

# Mark 4:1-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Mark chapter 4 verses 1 to 34 And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable?

How then will you understand all the parables?

The word, 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. 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. 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?

[ 2 : 22 ] 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 he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear.

With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given. And from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

And he said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and it rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

And he said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God? What parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.

[ 3 : 23 ] Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. In Mark chapter 4 we move into Jesus' use of parables. Once again he is surrounded by a large crowd, as he has been in the previous chapters.

He goes out onto the sea on a boat, and teaches them on the land, from the boat. The fact that each of the Gospels see fit to tell us where Jesus was teaching from, suggests that maybe it is an interesting and important detail to note.

Each one of them think it is important enough to register within their account. Why is that the case? Perhaps because the sea more generally is associated with the symbolism of the Gentiles.

As Jesus goes out on the boat, onto the sea, just a bit out from the land, it is like a bit of Israel going out upon the sea of the Gentiles, and addressing the Jewish crowd from that position. The parable of the sower contains four different types of soil, with different responses to the seed that is sown in them.

[ 4 : 35 ]     Seed along the path, consumed by the birds. Seed on the rocky ground, without much soil and scorched by the sun. Seed among thorns, choked by the thorns. Seed on good ground, producing 30, 60 or 100 fold.

Jesus then explains his use of parables. The kingdom of God is a secret known only by those to whom it is given. This is to fulfil the judgment spoken of by Isaiah, in a passage that is very prominent within the New Testament.

Isaiah chapter 6. And this passage speaks of the catastrophic judgment of the people. Their hardening so that they will not hear, they will not perceive the message that the prophet has been given to bring to them.

However, there will be a remnant. And at the very end of chapter 6, Isaiah's commission moves into a statement about how the people will be restored. Keep on hearing, but do not understand.

Keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

[ 5 : 33 ]     Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste, without inhabitant, and houses without people. And the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

Jesus' reference to Isaiah's commission, at the end of which there is that reference to the holy seed, I think provides us with some basis and background for understanding the parable of the sower, where it is coming from.

The passage speaks of the catastrophic judgment of the people, their removal from the land, but there will be a remnant, and those will be the seed that will be sowed in the land. God sows his people in the land in the return from exile.

This is language that we find on several occasions within the Old Testament. In places like Isaiah chapter 61, verse 11, For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

[ 6 : 42 ]     In Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 27, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast.

Ezekiel chapter 36, verse 9, For behold, I am with you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. And Hosea chapter 2, verse 23, And I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will have mercy on no mercy.

And I will say to not my people, you are my people. And he shall say, you are my God. Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like. God is sowing the seed in the land.

He's restoring the people from exile. He's restoring his presence to them. He's overcoming, in part, the judgment spoken of by Isaiah. But even in this situation, there is that hardening of the people.

And so Jesus is explaining why, even as God is restoring his people, sowing the land with that seed, there are people who are not responding in the proper way. That seed that's being sown is producing different responses.

[ 7 : 48 ]     This frames Jesus' own ministry as God's sowing of the land. His word is being sown among the people and producing fruit of persons who either respond, and in some cases, people who reject that word.

Jesus is the one who's bringing about the fulfilment of these Old Testament prophecies, and the awaited kingdom of God is happening in their midst. But it's not happening in the way that they might have expected.

Jesus teaches that a lamp is not brought in to be hidden. He has not come to the scene in order to hide his identity forever. It will be revealed. Things secret are to be brought to light, and things hidden to be made known.

And people must act accordingly. Actions right now, the measure that people use with others, has consequences in the future. Those who perceive the message of the kingdom now will be blessed with more later, whereas those who reject it and are darkened and hardened will lose even what they currently have.

The parable of the growing seed is the only parable in Mark not found in either Matthew or Luke, and there are many questions about what is the actual focus of the parable. Is it the secrecy of the seed's growth?

[ 8 : 56 ] Is it the man who scattered the seed? Is it the harvest? Like the parables that surround it, the parable of the growing seed seems to address the question of why things are as they are if the kingdom is present.

The growth of the kingdom occurs without human intervention. And there seems to be an allusion in the reference to the harvest to Joel chapter 3 verse 13. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. The harvest is certain, but the growth is largely hidden, and it occurs apart from human involvement.

It is God's kingdom, and God establishes its process. And the person who's waiting for the kingdom must trust and be patient. In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background.

I think here, particularly, the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17, concerning the two eagles and the vine. What Jesus says about the mustard seed does not fit with the actual reality of the mustard seed.

[ 9 : 59 ] But the expectation that it should do seems to arise from the mistaken notion that Jesus is just giving an illustration from nature. He isn't doing that. The whole point is that the mustard tree is not a grand tree, and yet it's described as becoming very grand.

We are to recognize that this isn't a natural situation. Daniel 4 is also about a tree in which the birds take refuge. Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom and his empire and what he represents.

However, this mustard seed, against all appearances, is going to be one that outgrows all the great trees of the nations. Although Israel may seem small, although the kingdom may seem weak and insignificant, it will become more important and extensive than all of the great empires that had led to that day.

The Babylonians, the Medians, or the Greeks, saw the Romans. It was going to span the whole world, and yet it would rise from the smallest seed of all, a seed altogether without natural promise, and it would be that seed from which the kingdom would grow.

Perhaps we should also think about the stone that becomes a great mountain in Daniel chapter 2. A question to consider. Reading these parables of growth, how should we think about the growth of the church relative to the sorts of growth that the world tends to put its store in?

[ 11 : 21 ] What encouragement, what challenge can we draw from these parables for our own experience and view of the world?