

Mark 4:10-20

From Catena Aurea:

10. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.

11. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables:

12. That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

13. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?

14. The sower soweth the word.

15. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.

16. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

17. And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.

18. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,

19. And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

20. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirty-fold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

THEOPHYLACT. Although the Lord appears in the transactions mentioned above to neglect His mother, nevertheless He honours her; since on her account He goes forth about the borders of the sea: wherefore it is said, And Jesus began to teach again by the sea-side, &c.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. in Matt. 44) Which we must understand was not done without a purpose, but that He might not leave any one behind Him, but have all His hearers before His face.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ubi sup.) For He rouses the minds of His hearers by a parable, pointing out objects to the sight, to make His discourse more manifest.

THEOPHYLACT. And in order to rouse the attention of those who heard, the first parable that He proposes is concerning the seed, which is the word of God. Wherefore it goes on, And he said to them in his doctrine. Not in that of Moses, nor of the Prophets, because He preaches His own Gospel. Hearken: behold, there went out a sower to sow. Now the Sower is Christ.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ubi sup.) Not that He went out in space, Who is present in all space, and fills all, but in the form and economy by which He is made more near to us through the clothing of flesh. For since we were not able to go to Him, because sins impeded our path, He went out to us. But He went out, preaching in order to sow the word of piety, which He spake abundantly. Now He does not needlessly repeat the same word, when He says, A sower went out to sow, for sometimes a sower goes out that he may break up land for tillage, or to pull up weeds, or for some other work. But this one went out to sow.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ubi sup.) Further, as a sower does not make a distinction in the ground which is beneath him, but simply and without distinction puts in the seed, so also He Himself addresses all. And to signify this, He says, And as he sowed, some fell by the way-side.

THEOPHYLACT. Take notice, that He says not that He threw it in the way, but that it fell, for a sower, as far as he can, throws it into good ground, but if the ground be bad, it corrupts the seed. Now the way is Christ; but infidels are by the way-side, that is, out of Christ.

THEOPHYLACT. Or, the stony persons are those who adhering a little to the rock, that is, to Christ, up to a short time, receive the word, and afterwards, falling back, cast it away. It goes on: And some fell among thorns; by which are marked souls which care for many things. For thorns are cares.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ubi sup.) But further He mentions good ground, saying, And other fell on good ground. For the difference of the fruits follows the quality of the ground. But great is the love of the Sower for men, for the first He commends, and rejects not the second, and gives a place to the third.

THEOPHYLACT. See also how the bad are the greatest number, and the few are those who are saved, for the fourth part of the ground is found to be saved.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ubi sup.) This, however, the greater portion of the seed is not lost through the fault of the owner, but of the earth, which received it, that is, of the soul, which hears. And indeed the real husbandman, if he sowed in this way, would be rightly blamed; for he is not ignorant that rock, or the road, or thorny ground, cannot become fertile. But in spiritual things it is not so; for there it is possible that stony ground may become fertile; and that the road should not be trodden down, and that the thorns may be destroyed, for if this could not take place, he would not have sown there. By this therefore He gives to us hope of repentance. It goes on, And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

THEOPHYLACT. For it was God Who made them to see, that is, to understand what is good. But they themselves see not, of their own will making themselves not to see, lest they should be converted and correct themselves, as if they were displeased at their own salvation. It goes on, Lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins be forgiven them.

THEOPHYLACT. Or we may understand in a different way His speaking to the rest in parables, that seeing they might not perceive, and hearing, not understand. For God gives sight and understanding to men who seek for them, but the rest He blinds, lest it become a greater accusation against them, that though they understood, they did not choose to do what they ought. Wherefore it goes on, Lest at any time they should be, &c.

AUGUSTINE. (Quæst. 14, in Matt.) Or else they deserved this, their not understanding, and yet this in itself was done in mercy to them, that they might know their sins, and, being converted, merit pardon.

GLOSS. (non occ.) And for this reason, the Lord in saying these things, shews that they ought to understand both this first, and all following miracles. Wherefore explaining it, He goes on, The sower soweth the word.

CHRYSOSTOM. (in Matt. Hom. 44.) And indeed the prophet has compared the teaching of the people to the planting of a vine; (Isa. 5) in this place however it is compared to sowing, to shew that obedience is now shorter and more easy, and will sooner yield fruit.

