

# An Inappropriate Reception of the Word

Mark 4:1-20

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## Introduction

Today in our sermon series from Mark's gospel, we have come to chapter 4 where Jesus tells parables about the kingdom of God.

- These parables speak of the growth of the kingdom—of those who enter the kingdom of righteousness that Jesus came to establish on earth.
- The first parable we come to, and the one we will be looking at today, is the parable of the sower.
  - It is one of the best known of the parables, perhaps for several reasons.
    - First, because it appears in three of the four gospels.
    - Second, because it also includes, in each account, a complete interpretation given to us by Jesus Himself.
    - Third, because it contains an explanation by Jesus (that many find hard to accept) of His reasons for speaking in parables.
    - And finally, because there is, in each account, an indication that this parable is of special importance.
      - For example, in Mark, He says (in verse 13): **“Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”**

Since this parable stands out as of special importance, and since it is packed with so much useful material, I have decided to spend two weeks on it.

- This week, we will look at an overview of the whole passage, touching on the parable, but also looking at what Jesus says about His reasons for using parables and how it all relates to us...
- And then next week, Lord willing, I will look more closely at the parable itself and the four responses to the word that it describes.

Please listen now as I read this passage to you... Mark 4:1-20.

- Pay careful attention because this is the Word which God has graciously provided to us as His people.

**Mark 4:1-20:** And again He began to teach by the sea. And a great multitude was gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat *in it* on the sea; and the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. <sup>2</sup> Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: <sup>3</sup> “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much

earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. <sup>7</sup> And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. <sup>8</sup> But other *seed* fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.” <sup>9</sup> And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” <sup>10</sup> But when He was alone, those

around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. <sup>11</sup> And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, <sup>12</sup> so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and *their* sins be forgiven them.’ ” <sup>13</sup> And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their

hearts. <sup>16</sup> These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; <sup>17</sup> and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. <sup>18</sup> Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept *it*, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His holy word.

Jesus makes it clear that this parable is about the word of God and people’s reception (or lack of reception) of it.

- The *word of God* is, of course, God’s special revelation to us that comes through His prophets and apostles.
  - God is certainly revealed through His works of creation and providence... what is sometimes called His general revelation (because everyone has this revelation).
    - If we were not defiant and twisted in our minds by sin, we would all be able to see God’s eternal power and divine nature through creation.
    - Our rebellion and blindness is exposed by the absurd narratives we come up with to try to explain where we and our world came from—apart from the only real explanation—that we were created by God.
  - But when Jesus speaks of the word in this parable, He is not referring to the general revelation of God through creation.
    - He is referring to the things that God has revealed to us that we could not know apart from His speaking, His special revelation—in particular the way of salvation.
    - You can look at the moon and the stars, and the land and the sea, at all the creatures and their incredible design, at the human body and know of God’s eternal power and divine nature,
      - but you cannot look at these and know that He sent His Son to come in human flesh and die on the cross to atone for sin, or that God has promised that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life with a resurrected body in a new heavens and a new earth.
    - You can’t even know that if you know that Jesus came, did miracles, died on a cross, rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven...
      - He could have done all of that before your very eyes, but if God had not revealed to us the reason that He did it and the salvation that comes to those who believe, we would have no way to know these things.

- In verse 11, Jesus calls the revelation of these things **the mystery of the kingdom of God**.
  - The word **mystery**, as it is used in the Bible, does not mean that it is something mysterious that clever people have to figure out...
    - A mystery is rather the name given to something that can only be known if it is told to us by God.
- That's the reason that God's word is so important for everyone to hear.
  - Without it, we cannot know or experience God's salvation.
  - Not one of us deserves to hear it any more than we deserve to be saved.
  - And not everyone has the privilege of hearing it, but those who receive it are called to proclaim it all over the world—
    - And everyone who is exposed to it ought to welcome it with great joy and gladness!

Let's take some time to consider how the word ought to be received...

**I. The only appropriate response to the word of God is to receive it with faith and love. After all, it reveals God's gracious way of salvation!**

A. Here you have God speaking words of salvation to a world that has rebelled against Him and has fallen under His wrath and curse.

