

# A Study of Mark's Gospel

Week Five

Mark 4:9-34

## Day One

9 Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." 10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 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 12 so that "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

v. 9 – At first glance, this may seem a bit harsh. Jesus was saying that those who did not want to hear or who chose not to hear would get their wish—they would not hear. He would talk in riddles and parables so that they would persist in their misunderstanding.

It would seem that Jesus should have made every effort to help them understand, or at least that's what I used to think. Then I stopped questioning Jesus' motives! God knows the hearts of men and He knows who has ears to hear—those who want to hear and who have a heart not only to hear but also to understand. I have come to one conclusion and that is I need to pray, "Lord, give me ears to hear and then help me hear!" I don't want to walk away from a meeting or teaching session and not hear what God wants me to hear.

**How about you?**

v. 10 – I think this is the key: We must seek the Lord for understanding. The disciples asked Jesus to explain what they did not understand. The others went home, shrugging their shoulders and saying, "I like what He says; I just don't understand it!" It reminds me of a passage in Proverbs:

My son, *if* you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and *if* you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and *if* you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, *then* you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:1-6 emphasis added).

Notice in these verses that understanding and wisdom are conditional: You *must* seek them and keep on seeking until you find them. Also notice the intensity with which you must seek as evidenced by the phrases call out, cry aloud, search as for hidden treasure. **Are you doing all that to get wisdom and insight from God?** You cannot be passive and follow Jesus. You must actively seek God and His answers.

vs. 11&12 – Yet for all your seeking, the secrets of the Kingdom are still a gift, they "are given" to you and me. I can never boast or brag. It's the Lord who initiates my desire and then meets it by His grace. God chooses those with whom He will work and walk, but those whom He chooses must cooperate with His grace and not receive it in vain:

As God's fellow workers we urge you *not to receive God's grace in vain* (2 Corinthians 6:1 emphasis added).

## Day Two

13 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 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. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

v. 13 – Jesus rebuked His followers for being slow and not comprehending the parable. Since Jesus was not whimsical or capricious, He had to be correct in His assessment of their spiritual dullness. After all, they had been with Him for some time and they should have been growing and learning, as well as teaching others. The same is true in today's church:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:11-14).

**What are you consuming, meat or milk? Are you growing in your knowledge of God and His ways? Are you growing in confidence and knowledge where the Word is concerned?**

v. 14 – The farmer is God and His workers are those who sow the seed of the Word. We are always in partnership with God. It is never us or God alone; it is us working with Him, and Him with us. **Are you sowing the Word anywhere, with anyone? If not, why not? Two billion people in the earth haven't heard about Jesus. What are you doing to help reach them?**

v. 15 – Some people have the Word snatched away as soon as they receive it. Jesus warned us once again that we have a real enemy in Satan, who opposes the work of the Kingdom and the sowing of the seed of God's word. He is able to somehow snatch the Word from people, whether through an onslaught on their mind or a determined effort to sidetrack their attention and affection. Since Satan knows the Word and is crafty and has spiritual intelligence, we are no match for him unless Jesus helps us.

Many times I have heard people taunt and mock the devil. I am not one of those people. I have a healthy respect for my adversary and don't want to try and match wits or power with him. I will just keep my focus on Jesus.

v. 16 – There are people who receive the Word with great joy at first. I had a friend who came to the Lord in the same meeting as I did and we both set off with great enthusiasm and zeal. Soon, however, his zeal waned and our lives went in two different directions. I don't think this is just a dynamic that is evident only when the Word first comes to someone's life. **Have you ever been to a conference and come home all excited and enthused, only to have your enthusiasm fade over time?** Perhaps Jesus is referring to that dynamic as well.

### Day Three

17 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. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 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. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop — thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

v. 17 – Some people are shallow in their faith because it doesn't take root. Instead of pressing into God when trouble comes, they run from God. When there is no water, a tree will send its roots deeper to find some. When trouble comes, people can either dig deeper into God or else give up. There are some, according to this parable, that give up. **Which type are you?** I want to take advantage of the promise in Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

vs. 18&19 – I heard a message once that talked about soil preparation being the key to godly living, using this parable as an example. The man used all kinds of agricultural examples to describe what a farmer would do with rocky soil, soil with thorns and soil that was worn out with no life. **We spend our time on the delivery of the Word; but should we really be spending more time on soil preparation?**

There is nothing wrong with the seed that we are sowing. The problem is with the soil that will receive it. In this verse, we see that it isn't trouble or persecution that is the problem. The problems are wealth and the cares of this life. The gospel has a lot of competition for the hearts of men and women and that competition has the potential to choke out the life of the Word.

