

# What about Parables?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn then to Mark chapter 4 and have a look at this together. So we're looking at Jesus and parables.

I wasn't sure whether we would look at just the first 20 verses or squeeze in a little bit more to verse 34. We'll see what we can do. So the question is really what is all this about parables?

What's going on when Jesus speaks in this way? So let's pray and ask for help. Lord, we do pray that you'll help us to hear your word as you said to these people those years ago.

That those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Amen. Amen. So let's first of all do a little attempt at a definition.

What is a parable? Well, what is a parable? I think a useful definition for a parable in the Bible would be to say it's a method or a particular example of communication where one thing or one situation is likened to another.

[ 1 : 44 ] So Jesus doesn't. I particularly think of the teaching of Jesus. But there are parables in the Old Testament as well.

The word parable seems to include quite a lot of different types of communication. But particularly when Jesus does this, he likens one thing to another.

So you can see this in 4, 26 and 30 where he says, this is what the kingdom of God is like.

So he says, you know, the kingdom of God, which I'm speaking about, is like something else that you will be familiar with. We're in verse 30. What shall we say the kingdom of God is like?

Or what parable shall we use to describe it? So again, it's this question of one thing being like another. We've already had an example of a parable in chapter 3, verse 23, when you remember Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan.

[ 2 : 51 ] And Jesus said, well, you're really saying is Satan's driving out Satan, so you're calling me Satan. And he answered that by means of a parable. And it's there in verse 23.

Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables. And the parable, I think, is particularly in view there, is the parable of, it's like burgling a strong man's house.

Who can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. So Jesus is saying, what I'm referring to is like this. It's like breaking into a strong man's house, taking off his TV, taking off his iPad, taking away all his stuff.

And really to do that, you've got to deal with the strong man. You've got to tie him up. And that was Jesus' answer to the accusation he was doing by the power of Satan. He says, no, it's not an internal division.

Satan versus Satan. It's actually an invasion from the outside. A stronger one is coming to that strong man and binding him and dealing with him, binding him up.

[ 4 : 07 ] There are other parables as well. For example, Mark 12, 12. And lest we should think that a parable equals a Sunday school story about little animals and furry, furry things.

In Mark 12, 12, Jesus tells the parable of the tenants. And in this likeness, he says it's like a letting agent who goes to the tenants to get the rent and they refuse to do it.

And in the end, the landlord, instead of sending a letting agent, sends his own son. And in Mark 12, roundabout verse 12, in fact, verse 8 in the parable, the landlord's son gets killed by the tenants on the presumption that if they kill the landlord's son, they can grab the vineyard for themselves.

And this is, it might sound like a rather bizarre story, but the listeners, verse 12, then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them.

So they were so incensed by what this parable was saying that they wanted to arrest Jesus and kill him. So parables are not necessarily safe.

[ 5 : 39 ] It's used 12 times in Mark. And just to give you a little idea of the range of the idea of a parable, if you look in Hebrews 9, 9, you will see the same word is used, but it isn't translated parable.

So Hebrews 9, 9, 9, talks about the Old Testament provisions for meeting with God, with the temple and the ark and the curtains and the priests and sacrifices and so on.

And Hebrews 9, 9 says, this is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.

Well, the word that we translate there, illustration, is the word parable. So that whole thing is, in some sense, a parable, a figure, an illustration, as the NIV translation puts it.

And 11, 19 in Hebrews, again, just to give us an example of the range of meanings. Page 1209. Thank you very much, 1209.

[ 7 : 00 ] So again, this is, we don't have to concern ourselves with the main argument of it, but it refers back to Abraham, who was instructed to kill his son as a sacrifice.

And at the last minute, God said, no, stop, that's not going to happen. And Abraham had his son back again, as it were. And in Hebrews 11, 19, Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead. And figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead. And again, the word there is parable. So I think that just makes us think it has quite a wide range of meanings.

In a parabolic sense, he received his son back from the dead. It was somehow like that, figuratively or whatever. So that's just to try to show us the sort of things that we're talking about.

Let's look at how it works in this text. So I've done a little map. I'm going to not try to go into too much detail.

[ 8 : 15 ] But I've done a little map of the Mark 4 text. So it begins with Jesus by the sea with the crowds.

