

## He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear Mark 4:1-34

What can we learn from soil, a lamp, a measure, and some seeds? Jesus uses these simple, homely, everyday little items to teach the most important truths in the world... Let's **pray** for ears to hear what He is saying to us in His infinite wisdom.

### Introduction

I thought about these parables a lot last week in S Asia. Most of our folks are struggling in one-way or another. So it was a well-timed trip. We spent a lot of time encouraging them, we worshiped; and we laughed ... a lot. Donnie said, **"That's the longest I've laughed all year."** **We played a lot of pool volleyball...** As the team was sharing their experiences, I reflected on the truths we see in Mark 4:1-34. This chapter talks about the mysterious and dynamic nature of God's Word, and the way the kingdom of God advances.

One of our folks shared a story about an evangelism training that he did. His translator didn't show up, and he was left to himself. He didn't think anyone was getting it. Yet, he kept persisting in the training even though he got the deer-in-the-headlights look from the group. He came back the next week with a translator and asked how the group did in sharing their story... To his shock, they all followed his instruction. One person said, **"Yes, I was able to share with 6 people, and 3 of them believed!"** Our missionary said, as he likes to say, **"Naahh!"** He wanted some more proof so he broke them into groups, shared the bridge analogy with them, and said share this with a partner... Then he told the translator to listen. The translator came back and reported, **"Yep, they're saying exactly what you told them!"**

It's amazing how God uses the simple sowing of the Word of God to bring people to life. It's amazing how quietly the kingdom of God advances. Mark 4 reassures of many important truths, like the fact that the Word of God accomplishes the work of God.

### Parables – a few notes

1. What is a parable? **A parable literally means "to throw alongside." A parable is a practical story that illustrates a spiritual truth or truths. It consists of a story and its intended corresponding message.**
2. Parables aren't allegories... not every item refers to something else... we need to try to find the intent of the parable, avoiding subjective correspondence.
3. Jesus used parables as a two-edged sword. They served to **warn of judgment against outsiders**, and as a means of **instruction on the kingdom of God to those on the inside** – to those in his newly formed messianic community.
  - **To say it another way, parables revealed truth to those who believing the mysterious; and the parables concealed truth from those who were denying the obvious** (Platt). The mystery or the secret concerns **Jesus**. It was not secret that God was going to send the Messiah. The mystery/secret was **what kind of Messiah he would be**. For those trusting in Jesus, the parables taught believers what kind of Messiah he would be. And this understanding was a work of grace ("to you it has been given," v. 11). But for those refusing to believe he was the

Messiah, the parables were a means of judgment – they were meant to disturb and unsettle those who were spiritually blind.

○ **Parables divided. Parables called for a decision.**

4. Jesus didn't invent parables, but no one used them more in Scripture than Jesus. The Gospels record some sixty different parables of Jesus. They were particularly appropriate form of speech since the full meaning of Jesus' ministry wouldn't be revealed until the cross/resurrection.
5. Parables are presented in particular **contexts** for particular purposes.
  - Something to keep in mind when reading the gospels: The gospel of Mark (like the other gospels) is *not presented in strict chronological order*. There's a general order (birth to resurrection, not vice versa). But don't think one chapter follows the next. He might put some miracles together; sometimes confrontations together, and so on.
  - Mark 4:1-20: This is only one of two teaching sections in Mark (parables), along with chapter 13 (Olivet discourse). Mark is more action oriented.
  - Why is this parable section here? It's because of the opposition in chapters 2-3. There are some others who don't get it, and some who do get it. That's the way it is with the parables. Insiders receive it and outsiders don't get it.

Jesus gives a series of parables to teach and to warn, concerning the word of God and the kingdom of God...

### I. The Parable of the Four Soils (4:1-20)

#### Verses 1-9

- V. 1-2 – It was a floating pulpit. V. 1 is an awkward construction in Greek. “Jesus got in a boat and sat on the sea.”
- V. 3-9 – a common farming method of the time, the sower sows without plowing the ground.
  - Verse 3, and 9 both stress *hearing*. That's the main point of the parable.
  - “Hear” or “Listen” appears like **14 times in Mark 4**. – akouo – acoustics. It brackets the parable of the soils (3, 9).
  - The Sower represents Jesus, and in a secondary sense, those who scatter his Word. He “goes out” like Mark 1:38 describes Jesus going out to preach.
  - This parable really illustrates Jesus whole ministry.

