

PARABLES

Mark 4

The connection can be made very simply by explaining what a parable is and the fact that the whole Word—everything we have been studying—is actually a parable. Then point out that the meaning of this first parable in our chapter was explained by the Lord Himself, and go on from there. Even the little children can understand this much.

Doctrinal Points

All the Word is parable.

The Lord can enlighten all those who want the truth for the sake of living better lives.

Our eternal home is determined by the state of our hearts when we die—whether love to the Lord and the neighbor or the love of self rules there.

Notes for Parents

People often ask, “Why does the Lord speak to us in parables? Why does He not tell us plainly what He wants us to do?” But suppose He did: would we always do it? Yet it is when we refuse to do what we know the Lord is telling us to do that we commit sin. The Lord is our savior. He came into the world not to condemn, but to save. So He teaches us little by little in hidden ways, giving us an understanding of the truth only as fast as He sees we may accept and obey it.

Read in our chapter for today the parable of the sower and then read the Lord’s own explanation of it. The Word of God is like the seed sown broadcast. Everyone may read it. But only in the good ground does it sink in, take root, and bring forth fruit. The good ground is the mind of any person who truly wants to be good. The parables are simple stories, easy to understand and easy to remem-

ber. They stay in the mind as stories until we need the lesson they are given to teach us, and then suddenly we think, “Oh, this is just like such-and-such a parable,” and then we really understand and are helped.

And, do you know, we do the same with everything we read in the Word of God. At first we take it just as a story of something that happened long ago, but sooner or later it comes home to us with meaning. For all of the Word is a parable which the Lord is speaking to us, just as we tell or read to our children little stories which they can understand and enjoy and which, we hope, will sooner or later help them to decide rightly in the face of some temptation. In the sight of the Lord we are all little children and He leads us gently in the same way, giving us the truth we need but leaving us free to make our own decisions.

Read the whole chapter, remembering that the seed is the Word of God, and that the truth that is within it is the light of the lamp which we should let shine into all the dark corners of our minds and hearts.

Primary

Tell the children the parable of the sower, reading a verse here and there, including some of the Lord’s interpretation to show how the story has a hidden meaning. Then read verse 21 and explain simply what it means. Finally, read verses 26 to 34 and see what ideas the children draw from the two parables. You may be surprised at their understanding. Encourage them to think about what kind of ground they are and what kind they ought to be.

Our lesson today is about some of the Lord’s parables. A parable is a story which has a meaning hidden within it. Did your mother ever say to you at night, “I know someone who is very sleepy”? What did she mean? She meant you, didn’t she, although she seemed to be talking about someone else. That is a kind of parable. If she had said, “You are sleepy,” perhaps you would have tried to make her believe you were not, because you didn’t want to go to bed. But she made you look at yourself as if you were someone else, and you knew she was right. That is the way the Lord talks to

us in the Word. He tells us stories about other people, but they are really about us. One verse in our chapter, as you will hear, says, “Without a parable spake he not unto them.”

You know that none of us likes to have his faults pointed out to him.

But we are all quite willing to see other people’s faults.

The Lord knows us through and through.

So He can use even our weaknesses as a means of teaching us.

In the Word He tells us stories about other people, and we easily see the point of these stories when we are thinking of the other people.

Then He shows us that the stories are really about us.

The parable of the sower, with which our chapter begins, is very well known.

Afterward the Lord told His apostles the inner meaning of this parable, saying that the seed is the truth the Lord gives us in His Word and that the different kinds of ground are different kinds of people. The good ground means the people who learn the truths of the Word and try hard to live according to them.

When you are listening to the Word, which kind of ground do you want to be?

Do you know the song which begins, “Jesus bids us shine”?

That song will help you to understand verse 21.

The other two parables in our lesson are both about seeds.

The things you are learning in Sunday school are some of these seeds of the kingdom of heaven.

Once they fall into your mind, the Lord can take care of them there so that when you need them, you will remember them—that is, if you want to be good.

