

# Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

## Session Eight – Mark 4:1-34

*Mark 4:1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.*

### **Preaching from the Boat**

Remember from previous chapters, one of the reasons Jesus was preaching from a boat was because of the size of the crowd, and the danger of being crushed! But there is also the added dimension of being able to have your voice carry well to those on shore. Even today, because of the “bowl-like” nature of the Sea of Galilee, voices carry well from the water to the shore.

### **Jesus and the Sea of Galilee**

The ministry of Jesus is closely tied to the Sea of Galilee. The northern shore forms what is known as The Evangelical Triangle, from Bethsaida to Tabgha, and up to Chorazin – a comparatively small area within which the majority of Jesus' ministry years and teaching was held. The “Triangle” can be circumnavigated on foot within the course of a busy single day.

*Mark 4:2-3 - He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: “Listen!*

### **Parables, parables**

The Synoptic Gospels record many of Jesus' parables, far and away his favourite method of teaching, so much so that Matthew writes (13:34), *“Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.”* Mark's language reflects this: *“everything is said in parables,”* and *“with many similar parables”*.

### **What is a parable?**

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word παραβολή (parabolee). In the Greek para means beside, and ballo means to cast or throw. So a parable means “to cast beside.” A “parable” is a story in which a familiar idea is “cast beside” an unfamiliar idea in such a way that the comparison helps people to better understand grasp the unfamiliar idea.

### **The Kingdom of God is like...**

Jesus' announcement that the “Kingdom is among you” is an unfamiliar concept. And so, he tells stories of events and situations familiar to the listeners to help them understand the principles of the Kingdom. But that doesn't mean it is always easy to understand! Parables are often designed to make people think very hard about something – or to reject it as not worthwhile.

## **Listen!**

The key word in this collection of parables is “Listen!” or “Hear!” Not coincidentally, “Listen” or “Hear” is the first word in the primary confession of faith of the Hebrew people, namely, “She-ma yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad” – *“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One...”* This is typically followed by, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

## **What are the Parables about?**

Jesus is almost always using parables to describe the Kingdom of God. Mark carefully chooses these particular parables to emphasize the importance of hearing – of listening carefully to the teaching of Jesus. Those who listen carefully and apply the principles will reap the benefit of Jesus’ teaching, while those who do not will end up missing the boat!

*Mark 4:3-7 - A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”*

## **The Good Soil**

The word translated “shore” (ge) literally means “soil” (or “earth”) and is the same word used for the soil that did not have much depth of earth (4:5) and for the “good soil” where the seed is sown. The crowds on “the soil” – Jesus’ audience for this parable – can be understood as the recipients of Jesus’ sowing of the word. As are we! So, are we the seed or the soil? Or both?

## **Stories of Everyday Life**

We think of the Sea of Galilee in terms of the fishing economy, but Galilee was equally important as the “breadbasket of Israel.” Even today, the lushness and rolling green hills of Galilee and the rich agricultural land of the Jezreel Valley are in sharp contrast to the rocky, inhospitable areas of Central and Southern Israel. Chorazin, up the hill from Capernaum, was said to produce the finest wheat in the country, used for the sacred Temple bread.

## **Terrace Farming**

Much of the farming done in the Galilee – and particularly in places like Nazareth – was terrace farming, rather than Canada’s vast fields. Jesus’ description of the farmer sowing seeds is particularly evocative of this kind of small-scale agriculture. Most of his listeners could easily imagine the circumstances of the Sower and the Seed story – and perhaps even lived them!

***Mark 4:9 Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”***

Again, the repeated refrain, which not only captures the heart of this parable, but of the entire chapter – it is vital to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying, and to consider how it applies to your own life.

***Mark 4:10-12 - When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”***

### ***The Insider’s Report***

Mark treats us to a private conversation, as a lesson in how a parable works. The expectation is that Mark’s readers will use the Parable of the Sower, and the method of interpretation, as a guide to understanding the Parables, and as a valuable lesson – you have to prepare your heart to receive the parable, and spend the time and effort necessary to understand and apply it.

### **Isaiah 6:9-10**

Jesus quotes this difficult passage from Isaiah (who Mark sets up as the primary prophet by whom we understand Jesus as Messiah). God says to Isaiah, ***“Go and tell this people: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”***

### **Is this fair? Doesn’t God want everyone to understand?**

The context of the Isaiah passage is important. God is commissioning Isaiah to preach in spite of warning him in advance that it will only harden the hearts of the hearers until God carries out the punishment. That command brims over with irony and scorn. God is calling a faithful prophet, Isaiah, to preach to faithless people.

### **And so to Jesus:**

Jesus’ explanation for the parables uses the same irony and can be translated: “So that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; because the last thing they want is to turn and have their sins forgiven.” In Isaiah’s time the people could not understand the message until the land and Jerusalem were decimated. In Jesus’ time, many – including his own family – will not understand until Jesus is crucified and risen.

