

Parables of the Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] Well, growing up, I was a bad listener. I'd often get hearing and listening confused. As a kid, this got me into trouble a lot of the time, but when I really suffered for it was during my apprenticeship as a carpenter.

One thing I remember my boss telling me more than anything else was, listen. Listen. One of our drills, our handheld drills, had its forward-backward switch reversed.

It was German. It's a bit like having an indicator on the left side of the wheel. He'd often find me drilling and drilling into a piece of sheet metal and come and tell me, hey, Jeff, the drill's in reverse.

Now, whenever he said this, I would hear him and flick the switch. But because of my hearing-listening problem, he'd have to keep telling me, listen, Jeff, just think about what you're doing.

I wonder if you ever find yourself in a situation like this, when information goes in one ear and out the other. In today's passage, we learn a lesson about hearing and listening to the truth of the kingdom of God.

[1 : 1 7] This series that we're starting tonight in Mark chapters 4 and 5, it's a bit uncommon. We're not looking at the rest of the gospel account, just these chapters.

So for this beginning, let me try and set the scene a little bit. This passage, the one that Daniel just read, begins with Jesus teaching by a lake again.

It's obviously in the middle of a story. Jesus has done this before and people are pretty familiar with him and they clearly like him. Listen from verse 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 water's edge. This scene gives us a bit of an idea about what's been going on since Jesus began his public ministry.

People have seen him and heard him and they're amazed. He's taught with authority, unlike the religious leaders. He's driven out demons and healed the sick.

[2 : 2 0] He's even healed a paralysed man by telling him to get up. It's not surprising that there is a huge crowd eager to hear what Jesus has to say.

And during this time, a bit's happened. He's gained a few close friends, some people who have left their jobs to follow him. He's also gained a few enemies.

People who have accused him of being in a league with Satan and even begun plotting to kill him. What we see in this context is despite Jesus' popularity, not everyone gets what Jesus is on about, even the people who are closest to him.

You might even see this true in our society today. Well, it's in this context, that is Jesus' ministry and how people respond, that we must keep in mind as we read this passage because the parables that Jesus teaches in this passage are about exactly that issue.

That the truth about the kingdom of God is proclaimed and while everyone hears it, not everyone understands or accepts it. We're at point one on the outline.

[3 : 48] Jesus begins by telling a parable about a farmer who is sowing seeds. Now, this may be obvious to some of you, but Jesus isn't telling a lesson about farming because what kind of farmer tries their luck by throwing seeds on the road or among thorns?

Like, just put it all on the good soil, would you? Parables are like illustrations, which contain hidden truths about the kingdom of God. When upon reflection, those who hear may see and understand, though not everyone will.

So let's have a listen to this one. I'm sure many of you will be familiar. Verse 3. Listen. Listen. Listen.

This is a pretty familiar parable to many of you, isn't it?

I bet that as you heard it, your mind quickly went back to all the times you've heard it before. But before you go there, I wonder if you might try and empathise for a moment with the crowd who heard it by the lake.

[5 : 30] If you were standing there along the shore, hearing this perhaps story about farming, for the first time, what would you think?

Later, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples, and many of us will automatically think about that explanation when we hear it.

But those in the crowd didn't get any kind of explanation. They would have just heard the next parable, down in verse 26. So how would you have responded? I think it would have been a pretty odd experience.

I can imagine myself, sorry, I can't imagine myself walking away with clarity or deep insight. Oh, Jesus, good one. I might be wondering, oh, there probably is a point.

But would I pick it? Would you pick it? Well, despite what we or they may have thought, Jesus, in this parable, proclaims the truth about the kingdom of God.

[6 : 45] However, his proclamation of the truth is a touch ironic. In this parable, Jesus explains the way the word is proclaimed and received.

It's ironic because he uses a parable to teach the truth, and a parable by design conceals the truth. It's a bit like this issue I keep having with my computer.

It won't connect to Wi-Fi. And so I click on troubleshoot because I don't know what else to do. And it rarely solves my problem. And so the troubleshooter asks for feedback.

