

“The Farmer Sows the Word”

The Twelfth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 4:1-20; Isaiah 6:1-13

It was becoming painfully clear that Jesus was not going to be accepted by the religious leaders of Israel. Already the Jerusalem Sanhedrin had sent representatives to the region near the Sea of Galilee to evaluate Jesus’ ministry. These men accused Jesus of doing the work of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. The Pharisees who lived in the area, and who had witnessed a number of Jesus’ miracles first-hand, thought Jesus such a threat to them that they began working with their sworn political enemies—the Herodians—to find some pretense to kill Jesus. Because of their unbelief, God’s judgment would come upon Israel in the form of covenant curses. And so Jesus pronounced the supreme covenant curse upon the Teachers of the Law who had come from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem—their sin was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Jesus will also begin to speak in parables as a form of judgment upon the faithless religious leaders of Israel, in effect, hiding the truth about the meaning of his messianic mission in plain sight from the scribes and Pharisees. They will hear but not understand. They will see, but not perceive. They will not be forgiven.

This morning we are resuming our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are dealing with that period in Jesus’ ministry known as the later Galilean phase, which runs from Mark 3:7-6:13. Throughout this portion of Jesus’ ministry (which transpires several months after Jesus suddenly appeared in Capernaum), people are struggling to figure out just who Jesus is and what his ministry means. We have seen how the crowds follow Jesus everywhere he goes. These people have come from all over the region, having heard about this miracle-worker/exorcist who can heal with but a touch and who can command demons to flee with but a word. These people don’t much care about who Jesus is or that his mission might have a more important purpose—not just dealing with the symptoms of the human condition, but getting to the root of the real problem which is that we are a fallen race in need of redemption. The crowds are so eager to get to Jesus that they will not let him sleep nor eat. And then there is Jesus’ own family—including his mother and his half-brothers. They have traveled to Capernaum from Nazareth to take charge of Jesus, believing that he is not in his right mind.

So far, the only participants in Mark’s proclamation who fully understand who Jesus is are the demons. They immediately recognize Jesus as the Holy One from God who is indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit. When Jesus approaches, the kingdom of God draws near as well. Although Jesus’ glory is veiled by human flesh, the demons know who this person is and what his presence means. And while Jesus has slowly but surely begun to reveal his true identity to those twelve disciples whom Jesus has called to form a new Israel, at this point the only ones who truly know and understand who Jesus is are those whom Jesus has come to bind and plunder. This entire section of Mark’s Gospel is thick with irony. Jesus is being rejected by the shepherds of Israel (the Sanhedrin, scribes and Pharisees). The people of Israel are not interested in his mission to deliver them from God’s judgment—they just want to be delivered from sickness and disease. And then his own family thinks that he is out of his mind. Therefore, even early on in Jesus’ ministry there is a certain inevitability that he will be rejected by those he came to save and that his mission will ultimately take him to Jerusalem and to the cross.

As we come to Mark chapter 4, Mark recounts three of the parables which Jesus told during this phase in his ministry. While we know from the other gospels that Jesus told many more parables than those mentioned by Mark, Mark does include these parables which particularly illustrate the

nature and character of the kingdom of God, which is the central theme of Jesus' preaching during his days in the Capernaum region.

When Jesus begins his public ministry and focuses his preaching upon the presence of kingdom of God, it is clear that the critical turning point in redemptive history has come because he has come. That Jesus has come at this particular time and appeared in this particular place (Capernaum) is a sign that God is absolutely sovereign and that the critical moment in the redemptive drama is finally arrived. The fact that those who should have recognized Jesus—his own people, and especially their leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees—have not, is also critical to the story. Their rejection of Jesus tells us that sin has so blinded God's people to the truth of Jesus' identify and God's means of delivering them from their sins, that when God in human flesh enters their presence to save them from their sins they immediately begin plotting to kill him. Thus Jesus must go about his messianic work in an atmosphere of unbelief and rejection.¹ This should not come as a surprise since this too was foretold by Israel's prophets, most notably Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 53:3).

As the second Adam and the obedient son, Jesus must accomplish his messianic mission in a very hostile environment, if he is to fulfill all righteousness. He will be opposed by his own people virtually every step of the way. Although Jesus will have compassion upon the sick and suffering and heal countless of them, the sad reality is that they are every bit as blind to the truth of Jesus' ministry as are the scribes and Pharisees. The same can even be said of his own brothers. They will not believe until after the resurrection. While the scribes and Pharisees are overt in their rejection of Jesus, the crowds don't care much about the nature of Jesus' mission either. These poor people just want relief from their suffering and when Jesus challenges them to follow him and explains the cost of discipleship, they reject him as well. On Palm Sunday their cheers quickly turn to jeering when Jesus turns out to be a king of a different sort than they had been expecting. But then Jesus predicts this very thing.

