

Jesus Changes Our Perspective

DAVE BAST

Abraham Lincoln, himself a great storyteller, once said that Jesus used parables because they were easier for the common people to understand and recollect; but if you look closely at the gospel record, you will see that that is not entirely accurate. Today on *Groundwork*, we will dig into why Jesus used parables, and what their message was. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are now at the fifth program of six, not covering the Gospel of Mark exactly, but trying to bring out some of the distinctives of this earliest gospel, most dramatic in some ways—certainly fastest paced; and once again we are very pleased to be joined by Dr. Gary Burge of Calvin Seminary. So, welcome Gary.

GARY BURGE

Thank you; really good to be with you, Dave and Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now on this program, we want to think about parables. There is a distinctive parable in Mark, but also just sort of the meaning of parables; and Dave, you said at the beginning that Abraham Lincoln said something that I think a lot of people think, and that is: Oh, Jesus told parables to make it easier to understand, but that is not quite true, is it?

DAVE BAST

Well, no; in fact, listen to this. The great chapter of parables in Mark is Mark 4, and we will be considering several of the parables there. In the middle of that chapter, we read that ¹⁰When Jesus was alone, the twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. (So, his disciples come to him and say: Give us the scoop on this) ¹¹and he told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you; but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables (and then he quotes from Isaiah) ¹²so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven.”

GARY BURGE

Well, there is so much to unpack here it is hard to know where to begin. The first thing is, let's just talk about how parables are functioning. They are a teaching strategy is what they are; and you have to look at the way we teach as a culture. In fact, this whole radio show would actually be an example of that; or just turn on CNN. Our culture likes prose. We like to be talking about facts; we like to be putting down positions, but we are not storytellers, per se. We do like stories. We get them from the television, we get them from the theater, but we don't tell stories to each other; we don't encapsulate sort of theological ideas or morals inside of a story that is really compelling; but that was Jesus' world. To be a great teacher means to be a great storyteller. So therefore, Jesus doesn't wax eloquent about, let's say, oh, I don't know, the corruption of the Pharisees or something. He talks about them as whitewashed tombs. That is a dramatic picture. He likes

illustrations. That is precisely the way someone in this world would work.

Now, when you are telling stories, there are a few reasons why you may tell stories. For one thing, if you have what you perceive to be a hostile audience, the best way to disguise yourself is with a story, because, you know, your audience then walks away scratching their head, wondering: Did he just say something about us? I am wondering about that. But it isn't sufficiently explicit, so that no accusation can be made. But the main thing is that parables provide what we could call insider information. So therefore, when someone tells a complicated story and you are someone who is able to understand what the inner workings of the story is, then you seem to have insider knowledge, which people on the outside just cannot have. It is like watching a movie that has all kinds of symbols in it, and if you haven't got an array of symbols in your pocket, you are going to have a difficult time figuring out what the movie is all about.

So therefore, you might say a parable sets itself up like a box with a mystery inside of it; and as you are looking at this box from the outside, you think you understand what is going on because you can see the box. So, you see it, but you don't perceive what is actually inside of it. It is like looking at a painting at an art gallery, and you look at it and you say: Oh, I see. This is an elderly man who is receiving and hugging his poor son, who is kneeling in front of him; and maybe you will know that that is Rembrandt's *The Prodigal Son*; but it is only if you have insider knowledge about the story of the prodigal son that you can get inside of that painting.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

GARY BURGE

So, the parable, therefore, is an invitation; but, it is also a temptation to stay on the surface of it; and that is what Jesus is doing by telling it. It will be entertaining for some, but for others, it can be a breakthrough into profound knowledge.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Eugene Peterson used to describe parables as narrative time bombs...

GARY BURGE

Nice, very nice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The people who receive the story: Ah, nice story about a woman baking bread, and they would walk home...tick, tick, tick, tick, tick...the time bomb goes, and then all of a sudden: Boom! It explodes into new awareness. Wait a minute...wait a minute. He was talking about us and God, and I am not sure we came out very well. So, you know, it discloses itself over time, and not in the moment. So that makes it different, Dave, from what Abraham Lincoln thought or what a lot of people think, that it was just an illustration to make it easier to understand. No, it teased out an understanding over time about deep, deep matters of the kingdom of God.

GARY BURGE

So, it lets some people think, Scott, that actually there is a prerequisite for getting inside of a parable. So, what is it? You have to have faith; you have to have a receptive heart; you have to have a willingness to let the parable dissect you; and when you participate in a parable like that, suddenly, then, you gain that insight.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, when Jesus says: To you it has been revealed...this secret of the kingdom...he is talking about, really, the secret of any parable...

