

THE REAL JESUS
A Series on the Book of Mark
“How to Listen”
Mark 4:1-25
New City Church of LA
October 26, 2008
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I. Vision of New City

Welcome to New City. We are a brand new multi-ethnic multi-socioeconomic come-as-you-are, in other word, inclusive, church right here in downtown LA. We are an inclusive church because we are a gospel-centered church.

Our vision statement says that our vision is to be an inclusive gospel-centered community. The reason that we are inclusive is not because we think everyone is okay, but because we believe in the gospel which says that everyone is messed up. You’re messed up and I am messed up, but God loves us more than we can ever imagine. And when we allow the love of God to get deep into our hearts, our lives start to change from the inside out. That’s what we mean when we say we are an inclusive gospel-centered community.

II. Introduction to the Series on Book of Mark

We are in the middle of a series called THE REAL JESUS, a series on the Book of Mark. We are looking at Mark because Mark is arguably the best place to go for the real Jesus, the raw, unadulterated, unfiltered, straight-up Jesus.

III. Sermon

A guy was really frustrated because his wife refused to admit that she had a hearing problem. One day he asked his doctor for advice how to convince his wife that she has this problem.

The doctor told him that when he got home he was to confirm the problem by opening the front door and from there asking his wife what’s for dinner. Then the doctor said, if she doesn’t answer, move closer to the kitchen. Repeat the question again, and if she still doesn’t answer, move right up to her ear and whisper in it, “What’s for dinner,

honey?” This way, the doctor assured him, she’ll have to admit she has the problem.

So the man raced home and opened the front door. “What’s for dinner, honey?” he asked. When there was no reply he moved closer to the kitchen and asked again. “What’s for dinner, honey?” No reply. When he looked into the kitchen, sure enough, there she was. So he tiptoed over to her and whispered in her ear, “What’s for dinner, honey?”

Immediately she turned and looked straight at him: “For the 3rd time, I said we’re having Spaghetti!”

Often times, we pray to God and think that God has a hearing problem. How come he’s not answering my prayers? Is he really listening to my prayers? Maybe we’re the ones with a hearing problem. God is talking to us, but we are just not listening to God.

Of course, there are a lot of ways to listen to God.

- Sometimes, he speaks to us through that still small voice of the Spirit or a thought that comes into our mind
- Sometimes, he speaks to us through a friend or a family member
- Sometimes, he speaks to us as we seek him in prayer and solitude

But, the surest way that he speaks to us is through the word of God as reveal in the Bible.

- The Bible is like the software for God communicating with us. If we don’t embrace the word of God as revealed in the Bible, it’s hard to discern God’s quiet voice in our lives.
- The Bible is like a trellis for God’s communication to us. If we don’t embrace the word of God as revealed in the Bible, it’s hard for us to grow closer to God and hear what he is saying to us.

There is one parable that Jesus told in which he answered the question of how to listen to the word of God. I want to look at that parable today: the parable of the sower. This is

my favorite parable in the Bible because it had and still has a huge impact on my life. It completely changed the way I approach the Bible. It created this thirst in my Spirit to understand the word of God.

Before, my approach to the Bible was that I didn't expect to understand it. After all, it was written a few thousand years ago. And I was too lazy to try to figure things out myself. Amazingly, though, I had this sense that I read it and I don't really need to read it again. Kind of like a novel. Once you read it, you don't feel compelled to read it again. And even when I read it, it sounded like the same old stories. Then, the Spirit of God led me to the parable of the sower and I learned how to listen to the word of God in a new way.

A. The Parable of the Secret of the Kingdom of God

Let's go to Mark 4:1ff:

Let me give you the context of the passage. This was still the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. In fact, this was the first of many parables he would tell. He had healed and preached with authority in a way no one had. The word about Jesus had been spreading. He was getting increasingly popular. More and more people wanted to see Jesus.

As I read the passage, try to place yourself there. I would like all of us to travel back in time to a lake that Jesus taught at.

Let's read Mark 4:1-2.

1 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:

Who are you in the story? Where are you from? Why are you here?