**Point: Anyone can hear Jesus, but not everyone hears Jesus.**

- How we hear is determined by our hearts
- The ground determines as to what becomes of the seed sown.
- **Everything in discipleship hangs on how you hear. Those with good hearts accept the word and bear fruit.**

#### Verses 10-13:

- V. 10 – those who are with the twelve receive insight. This is grace.
- V. 11 - The mystery is in the secret of the person of Jesus. If you get Jesus, then you can get the kingdom. He is the Messiah – though many didn't recognize him as such.

- V. 12 – Jesus, like Isaiah, speaks prophetic warnings to the hard-hearted. There are serious, eternal consequences of not listening to Jesus. Few things have changed since the days of Isaiah. William Lane, “The citation of Isaiah 6:9 does not mean those outside are denied the possibility of belief. It indicates that they are denied the opportunity for further instruction in the kingdom so long as unbelief continues.” Further insight only comes through faith. Those who have ears to hear – those who are humble – they receive more understanding. Those who harden their hearts do not.
- The good news is that outsiders can become insiders, and the gospel of Mark shows us this reality.
- V. 13 – do you not understand? There’s mystery here. Even the disciples would need additional light (Mark 8:27-38)

With that, Jesus explains this particular parable to the disciples, and in so doing, provides us with four applications regarding how we listen.

### Applications:

#### **1. Indifferent heart (4, 14-15)**

- Stone pathways were there for you to walk on. Invariably, seed would go on this path... You won’t get a crop there. It’s like sowing it on the sidewalk...
- **Satan**, verse 15, immediately takes away the word....
- Listening involves **spiritual warfare!**
- Hearts can be hard in a number of different ways....

#### **A. One can be indifferent because he or she finds the Bible “uninteresting”**

- “It’s waste of time to hear the Bible.”
- If you say, “I’d rather have a root canal watching Barney than hear the Word,” then it’s very likely that nothing will happen in that kind of heart.
- **Some listen to sermons like I listen to telemarketers... you simply endure, and forget it happened.**
- Many read the Bible like a **Disclaimer page**
- **You should stand up front sometime and look at faces! Not everything is revealed in one’s expression, but it’s amazing how non-interested some people can look!**

#### **B. One may be indifferent because he or she finds Christianity “archaic and irrelevant”**

- “The Bible is an outdated book for primitive people”
- “I’m sure Paul wouldn’t have said what he said about marriage if he were living today.”

#### **C. One may be indifferent because he or she finds Christianity “implausible”**

- When they read the Bible or hear the Bible it sounds like the people who talk about UFO’s.
- “**Dead man coming to life? Flood, plagues, walking on water? Come on.**”
- How do you respond to these people? You may present some arguments, but the problem is with their hearts.

Notice again what's going on. Satan takes away the word. This is spiritual warfare.

- Satan he hates that you are here today.
- He hates that you read a good Christian book
- He hates that you are in a Bible study
- The Devil wants to rob the word's effectiveness
- He wants the ride home to have drama (De Young)
- He wants there to be no discussion and personal application.

## 2. Superficial Heart (5-6, 16-17)

- Initial excitement, but not depth .... **Summer camp, college, Christian church helped you get sober....** Great early experience, show up at everything, but no depth. Result? You wither
- **George Whitefield, after the Great Awakening was asked, "How many were saved?" He said, "We'll see."** He knew of the possibility that some were caught up in an experience, but would never bear fruit and prove to be a disciple.
- This kind of heart forces us to ask some questions
  - Do you really know what you believe?
  - Are you growing, or are you living on the faith of others?
  - Are you devoted to the local church?
- One of the keys for not experiencing this kind of firecracker faith is a love for and involvement with the local church. I'm all for campus ministries, parachurch ministries, but depth comes in the local church, under substantive teaching, in genuine community, and involvement in mission...
- Why no depth? Why no perseverance? **Persecution/Trouble**. (a big issue for Mark's audience)
  - At some point the shine will wear off...
  - It will wear off with a church as well...
  - Will you continue to grow when the shine is gone?
  - Will you stick with us for 30 years?
- If you are intending to go into ministry, plant oaks, not grass. Grass fades. Oaks endure. Don't simply get people excited for a bit; take the long view. If people have no depth, they will not persevere.

