

Same message. Same kingdom. Same Jesus. Different responses. *Wildly* different responses. *Completely* different responses.

Why? If this message is good news, why isn't that obvious to everyone? If God's kingdom really is breaking into our world, how can so many people not see it? If Jesus *is* the Son of God, as Mark has said, then why do some people think that he's an insane demoniac?

This is the first time in Mark's gospel where the *action* slows down, and Mark gives us a longer look at Jesus' *teaching*. We've seen his miracles and his debates, but now we get to hear from Him. And you might think that if people took the time to listen, then the questions would be answered and the debates would go away, but that doesn't happen. If anything, the secrets of the kingdom are even more hidden than before.

I'm going to work through the text by asking four questions, and I'll give them to you right at the start. First question: How can people respond so differently to Jesus? (v. 1-9). Second question: Why is the kingdom cloaked in parables and secrets? (v.10-12). The third question takes the first question deeper: what explains the different responses? (v.13-20). The fourth question develops the second question: What is this kingdom like? This question summarizes v. 21-32, but the question comes straight from Jesus in v. 30. Verses 33-34 then close the section by giving us Mark's commentary on Jesus' ministry of parables.

We've already seen that Jesus doesn't teach like the scribes; He teaches with authority. But here in Mark 4 we see that Jesus not only teaches in a different *manner*, He also teaches with a different *method*. Our text today is filled with kingdom parables, short stories or word pictures that both *reveal* and *conceal* the message about God's kingdom.

And the first parable that Jesus tells illustrates the different responses that Jesus gets, but it does so in a way that ensures that those differing responses continue. Jesus isn't troubleshooting; He's not trying to fix a *problem* with His ministry. Calling forth different responses is what His ministry is *designed* to do. And so he uses parables both as a way to *explain why* and to *make sure* that different types of people respond differently.

At a basic level, vv. 1-9 do nothing more than illustrate the realities of farming. But as a parable, for those who have ears to hear, there is more to be found. Parables are not explanations or illustrations. They are puzzles or riddles; they only give up their secrets after you've worked with them for a while.

And part of the work of understanding a parable *involves seeking wisdom from outside yourself*, recognizing in humility that you need help. That's what the disciples do in v. 10. Jesus answers them at two levels, *first* explaining his overall parable strategy, and *then* explaining the parable of the sower in particular.

Jesus says that those on the inside, those who come to Him for wisdom, have access to the secrets of God's kingdom. Those outside, who rely on their own wisdom, encounter the kingdom only in riddles and mysteries. Jesus quotes the Old Testament, basically making the point that a parable says: the kingdom is here, *if you want it*. Seek it here, and you will find it. But if you don't want to seek for it, if it's too much work or if it seems *demonic* to you, then you will *see* but not *perceive*, *hear* but not *understand*.

You won't understand unless you submit, yield, follow. These teachings about the kingdom bring you right up to the door marked "faith", and promise you that the *secrets* of the kingdom are on the other side. Now, the scribes believe that this door is the door to *Satan's* kingdom, so they're never going through. This means that they will never be able to understand, they will never turn and be forgiven. Understanding is a gift given *only* to faith.

Then Jesus explains the parable of the soils in such a way that the disciples can see how parables work. Parables themselves are like speech seeds, and they only "bear fruit" under certain conditions. Parables are like a code, and Jesus is giving them the key. It's not so much in the details of this parable, but in learning how to think "in parable", like another language. In parables, images and actions represent realities under another name, and sometimes a parable will contain a lot of allegory. The key is in identifying the hidden meaning *or meanings*, and that's what Jesus shares with those who trust Him enough to come and ask.

When Jesus explains the parable, He's giving us the answer to my third question, what explains the different reactions that Jesus is getting. The sower isn't identified, but it probably represents Jesus and His apostles. The seed is the Word of the gospel. The hearers are the different soils, and the parable is really about them. The first three soils prove unfruitful, the last three are very fruitful. The first three are *unfruitful* for different *reasons*, the last three are *fruitful* to different *degrees*.

The first soil describes those who are deceived and enslaved by Satan. Their hearts are so hard that Jesus' message doesn't even make a dent. The sower might as well be scattering seed on concrete. Nothing's gonna grow there.

