

The Gospel of Mark

Leon L. Combs, M.A., M.Div., Ph.D.

Chapter Four

Mark 4:1-2 NAS77

And He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very great multitude gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. (2) And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching,

I like to imagine sitting on this beach listening to my Lord Jesus teaching to the crowd that includes me. How wonderful and experience that would have been if I had ears to hear His teachings. There was such a crowd that He had to go into a boat out from the shore to speak to them all. He did not have a football stadium seating over 100,000 that many people today go to watch a football game. Watching a football game is only for a very small value compared to the opportunity to listen to the teachings of the Son of God. He also did not have a TV audience to watch and listen to Him as TV preachers today have available. So from that perspective His disciples today can do much more than He did in the context of just the number of people from so many different areas of the world that can be reached by TV and the internet. But still the only lasting value of receiving the teachings of TV ministers and internet sites is if the words being taught are in line with His teachings. So we must let the Holy Spirit teach us now so that we can judge the teachings as to be real knowledge or ear-pleasing words.

It seems that this is the first time that Jesus taught in parables but He continues to do so as He taught them many things in parables. We cannot know exactly when in His ministry this occurred but we see three parables in this chapter. He had taught with parabolic symbolism of salt, light, and house-building but the parable of the sower is His first full parable as agreed by all three evangelists (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). His ministry to the outside world then has changed and it is worthwhile to wonder why He used this alternative method of teaching. At this point in His ministry opposition was becoming more hostile and spreading among the Jews. In the house at Capernaum He forgave sins and was attacked for doing so. In the house of Levi He was criticized for interacting with sinners and for permitting His disciples to neglect the ceremonial fasts. In the cornfields He was criticized for permitting His disciples to pluck ears of corn on a Sabbath. On another Sabbath He healed the man with the withered hand in the synagogue and then the Pharisees and Herodians gathered to determine how to destroy Him. In the house at Capernaum they declared that He had Beelzebub and was doing miracles by the power of demons. Jesus expressed His anger because of the hardness of their hearts and then He began to teach with parables. We will see His explanation to His disciples in verses 10-13.

Mark 4:3-9

"Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; (4) and it came about that as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. (5) "And other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. (6) "And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and

because it had no root, it withered away. (7) "And other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. (8) "And other seeds fell into the good soil and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." (9) And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus tells the crowd to pay close attention in verse 3 and again in verse 9. Both of these warnings imply that the meaning may not be obvious. The application is the rural life of the area as most of the people would have been very familiar with the sowing that was done in a broadcast manner before any plowing. Therefore they would have known the result of seeding in the four different areas. Some people have paraphrased His last statement in verse 9 as "Figure this out for yourself if you can". Surely the four different results would have been easy to understand but not the application to reality.

Mark 4:10-13

*And as soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. (11) And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables, (12) in order that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE; AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND LEST THEY RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN." (13) And He *said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables?"*

Mark records that Jesus had other followers than just the twelve and, when He was alone with them, He then explained his use of parables. In verse 11, the Greek word *mysterion* is used that is translated above as mystery and in some translations as secret. The word only appears here and in the Parallels (Matt 13:11 and Luke 8:10). Paul uses the word frequently in his writings (21 times) and it is also used in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7). The meaning is that here is something that previously was a mystery but now is explained. The parables are for everyone but only those with faith can understand them properly. The quotation is from Isa 6:9-10. Luke gives this matter less attention than Mark and Matthew gives the matter a fuller discussion so we need to look at all three narratives for a good understanding of why Jesus used this method. It seems that the reason is so that only those chosen to receive faith will understand them and this seems a bit calloused to some people. Interpretation really gets to the point of whether or not Jesus came to provide a path of salvation for everyone. A fuller understanding can be had by also looking at sentences 21-25. In verse 11 Jesus tells them plainly that only they are given the mystery of the kingdom of God. Those outside of the group get everything presented to them as parables. Jesus then tells them that the difference in understanding is the difference in the people's relationship to Him. His people will obtain the full meaning but those outside of their group will only receive the mysteries in parable form. Let's look at the fuller explanation of Matthew:

Matt 13:11-17 NAS77 And He answered and said to them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. (12) "For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. (13) "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they

do not hear, nor do they understand. (14) "And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; (15) FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I SHOULD HEAL THEM.' (16) "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. (17) "For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The people who do not understand His teachings are those who have chosen to not have any changes in their understandings. They think so highly of their own knowledge that they resist making any changing in their thought processes. They bring to the table so much of their preunderstanding that they cannot understand any concepts that challenge those false foundations. They are like someone building his structure on shifting sand rather than on a firm foundation:

Luke 6:47-49 NAS77 "Everyone who comes to Me, and hears My words, and acts upon them, I will show you whom he is like: (48) he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation upon the rock; and when a flood rose, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. (49) "But the one who has heard, and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house upon the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great."

