

JESUS: THE SERVANT AT WORK

VOLUME ONE

STUDY FOURTEEN

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20

The condition of your heart will determine the destiny of your life.
—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

YOUR backyard garden refuses to grow tomatoes. Your lawn turns yellowish brown because weeds have choked out its grass. The flowers in your planter blossom in springtime but wither in summer. And yet, a farm down the road yields bushels of fruits and vegetables! What's the difference?

It's not the fault of the plants or the seed. It's the condition of the soil that determines the beauty and fruitfulness of the garden. *Different soils, different yields.*

A soil's poor quality doesn't always show itself right away. Even a barren hillside can grow a lush carpet of grass—when the rainfall is just right and the climate is temperate. Such was the spiritual climate in the early days of Jesus' ministry. Disciples, like wildflowers, were springing up everywhere. But summer would come. The searing heat of persecution's sun would bear down on these people, revealing the quality of their faith. Would they survive?

As Jesus scanned the faces of the thousands of people coming to see Him, He was thinking more about hearts than numbers. The larger the crowds, the more He wondered whether these people really understood His message.

From Jesus' point of view, it was time to purify, not magnify, the crowd. It was time to separate the casual onlooker from the devoted disciple, and Jesus knew the best teaching tool to do the job: *parables*.



INSIGHT FOR LIVING



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Chuck's message.

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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare to study Jesus' teaching, invite the Holy Spirit to till the soil of your heart, uproot distractions and anxiety, and make it fertile for His Word to grow deep roots and blossom.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
Point out anything in me that offends you,
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. (Psalm 139:23–24)*



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

For the first time in Mark's gospel, we read that Jesus was teaching "in the form of parables" (Mark 4:2). The word *parable* finds its root in the Greek verb *paraballo*, from *para*, meaning "beside or alongside," and *ballo*, meaning "to cast or throw." So, parables are earthly stories that communicate a heavenly message, profound truths that are thrown alongside the familiar in a way that holds the attention of those listening.

In his commentary, *Insights on Mark*, Pastor Chuck urges us to avoid two pitfalls when dealing with parables: "First, we must guard against missing what is important in the hidden truth; second, we must resist the temptation to overanalyze every detail."¹

According to tradition, Jesus taught at a location on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee known today as the Bay of Parables. The curve of the bay and slope of the hillside form a natural amphitheater in which thousands of people can gather. As this new scene begins, join the multitude along the bay where the wildflowers bloom on the grassy hill. See Jesus sitting in the fishing boat speaking without a microphone. Make your way through the crowd and *listen up!*

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20

It was a mixed multitude. There were scribes whose hearts were hardened. There were curiosity seekers. There were people who wanted their bellies filled when they got hungry. There were those who wanted to be healed. And there were those who loved Him and were following Him with great devotion.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Observation: The Parable of the Four Soils

Observing the text is the initial step of *Searching the Scriptures*. Begin by reading [Mark 4:1–20](#) as if you're on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, hanging on every word. Place yourself in the context of when and where it was written.²

The Setting—Mark 4:1–2

What details do you observe in Mark 4:1–2 about the place where Jesus was teaching and the people who gathered around Him? Why do you think Jesus sat to teach?

Jesus Speaks and Interprets the Parable—Mark 4:3–8, 14–20

How did Jesus begin the parable in Mark 4:3? Later, to His closest disciples, Jesus explained the meaning of the parable. What does the seed represent, according to 4:14?

I want us to pause and let those words sink in. “Listen up!” That’s what we would say today. “Pay attention. Hear this!” Understand, parables were never meant to be read. Parables are stories meant to be told.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20

The seed was sown in four types of soil—which represent types of people. Describe each soil type and summarize Jesus’ interpretation based on [Mark 4:3–8, 14–20](#).

The Parable of the Four Soils		
Soil Type	Description	Jesus’ Interpretation
Hardened		
Rocky		
Thorny		
Good		

Jesus Urges All to Hear and Understand—Mark 4:9–13

Mark used a “sandwich” structure to insert [Mark 4:9–13](#) between the parable and its meaning. What do these verses say?

Jesus says, “I deliberately make it unfriendly. Because when I tell stories there is a line of demarcation clearly marked, and those who are on the outside realize, ‘I’m on the outside. I’m not getting it.’ And those who are on the inside are thrilled beyond words.” —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20



Interpretation: The Soul's Responses to God's Word

Interpret [Mark 4:1–20](#) by using Bible-study tools that explore its key terms and background.

We observed that “the sower went out to sow” and the seed he sowed was God’s Word (Mark 4:3, 14 NASB). Who can be a sower?

Why did the person with the hardened heart not receive God’s truth? What insight into this person’s choices do [Matthew 13:19](#) and [Luke 8:12](#) add?

What causes the person with shallow roots to “fall away” and no longer believe in Christ and His Word (Mark 4:17)?

What crowds out the Word in the person with a divided heart, causing him or her to bear no fruit and “never grow into maturity” (Luke 8:14)?

When you're caught up in the deception of riches, it strangles the Word.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20

The fertile soil represents those who hear and accept God's Word in their hearts. Look up the Greek verb *paradechomai*, translated "accept," at billmounce.com. Read [Mark 4:20](#) in the MSG and J. B. Phillips translations. What does it mean to have a heart that accepts God's Word? What does bearing fruit look like?

You know what the Greek word means? It's the word for opening your door and welcoming someone inside. "Lord, I hear Your truth, and I invite You to come in. I welcome You to come in. Thank You for revealing to me the truth concerning my life." —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Becoming the Soil That Bears Much Fruit

The goal of planting a seed is for it to grow and bear fruit. God's Word is necessary for spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Compare [Psalm 119:9, 11](#); [Mark 4:1–20](#); [John 17:17](#); [1 Peter 2:1–3](#), and explain how important His truths are to our growth.

You're not helped along in your maturity by hearing opinions. You're helped when the Word of God is opened, the truth is taught and applied in a way that you can get it. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Spiritual maturity is a process whereby the Holy Spirit transforms our lives with His Word as we cooperate with Him. Compare our passage with [Psalm 139:23–24](#); [John 15:1–5](#); [Galatians 5:16–23](#). What do these passages teach about becoming fertile soil and bearing fruit?

Souls in Soil

Mark 4:1–20

The most significant journey you can take in life that is rarely traveled is the journey into your own heart—to know the true condition of your soul.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Welcome God's Word in Your Heart

The main lesson that Jesus' parable teaches is this: *The condition of your heart will determine the destiny of your life.* In what way has the Holy Spirit used this passage to open your eyes to the condition of your heart? What encouragement did you find that will help you in your journey toward spiritual maturity?

So, where are you in this parable? Which heart is yours? You know what's interesting? No one else can tell you but you. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

We hear messages on bearing the fruit of joy amid trials, true peace in chaotic times, and love toward those who have caused us harm. But living out these truths often feels like gardening in hard, rocky, and thorny soil.

What invitation is Jesus giving you through His parable to help you cultivate in your heart good soil that nourishes the spiritual fruit of the abundant life? What response would you like to give Him?

Open the door of your heart and welcome Christ and His Word. "Lord, I hear Your truth and I invite You to come in. I welcome You into my life. Thank You for revealing to me the truth concerning my life." —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Mark 4:1–20



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word that nourishes my soul so that I can grow and bear much fruit. I welcome Your Word. Help me to love You with all my heart, all my soul, and all my strength. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Mark*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 2 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 110.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](https://www.insight.org/how-does-pastor-chuck-swindoll-study-the-bible)" at [insight.org](https://www.insight.org).

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Mirlenda Noëlliste in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2010, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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