

## Mark 4:21-41

We pick up where we left off in this narrative with Jesus continuing to tell the crowds parables. As we saw last week Jesus explained why he spoke in parables to his disciples saying,

*“To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables so that, **‘They indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven’**”*

Peter examined this passage last week and showed the parallel between Isaiah 6 and Jesus reason for the use of parables. Jesus was being intentionally murky to bring judgment to Israel. So the reason that Jesus speaks in parables is so that the kingdom and the King are veiled to those without “ears”.

In these passages, I would like to focus on one central idea in this passage and see how the idea affects the meaning of the entire passage. This is Jesus command to “Watch how you hear”.

The translation says, “Pay attention to what you hear”, but the actually word means “You see”. It’s not simply to pay attention to, but it is to see and perceive HOW you are listening.

With this concept in mind, let us define what a parable is and how the parables function in Mark. A popular and helpful definition is that a parable is a short story with a moral or religious message. But the Biblical parables in Mark point to the specific content and meaning of Jesus ministry, the coming of the kingdom of God. This means that in reading the parables we should attempt to better understand what Jesus is communicating about the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus teaching his disciples that he uses parables to veil the message is intriguing because his next parable talks about how inappropriate veiling light is.

He basically asks the question, isn’t the purpose of a light to be used to light a room? It wouldn’t make sense to put light bulbs under your bed or under a basket! You would be wasting electricity or the oil in your lamp for nothing. Jesus says the kingdom is the same way.

And this is where we can come to better understand the reason for Jesus use of the parables. Everything that is hidden is one day supposed to be made known and secrets are to be known so that they may come to light at the proper time.

Imagine a surprise birthday party. Obviously it is kept secret, the details are kept from the birthday boy or girl, but the whole reason that the party is kept a secret is so at the proper the person may understand and appreciate everything that had gone on before.

Similarly in Jesus ministry, Jesus used parables so that his hearers would not understand. The crowds could not appreciate Jesus mission and would not understand it. So Jesus commands

people to be silent before his resurrection. Jesus initial preaching was to bring judgment upon Israel, BUT after atoning for the sin of the world, the secret of the Gospel was to be revealed, or more precisely, had to be revealed!

But truly, the things of God are still hidden to those who do not believe in the Gospel, for in their unbelief they hear the Word of God but do not understand it. And this is why Jesus commands them in verse 24, SEE how you hear!

Jesus was commanding the people to evaluate and look at HOW they listened.

How terrible would it be to be in the crowd and hear the words of Jesus yet not understand what he was saying? How foolish must those people have been!

How often do we hear the Gospel and not truly encounter it? How often do you come to church, hear what is being preached, but the Gospel does not cut you to the heart in worship and adoration of God?

We, like the crowds, are a people prone to wander and miss such a blessing when we do not hear the Word of God.

Which is precisely why Jesus says that the one who watches how he listens will be given more understanding, but if the one who has a little understanding but does not listen, even that little knowledge he had will be taken away.

The reason listening to the Gospel well is so difficult though is addressed by Jesus in the next parable.

Jesus again uses agricultural imagery and says that the kingdom is like when a farmer goes out to scatter seed on the ground. Now, I'm not aware of any full-time farmers in the congregation, but I'm sure a number of you have a good understanding of how the agricultural process works. And the people that Jesus spoke to probably knew the process pretty well also.

Jesus point is not that we don't know or can't know how the fields do what they do; rather, his point is that he cannot control all of the variables that go into farming. No matter how good a farmer is, he cannot get the crops to grow on their own. But when the time is ready, the farmer knows when to begin harvesting.

The kingdom of God is the same way. We cannot bring about the kingdom of God by our own effort, it depends on his timing. This does not mean that you should be uninterested in the coming of the kingdom just as the farmer is not uninterested in the coming of his crops, but you should recognize that God is in control of the coming of the kingdom.

But this idea that God ushers his kingdom in on his own time in his own terms is perplexing to us, and particularly to the Jews and the expectation of the Messiah. Like we've seen previously with the religious leaders, they sought to remain obedient to the Law so that they would continue to receive God's favor. And we've appreciated this zeal, for if only Israel would have fulfilled the Law after Joshua they would not have been exiled.

But this religious zeal to be obedient so as to usher in the coming of the kingdom is based on a misunderstanding of the kingdom, and Jesus addresses it with His next parable.

