

The Importance of Listening to the Word– Mark 4:1-20 (1)

Introduction, outline

- Scripture reading: Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:10-17.
- Mark 4:1-20 (NASB95)

4 He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. ² And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ³“Listen *to this!* Behold, the sower went out to sow; ⁴ as he was sowing, some *seed* fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up.⁵ Other *seed* fell on the rocky *ground* where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other *seed* fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ⁸ Other *seeds* fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”⁹ And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, ^[a]let him hear.”

¹⁰ As soon as He was alone, ^[b]His followers, along with the twelve, *began* asking Him *about* the parables.¹¹ And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, ¹² so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven.”

¹³ And He *said* to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?”¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. ¹⁶ In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky *places*, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷ and they have no *firm* root in themselves, but are *only* temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they ^[c]fall away. ¹⁸ And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, ¹⁹ but the worries of the ^[d]world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰ And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.”

- Six different kinds of audience - the mind-wandering kind (What should I eat for lunch?), the indifferent kind (zzzzzz...), the side-tracking kind (The preacher really needs to wash his shirt), the nitpicking kind (He didn't say for God's glory!), the role-playing kind (Mr. so-and-so really needs to hear this!), and finally, the attentive kind (Hmm, that's true, and I need to apply it in my life). Which kind are you?

Outline:

Title: **The Importance of Listening to the Word**

1. Background of Jesus' Teaching in Parables (v.1-2)
2. The Parable of Four Kinds of Soil (v. 3-9)
3. Purpose of Jesus' Teaching in Parables (v.10-12)

Background of Jesus' Teaching in Parables (v. 1-2)

- “He was teaching them many things in parables:’ most of the audience are hard-hearted rejecters, including those religious leaders in the last chapter. They would rather credit Jesus’s power to Satan (3:22) than to believe Jesus is the Lord and to confess their sin and submit to Jesus’s authority. To those whose hearts are the hardest, Jesus’ judgment for them is that they would never have forgiveness. They’re already condemned to hell while they’re still alive (3:28-29). The parables for them are a kind of judgment (4:10-12).

But for Christians, the key point of these parables is how we should do evangelism. Jesus has already selected the 12 apostles (3:13-19), and soon he’ll send them off to preach the gospel (6:7-13). These parables are meant to give them a correct mindset about this mission!

[Expectations] Studying these parables will help us better carry out the Great Commission in the following ways. First, it **tells us what to anticipate**, so we don’t have unrealistic expectations. Second, it **protects us from discouragement**, especially when we don’t see any fruit for a long time or when we thought we saw fruit only to later prove false. Third, it **gives us the real reason for various results**, so we don’t have wrong suspicions or worries. Fourth, it **reminds us of our responsibility in evangelism**, and warns us of the serious consequences of ignoring this responsibility. Fifth, it **strengthens our faith and hope**, motivating us to be more zealous for and diligent in doing the Lord’s work.

- “He got into a boat in the sea”: So that more people can listen to Him. There’s always a huge crowd whenever Jesus comes by the sea (2:13, 3:7), so He gets into a boat to avoid being crushed (3:9). The zealous crowd has all the wrong motives. Some of them just want to see miracles, some seek only their own benefits, and some even want to kill Him who follow Him just to find something to accuse Jesus with.
- “Parable”: use vivid and concrete vehicles to illustrate abstract realities that are hard to grasp. It is a very effective way of teaching, but if you only have the vehicles and not the realities they illustrate, you’d have no idea what’s being taught. The key to understanding parables is to find the connection between the vehicles and the realities. Because of this, parables can be used to reveal knowledge as well as hide knowledge.

【Example】 “The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.” What does this parable mean?

If I tell you I use the sun to represent God’s truth, and I use wax and clay to represent two kinds of human heart, wax being the truth-loving heart and clay being the truth-hating heart. Now, are you getting this parable?

【Key point】 The parables Jesus uses here have such a double-edged effect. For the disciples, these parables are meant to reveal truth, because Jesus explained them to the disciples; but for the crowd, parables are meant to hide truth, so that they don’t understand what they hear. This is God’s judgment of their unbelieving hard heart. They’ve refused the light when they have it, now Jesus is shutting down the light on them.

The Parable of Four Kinds of Soil (v. 3-9)

- “Listen to this!” : The word “listen” is used 13 times in this passage, so by sheer number of repetitions you know listening is a key point here.

