

“How’s Your Hearing?”

Mark 4:1-34

October 24, 2010

One of the biggest surprises that I had as a young Christian came from my friends’ reaction to my conversion. I was sixteen years old when I trusted in Christ as my Lord, and I was so excited by my experience with Christ. I knew that he had changed me and that I wasn’t the same. So naturally I started telling my friends about this new relationship with God. Why wouldn’t I want to share that kind of good news with other people? I was sure that they would want to hear about what I had discovered and that they would want to know Christ like I had. Why wouldn’t they? Why would anyone not want to experience the love of God in their lives?

But to my complete surprise my friends did not respond the way that I had expected them to. Some of them showed some interest, but other people didn’t respond that way. Some of them listened to me and indicated that they were happy for me, but that was as far as their interest went. Others were polite to me, but I could tell that they thought I had gone off the deep end!

I couldn’t figure out why they responded the way that they did. More than that though, I wondered why God didn’t do more to help my friends to understand what I was trying to tell them about Christ. I was doing everything that I could to spread the good news about Jesus. Why wasn’t God doing more? Didn’t he want people to come to faith in Jesus and experience his love?

Don’t you sometimes wonder about that too? Why does the good news of Jesus Christ not spread faster and have a greater impact all over the world?

We are not the first people to ask questions like that. Those questions go all the way back to the 1st century and to the time of Jesus himself. Just imagine yourself as one of Jesus’ first disciples. You have been observing this man named Jesus, and slowly you have come to the conclusion that he is the long-awaited Messiah. He is the Chosen One of God. Jesus is the person that your people have been waiting for and praying for. Now he’s come! He is going to establish the kingdom of God once and for all on earth! You’re convinced of that!

But what is so obvious to you is not so obvious to others. Many people are attracted by his miraculous healings, but that is as far as their interest goes. The religious leaders oppose him. They even accuse him of coming from the devil, and they start to think about ways that they can kill him. And his own family doesn’t support him. They wonder if he might be going insane! Why does Jesus meet with such mixed reactions? Why doesn’t God do more to show people who Jesus really is?

We’re talking this morning about expectations. What should you and I expect from God—particularly when it comes to the spread of the good news about what Jesus has done for us through his death and resurrection? It’s important that we find an answer to that question. If we expect something from God that he has not promised, then we are inevitably going to end up disappointed. How does God work in this world? How is the good news about his Son Jesus being spread? What should you and I expect from our efforts to tell others about Christ?

Jesus addresses that precise issue in his parables.

The Parables

People often think of the parables as nice little stories that contain some simple and easily understood lessons about God. Picture Jesus teaching Sunday School to second graders. He uses lots of stories to get his point across. That’s the way that it is with his parables.

Hold on! Not so quickly! Let’s look at what Jesus himself says about the purpose and the result of his parables.

¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ 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 ¹² so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,

and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (Mark 4:10-12)

That’s not what we expect Jesus to say, is it? Jesus says that he tells these parables so that the majority of people will *not* understand what he is talking about! In fact, he says that if they did understand, “they might turn and be forgiven.” Jesus apparently does not want them to be forgiven! What do you make of that?

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, there are two things that we need to keep in mind. First, notice that in verse 12 Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah. These are not Jesus’ own words. They are Isaiah’s. Isaiah uses strong and uncompromising language. But if you take the time to read all of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, you’ll find that Isaiah actually did want the people of his day to turn to God and be forgiven. But here’s the point: Isaiah also knew that they were so entrenched in their sinful ways that they would not turn to God and be forgiven. So Isaiah uses a figure of speech called hyperbole or exaggeration in order to get his point across. Jesus does the same. In order to emphasize and highlight how total the rejection of their message is going to be, Isaiah and Jesus speak as if the goal of their ministry was to be rejected.

That understanding of Jesus’ words is supported by a second thing that we should notice. Throughout this passage there is a strong emphasis on the need to hear. In Mark 4:1-34 the Greek word for *hear* is used thirteen times. In our English translations the word is usually translated as “hear,” but sometimes it is rendered as “listen” or “understand.” But it is the same Greek word. The Parable of the Sower begins in verse 3 with a command: “Listen!” It ends in verse 9 with another imperative. “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” That instruction is repeated in verse 23, and verse 24 begins with “Consider carefully what you hear.”

A parable is not a nice story designed to entertain us. A parable is a story that makes us think and then requires a response. Think of parables as political cartoons. What are political cartoons? They are cartoons, right? They show funny little pictures of well-known people doing strange things. They’re cartoons! But political cartoons are designed to elicit a response, aren’t they? If they are making fun of someone you don’t like, they’re great! But if they’re making fun of someone you admire, you get angry! Political cartoons make us think and respond. So do Jesus’ parables.

That’s why Jesus gives his parables and then says, “Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.” How are you going to respond? What will you do with Jesus’ message? Will you respond positively and follow Jesus more than ever before, or will you respond negatively because he has not lived up to your expectations?

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

The Parable of the Sower

The Parable of the Sower is probably one of the best known of Jesus’ stories. It speaks directly to the expectations that we have about how the message of God’s love is going to be received. I’d summarize the message of the parable this way: *God’s kingdom will not be consistently embraced, but it will be fruitful.*

God’s kingdom will not be consistently embraced. Some people reject the message of Christ immediately. Others receive it with great joy. We like to say that they are really “on fire” for the Lord. But later on we can’t find a spark of spiritual life left in them. Others last longer but gradually their walk with God gets choked out by “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth” (Mark 4:19). Do you hear the message? God’s kingdom will not be consistently embraced.