This climate of rejection, self-centeredness and ignorance to the things of God is the context for what follows. One of the things for which Jesus is most noted is his use of parables in his preaching. In the parables of Jesus, which are found throughout the gospels, Jesus uses concrete examples and vivid word pictures, while at the same time avoiding abstractions. It is vital to notice that Jesus uses these parables to speak about the meaning of redemptive history as it unfolds in his own person and ministry. Unlike the so-called holy men of other religions, Jesus is not merely a great teacher offering timeless truths along the lines of Aesop's fables. Rather, in Jesus' parables there are two critical things for which we must look. On one level (the surface), Jesus speaks of the natural order of things and of daily life in terms quite familiar to the people of that age. That is why the parables are so effective as means of communication. We can all understand and relate to what is going on in the story. But on another level (a deeper level), Jesus speaks of God's redemptive purposes in these same parables. Because God is the author of both nature and redemption, these two things fit very easily together. Thus when Jesus calls attention to the one (a certain man . . .), this can easily illumine the other (the kingdom of God). This is why parables are such a profound and powerful way to teach and why those who do not believe that Jesus is the Christ have trouble grasping our Lord's deeper meaning.²

Mark describes the now familiar scene in which Jesus speaks the first of several parables recorded in this

¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 149.

² See the helpful discussion of this in Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 149-15.

chapter. *“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.”* Mark doesn’t tell us if this parable was told by Jesus during the earlier incident where Jesus was forced into a boat because of the huge crowds recorded in Mark 3:9. More than likely Jesus told this particular parable on many occasions, including this incident now described by Mark. As so Mark simply tells us that “[Jesus] . . . *taught them many things by parables,*” before going on to recount this particular parable, known to us as the parable of the sower.

As we read in verses 3-9, Jesus both begins and ends this parable with a stern call to listen attentively. *“Listen! 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, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times. Then Jesus said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”* The manner in which Jesus tells the parable forces the listener to involve themselves in the story and then make a judgment about the outcome. Unless they tune Jesus out completely, the audience cannot hear his words without making a judgment. Jesus pulls them in. By telling his audience to listen carefully, we are given the sense that there may be more going on here than appears on the surface.³ In fact, this particular parable is the key to understanding a number of the parables which come later.

While the whole idea of sowing and harvesting sounds quaint to us, remember that this was very much a part of daily life in Palestine. People would be very familiar with the particulars of the story. In first century Palestine, it was understood that the farmer who sows seed (a rather precious commodity) would be very careful about where he would sow. Jesus’ hearers would immediately know that the sower is intentionally sowing seed in a variety of places, including places where the farmer would not be likely to plow after he had sown. There is also a definite progression of thought here.⁴ The first batch of seed was sown along a foot path, where the ground was packed down by people walking on it. The seed sown here would never even germinate. The ground was too hard, there was no topsoil and so birds came and ate it up before the seeds could even start germinating. The second batch of seed was sown on rocky soil, so that once it germinated and started to grow it would quickly die from a lack of water. The soil was not deep enough for the newly germinated seed to establish any kind of root system. As soon as the sun hit it, it was scorched. The next batch of seed germinated and actually survived and grew, but because of the surrounding thorn bushes, was choked out and never did bear a crop. The final batch of seed the produced a harvest was seed which was sown in good soil.

Therefore, the key to understanding the parable is to notice that the same seed (which represents the kingdom of God) is sown by the sower in diverse places (different groups of people, most likely the different kinds of people we have already seen in Mark’s gospel). The only seed which produces a harvest is that which is sown on good soil. While there are differing soils, the seed (which represents the kingdom of God) is the same and is intentionally sown by the sower in a number of different places, but

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 153.

⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 191.

only one place successfully produces a crop.⁵ Furthermore, when the final batch of seed produces a crop there are varying degrees of success, thirty-fold (an average harvest), sixty-fold (a very good harvest) and one-hundred fold (which would far exceeded all expectations). Throughout the parables told by our Lord, the harvest is a metaphor for the future consummation of the kingdom of God (judgment). This means that prior to the harvest, seed must be sown in different places and that there will be continual growth before a glorious crop comes in at harvest time. This much was pretty clear to those who heard the parable. What remained hidden, however, was the relationship between Jesus and the sower, the nature of the seed, and the amount of time which remained until the harvest.⁶ If this is not specifically revealed by Jesus to his disciples, then this particular aspect of the parable will remain hidden.

