

FOLLOWING IN THE WAY:

The Gospel of Mark

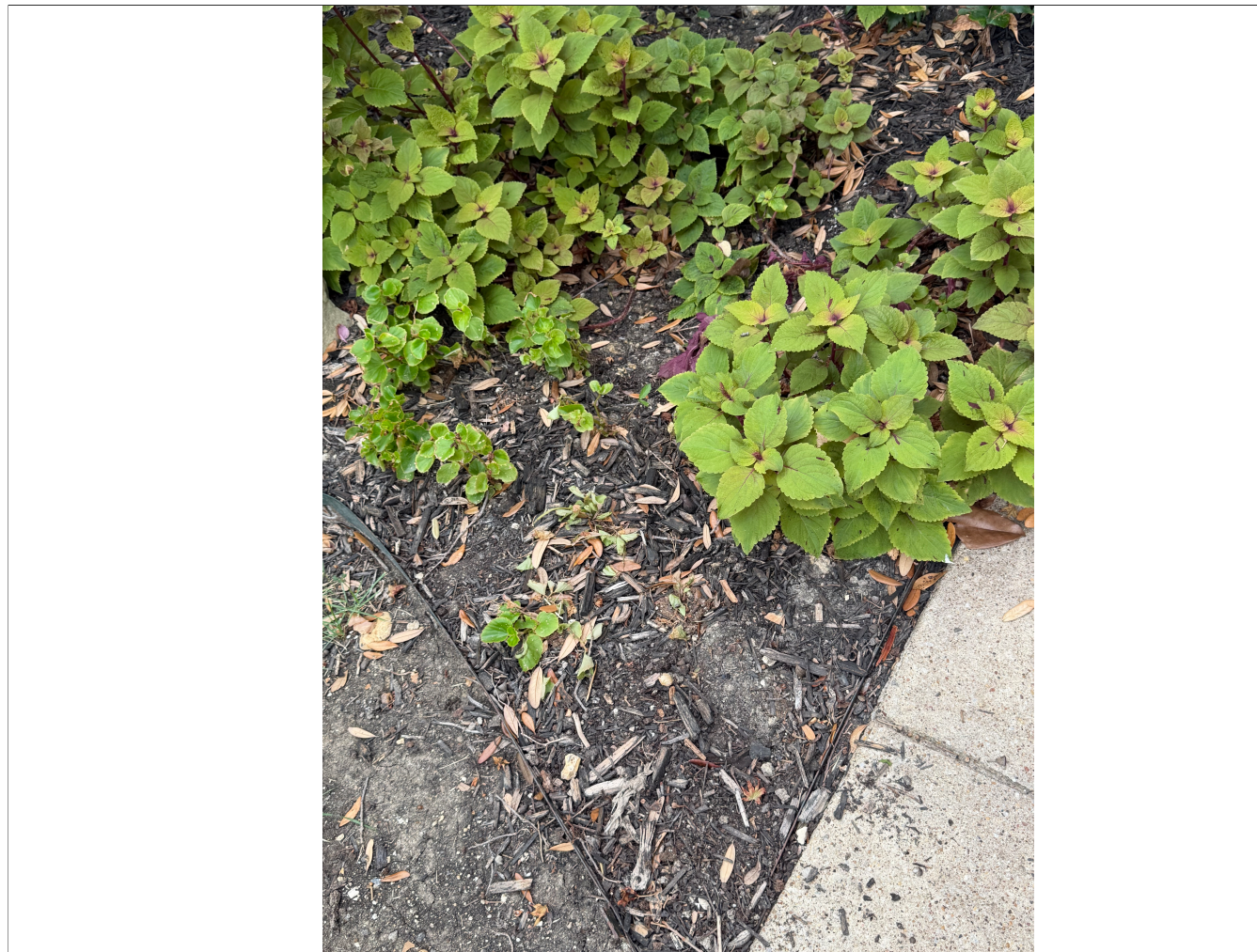
Is Anybody Listening?