Looking to clarify what the kingdom of God was like, Jesus appeals to the mustard seed. This seed, as Jesus tells us, is a small seed which eventually grows into a large plant. So if you did not know what a mustard seed was and you saw it planted, you would be astonished to see how large it had become. So it is with the kingdom of God.

Jesus person and ministry take this model perfectly. Few were aware of the meaning of a little baby's birth in Bethlehem. He grew up in obscurity and no one thought anything particularly special about Jesus. We saw two weeks ago that his mothers and brothers and sisters came to him and told him to stop his preaching for they thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). And Jesus was from Nazareth, where we see the disciple Nathaniel asking, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45)

There was no indication that Jesus would make any significant difference, even to his friends and family. But in a radical twist, God decides to use this apparently weak vessel to bring the kingdom of God in. Being small and insignificant in the world's eyes did not matter, for God knew that Jesus was destined to grow larger than all the other garden plants. Through his humility Jesus not only outgrew all of the plants that the world believed would be greater, but he also provides rest and peace for those who look for peace in his branches.

The three parables may be summarized as follows:

First, the coming of the kingdom means that Jesus identity and work will be proclaimed at the right time

Second, the coming of the kingdom means that it will happen in God's time apart from human striving

Third, God uses the weak and apparently inconsequential to bring the kingdom of God in power to the world.

Mark then concludes this section of parables by reminding his readers that Jesus spoke with those that were able to hear him. Though, in his public ministry the meaning and intention of his ministry was unclear. To Jesus own disciples he gave insight and explained the parables

more fully, but it must not be assumed that they then comprehended everything that Jesus was teaching about the kingdom then.

On the same day that Jesus had spoken these parables (and explained them to the disciples), Jesus and his disciples traveled to the other side of the sea.

But with Jesus decision to move to the other side of the sea, they pushed off from the shore and were on their way to the other side. But on their way, a great storm rose up and water was coming into the boat. Not only was water coming into the boat, but Mark says that water was filling the boat, endangering the safety of everyone on board!

And throughout all of this commotion, we see Jesus asleep in the stern. For those with little to no experience with boats, the stern is the back portion of the boat. This type of situation is nearly comical. While this dangerous storm is raging outside, Jesus is fast asleep! So is Jesus just absolutely crazy? Why isn't he as worked up as his disciples, who will all share the same fate?

The Disciples certainly thought so and asked him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Now I do not wish to read too much into what is not in the text, but I do not imagine that this statement was said calmly or inquisitively. If you would imagine the scene with me for a second I can only guess what my reaction would be.

But Jesus response is amazing. He wakes up, and rebukes the wind! And He commands the sea, "Peace! Be still!"

What an amazing command! This is an outrageous command, to command nature itself?! Who can do that? But the disciples watched in amazement as the winds stopped and the waters calmed.

And Jesus chastises the disciples saying, "Why are you so afraid? Have you STILL no faith?"

What does Jesus mean by using the word still? Was he implying that he had calmed the winds before and the disciples forgot?

No, but what Jesus was referring to was the teaching that Jesus gave in the parables. Jesus is understandably frustrated because even though he explains the parables to the disciples, they still do not understand them. He had spent the day teaching them in parables and explaining to them the importance of how they heard the message, and yet they did not understand him.

As we will come to see later this behavior and inability to hear and comprehend continues. Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. James and John ask to sit at Jesus side in the

kingdom, a misunderstanding of what the kingdom was about. Peter later denies Jesus three times in 14:66-72. All of the disciples leave Jesus and scatter in fear.

But this is why Jesus warning of watching how we hear is so important. Those of you who know Scripture well, who would consider yourselves close to the Lord, watch how you hear! For when the moment of temptation comes, your listening skills will be demonstrated.

The problem is, when we do not correctly hear the Word of God, we miss the identity of the Son of God who has brought the Kingdom to the world. Too often, our expectations and understanding of who Christ is and the power that he possesses go unrealized. For the disciples, fear gripped them when they saw the power the Christ exerted even over the forces of nature and they asked "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

Most pastors when preaching through these texts break it into two sermons. One sermon on verses 21-34 and the other on verses 35-41. This is certainly a valid way of breaking the passages up, but we cannot miss how the parables and this occurrence on the Sea are connected.

