

## Mark 4:1-34

### Introduction

1. The upcoming chapters, Mark 4 and 5, divide into two major segments: 4:1-34 and 4:35-5:43. In 4:1, Jesus begins “again” to teach beside the sea. The sea reference signals the audience that another new section has begun. Mark 4:35 begins a series of sea crossings, from one side to the other, that connects all four episodes in 4:35-5:43. Moreover, the two major segments, while separate, are firmly linked by the definite time notice in v. 35: “On that day, when evening had come.”
2. In addition to opening with a geographical reference to Jesus “again” beginning to teach beside the sea (by this point a quite familiar signpost for the audience) Mark 4:1 displays rather unusual care in setting the scene for the teaching session: “And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea; and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.” Three repetitions of Jesus’ link with the sea in so few words suggest that the relative positions of Jesus and the crowd are important for the audience to note.
3. Jesus teaches from a boat on the sea and the massive crowd is by the sea on the earth. It is typology, not geography or history, that stands behind this setting. In the parables that follow, those who hear the word that Jesus speaks may respond in one of the same four ways in which the four different types of earth respond to the seed sown in them. The huge crowds who listen to Jesus “on the land” are types of the parabolic “earths” about to be expounded. As we have indicated previously, the Parable of the Sower becomes a guide for understanding the rest of Mark’s Gospel, and the choices of characters within it.

*Questions; read Mark 4:1-34 aloud*

### Discussion Questions

1. **Having just read these three parables that are customarily named after the seed (the Sower, the Growing Seed, the Mustard Seed), what is actually the most significant, emphasized element within them?** In the way Mark uses them, none of them are really about the seed – it’s the *earth* that is the focus of attention. For Mark, these are not “seed” parables but “earth” parables, and it’s the multiple references to “earth” that bind them together.
2. **Which of our senses is most emphasized in these three parables?** The vital role of “hearing” is constantly repeated. Forms of the verb “to hear” appear 13 times in Mark 4:3-34 (four times alone in the Parable of the Sower). It begins with Jesus commanding people to hear (4:3) and ends with “and they were able to hear it” (4:33). The three delineations of the parables all reference the importance of hearing, and thus Mark is making an association between those who “hear” and the ones who are the “good soil.”

3. **Why does Mark have Jesus explain the Parable of the Sower?** The confusion of the disciples affords the opportunity for repetition, but really it's just a blatant signal to the audience of the significance of the Sower parable: "And he says to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?'" (4:13).
4. **As Jesus explains the various soil types, are there certain characters that Mark has already assigned to fit a type? Are there other characters (even those yet to be introduced) that might fit a certain type?** Mark's intention with this parable is to identify each type of response, each type of ground, with a group of people. **Type 1 – The Path.** The first type is the "path," the ground in which no seed can grow. This is clearly the scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, and Jerusalem religious leaders. We know this because from their first appearance they oppose Jesus and they defame his powerful word as blasphemy. For them, to hear is to disaffirm. Such a response, as the interpretation indicates, can only arise from the work of Satan. Far from Jesus being in collusion with Satan, as the scribes alleged (3:22), they themselves are Satan's feeding ground, the hard earth which the seed cannot enter. **Type 2 – The Rocky Ground.** So far in the narrative only two groups have been depicted as accepting or believing immediately in Jesus' power: the disciples and those healed. The call stories of the disciples emphasize the sudden and complete response of each of them. They "immediately" follow Jesus. On the other hand, the wordplay on Peter's name, the indications of Judas' coming betrayal, and the ominous (to the audience, anyway) discussion by Jesus of the ultimate failure of divided houses (3:16-26), all strongly nominate the disciples as the group representing the "rocky" ground. The succeeding chapters of Mark will quickly and thoroughly certify their election to this post. **Type 3 – The Thorny Ground.** As the initial descriptor "others" suggests, this group has not yet made an appearance in the Gospel, but its characteristics are quite clear. Unlike either of the first two groups, the ground here is actually fertile, and there is a possibility of growth and fruit. The problem is that there are too many noxious plants already growing in the ground, which choke out the seed, rendering it unfruitful. And although we haven't been introduced to these characters yet, if we have experience with Mark's Gospel we may be able to guess several. Perhaps the most obvious is the rich man (10:17-22) who seems to be such good ground and upon whom Jesus looks with great love. But his "delight in riches" chokes out his potential. Another character we can think of is Herod (particularly in the death of John the Baptist story of 6:14-29). Herod has a good relationship with John – while he may not understand him, Herod certainly respects him and protects him (consider Herod's willingness to *hear* John as an indication of his "fertility"). But when confronted with the opportunity to do the right thing and save John, Herod folds to his pride and honor – thus squelching his fruitful potential. And lastly, consider Pontius Pilate, who doesn't want to kill Jesus but who gives into the will of the people and does what he knows is wrong. **Type 4 – The Good Ground.** Simply put, the ones who experience healing, who go and do the will of God, are the good ground.
5. **What is Jesus talking about in 4:10-12?** These two verses have probably received more scholarly attention than any two verses in the entire Bible! The

