

BEYOND THESE WALLS: HERE WE GO!

Weekly Devotional

A ministry of Chapel Hill

chapelhillpc.org

WEEK 1

This guide pairs with Mark 4:1-20 and the sermon preached at Chapel Hill on May 4-5.



Written by Gunnar Tesdahl

Gunnar lives in Gig Harbor with his wife and best friend Aimee. He was born and raised in Spokane, Washington, where he graduated from Whitworth University. He currently serves as Director of Worship at Chapel Hill. Gunnar is pursuing a Master of Divinity at Knox Theological Seminary with the aspiration of serving as a pastor in the future. Gunnar enjoys playing and listening to music, reading all sorts of theology books and articles, and watching sitcoms.

LifeGroup Guide

Head

What is the purpose of the parables according to Mark 4:11-12?

Why were Jesus' followers, and not the others present, the only ones who heard Jesus' parables with the ability to understand "the secret of the kingdom of God"? In other words, why do some have "ears to hear" and others do not?

What does this parable teach about the nature of the kingdom of God?

Heart

Are you familiar with the truth of this parable in the natural world – through farming or gardening experience or knowledge perhaps? As you relate the parable to real-life experience in the natural world, what are your reflections on its applications in the spiritual realm?

How would you describe the soil of your own heart in light of Jesus' parable? If you humbly admit that your soil is "good," which not-good soil could be considered in second place for you?

The seed in the good soil experienced growth, increase and yielded huge results, of even "one hundredfold." The ESV Study Bible says the typical result a farmer at the time might have expected was somewhere between fivefold and fifteenfold. When have you experienced the abundant blessing of God, that goes above and beyond what you might have expected?

Hands

Consider those in your life who are far from God. With this passage in mind, how should you approach and pray for your friends and family who have yet to believe in Jesus Christ? Take some time in your group to pray for these loved ones.

Pray for the participants of Alpha as they explore the truth of the gospel. Participants are just a couple of weeks into the Alpha experience, and the door is wide open for others to join! Pray for good soil, receptive hearts, and evident fruit as God is at work in many lives!

DAY 1 – Monday
Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:1-3; Mark 4:33-34

Ask

Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables so often?

What are some modern-day examples of parables? What makes stories such an effective communication tool?

Reflect – The Parables (Part 1)

Many of us are familiar with the parables of Jesus—from the Good Samaritan to the Prodigal Son. But what we may not know is what a parable actually is and why Jesus used them in the first place. In our passage this week, we get a glimpse into what these parables are all about.

A simple definition of “parable” comes from the NLT Study Bible: “A brief narrative story told with earthly analogies to illustrate a spiritual truth.”¹ These stories usually have to do with another big theme in the gospels: “the kingdom of God.” In other words, when Jesus tells his stories, he’s typically seeking to open our eyes a bit more to how God’s reign in the world really works. These truths about God’s kingdom are, understandably, tough to grasp. In our passage, Jesus calls this the “secret of the kingdom of God.” That Greek term, *mysterion*, can also be translated “mystery.” A mystery in the New Testament is something that was once secret but is now being revealed. God’s kingdom had been a secret in many ways—something people could easily miss. But Jesus invites them now, through his stories, to get the “inside scoop.”

The use of parables in religious teaching was not something unique to Jesus. The rabbis of Jesus’ day used these kinds of stories, too. Presenters today add a story to their speech to capture the attention of their audience. And parents still tell stories to their kids with a life lesson, with the hope that they will stick with them over time. Jesus’ teachings are a bit different in that he does not always make the “moral of the story” clear to everyone. We’ll explore more why that is tomorrow.

¹ *NLT Study Bible*, p. 2443.

DAY 2 – Tuesday

Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:9-12; Matthew 13:10-17; Isaiah 6:8-13

Ask

What was Jesus' point in quoting Isaiah? What is he trying to get across by using that as the reason for his parables?

How do you depend upon the Holy Spirit as your teacher/helper when you read Scripture?

Reflect – The Parables (Part 2)

It's pretty apparent in this passage that some people were "insiders" and others were "outsiders" when it came to understanding Jesus' teachings. This can make us, as modern westerners, pretty uncomfortable. "Where is *their* choice in the matter? Shouldn't *everyone* get a chance?" While the parables made Jesus' teachings very accessible and understandable, in that they connected to his time and place, he taught things that people would've had a difficult time grasping without some more background.

