

How to Listen to God: The Good Soil

Parables in Mark: Part 3

Mark 4:20-25 (Matthew 13:12 & Luke 8:16-18) 7/8/2018

Summary: Why is Scripture hard and why so many different conclusions about Jesus? Because he hid the truth in hard sayings. Why make it so hard? Judgment on the hard soil and in order to reveal it to the good soil. The hard work required to discover the meaning protects us from the six threats.

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Mark 4:14 The sower sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. Immediately Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it become unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

21 He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? 22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23 If anyone has ears to listen, let him listen.” 24 “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. 25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

Introduction

Why Don't We Hear from God?

Have you ever thought about how many promises the Bible makes about itself? It promises to be food to your soul, pure, spiritual milk, refreshing water, sweeter than honey, it promises to revive your soul, make you wise, give joy to your heart, give light to your eyes, keep you from sin, give you life, show you the glory of God—the list goes on and on and on. So here's a question: why doesn't it work? Sometimes it does those things, but why are there so many times when it doesn't? I get up in the morning, I read a chapter of Scripture, I pray about it, think about it, and none of those things happen. Some of the stuff I read I don't even understand. And the part I do understand is usually stuff I already knew. So it feels like I'm not really any better off after reading the chapter than I was before I read it. For many Christians, that's their experience with the Bible most of the times they read it. They read the Bible, but they don't really hear from God.

Why Are People Rejecting Jesus?

And if God has spoken in his word, why is it that people arrive at so many different conclusions? Why are there so many different interpretations of Scripture? We're only 3 chapters into the Gospel of Mark and look at the variety of conclusions people have already arrived at about Jesus. "He's satanic." "No, he's insane."¹ "No, he's the greatest preacher ever." And the crowds say, "We don't know what to make of him."² They are all observing the same man, witnessing the same events, hearing the same preaching. Why so many different reactions to the same Jesus? And why is God's word still so hard to understand for you and me today? Is God's word unclear? Did God speak in ways that were designed to confuse people?

Hidden Truth

Intentional Obscurity

It sounds like it when you read vv.11-12

11 He told them, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that, " "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding."³

Usually we think of a parable as a story. But sometimes the word *parable* refers to a riddle, or a hard saying—something that is difficult to understand.⁴ And that's how it's used here in this context. Jesus said, "To the outsiders I speak in riddles and hard sayings, so that they won't understand." Why Jesus? Why make the Bible so hard to understand? Why hide the truth from people? Did Jesus intend for the gospel to be a secret that is kept under raps? No. Look down at v.21.

¹ One reason Jesus told the parable of the Sower was, no doubt, to help the disciples understand why there was so much rejection. In Luke 13:23 Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" That question is understandable given how much rejection there was.

² Later in the book the conclusions expand to include Elijah, a prophet, John the Baptist back from the dead, and the Son of God.

³ The sentence goes on, "...otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" The implication is that the only way a person can repent is through hearing and understanding the word. Inability to understand makes repentance impossible.

⁴ In Mark 7:15 Jesus says, "**Nothing outside a man can make him `unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him `unclean'!**" and in the next verse that statement is called a parable. It is not a story or any kind of illustration. It is simply a saying that was difficult for them to understand.

Revelation is for Revealing

21 He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”

God’s word is a lamp.⁵ And the only purpose of a lamp is to shine, not to be covered up. The purpose of all revelation is to reveal. It’s to turn on the lights. God communicates in order to be understood. If he didn’t want you to get what he’s saying, he wouldn’t say it. The purpose of planting seed is to get a harvest.

God Desires a Harvest

When God tells us something, it’s never just FYI. “Why is that verse in the Bible God?” “Oh, no reason. Just FYI.” No—there is not one word in the Bible like that. Every sentence in the Bible has a specific purpose that God intends for it to accomplish in your heart.

Isaiah 55:11 ... my word ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Whenever God sends a word out of his mouth, it has a purpose that God wants it to accomplish. Three of the four soils have a positive response to God’s word, but of those three, only one is called good. Why? Because only one produces a crop. You’re not really listening to God with your heart until you produce a crop.