In my thinking, this is the dilemma of modern life. There are so many voices vying for our attention that the gospel has a hard time bearing fruit. **Could this be why the gospel always seems to have greater entrance in to the life of the poor person?** They have less distractions than the rich. And could this be why Jesus said this about the rich:

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:25).

**So should we concentrate our time and effort on the rich and rich societies or on the poor?** The tendency, however, is to focus on those who have, who are most palatable or acceptable. Is this why Jesus said,

Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

v. 20 – Seed that takes root and grows can produce much more than its own substance. I remember reading that one corn seed can produce 600 seeds of corn, per ear of corn!

**Where do we tend to spend most of our church time, with those who are productive or those who have problems or struggle?** I am not saying that we don't help those who need help, but we should not spend a disproportionate amount of time fixing problems or people. We should spend more time on those in whom the seed takes firm root and those who bear abundant. The essence of Christianity isn't being a nice person; the essence is bearing fruit. **Are you bearing fruit?**

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name (John 15:16).

#### **Day Four**

21 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? 22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

vs. 21&22 – **Why would Jesus say this immediately following the parable of the sower?** I had always seen the answer being that the things hidden in everyone's heart would be revealed for all to see. But I am seeing something different this time. **Could this refer back to the fact that the meaning of the parable, which was hidden, was revealed to those who wanted to know?** While Jesus was teaching in parables, His ultimate intent wasn't to hide the truths of God or else He would not have explained the truth of the parable.

The fact that the parable (and explanation) was included in the inspired word of God proves that God's intent wasn't to hide but to reveal. For the rest of time, anyone who wants to know Jesus' meaning of this parable can just read the gospel.

This is why I am suspicious of any teacher who acts like he or she is seeing what no one else can see in the Word, the hidden truth so to speak. The allegory style of teaching sees hidden truth behind many of the stories and details in the Bible. My personal philosophy is that there aren't any hidden truths that aren't clearly available to all with study and by God's grace. God's truths aren't just available to some special teachers, but to all His

teachers. This doesn't mean that there aren't more gifted teachers than others; there are. But their giftedness lies in getting the Word across to the student, not in their superior insight into the Word.

This is especially true where the end times are concerned. I have heard some claim that some of the Old Testament prophecies specifically relate and apply to 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century nations, and they make these claims with certainty. That is not the kind of truth that God reveals to a certain privileged few.

Does this make sense? I hope it does, because it can de-mystify the study of Scripture. God's truth and insight isn't just available to some, but to all. There are some who hear these outlandish claims to special insight and, because they don't have or see them, disqualify themselves as being able to do much with God's word. This principle is close to what Paul described in his letter to the Colossians:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23).

What comes off as super-spirituality where biblical insight is concerned seldom is anything but deception.

v. 22 – Jesus urged anyone who could accept this to do so. Paul warned of what would happen if anything refused to hold fast to this basic truth:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

### **Day Five**

24 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you — and even more. 25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." 26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

v. 24 – Oh, how I wish that people would consider carefully what they hear. I have seen the dynamic of one bad teaching taking hold in someone's mind and staying there for years. I think we need to accept what we are taught, but do like the Bereans did in Acts:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men (Acts 17:11-12).

You can enthusiastically receive what you are taught, but you still have the duty to study that truth for yourself to insure that it is true. You should not develop a closed mind, but neither should you automatically receive what you hear without question. I think a healthy skepticism, not cynicism or rigidity, is in order. So it's alright to think, "I like what I hear, Lord, and now I need You to confirm it to me. I am open, so I ask that You show me from Your word the truth of what I've just heard." Remember, Scripture isn't an end unto itself, for in John's gospel, Jesus said:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

**It is a legitimate question to ask, "Does that teaching bring me closer to Jesus or make me more like Jesus? Does it impact my life in such a way that I am better equipped to carry out God's will for my life?" If the answers are "no," then you should leave that teaching or doctrine alone.**

v. 25 – If you do this properly, God will give you more and more insight into His word, and you will be delighted with opportunities to share that insight with others. I have found that as I give away what God has given me, even if it is some insight or application of His word, then He gives me more! I like that cycle. He gives, I give, He gives more, I give, He gives even more. That dynamic can be true for teaching as it is for finance.

vs. 26&27 – Mark's gospel runs together into one continuous account. That is not probably how it all happened. I doubt if Jesus went right from the parable of the sower into this parable of the Kingdom being like a man scattering seed. That is the beauty of Mark's gospel—it is short, concise and communicates urgency and activity. Since many scholars believe that Mark the writer was Peter's assistant, then there is a good chance that this is the gospel through Peter's eyes and perspective.