That the disciples were beginning to understand that this was the case, becomes clear in what follows next.

Since Jesus had been out on the lake near the shore in a boat preaching, when he told this parable to the multitudes who had gather to hear him, the disciples are forced to wait until later to ask Jesus about what he had meant. As we read in verse 10, “*When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.*” This explanation of the parable of the sower comes later on (time wise), and also includes an explanation of all of the parables told in this section of Mark, since Jesus is still out in the boat in v. 36 of this same chapter. This also confirms the fact that Jesus’ parables contain an element of mystery about the kingdom of God which needs to be explained to the disciples in private.

Jesus uses this occasion to explain why he is now speaking in parables. His explanation drives the old Protestant liberals crazy because Jesus tells his disciples that he is intentionally hiding the truth from people as a form of judgment. According to old-guard Protestant liberals, Jesus would never do such a thing.⁷ But according to Mark, Jesus does exactly that. “[Jesus] *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 context for our Lord’s word of explanation is that rejection of Jesus and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit we have just seen in the preceding chapter. But Jesus does graciously reveal the mystery of the kingdom to his own disciples, while at the same time hiding this mystery from the multitudes who were following him, as well as from the scribes and Pharisees. While Protestant liberals (and sadly, many evangelicals) find this offensive, this makes perfect sense in a covenantal context, where there are both covenant blessings and covenant curses. In explaining these parables to his disciples, Jesus is, in effect, pronouncing a covenant blessing. In hiding the mysteries of the kingdom from the others, Jesus is pronouncing a covenant curse.

This means that whenever Jesus speaks in a parable there are two kinds of people to whom he is speaking. To his disciples (which includes the twelve plus all those who now follow Jesus and who believe that he is at the very least a prophet sent from God), the parables reveal the unfolding mystery of the story of redemption. More specifically, the parables reveal what the kingdom of God is like, how it advances and how it will be consummated at the end of the age. To the multitudes who, sadly, see Jesus

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 154.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 155.

⁷ Cf. C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Charles Scribner 1961), 14 ff.

as nothing more than a walking emergency room, and to the religious leaders of Israel (whether they be from the Sanhedrin, or the local scribes and Pharisees), Jesus' parables are a form of judgment. They may understand the surface meaning of the story and they may even understand (as they often do), that Jesus is using these parables to expose their self-righteousness and lack of care for God's people. But what they don't see is that these parables actually serve to blind them to the truth so that everything Jesus does remains a riddle or an enigma. This is what we mean when we say that the parables are a form of judgment.⁸ The more Jesus speaks to them in parables, the madder and more troubled they become.

Notice, too, that this was also predicted in the Old Testament. Jesus cites from Isaiah 6:9 and following (our Old Testament lesson) to make this very point. In saying this, Jesus does not mean that all those presently outside the kingdom are denied the possibility of belief (and therefore, salvation). But it does mean that as long as they remain in unbelief they will never see nor understand the true nature of the kingdom. Unless God grant people faith and repentance, Jesus' words will remain ever cryptic, ever mysterious, ever troubling.⁹ This is what we mean when we speak of Jesus as the final prophet, that one about whom Moses declared in Deuteronomy 18:15, "*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*" For unless Jesus grant us insight into the mysteries of the kingdom, we too will be ever seeing, yet blind, ever hearing, yet deaf. Unless Jesus gives us ears to hear, we will never truly listen to what he says.

After having discussed the purpose of these parables, Mark now moves on to recount how Jesus interprets this particular parable for his disciples.

This parable comes first in the series because this particular parable clearly serves as a basis for understanding the rest of those which Jesus tells in this portion of Mark. Jesus is about to give his disciples an important glimpse into the meaning of redemptive history. This will, in part, give them an important glimpse into the meaning and purpose of Christ's messianic mission. According to Mark's account, in verse 13 "*Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'*" This question stems from the fact that the disciples had come to Jesus once they were alone, specifically to ask him about what this parable meant. Jesus' explanation will give them deeper insight into the unfolding mystery of the kingdom of God. That he does so, is an act of grace in its own right. Jesus is dispensing upon them one of the blessings of the covenant, deeper insight into the things of God. In explaining this parable to them, he is granting them sight and hearing!