As explained above, the parable spoke about the coming of the kingdom, and pointed to Jesus identity as the coming Messiah. Jesus stressed the importance of watching how we see, but Mark positions the example of the disciple's disbelief right afterwards to demonstrate even the hardheartedness of the Apostles.

The Apostles had the benefit of hearing the Word, and hearing the parables explained to them, yet they did not comprehend what they were hearing. They had their own understanding of what the kingdom of God would be like, and filtered Jesus teachings through their expectations. This can be seen in their reaction to the storm and more clearly in the further ministry of the Disciples.

They misunderstood the first parable because they did not recognize Jesus as the light of the world who was being veiled at the present time so that judgment would come. They believed he would come to restore Israel, but Jesus identity and the way he would accomplish this restoration was unheard by them.

They did not hear the second parable because they did not recognize the timing of God and that Christ was the appointed one to bring the harvest. Otherwise, their response would have been much less fearful and they would have trusted in Christ. This doesn't mean that they would not have had any concern, but we see their response was gripped with fear, and not trusting in Christ despite the threatening circumstances.

And the disciples misunderstood the third parable because they did not recognize that they could take their rest (as the birds) in Christ's branches. I should emphasize, I am not saying that the disciples should not have shown any concern at all, for that would be foolishness! But their reaction to the storm was one controlled by fear of nature, which demonstrates that they were more scared of nature than of the Creator. So we see that the disciples did not understand properly listen to Jesus explanation of the parables themselves

And you have advantages to hear the Word preached and explained, like the Disciples. You hear Biblical preaching every week. You get to hear the Word of God expounded, and in our churches we have the wealth of theological and biblical precision contained in the WCF and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. But if you do not allow your theology to point you to your need of redemption, you are not properly receiving the message. You may be hearing good theology and preaching, but see that it moves your heart to recognize Christ as Lord and King. For even if the disciple of the Lord could misunderstand, see that you hear the Word.

But your reaction may be, How can I be expected to do it if the disciples who heard him did not understand it!? The Scriptures can seem so confusing and no matter how hard you try you can't seem to make sense of it. But do not lose heart! There are three reasons why we should not despair in this situation though.

First, Jesus parables were confusing to those who were not concerned about knowing Him. They were seeking the coming of the kingdom in a powerful leader, so they could not make sense of the person of Jesus. But if you do not understand, do not lose heart, search out the meaning of Scripture! Realize that you trust in Jesus who IS the light and that He has promised the Holy Spirit to led us into all truth, which leads into the Second reason...

The Holy Spirit had not yet descended on believers to illuminate their hearts to the meaning of the Word. But after Pentecost, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to instruct believers in Jesus' teaching. In Christ, we have the Holy Spirit to help us understand the meaning of Scripture. This give us confidence in wrestling with Scripture

And Third, the key to understanding Scripture is to look for Jesus. Jesus is the focal point of all of his parables and all of Scripture. When you are reading Scripture, a way to understand the meaning of any passage is to ask, what does this teach me about Jesus? One of the problems of modern evangelicalism is to ask, "What does this passage say about me?"

There is nothing wrong to figuring out how a passage affects you, but the way we do that is seeing what the passage says about Jesus, and because we are made part of Christ through faith, that then has ramifications for us.

This is what it means to watch how we hear, Listen for Jesus and seek after him. The disciples and the crowds listened to Jesus, but they did not recognize that he was the Messiah come to rescue them from their sin. This indicates that they did not recognize the gravity of their sin and the power of Jesus to defeat it.

And while we think of the listening to the power of Jesus, we should remember Genesis 1:28 which reads, *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the Earth”*

But notice the authority of Jesus over the wind and the sea. Jesus is greater than Adam! And his power and authority supersede Adam’s authority over livestock, birds, and fish. Jesus is the King of every aspect of creation, and as such, we must attentively listen to our King...Who uses his power to watch over and protect all of those under his care.

So brothers and sisters, as we conclude, watch how you listen. Recognize your need for Jesus Christ. Know that Jesus has brought the kingdom in the timing of God, though appearing small and insignificant, has overcome the kingdom of Satan. And in difficult situations, remember the power of Christ, and how he conquered in humility and apparent defeat. When we listen properly to the Gospel, we will be able to face temptation and difficulty because of Christ’s power.

So do not hear the Word of God in vain, but watch how you hear. Let the Word of God bring you near to Jesus Christ, the meaning of the parables and all of Scripture.