But if you don’t come to Sunday school, you miss many of these seeds.

What did the Lord say about the mustard seed?

Sometimes what we are told doesn’t seem very important to us at the time.

But what does the mustard seed become?

What lesson does this teach us?

Junior

After explaining what a parable is, have the class look up Nathan’s parable (II Samuel 12:1-19) and read it. Discuss it as showing why the Lord speaks to us in parables. Then have the children take up each parable in our chapter, thinking how it applies to themselves. The Juniors are old enough to begin to practice reading the Word in this way, and it is one way to stimulate their interest in reading it daily.

What is a parable?

In our chapter, where is the Lord teaching?

Who are listening to Him?

What parable did He tell them?

To whom did He explain the parable?

In verses 11 and 12, the Lord tells us why He spoke to the multitude in parables. To help us understand what He means, let us read II Samuel 12:1-9. King David had committed a great sin. If Nathan the prophet had come to him and immediately charged him with it, David would have been angry and would have tried to justify himself. But Nathan told him about another man who had done wrong. The story seemed to have nothing to do with David; so he condemned the wrong-doer immediately. Then Nathan said, "Thou art the man," and David could not help seeing that he himself was guilty.

The whole Word of God is a parable. It seems to be talking about the doings of people who lived long ago. We can read their history and judge them, saying, "This was a good deed, and this a bad one. How could people turn to the worship of idols when the Lord had done so much for them? These people brought their own punishment upon themselves." Then there comes the voice of the Lord saying to us, "Thou art the man." We begin to look honestly at our own feelings and thoughts and conduct, and we see that we have done the same things just in a little different form. The Lord teaches us in this way because He knows how prone we are to defend ourselves and to blame others. In the parable of the sower, we need to understand that in those days seed was sown by being scattered broadcast and allowed to come up where it would.

What is the seed?

What are meant by the different kinds of ground?

What is the fruit which the seed should produce?

The next little parable (verses 21-22) does not seem to have much relation to the sower, does it? But read verses 23-25. You know that light is a symbol of truth. The Word of God is like seed planted in our minds, but when we "see" its meaning, it becomes

like a light which “enlightens” our minds. You see, we use this same symbol language all the time. Now let us say to ourselves, “Thou art the man.” This very lesson which we are studying today in Sunday school is seed which the Lord is sowing in our minds. Are our minds like the wayside, the hard-trodden path of selfish inattention into which nothing can sink, so that thoughts about ourselves, like the evil birds, carry off the seeds before they have time to sink in? Or do we listen and enjoy the lesson and then immediately get to thinking about something else and forget all about it? Or do we truly mean to do as the lesson teaches us, but give in to the first temptation which comes along? Or are we like the good ground? And then, if we do understand the lesson, do we let it shine into all the dark corners of our souls, or do we try to keep it hidden?

Some people think that verse 25 is very puzzling. Does the Lord really favor people who have plenty already? This shows how important it is always to study a verse in its “context,” that is, with reference to what goes before it and what follows it. If we do this with this verse, we see immediately that by “he that hath” the Lord means the person who has not only received the good seed into his mind but has made it his own by using it in his life, the man who has used his lamp or candle of truth to “bring to light” and drive out the hidden faults and weaknesses of his character. But we know that seed which does not bring forth healthy growth dies, and a candle which is put under a closed container goes out. This is the man who “hath not”—who is bound to lose what he has.

There are two other parables in our chapter, both about seed. We do not any of us use immediately all the truth the Lord gives us. We are like the man who sleeps and rises night and day. We have our times when the good in us is awake and active, and our times when it seems to be asleep. But if we use our daytimes rightly, the Lord takes care of the seeds of truth that have been planted in our minds and without our realizing how it has happened, makes each one grow and bear fruit.

