

Last time we looked at different responses to Jesus,
and we saw that Mark’s point was to show us
that we cannot look to others to see how we should respond to Jesus.

Instead Mark says that we should listen to Jesus.
Don’t worry about what others think
(Jesus’ own relatives thought that he was nuts),
you are to listen to Jesus:
“whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Now Mark takes us to the next question.
How do you listen to Jesus?

1. The Parable of the Sower (4:1-9)

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.*

2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

3 “Listen! A sower went out to sow.

*4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path,
and the birds came and devoured it.*

*5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil,
and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.*

*6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched,
and since it had no root, it withered away.*

*7 Other seed fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.*

*8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain,
growing up and increasing
and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”*

9 And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Let’s say you’ve never heard Jesus’ own explanation of this?

What is the point of this parable?

He tells a story about a farmer.

Everyone would have been familiar with agriculture.

There is nothing confusing or difficult about what Jesus says.

When you sow your seed,
some of your seed falls on the path and never sprouts;
some of your seed falls on rocks and sprouts, but never takes root;
some of your seed falls on ground that produces thorns—
and it grows into a weak, sickly plant whose grain never ripens.

But hopefully most of your seed falls onto good ground,
and produces a bumper crop.

His hearers no doubt understood that there was some spiritual point to this.
But without the explanation, they were left guessing.

Many people claim that Jesus spoke in parables in order to make things clear.
He told stories, they say, in order to illustrate the truth more clearly.

If that were true, then it is very unfortunate that his disciples
did not learn well from their master!
Because none of the apostles use parables in their teaching!
The epistles contain straightforward teaching and exposition.

But of course, Jesus himself makes it perfectly clear why he speaks in parables.
The parables are designed to make his teaching murky.

Next week Brandon will show us that we are not supposed to be like Jesus in this respect.
While Jesus hides his identity and his teaching,
his disciples are to openly proclaim who he is and what he is doing.

But why does Jesus keep hiding his identity and teaching?
Why is this “messianic secret” so important?

Jesus explains this in terms of Isaiah’s mission.

2. Isaiah 6 and the Messianic Secret (4:10-12)

*10 And when he was alone,
those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.
11 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,
12 so that
“they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.”*

When Isaiah was called and commissioned as a prophet,
Isaiah was called to bring a message of judgment—
a message that he is told up front will be rejected.
Isaiah was to tell the people,
“Keep on hearing, but do not understand!”
God’s purpose was to bring judgment upon Israel,
and so Isaiah is commissioned as God’s instrument
in proclaiming this judgment.

In Isaiah 6, when Isaiah asks “how long?”

The answer is, until the cities lie waste and the LORD exiles his people,
and only a remnant—a holy seed—is left, like a stump in the ground,
after a great tree is chopped down!

In one sense, Isaiah has a task worse than Jonah's.

A generation before, Jonah had been commanded to go to Ninevah
and preach the judgment of God.

He didn't want to go, because he knew that God might relent and have mercy.

But Isaiah is told to preach the judgment of God to Jerusalem,
with the promise that God is not going to relent.

Indeed, he is called to close their eyes.

Jesus now identifies himself with Isaiah's mission.

His purpose is to bring judgment.

Keep hearing, but do not understand!

The reason why Jesus does not want people to understand who he is
is because the Kingdom will only come through the death of the King.

The day will come when the gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed clearly—
but that will only come after the resurrection of Jesus.

Incidentally, that is why the apostles do not use parables!

They want to be understood, so they speak plainly!

But then Jesus explains the parable.

3. The Key to the Parables (4:13-20)

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable?"

How then will you understand all the parables?

Jesus explains that this parable is the key to all the others.

If you understand this one, then you will get the rest.

If you don't understand this one, then you will miss the rest.

And the reason is simple:

if you are good and fertile soil, then the Word will take root in your heart
and bear fruit for God's kingdom.

14 The sower sows the word.

As the word of God is proclaimed,

the seed is sown.

The Word goes forth to all who are within earshot.

But the Word does not have the same effect on all.

Each of you hears it differently.
The same sound waves come to your ears.
You all hear the same words.
But you hear the same words differently.

What effect the Word of God has depends on what sort of soil you are!
Augustine asked this question at the beginning of his sermons on John's gospel:
what kind of soil are you?
How will you hear the word?

Jesus suggests that there are four basic responses to the Word.

*15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown:
when they hear, Satan immediately comes
and takes away the word that is sown in them.*

When the seed falls on the path—
when the word of God falls on a hard heart—
it simply bounces!

Notices that Jesus says that they *have* heard.
The message of the gospel of the Kingdom has registered—
but they do not believe.
They may understand (intellectually) Jesus' message,
but their response is indifference.

So what if Jesus is the King?
What does that have to do with me?
I really don't care!

The birds devour the word —
Satan comes and takes away the word that is sown in them —
and nothing ever comes of it.

Beware of letting the word of God simply bounce off you!

*16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground:
the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.
17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while;
then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word,
immediately they fall away.*

This is perhaps the category we have the most difficult time understanding.
They endure for a while.
But they *fall away*.
Is it really possible for a believer to fall away?