The Lord used and uses the personalities of all His servants. **Do you think you have to be someone else for God to use you? Are you holding back until God makes certain changes in your life, changes He may never make or even want to make?** The four gospels are different because four different men wrote them. The Spirit inspired the word, using the experience, personality and vocabulary of each one, preserving their individuality while inspiring His word. Don't fight who you are. Allow God to use who you are as you are.

## Day Six

28 All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." 30 Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground.

v. 28 – **What does this parable tell us about the kingdom of God?** If we don't force every detail to mean something, then we can enjoy this story and come to the following conclusions:

- the Kingdom comes through men sowing God's word into the hearts of people;
- the Kingdom grows and develops in a natural, progressive way, just like a shoot of wheat;
- the Kingdom works inside of a person, and no one really understands how—it's the work of the Spirit;
- this does not necessarily apply to societies or churches as a whole, for remember that the soil in the previous parable was the human heart;
- there is an expectation of maturity as the Kingdom grows, for at some time there will be a "harvest." Is this harvest death or the end of the age? The parable doesn't tell us, nor is it important to the central lesson, that the Kingdom is a gradual, steady work in the human heart that does reach its logical conclusion.

**Do you see how I treated this parable? Is there anything else you see that is consistent with the main lesson?** I didn't ask if there was anything you want it to say, or hope it would say, or desperately need it to say. You must discipline yourself to stick to what it says, no more, no less, but to learn and see as much as possible by God's grace for insight and understanding.

vs. 29-31 – Jesus presented another parable to describe the kingdom of God. **What is the basic lesson?** That the kingdom can have a small start in the human heart, just like a tiny mustard seed can have a small start in the ground. Yet the size of the start isn't an indication of the size of the finish. I have seen some who started very quickly and strong in their walk with Jesus, only to have their strong start fizzle. Then I have seen others start more slowly, but then blossom and develop into something strong and great. Remember, the strength of the Kingdom is in the seed. The results of the Kingdom are determined by the soil.

This makes me think of the verses in Jude:

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty,

power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 24-25).

The little seed of the Kingdom has great power because God has invested Himself in that seed and it will accomplish what it sets out to do, if the soil doesn't thwart its progress.

### **Day Seven**

32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." 33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

v. 32 – Here is a good example of what I am saying. **There is a temptation to try and determine what the meaning of the birds may be in this verse. Do they represent people? Do they represent the Spirit, who Jesus said descended like a dove? Do the birds have some other hidden meaning that one day God can reveal to some special teacher?**

The answer is that the birds have no meaning here. It is simply a statement that this tree, which started from a speck, can now hold more than its own weight. If someone tries to tell you what the birds represent there, just smile and say, "Thanks, I'm not sure about that, so I think I will study it for myself." To look for special meaning where there is none is a waste of time. Stick to the main lesson; there's enough there to feed your spirit and mind for the rest of your life.

v. 33 – Jesus gave them as much as they could understand. That tells me we have limits and I must do what I can to increase my capacity to understand God and His word. **What are you doing to extend your capacity? Taking classes? Reading?** I am going back to school soon to work on another doctorate for a number of reasons I won't go into here. One of them is that I want to understand more! I want more, God! This is certainly consistent with Psalm 119, which you may want to take a moment to read. As you do, underline all the prayers in that psalm that speak to increased understanding of God's word. For example:

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (Psalm 119:18).

Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight (Psalm 119:34-35).

**Can you pray those prayers and the others found in that psalm? If so, what are you prepared to do to make them come to pass?**

v. 34 – Jesus explained everything to His disciples. That is a necessary condition for learning God's word. Certainly someone can study the Bible and learn much. If they are

not a disciple of Jesus, however, they will never see all that there is to see I am a follower of Jesus and the Bible is my book to learn about Him, and to become like Him. Anyone can read it, but only disciples can understand it.

**Are you a disciple? Then you can expect Jesus to “explain” His word to you. Are you using that promise for your own good? Growing in the knowledge of God and His word? If not, what is the impediment? What can you do to remove it?**