And what is the crop? It’s the intended outcome. If you plant apple seeds, the intended outcome is apples. Pumpkin seeds, the intended outcome is pumpkins. God sows the seed of his word in your heart, he has an intended outcome that he wants. That’s what he means by **crop** in v.20. If the passage you’re reading is a command, then the purpose, the intended outcome, the crop, is for you to obey that command and behave a certain way. If the passage you’re reading is just a statement conveying information, the intended outcome that God wants is for you to think a certain way. Sometimes the purpose of a passage is to get you to feel a certain way—to have joy or hope or sorrow over sin or comfort or confidence or some other emotion. Take the 23rd Psalm. One of David’s purposes in writing that psalm, no doubt, was to give comfort and rest to God’s people, and to help them experience God as their shepherd. So you could study the 23rd psalm for 10 years and read every commentary ever written on it and know everything there is to know about it, but if you don’t experience God as your shepherd and come away with comfort and rest in him, then the purpose of the passage has not been accomplished in you. There is no crop. You’re still not a good soil. Until the purpose of that passage is accomplished in your life, you haven’t listened. You’ve listened with your ears, but not your heart.

Concealed to Reveal

So all that to say—God does not want his word hidden, he doesn’t want it secret, he doesn’t want it obscured, he doesn’t want it rejected. He wants it to be seen and heard and known and understood. So then why did Jesus speak in riddles? Why is the Bible so hard to understand? And how do we explain v.12, where it sounds like Jesus is purposely hiding the truth with the parables?

The Poor Get Poorer

There are two reasons given in this passage for why Jesus made his word hard to understand.

⁵ Some argue that the lamp is Jesus, because the literal translation is “Does a lamp come...?” But speaking of an inanimate object coming, as if it were a person, was not an unusual way of speaking (H. Meyer and WBC). And the definite article with “lamp” is no different than the articles with “bowl” or “bed.” In the context, the thing that is being hidden/disclosed is the word.

The first one we saw two weeks ago—judgment on the hard soil.

Jesus spoke in riddles in order to put his word out of reach of those who are indifferent and hard hearted. If you don't care enough about the meaning to search it out—there are consequences for that.

25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

When it comes to hearing from God and receiving grace from his word, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. When God reveals something to you, use it or lose it. The less receptive you are to God's grace, the less of it you get. The less intensity you have in your searching, the more you lose the little bit you do understand.

The Rich Get Richer

So that's one purpose of the hard sayings in Scripture—punishment for the hard soil. But there's another purpose, and this is where this really gets interesting. The rich get richer.

25 Whoever has will be given more

The more receptive you are to God's grace, the more of it you get. Look back at v.22.

22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.⁶

Do you see that word **meant to**? That's a word that speaks of intention and purpose.⁷ Did Jesus hide and conceal the truth? Yes. Why? For the purpose of revealing it and bringing it into the open. He concealed it in order to reveal it. You say, "That doesn't even make sense. How does hiding something reveal it?"

Well, I can think of one example of that. When my kids were little, if I took a dozen eggs and set them out on the kitchen counter, they wouldn't even notice them. They would have no interest in them, so they wouldn't even see them. But if I tell the kids, "It's an Easter egg hunt!" and I hide them all over the house, now they will search with all their energy for them, and when they find one, that egg is a little treasure for that child.

Now, that's not to say Jesus hid the truth in parables as a game. No, it's just to illustrate how if something is too easy to find, we become blind to it. And only when we have to search for it do we truly discover it and it becomes a treasure to us. Unlike the Easter eggs, the word of God is already a treasure, but we can't see it as a treasure unless we are required to search for it.

Here's the principle, and here's where all these last three sermons come together: For the last two weeks we've learned all the threats and pitfalls and dangers that threaten to destroy the work of God's word in your heart (the devil, suffering, persecution, the cares of life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and other earthly desires. For two weeks I've been warning you about all those threats. But avoiding all those things is easier said than done. So I promised last time that today we would learn how to avoid all those threats.

⁶ The sayings in vv.21-25 are illustrations Jesus used many times to make various different points.

- For v.21 cf. Mt.5:15; Lk.8:16; Lk.11:33.
- For v.22 cf. Mt.10:26; Lk.8:17; Lk.12:2.
- For v.23-24 cf. Mt.11:15; Mt.13:9, Mt.13:43; Mar.4:9; Lk.8:8, Lk.8:18; Lk.14:35, Mt.7:2; Lk.6:38.
- For v.25 cf. Mt.13:12; Mt.25:29; Lk.8:18; Lk.19:26.

⁷ Gr. Hina. The word is used 4 times in vv.21,22. Here is a literal translation: **21 He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp for the purpose of putting it under a bowl or under a bed? Instead, is it not for the purpose of being put on its stand? 22 For nothing is hidden except for the purpose of being disclosed, and nothing is concealed except for the purpose of being brought out into the open.**

And here's the answer: the hard work involved in discovering the meaning of the hard passages in Scripture is designed to protect you from the things that would make you a bad soil.

