



## THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Study Guide Full  
Mark 4:1-34  
September 22, 2019

Our extended journey into the nature of discipleship continues as we approach a large portion of text from Mark 4, which is the three sower-soil-seed parables.

In fact, there is probably enough material here for three studies; yet we would do well to get an overall sense of the nature of discipleship by asking of each portion of text:

*What does this parable say about the nature of God's kingdom, and what does it ask of me in my participation in that kingdom?*

*4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.*

*2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." 9 Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." 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 perceiv-*

ing, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

## Mark 4:1-34

Notes:

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 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.”

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. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” 24 “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. 25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

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.”

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.” 33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

## Commentary Notes:

**vv. 1-12.** The link between the water and discipleship continues in these verses, as, for the fourth time in as many chapters, Jesus makes a lake the setting of his teaching regarding discipleship.

He begins this teaching with the command, “Listen” (Ἀκούετε). This is one of only two times that this verb is used as an imperative in all of Mark’s gospel, a fact suggesting the particularity of the word’s use here: “listen” undoubtedly echoes the formative, fundamental *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, that great verse of Israelite identity, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

So it is that our Lord speaks a fundamental word about discipleship and the kingdom of God through 3 seed parables, beginning with the parable of the 4 sowings. Note that the bad soils and the good soil coexist; there is nothing wrong with either the sower or the seed. The emphasis is clearly on the supernatural abundance as the kingdom of God falls upon those with ears to hear.

**vv. 11-20.** In explaining the parable of the soils, Jesus makes clear that those who respond positively to

## Discussion Questions:

*Discuss:* Knowing what you already know about Israel’s expectations of Jesus as Messiah—as a powerful political liberator—discuss: How do you think the original audience of Israel would have heard the parable of the soils? What sermon comments did Anthony offer in this regard?

*Meditate:* With which soil do you most identify?

*Confess:* How, in the past few weeks, has your heart looked more like rocky or thorny soil than good soil? Confess, and ask for the Spirit’s revitalization.

*Reflect:* We usually consider the parable of the sower from an individual perspective. What does it look like if we consider it from a congregational perspective? In what ways are we, collectively, good soil? In what ways might we be rocky soil?

*Discuss:* How would you respond to the critique that Jesus is deliberately obfuscating his message? What is the context of this teaching in Mark?

*Study:* Read the Old Testament quotation from Isaiah and its surrounding verses, Isaiah 6: 8-13. How does Jesus change slightly the Old Testament verses? Why do you think Jesus quotes these verses in Mark? What is the literary context of the original passage?

*Discuss:* What does Jesus’ explanation of the parable have to say about the nature of Christian discipleship?

good news of God's kingdom will be fruitful believers, blessed by the yields of God in ways beyond human calculations. This is a truth we must actively remember in light of the reality of resistance to Christ's teaching, both in the ancient world and in our modern one.

**vv. 21-25.** These five sayings about revelation and response, which likely were originally individual Jewish proverbs, continue to speak of the reign of God, stressing that the real purpose of Jesus's teaching of the kingdom is revelation. Note that "the measure" most likely refers contextually to how we regard Jesus and his teaching.

**vv. 26-29.** The kingdom begins with mere seeds, but flourishes into grain and a full harvest—such is the nature of the irrepressible growth of God's word and kingdom.

**vv. 30-34.** Whereas the Jews were used to describing God and his rule in language of lofty cedars (as in Ezekiel 17 and 31), here we have language of the mustard seed, the seed of what was essentially a kitchen-garden shrub. So it is that the mighty cedar has given way to the meek mustard seed; and yet, it this mustard seed plant is irresistible in its fully flowering form.

*Reflect:* How has God produced abundance in your life in unexpected ways, especially when you have striven to follow him with "ears to hear"?

*Pray:* Pray, in Augustine's words in his *Sermons*, that we "be unwilling to have a 'hard heart'...a 'thin layer of soil'...[but] to be good ground."

*Discuss:* How do these verses describe the nature of discipleship?

*Discern:* In the upcoming weeks, how can you be sharing the truths about the kingdom of God to reveal the light of our Lord?

*Pray:* Pray that we, FBC, would truly have ears to hear the Spirit's words of God's power for us.

*Reflect:* How does the imperceptibility of the growth of the kingdom challenge you this week?

*Reflect:* How does the "all by itself" growth of the soil and grain encourage you this week?

*Discern:* How do we translate the truths of God as mustard seed into language that is understandable and helpful in our surrounding neighbourhoods?

*Meditate:* How is this word that the kingdom of God is coming in its full glory, but in ways we might not expect, speaking to you this week?

*Pray:* Pray that we, FBC, would fully flower, embracing Vancouver in the shade of our hospitality.