

Listen Well

Mark 4:1-34

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several weeks ago I decided to throw some grass seed on my lawn in areas where it looked a little patchy. So I prepared the soil a little bit, sowed some seed, did a little watering...and waited for it to grow. I waited for several weeks and nothing happened—it wasn't growing—so I decided I would help it grow. I thought to myself, *I believe that positive motivation is always more effective than negative*—and I went out into the lawn and had a little talk with the grass seed. I said, “You know, I'm sure that you're doing your best and I just want to encourage you, because I've seen lawns growing all over town and I know it can happen. I just want to encourage you to give it your best shot. I think it's going to happen!”

I went in the house and waited for a couple days...and nothing happened. So I thought, *Well, I'll use a little reverse psychology*. So I went out there and I said to my lawn, “You know, I really don't think you can probably do this. I thought maybe you could, but now I realize that you probably can't grow. I mean, the flowers are growing and trees are growing and lawns are growing all over town—but obviously you can't grow!”

I thought maybe that would do it. I waited for a couple of days...but nothing happened. So I thought, *Well, maybe I'll try some intimidation*. I went out in the yard with a bottle of Roundup and I said, “I'm going to give you two days to grow and then I'm going to turn you into birdseed!” Didn't work.

I had one more bullet left in my gun: I decided to try some New Age technique. I sat at my kitchen table and I just visualized the grass growing. But it didn't grow. Now, there may be visitors here today that are beginning to question my sanity. So you need to know the only thing I *actually* did was sow some seed; the rest I really didn't do. I may not be the sharpest tool in the drawer, but I am aware of the fact that I can sow and I can water but I can't make the grass grow. Only God can do that.

I am also aware of the fact that every weekend my responsibility is to sow the seed. But that's all I can do. I can't make the seed grow. Only God can do that. But it is sobering to recognize that the difference between a life that experiences the harvest of God's blessing and a life that experiences misery and heartache is based on the condition of the soil of your heart and how willing you are to receive the seed.

Jesus talks about that in Mark chapter 4. Last week in chapter 3, Mark, through a series of narrative events, reminded us how people were responding to the ministry of Jesus. Many were responding as consumers. These were people that really didn't want to follow Jesus; they just wanted to use Jesus for their own personal gain.

Then there were those that we called sympathizers—those that were sympathetic to Jesus and what He was doing and probably really cared about Him as a person, but they just didn't get it. They didn't understand the radical nature of his message. They wanted to have an intervention; they thought He had lost His mind and they needed to take Him back home. They just couldn't come to grips with the radical nature of the gospel of Jesus.

Then there were those that we called antagonizers. These were people that were very religious and would have easily been able to quote Scripture. But they not only didn't get it,

they were also offended by the message of Jesus. They accused Him of doing His works through the power of Satan.

Then there were the followers of Jesus – those that embraced both the person and work of Jesus. Jesus called them to be with Him, and as a result of being with Him, they would become a part of accomplishing His mission, His purpose in the world. Jesus identified the people as His family, as the true Christians.

Now in chapter 4, Mark goes on with the same theme, but rather than telling us in narrative or in story form, he’s shifting to the very teaching of Jesus to reinforce these same concepts. Verse 1:

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. (*NASB)

Make a mental note here – that word “land” is the word “soil” that’s going to come into play in just a minute. So Jesus is out on a boat. It was probably to escape the crowd (Note that these crowds were huge; probably in the tens of thousands.) but also to amplify His voice – which the water would do. Jesus is on the boat in the water and the rest of the people are on the soil, which then becomes the key to His picture here in a minute.

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, “Listen!” [*NASB has “Listen to this!” but the Greek is just “Listen!” This is the key in Mark chapter 4. It shows up 13 times—either “Listen” or “Hear.” So what’s key to understanding this chapter is the importance of listening—not just hearing the information—but listening and understanding and embracing the words of Jesus.*] **Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. 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. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 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.”**

And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” [*again that emphasis on listening*]. **As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. 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.”** (vs. 2-11)

After Jesus tells this parable, He gets aside with His disciples (the 12) and also His followers (a larger group than just the 12). They begin to ask Him what the parable means. Jesus makes reference to the fact that He’s unveiling the mystery of the kingdom to *them*, but to those on the *outside* He’s speaking in parables. Jesus’ language here is very interesting. He’s drawing a clear distinction between those on the *inside* and those on the *outside*.