And that's a familiar situation. Jesus, we've seen this a number of times, that there are so many people pushing and pressing, falling over one another, not necessarily behaving in a civilized manner, not necessarily really understanding what Jesus is on about.

But he persists with them. And again, do you notice it says, 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 out on it on the lake while the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

And that's happened a few times before. And while he's speaking to them, he tells them the parable of the sower.

And he says, the sower goes out to sow his field, and all sorts of different things happen when he sows the seed, chucks it out, lands in all sorts of different places with all sorts of different results.

[ 9 : 32 ] He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And I wonder what they thought. Perhaps they thought, yeah, do have different results when you sow a field.

Or whether they thought, what's he getting at? Well, let's find out a bit later what he was getting at. When he was alone with the 12, and the others around him, so 12 plus other sort of inner circle people, they asked him about the parables.

And he says, and he says, that the secret of the kingdom has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables.

So he makes this distinction between the people on the outside and the people in the house, the people on the inside. To them, I speak in parables.

To you, I give you the key, the secret, the understanding. And he quotes Isaiah 6.

[ 10 : 43 ] And if you care to check the quote, it's in the chapter where Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up, and that his train fills the temple.

And it's an amazing, awesome picture of God in his holiness, and Isaiah in his sinfulness, nevertheless, asking that he might serve so holy a master.

And in Isaiah 6, verse 9, what does God tell him to do? He says, go and tell this people, be ever hearing, but never understanding.

Be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused. Make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

And what an unexpected commission that is. What he's saying is, I want you to go and speak to these people.

[ 11 : 51 ] I want you to go and preach your heart out to them. I want you to tell them everything as clearly, and as strongly, and as definitely, and as winsomely as you possibly can. And they'll hear, and hear, but they'll not understand.

And the clearer you make it, the less they'll understand it. And the more you say it to them, the more hard they're going to get. And in the end, they will be hardened, and they won't turn, and they won't be healed.

And this is the process I want you to go through. And this is the process that I'm going to superintend with you preaching, and these people getting harder. Isaiah. And that's what it's saying in Isaiah.

And it's really hard to swallow, isn't it? But that, I can't see any other interpretation of this text. And this is what Jesus quotes.

Why, Lord, tell us what's going on with parables. You're speaking to all these people. Well, says Jesus, what's happening is that what happened with Isaiah is happening here again.

[ 13 : 00 ] I speak in parables. They're all listening. They're falling over one another, listening, having a good laugh, thinking how wonderful it all is, and they all come back the next day and listen again, but they're ever seeing, but never perceiving.

Ever hearing, but never understanding. And the upshot is that they won't turn and be forgiven. And you see what I mean when I say the parables. You think it's nice and simple, but actually, if you look at it, it's really deeply mysterious.

And Jesus then goes on to say, well, don't you understand? Are you getting hard? And that's one of the issues that goes on through Mark's Gospel.

Jesus says things to his disciples. Are you so stupid? Are you so dull? Have I been with you so long? You still don't get the idea. And he says it here, don't you? Do you not understand this parable?

This parable is sort of the key, the master parable. It unlocks everything else. If you don't understand this, you're not going to understand anything. And he interprets it. He says, here are the key points for you to get.

[ 14 : 07 ] This sower is sowing something which produces the effects and what he sows is the word, the message. That's what he's doing. He's telling the message. Did you not see me doing that this morning, guys?

As it were, Jesus is saying, what was I doing in the boat? I was sowing the word, wasn't I? And what was happening while I was in the boat sowing the word? Well, some of them, some of the people heard it, thought it was great and immediately forgot it.

And the first conversation they had when I'd stopped was, have you heard what's happened to my auntie's sister? They hadn't, it hadn't gone in at all. It had just bounced off them and he says, that's Satan that does that.

As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. And he says, what else was happening? Well, it was like the bit about sowing seed in rocky places. Well, that was happening too.

There were some people in that crowd who said, this is great. Jesus is brilliant. Oh, I'm going to do this for the rest of my life. And they hadn't really thought about it. And when they go home the day after tomorrow and they say to, you know, Uncle So-and-So who's a professor in the rabbinical school, I'm going to follow Jesus.

