

The King's Parables

The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 4

Mark 4:1-20

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Does God hide things? We know God reveals things. He reveals His Word. He reveals His Son. Through His guidance, He reveals how we should walk through life. By His leading, He reveals the direction of holiness. But along with His guiding, leading, and revealing, does God also confuse, obstruct, and even conceal?

In our passage today, Jesus says that He does. In quoting a passage from Isaiah, Jesus says that at times the Lord acts in such a way so that people “see, but do not perceive,” they “hear, but do not understand” (Mark 4:12; Isaiah 6:9-10). Jesus is referring to a sobering truth: God’s judgment sometimes takes the form of concealing things from us. God’s revelation can, at times, unfold in such a way that it draws some people further into the light while pushing others further into darkness. For those who bring to the hearing of God’s Word pride, over-confidence, or apathy, that Word may stir in them greater arrogance, self-assurance, or indifference. Responses that not only further blind to the truth—the truth about themselves and God—but responses that are, in themselves, God’s judgment.

At times, God’s Word acts to draw the humble and hungry further into the light, but the proud and self-satisfied further into darkness. Jesus puts it this way in Matthew 11:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have **hidden** these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Matthew 11:25-26).

Be careful, therefore, how you hear the Word of God—for, by your judgment of it, it may be judging you. This is the point, as we will see, of the Parable of the Sower—a parable all about the hearing of the Word of God. Recorded in Matthew, Luke, and Mark, we’ll consider how Mark recounts it in Mark 4:1-20. The passage sets before us two exhortations. First be careful how you hear: *what attitude, or heart posture, are we bringing to the hearing of God’s Word? Skepticism? Pride? Indifference?* And second, be eager for God’s Word: *are we working hard to hear more of God’s revelation? Are we hungry for it?*

When Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower, he is well into his first year of ministry. In Mark 1-3, we see that Jesus is becoming very popular. But, along with growing popularity, there is rising criticism towards Jesus. Due in part to his claim to have “authority to forgive sins” (2:10), and to be “lord even of the Sabbath” (2:28), religious leaders have taken offense at him. The Pharisees are conspiring with the Herodians to “destroy him” (3:6). Jesus’ family is concerned he is “out of his mind” (3:21). And most severe, just prior to this parable religious leaders up from Jerusalem to make this damning statement about Jesus: “He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out demons” (3:22). If Jesus is God in the flesh, as Mark is suggesting, these religious leaders are calling God, Satan.

In Mark chapter four, Jesus seems resolved to face the criticism. And to do so, he teaches in parables:

Again, he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables... (4:1-2).

Now, this seems to us a strange way to respond to critics—by teaching seemingly benign and friendly parables about farming. *Parables are innocent little things, are they not?*

When we think of parables, we think of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* or *Aesop's Fables*. We think of heart-warming stories easy enough for children to understand but profound enough for adults to learn from. Parables are lofty wisdom made simple by being told with vivid, everyday imagery so that even simple folk—like Galilean fishermen—can understand. But friends, if that is our view of parables, we are at best only half correct. And, as J.I. Packer famously said, “A half-truth masquerading as a whole truth becomes a complete untruth.”¹ Parables are in fact dangerous. They are dangerous because they expose hearts and force decisions.

I. Be Careful How You Hear: *Parables Are Dangerous*

What we see as simply a story meant to instruct, in the hands of Jesus, may be a sword that divides. Parables serve to further the divide between those leaning toward Jesus and those increasingly rejecting him. Notice how Jesus responds to his follower’s inquiry about the parables in vv.10-12. After teaching the Parable of the Sower in verses 3-9, we read the following:

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that **“they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven”** (4:1-12).

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10 in order to explain part of the purpose of his parables—and it’s shocking. What we view as stories to enlighten the simple, Jesus sees as also riddles to blind the proud. Here, then, is the first lesson: for the proud, the self-assured, for those who reject the person and idea of Jesus, Jesus’ parables are a form of rejecting them. *How, exactly, does this work?* An example from a very short parable in Mark 2 will help us see the dangerous side of parables.

In Mark 2:13-17, Jesus calls Levi the tax collector to follow him. He also goes and dines at Levi’s home, where the Pharisees see him “eating with sinners and tax collectors” (2:15-16) and are bothered by it: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners” (2:17a)? Jesus responds with a mini parable—a brief snippet of a scene meant to convey a deep truth: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (2:17b).