The second soil is made up not of those who have hard hearts, but those who want *easy lives*. They see Jesus making people's lives easier, and so they run to Jesus, sprouting up quickly. But what they want *more* than Jesus is a life free from suffering, and Jesus doesn't offer that. In fact, He promises the opposite. So when persecution arises, they go just as quickly as they came.

The third soil doesn't want an *easy* life so much as a *fun* life. They love the world, and they are willing to go through some hardships if the worldly rewards are good enough. If Jesus really is going to be made king, then those who stay close to him might be handsomely rewarded! So they come, they stay, and they grow. But when the bigtime scribes start trashing His reputation, and later, when Jesus starts heading for the cross, not the crown, they rethink things, and ultimately, there is no fruit found there either.

The only fruitful life is the life of faith. Those who hear the Word and accept it for what it is are like good soil. They endure hardship and fix their eyes on what matters for eternity, and they bear abundant fruit, some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold, according to the measure of faith they've been given.

The point is that the seed *reveals* the nature of the soil. How you respond to Jesus' message shows what's going on in your heart, and how long you remain committed to following Jesus reveals what you really want. Jesus speaks in parables in order to shine light into the secret places of the heart (v.22). If you want an easy life more than you want Jesus, that'll come out. If you want a life of worldly pleasure more than Jesus, that'll become clear to everyone.

And that's what v. 24-25 speak to: if you respond to miracles and parables with faith, then the fullness of Jesus' ministry will be added to you. If you won't accept these things, then you won't be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.

Let's go deeper, focusing on this phrase: "Pay attention to what you hear." How do you respond to God's Word? Some people hear a sermon, don't like it, and immediately forget it. Some people like the sound of it, and think the preacher was a good speaker, but if they *apply* the sermon, then it'll hurt, and so they don't put what they heard into practice. Still others start obeying right away, and things look good...until the cares of the world catch up with them and following Jesus gets in the way of making money or satisfying other desires.

And on the positive side, even among those who hear and bear fruit, there are differences. Some of you really do love Jesus, but since you drifted off for the past ten minutes, you'll be lucky to bear thirtyfold fruit, while someone paying close attention will bear a hundredfold. Or, since most of the work of hearing a sermon really happens Mon-Fri through meditation and personal

application, you'll bear much more fruit if you keep coming back to the Word and asking more questions, like the disciples. They learned a lot more doing Q&A than they did during the sermon!

What makes the difference in responding to Jesus is not in the Word or the sower, but in the hearts of those who hear. There are those who respond out of self-interest and say "Jesus can get me what I want," and there are those who respond in faith and say "Jesus *is* what I want."

The kingdom is not for dilettantes or dabblers; the kingdom is for the faithful. This is an area where the seeker sensitive church *hasn't* imitated Jesus. Jesus doesn't reward curiosity or make His message easy to understand so that more people will come. He doesn't *want* to be followed by a crowd of non-serious, selfish people, and so He deliberately says and does things that cost him followers and scare people away, so that only the faithful who are really seeking the kingdom remain. If you came to see a show, you'll soon stop coming. If you followed Jesus for a free meal, you'll soon fall away.

But if you came to repent of your sins and receive forgiveness so that you can enter into the kingdom of God, then nothing will drive you away, not the confusing parables, not the scandalous actions, not the danger of offending the religious leaders and getting kicked out of the synagogue, not even the death of Jesus Himself. *That's faith*, and that's what God wants, and that's why Jesus speaks in parables.

And because the kingdom is about faith, it looks different than other kingdoms. It doesn't come like Rome, overpowering and conquering, and then slowly bending everyone to its iron will. God's kingdom is about persuading through faith, not coercion through the sword. It looks more like a sprouting seed than a marching army. In fact, it looks like a tiny little mustard seed, a man with a few followers making a stir out in the backwaters of Galilee. *That's* the great and unstoppable kingdom of God? Yes, it is. It's a kingdom of slow maturation leading to a decisive harvest. It's a kingdom of small and humble beginnings that grows bigger than anyone imagined, until it overshadows the entire garden.

So why doesn't everyone see the kingdom coming? Because it takes faith to see it, and without faith, it's impossible to please God. He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him, just like a parable rewards those who diligently search out wisdom from the One who hides the treasures of the kingdom in the soil of secret words.

May God give us all ears to hear.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*