[ 15 : 23 ] And the professor says, no, you're not. He's totally out of order. He's not loyal to our traditions. And if you follow him, you're going to be disinherited.

And they're going to just fall away. They're going to crumble under that pressure. And that's what's been happening, says Jesus. Jesus. And because there's no root, there's no depth, they haven't thought it through.

They haven't really taken it in properly. And they're like these people. When trouble or persecution comes away because of, comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

And still others, he says, well, what was happening? Some others, they got it. It went in there. But I tell you, in a couple of weeks' time, when they find that there's something wrong with a wife's pregnancy or when they find that they can't keep up the payments on the farm or something like that, when trouble, when the worries of this life, or perhaps actually they get on very well with the farm and they get a huge bumper crop this year and they think, well, I've got loads of money.

And that will get to them. The worries of this life or the deceitfulness of wealth or the desire for other things come in and little by little the enthusiasm they had for me and what I was saying, says Jesus, will just ebb away and it'll be choked off and you come back in a few years and say, Jesus, you were really keen on him, weren't you?

[16:55] And they said, oh, well, I was young then. I mean, I was impressionable in those days. No, I've got the real thing now. I'm investing, you know, in the Jerusalem stock market or something like that and he says, there'll be no fruitfulness in their lives at all and to be unfruitful is to say the least a risky position to be in and I think you could go further and to say, if there is no fruit, really there's no fruit, then there's no faith and there's no spiritual life and that's dead as a doornail.

He says, mind you, there were other people as I was saying who were thinking and they were hearing and they said, I think this Jesus has got something and they thought about it and it went down deep and they accepted the word, verse 20, and you know, with some of them, not all of them but just with some of them, that is going to produce such a change in their lives.

They're going to be different people and they're going to be different people forever and people are going to see the things that come out of their lives and the things that they say and people are going to be impressed by them.

People are going to say, I want some of what they've got and they're going to produce fruit and this is the way farming works, isn't it? You sow the seed, you don't want to just see it all disappear, you want fruit back from it and they'll sow seed and there'll be 30, 60 or 100 times what was sown and Jesus interprets the parable for them.

So we've got the sower, we've got this sort of secret inside, outside, we've got the interpretation for the people on the inside and then going back to the outside as a parable about putting a lamp in a certain position.

[18:45] So I'm afraid I'm not going to say very much about that because I hadn't thought it through what it says so I haven't had ears to hear so I can't tell you anything about it but Jesus says, there's another one, think about that.

But what I can say that he stops on this theme of responsibility because you might have been thinking, ah this all sounds very Calvinistic, this sort of God's sovereign hardening of people and you know it's all, nothing you can do about that, you just, it's all in God's hands and so on.

But actually Jesus says, I mean he's not un-saying that God is sovereign but he's saying, well here's another fact, you guys, you need to listen, to give attention to how you hear.

Verse 24, consider carefully what you hear and with the measure you use it will be measured to you and even more.

So he's saying that a hearer is in a very responsible position. that you, by listening, are giving something and putting something into the process and he says, I want you to be very careful how you do that.

[20:04] So, you know, there's an active hearing, if you've got ears then hear. put something into that process so in a practical term you might very well want to pray when, as when before you come to church and say, Lord, I don't want this to be a pointless, fruitless exercise.

Please wake me up, help me to hear and please certainly wake up the preacher so that he's got something to say. And listening, you know, I know people take notes, I find that really helpful actually.

So that, of course, I quickly forget what somebody said but to write it down a little bit just helps the concentration and he's saying all sorts of things like that. Give something into that process, make sure that it doesn't just waft over you and if you're in the habit of coming along and, you know, this is nap time, he says, you know, woe to you really because I know that sometimes the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak but if that's your settled attitude, I come along to church for a nice sleep, he says, well, woe to you for that because when that word goes out, when that message goes out, crucial things are happening.

your eternal destiny is resting on the way you respond and if you've got ears and you don't bother hearing them, you know, if you've got a hearing aid and you switch it off for the sermon because it'll disturb you and you just like a nice snooze, woe to you for that.

Even what you had will be taken away but those who has will be given more. I'm not trying to get at you if you've had no sleep and you've done your very best to come along here this evening and you've managed thus far but you're flagging.