Here is where the parable proves dangerous. Jesus knows that because the Pharisees are full of pride and contempt, they will be lured into a misinterpretation: they will imagine themselves as the “well” and “righteous.” They understand Jesus to be saying, effectively, that he’s only eating with the tax collectors, instead of dining properly with the Pharisees, because the tax collectors need the most help. The Pharisees would therefore think to themselves, *“Oh, Jesus is with these sinners because they need his message more than we do. We’re already “righteous.”* But the heart of Jesus’ message is that everyone, especially the prideful religious elites, are sinners and therefore need him. And ironically, it’s the tax collectors and sinners who end up coming to Jesus, not the Pharisees.

Just as an egotistical person’s ego is bound to make them see themselves as the hero of every story, so too the Pharisees’ pride lures them into a misinterpretation that only furthers their distance from the truth; hence, the parables are dangerous for them because they increase their blindness.²

Parables are dangerous because even as we read them, they read us.

- If we bring to them pride, we may mistake ourselves for the righteous in the story, and in doing so be judged doubly sick.
- If we bring to them our own wisdom, we may dismiss them as silly or too simple, and in doing so find ourselves judged as ignorant.
- If we bring to them indifference, we may dismiss them as insignificant, and in doing so, find ourselves judged as irrelevant to God’s deeper purposes in the World.

Just as a seed sown onto soil eventually reveals the fertility of that soil—whether or not it can cultivate growth, so too, a parable spoken to the ear eventually reveals the health of the heart—whether or not it has a place for truth in it.

It may be that the religious leaders who heard Jesus’ parable about the sower read themselves into the part about the good soil, thinking that their religious works equated to good fruit. And in doing so, only increased their blindness to their own barrenness. Jesus will, at the end of Mark’s Gospel, judge Israel’s leadership to be a barren fig tree (Mark 11:13; 13:28).

“For those outside,” Jesus says, to the rebellious, proud, self-assured, indifferent, “everything is in parables, so that *“they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”* (4:1-12).

Be careful, therefore, how you hear the Word of God—for, by your judgment of it, it judges you.

If you’re here today and new to Christianity or don’t consider yourself a Christian, this teaching may sound unnecessarily harsh. *Shouldn’t Jesus teach in the most accessible way possible, making it easier, not harder, to hear and understand?* To you, I want to stress that this dangerous aspect of the parables is typically aimed not at the honest and humble seekers of truth, but at the over-confident and proud—especially when the latter purport to be God’s leaders. Some of the blindest people in the Bible are those who think they are closest to God. And it is their pride for self and contempt of others, that keeps them in the dark—even when they have their faces in the Word of God.

But elsewhere in the Bible we find God moving towards, with great compassion, the seeker. Think of Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34), an example of God bringing His herald to those who are at

least open to the idea of God. Consider the Ethiopian Eunuch, who Philip finds and helps to understand the words of Isaiah (Acts 8:26-40).

God's patience and grace are not to be presumed upon; He will eventually hand the rebellious over to their rebellion, the obstinate over to their hard-heartedness. The parables are simply part of God's process of giving sinners what they want: a god in their own image, which eventually eclipses their ability to see the True God.

But the Bible calls people to seek, ask, and knock—saying that if and when we do, a door will be opened (Matthew 7:7-12). It's to those too proud to seek, that the door remains shut. So, friend, if you're in the least bit curious about God and Jesus, that curiosity may be a sign that God's Spirit is opening your heart to truly hear Him. Press in all the more and do so prayerfully.

And this brings us to our second exhortation: yes, we must be careful how we hear the Word of God. But we must also be eager for more of God's revelation through it. Let's now turn to the positive aspect of this parable—that Jesus is sowing God's word, and Jesus is calling people to hear it.

II. Be Eager to Hear: *Parables Bear Fruit*

Notice that the emphasis of Jesus is on *hearing*—he has come, so we can hear, understand, and learn. Jesus opens and closes this parable about the sower with a call to listen or hear: "Listen!" he opens in v.3; "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" he concludes in v.9.

When he then explains the meaning of the parable of the sower in vv. 14-20—explaining that the sower sows the word, and the different soils are different types of hearers—, "hearing" is again the decisive word, appearing in vv. 15, 17, 18, and 20. The theme of hearing continues throughout chapter 4:

And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

And this string of parables is concluded in verse 33 with the summary statement: "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it." Jesus has come to *reveal*—he wants us to hear, see, and come to him.

What, then, does proper hearing require? What form does good hearing take? Let me suggest to you four things.

1. Jesus is the Key

First, Jesus is the key to hearing and understanding God's revelation.

In 1799, a French officer made a significant discovery along the West bank of the Nile River—a town called Rosetta. He discovered an ancient stele (a large stone), divided into three sections from top to bottom, with each section containing a script in a different language. Scholars came to discover that each script said the same thing, but in the respective languages of Egyptian Hieroglyphics (at the top), Demotic script (in the middle), and Greek (at the bottom). The inscriptions were a decree issued in Memphis, Egypt, in 196 BC. It was from this combination of languages all saying the same thing that scholars were able to decode Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics. And the term “Rosetta Stone” is now used to refer to the essential clue that unlocks a new field of knowledge.

