



## Sermon Notes

**Term** – Autumn 2018

**Series** – Mark 4:1-20

**Gathering & Date** – the 5, 4 November

**Title** – “Waste ... want not ...”

**Preacher** – Paul Langham

**Readings** – Mark 4:1-20 (taken from Who? – see separate pdf)

### **Main message of this talk in one sentence** –

If we speak only partial truth and give the easiest answer, we will not do justice to Jesus or his teaching

### **Notes** –

#### **1. A little context**

In Mark 4 the parable of the sower is followed by 3 others

- The lamp on the stand in which Jesus explains that

*whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open (v. 22)*

- The growing seed in which Jesus speaks of another farmer who sows seed – all he has to do is watch and wait: the power of growth is in the seed itself
- The mustard seed in which Jesus sets up the contrast in size and impact and blessing of God's kingdom compared with its beginning

We may be 'familiar' with this parable and already 'know' the meaning

- The farmer is Jesus (or perhaps God)
- The seed is the 'word' (Luke adds 'of God')
- The ground represents the 4 types of human response to the word

The focus then becomes the challenge to us to sort out our soil!

In other words, a parable about the Kingdom has become all about us ...

The gospel, the good news of Jesus, is for us, but not ultimately about us. The great biblical narrative is that God is King – we are the beneficiaries of that, it's true, but we do well to remember it's not all ultimately about us.

#### **2. Parables**

3 of the gospels – Matthew, Mark & Luke – are called 'synoptic' (Greek for 'having the same viewpoint') because they are so similar. John is very different (e.g. John contains no parables).

When Matthew, Mark & Luke all record the same incident or teaching, we should prick up our ears – it nearly always denotes a 'shift' moment in the ministry of Jesus.

Matthew, Mark & Luke record 3 categories of parable

1. Parables of the Kingdom – they come before the feeding of 5000 (i.e. before Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9 e.g. The Sower (Mark 4)
2. Parables of Grace – between the feeding of 5000 & Jesus' entry to Jerusalem (i.e. before Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19) e.g. The Lost Sheep (Luke 15)
3. Parables of Judgement – almost all between Jesus' entry to Jerusalem & his arrest e.g. The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25)

Matthew, Mark & Luke all place the Parable of the Sower at the start of the main block of Jesus' use of parables (Matthew 13, Mark 4 & Luke 8) – in Mark, Jesus as good as says this parable is the key to all the others

*Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?' (13)*

### **3. Why the hidden nature of the Kingdom?**

Simply because everyone who listened to Jesus knew precisely what the Kingdom of God meant ... and all were precisely wrong. They were expecting an earthly, military uprising to overthrow Roman rule and restore the physical material glory of Israel at the time of Solomon.

Jesus needed to find a way to show just how radically different the Kingdom of God will actually be.

This also explains why when Jesus heals someone or casts out a demon from someone, he tells them to keep it quiet. In John 6.15 we read that the crowd wanted to make Jesus 'king by force' and Jesus had no intention of being that sort of king.

### **4. What is a parable?**

Parable is a composite word, constructed from 'para' and 'ballein' = 'to throw alongside'. Parables throw familiar images alongside the mysterious realities of the Kingdom to help us think differently about the Kingdom.

If you're thinking, 'Why speak in riddles?' you're in good company. That's exactly what the disciples ask Jesus.

In reply, Jesus quotes Isaiah to explain that it's so his hearers

*may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"*

That doesn't sound great! But hang on a minute

- Mark tells us that Jesus 'taught' the crowds through parables, and
- In the parable of the lamp which follows on immediately, Jesus says nothing that is hidden will not be revealed

In other words, we see once again that God never hides things from but for us. This inspired my 'doughnut' image in my retelling of this chapter, and also my conviction that when Jesus quotes Isaiah, he's not frowning and wagging his finger, explaining how he's cruelly preventing people from understanding, but sadly shaking his head at their failure to perceive:

<sup>10</sup> Later, on their own with Jesus, his followers asked him, 'Why do you speak in riddles?' <sup>11</sup> 'It's a way of testing people,' he replied. 'Each story contains a message about God's Kingdom, like jam in

a doughnut. Those who do no more than nibble at the outside never find it. But those who are truly hungry find an explosion of taste just when they least expect it. So, those who are just looking to be entertained simply hear the stories. Those who truly want to find God pick up on the message they tell. <sup>12</sup> Sadly, the ancient prophet summed up this generation when he said

*“They can’t make out the truth in what they see or hear.  
Spiritually blind and deaf, they don’t know which way to turn for forgiveness.”*

In other words, Jesus is being descriptive (this is the way things are) rather than prescriptive (this is the way I want them to be).

### **5. Why is this parable the launching point for all the parables?**

Because it introduces the theme of seed – one of the most popular in the parables. When we think of a seed, we know that the only way it produces life (the plant) is by dying, being buried, itself hidden – where it works ‘the miracle’ of life in the dark and secret place.

Even here, Jesus is pointing ahead to what will happen to him – how he will achieve the ‘miracle of eternal life’ for us through his dying, being buried and hidden in the darkness of the grave.

The 2 other parables about seed in Mark 4 underscore the point that the power (of the Kingdom) is in the seed, the word.

And there’s another thing – what is the word? Not the New Testament, that wasn’t written when Jesus spoke. The Greek word is ‘logos’, which we know means both the written and the living Word, Jesus himself.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. John 1*

This is a parable about the Kingdom and the King, from which we learn that God is extravagantly generous to the point of wastefulness as he scatters Jesus (the embodiment of the message, the good news) throughout the world.

He doesn’t look at the path, or the rocky ground or the ground choked with weeds and turn up his nose and say, ‘My Son isn’t coming to you!’

This should come as no surprise: we’ve already heard Jesus say, in Mark 2:17

*‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’*

### **6. So, what about the different types of ground?**

Well, the ‘traditional’ interpretation of the parable certainly has truth. The hardened path, the shallow soil the overgrown and choked, and the good rich soil – all are pretty good descriptions of the human condition. And most of us will have all 4 types of ground in our lives – e.g. woundedness may have led us to harden our heart to the person who hurt us. So with that particular person, Jesus’ call to bless and love our enemies may simply bounce around and quickly be gobbled up by the Enemy ...

But the problem with the ‘traditional’ interpretation is that it can leave us feeling we need to sort out our soil.

Before I taught this, someone in the church family had brought forward a picture during our sung worship –

of someone on a bike at the bottom of a hill, unable to get to the top. God stretched down his hand and pulled the bike up.

It was a perfect picture for what I wanted to say!

The 'traditional' interpretation can send us into a frenzy of activity to sort out our ground. Can a field really eject the stones that render its soil too shallow? Can a field really uproot all the wild stuff which has blown in on the wind and chokes the good seed sown there? No more can we sort out our own lives. In fact, this is the entire thrust of scripture – we are powerless to help ourselves. The good news is that in Jesus, God has done everything needed for our soil to be made good and rich?

So is there nothing we have to do? Well, not in terms of sorting things by our own effort. We need to pursue the presence of Jesus, welcome the logos into our lives and beseech him to take ever deeper root in us. Remember the parable of the growing seed later in Mark 4 – it grows without the farmer doing anything after planting it.

### **7. And finally – fruit**

Again, we can be left with the feeling that producing fruit is our work, our labour, our hard effort. In fact, if we remain in Jesus, and welcome his presence within us, fruit will simply grow.

See Jesus' other image in John 15 – he the vine, we the branches. All we have to do is remain 'stuck in' to him and we will produce fruit. And the fruit is becoming like him.