And each tiny seed is capable, like the mustard seed, of growing

into a great tree. We all have what we call “principles” that we live by which become stronger and more enduring all the time. They are the trees. Where did we get our principles? Each one grew up from a tiny seed—a little idea—planted in our minds at some time or other. If the seeds were truths from the Lord, our principles are good trees. But there are also weed seeds. Some of the ideas that come into our minds are not good. If we receive them and accept them as true, our principles will be bad. So we need to remember the Lord’s advice in verse 24: “Take heed what ye hear.”

Intermediate

Use this lesson as a study in correspondence under the Lord’s own instruction. Show the young people how basic and how far-reaching the Lord’s explanation of the parable of the sower is. The other two parables are illustrations of this. Be sure also to call attention to the lesson taught in verses 21-25.

The parable of the sower is one of the best known of the Lord’s parables, and one which all who read their Bibles can understand in some degree at least, because the Lord Himself explains it. We know that a parable is a story which has a meaning hidden within it. There are a number of stories in both the Old Testament and the New Testament which are recognized as parables,* but in the New Church we know that all of the Word is a parable, even though most of it is also true history.

There is a reason why the Lord always speaks to us in parables (verse 34), and this reason is explained in verses 11 and 12 of our chapter. People often think that the Lord should have told us plainly all that He wants us to think and do. But suppose He had: would we all be able to understand it or be willing to believe it? And if, knowing that it came from the Lord, we refused to obey the truth, we should condemn ourselves and there would be no hope of our ever getting to heaven. The Lord has to teach us first

*The New Church collaterals of Edward Craig Mitchell treat forty-eight stories in *Parables of the Old Testament*, and forty in *Parables of the New Testament*. —Ed.

in simple ways and lead us a step at a time. We can all understand the stories of the Word as stories, and they are interesting and stay in our minds, and then little by little their meaning grows on us and we begin to see how they apply to us.

The Lord could explain the parable of the sower because its application is general and no one would be disposed to deny it and so be hurt by it. We all know that people differ in the way in which they receive truth. Every teacher knows that he has some pupils who are like the hard-trodden path, or wayside, so set in certain ways of thinking that no new truth can sink in. He has some who like to listen but forget almost as soon as they hear—we call such people “scatterbrains.” Then there are some who do listen and understand and mean to do their work, but when they get out of class, the temptation to play instead of work is too much for them. And then there are others who really profit by what they are taught in different degrees according to their aptitude. It is just the same with the way in which different people receive the truths the Lord gives us in the Word.

Then our chapter likens the truth we receive to the light of a lamp. It is meant to shine into every corner of our house (see Matthew 5:15)—you remember that our house is our character—and show us the things in us that need to be swept out. If we don't want to see our faults, we try to cover this lamp. We may cover it while we live in this world, but we can't hide our faults from the Lord, and when we come into the other world, everyone there will see them clearly. Our lamp is given us on purpose so that we may get rid of our faults before we die. Verses 24-25 are a parable which teaches us that if we do not learn to be good here, the knowledge of truth which we have refused to use will be taken away from us. Read Matthew 6:19-21.

Like the parable of the sower, the other two parables are about seed. The first teaches us that the truths we learn when we are children, even when we do not understand them, are cared for by the Lord, and that the Lord brings them up in our memory again when we need them and are ready to use them. Sometimes, we

know, when some useful piece of information suddenly comes into our minds, we can't even remember where or how we learned it.

But we need to try to take in as much as possible of the Lord's truth and as little as possible of what is false. The Lord says, "Take heed what ye hear." We hear a great many wrong things in our daily lives; and sometimes we accept them without thinking, and they grow up in our minds all mixed up with the good, and we can't get rid of them until we begin to feel the harm they have done us. This is pictured by the Lord in another parable—read Matthew 13:24-30.

Every truth we learn is like the tiny mustard seed. It doesn't seem to amount to much to begin with, but it is capable of growing and putting out branches and becoming a great principle in which our wandering thoughts—like the birds—can find rest and shelter. For example, do you remember the first time you heard that the Bible is the Word of God? The knowledge was put into your mind like a little seed, and you accepted it because your parents or your Sunday school teacher said so, but it didn't mean much to you. But all the knowledge you now have of the Bible really grew out of that little seed, and think how many branches the tree has now, and it will keep on growing always.