MARK 4:1-20

10/4/26



Listen carefully. You're driving a bus. At the first stop, 4 people get on. At the next stop, 3 get off and 6 get on. Next stop, 2 get off and 1 gets on." Then ask: "What's the bus driver's name?" Most people will have been counting passengers. The answer is their own name, because it was in the first sentence. Ask how many people caught it and what they were listening for instead.



This was my flowerbed in front of my house on Wednesday of this past week. In May, I planted it and it was the best we ever had. Begonias, caladiums, and coleus.

It was the best we ever had.

And now, it is this. What killed it?



Today's lesson focuses on hearing.

We have always quoted Romans 10:17. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Translation: Just preach them a sermon and that will take care of it. However, that concept of "hearing" is the problem and Jesus deepens it in this lesson today.

The truth is there are three different kinds of hearing.

There is strictly "hear" as with the sounds hit my ear and my brain translated them into speech.

But then there is listening, where you take it, try to make sense of it and turn it over in your mind. It is more active, more engaged.

And then there is heeding. When it moves you to some form of action.

Think of it this way. An 8-year-old is scolded by his mother and he ignores her so she says, "Do you hear me?" How do you think it would go if he responded by saying, "I received your sound waves."

The Landscape

The assembled crowd

Parables in public

He Who Has Ears...

Explanation in private



As we survey this lesson, this is the overview.

We find an assembled crowd and Jesus teaches them using parables, stories that carry a subtle message. He wraps the story up with the epigram “He who has ears, let him hear.” But then, when he is alone with his disciples he explains the meaning.



If you were telling the story of the sower to someone else, what do you emphasize?

The focus of the lesson is a familiar parable, one we have heard hundreds of times...the parable of the sower.

So let me ask you, If you were telling the story of the sower to someone else, what would you emphasize?



Let's take a moment to see what the parable is before we try to explain it.

If you were so say, "what is most important?" You would soon discover that the interpretation Jesus gives is longer than the story itself.

That means that his point is more vital than his parable. Some heard a story but for others they hear grander ideas.

Things Related

Listen...hear...hearing...understand

Hear/Listen—9 times in 20 verses

And there are things that are related as well.

If you were to take this text, you find words that keep showing up, sprinkled along the way to make you pay attention to them.

Repeated words are a cue to what the true subject is.

Look at the word...listen, hear, understand...Jesus is talking about who really gets the gospel and its message.

Things Alike and different



Same seed, different soils

Some soils fail at the start, some under pressure, and
some over time.

And if you look for a common thread, you find out that the seed never changes. The sower never changes sacks, he never tries a different variety. The seed is the seed.

And there are differences, especially the soil. Some soils fail immediately but for others they wilt over time, succumbing to pressures and circumstances.

So the seed doesn't change but the soils are different. It is a key idea to understanding what Jesus wants us to know.

Where do you
recognize real people?
Where do you
recognize yourself?



So stop and think as we go through this. Where do you recognize real people, people you have known? But more importantly, where do you recognize yourself in the story.

Avoid the temptation of making you the hero and everyone else the villain. I'm the good soil but brother so-and-so is so thorny. If you do that, have you really heard what Jesus is saying?



“Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” (Mark 3:6, NIV)

Let's return to last week for a moment. Jesus is now under threat. The Pharisees have conspired with their arch enemies the Herodians to kill Jesus. Enemies now have a common enemy who threatens their standing and their power.

They have made up their mind...he is from the devil.

“Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. *Standing outside*, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “*Your mother and brothers are outside* looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at *those seated in a circle around him* and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! *Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.*”” (Mark 3:31–35, NIV)

Insiders and outsiders are defined by response, not by blood or religious standing.

And then, we come to a section we did not have time last week to examine but is important to our lesson today so we will touch on it briefly.

At the end of Mark 3, you have Jesus’ natural family come. Some of them think him insane. They want to see him. But Jesus responds in what seems to be a curt fashion. He asked, “Who is my family?”

