

The Teaching of the King

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Preacher: Andrew Price

- [0 : 00] Please take a seat. Last year I was teaching a CRE lesson with my year 6 class at a local school when I noticed a student had his head down on his desk.
- When I asked what was wrong, he didn't respond. So I went a little closer to see if he was okay. And when I came a little closer, I realised that he'd actually fallen asleep in my lesson.
- And I thought, am I really that boring? Don't answer that, by the way. But even when you try and make it interesting, it's hard often to get children to concentrate and listen.
- But the same is true of us adults too, isn't it? One of the most embarrassing moments I've had as a preacher was when one of the congregational members fell asleep while I was preaching. It wouldn't have been so bad except for the fact that this congregational member was actually the organist.
- It wasn't Ray. Just to make that clear. On the upside, it woke everyone up. On the downside, I'd only just finished my first point. So it wasn't a particularly healthy sign. Even myself, I've found it hard sometimes to listen to sermons from time to time.
- [1 : 11] Sometimes when I pick up the Bible to read at home, for example, I yawn or I get distracted easily. I'm not sure if you've ever found that happen to yourself. And so why is it we work so hard at trying to read God's Word, assuming you do?
- And why do we spend the largest chunk of time here at church listening to the Bible being read or taught, when listening is clearly hard work? And why do we still try to teach it to others, when sometimes they just don't seem to listen?
- Is it worth all the hard work and embarrassing moments? Well, as we come back to Mark's Gospel, we've had a couple weeks break from it. Mark chapter 4 is actually a chapter full of Jesus' teaching.
- In fact, it's actually a chapter teaching us about his teaching, how important it is and what to expect from it. But before we get to that, I want to point out something that is so obvious, sometimes it's overlooked.
- And that is, during his earthly ministry, Jesus was primarily a teacher. Point one on your outlines, verse 1 and 2 in your Bibles. Mark chapter 4, verse 1. You see, Jesus was a teacher.
- [2 : 39] In fact, during his earthly ministry, Jesus was primarily a teacher. I'm not sure if that's how you think of Jesus' earthly ministry. The first thing that often comes to people's minds about Jesus on earth are his miracles.
- We often think he's a miracle worker, and he did that. But Jesus was primarily a teacher. So if you flick back to Mark chapter 1, for example, Mark chapter 1, verse 14, John is arrested and Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming or teaching the good news.
- Or down in chapter 1, verse 21, the disciples and Jesus went into Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. Chapter 1, verse 38, Jesus answered, Let us go to the neighboring town so that I may proclaim or teach the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.

Or over in chapter 2, verse 2, where Jesus heals the paralytic, they gather at the house, and what's he doing? End of verse 2, he was speaking or teaching the word to them.

Chapter 2, verse 13, Jesus went out again beside the sea. The whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. See, and on and on and on it goes. Jesus, you see, was primarily a teacher.

[3 : 51] That is why he came, to teach people about the kingdom, and about himself, the king, so that they might repent, turn to him, and believe in him. The problem was, though, not many people were interested in his teaching.

In chapter 3, which we saw a few weeks ago, the crowds came to Jesus, not because of his teaching, but because of his healing. And his family didn't really listen to Jesus, but thought that he was out of his mind, if you remember.

And the Pharisees only listened to find fault with Jesus, and in the end, planned to kill him. And so one might ask, what good is Jesus' teaching? I mean, it seems so ineffective.

Not many people seem to be really listening. And so Jesus tells the crowd three parables about his teaching. The parables of the sower, the lamp, and the measure, which brings us to point to verse 3.

Have a look there at verse 3. Listen. A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.

[4 : 58] And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

Other seed fell onto good soil, and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding 30 and 60 and 100 fold. And he said, anyone with ears to hear, listen.

Now, I'm not a farmer. I've never been a farmer. In fact, the last time I was on a farm, I was actually chased by a cow. It was pretty humiliating, actually. But despite not knowing much about farming, it's not hard to imagine what's happening here, is it?

A farmer is scattering seed all over the place, on different types of ground. Some rocky, some on a path, on a good soil, on thorny ground, and so on.

Just like Jesus is teaching across all sorts of people. And if you'd ask the farmer then, what good is it to sow like that? He'd reply, wait until harvest, and then you'll see the good of it.

[6 : 00] For at harvest time, there'll be a bumper crop, 30, 60, even 100 fold, what was sown. And the point is simple, which will come out again in a moment. Jesus' teaching may seem ineffective now, but wait until harvest time.

Wait until Jesus returns, and then you'll see the good of it. For then, when Jesus returns, you'll see hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people standing with you, side by side, praising God.

You see, when we look at the world, even at our friends and family who reject Jesus' teaching time and time again, it may seem like the teaching of Jesus is ineffective, useless.

