

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

"These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come." – I Corinthians 10:11

Welcome to our fourth study in the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 4 Jesus expounds on the meaning of his call to discipleship. The disciples are "to be with him" and "to be sent out to proclaim his message" (Mark 3:14). In chapter five we will see the "authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:15). In both parables and life experiences Jesus describes what it means to be with him and to proclaim his message. The descriptions given here apply to Jesus' disciples through the ages.

- I. The Parable of the Sower and the Seed – 4:1-20 – what does it mean "to be with him?"
 - a. Four kinds of response to the seed (Word of God) – "great crowd" (4:1)
 - i. eaten by the birds on the path – 4:4
 - ii. scorched on rocky ground – 4:5
 - iii. choked by the thorns – 4:7
 - iv. fell on good soil and yielded a great harvest – 4:8
 - b. the smaller group – "those who were around him along with the twelve" – 4:10
 - i. "To you has been given the secret (mystery) of the kingdom of God" – 4:11; Eph. 3:1-6; Matt. 11:27; Rom. 11:1-12
 - ii. "to those outside, everything comes in parables (riddles)" – 4:11-12; Isa. 6:9-10; Matt. 13:10-15; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-41; Acts 28:26-27

This section underscores the fact that it is only through revelation that anyone knows Jesus or can respond to the Gospel (John 6:44-45). This is not to invite us to speculate as to who responds or who doesn't or how many will be saved (cf. Luke 13:22-30). It is only by God's grace alone that anyone comes to Christ (Eph. 2:1-10). Jesus will not answer the question, "What about so-and-so?" John 21:21-22. We are to follow knowing salvation is only by grace through faith – Eph. 2:8-9 ("Where is the boasting? It is excluded" Rom. 3:27-28). It is enough for us to know that the first will be last and the last first (Mark 10:31).

- c. The meaning of the parable – 4:13-20 – Rather than four distinct groups these may well be four stages of discipleship, stages which Jesus himself had to go through. Often Scripture speaks of distinct groups constituting a sequences rather than separate categories. Paul illustrates this in his discussion of Jews and Gentiles in Romans 9-11. Gentiles at present receive the Gospel while Jews mostly reject it. However the Jews who reject now will one day accept Christ and find salvation (Rom. 11:26). At the same time those who remain in one of the first three categories have no hope of salvation.

- i. Satan comes immediately to take away the word – 4:14; 8:27-33; 1:13
 - ii. Those who receive with joy but have no root – 4:16-17; 10:23-26; 13:19-23
 - iii. Cares and desires of the world choke the word – 4:18-19, 35-40; 8:14-21; 14:32-36
 - iv. Those who not only “receive” the word but “welcome” it (“accept” in NRSV) – 4:20; 3:35 – becomes a huge group, cf. Rev. 7:9

- II. The parables of the lamp and the seed – 4:21-34
 - a. The lamp on the lampstand – nothing hidden except to be disclosed – 4:21-23. The Gospel reveals what humans seek to conceal. Luke 9:46-48; 16:14-15
 - b. As they give they will also receive – 4:24; I Cor. 4:7; II Cor. 10:15
 - c. More will be given to those who have and taken away from those who have nothing – 4:25; 19:11-26

As we give to the Lord we also receive. What we store up on earth comes to nothing (Matt. 6:19-21).

 - d. the mustard seed – 4:26-34
 - i. the farmer does not know how the seed grows. Neither do we always know what impact our witness to the gospel has. 4:28
 - ii. The grain becomes more than ripe. It delivers itself up for the harvest. 4:29 The word translated “ripe” literally means “to hand, give over, deliver up.”
 - iii. The mustard seed appears very small but grows into a large tree. It is important to note that Jesus does not encourage the large crowds but focuses rather on the small group of disciples – 4:34. Even when there are many who claim to be his disciples they don’t necessarily remain with him. Yet even among those who do remain one of them is a “devil” - John 6:60-71.

- III. Being with Jesus in the storm – 4:35-41
 - a. The disciples are in “a great windstorm.” They are being overwhelmed with “the cares of the world” (4:19).
 - b. Jesus sleeps through the storm. They wake him not to ask about his safety but about their own, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” The truth is they are *not* perishing. They are however very frightened.
 - c. Jesus calms the storm. He then asks, “Have you still no faith?” – 4:39-40
 - d. The disciples ask, “Who, then is this . . . ?” After all they have seen they don’t seem to know that Jesus is, in the words of the demons, “the Holy One of God” (1:24).

- IV. Questions for us
 - a. Can we recognize the four stages of response to the seed in our own lives? Do we repeat those stages (as the disciples seem to)? What is the difference between receiving the word (the first three stages) and accepting, literally welcoming, it? Does thinking of the four kinds of soil as a sequence encourage or discourage you in your Christian life? Why?
 - b. What do you make of the fact that Jesus says to the disciples that to them has been given “the secret of the kingdom of God.” How do you account for

the fact that they don't understand (4:13) and at times seem to have "no faith" (4:40)?

- c. Have you experienced giving yourself over to the Lord and then receiving more than you gave (not necessarily in a material sense)? How would you describe that experience? On the other hand, do you feel like the sower who in rising night and day isn't seeing any impact in your life and others? Can you recognize the growth of the seed even without knowing how that happens? What do you find helpful in the parable of the seed in 4:26-29? What do you find difficult?
- d. Are you ever discouraged by the small growth in your own spiritual life or in the lives of others or in the church in general? How would you apply the parable of the mustard seed to that situation? Why do you think we have so much difficulty perceiving long term effects of the Gospel both in our lives and in the lives of others?
- e. We have all felt like Jesus was sleeping through moments of crisis in our lives. What lessons can we take from the experience of the disciples in the storm? Does Jesus continue to surprise us as he did them? Why do you think this is?