Basic Correspondences

seed = truths from the Word

Senior

With this class emphasize the lesson that all knowledge is for use in the service of the Lord and the neighbor, and that only if we have this desire in our hearts can we see the truth within the parables which form the letter of the Word. Then take up the individual parables with a brief explanation of the meaning and application of each. Be sure they understand what verse 25 means.

In our chapter for today we have the statement concerning the Lord that "without a parable spake he not unto them." This is true not only of the Lord when He was in the world but of all that He says to us in the Word. The whole Word is a parable. We are also

told in this chapter why the Lord spoke in parables (verses 10-12) and that He explained some of His parables to the disciples when He was alone with them. The Lord was able to open something of the inner meaning of the Word to His close disciples because they had been willing to turn from their own concerns and their own ways of life in order to follow Him. Read also Luke 24:44-45. He can do the same for us if we are true disciples.

We read in the *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture*, n. 57: “Enlightenment is from the Lord alone, and exists with those who love truths because they are truths and make them of use for life.” All our knowledge of God and spiritual things comes to us by means of the letter of the Word, but without enlightenment we do not see the truth within the letter. And the Lord does not enlighten those who do not want the truth for the sake of living better lives. We can understand verse 12 if we remember that it is much worse for a person to have acknowledged the truth and then refused to try to live according to it than never to have acknowledged it at all. The Lord told Nicodemus (John 3:19): “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” So the Word is given in such a way that everyone may read it and understand the words and get from it some rules for their external conduct, but its deeper truth is hidden from those who would not profit by it.

There is another reason why the Lord speaks to us in parables. Our understanding grows only with our development and experience, and yet we need to be prepared for the problems which we shall have to face. As we read the Word, we understand only as much as we are capable of understanding and using at the time, but the facts and stories which are in the letter stay in our minds and later, as we need them, the Lord can recall them to us and give us the understanding of their meaning. You remember, for example, that the Lord told the disciples many things which they did not understand and apparently forgot, but which they afterward recalled.

The parables in our chapter show us clearly the psychology of this method of instruction. Three of them concern seed, and the

Lord Himself tells us that seed represents truths from the Word. In the parable of the sower the seed is scattered broadcast—the manner of sowing in those days—just as the letter of the Word is available to everybody. The different kinds of ground are the minds of different kinds of people who read or hear the Word. Some are like the hard-trodden wayside, so settled in selfish and worldly habits of thought that their false ideas destroy the truth as fast as they hear it. Some are like the stony ground, apparently receptive but so hard underneath that the truth cannot go deep enough to take root. Some receive the truth but, when it begins to develop in their lives, allow it to be choked out by worldly things. Others are like the good ground and in them the truth is received and carried out into life.

This is a simple parable and one we can all understand, and we all need to understand and think about it. That is why the Lord saw to it that His explanation of it was recorded in the Word. It is one of the seven parables which are found in three of the four Gospels. Verses 21 to 25 show us—again in parable—the importance of our thinking about it. Such knowledge is given us to use, and its use is like the use of a light, to bring into view the things in us which we might prefer to keep hidden, our weaknesses and faults. We remember that our house is our character. Matthew (5:15) says that when the lamp is set on a stand, as it should be, “it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” We are reminded in verse 22 that someday we shall no longer be able to hide our faults. Our years in this world are the time for us to recognize and get rid of them. We cannot continue to hide them after we die, and by that time our eternal character is determined. If good predominates, the things which hinder our development will drop away and we can progress more and more. But if selfishness predominates, all that we have known of the truth will be taken away. This is what is meant by verse 25. “He that hath” is the one who has made the truth his own by using it to correct and develop his character.