Was this helpful? Well, no, because I'm still offline. So I go to give feedback. And what does it tell me? To give feedback, please log on to MicrosoftSupport.com.

Jesus' odd style leaves us with a question, doesn't it? Why? Why does Jesus teach the truth about the kingdom of God in a way that hides the truth?

[7 : 53] Well, before Jesus gives the answer, you'll be happy to know that, as far as we're told, no one understands what Jesus was saying. Even the disciples had no idea.

In verse 10, the 12 and some others with him asked about the parables. But before Jesus explains, he says something about parables and the kingdom of God, which is outright shocking.

Have a look. Verse 10. When he was alone, the 12 and the others around him asked about the parables. He told them, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything is said in parables.

So that they may be ever seeing, but never perceiving. And ever hearing, but never understanding. Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. Does that sound strange to you?

It sort of like, sounds like someone inviting all their friends to this big special party and printing all the invitations in parcel tongue. Jesus says that he speaks parables so that they wouldn't understand.

[9 : 02] Why would Jesus do this? Why would he obscure the truth? You know, Isaiah, where that quote comes from, the passage that Karen read, God sends his servants, his servant to his people with a message.

The message says, you will never see, you will never see, you will never understand. And as a result, you will be ruined.

Time and time again, in the prophets, God sends messengers to his people who are stiff-necked and stubborn, who refuse to listen to God and are unwilling to repent.

And so they will be judged. God's prophecy in this passage is that they will see and hear, but they will never understand.

When Jesus comes preaching the kingdom, the same stiff-necked, stubborn people hear the message. And those who hear, like their ancestors, they are unwilling to repent and believe, and therefore, they are unable to understand the truth.

[10 : 20] It's a bit like saying, I refuse to jump off that cliff, I don't want to jump off that cliff, and so I guess I'm unable to jump off that cliff.

What this means is that Jesus' parables are like an indictment on stubborn people who hear his call and are unwilling to accept the message.

And so this begs the question, I think, who will understand? Who will listen? Who will repent and believe?

Well, look again at verse 11. He told them, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. Who is this? You may have noticed that it was more than the 12 who heard Jesus' explanation.

Who is given the secret of understanding and what is it? Jesus helps us to understand the answer to this in the following verses. In verse 13, he rebukes the disciples for their lack of understanding.

[11 : 29] But instead of stopping there, leaving us to wonder, maybe the disciples are outside as well? No. He goes on to explain the meaning of the parable to them.

The meaning of the parable that many of you will know. The word is proclaimed and all hear it. Satan takes it from some. Trouble and persecution cause some to lose it.

Wealth and its empty promises prevent it from growing in others. And in some, it grows and produces more. Now, there are things in this explanation that we should reflect on.

But before we do, an interesting question arises out of this. If the disciples are given the secret of the kingdom of God, why did they need Jesus to explain the parable?

Surely for those inside, understanding what Jesus teaches is part of the package, wouldn't you think? I certainly thought this as I reflected on the passage through the week. Well, the answer to this question is surprisingly simple despite how much time I spent mulling over it.

[12 : 35] And it turns out Jesus has mentioned at a handful of times in the passage. I wonder if you've noticed what Jesus has repeatedly said. Anyone?

Listen. Listen. All through the passage, Jesus talks about listening, about those who are able to hear. So why were the disciples able to hear while the crowds were not?

Well, because they're the ones who had Jesus explain it to them. And while this might sound like an unsatisfactory answer, the fact of the matter is that the disciples have been given something special that the crowds have not.

and that is Jesus and a special relationship with him. Because of this special relationship, they are able to listen to the truth which they would otherwise be unable to understand.

So what does this mean about understanding the truth proclaimed by Jesus? Well, it means that Jesus speaks the truth and all hear and those who are near him, those who listen to him, understand and believe.

[14 : 01] And so I think this presents a challenge for us. When the truth of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, when the word of God is spoken, are you listening?

Do you have ears to hear? Some of you may feel like you never really understand. You might feel like you never really get it.

