

Mark Chapter 4 Verses

We covered last week in Chapter 3:

- Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath and the reaction from the religious leaders
- The growing crowds – and the components of crowds - following Jesus
- The choosing of the 12 disciples
- A house divided against itself cannot stand
- The unpardonable sin
- Jesus defining what family is to Him
- Some bad puns

Here in Chapter 4, we see Jesus beginning to teach in parables. *A parable is designed to create a familiar everyday scenario beside an abstract concept, allowing the listener to grasp a deeper truth through comparison.* Some people, like me, process a concept or thought better when they can see, or visualize, a picture of it. At the time of Jesus' ministry, Israel was largely an agrarian society – meaning the majority of their way of life was through agriculture. Therefore, Him being the great teacher that He was, and still is, we'll be seeing an agrarian theme in many of His parables to help the people grasp the message He was trying to get through to them.

¹ 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. ² Then He taught them many things by parables, and said to them in His teaching: ³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.

For the first part of this chapter, Jesus is going to present four scenarios of the parable of sowing seeds and then a few verses later, He is going to explain the meaning behind each of these scenarios. Therefore, for the purpose of going through these together, I'm going to present each scenario with the verse(s) that describes it and then the verse(s) that explains it – followed by some commentary. We're still going to cover every verse in this chapter, but for this particular parable and the way it's laid out in the chapter, we're going to deviate for the purpose of, hopefully, better understanding what Jesus is trying to present.

⁴ And it happened, as he sowed, *that* some *seed* fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. ¹³ And He said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. 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.

Jesus created a parable that is tied to planting a seed, and this action of sowing seeds to an agriculture-based group of people should catch their attention. The word "seed" in Scripture is often referred to as the Word of God. A sower is one who plants the seed. So, Jesus lays out four different scenarios of sowing, or planting seeds. As we read these scenarios, I think we'll see two dynamics we should be aware of:

- There's an adversary seeking to eliminate the value of the seed.
- We, being the soil of the seed, have a role, or a choice, in how deep and fruitful that seed is going to be.

The first of the four scenarios introduces the reality that we have an adversary when being presented the Word of God. We learn that the birds came and devoured the seed before it could take hold. In the Bible, birds are often symbols of Satan. From the very first time we learn of Satan back in the Garden of

Eden in Genesis chapter three, He is discounting and challenging the truth of the Word of God. God had clearly told Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Yet, when confronting Eve in the form of a talking serpent, what did Satan do? He first questioned what God said. Then he denied the truth that Eve would surely die if she ate the fruit. Finally, he misrepresented God's mindset and heart set behind the command to not eat the fruit.

I've said before, and I'll say it again and again. Satan is a liar. He does not want you or me to know the truth of God's Word. The Bible tells us that we are created by a God who loves us so much that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. This is why whenever you read your Bible, please pray for protection from the enemy to introduce lies or deceptions to devalue its truth.

⁵ Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. ⁶ But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. ¹⁶ 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.

The second scenario Jesus describes is there isn't really much soil for the seed to be planted and germinate – there's a stony ground. The soil is the condition of our hearts. A stony heart is one that is typically full of pride, wants little to do with spiritual things, and is devoted to being a slave to its fleshly needs and desires. The LORD describes this scenario that God's Word might catch this person's attention, and he/she may actually listen to it for a bit. But when the sun came up – the heat of life's trials challenged the truth of the Word, the person chose to serve the flesh's pain as opposed to learn from the truth. Whatever was planted didn't take root and withered away.

⁷ And some *seed* fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. ¹⁸ Now these are the ones sown among thorns; *they are* the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ 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.

The third scenario is the one that I believe most of us can relate to – I know I can. Verse seven said, "*And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.*" Seeds have a purpose. God created them to produce something – yield some kind of fruit. Jesus gave us a biology lesson regarding seeds when He was speaking to His upcoming crucifixion in John 12:24, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain [or fruit].*" For a seed to serve its purpose, it must first die. From that death, yields the roots of a growth of a plant that will one day produce fruit.

This third scenario acknowledges that the seed did die, it took root, and it began to grow. But let's go back again to the third chapter of Genesis. We read in verses 17b-18a, "*Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.*" As part of God's judgment on Adam's sin, while the ground that was perfect in the Garden of Eden, the ground *outside* the garden would now be cursed and full of thorns and thistles. The thorns and thistles are symbolic of the sin that is not only in our life but in the world that we live in.

What Jesus is speaking to here in this scenario is while we may be saved, we are still yielding to conform to this world – its temptations to serve the flesh. I like how Jon Courson describes the hearts of those of us who struggle with this – our hearts are overcrowded. We are allowing in our lives, which means it is a choice, things that get in the way of the LORD's leading. These the thorns and thistles such as busyness, overemphasizing work responsibilities, wealth pursuits, etc, are choking off our ability to yield to His leading and produce fruit.