But wait until harvest. Wait until Jesus returns, and then you'll see just how effective it truly is. When billions of Christians stand side by side, praising him who died for us.

You see, Jesus' teaching is not ineffective. However, it does divide. Have a look at verse 10 to 12. When he was alone, those who were around him, along with the 12, asked about the parables.

[7 : 06] And he said to them, to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. But for those outside, everything comes in parables. In order that, they may indeed look, but not perceive.

They may indeed listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven. I don't know about you, but verse 12 particularly, doesn't sit well with me at first glance.

It's saying that Jesus taught in parables, so that people would not understand, and would not turn to him for forgiveness. Why does he do this?

I mean, isn't Jesus kind and compassionate? Hasn't he come to call sinners into God's kingdom? Well, yes, he has. But he's been teaching clearly now for some time, yet people have not really been listening.

The crowds are more interested in seeing the miraculous, and his family is more interested in not being embarrassed, and the Pharisees are more interested, well, quite frankly, in killing him.

[8 : 06] And so now Jesus teaches in parables to divide between those who really are interested in who he is, and those who are not. In other words, the parables divide between insiders and outsiders.

Those who are interested in Jesus, who think there's something about Jesus, or with Jesus there's more than meets the eye, for those people, the parables provoke curiosity, such that they follow after Jesus, and ask him about what they mean.

And he would give them the meaning, the secret about himself and the kingdom. See verse 10 again? When he was alone, those who were around him, some people followed with him, along with the 12, so it's not just the 12 disciples with him, others had followed Jesus and were alone, and then they asked him about the parables, you see.

They see something in Jesus, and so they follow after him, and ask him about the parables, and then he tells them the secret about himself, and the kingdom, and their meaning.

These people are the insiders, you see. But those who didn't think much of Jesus, when they heard the parables, instead of turning to Jesus for meaning, they'd think, oh, nice story, but how about some more miracles, if that's what we want to see?

[9 : 20] Or they'd say, what is he going on about? I told you he was demon possessed. Or by the sea, they'd be going, oh, nice story, Jesus. Oh, I just saw a fish jump out of the sea, or whatever it was. You see, because they didn't see Jesus as anything more than a healer, or perhaps a troublemaker, then they didn't look for anything more in the parables.

They saw, but did not perceive. They heard, but did not understand. And so they do not turn to Jesus for meaning, and ultimately for forgiveness.

Instead, their stubborn hearts keep them on the outside and under judgment, just as it did back in Isaiah's day, as we heard from our first reading. But like in Isaiah's day, there was hope.

At the end of the reading, it talked about a holy seed, or a stump, a remnant, who would remain. People who would listen to God. And there are people like that here, in Jesus' day.

People do listen. In fact, it's worth noting that Jesus wants them to listen and understand. Jesus wants them to move from being outsiders to insiders. I mean, why else does he urge them in verse 3 to listen?

[10 : 26] Or verse 9, let anyone with ears to hear, then listen. It's as though he's saying, there is something more here. Follow me and find out. Find out who I really am, and so find forgiveness.

Jesus wants them to understand. And this point is rammed home, I think, by the parable of the lamp. So if you just skip down in your Bibles for a moment to verse number 21. Verse 21, Jesus said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand?

Of course not. For there is nothing hidden except to be disclosed, nor is there anything secret except that which is to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear, listen.

You see, the truth about Jesus and the kingdom is meant to be disclosed. It's not meant to be hidden under the bushel basket. It's meant to be made known. Now this will happen fully on the last day when Jesus reveals who he is to everyone, whether they like it or not.

But Jesus is revealing the truth now by his words and actions. And so he says in verse 23, him who has ears to hear, listen. Jesus has come not to hide the truth, you see, but to reveal it.

[11 : 41] He wants people to come after him and ask for meaning. He wants people to truly listen and perceive. But if you don't want to know, then you won't. If you don't really want to understand, then it won't be forced on you.

Not yet, anyway. Jesus' teaching, you see, was not ineffective, but it did divide. And it's the same today. When people hear Jesus' words, when they hear the gospel, it divides.

And people respond differently to it, don't they? When I was at university, we had a mission team, just like the RMIT mission team last week. And we put on a mission event at the university.

A Christian band came and played at the uni bar and the lead singer gave a gospel talk. At the end of the talk, he invited people to commit their lives to Jesus, to pray a prayer of commitment.

And he said, afterwards, if you just prayed or want to know more, then come forward during the next song and then afterwards we'll talk to you. And then as the band took their places and some people started to move towards the front, there was actually another person there who yelled out a couple of times because he wasn't heard the first time.

[12 : 49] And he said, what you said is a load of rubbish. I'm using the G version here. He actually used a different word, but you get what I mean. You see, same talk, different responses, weren't they?