This is the language that offends a lot of people today—to say that there are those who are “in” and there are those who are “out.” But this is a consistent message from Genesis to Revelation – either you believe or you don’t believe; either you’re on Jesus’ path or the path of this world. There’s no middle ground. And again Jesus says, “There are those who are in and those who are out.”

To those who are “in”, He’s revealing and unveiling the mystery. The word “mystery” is a very technical term and it’s used consistently throughout the New Testament. It is not the meaning of “mystery” as we would think of Alfred Hitchcock or something like that. It’s a word that means *something that was previously hidden that is now being made known by God*. The whole idea is that this is something no person could discover; it can only be known by God’s revelation. And the mystery is always something that was never known before, but now is being revealed.

So, imagine what it would be like for these disciples and followers of Jesus to be seated at the feet of Jesus and to have Jesus unveiling truths that have *never* been known about the mystery of God and His kingdom and what Jesus is doing. I mean, it must have been absolutely spectacular!

But He says He’s teaching in parables to those on the outside. He goes on in verse 12 to explain that:

“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.”

Verse 12 is considered to be one of the most difficult verses in all of the Gospels to understand and interpret. There are lots of different views by a lot of different commentators. One of the things I find interesting—and something I think we all struggle with—is when we have our view of God clear in our minds and we think we understand how God operates, then we run across a verse in the Bible that seems to be contrary to that. What’s interesting is how often we try to rework the verse so it ends up agreeing with our preconceived theology, rather than letting the verse cause us to rethink our theology. And that’s what I see happening in verse 12.

Basically, the discussion points have to do with the very first word in the Greek sentence in verse 12 that’s translated “so that” (which is a statement of purpose), and also at the end where it says “otherwise” or “lest.” Those are the two words that are argued about, because as the NASB reflects, it’s basically saying that Jesus’ purpose was to teach in parables so that people *would not* understand, lest they come and seek forgiveness. And we say, “Well, now that doesn’t sound like Jesus—that He *doesn’t* want people to understand; that He *doesn’t* want people to come seek forgiveness.”

So what do we do with that? If we change the “so that” from a purpose statement to a result, by using a word like “because,” it would say: “So Jesus was teaching in parables *because* they were not listening.” If we change the word “otherwise” to a word like “perhaps” it would say: “And He was hoping if He did that, maybe they *would* listen and *perhaps* come and seek forgiveness”. Then we would say, “Well, now that feels better; that feels more consistent with what I understand about Jesus.”

That’s good. The only problem is that is *not* what the text says. So commentators come back and they say, “Well, you know, we think that’s probably what it means and Mark just used the wrong word by mistake. Or the copiers just copied the wrong word by mistake.” But there’s no evidence of that; there’s no proof of that. That’s just trying to reconstruct the verse to fit a theology we’re more comfortable with. What we really have to do is wrestle with the text as it’s written. There’s no question Jesus was saying that the purpose, the reason why He’s teaching in parables, so that they *won’t* understand—because He *doesn’t* want them coming and seeking forgiveness.

Then what do we do with that? Well, first we have to understand this is an Old Testament quote from Isaiah chapter 6. You remember Isaiah has this magnificent vision of the holiness of God, and he falls on his face. Out of that, he's commissioned to be the prophet of God. And God tells him, "I want you to go out, and I want you to preach and proclaim the message. But I want to tell you something: They're not going to hear it; they're not going to understand it; they're not going to respond to it—because they're under My judgment. "

These were Hebrew people who had heard the message over and over and over again, and they chose to reject it and continued to live in their sin. So God was passing judgment, and the judgment was, "You're not going to hear it anymore; you're not going to understand it—because you're going to have to live with the consequences of your disbelief." And for the first 39 chapters in Isaiah, that is the case. Finally, again in Isaiah chapter 40, God once again reveals His offer of salvation, with the desire that maybe after living with the consequences of their disbelief, their hearts might be softened to hear what they haven't been hearing.