1. We know that we are estranged from our Maker.
  - a. We have rebelled against Him as a whole human race.
    - He is our Creator, and we do not worship Him as we ought.
    - We are His creatures, and yet we live contrary to our own consciences and we know that we do unless we have so resisted the truth that we are in utter darkness.
  - b. And not only have we rebelled against Him, we can also see His displeasure with us.
    - There are storms, sicknesses, shortages, birth defects, and above all, death.
    - There are fears and there is despair and there is guilt that we try to deny.
2. But since the fall of man into sin, there has been the word.
  - It is the word of life, the word of grace, the word of promise...
  - It is the word of salvation that tells us the way of acceptance with God...
  - It is a message of redemption that brings forgiveness and restoration from His gracious hand when it is believed.

TRANS> How eager the world should have been to receive and pass along this word!

B. A warm response to the word is even more to be expected from God's covenant people to whom the word has been especially spoken.

1. For 2000 years before Christ came, God singled out Israel to receive His word.
  - a. He had graciously revealed His word of promised redemption to Adam and Eve after the rebellion...
    - He promised that He would raise up from the woman a Son, and with this Son a people who would no longer follow Satan in his rebellion.
    - Nevertheless, all but one family in each generation drifted away from the word until God at last sent the great flood to wipe them out, sparing only Noah, who believed the word of promise, and his household.

- b. But then about 500 years after that, God graciously called Abram, whom He named Abraham, singling him and his posterity out as those who would bring forth the Son of promise, and as those who would receive the word of promise for the next 2000 years until the Son God promised (Jesus Christ) came.
    - These people, this family that became a nation, was later called *Israel*.
    - Over those two thousand years, God had to continually send prophets to them to call them back to Himself and to renew their hope in the promise that they continually drifted away from.
    - And not only that, but with these prophets, He had to send chastisements upon His people, which the prophets announced to them as coming from the hand of God to humble them and bring them to repentance that they might return to God.
      - The other nations were left to go their own way at that time, which meant that all of them departed from the true and living God.
      - In His dealings with Israel, we see how much God has to do to maintain a people for Himself.
        - Without relentless effort on His part, sending one prophet after another, Israel would have departed the way the other nations did.
        - God was under no obligation to do this for Israel or for any other sinful nation—it was all an act of mercy for those who deserved to be utterly cut off.
    - But God was faithful through all those years to maintain Israel as His people and preserve His word within them.
  - c. So what would we expect of them when the Son of promise came, preaching the word of the gospel to them?
    - You would certainly expect that Israel would have gladly welcomed the word. That certainly should have been their response!
      - For 2000 years God had been preparing them for Christ's coming.
      - For 2000 years the promise had been kept alive among them.
    - You would especially expect them to rejoice when they saw how God fulfilled the promise...after Jesus died and rose again.
      - Surely they would be overcome with gratitude and amazement when they saw the mystery revealed—that God's redemptive mercy to them came by making His only Son to be the Lamb of God...
        - to come in human flesh and to bear the curse for them by shedding His blood on the cross.
        - Such a thing was beyond their wildest dreams—to think that God would do such a thing for them—for sinners like them!
      - When they saw what God had prepared for them, surely they would gladly receive the word!
2. And you would think the same for the people who are in the church today.
- People like the nations from which many of us come who heard the word of God (the gospel) and received the salvation of God...
    - People among whom God preserved His word, in some cases for centuries.

TRANS> The only appropriate response for us and for Israel always was and still is to welcome that word of redemptive grace...

- to believe and receive it that we might obtain salvation in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

## II. **But in our text we see that Jesus speaks of a shocking, wicked indifference to the Word that will be prevalent in His kingdom (and indeed it has).**

A. He reveals this wicked indifference to the word in the parable of the sower.

- It is not so much an observation of what was happening at the time, but of how the word would be received even after Jesus rose from the dead.
  - Universal acceptance would be expected in Israel, but instead there was widespread indifference to the word.
  - Let's look briefly at what Jesus says in the parable...
- 1. There were those who received the word by the wayside, described in verse 15: **“And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.”**
  - Think of it.
  - The gracious word of eternal salvation is being proclaimed among them, but they can't be bothered to investigate.
    - They never even get the fact that Jesus, the very Son of God, has become the Lamb of God to die for their sins.
    - They may have heard of His crucifixion and His resurrection, but they never bother to learn what it is all about.
      - Some of them may even sit in churches where this is spoken and they may even recite the creed, but they never bother to find out what it is really all about.
    - If you have done much witnessing at all, you will know how many people there are who have been to church all their lives,
      - who have even been baptised, who know that Jesus died and rose, but who have no idea that He was punished for His people's sins so that all who believe might be pardoned.
- 2. Then there are those on the stony ground who go a step further than that.
  - Jesus describes them in verse 16-17: **“These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; 17 and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble.”**
  - Their initial response is what you would expect of all—they hear the word and they receive it with gladness—they understand it.
  - But these are so shallow.
    - They so undervalue what Jesus has done that as soon as they meet with some trouble because of the word, they are finished with Christ.
      - They find it unacceptable that those who follow Him would not be respected in this world and protected, so they turn from Him in bitterness.
    - Imagine it!
      - They forsake eternal life, reconciliation with God, to avoid some persecution.
        - What perverted judgment they have!