[ 22 : 10 ] I'm not going to look in case anybody is but I'm not trying to get at you but I'm just trying to make that point. It is important the hearing of the message and then Jesus gives another parable in verses 26 to 29.

This one is about sowing and harvest I'm risking getting in the wrong place in my notes here and I'm probably falling into the trap of doing that.

Anyway, I'll continue. This one is about the process of getting a harvest.

I will wait because I've got another slide for that. The next one is about the disproportionate growth of the kingdom. What is the kingdom of God like? It's like a mustard seed which is tiny and when you plant it amazingly you get this large tree in your garden.

I'll come back to that one again. And bear in mind all the way through we've got this division between the way he deals with the crowd and the way he deals with the disciples.

[ 23 : 25 ] With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them as much as they could understand. It's interesting that Jesus does take account of the capacity of the multitude but he did not say anything to them without using a parable but when he was alone with his own disciples he explained everything to them.

So you've got all the way through that dichotomy of the parables for the crowd but for those privileged to be on the inside they get the explanation.

Right this is where you see how my I've got ahead of myself. So why parables?

Well I think that's exactly what Jesus was asked. Why do you speak in parables? And one thing that he doesn't say is because sermons sermons illustrations enliven a sermon.

It's generally accepted that they do although I'm sure it will be different in different cultures. But it's not the same question as if I was teaching Sunday school would it be a good idea to do some visual aids?

[ 24 : 41 ] It's not the same question as that. It's not the same question as if I was doing Sunday school should I give them an activity and that will help them to remember things better. It's much more mysterious than that because what was his answer?

Because in parables people are given an opportunity. People are engaged. People listen. And in that crucial moment they can either respond positively or they can get harder and harder and harder.

And there's that crucial thing about response to the word being the key factor. And it's a very, what shall I say, keenly, sharply produced point.

There was the, see I did get ahead of myself, there was the parable of the sower. It's the same seed, it's the same seed but produces all those different effects on the path, in the shallow soil, in the thorns, in the good soil.

The pathway Satan snatches, the shallow soil where there's no deep root, the thorns where the word is choked, and the good soil where it's multiplied n times where n is an integer.

[ 26 : 11 ] Could be 30, 60 or 100. So let's ponder this just for a moment. I think this says something to us about how important hearing is. Take good care how we hear.

The parables require effort from the hearer and in that sense they're like every other ministry of God's word. It's a bit frightening actually. It's a bit frightening to think that as we sit and listen to somebody speaking from the front things are being sealed eternally.

I think that's quite a big responsibility for the person at the front but it's also a big responsibility for the hearers and I have an awful lot of sympathy for people who are hearing because whatever you get is always human isn't it?

It's a you can always find things to criticize or distract or whatever but Jesus is having none of that. He's saying if you're hearing the message you must if that's what you're hearing you need to pay great attention.

Don't use it as the opportunity to you know what's going to church an opportunity to catch up with my friends over coffee. What it is is the opportunity to hear the word that saves our souls.

[ 27 : 36 ] That's what's the opportunity for. And he says treat it seriously for goodness sake. And then here's another point to ponder.

That all the while this is happening God is working out his sovereign purposes including privileges and hardening.

Just think about the privileges. To some people Jesus gives the insight into the secret of the kingdom. That's a gift.

Do you know see how in this whole thing gift and responsibility are just woven together in an almost seamless way. human responsibility and God's sovereignty is woven together.

And he says you make sure you're listening. But at the same time he says you've been given the gift of understanding and the people outside haven't.

[ 28 : 41 ] And you might well say well why was I given this gift? What have I done to deserve it? And I don't know the answer to that. But if you've been given the gift if you find as you're listening you're not thinking what on earth is he going on about.

But thinking I know I can see that. I know the Jesus that he's talking about. I understand the gospel that he's referring to. If you've got that flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but the father in heaven you've been given a gift.

Be grateful for it. God is working out his sovereign purposes including privilege. He talks about given a secret a mystery to you it's been given.

And it includes the hardening that I've referred to before. It includes this mysterious thing that well we experience this as a church don't we? We try really hard with people.