With this in mind, we'll fill out our description of parables a bit more. These parables, in addition to teaching spiritual truths, were meant to quietly demonstrate judgment against all who were living in rebellion to God. The Bible teaches that we all, because of our sin, are separated from God and deserving of his righteous judgment. Without God's gracious intervention, we are unable to turn *from* our wrong ways of living *toward* God in belief and obedience. We all need a spiritual wake-up call and this only comes from God's Spirit changing us from the inside.

Jesus' parables, then, are a double-edged sword—they bring to light how far away we are from God *and* how compassionate God is to give us "ears to hear" what he has to say. It's only because of God's work in our hearts that we even care about Jesus, or even want to read the Bible, or have the ability to live the things we learn! This should lead us to immense gratitude and constant dependence upon God's Spirit to teach us. Consider beginning each of your times in Scripture by expressing gratitude for God's grace and requesting the Spirit's guidance. "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Psalm 119:18).

DAY 3 – Wednesday

Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:3, 14; Isaiah 55:6-13; James 1:21

Ask

What are some ways that God stoops to our level, so to speak, in order to teach us about his ways?

Are you listening to all the ways that God is speaking to you? How could you grow to be a better listener to God?

Reflect – The Sower and the Seed

We've acknowledged so far what the parables are and what they were meant to accomplish. Now we get to actually dive into the content of this incredible story told by Jesus! Each day, we will take a small portion of the story, as well as the parallel explanation that Jesus gives to his followers. Today, we'll cover the farmer and the seeds that he goes out to plant.

Why would Jesus use a farmer as the main subject of his story? Well, put simply, because everybody would get it! This was one of the ways that Jesus brought ethereal, up-in-the-clouds spiritual ideas down to earth for people. Jesus was seeking to make abstract concepts more concrete. Additionally, Jesus' willingness to use creation as an illustration to explain God and his ways demonstrates God's care for the world around us. God's world was made "very good," and it still is!

This farmer is said to have liberally tossed seeds in all kinds of areas. All of this is a picture of Jesus' preaching—he was sharing God's message with everybody, and some were actually following him and reaping the benefits! His message was the good news that God's reign had come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ— that God has shown up and we can know him! What better news is there? Unfortunately, not everyone was "picking up" what Jesus was "putting down." There are a variety of ways to respond to Jesus' message. And we'll take a look at these in the days to come.

But for now— spend some time enjoying God's world. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). What spiritual truths could he be teaching you from your seemingly mundane surroundings and circumstances?

DAY 4 – Thursday

Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:4, 15; 1 Peter 5:8-9; 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Ask

What characterizes a person who is the soil along “the path”? What does this look like in everyday life?

How does one practically “resist” the devil in his/her life?

Reflect – The Soils (Part 1): The Path

In these verses of the Parable of the Soils, we are introduced to the first of four soils: “the path.” This is the first of the three soils that are not “good” from Jesus’ point of view—they represent people who do not receive or live out Jesus’ message.

Along with each of these three soils, we are introduced to what many have termed the “three enemies of the soul.”² These three enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—have been acknowledged for centuries by notable Christians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross. These enemies work to keep non-Christians in a state of unbelief and disobedience, and to pull Christians away from belief and obedience.

The soil of the path represents those who reject Jesus’ message altogether. The reason for this is their lack of spiritual receptivity and Satan’s stealing the word away. Satan is pictured as a bird that, when the seed of the word is tossed, quickly swoops in to gobble it up. In all of our lives, Satan seeks to cultivate indifference to God’s ways; to pull us away from God toward lesser things; and to steal God’s abundant life from us.

The only way we can be freed from Satan’s control is for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, to turn us *away* from sin *toward* Jesus Christ. But this isn’t a one-time event. We are called to consistently *resist* Satan, firm in our faith. This first soil shows us the person we don’t want to become—one who is resistant to God’s word and open to Satan’s work. As Christians, we want to be the opposite! May God give us grace to resist Satan and open our hearts to God’s word daily.

² I’m indebted to the teachings of Ken Boa for the thoughts I present in this devotional guide on the three enemies of the soul.

DAY 5 – Friday
Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:5-6, 16-17; Luke 14:25-33; Romans 6:11

Ask

What characterizes a person who is the “rocky ground” type soil? What does this look like in everyday life?

How does one practically “consider” oneself “dead to sin but alive to God” in his/her life (see Romans 6:11)?