3. And then there are those sown in the thorny ground—among the weeds.
  - They go a step beyond the stony ground hearers—
    - They not only take root, they remain rooted as those who profess—but they have no fruit...
    - Of them, Jesus says (verse 18-19): **“Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”**
  - This is the sad account of those who profess and stay in the church until they die, but never truly receive life.
    - To use the picture from John 15, they are the branches that are cut off from Christ the vine on the day of judgment and cast into the fire.
      - They are the ones to whom Jesus says, “Depart from Me, for I never knew you.”
    - Like the stony ground hearers, they also undervalue the word of God—not so as to be offended by it and walk away, but so as to never truly embrace the Saviour because their heart was never really in it.
      - They are not born from above—
        - Though they are in the church, their treasure is not in the things above, but in the things of earth.
        - They too are superficial.
4. But, thankfully, there are some who truly do receive the word unto life—in the way that everyone would be expected to receive it... with true belief.
  - Jesus speaks of them in verse 20: **“But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”**
    - This is an incredible fruitfulness... even a 30-fold is a great harvest.
  - By obtaining life through faith in Jesus, they also produce fruit.
    - These are they that enjoy eternal life, both now and in glory.
    - They truly receive and rest upon Christ alone for their salvation.

TRANS> Again, we will look at these four responses in more detail next week.

- But consider how shocking it is that so many who hear of Christ do not hear in a way that saves them.
    - Jesus tells this parable so that no one will be surprised either by Israel’s rejection or by the rejection of those who are in the church in subsequent years.
    - Wide-scale apostasy should not make us doubt the veracity of God’s word.
      - His word is just as marvellous and just as true and just as powerful whether the people who are outwardly called truly receive it or not.
  - So you see how, in the parable of the sower, we are taught to expect this rejection of the word. But that is not the only way we are shown about this rejection in our text.
- B. We are also shown to expect rejection by the actual response of the multitude to Jesus when He first told this parable. They are a model for us of what to expect.
1. It is quite simple—consider it...there was a great multitude who heard Jesus speak this parable.

- Verse 1 says that there was a great multitude that came to Him by the sea so that He got into a boat and preached to them from the water.
    - A natural amphitheatre has been found in this area around a bay from which thousands could hear a preacher who was out on the water.
  - So there was a great multitude that heard Him speak this parable,
    - But there was almost no one who understood it... not even among His closest followers...
      - We know that they didn't because as soon as He was alone with (as it says in verse 10) **those around Him with the twelve**, they ask Him to explain the parable.
    - Apparently no one else bothered to ask Him about the parable.
2. This is symptomatic of the problem of indifference to the word.
- Most don't care to look beyond the surface of things they hear preached.
    - There is a nice story, a nice illustration... but they have no idea what the illustration was about.
    - They are content to be there and to hear a sermon, but they do nothing more to gain a true understanding.
  - And even among those that go a little farther and do come to understand, there are many that don't take the time to consider the value of what they have heard.
    - They do not consider how the word applies to them—they don't look at the Saviour and consider what He has done. They do not take time to delight in it, or to embrace Jesus with love and true faith...
    - So many professing Christians have never received the love of the truth and will perish.

TRANS> What a sad response to a glorious gospel!

C. Jesus tells us that such a response to the word is a judgment from God.

1. The ability to embrace the word... the mystery of the kingdom... is a gift of God's grace.
  - a. In verse 11 Jesus says to those who come to ask Him about the parable: **"To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God..."**
    - Truly hearing the gospel so as to believe is a marvellous work of God's grace in our stubborn hearts—so radical that it is called being born of God's Spirit, with the result that we are new creations in Christ.
    - The only ones who believe are those to whom it has been given.
  - b. Left to ourselves, we do not receive the word—the **natural man does not receive the things of the spirit of God for they are foolishness to him...** the glorious gospel is to him not of much importance.
    - Jesus calls them the ones who are outside... adding in verse 11, **but to those who are outside, all things come in parables...**
      - By saying, "all things come in parables," Jesus means that they don't understand—they only hear the story, but they do not learn the meaning.

