
The Parables (& perils) of the Kingdom

Mark 4:1-34

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Attention follows interest—like a child at Christmas time, or a bridegroom catching first sight of his bride, as a witness of a night sky overtaken by a cloudless full moon—rapt attention latches upon heart interest—as a Star Wars fan views *The Force Awakens* with unblinking devotion, or as one coming in from the outdoors to an open oven door featuring a butter-basted turkey 30 minutes before Thanksgiving dinner, or as a student when learning is so fascinating that it simply carries us with it—Attention follows interest.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we had captivated attention upon the Bible like this? Wouldn't it be pleasing to have a mesmerized interest in Jesus that creates an absorbed attention upon Jesus? For many in the room this morning it's a heart cry. And yet, my and large this is not our experience between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. The warzone in which the church lives is occupied by difficult distractions, delightful diversions and deceiving demons. Our attention span is short and our interests are divided and we hear Jesus today say, "pay attention to what you hear".

This morning's message continues our series in the Gospel According to Mark. We heard last week that the growing crowds were surrounding Jesus. But this was no evidence that everyone who was around Jesus wanted Jesus? There were mixed responses to Jesus. Were the crowds paying attention to Him or attending with interest to something else – something far less than Jesus himself?

In Mark 4:1-34, Jesus teaches the crowds about the character of the kingdom of God. He talks about how God has taken the initiative to come down to earth and invade it like a seed entering the ground. The Coming One God has sent to be among the people (1:7, 14-15); the long awaited Messiah—the king who will reign as God over His people and His creation. This coming one is none other than Jesus the Christ who rules over his people by holding sway over their interests evidenced by how they listen to Him. The king has come. His people are interested in obeying Him. Behold the kingdom of God.

But there is a problem. Jesus does not fit the Jews expectations of the Messiah. Political power he does not express. He is not impressive. He is not kingly. His regal power and majestic presence were hidden at first sight. He came to earth somewhat like a secret that can only be heard if you get close—really close— and listen to Him.

In this passage, Jesus teaches three parables on the secret of the kingdom of God. We will only have time this morning to expound one of the three parables. But the one on which we will focus is key to all the other parables (cf. 4:13). The theme for today is easy to detect. Repetition tells us this theme using words like "listen" in v3, "let him hear" in v9, "hears the word and accepts it" in v20, "let him hear" in v23, and "pay attention to what you hear" in v24. Paying attention to Jesus and His Word are central to understanding what is going on in this chapter.

The message for today may be summarized in this way: *Pay attention to the parables of the kingdom because there are perils outside the kingdom.*

Listen for this message as I read for us the entire passage – Mark 4:1-34.

The Parable of the soils

v.1-9

In v.1-2 we come to the setting of the parables. The crowds are gathering around Jesus. Jesus will tell them in a parable the importance of hearing and accepting God's Word (and the danger if you don't).

In v.3-9 we have Jesus using a common experience of his day to communicate something of His kingdom. We have a farmer sowing seed. We have four types of soils on which the seed fell. We have a variety of results with respect to the seed. And then we have Jesus ending his parable with the statement, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (9) What did He mean by that? Is there a hearing that does not hear; a seeing that doesn’t see? Can people hear words and yet not listen to them? What is necessary for hearing and understanding the parables?

The Purpose of the parables

v.10-12

In v.10-12 the disciples ask him the why he speaks in parables. Jesus gives them the reason. At the center of this paragraph is the focus of Jesus’ answer. Notice that Jesus quotes Isa.6:9, 10. These verses highlight the Israelites’ root problem in the days of Isaiah. They had hard hearts. Jesus sees in his day the same issue and applies it to the disciples’ question about the parables.

The crowd, by and large, had dull hearts. Though they gathered around Jesus hoping for something, they could not understand Him. Because they would not carefully listen to His words, they could not see who he was; namely, the Messiah who had come to bring salvation to God’s people. The reason Jesus told the parables was to hide the truth from those who did not want to hear the truth and bow to Jesus as the Messiah. These people were hoping for a different type of King; one provides swift deliverance from the earthly evils and enemies. God’s plan of redemption was entirely different from their desires. Consequently, when they heard Jesus speak in parables, their attention went elsewhere because they were not altogether interested. They simply did not understand...and that was okay with them.

<Illustration> The parables are like the tough outer skin of a sweet and juicy orange that keeps the fruit for the diligent but keeps it from the apathetic.

Unlike the hard-hearted crowd who were apathetic toward understanding, the disciples were blessed by God. Their attention followed their interest and their interest was Jesus Christ. (v.11). And when they did not understand something, they diligently sought answers from Jesus as seen in verses 10 and 34.

The Explanation of the parable

v.13-20

So what is the explanation of this parable? What do all these things mean?

Seeing this God-given desire to understand, Jesus in verses 13-20 begins to explain the parable of the soils. Is your interest in Jesus aroused? Do you sense your desires stirred up currently as you anticipate Jesus’ explanation of the parable? Or have you noticed in your life a dampened desire for Christ? You find paying attention right now to be effort. And it is simply not worth it.

Its three elements

Jesus wants us to notice two things. First we will notice three elements in the parable. Next, we will notice three environments in the parable.

sower, seed and soils

The plot to this parable has three elements. First we see that in each scenario there is a sower. Oddly enough, Jesus does not explain who this is. We assume that it is the Christ and his people but it is not said. The reason for this is simple. The parable is not about preaching. It is about hearing. Jesus simply says that there is a sower.

The second element to the story is the seed. He identifies it as “the word” (14). It is the message of the realm and rule of the King. It is the Word of God. It is the gospel.