Same teaching of Jesus, but some came forward to know more and others thought it was rubbish. It divided people just as it did back in Jesus' day. When people hear Jesus' word, they respond differently to it.

And we know that ourselves, don't we? And this is exactly what Jesus goes on to explain back in verse 14. Have a look there. Verse 14, the sower sows the word and these are the ones on the path where the word is sown.

When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And the ones where the seed is, the rocky ground, well, they represent those who hear the word and they immediately receive it with joy, but they have no root and endure only for a while.

Then when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And those where the gospel falls amongst thorny ground, well, they are like the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word and it yields nothing.

[14 : 04] And the ones where the gospel falls on good soil, the good soil, well, they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit. 30 and 60, a hundred fold.

Here we have four different responses to the word, four different soils, if you like. Now, I'm sure we all know people who are like one of these types of soil. I've sat next to some guys in church at a men's event after they heard the gospel clearly explained to them and I said, oh, what did you think?

Oh, nothing. I don't think anything, really. He was funny, but yeah, I don't really care about Jesus. Nothing. They're like the seed sown on the path, you see. It's gone.

There's no impact. I've chatted to youth group children who like the second type of soil receive the word with joy, but then their friends at school hassle them for being Christian and so they give up.

They chuck it in. For adults, I know of, it was because they suffered great loss and so they gave up following God. I know of another guy who like the third type of soil received the word with joy, came to church for a year, went to Bible study group, everything, but then slowly his love of money, the career, choked the gospel from his life and now he no longer calls himself a Christian.

[15 : 19] All these types of soils are in the end unfruitful. They're not true Christians, are they? But then there's the fourth type of person who hears the word of God and accepts it so much so that they do what it says.

Or in the words of the parable, they bear fruit. See, although there are four types of soil, in the end, there are only two types of people. Insiders, outsiders.

Those who hear the word and believe it so much so that they bear fruit and those who hear the word but remain unfruitful. Now, this is a big challenge for us because I take it if we had to put ourselves in one of these types of soil, which one would we pick for ourselves?

We'd pick number four, wouldn't we? And we've heard the word of the gospel, the good news about Jesus' death for us, and we've accepted it or believed in it. But do we continue to bear fruit for God when we hear his word at other times?

That is, do we keep doing what his word says? See, I take it that the picture of the farmer sowing the seed is also a picture of what happens here Sunday by Sunday as the word is preached.

[16 : 24] And if you're anything like me, even though I've accepted the gospel, I can sometimes act like one of those other types of soil when I hear God's word taught. I've been to conferences, I must confess, where the word of God has been taught and I just vagued out.

I didn't really listen. I looked like I was listening. No one could tell. But I just didn't really listen. Has it ever happened to you? Or perhaps you thought, you've heard a sermon and thought, that's the best sermon I've ever heard.

But then suddenly, what's for lunch? I think I left the washing in the dryer. Or I've got to mow the lawn. You know, it just goes. The worries of the world push out the word.

Or we do remember the word, but it doesn't change the way we live. It doesn't bear fruit in our lives. We can be like those other types of soils, you see, can't we? And so even though we might describe ourselves as the fourth type of soil, and rightly so, because we've heard the word of the gospel and believed it, it's very easy to act like the other types of soils.

And so the challenge for us is to keep working hard at really listening to God's word. That we might not just hear it and accept it, but also do it, as we heard in the children's talk.

[17 : 41] And so bear fruit for Jesus in our lives. At my last church, I was cleaning up after the evening service, and getting rid of all the newsletters and the outlines and things like that.

And I was just about to throw out one particular outline that had writing on it. When the couple came back in, they got to their car and realized they left their sermon outline in the church and they'd come back in to get it.

You see, they not only took notes during the sermon, but then they took those notes home and then one night during the week, they'd sit together and go back over it and pray that they might live in light of it.

Now that's a fourth type of soil, isn't it? Someone who seeks to bear fruit in their lives for God. So here's an idea. If you're a note taker or not a note taker, it doesn't really matter, I suppose.

But why not read over the passage the Sunday before? Why not pray in light of it sometime during the week that we might be people who bear fruit for God in our lives?

[18 : 41] For how we listen actually determines what we are given. Have a look at verse 24. And he said to them, pay attention to what you hear. The measure you give, that is how you listen, will be the measure you get and still more will be given to you.

For to those who have, more will be given and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. Now this is really the punchline application for these first three parables and the application is listen, really listen so that you do what it says.

And one commentator paraphrased it by saying, be big eared to God's word. And so here we go. This is just to help you remember. This is what we're to be when we come to God's word.

Now, I realize I look absolutely ridiculous, but if it helps you remember, I'm willing to suffer for the gospel. I'm going to take them off. But you get the point, don't you?