The other two parables show how the truth is developed in us if we do use it. We do not cause it to grow ourselves any more than

the farmer makes the seed grow. We merely clear away the obstructions. All life and growth are from the Lord. And every little seed of truth which we have really planted in our minds can be developed by the Lord into a great tree.

Adult

The teacher would do well to read carefully the *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture*, nn. 50-61 and try to present this teaching as a whole in its bearing on our reading and study of the Word. In the New Church people have tended to swing to one extreme or the other—to neglect the study of the letter of the Word, or to neglect the study of the writings. The letter of the Word is the basic study and should be pursued systematically throughout our life, but if we, in this new age, did not also need the knowledge which the writings give us, it would not have been given us. And our study of the letter of the Word should be governed and directed by our knowledge that it is divinely inspired, and not by the pronouncements of those who study the Word as the product of human intelligence. We should see clearly the difference between these two approaches and study the Word in light rather than in darkness.

Three of the universally recognized parables of the Lord are in this chapter of Mark. The parable of the sower and the parable of the mustard seed are found also in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but that of the seed growing secretly is found only in Mark. There are in all some ten parables in the Old Testament and thirty-six in the New which are recognized as parables by all Christians [see note, p. 54]. But our chapter tells us that “without a parable spake he not unto them,” and in the New Church we know that this statement has a far wider application than is generally understood. The whole Word is parable.

The principal reason why the Lord speaks to men always in parable is given in verses 11 and 12 of our chapter. To understand these verses we need to know who are meant by those to whom “it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God” and by those who are said to be “without.” They are the same two groups who are meant in verse 25 by “he that hath” and “he that hath not.” In the *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture*, nn. 50-61, Swedenborg tells us how we are taught in the Word. These sections need

to be studied very thoughtfully because certain statements in them, taken out of their context, have been used to support exactly opposite positions as to our proper study of the Word. Number 57 tells us that “enlightenment is from the Lord alone, and exists with those who love truths because they are truths and make them of use for life.” These are those who—in verse 25 of our chapter—are said to “have.” We do not have anything which we have not made our own by receiving it in the heart. Those who “have not” are described in number 60: “The contrary takes place with those who read the Word from the doctrine of a false religion, and still more with those who confirm that doctrine from the Word, having in view their own glory or this world’s riches. . . . For nothing blinds a man but his proprium and the confirmation of what is false. Man’s proprium is the love of self and the derivative conceit of self-intelligence.” The Lord, we know, never forces anyone to believe in Him or in His Word, and so far as possible He guards us against seeing truth which we are not prepared to apply to life. This is what is meant by verse 12, and is the principal reason why the Word is given in parable.

There is another reason which is suggested in SS 51: “Many truths also are accommodated to the capacity of simple folk, who do not uplift their thoughts above such things as they see before their eyes.” This was true of most of the multitude to whom the Lord spoke when He was in the world. It is true of all young children and of those adults whom Swedenborg often refers to as “the simple good.” But it is also true of all of us at the beginning of our acquaintance with any new truth. It has to be presented to us first in a form in which it can be easily grasped and which can serve as a permanent basis for growing understanding.

But that we should not stop with this simple understanding of the letter, the Lord showed by explaining not only to His chosen disciples but to all of us through the recorded Word the meaning of the parable of the sower, as an indication of what lies within the letter and as a clue to the meaning of many other passages in which sowing, seed, ground, etc., are mentioned. He showed it

later by opening the understanding of the apostles to see “in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms” the things concerning Himself (Luke 24:44-45). And especially He showed it by opening the Word in His second coming through the instrumentality of Swedenborg. The Lord does nothing useless.