## 3. Distracted Heart (7, 18-19)

Jesus mentions three *thorns*.... This problem is a real problem for Xians in America...

### A. The Cares of the World

- **This is probably the greatest threat to spiritual growth in our church.**
- It's not persecution – it's the business and cares of this life:
  - Business... Leaky shower... Cleaning the house... assignments... wedding plans... Taxes .... the dentist appointment... and of course **emails!**
  - All of this stuff can choke out the word!

- Notice in the parables that this ranks as a greater threat than persecution.
  - Persecution can actually foster great spiritual growth.
  - Beware of **busyness** of life not just **bullets** from terrorists.
- Here's what you need: **You must set aside moments of quietness before the Word, to slowly digest the word.** Can you do this? Do you have unhurried unhindered time with God?

### B. The Deceitfulness of Riches

- Riches are deceitful because they don't last; they don't give you ultimate security; and they take your eyes off Christ (KD)
- The problem is not with stuff, but with preoccupation with stuff.
- It may be fine to get a new house, even a bigger house. You can do great ministry with a big house. The problem is with your heart.
- **Is a love for stuff choking out the word?**

### C. The Desire for Other Things – again, the issue is with the heart.

- What do you desire more: the treasures of Scripture, or worldly treasures?
- Do you desire Christ more than comfort?
- Do you desire Christ more than sexual pleasure?
- **Are your desires for other things choking out the word?**

Notice the gradualness of this – **the thorn doesn't choke suddenly, but gradually, almost unknowingly.** Over time, if there's no dwelling on the Word, then the desire for money, the things of this world, etc., destroys the heart.

### 4. Receptive Heart (8, 20)

- Here we see the marks of genuine disciples:
  - **Hearing** – he hears it, and he really hears it. Faith is present.
  - **Receiving** – **1 Thess 1:13** – receive it eagerly, joyfully, as the word of God
  - **Bearing Fruit** - grow and mature.

It all starts with properly hearing God's Word.

**Summary: Good seed sown into a good heart grow into a good tree**

- Not all our equal in fruitfulness (30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold), but they're good trees.

**Have you ever prayed, God make me a good hearer?** Pray for God to change your heart so that you may hear, receive and bear fruit.

Let us move quickly to the final three sections...

## II. Four More Parables (4:21-34)

### 1. The Lamp (4:21-23)

**Continuing in the same line of thought from the parable of the soils, Jesus tells us that the about bringing an oil lamp into a room. It will reveal things that are hidden, like sin and hard-heartedness.**

A literal translation of the key phrase in verse 21 is, “**Comes the lamp . . .**” This refers to Jesus Himself, who has “come as a light into the world” (John 12:46). He is “the light of men” (John 1:4), “the true light” (John 1:9), and the “light of the world” (John 8:12). God has sent this Lamp to bring light to a dark world.

**Jesus has come to reveal truth, enlighten minds, and conquer the darkness! [Akin]. He’s a bit hidden now, not everyone comes to the light, but soon the whole world will know of the Light.**

**When we proclaim the kingdom of God, when we reflect the King, sin and hard heartedness is exposed. The kingdom is now manifested through us. We don’t hide under the couch, but we are to live our lives out in the open.**

**V. 23 – Jesus emphasizes the need to hear his truth about the kingdom – Don’t ignore the light! Welcome the light!**

## **2. The Measure (4:24-25)**

- This little proverb, or additional parable, **reinforces the call to be careful how you hear.**
- Jesus uses this little saying in various ways (cf., Matt 7:2; Lk 6:38), but here it refers to **the attitude you have when hearing the word.**
- **The point is simple: If your hearing is receptive to the Word, you will receive even more.** You will have increased understanding and blessing – both in this life and the life to come.
- **To say it another way: You got out of it, what you put into it!**
  - The same is true in the church, in your discipleship, etc.
  - Don’t complain about lack of fellowship if you aren’t pursuing it; don’t complain about lack of growth if you aren’t pursuing holiness.
  - Don’t complain about lack of joy if you aren’t giving.
- **The spiritually rich get richer, and the spiritually poor get poorer. That’s the point.**
- So go after the truth! Take your faith seriously!
- **Proverbs 9:9:** “Instruct a wise man, and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man, and he will learn more.”
- Those who are really taking their faith seriously are getting the most joy out of their faith.