- Maybe you live in Galilee, and you heard about Jesus and walked several days to come hear Jesus preach.
- Maybe you saw some people walking towards the lake and you decided to follow the crowd to see what's going on.

- Maybe you heard that Jesus could perform all kinds of miracles and wanted to see if he could do a miracle for you.

In a similar way, many of you are here for a variety of reasons.

- Some of you are here because you want to worship God and hear the word of God preached.
- Some of you might be here because you heard that New City is a happening church and you want to check out the action.
- Some of you are here because someone invited you to come or because it's just a part of your routine.
- Some of you are here because you are in pain, you are lonely, and you sense that you need a miracle in your life and you wanted to see if Jesus could heal you from your illness, emptiness, or loneliness.

Let's see what Jesus said in the story and let's see what Jesus is saying to us today.

Read verses 3-9.

3"Listen! (note that he starts out by saying Listen just like the Shema, which is the most memorized verse in the OT for Jews—it starts out by saying “Shema—which means Listen or Hear O Israel!) **A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."**

9Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

He ended the story by saying: **He who has ears to hear, let him hear!**

The next verse says “When he was alone.” So, that was it. That was the end of his sermon. What would your reaction be if you were there?

- Some of you might say: Say what? Did I come all the way here to hear this? What's he talking about? Sounds cool but don't really get it. You might go away pondering, what did he mean?

Let's see what happened in the story.

Read Mark 4:10-12.

10When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11He told them, (and this is very very interesting statement) "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. (who is this "you?" the people he is talking to—the twelve and the others around him) But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12so that,
 "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
 and ever hearing but never understanding;
 otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

He said to the Twelve and others who came to ask him about the parable that they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God while those on the outside (the crowd) were not given the secret of the kingdom of God. Jesus groups people into two categories: one group that has the secret of the kingdom and the rest that do not.

What is this secret of the kingdom of God? He said that the secret HAS BEEN GIVEN to you—so, it can't be the meaning of the parable because he didn't give them the meaning yet. It has to be something that this "you" group has that others don't. What is it? It is how they listened to Jesus. The secret of the Kingdom of God is how we listen.

There is a dramatic difference between how the insiders (the people who have the secret) listened to Jesus and how the outsiders (the people who don't have the secret) listen to Jesus.

- If you look at the description of the outsiders—Jesus says that they see but not perceive, they hear but never understand. You get the impression that they are not really listening.
- Those people who had the secret of the Kingdom of God sought out Jesus with honest questions. They wanted to understand what he was saying. They cared enough about what he was saying to seek to understand what he was saying.

- How many of you have gone skydiving? Let's say instead of doing a tandem jump, you're going to do a solo jump. So, you're receiving instructions before the jump. Now, if you don't understand the instructions, like which string to pull and when, you're not going to be blasé about stuff. Because your life was at stake, you will listen actively. You will ask questions.
- But on the other hand, when you're channel surfing, your level of listening is way down. You are completely passive and if you don't catch what's going on, you're not going to try to figure it out because it just doesn't matter that much.
- That was the difference. **Those who had the secret of the Kingdom of God were active listeners; they sought to deepen their understanding of Jesus. They were intellectually honest and asked questions!**
- The rest were just channel surfing. Passive couch potato hearers.
- I want to ask you: Do you have the secret of the Kingdom of God? Are you active listener or a channel surfing listener?
- You might ask why Jesus spoke in parables to the outsiders. Why could he not be more clear? In verse 21, he explains:

"Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? 22For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."
- This secret of the kingdom of God is not something that God is trying to hide. Verses 21-23 say that no one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; you light it so that others can see. This secret is not meant to be something that God is trying to hide from people, it is something that he wants everyone to come to understand. But, if he wants you to know that the only way to understand is to actively listen to Jesus, ask questions, and engage him.

B. The Illustration of the Secret of the Kingdom of God: Four Ways to Listen

Jesus then goes on to illustrate the secret of the Kingdom of God by explaining the parable and the four soils representing four ways to hear the word of God. Let's go on to verse 13ff:

13Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? (Jesus is saying here that this parable is about understanding all parables; in fact, it is about how we listen to and understanding the word of God) 14The farmer sows the word. (so, the seed represents the word of God)

The first type of soil represents indifferent hearers.