Understanding Jesus' person and work is the key—the essential clue—to understanding the parables. Notice in verse 11 that Jesus says to those closest to him, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” Then in verses 14-20, Jesus says he has the authority to explain the meaning of the parables. This means more than having a slight admiration for Jesus. It means coming to put your faith in His person and work. It means understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of the Son of God is the clue that unlocks to us the meaning of life.

- In it, we see **who God is**—because Jesus is God in the flesh (John 1:14).
- In the Gospel, we see **who we are**—sinful and without hope on our own, but forgiven and loved in Christ.
- And in the Gospel, we see **God's purpose for the world**—to bring people to know and worship His Son.

Jesus Christ and his Gospel is the “essential clue” that unlocks, the lens by which all else comes into focus. Every hearing of a parable, apart from hearing it through Christ, is a mishearing. Every parable, heard correctly, points away from us, toward Christ.

2. Head and Heart

Second, proper hearing is a matter not just of the head but of the heart. What we love most shapes what we are able to hear and understand and accept. Notice how in Luke's account of Jesus' explanation of the parable, true hearing is a matter of the heart: Luke writes, "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (8:15).

Hearing the Word of God is not like hearing a math equation, or directions to a restaurant. It's not merely facts. The Word of God conveys *meaning*, meaning about God, us, and life. And therefore, the biggest obstacle to hearing the Word of God—as the Bible notes again and again—is a hard heart.

This brings us to the third insight for good hearing: *prayer*.

3. Pray for a Heart That Can See and Savor Jesus Christ

Pray that your heart would be open to hearing from the Lord:

- A praying heart is a **humble heart**—aware that God loves to draw near to the humble. As Jesus says,

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Matthew 11:25-26).

- A **praying heart depends** on the Father's help in hearing; recalling Jesus' words to Peter when he finally recognized Jesus as the Christ:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:17)³

4. Work Hard at Hearing

Finally, brothers and sisters, let us work at hearing—let us be eager for revelation. Friends, the Sunday sermon is the one time during the week when we are all hearing God’s Word together. I must tell you what a privilege it is to preach God’s Word to such spiritually hungry people. Your appetite has been developed over the decades—under the ministry of John Yates—and I sense it when we open our Bibles on Sundays. We are eager for revelation.

Let us consider, then, the posture we bring to God’s Word on Sundays. Sometimes when I listen to sermons, I get into evaluating mode. But what if the more important point is that in hearing a sermon, God’s Word is evaluating us?

How do you prepare for the sermon on Sunday? You might read the passage several times that week leading up to it. Maybe pray over it; prepare your heart to be open to it. Friends, far more important than who is preaching up here is what is being preached—God’s Word.

What type of hearers are we when we come to that Word? Are we rushed? Are we indifferent? Do we bring to God’s Word self-interests, skepticism, or an ideology to fit it to? Or are we humble, excited, open, and eager?

For nearly three hundred years, since 1732, The Falls Church Anglican has held out the Word of God to this community. Through times of war at home (Revolutionary and Civil) and times of war abroad (WWI, WWII), through times of prosperity and times of great loss (Great Depression; losing our property). By God’s grace, we will continue to do so until the Lord returns.

So again today, the sower has sown the seed. It lies now atop the soil of your heart. Let us all ask, in this generation, *will the Word of God find a place to grow in my heart—in our hearts?* Be careful how you hear the Word of God, for, by your judgment of it, it may be judging you. But be eager for more revelation from the Word of God, for, by its faithful reception, there comes a bounty, “increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold, even a hundredfold” (4:8, 20).

Endnotes

1. J.I. Packer, "Saved by His Precious Blood: An Introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*," *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990, 126.
2. We might also recall the parable that the prophet Nathan tells King David (2 Samuel 12), after the king has taken Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, killed. Nathan tells the story of a poor man who only had one precious lamb. But a rich man, not wanting to waste any of his lambs, takes the poor man's lamb and slaughters it for a meal. The parable plays on David's own vainglory, and soon David burns with rage and wants to punish the rich man. "The man, is you," Nathan replies. Aha, the parable has got him—the parable lured David into condemning himself.
3. A praying heart also understands that saving faith—a heart that not only believes in, but sees Jesus as beautiful—requires an act of Creation within the heart: Paul writes that the truth of the Gospel "is *veiled*—hidden—to those who are perishing," And explains that in order truly to see Jesus, something akin to an act of creation, creation within our hearts, must occur¹: "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:3-6).