Reflect – The Soils (Part 2): The Rocky Ground

Our next soil, the “rocky ground,” allows the seed to sink one layer deeper than “the path.” These folks are described as very excited about Jesus initially— very enthusiastic about being his follower. Unfortunately, when times get tough, they are just as quick to give up on Jesus as they were to follow him. They give up because their faith in Jesus is putting their comfort, their way of life, at risk. They give up because of what the Bible calls “the flesh.”

The flesh is our natural, human propensity toward sinful living. It could be described as our commitment to our *earthly comforts and desires* over and against our *heavenly commitments and destiny*. When we choose the ways of the Spirit over the lusts of the flesh, we become the committed disciples that hold on to Jesus and don’t let go, even when the going gets tough. These are the kind of followers that Jesus is seeking. And in order to maintain our commitment to Jesus, we have to overcome the enemy of the flesh.

While our response to the devil is to *resist*, our response to the flesh is to *reckon* (that is, to consider). The Bible says, “So you also must *consider* [reckon] yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). Our fleshly, sinful ways no longer have any power over us—we *can* live a new life for God! And we need God’s grace to do this. Our closeness to Jesus has to be far sweeter than all of our earthly comforts if we are going to follow him completely, if we are going to forsake the flesh. Consider praying for God to cultivate a deeper love for Christ and a deeper disgust for the fleshly desires in your life.

DAY 6 – Saturday
Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:7, 18-19; Matthew 6:25-34; 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Ask

What characterizes a person who is the soil with “thorns”? What does this look like in everyday life?

How does one practically renew his/her mind against the worldly ways of thinking (Romans 12:1-2)?

Reflect – The Soils (Part 3): The Thorns

Again, this third soil is one layer deeper than the previous two! In fact, the seed settles in the soil, the plant grows, and it’s not until the thorns choke out its life that it finally dies. The people represented by this soil are those who are seemingly devoted to Jesus, but they get so caught up in “life” that they eventually turn away from him.

“It is easy to pack life with such a multiplicity of interests that there is no time left for Christ.”³
OK, read that quote again, and then pause to think about it... How is the busyness of life distracting your heart from your Lord? How is your love for this present world choking out your spiritual life?

The Bible identifies this heart-distracting, life-choking influence with one, simple term: “the world.” The world is our natural, fallen way of viewing life. This worldly point of view is the organic byproduct of our individual sin natures, brought together to create one big-ol’ mess. It has infected language, relationships, academia, art, entertainment, business, and everything else in society. It is “the world” that causes us to live our comfy, work-a-day lives and never even think about the God who gave us life to begin with.

What is the Christian’s response to the world? To *renew* our minds according to God’s point of view (Romans 12:1-2). We need the Spirit to change the way we think—to give us a fresh, eternal perspective— so that we may have a greater commitment to Jesus and his message. Consider praying regularly: “Spirit of God, would you use the word of God to make me more like the Son of God.”

³ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Mark*, p. 93.

DAY 7 – Sunday

Daily devotional

Read

Mark 4:8, 20; Psalm 1:1-6; James 1:22-27

Ask

What characterizes a person who is the “good” type of soil? What does this look like in everyday life?

Would you describe your life right now as “fruitful”? Why or why not?

Reflect – The Soils (Part 4): Good Soil

Finally! We’ve arrived at the “good soil.” This kind of soil stands in stark contrast to the previous three:

- Unlike the path, the seed actually sinks in
- Unlike the rocks, the seed is rooted
- Unlike the thorns, there’s a fruitful harvest

We want to be the good soil, don’t we? We want to accept Jesus’ message and live it out. The challenge is, this has to be an ongoing activity in our lives. We listen to Jesus, we give up our wrong ways of living, we receive forgiveness, we commit to obedience— over and over and over again. As we’ve learned, we have to consistently *resist* the devil, *reckon* against the flesh, and *renew* our minds against the world.

What is the ultimate aim of this consistent repentance? Well, we want to be fruitful! The harvest that Jesus describes (“produced grain... yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold,” v. 8) would have been astronomical. A 10 to 1 ratio would have been within reason, but still astonishing.⁴ What is Jesus saying here? This image of an immense harvest describes our lives when they become all that they were meant to be. *You are meant to live a fruitful life: a life of joy and purpose that puts God’s incredible nature on display for all to see.*

Now, who doesn’t want a life like that? So, stay the course! Rededicate yourself to a life of repentance, a life of obedience, a life of faithfulness. Hear the word, accept the word, live the word. And do it all while being dependent upon the Holy Spirit. God wants to make you fruitful!

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, NASB, p. 1433.