Well, that's exactly what Jesus is talking about here. Jesus has spoken to these religious leaders over and over and over again. He has demonstrated His power over and over again—and they absolutely will not hear it; they won't see it. So they're now under the judgment of God, and the consequence of God's judgment is that they're going to hear it but they won't understand it. They're going to see Jesus' miracles and works, but they won't get it. They're going to have to live with the consequences of their disbelief, and it's going to be miserable. But God's desire is that, having lived with the consequences of their unbelief, eventually their hearts may be softened to receive the gospel. Yet for now, He doesn't want them hearing it. This is part of the judgment, and that's what Jesus is referring to.

It is important to recognize that many of the scribes and Pharisees, after the resurrection of Jesus, did come to faith; they did come to believe. But through this period of time in the earthly ministry of Jesus, they just did not understand; they didn't hear; they didn't respond. And they paid a price for their disbelief.

Well, having that said that, Jesus goes on to explain the parable.

And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. [So, the seed is the Word of God. The words of Jesus are what we would call today "the Word of God."] 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. [I think He's talking about the antagonizers—those that never believe even for a moment. They don't process it. They don't hear it. They just immediately reject it.] 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; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away." (vs. 13-17)

Imagine a thin topsoil on top of the rocks. The seed is sown and immediately it appears that the seed is growing. But underneath there is no real root system, and when the sun comes out and scorches the plant, it immediately dies. Jesus called these people the consumers, who immediately respond with joy to the message because it sounds good to them. They think, *This is good for me; I can use this.* But as it becomes evident that there is a price to pay—that you have to take up your cross to follow Jesus—they say, "You know, this isn't what I was

looking for.” They have no roots, and they quickly wither away when life becomes a challenge.

And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (vs. 18-19)

This group seems to be the most promising of these first three. It appears that the seed is producing, that it’s growing, that there’s going to be a harvest. But as it begins to grow, the weeds start to grow up and choke it out. These are the ones that receive it and seem to understand it and embrace it. But they reach a point where it becomes clear that they have to make some choices. They realize, *There’s a value system that is about Jesus and there’s a value system about this world, and I’m going to have to choose. Am I about the things of this world, or am I about Jesus?* They just can’t let go of the things of this world, and they choke out the seed of the Word, and it dies off.

I see this often. These are people that go through difficult circumstances. They go through a death in the family or a disease or a financial disaster or a marital breakup—or something that really drives them to their knees, and they begin pursuing God. For a while they seem to be responding to the message, and it looks like there’s a change taking place. But they reach a point where they recognize this is going to be costly: *I’m going to have to make some decisions. I’m going to have to either embrace Jesus or embrace the things of this world.* And they can’t bring themselves to let go of the stuff of this world. Eventually, that choice chokes out the seed, and they just kind of fade away.

Verse 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.

Then there are those that have a good soil. The seed is received and it’s embraced, and God produces a harvest of His blessing—thirty and sixty and a hundred-fold. I do find it sobering that with Jesus being the master teacher—the best there’s ever been—only one out of four actually received and accepted and embraced the message. Now, I don’t think you can make a case that it’s *necessarily* 25 percent. But when it was all said and done, one in four actually received it and embraced it and became true followers of Jesus.

And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.” (vs. 21-25)

It is very important that we understand what Jesus is saying here. I think the lamp here is the Word of God, just like the seed in the previous parable. Psalm 119:105 says, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet.” Jesus is saying you don’t take a lamp and light it and put it under the bed or put it under a basket. The whole purpose of having the lamp is to put it on the lampstand and let it shine. He is saying that God doesn’t have these magnificent truths about Himself in

order to hide them. God does not want to hide His truth from anyone. God *longs* to put His truth on the lampstand, so that we can understand it. That's what He wants. He wants us to understand the mysteries of the kingdom. That's why He says again, "He who has ears, let him hear." God wants you to know these things.

Then He says, "So be very careful, for those who receive it and embrace it and obey it, God longs to give them more. But to those who don't want to hear it—to those who hear it over and over again, and they just don't understand, don't embrace it, and certainly don't obey it—I'm going to take away what little they have. I'll give it to somebody who wants it."

What Jesus is saying is that He longs for you to know the truth about Himself and the mysteries of the kingdom. And the only thing that limits your ability to know more is the condition of your soil. There is absolutely no limit to what you can know about God and the mysteries of His kingdom, if you really want to know. There's an old saying that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Theologically, that is true. There are those who really want to know God's truth and sit at the feet of Jesus, wanting to know the mysteries of the kingdom. They are not just hearers with intellectual information, but they want to know it, understand it, obey it and walk in it. They want to embrace it. For those people, the more they have, the more Jesus wants to give them. It's unlimited. He wants them to know, so the theologically rich get richer.

