

## **The Word Will Bear Fruit (Part 1)**

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The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 4:1-20

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### **Introduction:**

The gospel of Mark has two major themes that run through it. The first, and primary, is the person and the work of Jesus, the truth that the gospel is good news of Jesus Christ. As we read this gospel, we see Jesus as both mighty and mild. We see Him as the mighty Son of God as we read of His authority, power, and teaching astonishing people. We see Him as mild through His compassion for the lowly, concern for the weak, and sacrificial suffering as He moves toward the cross to die for the sin of His people. The second theme is Mark's clear and undeniable picture of what it looks like to truly be a disciple of this Jesus. Through this gospel, Mark shows that those who understand who Jesus truly is, and the depths of what He accomplished for them, experience a true and lasting change of heart. A change that affects their priorities, pursuits, and even desires. A change that will also mean sacrifice and probably even suffering, as we hear the call to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Our passage today is focused on that theme of discipleship. Last week we looked at the call to fully embrace Jesus, in Mark 3:13-35, and how it meant to be with Him and do the will of God. Over the next two weeks, we will consider Mark's first extended record of Jesus' teaching, revealing how the Word of God, which Jesus proclaimed and commissioned the apostles to proclaim, will cause a change in true followers of Christ that is evident for all to see. Today, we will consider Mark 4:1-20, and the first parable in a series of connected parables that run through verse 35. Look with me at how Mark begins in verses 1-2, "Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables." Notice how Jesus is beside the sea again teaching a very large crowd in a very specific way. He was teaching "many things in parables." Now, look at verse 35 with me, "On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'" This suggests Jesus delivered these parables together while teaching at the sea. In between verse 2 and 35, Mark discloses some of these parables. Yet, notice what Mark records in verse 10, "And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables." In verses 10-20, Mark interjects a conversation with His disciples, explaining the first parable, in between this teaching by Jesus. This interjection highlights the importance of understanding the explanation of the first parable and its relationship to all the parables. So, we want to focus on that today before we consider the rest of the parables next week. Let's break up verses 3-20 in two parts, verses 3-12, and verses 13-20. Look with me at verses 3-12, which reveal how,

### **THE PARABLES OF JESUS PROVIDE TRUTH FOR SOME AND HIDE TRUTH FROM OTHERS**

Verses 3-12 contain a parable, followed by Jesus explaining why He speaks in parables as the disciples ask about them. Consider a few aspects of this parable before getting to its explanation in verses 13-20. Look closely with me at verses 2-9, "And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'" Note how the parable speaks in imagery understood by the audience. The terrain of paths, rocky ground, thorns, and good soil were easily recognizable for the crowd because they were consistent with farming conditions in Palestine and Galilee. Yet, there is a difference between the parable and typical farming practices. Because of these conditions, farming was very orderly and methodical to give the highest likelihood of a good yield, yet the parable has the sower almost being wasteful in his scattering of seed.

Another thing to note is that, when Mark speaks of “some seed” and “other seed” in verses 4-7, it is singular, but “other seeds” in verse 8 is plural. This begins to focus the reader’s attention on the seeds that fell on the good soil, which is further magnified by the yield of “thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold,” as it would have been an uncommon and exceptional harvest, indicating divine blessing. But the most important aspect of parable is the call to “Listen” at the beginning, and “hear” at the end. “Listen” is written in a way to show urgency, and the call to hear at the end points back to that urgency. Jesus is saying seek to truly hear what is being said. The concept of hearing is repeated throughout verses 13-20 and again in verse 24, where Jesus says, “Pay attention to what you hear.” Don’t miss the urgency of this call on your own life at this moment. We should never squander our opportunities to hear the word of God. Instead, we should press into God’s word, as often as we can to hear it. Yet, I wonder how many weeks go by where we fail to really engage with God’s Word. Weeks where work, hobbies, or activities take us away from meaningful moments spent in God’s word. Let this call of Jesus sink in for you. Verses 10-12 reveal why this is so important. Look at verses 10-11 with me, “And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” Do you see what Jesus is saying? Jesus makes a distinction between those brought into the kingdom and those outside. Those inside, the ones with Jesus, are given the secret of the kingdom of God. But those outside are not. Notice the secret of the kingdom is a gift given to some and hidden from others. Then we see the purpose in hiding it from some in verse 12, “so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’ ” Jesus appears to be quoting from an Aramaic paraphrase of Old Testament texts called the Targum. Parables are given to fulfill the prophetic words of Isaiah 6:9-10 and designed to intentionally conceal truth from some hearts. This is not the only time Jesus speaks like this. Listen to His words in John 9:39, “Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” There is an uncomfortable tension that we rightfully wrestle with. Why would Jesus speak in a way that intentionally concealed truth from people? That is difficult to answer in a way that fully satisfies our curiosity, but the scriptures tell us God knows the hearts of people and is good, just, and loving in all His ways. There are hardened hearts that reject the truth, and those hearts would reject it even if it were spoken to them outside of parables. Yet, Jesus, in the just and righteous judgement of God speaks in a way that provides truth to some and hides it from others. Church, we aren’t called to fully understand this tension, but pray for ears to hear and eyes to see. Don’t consign yourself to unbelief from this, pray for God’s help, ask for the Spirit’s work on your heart. This moves us to the explanation of this parable, in verses 13-20, revealing how,