The third element in the story is the soils. Here is where we find the action. The variable in the parable is the types of soils. It is seen as either hard or shallow or thorn-invested or fertile. The kinds of soils represent the types of hearts and responses people have toward the message of the Bible. The only soil he commends is the fourth and final one; the good soil (v20). It is the only one that is able

to hear, understand and obey. It is the only one that produced fruit; some hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty.

Its three environments

devouring, scorching and choking

Next we look at the three environments. The environment is quite dangerous. It is described as devouring, scorching and choking.

Jesus unfolds the analogy by saying that there is an enemy against Christ's Kingdom—Satan (cf. v.15). He yearns to devour the message of the kingdom and take it away from our attention. Jesus makes plain that when the Bible is preached it is preached within enemy territory. According to Jesus' explanation, those who hear the Word but do not understand (and do not care to seek out the explanation; cf. v.10,11,34) are experiencing the devastating effects of the enemy.

Now these devastating effects have a range. They can appear as simply not understanding and with no desire for explanation. They can appear as giving up because obedience to Christ is too hard. Devastating effects can also look like being so overwhelmed with cares and desires for wealth that they also stop short.

The only soil that is much-admired is the one who hears the Word, understands it and obeys with endurance. Hearts and lives change when the hearts are fertile and receive the Word preached with desire to apply and obey.

Principlizing and applying the parable of the soils

Let's wrap up the message this morning by bringing it down to application. So far we have stayed at the observation and interpretation levels. We have seen that this parable is about hearing the Word. We've noticed that to hear the Word in an obeying way God must give the desire and ability to do so. This desire and ability to understand the Bible in a heart-changing, life-guiding way is seen in the context of spiritual warfare. Much is at stake each time we read the Bible. Much is at stake when the Bible is preached. There is a prowling enemy and there is much temptation in this present realm and rule of Christ; the realm in which you and I live.

So I want you to ask yourself a question "What does all this mean for me"? How does this expose where I'm at in my relationship with God? How does this apply to my life and the life of Clearcreek Chapel?

The Big Idea

To press this message upon our hearts here is the big idea of the parable. Keeping in mind that the parable is a warning, we can hear God through his word say: *Pay attention to the parables of the Kingdom because there are perils outside the Kingdom.*

Basic application

To be on our guard over how we listen to and obey the Bible, notice peril #1.

Peril #1 Apathy toward Understanding

Notice v.15 and then notice v.20. In part, the parable is about the necessity to understand. It is about understanding and accepting the Word that causes a heart to go soft and repent of sin and receive forgiveness (v.12). As I thought about this emphasis, I began to see why the disciples came to Jesus in v.10,34 to ask for explanation. The disciples, according to v.11, were given the desire and ability to understand. The proof that they were given this is in the fact that they cared about truth. They went to Jesus with questions. They queried the King until they got insight.

We are told to take care over how we listen to and obey the Bible. The warning we are to hear applies to us. When we listen to a message preached, have no idea over the meaning and application,

and then say, “oh well” we are in danger. We are in enemy territory. The devouring devil wants to see ignorance in congregations. If we are apathetic toward understanding we are experiencing the devastating effects of the enemy. Remember: *Pay attention to the parables of the Kingdom because there are perils outside the kingdom.*

Peril #2 Craving for Comfort

The second peril we come across in this parable is described as hearing the Word but not persevering through difficulties. Again, we see spiritual warfare around this response. Jesus talks about why this person fails to endure. He falls away due to difficulties brought on because of obeying the Word.

As I thought over this danger, it occurred to me that in the 1st Century, Rome didn't care much about people following Jesus. They did not believe that Jesus was resurrected and was the Christ. And so, if Christians were good citizens of the Roman Empire and contributed to the peace of the empire, Rome would not persecute them. However, if the Christians took the Word of God to heart and really desired to live out Christ's present Kingdom on earth, much persecution might take place.

I believe that if we are to *pay attention to the parables of the kingdom because there are perils outside the kingdom*, we must be aware of peril #2 Craving for Comfort. If we are pre-occupied with safety and wellbeing and popularity and acceptance to the extent that we don't show people (at work, school, home) that we have enthusiastic interest in Jesus, we are in danger of being seared by the scorching heat of Satan. We are in danger of falling away.

Peril #3 Fretting the Future

The third and final danger of which we need to be aware is seen in soil number 3. The cares of the world and deceitfulness of riches have a choking effect on someone listening to the Bible preached.

Now interestingly, Jesus talked about these two characteristics together earlier in his teaching. Matthew records them for us in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus warns his disciples about the danger of loving money and fretting over the future. The way Jesus connects these concerns leads me to believe that he is talking about one thing. That is, when we serve money we think that it will secure our future. As a result, we will despise God, desire money and then be anxious over our future funds. On the other hand, when we serve God we rest knowing that He will care for our future. As a result, we will be devoted to God, desire obedience to Him and then be at peace with our future.

This leads me to the conclusion that soil #3 is all about the danger of fretting over the future because our devotion is misplaced; off of God and on to the deceitfulness of riches. If we are to *be on our guard over how we listen to and obey the Bible*, we must be aware of peril #3 Fretting over Future.

Conclusion

As we leave today ask yourself this question: “What's got my attention”? What do I pay close attention to? I study it . . . I watch it . . . I play it . . . I talk about it . . . I'm devoted to it . . . I cannot stop thinking about it . . . What's got my attention? Your answer will lead you to your interest. For you see, attention follows interest. Does Jesus got your attention? Has your heart been given the desire and ability to pay attention to Him? You know you have a heart like this when you listen to a message like this and say: Jesus is the secret of the kingdom. Jesus gives clarity to the Word. Jesus gives forgiveness and life. Jesus produces through me an abundance of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness. Jesus is my life. Jesus steers me away from the perils of the enemy. Jesus protects. Jesus provides. Jesus is my salvation. (If on the other hand...)