

## MARK 4:1-34

### A note on the study:

Once again the study for this week follows the sermon from Sunday. On these occasions, it can be tempting simply to start discussion by asking people what they thought of the sermon. This can end up more in review of the style of the sermon rather than the content. Even when content is discussed, it is often in reference to the preacher's statements and opinions, rather than in reference to the word of God.

Please resist this!

Encourage your group to look into the word of God together (just as the preacher did in their preparation), and work out what it means for us together. This will equip them to be Bible *readers*, not merely talk *reviewers*.

### The use of parables:

Chapter 4 is the first place in Mark's gospel where we see Jesus using parables in his teaching.

'The Greek word translated "parable" meant literally "to set one thing beside another" — to draw a comparison between two things and show an analogy. Thus parables begin, "this is like that.'" Page 39 'The Gospel of Mark: Leaders' Guide', Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005.

'The parables of Jesus seek to teach us about the kingdom of God by comparing it with vivid and concrete situations in our world.' Page 39 'The Gospel of Mark: Leaders' Guide', Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005.

What Jesus means by the 'kingdom of God': 'The Greek word *basilea* (kingdom) that Jesus uses refers more to the "ruling power" of the sovereign than to the "realm.'" (Page 39 'The Gospel of Mark: Leaders' Guide', Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005).

### Read 4:3-9 and 14-20.

#### What is the word?

My contention is that the 'word' is the gospel – the message of Jesus' death for our sins, and his resurrection for our redemption, that he is Lord over the universe.

(The following questions in italics are taken from 'The Gospel of Mark: Leaders' Guide', Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005)

**a) *What is the main point of this parable? b) What else does it tell us about the kingdom of God? c) What does it tell us about the Christian life?***

*a) The main point.*

*The main point is "he who has ears, let him hear!" (v. 9).*

*See also vv3, 9, 13, 23, 24.*

*b) What else does it tell us about the kingdom of God?*

*Here are some of the implications. God's kingdom is so very different from earthly kingdoms:*

*(1) Earthly kingdoms come to the supremely confident, but God's kingdom comes to the completely humble, receptive.*

*The ground that "gets" the kingdom is not hard but soft and easily penetrated... The kingdom comes not to the fierce but to the teachable — those who know they have much to learn.*

*(2) **The power of the kingdom is truth not force.** The kingdom of God moves forward not by political or military force, but through teaching and persuading and by hearing and learning. Jesus' kingdom will conquer through love and service, not force, through sweet persuasion, not coercion, and it will produce loving obedience, not slavery, and therefore it will transform completely, not superficially. **Jesus' kingdom is more like a seed on the heart than a boulder on the head. The***

**boulder smashes from the outside, the seed penetrates to the inside.** The entry of a seed is the most gentle of procedures.

(3) Third, we learn here how small and unimpressively the kingdom of God can start! A few seeds in the ground are essentially invisible. Nothing appears to have really happened. In the same way, the church of Jesus Christ for many decades consisted of

a very small number of socially marginal people. No one would have ever thought that it was going to “take over” the Roman empire.

(4) Fourth, we learn how slowly and indirectly the kingdom of God can proceed. It may take a very long time and seem to be going nowhere. Some seeds and roots can lie fallow and hidden for an extremely long time and then spring up. So the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not something that will break in completely and immediately. The agricultural metaphor at least suggests that it will come in stages. It generally grows organically and gradually, not coercively and suddenly.

(5) Fifth, we learn how varied and disappointing the response to the kingdom of God can be. Notice that most of the people do not become fruitful disciples of Christ. Only one of the four soils responds properly.

c) What else does it tell us about the Christian life?

(1) Nothing is more important in the Christian life than listening to and understanding the Word of God. Learning and studying the word takes all the skill, time, and patience of farming. Both our admission into and progress in the Christian life is a very deliberate process of listening to God’s word.

(2) We must not necessarily expect dramatic immediate effects in our life. Of course there are many tremendous things that come to us the first second we believe — divine forgiveness, the new birth, adoption into the family of God, access to the presence of God. But like a new seed, most of this is virtually invisible. ... Most Christian growth is not very dramatic, but neither is the planting and germination of a seed (to which the kingdom of God is likened).

(3) There are three main enemies or barriers to patient, submissive listening to the Word. They are “the world, the flesh, and the devil” (1 John 2-3). Evil takes these three forms: evil around us “systemically” (world), evil within us “personally” (flesh), and evil above us “supernaturally” (devil). In the first three soils, we see these three forms of resistance to God’s Word, though in reverse of the traditional order. This shows the many ways that sin can keep us from hearing the Word. We must be on our guard.

(4) Lastly, the parable shows that self-deception is easy. Many, many people think they have heard the word when they have never really heard the message at all. The Word must go in deep — it takes great openness. It requires that the truth penetrate very deeply. Just as only time will tell if a seed has been properly planted, only time can tell if the truth has penetrated deeply.

#### **Get your group to think about what each ‘soil’ could look like today.**

Be careful here that the group doesn’t get into ‘finger-pointing’; it is very easy to talk about the people ‘out there’ but not to reflect personally on the dangers and temptations which are right in front of us.

Get them to think hard and practically about this (no vague descriptions).