The key to understanding this is found in the analogy:
when a grain of wheat falls on the rocks,
it may in fact sprout and grow for a time.
It may look for a few days or even a few weeks like all the other wheat—
at least, on the surface!
The difference is that it has no root.
(As Jesus puts it in verse 17).

Without roots it has no source of sustenance.
And soon it withers away,
because without roots, you have no connection to the source of life.

Jesus is here explaining the phenomenon that we have all seen too many times—
the phenomenon of temporary faith—
of those who believe only for a while,
and then fall away because they have no root—
they have no vital union with Jesus Christ,
the one true source of spiritual life.

*18 And others are the ones sown among thorns.
They are those who hear the word,
19 but 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.*

The thorny soil are those who also receive the word with joy and believe,
and these do in fact have roots.
Some say that these are true believers—
but true believers who aren't acting like it!
Others say that these are not true believers,
because they prove *unfruitful*.

I'm not sure that Jesus is particularly concerned about whether they are "true" believers.
His point is that they are *not* what believers are supposed to be!
They are not hearing the word of God rightly!

This is where you and I are especially tempted.
God's word has taken root in our lives,
but we are lured away by the cares of the world.
We are so busy with the day-to-day stuff,
that our ears become partly closed.
We do not really hear.

I know that you are busy.
There are many things that compete for your time and energy.
But Jesus warns you that if you allow the cares of the world to choke the Word,

then you will never bear fruit in his kingdom.

What is getting in the way of God's word?
What is interfering with your listening and doing the Word?

Let me ask you a question.

How many hours a week do you spend hearing the word?
(Including your own private reading of the Bible)

Okay, now how many hours a week do you spend listening to other voices?
(TV, radio, internet, movies)

I know that it is not simply a question of quantity.
But quantity is not a bad place to start!

It will tell you something about your priorities!

Whose word are you listening to?

But it is not just the cares of the world.

Second, Jesus says that the word is choked by the deceitfulness of riches.

I know that most of you don't think that you are wealthy.
But even the poorest among us has immense amounts of stuff.

Not so long ago, most people had one nice outfit for Sunday,
and two or three other sets of clothes for working days.

Wealth is so deceitful!

If you make 30,000 a year you think,
"if only we made 40,000 – life would be so much easier"
and if you make 100,000 a year you think,
"if only we made 120,000 – life would be so much easier"

And then we live a lifestyle that puts us on the very upper edge of our income.

And the demands of discipleship "get in the way" of our lifestyle.

We become more interested in our own kingdom—
our own "stuff" –

preferring to spend our time, energy and money
on our lifestyle rather than devoting ourselves to the word of Jesus.

Riches are deceitful.

And also, the word is choked by the desires for "other things"!

What "other things" do you desire?

Notice that Jesus does not say that these are "evil" things.

They are simply “other” things.
They may be good things!

But Jesus warns against desires for “other things.”

We are to desire *one thing*.
We are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.
We are to love the LORD our God with *all* our heart.

Any other desire that does not lead us toward Christ our King is a weed –
a thorn that left unmolested, will choke the word and make us unfruitful!

Chrysostom rightly points out that Jesus does not blame the world or riches.
It is not the world that prevents us from hearing Christ,
“but the care of this world,”
not “riches” but the “deceitfulness of riches.”
“Let us not place the blame on what we possess, but on our own corrupt mind.”

The problem is in us!

How do you know what kind of soil you are?
Well, if you don’t believe the Word of God at all, then you are the path!
And if you fall away, then you are the rocky soil!
And if you are not bearing fruit, then you are the thorny soil.

But we don’t want to be thorny soil!
We don’t want to choke on the cares, riches, and desires of the world.

How can we be *good soil*?

*20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word
and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”*

Jesus says that the good soil are those who,
hear the word and accept it and bear fruit.

Everyone hears the word.
What is different about the good soil comes down to two things:
they accept the word
and they bear fruit

Accepting the word means accepting it for what it is – the word of God.
The word here is only used a few times in the NT:
it has to do with embracing and owning as being one’s own.

Accepting the word means embracing it and owning it
as the pattern for your life.

It means that you look to the Word of God for setting the pattern of your life.

It means that you look around you and you see the thorns for what they are:
you see the cares of the world and you deliberately seek to root them out;
you see the deceitfulness of riches, and so you set your budget priorities
in a way to combat those weeds;
and you understand that the desires for other things – even good things –
cannot be allowed room to grow.

And then bearing fruit means that the Word of God is reproducing itself in you.

After all, what kind of fruit does a seed produce?

If you plant an apple seed,
what sort of fruit will you get?

If you plant a grain of wheat,
you should wind up with wheat as the fruit!

So as you come to know the Word of God,

as the word is planted in you,
the result should be that your life is more and more shaped by the Word,
controlled by the Word,
driven by the Word.

The difference in the yield –

thirty, sixty or hundred fold –
lies in the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

You have no control over the yield –
that is the work of God's Spirit.

But you do have control over what sort of ground you will be!

As Augustine put it:

“Cast away the stones from your field, and dig out the thorns.”
Be diligent to work the soil of your heart.

The reason why this is the key to understand all the parables

is because if you understand this one, then you will be good soil.

You will not only receive the word of God with joy,

but you will accept it – you will own it as the only infallible rule of faith and life,
and therefore you will also put it into practice and bear fruit.