Matthew elaborates the statement of Jesus by writing that those who have the ability to understand the parables will be given even more spiritual attributes but those who do not have this ability they will lose what they think they have since it was obtained without spiritual assistance in faith. Many prophets and righteous men prior to the coming of Jesus have only known that such miracles exist but they were not revealed until the advent of the Son of God. This teaching of the necessity of being spiritually born to understand spiritual concepts was also taught by Paul: *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.* (1 Cor 2:14) Jesus used the parables to entice men to want to understand it and that desire would be rewarded with insight by faith. Those who reject Jesus would then not be drawn to wanting to understand His teaching.

Mark 4:14-20

"The sower sows the word. (15) "And these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. (16) "And in a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; (17) and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. (18) "And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, (19) and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and

it becomes unfruitful. (20) "And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

Jesus then clearly explains the parable to His disciples. The parable has its focus on the sowing but the interpretation has its focus on the reception of the seeds. The sower is the Lord and the word is the message of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 13:19). There are four categories of soil discussed by Jesus and only one of them results in bearing fruit, or being admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven. The **first** type results in Satan coming and taking away the word that was sown in them so these would represent people who did not accept the word as truth to which they would be dedicated. The **second** type of people (as represented by the soil) is those who initially accept the word with great joy. However these people do not have the word as the dedicated principle of life for them in the world and so when persecution and affliction comes on them because of the word they immediately fall away. John also wrote of such people: *"They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us."* (1 John 2:19) The **third** type of soil represents people who hear the word but the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter into their thoughts and choke the word so that it does not bear fruit. These people were never born again but may initially seem like believers but when they begin to compare their other priorities to the word their other priorities take over and they do not love Jesus more than anything else. The riches of the world can appear to provide comfort and security and they place their priorities on anything other than the world. This category reminds me of: *"And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared? So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."* (Luke 12:19-21) It is only the **fourth** category that results in salvation. The key to this type of planting is that the "soil" hears the word and accepts it. If a person only has head knowledge of the gospel it will not transform the person into a child of God. The word must be applied to all areas of a person's life so that he will no longer be conformed to the world: *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Rom 12:2) If the percentages are taken to be literal then only 25% of people hearing the word of God are actually regenerated and transformed into children of God. A well-known evangelist said that 75% of people in a given congregation are actually Christians and we see that these predictions match.

Mark 4:21-23

And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a peck-measure, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? (22) "For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light. (23) "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."

This parable is also discussed in Matt 5:15-16 and Luke 8:16-17. The purpose of the lamp is to bring light into the world and John declares that Jesus is the light of the world:

John 1:4 NAS77 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

John 1:9-11 NAS77 There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. Jesus then came into the world as the light that was to enlighten every man about the Kingdom of Heaven but even the Jews (His own) did not receive Him. So even though not everyone who hears the words of Jesus will believe them and become citizens of Heaven, this light must be given to the whole world. Thus the way into the Kingdom of Heaven is no longer a mystery and it now becomes light. Jesus then says again that let those who have ears to hear, let him hear. So only those with faith will understand and apply the words to their entire being. Some of the secrets of God were originally hidden but now are being revealed. Some of the secrets of God were meant to be revealed in the light of Jesus Christ. We have been living in that light for 2000 years and then will live in that light forever. Praise God!

Mark 4:24-25

And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given you besides. (25) "For whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

Jesus then tells us to be careful about what we listen. We are to judge everything we spend time on by the Word of God and the more we tune our spiritual perception the more spiritual truths we will receive. But for those who do not dedicate themselves to the Word of God what they have will be taken away from them. This reminds me of the rewards that Christians will receive that is based upon the foundation on which they build:

- 1Cor 3:11-15 NAS77 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (12) Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, (13) each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. (14) If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. (15) If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.
- 2Cor 5:10 NAS77 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Mark 4:26-29

And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; (27) and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows--how, he himself does not know. (28) "The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. (29) "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

This parable is only recorded by Mark. The emphasis is not only on the soil but on the power of the seed to interact with the soil and produce the harvest. This parable is about the growth of the Kingdom of God. Its growth does not depend upon man understanding how it functions for God

has foreordained that it will grow and produce a great harvest of souls. Paul also discussed this growth:

1Cor 3:5-9 NAS77 What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. (6) I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. (7) So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. (8) Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (9) For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

The message is that God is responsible for the growth and all we have to do is to spread the word.