### **THE WORD OF JESUS WILL ACCOMPLISH LASTING RESULTS**

I am always encouraged to see the gospels show Jesus disclosing the meaning of some parables to His disciples. Even while Jesus spoke in parables to hide truth, He also disclosed that truth to His apostles and led them to disclose some of it to us. Yes, we will need to work to understand other parables, but God’s amazing grace is on display as He moves gospel writers to show some of that truth to us. Pay attention to how verse 13 opens this section, “And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” The apostles, and those with them did not understand the parable at first, and Jesus says understanding this parable is important to understand all the parables. Is this because it shows whether we have ears to hear? Or because this parable provides a key to other parables? I lean towards it being the second reason. Notice how it begins in verse 14, “The sower sows the word.” This parable speaks of two important realities found within many of the other parables we see in the gospel. First, it speaks about the sower of the word, which is both Jesus and His disciples that follow Him in that preaching work. The word sown is the word of the gospel of the kingdom and the whole of scripture. We understand the sower to be Jesus as we see him teach, preach, and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom throughout the gospel of Mark.

In fact, the word used for “went out” in verse 2 of the parable is the same Greek word used when Jesus speaks of His purpose in Mark 1:38. But, we discover the sower is also those who follow in His preaching task as He sends His apostles out to preach. Note the simplicity of their role, they sow the word. The rest of the parable speaks about the varied responses to the word sown. Pick back up in verses 15-19, “And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they 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. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” In verses 15-19, Jesus explains the three types of soils from the parable that yield no crop. Verse 15 shows seed on the path are people who hear the word and Satan immediately takes it away so it produces no change. Verses 16-17 shows the seed on the rocky ground are people who receive the word with joy at first but fall away because there was no root. The scorching sun is an example of the difficulties of tribulation and persecution. We need deep roots to bear under trials. Verses 18-19 describe the seed among the thorns as people who produce no real change because the lies of wealth and desires for other things choke the word. Notice the subtle shift of the seed as the word of God when it is sown to people’s responses to it. The Word of God is a seed inside of a seed. Pay attention as well to how each of these soils represent no real heart change. None of these people are truly redeemed. This is scary when you think about it. There can be some who receive the word with joy and have not root if it isn’t buried deep in our hearts, falling way and proving not to be redeemed. There can be others who receive the word by have it choked by cares of this world proving not to be redeemed. Church, we must take care of how we hear the word of God. Jesus says in John 8:31-32, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Abide in His word means living in it and clinging to it. And, as it gives us the truth, that truth sets us free from our sin, the cares of this world, and helps us bear under trials. This abiding is what the final soil points to. Look with me at verse 20, “But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” There are some significant shifts in language from verses 15-19 to verse 20 to see. First, verses 15-19 each say “and” when distinguishing between the different soils, where verse 20 says “but.” This signifies this final soil is contrasted with the other three. Secondly, which is harder to see in the English, the hearing described in verses 15-19 is in a Greek tense that speaks of something completed at a particular point in time, where the hearing described in verse 20 is in a tense that speaks on ongoing action. The good soil points to people who are continually hearing and responding to the word. Finally, consider the difference between accepting the word in verse 20, and receiving it in verse 16. The word for receive carries the idea of simply taking it in, where accept carries the idea of embracing it in obedience. All of these things point to a vastly different hearing of the word. A hearing that fully embraces the word of Christ, internalizing it, clinging to it, and responding in faith. And that response involves lasting change. Bearing fruit is a common metaphor in the Bible that points to change of habits, thoughts, and actions. Those that abide in Christ, the soil that embraces the word, bear fruit. Now, notice how Jesus speaks of varying degrees of fruit bearing. Some are thirtyfold, others sixtyfold, and some a hundredfold. The fruit in our lives will vary, but that shouldn’t cause discouragement, because it all comes from the grace of our Lord and Savior. This teaching has a two-fold purpose. First, to show us, as sowers of the word, how the word of Christ will bear fruit. We are called to sow and trust that seed to fall on the hearts that are prepped and ready for it. Second, is to cause us to look at our lives and see if the Word is bearing fruit. I want to focus on the second purpose. Consider the main question this passage causes us to ask.