15Some 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.

They simply didn't care. They heard the word of Jesus but it went through one ear and out the other. They came and left without ever understanding who Jesus was or what he had to offer. They totally missed out.

I believe there are such people here today—people who hear the word of God in the Bible and as preached by this preacher, but the word of God just goes from one ear and out the other.

- Grace tells me that sometimes I don't hear her. In fact, sometime she catches red handed: Kevin, what did I just say? I often try to make something up but the fact is that I was preoccupied with something and I didn't hear what Grace was saying. I am a typical guy. I can only do one thing at a time. In the same way, I think we don't hear God because we are preoccupied with something.
- What are we so preoccupied with that we don't hear God?
 - Maybe we're so busy that we don't take the time to understand God. We go through the motion of listening, but we don't really care that much. We even come to church, but our brain goes on inactive mode, somewhere between sleep and consciousness—the twilight zone. When we read the Bible, we're either daydreaming in that nothing is registering in our brain or we're too lazy

to read it in depth. We might even think that we read everything in the Bible and we know everything, but we have no depth.

- Maybe we have certain preconceived ideas that are preventing us from hearing God. Maybe, the old grid I talked about a couple of week ago?

It is interesting that Jesus says that people are indifferent to the word of God because of the work of Satan. Look at verse 15. According to the Scripture, we don't care because of Satan working in our lives. Isn't that a little over dramatic, you might ask? No. It is not what **I** am saying. It is what **Jesus** said. One pastor pointed out: Satan is working overtime to keep you from understanding the word of God.

Did these people have the secret of the kingdom of God? The answer is clearly NO. They did not have a heart of desire to deepen their understanding of the word of God and their relationship with Jesus and be a disciple of Jesus.

The second type of soil represents shallow listeners.

Let's go on to verse 16ff:

16Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

They heard the word and received it with joy but had no root. These people were shallow in their understanding.

- They are like a guy in the crowd that thinks that what Jesus said was really cool, and gets all excited, but he does not really seek to deepen his understanding or his relationship with Jesus, and ultimately walks away and goes back home without following Jesus.
- They are like a guy who get all excited after a retreat, but does nothing to deepen his understanding or his relationship with Jesus.
- They are like people that come to church seeking only emotional inspiration. But, they never study the Bible or take a step towards seriously growing their relationship with Jesus. They don't ask questions. They don't really understand. What they understand is pretty shallow. They don't want to develop a closer

relationship with God. They don't want to be a fully devoted follower of God. They don't want to be a disciple. After the initial buzz is gone, nothing happens. They're always looking for the next buzz.

- When it's no longer becomes cool or it becomes inconvenient, then they fall away. Following God is about getting something from God. It's ultimately about us. If it starts to cost us something to follow him, we start walking away.

Does this sound familiar? Is your Christian walk like this? On Sunday, you come to New City and you accept the word of God with joy but you have no root? Your heart of desire for Jesus is so shallow that the word has no impact on your life whatsoever. Are you tired of living this kind of life? Do you want to be a fully devoted follower of God?

- The solution to this problem is to become like the Bereans that Luke describes in Acts 17:11. They hear Paul preaching, and are eager to hear the word. But they don't stop there:

Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. (NASB)

- You see what they did? They heard the word, they listened attentively to Paul -- and then they searched the Scriptures themselves to check Paul out! Their understanding of these truths deepened, indeed the truths became part of them because of their effort to understand.
- So as you hear, work hard to internalize these truths! Make them a part of you, so that they can take root and bear fruit in your life.

Do you think the shallow hearers had the secret of the kingdom of God? I don't think they did. I think they did not come to Jesus to deepen their understanding, their relationship and become a disciple.

The third type of soil represents those who were worldly hearers. Let's go on to verse 18ff:

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.

These people heard the word of God and may even have decided that they were going to live their lives differently but found that the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things make it too difficult.

