant ships of design similar to those used by sailors from Tarshish on the Mediterranean Sea. Tarshish has sometimes been identified with Paul’s home of Tarsus in Cilicia or the city of Tharros on the island of Sardinia west of Italy. But the most probable identification of Tarshish is the Phoenician colony of Tartessus, located on the Guadalquivir River on the southwestern coast of Spain about 2,000 miles west of Palestine. This is about as far in the opposite direction from Nineveh as Jonah could have gone.⁵

References

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