

7: Kingdom Parables of Jesus (Mark 4:1-34)

A handful of seeds, a lamp, and a mustard seed—Jesus used ordinary things to reveal extraordinary truths about God's kingdom. Join us in Mark 4 as we learn to listen to his word, respond with faith, and trust God with the growth we cannot yet see.

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teachingnotes

* All Scripture is from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

Jesus told stories (parables) about farmers sowing seed, lamps lighting rooms, and tiny seeds growing into something surprisingly large. Through these ordinary images, Jesus invited people to see something extraordinary: what God's kingdom is like.

Parables are everyday stories revealing eternal truths about God's kingdom.

WHY PARABLES? Stories STICK. Someone once said: "Jesus could turn people's **ears into eyes**."

Mark 4:1–9

Again **he began to teach by the sea**, and a very large crowd gathered around him. So he got into a boat on the sea and sat down, while the whole crowd was by the sea on the shore. **He taught them many things in parables**, and in his teaching he said to them,"Listen! Consider the sower who went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn't have much soil, and it grew up quickly, since the soil wasn't deep. When the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it didn't produce fruit.Still other seed fell on **good ground** and it grew up, **producing fruit** that increased thirty, sixty, and a hundred times."

This was a largely agricultural society, so the story made sense to most everyone listening. But that's all it was - stories, and that's how it ended. No explanation. Instead, Jesus allowed the audience to chew on what they heard and wrestle with the meaning for themselves.

This must have been strange for the disciples of Jesus who heard Him teach many times, often interpreting difficult things in simple and clear ways, but NOW...now Jesus told these stories with no explanation, leaving the people hanging regarding what they meant. WHY?

Mark 4:10-12

When he was alone, those around him with **the Twelve** asked him about the parables. He answered them, "**The secret of the kingdom of God** has been **given to you**, but to those outside, everything comes in parables so that they may indeed look, and yet not perceive; they may indeed listen, and yet not understand; otherwise, they might turn back and be forgiven."

These are difficult words. *Doesn't Jesus want people to turn back and be forgiven?* Of course. We must remember that we have already seen resistance to Jesus in Mark's Gospel. Some religious leaders have begun plotting his death. Some have attributed the work of God's Spirit to Satan. These are serious negative responses to the light they have received.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 as the prophet was sent to people who would hear God's message and still resist it. Jesus' preaching would expose their hardness and become an instrument of God's judgment. And that's what these parables do.
These parables do more than make truth memorable.

Parables Reveal & Conceal - ***revealing truth*** to those who are willing to submit to the truth, but ***concealing truth*** to those who look & listen, but aren't willing to BOW to the truth.

The disciples didn't understand these parables either, BUT...***they bring their questions to Jesus***.

If you have questions about Jesus, bring them to Him.

James Edwards compares the parables to ***the cloud between Israel and Egypt at the Red Sea***: the same cloud brought light to one side and darkness to the other.[1]

Parables help the simple see and make the boastful blind.

[1] James R. Edwards, "Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives," NovT 31 (1989): 215.

Mark 4:13-15
Then he said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand all of the parables? The sower **sows the word**. Some are like the word sown on the path. When they hear, immediately **Satan** comes and takes away the word sown in them.

The seed is **the word**. Jesus is spreading it in his ministry, and His followers will carry that work forward.

The path pictures people who hear, but **the word** is taken away before it takes root. Jesus identifies **Satan's** activity here. Hearing the gospel is a spiritual matter, and opposition to it is real.

Mark 4:16–17
And others are like seed sown on **rocky ground**. When they **hear the word**, immediately they **receive it with joy**.
But they have no root; they are short-lived. When distress or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately fall away.

Many in Jesus' day **heard the word** and **immediately received it with joy**. They loved listening to Jesus and might have even claimed to be His followers. But times were coming when **persecution** would PROVE whether they were rooted or not.

Mark 4:18–19
Others are like seed sown among **thorns**; these are the ones who **hear the word**, but the worries of this age,
the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and **choke the word**, and it becomes unfruitful.

Worries, **wealth**, and **other desires** that begin to crowd out the plant that has grown from the small seed. Anxiety can consume our attention. Ambition can direct our decisions. Pleasure can become our priority.

(?) What is competing with Jesus for your trust, attention, and obedience?

Mark 4:20
And those like seed sown on good ground **hear the word**, welcome it, and **produce fruit** thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown."

The good ground pictures people who **hear the word**, **welcome it**, and **produce fruit**. The harvest size varies, but the word makes a lasting difference. There are many who claim to be followers of Jesus who have NO FRUIT. A profession of faith that leaves us permanently unchanged should concern us. Living faith bears fruit. Just before going to Gethsemane to be arrested, Jesus told His disciples...

John 15:5–8
I am the vine; you are the branches. **The one who remains in me** and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If anyone does not remain in me, **he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers**. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. **My Father is glorified by this**: that you **produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples**.

Fruit does not earn our place with Jesus; ***it grows from our life in him***.

(?) Examine your life. Is there growing love for Christ? Repentance when you sin? A willingness to obey? Love for others? Perseverance when obedience is difficult?

We are looking for evidence of life, not perfection. Growth takes time, and a struggling believer who keeps turning to Jesus should find encouragement here.

