

DAY 7: PARABLES: ORDINARY STORIES WITH EXTRAORDINARY MEANINGS

Mark 4:1-34

Parables were Jesus' preferred form of teaching. The first three Gospels record about 60 of them. *Parables* are allegorical stories based on everyday life—fishing, farming, housekeeping, family life, banquets, servants, vines, and fig trees—things familiar to everyone who heard Jesus. In an *allegory*, various elements of the story correspond to certain truths and, once the elements are identified, the story's lessons become clear. Parables reveal, yet at least partially conceal. Most importantly, Jesus' parables cannot be truly understood apart from faith in the One who tells them, because they teach eternal principles or spiritual truths that cannot be fully comprehended with the intellect alone. Jesus begins His teaching with the exclamation, "*Listen!*" (4:3). To truly *hear* demands that the listener be attentive and open, and sincerely desire to comprehend the truth being revealed.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (MARK 4:1-20) This story depicts a person who is sowing seed. Some of the seed falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Note how widely and unsparingly the seed is sown. Seed in the good soil came up, was growing, producing, multiplying. This crop yields "*thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold*" (4:8)—clearly, this is no ordinary harvest!

The parable reveals different things when seen from different perspectives. Look at it from the perspective of the *sower*. Despite the diversity of ground and climate, the sower casts widely and confidently. Or consider the parable from the perspective of the *seed*, which contains the power of germination. The Word of God, the gospel, is sown throughout the world and, misfortune and opposition notwithstanding, it moves from apparently helpless, hopeless beginnings to a glorious fruition. Finally, approach the parable from the perspective of the *soils*. This shifts the emphasis from God's initiative to human response. The soils represent various attitudes toward the gospel. Some attitudes deny the gospel a foothold or are too shallow to retain it. Some are so busy with other things—perhaps even good things—that they choke it. And others, like good soil, accept God's Word with hearing and believing receptivity and experience a plentiful harvest.

THINK ABOUT how like the seeds, the gospel was broadcast widely: first by Jesus, then by His first followers, and now by all who proclaim the gospel. We have no way of knowing how it will be received, but we do know that God has promised that His Word will never return to Him empty. Quite simply, our job is to get His Word out. God's grace is offered to many, regardless of their condition. We must resist the temptation to determine the condition of the soil and weigh our chances of experiencing success. Our part is simply to scatter the seed and pray that God would cause the seed to take root, grow, and produce fruit.

Mark inserts a brief interlude where Jesus is alone with His followers (more than the Twelve). The subject under discussion is parables. "*To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables*" (4:11). To the insiders—those willing to *hear*—the secret is revealed.

The interpretation of this parable stresses the importance of *hearing*. The Greek word *here* in 4:15-16, 18 implies a quick, superficial hearing. For those who give the gospel but a casual hearing, the promise of life is fruitless. But 4:20 is different. Here the Greek verb means *continual hearing*. The hearer continues to "*hear ... accept ... and bear fruit.*" This person's harvest—multiplied 30, 60, or even 100 times—will be miraculous.



THE OPEN SECRET (MARK 4:21-25) Jesus resumes His teaching by asking, "*Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand?*" The answer is obvious. Several times in the Old Testament the kingdom of David is called a *lamp*. In this instance, the *lamp* refers to Jesus! He comes into the world not to hide the kingdom but to bring it to light.

In Mark 4:24, Jesus teaches about receiving truth from God in proportion to how we respond to Him. He implies that if His audience is willing to receive the messages in His parables, then they will be able to learn even deeper things. The degree to which we allow the truth to transform us will determine how much more we will be given. Those who search to find and knock until the door is opened will find new and greater vistas before them, but those who search carelessly or refuse to listen will discover that the opportunity to receive the Word into their life has been withdrawn. *“Even what he has will be taken away”* (4:25).

THE SURPRISING SEED (MARK 4:26-34) *“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground”* (4:26). The man sows and then waits day after day until at some time the seed has fully ripened and is ready for harvest. Apart from sowing, the only job of the man in this parable is waiting patiently, confident of a harvest to come. The sower does not even know how the seed grows, nor is there anything he can do to make it grow. The coming of the kingdom of God is like this process of growth—despite the absence of human involvement and the inauspicious appearance of the seed, the seed contains within itself promise of a harvest, and once it is sown, it sets in motion a process that will result in harvest.

The harvest often symbolizes the arrival of God’s reign. Despite the humble beginnings of Jesus’ ministry, time will reveal the glory of God’s reign and Jesus’ role in it. The world in its blindness may deride, *“Where is the promise of His coming?”* (2 Peter 3:4), but God’s reign is even now present in this world, hidden and imperceptible to some, but growing and promising a harvest yet unseen.

The parable of the mustard seed contrasts the small size of the Christ’s emerging kingdom with its vastness when full grown. A mustard seed is tiny—smaller than a grain of salt—yet it can produce shrubs eight feet high in which birds build nests. So it is with Jesus’ ministry. From its obscure beginnings the kingdom of God will come! It will be much larger than His hearers can imagine. The mention of birds nesting in the branches is reminiscent of the Old Testament where such allusions point to the inclusion of the Gentiles (all nations) among the chosen people. The kingdom will include people from the four points of the globe as a testimony to God’s grace.

PERSONALIZE THIS LESSON. It is all too easy to hear the truth, even assent to it, and then walk away unchanged. James wrote, *“Don’t, I beg you, only hear the message, but put it into practice; otherwise you are merely deluding yourselves”* (James 1:22, PH). Think about your own response to the truth you have received from Jesus. What truth has brought fruit into your life and for God’s kingdom? Thank God for that and pray for more. Then ask the Lord to reveal anything that “chokes” the word in your life. Confess what He reveals and ask for His forgiveness and help to overcome. Then ask Him to increase your eagerness for more truth and the ability to apply it in your life. As you do this, you will find Him giving you even more life-changing truth!

REVIEW: PARABLES: ORDINARY STORIES WITH EXTRAORDINARY MEANINGS

11. Please share anything from your own study, the Core Group discussion, the teaching time, and/or the Commentary that resulted in a desire to change or grow in a particular area of your life.