GARY BURGE

Yes, yes.

DAVE BAST

You've got to be a disciple...

GARY BURGE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You've got to be close to Jesus; you've got to be a willing listener, wanting Jesus to change you, as disciples do; acknowledging him as who he is, as disciples do, albeit, imperfectly...

GARY BURGE

Right.

DAVE BAST

In order to even get to first base in understanding what he is really getting at in a parable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and that is also why this actually ties back a little bit to our third program, where we looked at this messianic secret in Mark. So, Jesus, rather surprisingly, when the disciples say: Why do you use parables? Jesus says: Oh, so they won't get it. I don't want them to understand me; which seems really an odd thing for Jesus to say until you realize that Jesus wants the people to take time...to not move toward him too quickly, but to take the time that is going to be needed to fully understand the very radical new things Jesus is going to teach; and it is interesting, too, that in that same chapter we read: Jesus did not say anything to them without using a parable.

GARY BURGE

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Isn't that interesting?

GARY BURGE

Exactly; you know, what this does is it calls up that old discussion in theology between knowledge...it is a paradoxical relationship between knowledge and faith. We often think, especially in the rationalistic West, that if I had more knowledge about something, then faith is going to emerge. Jesus, by teaching in parables, actually reverses that entirely. He would say: If you have faith...if you move toward me in discipleship, *then* knowledge will emerge. So, in this sense, you have Jesus then putting up a prerequisite. It is as if discipleship, therefore, is your first step, and then revelation is your second.

DAVE BAST

Faith seeking understanding...

GARY BURGE

That is exactly what it is...

DAVE BAST

To *not* coin a phrase.

GARY BURGE

Yes, but that is exactly what that means.

DAVE BAST

And in a sense, all of scripture functions this way, doesn't it?

GARY BURGE

It does.

DAVE BAST

I mean, you think about that use of Isaiah—the Isaiah quotation, which is from Isaiah 6—where God commissions Isaiah with that incredible vision, and then sends him out, and he says: By the way, they are not going to believe you.

GARY BURGE

Think about this, Dave. It is like revelation or a parable...it is both judging and it is revealing. So therefore, if you are in front of a parable without faith, it discloses the position of your heart; but if you step toward a parable in faith...with that receptive heart...then it becomes a gateway to your own...well, salvation, you might say. So, in that sense, the obscure revelation...Isaiah...or the parable in the gospels actually diagnoses where we stand.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the most famous parables...so famous that it is one of the few parables that is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke...is the parable of the sower in Mark 4; and we will get to that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

GARY BURGE

And I am Gary Burge.

DAVE BAST

So, let's jump right in to Mark Chapter 4 and the parable of the sower. So, Jesus is teaching by the lake—by the Sea of Galilee—he says to them: ³“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up; ⁵some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow, ⁶but when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants so that they did not bear grain. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and grew and produced a crop; some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” ⁹And Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, there it is. Parables are not allegories, generally speaking. You do not want to try to line up characters and events one to one with real-life things, for the most part; but there is an allegorical element here, as becomes clear when Jesus explains...so, the disciples didn't really get it any more than anybody else...so, Jesus will explain the parable; and as many of us know, he will identify each of those different types of soil; and he says:

¹⁵“Some people are like the seed along the path, where the Word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the Word that was sown in them. ¹⁶Others, like seed sown in rocky places, hear the Word at once and receive it with joy, ¹⁷but since they have no root, they last only a short time, and when trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸Still others, like seed sown

among thorns hear the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the Word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰And others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the Word, accept it, and produce a crop: some thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown.” So there Jesus kind of lays out what he is meaning about different kinds of hearts unto which the Word falls.

GARY BURGE

Well, let's begin by just placing the parable of the sower in the larger literary context of Mark's Gospel. You will remember that in session one we talked about how Mark's Gospel is divided into two halves, and the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi in Chapter 8 is sort of the linchpin—the hinge—that the gospel turns on. In the first half of the gospel, Jesus is disclosing himself to the public to see who can identify him correctly; in the second half of the gospel, Jesus is redefining Messiahship in terms of the cross. There are our two halves. Now, in each half, what you have is what we call a narrative parable. Most of the parables are short in Mark's Gospel...well, in all the gospels they are short...but here we have a really long parable, and over in the second half of Mark we have a really long parable as well. Each of these are disproportionately important, because here in this parable—the parable of the sower—the question is: What kind of soil are you? What kind of person are you? Because when the Word of God is scattered upon you as a seed, will you be receptive? If you go to the second half of Mark's Gospel, you will find the parable of the vineyard, the tenants, and the son who comes to the vineyard. It is of the same long length as the parable of the sower, and in the second half the question is: Do you see that when the Son comes to the Father's vineyard, it will cost him his life? So, the second narrative is about cross and sacrifice; the first one here is about reception and whether or not you have the kind of fertile heart in which the Word of God can grow.