## **DO WE HAVE EARS TO HEAR?**

I believe Mark's primary purpose is to have us consider this question as he repeats the call to hear and defines proper hearing as understanding the word throughout these verses. Look at the consistent refrain in Mark 4:3, 9, 12 and 13. Verses 3 and 9 tell us there is one thing to do, to listen or hear. And the explanation to the disciples show that hearing involves understanding, embracing, and responding to the word of Christ. The parable shows us there will be different receptions to the gospel of Christ, and calls everyone to have ears to hear. Do we have ears to hear? Let me give three questions to ask as you seek to answer that. First,

### **1) ARE WE DESIRING TO BE WITH JESUS?**

Right before this teaching, Jesus referred to those in the home with him as His "mothers and sisters and brothers" in Mark 3:34. Prior to that, in Mark 3:14, Jesus chose the 12 apostles to "be with him." Those with ears to hear the word of the gospel long to be with Jesus Christ. This means we desire to worship Him, pray to Him, and learn about Him from His Word. Church, the greatest good of the gospel is God Himself. The glory of God in Christ is our highest good. Jesus' death on the cross provided the forgiveness we needed to be reconciled to God. His resurrection provided the new life we needed to dwell with God forever. Our trust in Him primarily secures the grace and joy of being with Him forever. Those who have truly heard and embraced the word of God, have a desire to be with Jesus Christ. How much do you desire to be with Christ? Second,

### **2) ARE THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD AFFECTING OUR RECEPTION OF THE WORD?**

The seed that fell on the rocky ground and among the thorns were both affected by the things of this world. Those on rocky ground experienced trials that led them to fall away. Those among the thorns have the cares, desires, and deceitfulness of this world choke the word, causing them to be unfruitful. Each response should have us look to our own hearts and ask how the things of the world are affecting our reception of the Word. Have trials caused you to move away from Christ? What about riches, or desires for other things? Are they getting in the way of your love for Christ and response to His word? Those who have truly heard and embraced the word of Christ, have the grip of this world loosened as they learn to delight more in Christ. How are the things of this world affecting your reception of the Word? Last question,

### **3) WHAT KIND OF FRUIT ARE WE PRODUCING?**

This parable is clear that the call of Christ involves responding to the Word. It means growing and changing to become more like Christ. Loving others like Christ. Serving others like Christ. Fighting sin like Christ. Sacrificing like Christ. And seeking to share Christ's glory and the gospel with others. That fruit is a product of truly hearing and accepting the word. As Jesus says in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." Examine your life and ask what kind of fruit you are producing. Are you growing in your fight of sin? Are you growing in your love for others? Are you producing any fruit at all?

### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in our time of response, I want to end with a challenge given by a pastor named Danny Akin that struck me in my study. Here is his challenge: "Be greedy for the Word. Go after it, grab hold of it, and do not let it go. Like a starving beggar who has found bread, seize it with all your might and cherish it for the life-sustaining food that it is!" (Daniel L. Akin, Exalting Jesus in Mark, 90). The call of this parable is to hear and respond to the word of God. Don't let this time of response pass you by. Maybe you want to know how you can trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin. If so, I would love to speak with you, and I am sure others around you would as well. Ask and find true life today. Maybe the trials of life or cares of this world have distracted you from Jesus Christ. Cry out to Him and turn back to find your joy and satisfaction in Him. You can come down and fall on your knees before Him or cry out where you are at. Maybe you need someone else to pray for you. As always, we have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you. Press into how God is calling you to personally respond to His word today and receive His grace. Pray with me as we move into our time of response.