This fruit is defined as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, "*Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" While our sin nature prevents us from being all of this all the time, if we're not seeing these fruit becoming more apparent in how we're

treating those God brings into our lives, then we should be asking Him to reveal what the thorns and thistles in our lives are – then ask Him to help us get rid of them.

⁸ 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.” ⁹ And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” 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.”

The final scenario is the one each of us should be seeking. Jesus did not die for us just to save us. Just as He died, He rose again and produced fruit that has built up His church into the millions over two thousand years. When we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we die to ourselves allowing the seed of the Word of God to take root in our hearts. We become a new creation that is designed to yield much fruit. If you’re not seeing a lot of fruit in your life, don’t take this as a condemnation. This is the grace of God in action – He’s given you the freedom from being a slave to your sin nature to allow you to lean on the Holy Spirit to transform your heart and mind. This transformation leads to a fruit-yielding child of God. By being at this Bible study, you are, at least, seeking to be that good soil that can produce much fruit. God bless you for that!

¹⁰ But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.’”

This interchange between Jesus and His freshly minted disciples is interesting as He begins to distinguish between the kingdom of God from the world. He characterizes the kingdom as a mystery. I sat and thought about this a bit and found myself asking why is God’s kingdom a mystery? I’m sure there are more than one answers to this question, but I want to zero in on the concept of a spiritual world versus the physical, or tangible, world. Jesus told us in John 4:24 that God is Spirit. Since this is the case, then the kingdom of God must be a spiritual kingdom. Does that make sense?

We cannot see the spiritual world. However, we can see the fruit, or evidence, of it. The Apostle Paul revealed this to us in chapter 1, verse 20 of his letter to the Romans, “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.*” What Paul is saying the physical things we see – ourselves as human beings, the seas, the plants, the animals are all created. Therefore, we - being God’s creation, are the visible evidence of God’s invisible attributes, or character, that went into our being created.

Let’s say you were an artist – a painter. If no one knew who you were but saw one of your paintings, then they would at least know you exist. The painting didn’t just come together on its own. Furthermore, by looking at the painting, one might be able to pick up on who you are by the colors you used or the subject of the painting. The more the paintings you painted, the more someone could start to compile an image or understanding of you without even meeting you. They may not like your paintings, but they cannot deny that you are real because your creative attributes are on display. This is what the Apostle Paul is alluding to in Romans 1:20.

Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*” What makes God’s kingdom a mystery is unless you are spiritual – meaning you have come to faith in Jesus Christ, trying to understand a spiritual kingdom is, at least difficult, if not impossible. Out of God’s grace and love for both believer and non-believer, Jesus presents aspects of His kingdom via parables – via tangible examples to help us mentally visualize and understand them. We’re like little children first learning to read and comprehend things. This is why little children’s books are more focused on the pictures than they are on the words.

Verse 12, again, says, “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.*” These words are drawn from Isaiah chapter 6. The point Jesus is making is without the forgiveness of sin – the sole key to both salvation and entry into the spiritual kingdom of God, people may be able to physically see and hear, but they won’t be able to understand the spiritual truth(s) behind what they’re seeing and hearing. Again, He loves all of us so much, He speaks to us in parables to help us along the way to knowing God and His kingdom.

²¹ Also He said to them, “Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? ²² For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light.

God sees everything. There are no secrets with God – He is omniscient, which means He knows everything. Therefore, if you think you’re keeping secrets from God, what’s the point? He knows them already. He’s not surprised by what you’re keeping secret. He just wants you to be free from it. The purpose of God’s revealing light is not to condemn you. It is to heal you and restore you. This is the true heart of God.

²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ²⁴ Then He said to them, “Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given. ²⁵ For whoever has, to him more will be given; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.”

Jesus gives us in these verses an important dynamic of what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of God. Jesus said in John 10:10b, “*I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*” The forgiveness of sins and the liberation from being a slave to them; a restored relationship with our Creator; and the promise of going to heaven when we die are all amazing blessings by themselves. In my opinion, the availability to go beyond these amazing blessings and experience the abundant life Jesus is offering comes out of the dynamic He is expressing in verses 24 and 25.

I want to be careful with this as I don’t want you to think that being saved requires any efforts or works on your part. Ephesians 2:8 confirms that salvation is by the grace of God through faith alone – not of *any* works on our part. From that place of faith, we become new creations with new purpose. Therefore, our faith *should* produce and reflect a desire to live with this new purpose, out of gratitude, that yields fruit. Jesus’ brother James said in the second chapter of his epistle, “*For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*”

Take this truth, and you can conclude the opposite - faith *with* works is life. This is where I believe Jesus is connecting us to the abundant life. In summary, verses 24 and 25 are basically saying what you put into your relationship with God will have a direct impact on what you get out of your relationship with Him. He will reward those who pursue a deeper faith walk. How I interpret what Jesus is saying in verse 25 is that we are all given at least one spiritual gift upon our salvation. I believe the giving and usage of this, or these, gifts is where we discover the abundant life. If we choose not to use the gift, or gifts, while He will never take away our salvation or won’t love us any less, He will take away the gift.