Mark 4:21–23
He also said to them, "Is **a lamp** brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed? Isn't **it** to be **put on a lampstand?** For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and nothing concealed that will not be brought to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen."

A **lamp** belongs where its light can be seen. You don't bring it into a room to hide it under a bed! The picture helps us understand the kingdom's present hiddenness. God's work in Jesus will be revealed. What seems somewhat hidden now will not remain obscure forever. As the Gospel unfolds, Jesus' death and resurrection will bring his identity and mission into clearer view. His followers will proclaim that good news to the world - and put the lamp on the lampstand for all to see.

The message that has come to us is a message to carry to others.

Mark 4:24–25
And he said to them, "**Pay attention to what you hear**. By the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and more will be added to you. For whoever has, more will be given to him, and whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him."

Notice how often Jesus calls us to do more than just **hear**, but to **pay attention** to *what we hear*. As we hear what he says and respond to it, we receive more. Refusing the truth we have heard carries the danger of losing even what we think we possess.

(?) Make it personal: *What has Jesus already shown you that you need to act on? Is there a sin to confess? Someone to forgive? A truth to trust? A step of obedience you keep postponing?*

Receiving the word includes responding to it.

Mark 4:26–29

"**The kingdom of God** is like this," he said. "A man scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day; **the seed sprouts and grows**, although he doesn't know how. The soil produces a crop by itself—first the blade, then the head, and then the full grain on the head. As soon as the crop is ready, he sends for the sickle, because **the harvest has come**."

The farmer **scatters seed**. Then **he sleeps** and gets up, day after day. Meanwhile, **the seed grows**—even though he cannot explain or control the process. Ancient farmers knew a great deal about sowing and harvesting. But knowing how to plant a seed is different from being able to give it life and causing it to grow. ***The crop's growth exceeds the farmer's ability***.

We scatter the word, but we cannot manufacture spiritual life. (See Paul writing in 1 Corinthians 3:5–9, people plant and water, while God gives the growth.) Some will immediately reject. Others will claim to believe and walk away.
But...the ultimate result of the farmer sowing the seed is good fruit and **the harvest**!

Galatians 6:9

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time **we will reap a harvest** if we do not give up.

You aren't responsible for another person's response. ***You ARE responsible for obeying Jesus and taking the gospel to others***. Followers of Jesus should be encouraged that although they will face rejection & persecution, the planting and watering of the word WILL produce a spiritual harvest!

✓ Keep praying. Keep loving. Keep sharing the word. God can be working long before you see the evidence.

In fact, the next parable Jesus tells reinforces this hope.

Mark 4:30–32

And he said, "With what can we compare **the kingdom of God**, or what parable can we use to describe **it**? **It's** like a mustard seed that, when sown upon the soil, is the smallest of all the seeds on the ground. And when sown, **it** comes up and **grows taller than all the garden plants**, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade."

Notice that "**it**" is referring **the kingdom of God**. ***The Kingdom of God might be starting small -*** *like a mustard seed* ***- but it will not stay in the ground.*** **The Kingdom** that Jesus was bringing will GROW and be filled with those who appreciate the protection and provision of the King.

✝ Don't despise small beginnings. A quiet conversation about Jesus matters. Teaching a child the Scriptures matters. Faithful service that few people notice matters.

Mark 4:33–34

He was speaking the word to them with many parables like these, as they were able to understand. He did not speak to them without a parable. **Privately**, however, **he explained everything to his own disciples**.

Jesus keeps teaching, and he keeps explaining to his disciples. They still have much to learn, but ***they are with him, still listening***.

? You might HEAR what Jesus says, *BUT ARE YOU LISTENING?*

✝ Receive God's word, respond to it, and keep spreading it—trusting God to bring the harvest.

heretoserveyou

Have questions and need some help? ...real soon...how about now? Please **call** or **text** us soon!

* Contact **Jackie** (850-673-1582), **Christy** (850-673-9764), **Caleb** (864-315-8015), **Gary** (850-673-2507), **Betty** (850-973-3266), or another follower of Jesus soon!
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Discussionquestions [redacted]

These questions are designed to help you LIVE what you LEARN with your family, friends, or small group.

1. Read Mark 4:1–20. What distinguishes hearing the word from receiving it? What evidence of that difference can appear in everyday life?
2. Which warning do you most need to consider right now: resistance to the word, shallow roots under pressure, or competing worries and desires? What would a faithful response look like this week?
3. The disciples had questions and needed Jesus to explain. How does that encourage you? How can we distinguish honest questions from a refusal to listen?
4. Read Mark 4:21–25. What truth from Jesus do you need to pay closer attention to? What practical step of obedience could follow?
5. Read Mark 4:26–29 and 1 Corinthians 3:5–9. What responsibilities belong to us, and what depends on God? How should that affect both our effort and our anxiety?
6. How is fruit in our own lives different from visible results in someone else's life? How does Carey's story illustrate that distinction?
7. Read Mark 4:30–32. Where are you tempted to dismiss something because it seems small? How does this parable change your perspective?
8. Whom will you pray for and seek an opportunity to encourage or share the gospel with this week? Close by praying for those people and for one another's perseverance.