Perseverance Required

Now, someone might hear that and say, "I'm already good soil, so I don't have to worry about any of that." It's very common for preachers to take this text and say, "The good soil represents true Christians, and all the other soils are fake Christians who never had genuine faith." And you hear that and think, *I know I have genuine faith, therefore none of these warnings apply to me. I don't have to worry about it, because I know I'm good soil.* But here's what we need to understand: Jesus never says the shallow soil or the weedy soil was fake or insincere or anything like that. They received the word just fine at the beginning. The problem wasn't with how they started; the problem was that they didn't persevere.

Keep Listening

At first glance you think, *The only difference between the good soil and the other soils is that the good soil produces a crop.* But that's not true—there's something else. In the Greek, the first three descriptions are all in the past tense, and the good soil is in the present tense. The hard ground—they *heard* the word. Shallow soil—*heard* the word. Weedy soil—*heard* the word. The good soil—*is hearing* the word, *is accepting* it, and *is producing* a crop—all present tense. The point of that is this: the way to be good soil is to listen with an eager, receptive heart, and to *keep that up* even through persecution and distractions. The shallow soil and weedy soil were good listeners for a while. I believe the weedy soil even produced a crop for a while, because it says the weeds came and made it *become* unfruitful.⁸ Their problem was they stopped listening after a time. What sets the good soil apart isn't that it listened differently, it's that it kept listening. It didn't stop. That's how they manage to produce a huge crop.

Luke 8:15 the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

You may have heard the gospel and accepted it and you are growing and bearing fruit and doing great, but this parable teaches us that it aint over till it's over. Just because you accepted the gospel in the past doesn't mean you're out of the woods. You have to persevere. We need to beware of these dangers lest we become like the shallow or thorny soils. Christianity is not just a matter of what happened back at your conversion. The Christian life is a life of responding to the gospel over and over and over all day every day until you die.

Insider/Outsider Status is Changeable

Jesus speaks of insiders and outsiders, but we need to understand that those are not fixed categories. Outsiders can become insiders—that's the whole point of preaching the gospel, to make outsiders into insiders.⁹ And insiders can become outsiders. That's what happens to the shallow and weedy soils. And even the Twelve were vulnerable to that. Jesus had to keep pulling them back from the brink of being shallow or weedy soil. In ch.7 they don't understand a parable and he says, **Are you so dull? Don't you understand?**¹⁰ In chapter 8 they have eyes but don't see and ears but don't hear.¹¹ The very things that

⁸ Verse 19 says the weeds make the plant "*become* unfruitful" (ἀκαρπος γίνεται - *akarpōs ginetai*). The most natural way to translate *ginetai* here is "become," implying that prior to this, the plant was fruitful.

⁹ That happens with the Gadarean demoniac, the woman with the issue of blood, the Syrophenician woman, and the centurion (5:1-20, 5:25-34, 7:24-30, 15:38-39).

¹⁰ Mark 7:18.

¹¹ Mark 8:18.

characterize the outsiders in this passage are the things the disciples struggle with all through the gospel.¹² And one of the Twelve ends up succumbing to one of these very threats. Judas falls to the deceitfulness of wealth and becomes a bad soil.

And one reason Jesus used parables and hard sayings is to protect us from that. Because if you do what's necessary to understand them, that will protect you from the weeds and the thorns and the rocks and the birds. Let me show you how that works.

How Parables Protect You¹³

They Alert You to Hardening Soil

So how do hard passages in Scripture protect you from becoming hard soil? They do that by alerting you when your heart begins to harden. The way you know your heart is turning into hard soil is when you read your Bible, you don't understand something, and you're ok with that. You don't have the drive to figure it out, you aren't all that curious about the meaning—you're fine with just not understanding and not hearing from God. That's a flashing red light on the dash of your heart letting you know, red alert! The ground is getting hard. It's time to do what Jeremiah said: break up the fallow ground in your heart through repentance. If there is some sin in your life that is deadening your desire for Scripture, turn from that sin now, because it will destroy you if you don't. And if you don't find any unrepentant sin in your heart, spend some time thinking through the promises God makes about his word. Psalm 119 is loaded with them. Psalm 19 is another good one. Spend time every day in passages like that because the more you see how much God promises to give you through his word, the more your heart will *insist* on getting it.