problem is that they seem to suggest that Jesus is teaching in parables *so that* “those outside” will not understand what he is saying. But when we look closer at what Mark is doing with these verses from a literary perspective, their meaning becomes clearer. 1) “Those outside” should not be identified with the crowd to whom Jesus is speaking, for in the immediately preceding episode “those outside” denoted Jesus’ natural family, while those inside were his new family, people who do the will of God (3:31-35). “Those outside” in 4:11, then, corresponds to that class of people who, for whatever reasons, do *not* do the will of God. 2) The “you” to whom the mystery of the kingdom of God is given are not solely the Twelve, for “those who were about him with the twelve” indicates a considerably larger group. Thus, the division between those who are given the mystery, the insiders, and those who hear riddles, the outsiders, is not a simple opposition of disciples versus crowds; instead it’s an opposition of categories: those who do the will of God and those who do not, those who have ears to hear, and those who have not. The parables, like Jesus’ healing and preaching ministry in general, do not force people outside or pull people inside; they simply reveal the type of ground already present. 3) Since the audience of the Gospel, from our privileged position of first degree narrative, can hear and understand the parables as unconfusing and see them as guides for the entire gospel, Jesus’ comment designates the *audience* as the greatest insider of all. Whatever the characters in the story may or may not be portrayed as realizing, the audience stands with the narrator (and Jesus) in full knowledge of the implications of the parables. 4) Although the insiders do not hear riddles, they are still faced with a mystery. The kingdom of God is a secret, but a secret that cannot be hidden. As 4:21-22 tells us, “For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.” The secret of the kingdom of God, given to the insiders who do the will of God, can remain a secret only for a brief time. Neither Jesus himself, nor his powerful healing word, nor those of the good earth who bear fruit can remain secret or be hidden, for secrecy is only for the purpose of bringing to light. All the apparent secrets in the Gospel – Jesus’ identity, his healing miracles, his control over evil spirits – have as their goal the revelation of the kingdom, but only those with ears to hear it will hear it.

6. **What do you make of 4:26-29, the Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly?** Productive earth – good earth – produces on its own, as the repetitions of seed and earth emphasize. The sower does not dominate the production and does not make it happen; the sower only sows and goes about life, while the earth brings forth the harvest out of itself. Furthermore, the sower does not know *how* the earth accomplishes this act, only *that* it does, and knowing how is of little value when the aim is to harvest ripened grain (4:29). How some people, upon hearing the word, can accept it and bring forth fruit is unknown. They produce the yield out of themselves because of who they are, and it is precisely by bearing fruit that their membership in the good earth type is demonstrated.
7. **How is the Parable of the Mustard Seed really about the power of good soil?** The repetitions of “earth” and “when sown” stress the vital factors that transform the smallest seed into the largest shrub. How does the mustard seed become the bushy refuge of the birds of heaven? *By being sown in the*

*earth*. The power of the earth makes the difference. The parable, as Mark is using it, is neither about the small beginning nor the large ending, but rather it underscores the *cause* of the amazing transfiguration, the earth itself. Like the thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold abundance of the seeds sown in the good earth of the Parable of the Sower, the tiny mustard seed is metamorphosed into the great bush by the creative power of the earth. Such powerful earth is the kingdom of God, and those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit are its human manifestations. They are the ground of God. Jesus, in preaching the word, does not create them or convert them; he *reveals* them. Those who hear his word, accept it, and bear incredible, amazing fruit show themselves to be God's good earth.

8. **What does Mark mean in having Jesus say 4:24-25?** Hearing the word is the crucial moment of revelation, and then how one responds to that hearing determines the result. Those who are the good earth and respond with acceptance will bear fruit in profusion – whoever has will be given more. Those who fail to hear the word or to respond to the seed that has been sown in them will be infertile – whoever has not, even what he or she has will be taken away. The good earth, because it is already good before the seed is sown, is able to transform the seed to glorious benefit; the unproductive earth, because it is already bad before the seed is sown, allows it to be taken away, wither, be choked out. The consequent loss is great, and if it is recognized at all, it brings sadness (e.g. 6:26; 10:22; 14:72).
9. **Based on these three parables, how does the kingdom of God come about?** The seed, the word Jesus preaches, acts as the necessary catalyst to the process of transformation, but it can elicit growth only from good ground. Jesus does not bring the kingdom of God, for the good earth already exists, at least in potential, just as the unproductive earth, Satan's feeding ground, already exists. Hearing Jesus' performative word releases that potential into powerful, transforming activity. The seed and the good earth, the two necessary elements, must combine to bring the kingdom in power.

*\*\*\*For next session, read Mark 4:35 – 5:43*