- Instead of embracing the word of God and the beauty of Jesus, we start to embrace alternate saviors—money, success, and other things like approval from others, respect, family, marriage, all of which are good things but when they become our primary ambition (instead of our secondary ambitions), they become destructive.

We have a certain amount of understanding but then say:

"Let's be practical. Surely God doesn't mean for me to do that! I might lose my job!"

"Yes, I can obey God in that area -- after I make enough money and attain financial security."

"Wow, that's such a noble sentiment -- but it's simply not practical. Maybe people 2000 years ago could act that way, but it doesn't work at the dawn of the 21st century."

Have you responded to God's truth in this way at times? I certainly have. We can all come up with a zillion reasons why living according to God's word is not practical. Living by the Spirit means after we listen, we obey God whether that obedience makes sense from a human point of view or not. Living by the Spirit means we find our security, our satisfaction, our accomplishment, and our self-worth in God alone.

I asked myself why worldly hearers are so weak to temptation. I think one of the reasons is that we don't realize the full extent of pleasure we get from being a fully devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. In our moments of weakness, the devil actually makes

us think that stuff that we are tempted by will give us more pleasure than being in the presence of God. That's absolutely ridiculous!

Do you think these people had the secret of the kingdom of God? I think most of them did not seek to deepen their understanding and follow Jesus and become his disciple.

Finally, there were those who were active hearers like seeds sown on good soil.

Verse 20 says:

20Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."

In Matthew's version of the story, it says, "hears the word and understands it." What was the secret of these people? Why did they produce fruits while other did not? I believe they knew how to listen to the word of God. They came to Jesus and wanted to take another step. They wanted to deepen their understanding. They wanted to be a disciple.

In the same way, I believe there are people here today who want to take the next step. You are tired of shallow Christianity. You are tired of being entangled by worries and temptations of life. You are saying: I want to follow you, Jesus. I want to deepen my understanding and my relationship with you. I need to do something radical in the way I respond to the word of God.

The secret of producing a crop of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown is in seeking Jesus to take the next step—getting on that continuum of discipleship. You don't just want to stay where you are. You want to go beyond your comfort zone and become a disciple of Jesus. When you do that, God will begin to bear fruit of the Spirit in your life. God will change your life. He will transform your life. God will tell you the purpose for your life, develop spiritual gifts in you, and start using you as a vessel for his kingdom.

For some of you, taking the next step means you have to get serious about Bible study. It's time to say no to shallow understanding of the word of God. It's time to say, I want to deepen my understanding of the word of God. I want to be a seeker. I want to come to Jesus and honestly ask him questions. No more skipping over stuff in the Bible

that I don't understand. I'm going to ask questions. I need to ask him some of the tough questions of my life. I challenge you to enter into this journey with God, and I believe that as you do so, God will begin an amazing transformation in your life. God will produce fruit in your life.

You should note the beauty of this parable. There're at least three layers to the parable. The content of the parable that Jesus is telling, the way he is telling the story, and the way we are reading the story all force the hearer to become like one of the four soils.

C. How we listen to God Determines our Growth

I want to conclude by looking at verses 24-25:

In verse 24, Jesus said;

“Consider carefully what you hear,” (this could be translated “how” you hear) **“with the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.”**

What is Jesus saying? Is he saying the rich get richer and the poor get poorer?

- Jesus calls us to look at our listening.
- If we hear the word of God with a heart that seeks to deepen our understanding of his word and our relationship with Jesus, and become his disciples--in other words, having the secret of the kingdom of God--then you will produce. More desire for understanding and discipleship will be given. This will lead us into the road of wholeness and healing.
- But if we don't have this seeking heart, even what we think we have will be taken away from us. The word of God will have less and less impact on our lives.

So, let us examine our hearts. Do we hear the word of God with a heart that seeks to deepen our understanding of God's word, grow in our relationship with Jesus, and become a true disciple?

Why is how we listen so important? Because the gospel is ultimately not about what we do, but what he has done for us on the cross. And that our identity is that of his sons and daughters. We don't have to earn it. It is a gift. We have to listen to God's love in our hearts. That's the most important thing.