

**Parables of Jesus//Portraits of the Kingdom
Part One – The Parable of the Sower**

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Mark 4:1-20

This summer we're diving into a series on the parables of Jesus. We're calling them "portraits of the kingdom" because, as we'll see, the parables of Jesus are not cute stories to simplify down complex "spiritual truths" and help us live our best life now. They perplex. They subvert. They get behind our defences and gives us a new imagination for seeing the realities of God's kingdom and what it means to join the Jesus-Movement.

In the Gospel of Mark, the first thing that Jesus says in this biography was:

"The time has come...The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news." – **Mark 1:15**

"[the parables] ...call people to repent and to revolutionize their entire perspective on God and life." – *David Garland*

I. Learning to Listen

"Jesus' favorite speech form, the parable was subversive. Parables sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seed, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants. And they are wholly secular: of his forty or so parables recorded in the Gospels, only one has its setting in church, and only a couple mention the name of God. As people heard these stories they saw at once they weren't about God, so there was nothing in them threatening their own sovereignty.

They relaxed their defenses. They walked away perplexed, wondering what they meant, the stories lodged in their imagination. And then, like a bomb, they would explode in their unprotected hearts. An abyss opened up at their very feet. He was talking about God; they had been invaded!"

Parables aren't illustrations that make things easier; they make things harder by requiring the exercise of our imaginations, which if we aren't careful become the exercise of our faith.... Parables subversively slip past our defenses." – Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*

II. Why the Enigma?

“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!”

1) Parables Function Like Political Cartoons

“The problem – and this seems to be the main reason Jesus taught in parables – is that Jesus’ vision of how God was sowing his word was, as we would say today, politically incorrect. People were expecting a great moment of renewal. They believed Israel would be rescued lock, stock, and barrel; God’s kingdom would explode on the world stage in a blaze of glory. No, declares Jesus; it’s more like a farmer sowing seed, much of which apparently goes to waste because the soil isn’t fit for it, can’t sustain it.” – *N.T. Wright*

The kingdom Jesus announces is so utterly different than what Israel expects – with its hope in a violent, military upheaval. The King of the Kingdom – Jesus – he will bring renewal, but not by an act of violence against the oppressors. How then? By the greatest act of love. By laying down his life, letting evil do its worst to him. He will exhaust the power of evil and sin and death in his own body on the cross.

And this is where it really gets challenging. Just after correcting Peter, Jesus then says,
“Whoever wants to be my disciple – like, whoever wants a part in God’s kingdom – must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” – **Mark 8:34b**

Why speak in parables? Because this message Jesus is preaching is so radically different than people expected, and they would be furious if it were in plain language.

But for those willing to *really* listen – who make a commitment to “hear,” to pay attention to Jesus – they will get to hear the meaning of it – the “Secrets of the kingdom,” as Jesus puts it.

2) Is Jesus trying to be exclusive?

“When he [Jesus] was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.” – **Mark 3:10**

Some people have stayed with Jesus. These folks had made a commitment to being with Jesus. These are the ones who *want to know* what Jesus means. *And* they ask him for an explanation. They *pay attention*. They trust that Jesus is worth hearing out.

So why does Jesus quote this hard passage from Isaiah? He knows, with a great sense of reality, that just like the people of Isaiah's day, not everyone will want to go beyond simply "looking in".

Not everyone will want to take in this message with understanding. Jesus is full of mercy; but he's also a realist.

Biblical scholar Dale Brunner is right to say that to "understand" means to "stand under" – to submit myself to Jesus and his teaching. See, it's those who stick around – who make a personal commitment to being with Jesus – they are the ones who get to hear what the parable is about.

3) Outsiders can become insiders if they will listen to Jesus – to change how they hear. To "Stand Under" his loving leadership.

This is a *real invitation*. And a *real warning*.

You can make a choice – to be in that group that *keeps listening, paying attention to Jesus and his words...or not*.

Am I willing to make this sort of personal commitment – to look more closely, and really perceive? To truly "stand under" what Jesus says?

III. How's Your Hearing?

1) This text hints at Jesus' identity as the One True God

"Listen." This is the first word, *Shema*, of the prayer that the ancient Israelites would pray several times a day, as recorded in Deuteronomy 6:5. "Hear" or "Listen," O Israel..." When Jesus says "Listen," this is an echo of God's own voice.

No wonder Jesus makes such a big deal about our hearing! **To listen to Jesus is to listen to the Voice of the Living God.**

2) Jesus has only one command here: Listen. Hear. Pay attention.

How does the good hearer be a good hearer? Jesus never really tells us the answer to that directly. But, summarizing Robert Gundry, David Garland states:

"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." – *In Garland*

Am I seeking Jesus' own words and wisdom for the way I make decisions? Am I ready to hear with a heart dedicated to "standing under" Jesus' way of life?

3) Keep Sowing the Seed

Who is the “farmer” or “Sower” in the parable? Mark doesn’t say, which is probably important.

Certainly, to the first crowd, gathered on the shore – on the “soil” (it’s the same word in Greek) - the farmer is Jesus, sowing his own words of gospel, the word of God. But in all subsequent generations, the “Sower” is any Christian who is sharing the good news of Jesus and his kingdom.

- a. **What *is* our purpose?** This reminds us that the Kingdom of God is spreading, well, through us – God’s missionary people. Like, we become the Sower. We join in with what God is doing.
- b. **Whenever we continue to announce the news of Jesus there are a number of factors at play in how a person “hears”, what they will do with that word.**

Jesus’ parable helps me make sense of why some people can hear this amazing news of God’s loving, saving work in Jesus and be utterly transformed – have lives that are so different, are bearing fruit – while others are sitting right next to them can shrug and walk away.

- c. **Jesus tells us, some will respond in trust. And when Jesus’ message of the kingdom takes root in them, there will be fruit; thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold!**

The fruit of what Jesus started has had an undeniable and enormous impact on the world as we know it. Historian H.G. Wells writes:

“I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as an historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history.” – *H.G. Wells*

“His [Jesus’] life and teaching simply drew people to follow him. He made history by starting in a humble place, in a spirit of love and acceptance, and allowing each person space to respond. His vision of life continues to haunt and challenge humanity. His influence has swept over history bringing inspiration to what has happened in art, science, government, medicine, and education; he has taught humans about dignity, compassion, forgiveness, and hope.”

– *John Ortberg*

Reflection Questions:

1. How have you typically thought about parables? In what ways might this parable of Jesus challenge or change your initial impressions?
2. Why might the message of the Kingdom that Jesus brings be hard to hear for you? How could these “portraits of the Kingdom” give you a new imaginative space for considering life with Jesus at the centre?
3. In Jesus’ interpretation of his parable, how have you seen the work of the Enemy, the pressures of following Jesus, or the deceptiveness of wealth or comfort threatened to make the message of Jesus ineffective in you?
 - a. How might you find ways to keep giving your attention to Jesus?
 - b. What might God be saying to you specifically in relation to this parable?
 - c. What will you do about that?

Prayer: Take time to pray in response to what God is saying to you in this text. Holy God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – thank you for speaking to our hearts in a way that drives us deeper into relationship with you. May your word find good soil in our hearts and bear a crop that sees your “kingdom life” come alive in our community. Amen.