But for those who really don't want to know God's truth—they don't listen, they don't embrace it, they really don't care—Jesus says, "I'm going to take what little you have, and I'm going to give it to somebody else. I'm going to give it to somebody who wants it."

There has to be some way to explain why some Christians, after two and three years, know far more theology than some who have been Christians for 40 years. The answer is they just want to know more. They *want* to know more. They long to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear the Word of God. They long to hear the mysteries of the kingdom, so that they might understand, obey, live and accomplish the purpose of Jesus.

What does it take to really know the truth of God? It does not take a seminary education. It does not take learning Greek; it does not take Hebrew. What it takes is a heart in which the "soil" wants to receive the Word. If you're passionate about knowing the truth and living the truth, God longs to pour it into your mind. God longs to pour it into your heart. He wants you to know the mysteries of His kingdom. The only question is: How much do you *want* to know? That's the only thing that will limit the truth in your life.

Well, Jesus goes on. It's important to understand in Mark chapter 4 that when Jesus spoke these parables, He didn't just speak one after another. If you read the other Gospels, you see that the parables were spread out. There were other events that happened in between them. But for Mark's purpose, he's putting them all together because he's making a specific point.

In this last parable, there is a reminder that we, too, are stewards of the truth. You remember when Jesus called the disciples to be with Him, as a result of being with Him, they would become proclaimers of the kingdom and they would be sowers of the seed. And there's a reminder here to the disciples that when you understand these truths of the mystery of the kingdom, you don't take that lamp and put it under the bed. Put it on the lampstand. You need to be sowing the seed. And I think the parables shift here to talk about that.

And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and

grows—how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

(vs. 26-29)

Jesus is now saying that the mystery of the kingdom is that we are to go out and sow the seed. The seed is the Word of God. As God reveals His truth to us, we don't keep it to ourselves; we sow the seed. But we understand that all we can do is sow the seed. We can't make it grow; we can't make people listen; we can't make people embrace it; we can't make people obey it. All we can do is sow the seed. It says the farmer sows the seed; then he goes to bed...gets up...goes to bed...gets up...goes to bed. He has to wait. And God finally makes the plant grow. You have the leaf and then pretty soon there's the head; and pretty soon there's the grain; and pretty soon it's harvest time.

But the farmer has to recognize God did that: *I sowed the seed, but God did produced the crop*. It is very important for us to understand we have a responsibility to sow the seed, but that's all we can do. We can't argue people into the kingdom; we can't fight with people; we can't cram it down their throats. Just sow the seed. And let's remember that even when Jesus sowed the seed, only one out of four embraced it. That's the way it's going to be.

This is where we get into the problem of legalism again. Sometimes we try artificially to grow the seed. We can't do that. We must let God do that. Just sow it. Faithfully sow the seed and God will produce the harvest. To me, this takes the pressure off. I don't have to sow the seed thinking that I have to convince people, or answer all their questions, or be able to debate with them, or any of this. All I have to do is sow the seed. The rest is up to God. He'll do His thing.

There's also a reminder, though, that there's a process with this: First comes the leaf and then the head and then the grain. All of this happens over a period of time. I can't sow the seed today and expect a crop tomorrow. You don't know what God is going to do with the seeds that you've sown. You just sow the seed, and God will take it from there.

And He said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.” (vs. 30-32)

Jesus says there's this mustard seed, and it's a tiny speck of a seed, seeming so insignificant when it's sown. But eventually it grows into this six to ten foot plant that has these large branches that produce all this shade. Jesus is dealing with the fact that His followers may feel like this seed is very insignificant. With all that was going on in the Roman Empire, here's this little group of people gathered together. It may have felt like their seed was so insignificant. What difference could it make?

What difference could it make? Do you realize every person that has trusted Jesus as Savior can trace his/her spiritual roots back to one of these people sitting in the room with Jesus on that day? It may have seemed like a little, insignificant seed, but it changed the world—literally changed the world. The fact is, when we're out there sowing seeds, three-fourths of the people really don't want to hear it. They don't want to respond to it and embrace it. It may start to seem like, *What's the point? It just feels so insignificant. What difference could it make?* It's like this little mustard seed.