## **3. The Seed Growing (4:26-29)**

- **Jesus teaches us here about God’s power at work when the seed is planted.**

Two points:

- i. **It is surprising how the kingdom grows. (26-27)**

- See the man is “sleeping” – He’s doing nothing! Night and day. **That’s his contribution! This is not an impressive guy!**
- **Plant the seed and the seed does the work of God by the power of God.**
- **Like in farming, there’s a hidden work going on beneath the surface.**
- The sower is passive. He wakes up and says, “**How did that happen?**” **Like our missionary said, “Nah... Did that really happen?”**
- Now, there’s more to it than this, but Jesus is telling the story. There’s more to farming than this; Jesus knows this. The point is simple: **the seed sprouts because the seed is powerful.**
- **The seed bears fruit “automata” – automatically.**
- The word does the work. **Luther said this about the Reformation.**

ii. **It is a certainty: the kingdom will grow. (28-29)**

- Think about the Jewish mindset regarding a king – think 1-2 Sam, and 1-2 Kings. Think David. Does this look like Jesus? A military king? A king bringing prosperity like Solomon. Jesus’ kingship is different. Jesus came from Nazareth, selected a bunch of ordinary Joes, said some strange and hard-to-believe things, so how will His kingdom have no end? We read of the number of the redeemed in Revelation and we marvel at the growth of the kingdom! **The messianic rule of God commenced inconspicuously but grows steadily in the midst of adversity until this glorious culmination.** “Sickle” and harvest are metaphors for final judgment (see 30-32).
- How does this growth happen? How will there be a harvest of people? **By the Word.** Not military dominance. By speaking the message. It is surprising! It is certain!
- How did those people get there? **Not by the ingenuity of the farmer, but because of the seed.**
- The farmer sleeps; the seed grows.
- I don’t want to suggest that planning and ingenuity and planning are totally irrelevant, but I do want to make the point of this parable: God blesses His Word. **The word of God does the work of God.** So let’s give ourselves to it.
- I don’t care if you remember my points; or my sermons. **I care about the seed being sown in a good heart.**

**Point: Just keep sowing, just keep sowing... throwing the seed... And then one day you’ll say, “What! What a God! God gave growth!”**

- **Have an unshakable confidence in the word of God!**
- **It is the imperishable seed by which people are born again (1 Peter)**
- **Don’t listen to people who say “That’s just an old book.” Satan wants you to believe this!**

**4. The Mustard Seed (4:30-32)**

- **Main point: It is surprising how Big the kingdom grows.**
- **Critics say: “There are seeds smaller. See the Bible has errors.” No, this was a proverbial saying. We say things like “it’s easier to find a needle in a haystack.” Technically, it may be harder to find a *contact in the ocean*. But you get the point.**

- The same here. A mustard seed is tiny. Again, the kingdom begins in a small and unnoticed way... Not how people expected it to begin!
- But then it grows huge! The disciples probably never imagined how big the church would be today.
- The kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed – which can produce a large bush, so the kingdom will grow like this.
- The resting of birds is a picture of divine blessing, and perhaps of the nations.
- If you doubt this growth, read Revelation 7:9-10!
- In Daniel 4, we find similar language as Mark 4. Daniel’s dream predicts the expansion of Neb. But Jesus’ kingdom will exceed it.
- Nothing will stop the advancement of Jesus’ kingdom – not a political election, the economy or persecution.
- The kingdom will flourish because it is God’s kingdom.

**V. 33-34** – One can only understand if one comes to Jesus. Otherwise, you remain in the dark.

### Conclusion

#### Unbeliever

- This section shows Jesus to be the ultimate teacher.
- He is warning and instructing.
- He is the subject of his own teaching – for He is the King of this Kingdom.
- There are insiders and outsiders. There are believers and unbelievers. Come to Jesus and live.

#### Believer:

- God hasn’t called us to be the best looking or the smartest of most creative people – he calls us to **plant the seed and go to sleep**. He calls us to be faithful to do that.
- Put your hope in the word.
- Dwell on it daily, and sow it daily.
- Sow it and pray for good hearts to receive it.
- Until we see the King, with a people in which no one can number, and we all say, “How did this happen?”