#### **Some follow-up questions you could ask, for example, are:**

- What is the difference between someone who receives the word with joy, and continues as a Christian, and a person who receives the word with joy initially, but falls away?
  - In the parable, the answer is given – in verse 17 - that they have ‘no root’. The group would then need to work out: what does it look like to have ‘roots’? What sort of trouble or persecution might someone experience that might make influence them in falling away? What kinds of things do people need to equip them to withstand that? How are we providing those for one another in church and Small Group and friendship? How can we support one another so that we can withstand trouble/persecution?
- In contrast to the seeds sown on rocky soil who fall away because of trouble, the seeds sown on thorny soil struggle because of ‘pleasures’: ‘the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things’ (v19).
  - What are the ‘cares’ that we face most?
  - How susceptible are we to the ‘lure of wealth’? How could we recognise that? What can we to guard against it? How can we help each other not to be ‘lured’?
  - What ‘desires for other things’ do we experience, which would choke us?
  - Notice that the plant here isn’t described as having died, but as having been choked and so ‘yields nothing’. They could be someone who still calls themselves a Christian, and perhaps comes to Small

Group and church, but nonetheless doesn't bear fruit for God's kingdom. This is a scary description! Is it familiar to the group? (It should be!)

- The seed that falls on good soil and bears fruit.
  - What does it mean to bear fruit? Think about this in the context of Jesus speaking about the kingdom of God.
  - How do you know if you are bearing fruit?
    - At this point it could be good to talk about how it can sometimes be difficult to discern this for ourselves; we often need others to point out the changes they see *in* us (internal), and the way that they see God working *through* us (external). We also need to ask God to help us to see these things in ourselves and others, and encourage us by them. We may also need to recognise that, the longer we are Christians, the slower the rate of change may be.
      - God's commitment is to make us like Jesus, and to fulfil His purposes through us, so we may need to hold on to that promise when it looks unlikely. See Philipians 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 for encouragements there.

**Ask people to reflect on which of the four soils they identify with.** It might be helpful to give them some private reflection time to do this.

#### **What are some implications of this parable for evangelism?**

Have the group reflect on the parable's implications for our approach to, and expectations of, evangelism. I sometimes wonder if we don't share our faith more because we only believe in the first 3 soils! It can be a great encouragement to remember that there is a fourth; God does save!

Sometimes people give up *sharing their faith* because they have been discouraged by seeing people fall away, or not respond at all.

Sometimes people do not give up on wanting to see people become Christians, but actually – whether consciously or not – give up on the *gospel message*. They think that *something else* will bring people to faith, so they either abandon the gospel for another message, or twist the gospel so that it is more appealing.

But this parable tells us that the problem is with the soil, NOT the seed.

Changing the message doesn't help to change the soil. This parable may serve as a timely reminder to some not to give up on gospel faithfulness. It might also serve as an encouragement to people who assume they must be doing something 'wrong' in their attempts to share their faith. This parable tells us that even when we do everything 'right', it may not result in people becoming Christians. This is a frustrating truth for many of us, but it can actually be quite freeing as well. The results do not ultimately rest in us, but in the person who speak to and in God Himself. We can and should pray to Him for the word we speak to take root and bear fruit in our friends' and families' and enemies' lives.

(A note on some tricky verses, again taken from 'The Gospel of Mark: Leaders' Guide', Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005, page 42):

#### **In verses 10-12, who are the two groups of people Jesus is talking about?**

#### **What characterizes each group? What is the "secret of the kingdom?"**

This is a difficult saying to interpret. Either Jesus is saying that he is deliberately trying to be obscure, or he is saying that the parables-method reveals people's hard hearts, since they will simply not take the stories and "plant them" through deep meditation and reflection. While the latter answer is a bit problematic, the former answer is impossible. Why would Jesus come in to the world to hide the gospel, when he could have done a far better job by not coming at all? First, there are those "outside" the kingdom. The parables will basically remain opaque to them. This does not mean that they will be consciously confused by the parables. They may "get" the point intellectually, but they will not let the parables draw them in to personal understanding and deep conviction. In other words, they will not truly hear them. For example, in 2 Samuel 12, Nathan the prophet tells David a parable, but though David "gets" that it is really about him, he does not see the massive implications of the story for him. In the same way, people outside the kingdom are not personally convicted about Jesus' teaching. They are not humbled by it and they don't see its ramifications for them. They do not see how it reveals the deep workings of their heart. Thus they "hear but do not hear." They will never be able to accept the deeper truth behind them.

Isaiah 6:9 is quoted, and the context is important. In Israel's day, the people rejected God's word, so in response God blinded and deafened them. If we resist the truth we have, even that will be taken from us. So we must not ignore the

“so that” of v. 12a or “otherwise” of v. 12b. It means because of humanity’s rejection of God, God blinds and deafens them.

Second, there are those (by implication) “inside.” Jesus says that he chooses some people to explain the parables to, to get them to understand. This means that Jesus, by grace, comes and opens our minds to the truth. This is probably the “secret” of the kingdom. The disciples are shown that the kingdom has come in Jesus and that it can be received by receiving Jesus. This is not an easy teaching, but it is true to our experience. Most of us spend years “hearing” the Biblical truths without really hearing them. But then at some point, we realized the implications of it all for ourselves. What happened? This text suggests that Jesus “came” to us through the Holy Spirit and opened our eyes to it. This raises some difficult questions. If He comes to us, why does He not come to all? But we are not told that. We do learn from this that anyone who stays blind has freely chosen to do so. By nature, we all dislike the truth, and we have willfully closed our hearts.)