

MARK 4 NOTES

There are many ways to understand the parable of the sower and the whole section that surrounds it. In fact, 4:1-34 should be read as part of a whole. Mark has in mind the state of the church in his day, easily demoralized and overwhelmed by persecution without and division within. Today as churches we may know little about persecution. But we do know about decline in influence, numbers, and money. This is our form of suffering today, that we no longer matter, and that society doesn't take us seriously, that we are ignored or dismissed. This inner stirring, we have, for God, for something more, for transcendence, for truth and insight - Jesus has come to engage that. How will people respond? How will people receive the seed or grow what is in them already?

4: 1-9 - is addressed to the larger crowd. Jesus tells them that the purpose of the church is to sow seeds, the seeds of the kingdom - seeds of compassion, concern for justice, solidarity and advocacy, all motivated by faith that God is love and through that love, God is reaching out to human hearts. But sowing is not growing. The church's task is simply to sow, the growth belongs to God. Can those listening understand this?

4: 10-12 - is addressed to the disciples. They are the ones chosen (because Jesus chose them) to understand the mystery of God's kingdom. Jesus uses parables to distinguish the church from the crowd, a remnant who will understand and co-labour with God to spread God's rule and fellowship (kingdom) on earth by sowing seed. But the purpose of distinguishing the church is not in order to cut out the crowd from understanding. Rather, Jesus intends the church of the disciples to share in his work of sowing so that more seeds are sown.

4: 13-20 - Jesus seems frustrated with the disciples' apparent failure to understand. Sow and leave the growing to God. This is the message.

4: 21-23 - Jesus tells the disciples not to despair, just to sow. They are the ones who have been given the seed. Not sowing is like hiding the light of a lamp after it is brought into a room. It must be brought in and allowed to shine. The grower must be trusted. Disciples must focus on the sowing.

4: 24-25 - The disciples are told again that they must sow. They must not despair, for sowing is their reason for being, their purpose, their mission. The seed can only work if it leaves them. To keep it inside is to lose it.

4: 26-29 - Again, the disciples are told not to despair but to keep sowing. The crop is not a matter of their technique or expertise as growers. They must focus on sowing and then sleep soundly (and not be anxious about the future of the church or their seed). The growth will be automatic. Just sow and let go.

4: 30-34 - Again the disciples are told not to despair but to sow. They mustn't worry about poor or inadequate sowing. The crop is not in their hands, after all. The kingdom of God does not abide by the standard rules of agriculture. The grower can take anything sown, anywhere sown, anyway sown, and yield a bumper crop. Therefore, sow.

Looking at the parable more closely as individuals, what can we learn?

1) There is a mystery as to why some people respond to the call of faith and love while others do not. Sometimes it takes time and sometimes it's beyond time.

2) There are reasons why the seed does not take root, such as: 1) our focus in life may be too superficial and we avoid going deeper, 2) the troubles of life make us question and doubt out of a bitterness, cynicism, or disappointment and hurt, 3) we are too busy, distracted or attached to the way our life is currently going and don't want anything to change, 4) our goals are much more self-focussed than focussed on God's call to compassion for others tangibly and relationally. Do we discover our true inner self much more fully when our love moves outwards toward others and then comes back to us again, rather than hoarding it in self-concern and self-interest?

3) The seed does take root here and there (a minority of it) and does yield fruit. And thus, there is hope, but it is not in the glory of popularity and prosperity, or comfort and ease, which is so deeply what we want as human beings, missing the whole point of the gospel - love and the fullness that comes from love vs glory, distraction and vain pursuits and its spiritual emptiness.

Vs 33-34 - Why speak in parables? The point is not to keep people out, but to distinguish those who really want to understand and commit themselves to understanding, from those who are there for any number of other reasons (their own personal benefit or desperation). The point of the whole thing is to establish a community of disciples so that there may be more labourers to sow seed.

Vs. 30-32 - the parable of the mustard seed is one of many analogies (yeast, light, salt) where something invisible or small (the seed) is planted, mixed in, or reflected, and only in time, often invisibly, it grows and bears fruit. The church's job is simply to sow and entrust the process to God and the openness of hearts and souls which is invisible. The toughest soil for seed to grow is the busy and materialistic world we inhabit. People are too distracted and not sufficiently in touch with the elemental questions and concerns of life to seek out a greater power through which to live and a greater path by which to journey.

Vs 35ff - the theme of trust, trusting in Jesus and in God, is taken up here and extends into Chapter 5. Do we take matters into our own hands or must we entrust ourselves

and our lives into God's hands? There are many aspects of our lives, areas of anxiety and stress, where we must learn greater relinquishment (letting go) and letting be. The positive side to this is trust. Another word is waiting. To trust and to wait trustingly. What a challenge. Passing through this challenge is the way to true faith and true inner peace as we journey.