²⁶ And He said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Jesus is speaking to the fruit of sowing seeds – sharing and living the Gospel to those He brings into our lives. Even with all our scientific research and technology today, there’s still a mystery in how a

seed becomes a plant or tree. As Jesus said in verse 27, we don't know how the growth happens. The good news is, we don't have to. The Apostle Paul spoke to this in 1 Corinthians 3:7, "*So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*"

We are a results-driven society. We like to see the fruit of our labor. Have you ever thought that in the kingdom, *we as believers* are the results? Yes, we are asked to plant the seed of faith by sharing God's Word to those He brings into our lives and then water the seeds with how we love them. However, how they respond to what we do is up to them and God. There's a freedom in this mindset – the results are God's problem. We just need to show that the seeds can produce fruit.

³⁰ Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? ³¹ *It is* like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; ³² but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

Regarding this parable of the mustard seed, there are different interpretations among the Bible scholars. The commentaries that I follow and trust, are united in the interpretation that Jesus is creating an image of men overengineering church growth. As I just noted whether people choose to follow Jesus is up to them and God. This should be liberating to church leaders, but, again, we're a results-driven society. Therefore, if a church isn't growing at the rate its leaders want, they'll start attempting to do what is the Holy Spirit's job. Programs and gimmicks are created to bring more people in.

A mustard seed is supposed to turn into a bush that can grow up to 3'-10' tall. They typically have narrow or thin branches. Jesus is describing this mustard seed turning into something different – having shoots and *large* branches. He notes that the birds of the air may nest in these branches. As I said earlier, birds in the Bible are often symbols of evil and Satan. The gimmicks and programs might bring in more people, but their coming for carnal, not spiritual reasons. They also can become a thorn in the side of the very people – the leaders – who came up with the plans to make the church into something God did not intend it to be. Or at least not yet.

³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear *it*. ³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

Mark is again making the point that the parables are presentations of spiritual concepts in scenarios that are relatable to the listener. Jesus understood that the non-believer may not get the spiritual message behind the parable. However, He will always explain the meaning behind the parable to those who are choosing to follow Him. This is kind of what we're doing here in this Bible study.

³⁵ On the same day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side."

³⁶ Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. ³⁸ But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How *is it* that you have no faith?" ⁴¹ And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

This is one of my favorite scenes in the New Testament. To get the full appreciation of it, please remember what Jesus said in verse 34, "*Let us cross over to the other side.*" The "other side" was the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Below is a replica of what was believed to be what these little boats looked like.



Not much, huh? When I showed this picture to Vickie, she got understandably confused as how could 13 men fit in this little boat. There is a mentioning of other little boats that were also with Him. While it is unclear, it's possible that not all the disciples were in the same boat as Jesus. What we can be sure of is at least some of them were in the boat to tell this story.

So, they head out across the sea, and a great windstorm kicks up causing the waves to splash water into the boat. The disciples are freaking out, but what is Jesus doing? He's schnoozing. They wake up the LORD and have the nerve to ask Him if He even cares about them and their situation. Jesus stills the storm and then asks them why they don't have faith in Him? Understandably, the disciples are "blown" away by this seeing that even the wind and sea obey Him.

There are important takeaways from this marvelous scene.

- First, what did I ask us to remember about what Jesus said? "*Let us cross over to the other side.*" This wasn't just a suggestion – it was a command. Jesus, being God, cannot lie. If He says you're going to the other side, you're going to go to the other side. What He didn't say was how they were going to get there.
- Secondly, Jesus is in complete control. I believe He instigated the storm for the purpose of giving His disciples a lesson in trusting Him. If He can command the wind and waves to be still, He clearly can command them to rise up.
- The third takeaway may leave you uneasy, but it is the truth. Did you catch that being in the storm was God's will for them? Can you imagine a more obvious example than this? They were with Jesus! It is completely understandable to struggle with how a good and loving God's will would be to send His creation into storms. Yet, what's the real message here in this scene? The disciples weren't alone. Jesus was with them the whole time in the middle of their storm.

You may recall in the first week I emphasized that this life is not all there is. I call this life the "boot-camp" to eternity. I believe God gives us lessons in this life to prepare us for our eternal life. If you're like me, which I hope you're not, the lessons I truly learn from are the painful ones. We see here in this scene Jesus creating a circumstance that is literally threatening the lives of His disciples. Again, the message He's sending them is regardless of the scariness or painfulness of their circumstances, He will never leave their side. This is the kind of faith He is seeking all of us to get to. He want us to trust Him, because He is faithful and true. Amen?

Questions

1. Have you ever had moments, or having them now, when you feel your soil – your heart and mind – was full of thorns and thistles that were getting in the way of your relationship with God? If so, what did you do to get rid of them?
2. Have you found that your works of faith helped you in your relationship with God or with other people?
3. Have you ever been in a stormy season wondering where God is?