### **My Mother:**

When I was determined to do something that my mother disapproved of, she would say, “Fine, go, enjoy, knock yourself out, but don’t come crying to me when it all goes bad.” My

determination to ignore her advice and not listen to her warnings were a sign of my lack of understanding of her words, which I chose to not take seriously.

***Mark 4:13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?”***

**“This one is pretty obvious!”**

Jesus is laying out for us how a parable works – and the kind of preparatory work we need to do in order for a parable to take root and make a lasting difference in our lives. Notice that the disciples are often criticised by Jesus for their lack of understanding – which gives opportunity for Mark to explain to “us disciples” what is being taught.

***Mark 4:14-15 The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.***

### **Seed or Soil?**

Remember earlier how we are like the soil – but here Jesus says we are the seed? There are lots of things going on here. God is the sower – and the Word, or the Teaching of the Kingdom, is what is being sown. It appears that our willingness to hear, and the preparation we have undertaken, is the soil, and the plant is the evidence of the Word taking root in our lives.

### **The Danger of Shallow Belief**

Right away, Jesus points out that some people simply dismiss the teaching of Jesus without ever bothering to listen. It never breaks the surface. “Satan takes it away.”

***Mark 4:16-17 - Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.***

### **The Danger of Shallow Commitment**

The Kingdom Life - the Christian walk – is a long haul, more of a marathon than a sprint. Some people, despite initial enthusiasm, quickly become discouraged or distracted by difficulties they encounter. We are used to hearing, “for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health” at weddings. Maybe we should hear it in church!

***Mark 4:18-19 - Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.***

## **Worries, money problems, misplaced desires**

This is a devastating trio, and a threat to the walk of faith. It is amazing how timeless they are! It is significant that when Christianity comes into a non-Christian culture, it often takes root first among the poor. The discipline of the faith brings wealth, with materialism following – and soon the faith begins to wither. In today’s world, the growth of Christianity is explosive in the 3<sup>rd</sup> World, and declining in ours.

***Mark 4:20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.***

## **Cultivated Field**

The good soil is neither hard, shallow, rocky or thorny. In short, it has, with great effort, been cultivated and prepared, and as a result, the seed is able to flourish, and to multiply exponentially. How do we prepare ourselves to receive, nourish and grow the teaching of Jesus? How is the “crop of faith” bearing fruit in our lives?

*“The good hearer welcomes the word immediately so that it cannot be snatched away by Satan. The good hearer welcomes it deeply so that it is not withered by persecution. The good hearer welcomes it exclusively so that other concerns do not strangle it. As the seed fails in three different ways in the bad soils, it succeeds in three different ways in good soil – 30, 60, 100 times the impact.”*

## **Four More Parables**

Jesus has now explained why he teaches in parables (to reveal the nature of the hidden Kingdom of God to the receptive) and what the effect of preparing for and receiving Jesus’ teaching is (steady growth and multiplication). The next four give examples – two regarding the purpose, and two the result.

***Mark 3:21-23 - He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”***

## **A Lamp Unto My Feet**

The Old Testament, and in particular the Psalms, present the Word of God as “a lamp,” or in the words of Jesus, “the Light of the World.” The word is meant to be shared, particularly to those in darkness! In many ways, we are to be the “stand” from which the light can shine!

***Mark 4:24-25 “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”***

### **A rabbinic tradition professes:**

*Observe how the character of the Holy One, blessed be He, differs from that of flesh and blood. A mortal can put something into an empty vessel, but not into a full one. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so; He puts more into a full vessel, but not an empty one; for it says, “If hearkening you will hearken” (Exodus 15:26), implying, if you hearken you will go on hearkening, and if not you will not hearken.*

### **The Faithful Listener**

The faithful listener, expending the effort to hear and cultivate and apply the teaching of Jesus, will continue to grow ever more in faith. The one who has little faith, and expends little effort to grow, will lose even that – like the seed in poor soil.

***Mark 4:26-29 - He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”***

### **A Puzzler**

This parable can be understood in so many ways – the mystery of how God grows his kingdom, the unseen but evidence-based nature of faith, the fact that faith takes time to grow. Jesus’ brother James uses it as an example to be patient: ***James 5:7-8: Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.***

***Mark 4:30-32 - Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”***

### **The Galilee Hillsides**

A great joy of mine is to walk through the vast fields of wild mustard, from the Mount of Beatitudes, down to the shoreline. Doubtless these fields of yellow, replete with birds, were surrounding the listeners. The lesson: Faith may begin small, like a mustard seed, but it grows! So it is with the Kingdom of God.

***Mark 4:33-34 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.***

**And that’s what Bible Study is about!**