- The gospel itself remains a parable to them—the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is a true story (and they may believe it), but it does not change them or give them eternal life.
  - They may like the parable, or the story of the cross for that matter; they may tell it to others and read it to their children; but for them the way the story saves is still a mystery that is not revealed... the story of the cross does not lead them to trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.
- 2. Jesus shows that their inability to embrace the gospel in a saving way is because of God’s judgment of them.
  - In verse 12, He quotes Isaiah, to explain what the result is of all things coming in parables to them: **“So that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn, and *their* sins be forgiven them.’”**
  - God has consigned them to judgment for rejecting His word for so long... for them, hearing the word will just make them more and more blind.
    - Sometimes, God will even give them preachers who are blind and who soothe them in their unbelief and even confirm them in it.
      - For example these preachers will teach that God did not really create the world in six days, and that Jonah could not really have been swallowed by a great fish, and that God accepts people from other religions.
  - The Bible tells us repeatedly that blindness is a punishment.
    - It is a punishment for those like Israel or like the nations after them that have been called by God, but have become cold to the gospel.
    - After a while, the LORD sends blindness to them so that **seeing they may see and not perceive...** they can tell the story of Jesus, but they don’t get it...so that **hearing they may hear and not understand.**
      - God does not intend to forgive them.
      - He has turned them over to walk in their own way as a punishment.
      - He has mercy on whom He will, and whom He will He hardens.
  - Paul explains in Romans 11:7-8: **Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: “God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day.”**
    - Some are in the privileged place of hearing the gospel, but God blinds others lest they should turn and their sins be forgiven them.
    - There is no cause for complaint—no one deserves to hear, much less to be transformed by grace to believe.

TRANS> So you see how Mark 4:1-20 teaches us much about the inappropriate reception that many covenant people have to the word of God.

### III. What should you take away from this passage? How should you respond to it?

A. First, don’t be surprised when you see a cold reception to the gospel.

1. Jesus is telling us about this so that we will not stumble when we see it.
  - Some rejected the gospel in Israel because the leaders of Israel rejected it.
    - They said, “Have the elders believed?”



- And in our day, there are those who reject it because of hypocritical ministers...the ministers question parts of the word and people follow them.
  - They devalue the gospel because their ministers devalue it.
- You should not be surprised when you see this because Christ told us in this parable that it would be so.
- 2. But you should not cease to be anything but horrified by the very idea that such a glorious gospel should be rejected by those who are outwardly called.
  - It is a horrible thing and its horror needs to be seen.
  - Not that you should be proud, but rather humbled inasmuch as even if you believe to salvation, you know that it is only by the grace of God.
    - You know your own heart—
      - You know that without the grace of God, you would have rejected the gospel too.
      - You can see far too much indifference to such a glorious gospel in your own heart, can you not?
        - Consider how outrageous and wicked this is.
- B. Second, make sure that you are not among those who are indifferent to the word.
  - Engage with the word, inquire into the word, seek the word, ask God to give you light from His word.
  - Welcome the word so that you receive Christ and rejoice in His salvation.
    - What a gracious Saviour He is—that He should even bear the cross for us!
      - This is not something to be indifferent about.
      - He is not someone to be indifferent about.
    - Inasmuch as you have been indifferent, repent in sackcloth and ashes!
      - Plead with the Lord to give you an appropriate love for the gospel.
- C. Third, weep over those who are indifferent to the word.
  - Take time to consider their condition.
    - If they do not repent, they will perish.
    - They are where you would be without the grace of God.
  - Consider Paul’s example. He wept over his brothers in Israel and cried out to God night and day that they might be saved...
    - He even told God that he would be cursed if they might be saved.
  - Do not become smug and proud—“I have believed and these haven’t,”—or you may find in yourself “an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God...”
    - You might prove to be nothing more than a superficial hearer yourself.
- D. Be humbled by a text like this, and be filled with thanksgiving if you have been brought to the Saviour.
  - Be humbled not only because the word shows you what Christ had to do because of your sin,
    - but also because the word shows you what God the Spirit had to do in order that you would believe.
  - Be thankful that He changed your heart, and be thankful that there should even be salvation for us—especially at the cost of God’s only Son.