DAVE BAST

So, it is really...I don't know if it is in Mark or Matthew, but *the field is the world*, a famous little phrase; and we begin to sort all this out. The seed is the Word; Jesus says that explicitly here...

GARY BURGE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So it is all about his Word is going to go forth, i.e., the Gospel—his story—the story of the cross—Jesus' death and resurrection. He is not just speaking, really, in the context of his immediate ministry now, is he?

GARY BURGE

No.

DAVE BAST

Isn't he looking forward to a time after his death and resurrection, when the Gospel is going to be proclaimed throughout the world?

GARY BURGE

Right; yes, I think this is a fair diagnosis of what will happen when Jesus discloses himself to the public of the 1st Century: Who is going to respond? Who will not respond? Who will misunderstand? Who will fall away? But I think you are right, Dave. I think this is a universal description of what it means when the Gospel is presented inside of even our world. There are some who will receive it and it will flourish in their lives and yield amazing fruit. There are others where the Gospel will not even take root at all. So therefore, yes, I think...

DAVE BAST

And then there are those two intermediate who respond partially or superficially or temporarily; and when the going gets tough, they kind of disappear.

GARY BURGE

They do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we do...and rightly so, as you pointed out, Gary...we do focus on the soils and sort of, you know, what kind of soil are you, and so forth; but one thing about this parable that also strikes me. When I have preached on this, I have said imagine this farmer like a modern-day farmer. He has his John Deere tractor; he hooks up the corn planter to it, takes off; but he throws the switch on the corn planter long before he gets to the field. It is plopping corn seed on the road as he cuts across the scrubby patches, it is still plopping... Who farms that way? Who doesn't wait for the field? Well, God doesn't. I have called him the prodigal sower, because God is so eager to get his Word out, he flings it everywhere...

GARY BURGE

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Knowing full well that it is going to land on the road in some cases; on the path; in the rocky places; in the thorny patches; but God is so eager to get his Word across...and Dave, you were saying this looks forward to that day when the Gospel is going to be preached. We are going to preach it to anybody and everybody. It is not always going to stick, but God wants us to fling the seed prodigally, and almost crazy-like, to get the Word across.

DAVE BAST

But isn't this an example...I mean, yes, I get that, Scott, and I agree...but Jesus didn't expect his hearers to think of John Deere tractors and paved roads. The story is told in *their* context—their agricultural context—and it would have been a very normal kind of thing, wouldn't it? Because the paths just ran right through the middle of the field?

GARY BURGE

That is right; in fact, European commentators on this parable were always stuck on this idea, because in European and North American culture, we plow first and then we seed, right? And so therefore, we look at this and we think: This guy is not only profligate...we think of him as a bad farmer; but actually, in this story, you have a description of the way people farmed in the ancient world. You would have a field that has stood fallow throughout the winter; and so therefore, what you do is you come to the field; it has weeds inside of the field; there are rocks in the field; inside of Palestine, all of the fields actually have limestone underneath them, and the limestone breaks up; and the first thing you do before you can plant and plow is that you have to remove all the rocks; and throughout the winter, people take shortcuts through the field; so, don't imagine that this farmer is just throwing seed carelessly onto an asphalt road, or somehow he throws it into the weeds. The farmer intends to plow path and weeds...everything. So he spreads the seed in his field and he plows the whole.

DAVE BAST

So, we get back to the question of the parable judging us, in a sense...

GARY BURGE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You don't just read this and think, well, Jesus is talking about three kinds of people: three non-Christians and one good believer. He is talking about us, because I can be any of those soils at any given time in my life.

GARY BURGE

Yes, right; and the constant in the entire experience is, it is the same God giving the same seed to the same field. So, it isn't as if, in some manner, God is selecting excellent soil and disregarding others. Each of us has the same exposure to the very same Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this image of the seed ends up being very important for Mark's Gospel, including in a parable that is unique to Mark's Gospel...you don't find it in Matthew or Luke...and we are going to take a look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee.

GARY BURGE

And I am Gary Burge.

DAVE BAST

We are talking about the parables, Gary, in Mark...in particular, Mark 4, and the parables of the kingdom. So, say a little bit more about Jesus' theme of the kingdom—the great theme of his preaching and the theme of many of these parables as well.