We may take the parable of the sower as an example of the process by which we learn from the Lord. We all heard this parable when we were children. It came to us in simple words which we could understand, presenting a vivid picture which our imaginations could grasp. So it stayed with us. The fate of the seeds in the different kinds of ground touched our tender hearts. When we were a little older, the Lord’s explanation of the parable was given us, and we realized suddenly that we might be one of those kinds of ground which did not bring forth fruit; we might be letting the Lord’s truth be carried out of our minds by the birds of false thought, or scorched by our selfishness, or choked out by worldly pleasures and temptations. Our childhood concern for the poor seeds is transmuted into more mature shame for our own faults. Today, when life experience has illustrated the parable to us again and again, reading it leads us into many paths of thought concerning our own state and the state of the world. But we should note that it is as we read the parable in the letter that these thoughts come to us. The letter still stands in our minds as the “basis, containant, and support” of the meaning we have found and of new meaning which we shall continue to find to eternity.

In our chapter there are two other parables concerning seed, but before they are introduced, we have the warning of verses 21 to 24. If we have received the seeds of truth into our minds with a desire to apply them to life which has enabled them to grow and bring forth fruit, we must leave no dark corners in our character into which we will not let the light of truth penetrate. We must be willing to go all the way in self-examination and correction. This world is our opportunity to get rid of our evils. When we pass into the other, all those things in ourselves which we have been unwilling to see will be brought to light in spite of us, and in that world

we shall find that they have become a permanent part of our character. We can no longer get rid of them.

If, however, we are honestly trying to follow the Lord “in the regeneration” (Matthew 19:28) we shall find that wonderful things have happened to the seed which has been sown in this world. We all fortunately are able to see some progress in understanding as we go through life. The seed springs up, we know not how. No truth that is sown in the good ground of a sincere heart will fail to produce its harvest—if not here, then in the world to come. Read here AE 1153⁶.

Then the thought presented in these verses is carried further by the parable of the mustard seed, which tells us that even the least truth received from the Word has in it tremendous capacity not only for growth but for future helpfulness. It can become “greater than all herbs,” and we remember that the herbs in the Creation story, the first vegetation brought forth by the earth, represent the small beginnings of good and truth which man ascribes to himself.

The chapter ends with the stilling of the storm by the Lord, and the whole thought of the chapter is focused in verse 38: “And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?” Compare this with Psalm 107:23-30. As long as we have the letter of the Word in our minds, the Lord is present with us, and although we may imagine that the Lord is not caring for us when trouble and anxiety distress us, it is only because to us at that time He is, as it were, asleep in the hinder part of our ship. We really know that the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps and that He cares for us always. It is we who are asleep to His presence and power, and we have only to call Him to remembrance in order to have our troubled sea become calm.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 2449²: “They who come into the other life are all brought again into a life similar to that which they had in the body; and then with the

good evils and falsities are separated, in order that by means of goods and truths they may be elevated by the Lord into heaven; but with the evil, goods and truths are separated in order that by evils and falsities they may be borne into hell.”

Arcana Coelestia, n. 5922⁶: “The Word as to the external sense is in a cloud, for the reason that human minds are in darkness; and therefore unless the Word were in a cloud, it would be understood by scarcely anyone, and moreover the holy things which belong to the internal sense would be profaned by evil people in the world.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What is a parable? *a story with a hidden meaning*
- J. How many parables are there in the Word? *see footnote, p. 54*
- I. Why does the Lord teach us in parables? *we can see truth better if it doesn't seem at first to apply to us*
- J. What are three of the parables in our lesson about? *seed*
- J. What is the seed? *truth from God's Word*
- J. What are the different kinds of ground? *different kinds of minds*
- P. What does the Lord say about a lamp? *should be put on a stand*
- I. What does light symbolize? *truth which enlightens*
- S. How should we use the truth? *to help see our own faults*
- J. What happens if we do not use it? *we lose it (lamp goes out)*
- J. By what degrees does grain develop? *first blade, then ear, then full grain*
- P. Who makes it grow? *God*
- P. What does the Lord say of a grain of mustard seed? *smallest of seeds*
- J. What does it become? *great bush or tree*
- S. How is this like the development of the truths we learn from the Word? *at first some truths don't mean much to us, but later we may see real meaning*