They Send the Roots Deep

Secondly, the hard passages of Scripture keep you from becoming shallow, because the process of discovering their meaning requires deep thought.

24 Consider carefully what you hear.

In the Greek, that's a striking command because literally it's **Look at what you hear**. Don't just hear it; look at it. Examine it. Contemplate it. Unfold it. Give the word a chance to take root.

Give the Word a Chance

People have their devotions, slam their Bible closed (“okay, that's done”) then immediately go on Facebook, or they get on with their day. And whatever spiritual thoughts were planted are gone that fast. They go to church, and the moment the sermon is over they are focused on lunch. They read a chapter of Scripture, then immediately turn on the TV or check the news headlines or email. And they never give the word a chance to sink in and establish some roots. So Jesus says, “No, once you've heard the word, stop and look at what you've heard.” Or to use Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 3:6, once the seed is planted, water it. Tend it, like a fragile flower trying to survive in your garden.

¹² This is an encouragement to us, when we struggle to understand. But there is also a stern admonition for us to be earnest listeners lest we fail to bear fruit.

¹³ Jesus most likely had multiple purposes in telling this parable, including, 1) to explain why so many were rejecting his word, 2) to announce judgment on Israel, 3) to give let us know what to expect regarding the response to the preaching of God's word. But we should not overlook the purpose of teaching us right and wrong ways to respond to the word. Implied in every parable is that we should avoid the things described negatively in the parable and strive for the things described positively.

Digestion Required

Psalm 119:130 The unfolding of your words gives light.

God's thoughts in the Bible are folded up. They are compressed, like a zip file on your computer. That's how God packs so much truth into just one, single book. And in order for his word to have the life-giving effect on your soul that God intended, in order for you to really hear God's voice speaking to you through the Scriptures, those truths need to be unfolded, which requires deep thought and serious study. Otherwise you won't get it.

Back in v.12 Jesus talked about people who see but don't perceive, and hear but don't understand. What does that mean? It means they were swallowing it, but not digesting it. If Jesus put everything in simple form, we would never chew long enough to really digest the truths.

Imagine a scientist who figures out how to grow a special kind of food that can cure cancer. But it only works if you eat it when you are ravenously hungry. If you just casually nibble at it or snack on it when you aren't very hungry, then all it does is make your cancer even worse. And so the scientist plants a whole field of this special food so anyone can just come and take as much as they want. But he plants it way up high on a mountain, to make sure that by the time people get to it, they will be hungry enough to eat it in a way that will cure them instead of making them worse.

That's what God did with his word. He placed the truths of Scripture high up on a mountain, so that only those who are interested enough to climb that mountain can get it. And it's the very act of climbing that mountain that makes your heart hungry enough to digest the word.

Spiritual truth that is easily gained is easily lost. But when it seems impossible to understand, and you study and think and pray and search and ask and finally discover the meaning, that sends the roots down deep. And please understand, I'm not talking about just getting a Bible education. That can help, but there are people with PhD's in theology who don't get it at all. It's not education; it's meditation. Understanding God's word is hard, but it is within the reach of everyone in this room, no matter what your training, your education, your IQ—every soul in this room can have access to the truth of God's word if we do what Jesus commands in v.22 and look intently at what we have heard.

You can do it, but it requires more effort than just casually reading your Bible. My granddaughter just turned 2, and she somehow inherited her grandpa's attention span. She's easily distracted, especially when she is eating. She will fill up her cheeks with food, and then start running around and playing and she's still got a whole mouth full of food from 5 minutes ago. And so we always here her mom and dad saying, "Sadie, chew and swallow. Chew and swallow." Some people in the church need to be told that. They are running around with their coffee mug theology. "The Lord is my shepherd, so judge not, because he works all things together for good for those who are committed to cleanliness..." And someone needs to grab hold of them and say, "Chew and swallow! Slow down, chew on what you've learned, think deeply about it, and then swallow it and digest it."

How to Discover the Meaning

Spend time in prayer asking God to give you insight. Do what the disciples did—ask Jesus, "What does this mean?"

And then study. Get a study Bible, get a commentary, listen to some sermons online from good Bible expositors like John Piper or John MacArthur or Kevin DeYoung. Call me or some other pastor on the phone or send an email and ask, "What does this passage mean?" But most importantly: *think hard!* Mull it over in your mind. Look at it from every angle. Ask questions. Every time you read the Bible, ask question like these (I'll give you 6 of them):

1. What does this passage teach me about what God is like?
2. Are there any commands to obey?
3. Are there any promises to trust?
4. Does something in my thinking or attitudes or emotions need to change?

