

Mark chapter 4

Vs. 1-34 in this passage the writer of Mark answers some of the questions the early church was struggling with. For example

Is the effort to follow Jesus, live in and proclaim the Kingdom of God worthwhile?

Why does the teaching and preaching of the gospel not bear more fruit?

What difference, if any, does hearing the gospel make?

What do hearing, seeing and understanding mean in this passage and in life?

How do parables work and how are we to receive them?

In Mark chapter 1 Jesus announced the presence of the kingdom of God. This unit is now the first elaboration on what Jesus is saying when he speaks of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is teaching in parables in the first 34 verses of chapter 4. The section is known as Parables by the sea.

There are 3 parables – all about seeds – then Jesus adds a word about parables in general and a cluster of sayings on Light and hearing.

Vs 1-2 introduce the subject and the setting

Vs 3-9 tell the parable of the sower

Vs 10-20 contain Jesus explanation to the disciples

10-12 explanation about parables

13-20 interpretation of the sown seed

Vs 21-25 sayings about light and hearing

Vs 26-29 parable of the seed growing of itself

Vs 30-32 parable of the mustard seed

Vs 33-34 Jesus parabolic teaching

The word parable is used much more broadly in Greek than in English. English distinguishes among parable, allegory and saying.

In the New Testament, “parable” refers to comparisons but also proverbs and riddles.

Parables are open to multiple meanings.

Parables are to invite reflection rather than definition.

Parable of the Sower vs 3-9

Story appears in all 3 synoptic Gospels and as a saying in the Gospel of Thomas

The crowds are gathered on the hillside that runs down to the edge of the sea.

Everyone gathered would be familiar with the process of sowing seed – broadcasting –

The farmer takes seed in his hand from a pouch over his shoulder and then with a rhythmic swing of his arm casts it on the ground in front of him as he walks. Once that is done the farmer then plows the seed under.

The picture painted and the subject discussed are both the Kingdom of God

About parables vs 10-20

In answer to the disciple’s questions about parables, Jesus speaks about how parables function – that is, they inform the members of the believing community and confound those who do not believe. Actually, this statement is not about the purpose of parables but rather describes the contrasting effect of parables for those who hear.

This is another harsh saying of Jesus – though the hardening of hearts is temporary.

In Mark Jesus uses a quotation from Isaiah - God’s call to Isaiah – when answering the disciples.

Vs 13-20 Jesus interprets the parable

1 the seed – the word

2 the birds – Satan

3 4 kinds of soil

The parable points to the problems the early church was experiencing – trouble and persecution, worry, and the world's values.

All 4 vignettes hinge upon the word “hear”

Vs 26-29

The kingdom of God grows in hidden and mysterious ways, independently of human effort. Grow is spoken of as the miraculous work of God and harvest as an outcome that is both gift and miracle.

Vs 30-32 the Mustard Seed

Hope in the Kingdom of God. God will accomplish great results from small beginnings.

The mustard seed like the kingdom is lowly and must have its seed spread.

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