THEOPHYLACT. Further, of those who receive the seed as they ought there are three degrees. Wherefore it goes on, And these are they who are sown on good ground. Those who bear fruit an hundred-fold are those who lead a perfect and an obedient life, as virgins and hermits. Those who bear fruit sixty-fold are those who are in the mean as continent persons and those who are living in convents. Those who bear thirty-fold are those who though weak indeed, bear fruit according to their own virtue, as laymen and married persons.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

4:10 They Asked Him Concerning the Parables

Fixing Memory.

Chrysostom: He speaks in parables that he may also make his discourse more vivid, and fix the memory of it in them more perfectly, and bring the things before their sight, as did the prophets also. The Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 44.3.

The Organic Unity of Holy Scripture.

Chrysostom: Suppose a physician excised a portion from the side of an organism, even in that small part you would find all the elements out of which the whole is composed—nerves and veins, bones, arteries and blood, and a sample, as one might say, of the whole lump. So likewise with regard to the organic unity of the Scriptures. In each distinct portion of what is written, one may see the connection with the whole clearly appearing. The Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 1.8.

4:11 For Those Outside Everything is in Parables

Those Unready to Hear.

Origen: Sometimes it does not turn out to be an advantage for one to be healed quickly or superficially, especially if the disease by this means becomes even more shut up in the internal organs where it rages more fiercely. Therefore God, who perceives secret things and who knows all things before they come to be, in his great goodness delays the healing of such persons and defers the remedy to a later time. If I may speak paradoxically, God heals them by not healing them, lest a premature recovery of health should render them incurable. This pertains to those whom our Lord and Savior addressed as “those outside,” whose hearts and reins he searches out. Jesus covered up the deeper mysteries of the faith in veiled speech to those who were not yet ready to receive his teaching in straightforward terms. The Lord wanted to prevent the unready from being too speedily converted and only cosmetically healed. If the forgiveness of their sins were too easily obtained, they would soon fall again into the same disorder of sin which they imagined could be cured without any difficulty. On First Principles 3.1.7.

4:12 See But Not Perceive

An Open Utterance Partially Veiled.

Augustine: Jesus did not ordinarily assume that his teaching would remain hidden. He expected it to be proclaimed openly in every direction. Yet it is possible, in defensive circumstances, to utter something openly and yet veiled at the same time. Something may be said not strictly in secret, but in a secret way. Note that it was not in secret that Jesus said “they may indeed see but not perceive.” If this had not been spoken openly, there would have been no sense to the phrase “not seeing.” The same hearer may not perceive the level on which something is spoken openly, yet on another level secretly understood. The very things which his detractors had heard without understanding were such as could not with justice or truth be turned into a criminal charge against him. As often as they tried by their questions to find something by which to accuse him, he gave them such replies as utterly confounded all their plots and left no ground for the calumnies they devised. Tractates on John 113.

The Eyes of the Mind.

Cyril of Alexandria: Parables are word pictures not of visible things, but rather of things of the mind and the spirit. That which cannot be seen with the eyes of the body, a parable will reveal to the eyes of the mind, informing the subtlety of the intellect by means of things perceivable by the senses, and as it were tangible. Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 8.5.4.

4:13 Do You Not Understand This Parable?

The Word Is Made Effective by Its Own Power.

Clement of Alexandria: At times our Savior spoke the Word to the apostles by means of mysterious sayings. For prophecy says of him: “He will open his mouth in parables, and will declare things kept secret from the foundation of the world.” ... The efficacy of the Word itself, being strong and powerful, gradually draws into itself secretly and invisibly everyone who receives it. Stromateis 5.12.

4:14 The Sower Sows the Word

The Seed Sowed in All Cultures.

Clement of Alexandria: The Greek culture, along with its philosophy, was preparatory. By this it is made clear how obliquely, not with a straight direction, gifts have come from God to humanity—in that miscellaneous way that showers fall down on the good land, and on the dunghill, and on the houses. Then both grass and wheat sprout. Both figs and reckless trees grow on sepulchers. These things are like a figure of the truth disclosing itself. All enjoy the same influence of the rain. But they do not have the same grace as those which spring up in rich soil, inasmuch as they are withered or plucked up. And here we are aided by the parable of the sower, which the Lord interpreted. Finally there is only one cultivator of the soil of the human soul. It is the One who from the beginning, from the foundations of the world, has been sowing living seeds by which all things grow. In each age the Word has come down upon all like rain. But the times and places which received these gifts account for the differences which exist.... Some cultures have rightly sought out the word of truth through understanding. “But Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith.” It is therefore of no advantage to them after the end of life, even if they do good works now, if they do not have faith. Stromateis 1.7.