But God is saying, “This little seed is going to grow the kingdom of God and that ultimately will be all that matters.” One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. One day God’s kingdom will rule. Ultimately that’s all that’s going to matter. And if that’s all that’s *ultimately* going to matter, then that’s all that *really* matters today.

So it may feel like your sowing of the seed is very insignificant – what could possibly come of this? Well, an eternal harvest, for one thing, as God takes these little seeds that are sown and He builds His kingdom that will one day reign forever.

With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples. (vs. 33-34)

Again, there’s a final reminder that there were those that were only receiving parables because of their disbelief. But to those who listened, to those who heard, to those who believed, Jesus continued to unveil the mysteries of His kingdom.

I see two strong applications coming out of Mark chapter 4. One has to do with our responsibility to sow the seed—to take the pressure off and realize we don’t have to do God’s job; we just need to sow the seed. But as God reveals His truth to us, we don’t take the lamp and stick it under the bed. We need to let it shine. We sow the seed and trust God to take that seed. It may seem insignificant at the time, but He’s going to grow it into His kingdom. God will do things with those seeds you can’t even begin to imagine. Just be faithful to sow the seed.

But I also think another main application of this passage is about having ears to hear. We recognize how important it is that we have hearts that are receptive to what God wants to say, that we’re willing to hear it, to understand it, to embrace it, and to live it—to let God’s Word radically change our lives. Yet we must understand the consequences of choosing *not* to hear what God has to say.

I don’t know how many of you were able to be here last Sunday night, but it was one of the most moving, stirring, encouraging services that I have attended in my 20 years as a pastor. It was absolutely wondrous: 65 people telling their stories of how Christ has changed their lives and then being publicly identified as a follower of Jesus. It was wonderful! But you know, this week I found myself thinking how many hundreds of other people heard the same seed but just never embraced it—chose not to believe it, never really allowed the seed to be planted in the soil of their hearts. And I wondered, *Where are those people right now?* As I watched 65 people celebrate—*absolutely celebrate*—what God had done in their lives, I wondered, *Where are these other people?* Because of their disbelief, they are living lives of emptiness, meaninglessness, struggling along, because their hearts were a soil that was not receptive to the seed.

What about the soil of your heart? Is the soil of your heart ready to receive the seed, to hear it, to understand it, to embrace it, to obey it, to live it—to allow God’s Word to radically change your life—that God might produce in your heart a harvest of His blessing?

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Study Questions

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

Listen Well

Mark 4:1-34

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Some people clearly trust Christ and experience significant growth in their Christian walk, while others seem to always struggle and never advance beyond infancy. Why is this?
2. If you were to identify three essential keys to growing as a Christian, what would those keys be and why?

Bible Study

1. Review the four groups of responders to Jesus from last week's lesson in Mark 3:7-35.
2. Read Mark 4:1-20. How do the four soils line up with those four groups from Mark 3? Describe each of the four soils in your own words.
3. In Mark 4:10-12, 21-25 Jesus clearly states that His desire is to unveil His truth to those who want to receive it. Compare with Hebrews 11:6 and Psalm 1.
4. How does Mark 4:25 help interpret 4:11,12? Is Jesus being unfair? Why or why not? Compare with I Timothy 2:3-7 (see verse 4).
5. Compare Mark 4:26-32 with I Corinthians 3:1-9. What do we learn from this in terms of our responsibility as stewards of the truth?

Do we sometimes create anxiety for ourselves when we seek to convince people of the truth rather than simply being the sower of the truth?

6. Is the Church (kingdom of God) winning or losing the battle according to Jesus? Compare with Matthew 16:18.

Does the Church have to be a big, powerful force in the culture to be accomplishing her mission? What is the responsibility of the Church and what can only God do?

Application

1. How would you rate your soil these days? What are the issues in Jesus' parable of the soils that you struggle with that prevents good growth of the seed?

What are three practical things you can do to cultivate better soil in your life to receive God's truth?

2. What practical counsel does this text in Mark give you to help you be more effective as a sower of God's seed? How does this text take some of the pressure off you when sowing the seed?

3. What practical things can your LifeGroup do together to continue to cultivate good soil for receiving God's truth?