

The Gospel of Mark

(Mid-Week Bible Study)

Week 5: Hearing the Word of the Kingdom -- Mark 4:1–34

Picture the scene. The crowd by the Sea of Galilee has grown so large that Jesus has to step into a small fishing boat, push out a few feet from shore, and teach from the water like a teacher in a natural amphitheater. The hillside is alive with people. Some have come hoping for a miracle. Some have come because everyone else is going. A few have come because something in them is hungry for what only this Teacher seems to have. The water gently slaps the side of the boat. Jesus sits down (the posture of a rabbi about to teach), looks out at the sea of faces, and begins, “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow” (v. 3).

Mark 4 is a chapter about hearing. The word “hear” or “listen” appears more than a dozen times in these thirty-four verses. Jesus tells four short kingdom parables in a row: the sower and the soils, the lamp, the seed growing secretly, and the mustard seed. Together they sound like a series of riddles, but they are actually answering one enormous question. What is the kingdom of God really like, and what does it ask of the people who hear about it?

The answer Jesus gives is not what most of His listeners were expecting. The kingdom does not arrive with a sword. It arrives like a seed. It does not come in a single moment of national glory. It grows secretly, mostly underground, in lives that look quiet from the outside. It does not begin big. It begins like a mustard seed, the tiniest grain in the field, and only later becomes the great tree where the birds find shade. It does not work automatically. It depends on the kind of soil the seed falls into, the kind of heart the word lands on, the kind of attention the hearer is paying.

That is the question that walks home with us this week. The seed has been sown into your life. You have heard the gospel. You have read the Word. You have sat in worship. You have prayed. But what kind of soil has the Word been landing on lately? Is it bearing fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold, or is it being snatched away before it can take root, scorched in the shallow places, or quietly choked by the cares and the riches and the desires of life? Jesus is not just telling parables. He is asking you to take a long, honest look at your own heart.

Group Discussion: All four of the parables in Mark 4 are about the kingdom of God, and yet they tell us almost nothing about the kingdom’s outward appearance. They are mostly about the way the Word of God is received, grows, and bears fruit in human hearts. Why do you think Jesus chose to describe the kingdom this way, and what does it suggest about how the kingdom of God actually advances in our world today?

Personal Reflection: Of the four soils in the parable (the path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil), which one most accurately describes the condition of your heart in

this season of life, and what specific “path” or “rock” or “thorn” would you need to name out loud before honest change could begin?

Read Mark 4:1–34

Study Questions

1. In the parable of the sower (vv. 3–9), Jesus pictures a farmer scattering seed on four different kinds of ground. When He explains the parable in verses 13–20, He tells us that the seed is “the word” (v. 14). What does it teach us about the nature and power of God’s Word that Jesus would compare it to a living seed that contains its own ability to grow?
2. Look carefully at the four soils Jesus describes: the path (vv. 4, 15), the rocky ground (vv. 5–6, 16–17), the thorny ground (vv. 7, 18–19), and the good soil (vv. 8, 20). Without rushing to the “right” answer, which soil best describes the actual condition of your heart right now, and what specific evidence in your daily life would honestly point to that?
3. When the disciples ask about the parables, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9–10 and tells them that those “outside” see but do not perceive, hear but do not understand (vv. 10–12). How can we faithfully understand this teaching without falling into the error that God arbitrarily prevents some people from being saved, and what does Jesus actually mean about the parables, the hardness of human hearts, and the genuine offer of the gospel?
4. Mark 4:24 records Jesus saying, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.” Where in your life right now are you not really paying attention to what you have been hearing from God, and what is the price you are quietly paying for that inattention?
5. In verses 21–23, Jesus says, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand?” What is Jesus teaching about the purpose of the Word of God in the life of a disciple and in the life of His church, and what does this mean for how Christians are to live in the world?
6. The thorny soil is described as one where “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (v. 19). Name the specific cares, riches, or desires that are most likely to be the choking thorns in your own life this season, and what would it look like to actually pull one of them up by the roots?
7. In the parable of the seed growing secretly (vv. 26–29), Jesus says that the farmer scatters seed and then sleeps and rises, night and day, while the seed sprouts and grows, “he knows not how.” The earth produces by itself. What is Jesus teaching about how the kingdom of God grows, and what does it mean for the church’s ministry of preaching, teaching, evangelism, and discipleship today?
8. Many believers are exhausted from trying to manufacture spiritual fruit through sheer effort. Where in your own walk are you working hard to produce results that only God can produce, and what would it look like to faithfully “scatter seed” and then trust the Lord with the growth?

9. In the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30–32), Jesus says the kingdom of God is like the smallest of all seeds, which becomes the largest of garden plants. Connecting this parable with Daniel 2:44, Mark 1:14–15, and Acts 2, what is Jesus teaching about the timing, the visible growth, and the present reality of the kingdom of God, and why is this so important for understanding what Christ has already accomplished through His church?
10. Looking back across all four parables in this chapter, what kind of soil do you want your heart to become before this study is over, what specific weed or stone do you need to remove this week so that the Word can do its work in you, and who could you ask to walk with you while you do it?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 55:10–11, the promise that God’s word will not return to Him empty; James 1:21–25, the call to receive the implanted word and be doers, not hearers only; 1 Peter 1:22–25, being born again through the living and abiding word of God; Daniel 2:44, the prophecy of a kingdom that will never be destroyed; Acts 2:36–47, the day the mustard seed visibly became the church.