4:15 Satan Immediately Comes and Takes Away the Word Which is Sown in Them

The Word Taken Away.

Irenaeus: While we are sleeping, the enemy is sowing weeds. This is why the Lord commanded his disciples to be always on the outlook. Those who are not actively bringing forth fruits of righteousness are quickly covered over and lost among the brambles. Yet if they exercise diligence and receive the word of God as a graft into themselves, they may again recover the pristine nature of humanity, created after the image and likeness of God. Against Heresies 5.10.1.

4:17 When Tribulation or Persecution Arises, They Fall Away

The Rootless Amid Tribulation.

Athanasius: Let us, therefore, following the faith of the apostles, hold frequent communion with our Lord. For the world is like the sea to us, beloved, of which it is written, “There go the ships, and Leviathan that

you formed to sport in it.” We float upon this sea, like wind, with everyone directing his own course with his own free will. Under the pilotage of the Word, one may safely approach the port. But, if possessed by wayward inclinations, one is in peril by storm and may suffer shipwreck. For as in the ocean there are storms and waves, so in the world there are many afflictions and trials. The unbelieving therefore, “have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away,” just as the Lord said. They are not likely to endure the complications which arise from afflictions, if they are fixed upon the temporal and not confirmed in the faith. Letter 19.7, Easter a.d. 347.

4:18 Sown Among Thorns Which Choke the Word

Weeding Out the Undergrowth of the Soul.

Evagrius: Allow the Spirit of God to dwell within you; then in his love he will come and make a habitation with you; he will reside in you and live in you. If your heart is pure you will see him and he will sow in you the good seed of reflection upon his actions and wonder at his majesty. This will happen if you take the trouble to weed out from your soul the undergrowth of sporadic desires, along with the thorns and tares of bad habits. Admonition on Prayer.

How Riches Choke the Word.

Chrysostom: When the Word is choked, it is not merely due to the thorns as such, but to the negligence of those allowing them to spring up. There is a way, if there is a will, to hinder evil growth and use wealth appropriately. For this reason he warned not of “the world” but of the “care of the world”; not “riches” as such but “the deceitfulness of riches.” Let us not place the blame on what we possess, but on our own corrupt mind. For it is possible to be rich and not be deceived. It is possible to be in this world, and not be choked with its cares. For indeed riches have two contrary disadvantages; one, anxiety over them, wearing us out, and spreading darkness over us; and the other, luxury, which makes us soft.... Do not marvel at his calling our luxuries “thorns.” If you are intoxicated in your sense you may not be aware of this. One is in sound health who knows that luxury pricks sharper than any thorn. Luxury wastes the soul away even worse than anxiety. It causes more grievous pains both to body and soul. For no one is as seriously harmed by anxiety as by immoderate indulgence.... It brings on premature old age, dulls the senses, darkens our

reasoning, blinds the keen-sighted mind, and makes the body flabby. The Gospel of St. Matthew, Homily 44.7.

4:20 The Good Soil

Becoming Good Soil.

Augustine: Work diligently the soil while you may. Break up your fallow with the plough. Cast away the stones from your field, and dig out the thorns. Be unwilling to have a “hard heart,” such as makes the Word of God of no effect. Be unwilling to have a “thin layer of soil,” in which the root of divine love can find no depth in which to enter. Be unwilling to “choke the good seed” by the cares and the lusts of this life, when it is being scattered for your good. When God is the sower and we are the ground, we are called to work to be good ground. Sermons on New Testament Lessons 73.3.

The Perpetual Stream.

Ephrem the Syrian: The fields have but one season of harvest; but from the Scripture there gushes forth a stream of saving doctrine. The field when reaped lies idle, and at rest, and the branches when the vine is stripped lie withered and dead. The Scriptures are garnered each day, yet the years of its interpreters never come to an end; and the clusters of its vines, which in it are those of hope, though are gathered each day, are likewise without end. Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron, Proem.