GARY BURGE

Yes; the kingdom of God is undoubtedly the premier theme of Jesus' entire ministry. The reign of God is now active and present inside the world in an unprecedented way; and Jesus himself is the catalyst of a new era, in which God's power...through the power of the Holy Spirit, now...is going to be present among us. So therefore, Jesus anticipates, not just our private salvation... It is not as if what it means to be his disciple is to benefit from his death on the cross. Well, that is a part of it; but what he really wants to establish is a new way to live inside of this world; and disciples, therefore, are not simply saved; disciples are participants in a movement that will reclaim God's creation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again and again throughout all the gospels, the images for that kingdom are tiny things...

GARY BURGE

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Seeds or yeast...and things that are invisible almost...and in fact...so, here is a parable, also from...still from Mark 4, and this is unique to Mark.

²⁶Jesus also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself, the soil produces grain: first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it because the harvest has come."

So, that invasive presence of the Gospel seeping into the world, Gary, as you were just saying, bit by bit by bit...

GARY BURGE

That's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, it is going to become this grand kingdom.

GARY BURGE

Yes; it is like the parable of the mustard seed...the same thing. You plant this little seed and suddenly it becomes this amazing bush. So, the kingdom of God is an effort of God. This is God at work, and it takes us by surprise; and this is opposed to us thinking that we have to engineer the success of the kingdom of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, that is important.

GARY BURGE

That is always our temptation: I am going to engineer this through the care of my ministry—through my own calculations—but no; the kingdom of God is God's work, and that, therefore, frees us to a certain extent, to celebrate what he is doing, and not be burdened by what hasn't been done.

DAVE BAST

You know, you think: so many basic questions that maybe we puzzle over, like, how do churches grow? You know, what is the technique? Is there something we can patent? Is there some kind of series we can buy that will make our...or, how do we improve our communities? How do we help that shalom that we long for—that we talk about often? We have done many programs on that. How does that happen, you know, in the world? Or even, basically, how do people become believers? How do people become Christians? And this little parable is really addressing those kinds of questions, isn't it?

GARY BURGE

Right; well, you know, one of the things that has been a blessing to me, being at Calvin Theological Seminary is that I have gotten to know a number of our Chinese students; and sometimes I think we look at the Western Church...we look at the American Church...we wring our hands and we think: Why aren't we growing like we used to in 1950? And then I sit down with one of our Chinese students, and they tell me what the estimate is, and the speed with which the Gospel—the Church—is growing in China; and you know, I blink and think: Oh, my goodness. So, God is bringing about the yield...you know, the crop...that we had very little to do with. So, yes, God is at work doing something magnificent in the world, and sometimes we really just cannot measure it the way we would like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is an important point, Dave and Gary, that you both have made just in the last couple of minutes, and it kind of ties back to our third program about the Messianic secret, that the disciples wanted to make Jesus into *their* kind of Messiah...

GARY BURGE

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who would be a political powerhouse, and shake things up through raw power; and Jesus said: No, I have to do it through sacrifice and humility...

GARY BURGE

That's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here, today too in the Church, right? We think if we just get the right techniques, we can manipulate this thing and grow the church; and this is saying: No, God's doing it, and he is going to do it his way; just go with God's flow.

GARY BURGE

I want to make the Messiah my kind of Messiah, and I want to make the kingdom my kind of kingdom...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

GARY BURGE

And when we do that, we secularize everything.

DAVE BAST

And it is going to take more money, and it is going to take some political power in order for us to get our agenda through... I love this line in this parable, you know: Night and day, whether the farmer is asleep or awake, the seed is growing. It doesn't matter what he does or doesn't do. It always makes me think of that great line of Luther explaining the Reformation: The Word did it; he said. Philip and I just sat around drinking beer; and meanwhile, God, you know, broke in with his kingdom. That is really the story of this parable, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I also like, yes, whether he is awake or whether he is asleep, it happens; and at the end of the day, he doesn't know what's going on. He doesn't understand it. Jesus and the Holy Spirit of God are always at work, and the kingdom is always growing, thanks be to God.

Well again, our thanks to Gary Burge for joining us on this series. Gary, it has been great to have you with us on three of these programs.

GARY BURGE

Yes; and thanks to you, Scott and Dave. This has been a lot of fun, and I hope to all of our listeners that this has been a blessing so that you are going to enjoy the Gospel of Mark and grow in your faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our series on the Gospel of Mark by discussing its rather abrupt and unexpected ending.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com; share what *Groundwork* means to you and what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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