He then makes the point that family to him is whoever does the will of the father.

But I want you to see a contrast in this text. Some are outside (mother and brothers) and some are inside, the ones listening to Jesus.

Jesus makes a point of saying that an insider or outsider is defined by their response to the message, not by blood relation or even standing in the religious community.

“Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:” (Mark 4:1–2, NIV)

So Jesus moves away to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There is a huge crowd who press upon him so he gets in a boat and pushes out in the water so he can teach.

Think about who is in that unnamed crowd.

Four Audiences

Seethers
(Animosity)

Spectators
(Anonymous)

Seekers
(Following)

Seeders
(Fruitful)

In every crowd, including the one in this building at 10 AM, are four different audiences.

There are seethes, those who have animosity to the message and wish it would just go away and leave them alone.

Then, there are the spectators, the people who are there and don't want to make a move. Just let me sit and listening, don't bother my stability but I want to hear what all of this is about, but don't ask me to do anything else.

Then there are the seekers, the people who are interested enough, that their minds and hearts are engaged. They lean forward. This seems to have merit to me. Tell me more.

And finally there are the seeders, those who move on a message, respond in a positive way to spread God's way either through words or lifestyle. These are people who are constantly changing their lives to bring them into concert with what God wants.

The challenge for the preacher is to move who can be moved to a new level and to know who not to concentrate on. You can preach to soreheads and miss those who need more to become what God wants of them.

But which describes you?

Parable

Throw alongside

Three ways of getting attention: Riddle, Proverb, and Parable

Common Images That Allow Personalization

And it says he taught them in parables.

We say that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. But we need to know more than that.

The word itself means to throw difficult concepts alongside easily understood concepts.

It is a way to get people to think. There are three ways to get attention. You can tell them a riddle and it will gnaw on them forever. A proverb engages because it has so many different ways it can be understood and a parable has many different layers.

And a parable doesn't give you too much detail. It lets every person fill in the holes. For instance, there was a man with two sons. You don't know the man's name or social standing. You don't know the background of the sons until you deduce them from the story.

“Mary told me Joe is getting out tonight. The old gang is going to give him a party at Marty’s.”

Who is Mary?
Mother? Girlfriend? Sister? Wife?

Where has Joe been?
Army? Hospital? Prison?

What is “Marty’s”?
A Friend’s House? A Bar? A Restaurant?

Here is an example.

One phrase: “Mary told me Joe is getting out tonight. The old gang is going to give him a party at Marty’s.”

You are now filling out this story...Who is Mary?

Where has Joe been?

What is Marty’s?

All of those are in the story but as you hear them, you get to make them your own. That’s the beauty of parable.

“***Listen***! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” (Mark 4:3–8, NIV)

Jesus starts the parable with Listen. The word commands attention so that they will perk up but then, the story will hook them even more. (Go through the text.)

Jesus doesn't tell you much. A common image of sower and how seed grows or doesn't. He doesn't explain but wants them to try to figure it out.

“Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”” (Mark 4:9, NIV)

What do you think the typical response of the people would have been to this?

Jesus ends this with an epigram, a common saying that gets repeated.

He who has ears, let him hear.

Now that a strange thing. If you have ears, don't you hear?

When Jesus says this at the end of the parable, what do you think would have been the response of the people?

“When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.” (Mark 4:10, NIV)

Then, the scene changes. It is probably end of day and the people have filtered away to go home and he is left with his disciples plus a few and they are perplexed. They don't know what he is doing.

Deep truths get explained to people who are open to them. You tell secrets to people you trust.

“He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “ ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”” (Mark 4:11–12, NIV)

Does Jesus teach in parables to keep people from understanding?

So he says this is a secret, a word that means hidden from view but uncovered in a strange way. It is our word Mystery.

He reveals his method. Speak in parables to all. And then, he turns and quotes them something...some see but don't see it, they hear but don't hear the message. Because if ever see it and really understand the message, they will change.