But what is hidden is meant to be revealed. After the disciples ask Jesus about the meaning, he rebukes them as though they're thinking there's no way they could ever understand.

Jesus explains to them in another parable, believe it or not, that a lamp, when you put it out, is meant to be seen. He says what is hidden is meant to be revealed.

You know, I think the disciples can be a great comfort to us as we struggle to understand because while they went on in the future to bear much fruit for the kingdom, didn't they make some foolish mistakes early on?

[15 : 16] The disciples didn't understand. But as we've seen, that doesn't mean they were never able to. They asked, they listened, they grew, and eventually, years later, they produced a crop, didn't they?

And we're part of that. Jesus finishes with two more parables about learning to see and understand the truth. Both of these short parallels continue the theme of farming and growing and they contain a specific point.

In each, the seed is sown like in the original parable. I'm just going to explain these quite quickly. In the first of the two, Jesus' point is a comfort for us who struggle to understand the truth.

It comforts us because despite what we might think about our understanding of the truth, growth is happening even if we can't see it. Each morning, I sit next to a big shelf of plants and look to see how they've grown.

To be honest, in the day-to-day, I don't really see much change and that's not really that surprising, is it? Just as the kingdom of God grows outside our control, so our understanding of what God reveals about himself through Christ grows without us seeing much change in the day-to-day.

[16 : 49] In the second, the focus is less the growth and more the final result. The parable is about recognising the truth of the kingdom in the person of Jesus. At first, his appearance is small, much like a mustard seed, but the day will come when the kingdom will be completely revealed with Christ at its centre.

In both cases, the truths about the kingdom of God come from seeing and understanding who Jesus really is. Tonight, what we've seen is that Jesus speaks the truth of the kingdom and to properly understand his truth, we must seek him and listen to him.

In the next few weeks, we're going to continue to think about how Jesus makes known the truth about himself, but we'll see that more in what he does than what he says.

But now I think it will be appropriate for us to consider carefully what we have heard. Jesus proclaims himself to us.

He proclaims the truth of the kingdom of God. How will you respond to hearing the word tonight? My failure to really listen to my boss when he reminded about the drill.

[18 : 13] Well, it really cost me on one occasion. It was our last day on a job. Everything was just about finished. We'd installed a new kitchen. It really looked good.

I'd screwed in a final support piece along the inside of the end cupboard. The other side was that nice laminate factory finish, smooth, shiny, very expensive.

My boss asked me to back off the screw a bit so he could clean out some glue. I rubbed my finger over the button which on all drills is reverse.

Nearly all drills. I pushed good and hard to make sure I got a good hold in the screw because I don't want to edge it out. but I didn't back it off.

If only I'd listened more carefully. If only it had gone in and stayed in. How long would it have taken for me to just commit that to memory?

[19 : 24] This one's different. Looks different. Feels different. The look on his face. It's very easy to hear the word isn't it?

Everyone hears. What will happen to the word sown in you tonight? I wonder if Satan is here working amongst us.

Will he take away the word so that you are unable to accept it? Just like the stubborn Israel of the past. Perhaps you'll go home excited and pumped which is great but without conviction so that persecution in your job makes you hide your joy.

Is your struggle more so looking the part wearing the tool belt and the steel cap boots looking like you belong?

going to summer Bible studies but never really taking the word to heart? Or will you hear and listen and even though you don't know it all and probably never will cling to Jesus persevere seek grow?

[20 : 51] I think this is one of the most confronting parts of scripture because while it's so familiar and usually sits in our minds as a kids church lesson it reminds us of just how rare genuine repentance and faith in response to the word is.

please don't leave here tonight thinking I'm not a good enough Christian I'm not growing fast enough I don't know my Bible well enough I never get the big idea that's the wrong response the right response is to listen to Jesus to ask him for help and to respond to his word in repentance and faith shall I ask him for help to do that now please join me gracious father we thank you for your word we thank you that the Lord Jesus proclaims it we thank you that in him we see and know the truth and we thank you that you have made it known to us cause us father tonight and every time we sit under your word to hear it to listen to understand and to respond in repentance and faith amen