Every time I read this parable, I’m struck by how extraordinarily realistic Jesus is. I think back to August of 1970. I had been a Christian for just one year, and God gave me an opportunity to spend a month as part of a work crew out at a Christian camp in Colorado. There were about twenty-five of us on that work crew. By the end of the month all of us on that work crew were flying high spiritually.

The night before we left we had our final crew meeting, and Don, the director of the camp, came to talk to us. I’ll never forget what he said. We were all supercharged thinking that nothing could ever stop us in our walk with God. Don very calmly said to us, “Based on our experience with other work

crews we know that most of you will fall away from the faith.” There was dead silence in that room. That was the last thing that any of us expected him to say.

After we had all returned to our homes, letters got sent back and forth. The news started to trickle out. Don’s prediction had been right on target. And it only took a few months for it to come true! That’s what Jesus is talking about in the Parable of the Sower. God’s kingdom will not be consistently embraced.

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Make sure that you also hear the other part of Jesus’ message. It does contain an encouraging message. God’s kingdom will be fruitful. “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).

God’s kingdom will not be consistently embraced. Don’t expect that, or you will end up terribly disappointed. On the other hand, there can be great fruitfulness! You and I can be fruitful in our service to God if we will persevere through all the trials and all the temptations.

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

The Parable of the Lamp on a Stand

Jesus continues with four more parables. They are all short; they are all positive; and they all contain messages that we need to take to heart.

²¹ He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.” (Mark 4:21-22)

How would you summarize the message of that parable? Here’s my summary: *God’s kingdom will be made known.*

Think of the early disciples. Jesus told that small group of fickle and fallible disciples that they were to take the message about him to all nations so that people of every tribe and language could become his disciples. Talk about an impossible expectation! How ridiculous! Why even try? But we know that through the power of the Holy Spirit the message about Jesus did spread around the world.

Sometimes we feel the same way those early Christians must have felt. You’ve told a member of your family or a friend about Jesus and what he can do for them, and there’s no response. Not even the slightest show of interest. You gently and respectfully share your faith with that person time and time again. No response! So why try any more?

Because Jesus says that the light will shine! God’s kingdom will be made known. I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon how my friends responded when I first became a Christian. I think of one girl, in particular, with whom I had shared my faith. I got a letter from her back in 1995. She writes, “It was 25 years ago this fall that Fred introduced to Life.” She had trusted in Christ that night I had shared the gospel with her, and she’s still walking with the Lord. God’s kingdom will be made known on this earth!

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

The Parable of the Measure

²⁴ “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵ Those who have will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Mark 4:24-25)

In this life you and I may not get any rewards for our walk with God. That is undeniable for the many Christians around the world who are today being persecuted for their faith. Here in our country vocal opposition to faith in Jesus Christ seems to be on the rise. Our families may turn against us, and our friends may make fun of us. Sometimes you wonder if it’s worth it.

But this parable teaches us an important lesson: *God’s kingdom will bring rewards.* It will be worth to walk with Christ and live for God no matter what happens to us in this world. “Those who have will be given more.” God’s kingdom will bring rewards.

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29)

God’s kingdom will come in ways beyond all human understanding. That’s the message of the Parable of the Growing Seed.

When I read that parable, I think of one of the great untold stories of the 20th century. The secular press totally missed this one. At the beginning of the 20th century ninety percent of all Christians lived in North America, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. Ninety percent! One hundred years later seventy percent of all Christians lived outside of those four places. The number of Christians in the non-Western world went from ten percent to seventy percent! Today there are more Christians worshipping in Anglican churches in Nigeria than there are in the North American, Britain, and Europe combined. More people worship Jesus Christ in China than in all of Western Europe.¹

Huge changes have taken place in the last one hundred years. The geographical center of the Christian faith has moved from the northern to the southern hemisphere. That has never been true before! God’s kingdom is coming. Whether the modern media is aware of it or not—whether anybody is aware of it, God’s kingdom is coming! God’s kingdom will come in ways beyond all human understanding.

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The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.” (Mark 4:30-32)

Do hear the message of the parable? *God’s kingdom will eventually come in unmistakable triumph.*

God’s work in this world may have started off in the 1st century as a small and insignificant movement. Even today God’s people may be persecuted by their opponents, or they may appear to be ineffective in changing the world. But be assured that when God is done, his kingdom will be, as Jesus says, “the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.” Or as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians, “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:10-11a). God’s kingdom will eventually come in unmistakable triumph.

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Conclusion

In this life all of our expectations will not be met. There will be times when we have questions about what God is doing. Don’t be surprised at that. There will be times when God’s work in this world receives tremendous setbacks. But we do not need to despair. Jesus assures us that the kingdom of God is coming. Sometimes we see God moving in dramatic ways. Sometimes we just catch glimpses of what God is doing. Sometimes we wonder if he is doing anything at all. But be assured that the lamp will shine and the seed will grow. The kingdom of God will come. We have Jesus’ promise on that.

“Anyone who has ears to hear, let them hear.”

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, “An Upside-Down World,” *Christianity Today* (January 2007), 42.