5. Why is this passage here?
6. What would be different for me and the people around me if the purpose of this passage were fulfilled in great, 100-fold ways in my life?

It's amazing how Scripture can come alive just by taking the time to answer those 6 questions.

And don't skip #6. It's not enough to just understand; you must put it into practice. Produce a crop. Beliefs that are not acted on don't remain your beliefs very long. Jesus said those who hear but don't put it into practice are building their house on sand.

They Choke Out the Weeds

So that's how hard passages protect you from becoming hard soil or shallow soil. How about the third one: thorny soil? Thorny soil listens to the word, accepts it, believes it, and starts producing a crop. The word is accomplishing its purposes in their heart—for a while. But then life gets in the way. They get busy, and they become distracted so they just don't have any time to think about the word.

Either that or they become divided, partly running after God and partly running after money or other earthly things they desire. And those desires or distractions start taking up all the space in their heart so the word of God gets choked out. They aren't against the word, they don't doubt it, they still affirm it as God's word, and they have really been meaning to get back into it, but right now all the issues of life (the weeds) are just taking up all their attention and energy.

If you've ever had a garden, you know it's a constant job to beat back the weeds. You pull them, and a week later they're back. There was a guy working in his garden and he was wearing a hat that said, "I hate weeds." I can relate to that. Last Saturday I spent the whole day pulling weeds at our place, and by the end of the day I wanted to buy one of those hats.

Every Christian should have a hat like that. Not for physical weeds, but for the weeds in this parable. I hate weeds. I hate the deceitfulness of wealth. I hate runaway desires for earthly things that choke out my desire for God. I hate it when I let the cares of this life to choke the word out of my heart. I hate spiritual weeds.

So how do the hard passages in Scripture help us fight the weeds? Here's how: The way the weeds kill the word is by taking up all the space in your heart, crowding the word out. But when you go through the hard, difficult process of figuring out what a passage means, that takes dedicated time and focused thought, which chokes out the weeds. Now the tables are turned and there is no room for them to take over.

Now, obviously you have to spend *some* time thinking about the cares of this life. You have to get the bills paid, you have to take care of your finances, you have to spend time figuring out how you're going to deal with the problems in your life. You have to do all that, but you don't have to devote all your free time to it. Think about it as much as you need to think about it, but then carve out some time to devote your heart to what you've been reading in God's Word.

For me, I try to reserve bedtime only for spiritual things. I lay down to go to sleep, and it takes me a long time to get to sleep so I need to think about something. Whatever worries I have going in my life at that point, they have to wait. No worries allowed in bed. It's a bad time for that anyway because #1 I can't do anything about my problems at that time, and #2 thinking about the problems of life just creates stress and makes it harder to get good sleep. But thinking about my heavenly Father and his promises takes away stress and makes me sleep like a baby.

And beyond that, I've found that if I can manage to fall asleep thinking about some passage of Scripture or a biblical principle—if I'm chewing on that right at the moment I drop off to sleep, very often my mind will mull over it all night long even while I'm sleeping, so that it's my first thought in the morning when I wake up. So last thing at night, first thing in the morning—no worries allowed. Carve out some space in your life where the weeds are just not allowed, so that the seed of God's word has a chance to grow without getting choked out.

What about the weeds of desire—desire for wealth or other earthly things? The more time your heart spends wrestling with the word of God, the more your desires for eternal things will be awakened, and they will grow stronger than your desires for earthly things.

Conclusion: With the Measure You Use

And if you do this, not only will you gain understanding into what God has said, but the next time God speaks you'll have even more ability to understand.

25 Whoever has will be given more

Salvation is an ever deepening stream.¹⁴ The more you strive to understand, the more your ability to understand doubles and redoubles. I love the way he puts it in v.24.

24 ...“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.

A **measure** was a container for whatever you were buying at the market. So you go the market and say, “I’ll have two measures of wheat, please.” You pay the money, and the guy hands you two containers full of wheat. And he’s the one who decides the size of the container.

But the Bible is a little different kind of a store. When you come to the Bible, you decide the size of the container. With whatever size measure or container you bring, that’s what God will fill up with his truth. You can bring a thimble or you can bring a wheelbarrow, or a dump truck. The measure is the way you listen, and you’re the one who decides the capacity. There is no limit to how much you can receive from God.

¹⁴ Ezekiel 47:1-5.