Mark 4:30-34

And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? (31) "It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, (32) yet when it is sown, grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE." (33) And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it; (34) and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

This parable has been wrongly interpreted by many people over the years. The mustard seed is indeed a small seed but it grows into a shrub, not a tree. If Jesus had wanted to present a parable showing the growth of the church into a mighty force in the world he could have used for a seed the acorn growing into a mighty oak tree or a cedar seed growing into the mighty trees of Lebanon. Everyone listening to this parable would have understood that this parable is not about the healthy growth of something from a seed but would have understood that the growth is actually grotesque. We have also seen from the first parable that the birds represent the evil one and certainly the analogy continues as He stated in His explanation of the first parable. Birds often are used as symbols of evil or punishment in Old Testament verses as when Jeremiah was lamenting about the lack of faithfulness of Judah as they prospered worldly but not before God: *"Like a cage full of birds, So their houses are full of deceit; Therefore they have become great and rich."* (Jer 5:27) Ezekiel used the same analogy in declaring God's prophecy of destruction of Pharaoh: *"And I will leave you on the land; I will cast you on the open field. And I will cause all the birds of the heavens to dwell on you, And I will satisfy the beasts of the whole earth with you."* (Ezek 32:4) John told of the destruction of the beast his armies with the vision of carnivorous birds having their fill of their flesh: *Rev 19:21 "And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh."* (Rev 19:21)

Certainly the visible church has grown tremendously from the small home churches to huge congregations throughout the world. From the beginning the church has been attacked by Satan and his disciples. Paul described such evil attacks in his time on earth and church history reveals many such attacks over the two thousand years since his time. The Reformation fueled by Martin Luther yielded some wonderful corrections to severe church errors. But in the last

hundred years we have seen the visible church invaded by worldly doctrines such as the promise of worldly success, Biblical sin as acceptable lifestyles for Christians, etc. This invasion of the world into the church gave birth to the secular church or one ruled by the world's standards. In yesterday's Atlanta Constitution I read about a church and a former Presbyterian pastor bragging about how Muslims, Christians, Jews, etc. all worship the same God and how the church should welcome people practicing sins condemned by the Bible. This is not the goal Jesus prayed for when He prayed that we would all be one (John 17:21).

Recent Pew polls show that only 56% of Americans say that religion is very important in their lives and only 29% attend religious services at least once a week. Sadly 70% say that many religions lead to eternal life, only 60% believe in a personal God and 25% say that God is an impersonal force. Only 40% of politically conservative Americans say that they pray daily. Only 40% say that they see a tension between religion and modern society and only 40% say that the homosexual lifestyle should be discouraged by society. The percent of Americans who are unaffiliated with religion now is 16% even though only 6% say that they were not affiliated as a child. In reading these numbers we must know that "religion" includes Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. Secularism has definitely invaded the religions of America although not yet to the extent that it has in Europe. The fundamental principle of Secularism is that, in his whole conduct, man should be guided exclusively by considerations derived from the present life itself with no reliance upon any religious considerations. But we must know also that Christianity is not a religion in the sense that all one has to do to belong to a religion is to learn its rules and language and actively follow its standards. One becomes a Christian by being born again into the family of God. We then obey God's commands because we are His children and we love Him. Although the visible church has grown considerably in two thousand years the invisible church is rapidly shrinking as judged by the actions and attitudes of the members. **The birds are active in the branches.**

Mark 4:35-41

*And on that day, when evening had come, He *said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." (36) And leaving the multitude, they *took Him along with them, just as He was, in the boat; and other boats were with Him. (37) And there *arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. (38) And He Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they *awoke Him and *said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (39) And being aroused, He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. (40) And He said to them, "Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?" (41) And they became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"*

Because of the number of details reported, this is certainly written by an eyewitness. There is no reason given for the discussion of Jesus to go to the other side of the lake. Perhaps Jesus was tired after teaching the great number of people from the boat and He needed some rest. Saying that they took Jesus "just as He was" means that He did not leave the boat before the trip. We are

not told what happened to the other boats. They may have been occupied by some of the people to whom He was teaching and they turned back when the storm arose. The Lake of Galilee is situated in a basin surrounded by mountains and so is subject to sudden strong winds sweeping down from the mountains. The wind was so strong that water was being swept into the boat and was thus presenting a terrifying situation for the people in the boat. However Jesus was in the stern sound asleep on a cushion. This is the only place in the gospel where Jesus is described as sleeping. Jesus was presenting an unusual calm by sleeping in such a violent storm that the disciples rebuked Him for not helping them when they viewed the situation as very dangerous. Matthew and Luke do not report this rebuke and it shows that they did not understand Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Surely this event was planned as another illustration to them of the control of Jesus over all creation: "*He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.*" (Col 1:17)

Only Mark records these exact words of Jesus as He rebuked the wind and told the sea to hush and be still. Of course the wind and sea obeyed Him and surely they would have all been awed by this exhibition of control over the forces of nature. Jesus then rebuked His disciples for not using their faith that they had been given. He rebukes them several times for their lack of understanding and faith (7:18; 8:17-18, 21, 32-33; 9:19). The disciples then demonstrate fear because of the revelation of such power over the forces of nature. They then discuss among themselves as to exactly who is this man they have been following. The early church must have been vastly assured when they read this account as they were undergoing great persecution and it encouraged them to know of this demonstration by their Lord.