John 10:27 - “ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me”

How much do you want to hear the voice of God? How much do you want to hear the teaching of the Bible and to follow it in your daily life?

- “Sow”: Jesus’ question in verse 13 indicates that the key to understanding all these parables in this whole chapter is to understand this sowing parable. This parable provides a foundation for all the other parables, so they all have to be interpreted according to the principles laid out here.

Although it’s commonly referred to as the parable of the sower, a better name would be the parable of four soils. Jesus here does not say anything about the sower, but focuses on the soils. The vastly different outcomes of sowing is not due to the skill of the sower nor the seed, but entirely due to the soils which the seed falls onto.

【Application】 When discussing evangelism, Christians tend to focus too much on what is exactly the most effective method, as if conversion depends on how well can the preacher tell a moving story, or how much emotional response can the pianist produce with music, or how much passion can the preacher work up to issue the final alter call.

【Application】 Truth is, as long as the seed you sow is the true gospel message, the key factor that determines the outcome is what kind of soil it falls on, that is, the heart condition of the listener.

- “beside the road”: Hard soil that has been trampled on over and over by pedestrians. It’s hard, dense, and impenetrable.
- “Rocky ground where it did not have much soil”: You cannot see the depth of soil from the surface, so it can be deceptive, for you don’t see the rock underneath it. For some physical-chemical reasons, this kind of soil has the best condition for germination (temperature, humidity, and nutrition), so the seed that falls onto it springs up the fastest. It’s very deceptive.
- “among the thorns”: This is soil infested with weeds. Thorns are very tough weeds that outgrow any other plant and are very hard to remove. When the good seed starts to take root, the thorns have already spread their root into every inch of the soil, absorbing all the water and nutrients so that the good seed is “choked” and “yielded no crop” and eventually withers and dies.
- “Fall on good soil”: The average yield at that time is 7.5 fold, and a 10-fold harvest would be considered very good. But for the good soil, the smallest yield is 30 fold, which is totally supernature! Every element in this parable is common life experience, except this final yield which is an amazing surprise. Jesus obviously wants to encourage the faith of the disciples.
- “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”: Who are those who have ears to hear? In one sense, everyone has ears, so everyone should hear this. But this statement also implies that the truth here isn’t easy to understand, so one needs to listen carefully and ponder it.

Purpose of Jesus' Teaching in Parables (v.10-12)

- “His followers, along with the twelve”: Not only the twelve disciples. The other followers are those who have “ears to hear”. They don’t understand the parable, so they stay with Jesus along with the disciples to listen to Jesus’s explanation
For the majority of the crowd, they don’t mind not understanding this parable. It does not matter to them. They weren’t seeking truth in the first place. All they care about is their own selfish desires.
- “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables”: The two-fold purpose of parables, to reveal truth to some, and to hide it from others. For the hard-hearted crowd who refuse to repent and believe, parables are meant to hide knowledge so they can’t understand what they hear. But for the disciples, parables are used to reveal truth, so that they can understand the mystery of the kingdom of God.
- “mystery of the kingdom of God” : This is the key theme of all these parables. “Mystery” in the Bible is not something too profound to understand. It always refers to something that was once hidden but now revealed through God’s revelation. Therefore Jesus says the mystery of the kingdom of God “has been given” to you. It is not meant to be hidden, but to be given to you. Why? Because you are part of that mystery! We also need to know the mystery of the Kingdom.
- “while seeing, they may see and not perceive,” This is the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10. When Isaiah was called to preach, God told him what response he would get from his audience. Most of them would not listen to him and would not repent and be saved. God was not being cruel as if He never gave them a chance, but it’s because their hearts were hard and rebellious against God, just like Jesus’ listeners here. So, God judged them, that it’d be even more impossible for them to understand.

These words express a universal spiritual principle - from Isaiah to Jesus (cf. John 12:37-41), to Paul (Acts 28:25-27; Romans 11:7-10). It’s also the case today !

You may have heard the saying that God helps those who help themselves. That’s not true. No one can help themselves. But it *is* true that **God always hardens those who harden themselves.** If you harden your heart against God, God will make your heart even harder.

Summary Application:

In Matthew, Jesus added one more line for the disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.” The reason we can understand the gospel is not because we are above them, but because we are blessed. The Lord has opened our eyes so we can see and our ears so we can hear. How else should we respond to such a blessing, but to use the ears God opened to hear His Word? Not only to hear, but also, to be doers of the Word.