So, do you think Jesus teaches in parables to keep people from understanding? To hide his message?

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” He said, “Go and tell this people: “ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”” (Isaiah 6:8–10, NIV)

This comes from Isa 6. This is the call of Isaiah to be a prophet and it isn't the best recruiting speech. Isaiah is to go to Jerusalem and tell them their sins will doom them. He tells them to return to God but God is aware of the stubbornness of his people and that they will listen to his preaching but not hear his message. Because if they really hear it and see it and understand it, they will respond.

A parable is a test of the heart. It opens up to people who lean in and closes to people who walk away.



A parable is a test of the heart. It opens up to people who lean into it but closes to people who walk away. For some it is great truth; for others its just a story.

“Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.” (Mark 4:15, NIV)

Hardened & Unabsorbing

“Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you *understand* this parable? How then will you *understand* any parable?” (Mark 4:13, NIV)

So the explanation is made clear. He is delineating the various kinds of people who encounter the gospel’s message.

The first is seed on the path that is so hard that nothing will penetrate it. (Think about the soil around here before this week’s rain.)

This is the prime hunting ground for Satan because they don’t want to listen to anything.

These people are hardened and unabsorbing. Nothing penetrates. Remember his encounters with the Jewish leaders who had their minds made up and would not even try to listen.

People who are like that refuse even to give the gospel a hearing.

“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 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.”
(Mark 4:16–17, NIV)

Shallow & Superficial

Then the second is the rocky places.

(Tell my story about Central Texas and trying to plant grass.)

These are people who seem to be in great shape. They receive it with joy. But there is no root, so it soon dies, usually because Christianity has now gotten hard.

These are the shallow and superficial. They run on the adrenaline of the moment, the emotion. (Guy who wanted to know why every church service could not be like teen camp...amped up and emotional.) These are people who don't stick around long enough to find out how to cope with the trouble of life and how to deal with pressure in their life.

(My story of “used to be’s”)

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” (Mark 4:18–19, NIV)

Distracted & Divided

Then it moves a level. Here you find the thorns. They get choked by the affairs of life and their minds are divided in their allegiances. They think that more money will make them happier and more fulfilled. They pursue life with Christ as a side interest.

They are distracted and divided.

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”” (Mark 4:20, NIV)

Hear · Accept · Produce

And finally, you have those who hear, accept, and produce. And their flourishing is beyond anything that is ordinary.

These are people who are focused and desiring. They put life in its proper perspective that all the things you chase in life, the money, the promotions, the approval of others...that is not what gives them the deepest meaning in life.



Don't make
this about why
they don't
listen.

Jesus doesn't tell this to give us a primer on why people don't listen to the gospel. This is how it has been used before. Oh, they are that.

It is not about "them" and more about "you" and "me." Where do we stand in this process? Do we listen at all or are we resistant? Are we so overwhelmed by life we let our spiritual lives slide (give them a spot in the corner but not on the mantle.)

Don't try to explain others. Confront yourself.



Ask yourself, where have you stopped listening? Where does scripture get to close that you have decided God doesn't get a vote on it?

Part of the Bible we either don't read or explain away because they hit a nerve. I don't have a problem with money so I don't need 1 Tim 6.

I don't hate anyone who Love your neighbor doesn't really apply to me.

So what is that for you?



Four Questions for Hearers

The Rocks

Is my faith running on feeling or on roots? What do I do with God's word when it's not exciting?

Is my faith running on feeling or on roots? Can I keep my devotion on days I don't feel like it? What do I do with God's word when it is not exciting? Are you deep enough to handle life and its pressures?



What's competing with Christ for my attention right now? What in your life gets the label of "critical?" And do you think, I will get back to my faith when this crisis is over?



But if the problem is with the soil, what would it take for you to till that soil, clear the weeds and rocks, so nothing gets in the way of serving Christ?

However your answer will determine how well you hear. He who has ears, let him hear.