Our Lord's explanation of the parable comes in verses 14-20, "*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. 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. 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. 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.*"

As Jesus explains the parable, it immediately becomes clear that this is a parable revealing the way in

⁸ See the helpful discussion of this in; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 156-159.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 159.

which the kingdom of God spreads. When Jesus tells his disciples that the seed is the word of God, it is clear that the kingdom spreads through the proclamation of the word of God. The farmer is obviously Jesus, who very specifically sows seed (the message about the kingdom) in diverse places—probably reflecting the nature of the unbelief that Jesus has already encountered and to which his disciples have already been witnesses. Jesus has not only preached the same word (the seed) to different groups in Israel (represented by the different soils), but the advance of the kingdom will be just as apparent to those with the eyes of faith as is the opposition to the kingdom they have already witnessed. Given the climate in which Jesus must minister, the focus initially falls upon the those who do not believe.

It is not accidental that Jesus first mentions Satan as the one who opposes the preaching of the word. Mark has recounted Jesus' encounter with Satan in the wilderness and the demonic activity throughout the Capernaum region. The religious leaders are no doubt in mind in Jesus' mind, since their opposition to Jesus is resistance to the kingdom of God and the preaching of Jesus. They are doing the work of Satan by trying to prevent God's people from responding to the word Jesus has been preaching. Indeed, they have opposed Jesus at every step of the way. When Jesus speaks of the rocky soil he is speaking the multitudes who follow him and who have received him with great joy because he is a miracle-worker/exorcist. But these people will quickly fall away when Jesus tells them that they must deny themselves and their own righteousness, that they must repent of their sins and take up their own cross and follow Jesus. This, they are not willing to do. They will quickly fall away when things get tough, or when people challenge their allegiance to Jesus. And then there are those who will follow Jesus, but for a number of reasons all related to the day to day things of life, will never truly give Jesus their full and total allegiance. They will be unfruitful. In all of these instances, these people are confronted by the kingdom and their response to it varies according to their differing circumstances. Nevertheless they will find that the secret conveyed by the word, remains hidden. They do not understand, indeed they cannot understand, that Jesus has come to bestow upon them eternal life. The very fact that Jesus will humble himself to death so as to save them from their own sins, is to them a sign of weakness and offence. These people may be excited about Jesus now. But they will quickly and inevitably fall away.

But Jesus also foresees that his word will be received by all those whom he has called to follow him. Those who are truly members of Jesus' family through faith, will produce a crop at harvest time. Some will produce what is expected. Some will produce much more than is anticipated. While Jesus is speaking to his disciples, we need to see that Jesus is not only speaking of them as individuals, but he is describing the course of the age. There will be Satanic opposition to him and to his preaching until the day of judgment (the harvest). There will be those who get all excited about Jesus, but who fall away once trouble comes. There are those who follow Jesus to a point, but are more worried about the things of the world than their undivided allegiance to their master. But at the time of the end, there will be a harvest, and it will be huge! And all of this is according to God's timing, since Jesus is the sower and his word the seed. The harvest will come when God sees fit. Thus the kingdom is both present and will possess a future glory which is presently unseen.¹⁰

What, then, are we to take away from this parable by way of application?

In this parable, Jesus does two things. First, he reveals to his disciples why it is that the people of Israel are rejecting him. Jesus is sowing the word of God on ground that is unproductive. But nevertheless, he is also sowing the word of God in good soil and there will be a harvest in Israel—some of

¹⁰ Lane, The Gospel According to Jesus, 162-163.

it beyond all expectation. Second, Jesus also sets before us a guide to the course of redemptive history until the end of the age. We know that there will be a long period of sowing the word of God and that there will be continued opposition and indifference to the gospel until the time of the end. But we also know that there will be a great harvest. In some cases, the return will be what is expected, while in other cases, the harvest will exceed all expectation.

Therefore, the application for us is that Christ's church and its members must be about the business of sowing seed, which is the word of God. We cannot change the condition of the soil where we are sowing. Only God can do that. But we can ensure that we are actively engaged in missions and evangelism (as well as supporting those who do), specifically the preaching of the word of God as it is rightly divided into law and gospel. When we do this, and support those who do this, we will see a harvest. Because Christ has appointed us as his ambassadors, we must be like the farmer who sows the word. Our confidence is not in ourselves, our creativity, our speaking ability, our anything. Our confidence must be in the word, which when sown, will indeed produce a great harvest, even though many will reject our message.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 10:14-17. *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* Therefore, let us be about the business of sowing seed—telling everyone in our sphere of influence that while we stand condemned before God (according to the law), God has sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins and to provide us with a perfect righteousness (the good news of the gospel). And then let God bring about a glorious harvest. Amen!