We look out for them and pray for them and know them by name and befriend them and help them to listen to the Bible or something like that.

[ 29 : 51 ] But all of a sudden we wake up and we find they're not interested. They've gone off it. They've got hard. And sometimes with great patience people can be won back.

But it's extraordinarily difficult thing to do. And Jesus says you know this is going on as well. You're right there in the middle of God's sovereign purposes. Let's move on and see what I had on the last sheet.

So thinking about this kingdom that Jesus is telling us about. Which as you may remember from way back it's a kingdom of the word rather than a kingdom of the sword.

Because the people were probably expecting a kingdom of the sword. And in these last couple of parables Jesus says you might think that this is all going to happen now.

That if since Messiah has come that's it. Bang. Totally. New world. Everything. He says it is in a sense this is one of the new teachings that Jesus brings.

[ 31 : 06 ] That the coming of the kingdom is not bang or here. But there's process to it and time and delay. So in that parable 26 to 29 he says the word is sown.

And the farmer he whether he sleeps or gets up the seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how.

all by itself the soil produces corn. Then the ear then the stalk, ear full grain harvest.

And he says this is the way it is in the kingdom. Please don't think that because the button of human responsibility has been pressed.

You know ears to hear, hear, hear. don't think don't think that it's just you and you can take credit for it. Aren't I wonderful all the responses that are in me and all the responses that I see around me.

[ 32 : 13 ] He says God uses you but it isn't down to you because actually you could all go to sleep and God's word would still work all by itself.

There is a story of Luther, I don't know whether it's true because I haven't looked it up, Martin Luther and his associate Philip Melancthon and somebody said Martin Luther you have you know during the course of your life you have seen Europe changed with the Protestant Reformation and how do you account for this great transformation and this you know kingdoms being turned upside down and huge changes across the church for the better and the reply was Philip and I just drank our beer and the word of God did its work.

I might not even have remembered it properly but you get the idea. I mean he was very laid back about it in that sense. It's God's work and here's a parable that says that and then another parable about the disproportionate growth.

This is one of the things that's going on. You get this tiny little seed this sort of insignificant message. It's not on the Sade program and it's not on the world at one and John Humphreys doesn't really have a clue about what the Christian message is.

It's this tiny little insignificant thing and yet you plant it in somebody's life and it changes everything. You plant this in a society and it changes the society.

[ 33 : 57 ] You plant this in the world with starting off with twelve disciples and you can change the face of the globe. That's what it's like. That's what the kingdom is like.

It doesn't happen overnight but it takes time and this is the nature, the amazing nature of the word.

God's sovereignty grows his kingdom but using effort but not relying on it. Human effort isn't the bottom line. It's part of it but it's not the bottom line. The bottom line is that God does his work and his word does its work.

God produces amazing results via his word, via his gospel in the kingdom. Just like that tree, you wouldn't have expected it from the little packet of seeds that you got but this is what happens.

[ 35 : 06 ] It's what happens in the natural world and Jesus says the spiritual world is like that. I thought we could perhaps learn that we need patient persistence.

If this is the nature of his kingdom we need patient persistence and I thought first of all with ourselves because we can get frustrated with ourselves. Why aren't I more spiritual?

Why can't I grow more quickly? Why do I keep having the same problems over and over again? I think these parables are saying God does work but it doesn't happen instantaneously.

There's a process to go through. And also to be patient and persistent with the mission of the church. So at the last FIEC leaders meeting John Stevens was saying now was he saying this or I just imagined it that the decline of the church in the UK has been over decades.

You could perhaps take it back almost to the beginning of the 20th century. The church has been declining and said we should aim to reverse that but we should aim long term.

[ 36 : 23 ] That won't be done before Christmas. We need to be planning for years and decades ahead and putting into place things now to train people up and tell them you need to be working.

You're an 18 year old or whatever. You need to be working through your lifetime and to keep on working. Maybe tell people that you meet later on they'll need to be working through their lifetime to see the gospel progress.

Patient perseverance, patience and persistence with ourselves. And then finally I think the bottom line is trust in God because underneath all this this amazing web of responsibility and process and action and decision and crisis and everything underneath this it's God who's doing his work and I think that gives us a great basis for confidence.

Let's stop there. Thank you.