Be big eared. Really listen to God's word. Reflect on it. Digest it. And live in light of it. Doing what it says. And if we do, sorry, and if we don't, then the warning in verse 25 is, the measure we use, that is how we listen to God's word, will be measured against us.

[19 : 59] And for those who perhaps keep a smile on our faces, but make no real effort to consider God's word carefully, then Jesus says, whatever they have will be taken from them. Like those outsiders who don't really listen to Jesus and so will be judged.

But for those of us who like the good soil, hear God's word and accept it, you know, really believe it, so much so that, you know, we do what it says, that we bear fruit, Jesus says, even more will be given.

You see, Jesus' teaching is important. It is worth listening to for it determines what we are given. But more than that, despite appearances, it will cause growth.

And here we come to the last two parables, which will be much shorter. The parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed. Point three, verse 26. He also said to them, the kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night or day, yet the seed would sprout and grow, yet he does not know why.

The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.

[21 : 06] Here, the emphasis is that the kingdom will grow despite our efforts, whether we sleep or awake, whether it's night or day, the kingdom will grow.

You see, the kingdom at the moment and certainly in Jesus' day looks rather weak. I mean, I'm growing to love you people and so bear that in mind when I make this next comment.

There's nothing particularly extraordinary about us gathered here this morning. I love you, I think you're great, but when you look around at God's kingdom in the world today, it doesn't look particularly extraordinary, does it?

It looks rather weak sometimes, just like it did in Jesus' day. The gospel is mainly being rejected today in our world, just like it was in Jesus' day.

But Jesus is saying again, wait until harvest time. Then you will see just how powerful the gospel is, how much growth it has produced.

[22 : 05] For God's word will impact lives and will cause growth despite our efforts. Why? Because it is God's word and he causes it to grow.

In Isaiah 55, God says, my word that goes out from my mouth does not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire. God's word will not return to him empty, he says.

Instead, it will accomplish what he desires and produce a great harvest, 30, 60, even 100 times what was sown. And this ought to be a great comfort to us. You see, it can be really disappointing when you invite people to church or events.

You might invite someone to the Christmas services and they actually say yes. They come, they hear the gospel and then afterwards you say, oh, what do you think? And again, yeah, so, there's no impact.

It can be disheartening. But Jesus says that God's word will still be at work and so it is still worth sharing. It is still worth encouraging people to hear it. In fact, it's still worth reading the Bible with each other as well as sharing it with non-Christians.

[23 : 10] for God's word will not return to him empty but accomplish what he desires. Despite appearances, you see, the word will cause kingdom growth both in quality and quantity.

But more than this, this kingdom that grows from this small and seemingly insignificant word will actually grow to be the greatest kingdom of all. See verses 30 to 32? He also said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God?

Or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest, the most insignificant of all the seeds on the earth. Yet, when it is sown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

That picture at the end there of birds perching in the branches is something that Ezekiel spoke about in the Old Testament. And there in Ezekiel it represents people from all nations coming to rest in God's kingdom.

And I suspect that's in the back of Jesus' mind here. People from all nations being brought into the kingdom of God by the word of the gospel. But either way, it's a great kingdom that comes from a small, seemingly insignificant word.

[24 : 22] It reminds me of that superannuation song. Have you seen the Australian super ads on TV? And they've got that little song that says, from little things, big things grow.

Yeah. It's kind of like this here, isn't it? This little thing that seems so insignificant to the world, this gospel word, actually produces the greatest kingdom of all.

You see, the kingdom that comes from God's word which seems so insignificant, so out of date, so irrelevant, or whatever else people say about the Bible these days, from that word, from this word, will come the greatest kingdom of all time.

numbering in the billions, having glory that outshines all other kingdoms. See, Jesus' teaching is not ineffective. No, no. It may divide, but it will cause great growth and give way to the greatest kingdom ever, a kingdom that we can be part of if we believe in Jesus.

Well, Jesus has taught us about his teaching this morning, that it is very important. And so, as we come here on Sunday mornings for various reasons, the centre of what we do rightly should be the hearing and teaching of God's word.

[25 : 31] For the word is the way in which God grows his kingdom and produces fruit in our lives. And once we understand how important this word is, once we see that hearing of God's word is not just an optional extra, but the very means by which we enter his kingdom, the very means by which God grows and shapes our lives, then ought we not make every effort to make the reading of it a priority in our lives?

Should we not make the hearing of it a priority in our week? Well, let me finish by asking this question. I wonder what type of soil this word this morning has fallen on today.

Let's pray it would be the good type. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for Jesus and we thank you for his teaching.

Help us to remember the importance of your word. Help us to make hearing it a priority in our lives and when we do hear it, help us to be big-eared that we may truly listen by doing what it says and we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.