

Pay Attention

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 1 through 25. Our passage begins on page 787 in the Pew Bible.
- We will have it on the screens when I read it in just a second, but it would be good to have it open before you as we walk through our text this morning. Let me pray for us, and then I'll read.
- Father in heaven, how firm a foundation indeed we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord, and the word that he has authorized and inspired through your Holy Spirit.
- Lord, as we come to your word now, would you do this work of comforting, strengthening, convicting, converting, equipping, and glorifying your great name.
- Give us ears to hear, Father, what your Spirit is saying to us today. In Jesus' name we pray, amen. All right, Mark, chapter 4, picking up in verse 1.
- [1 : 3 0] 30-fold, 60-fold, and 100-fold.
- And he said, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.
- But for those outside, everything is in parables. So that they may indeed see, but not perceive. May indeed hear, but not understand.
- Lest they should turn and be forgiven. And he said to them, do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word.
- And these are the ones along the path where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground.
- [2 : 5 0] The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. Then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.
- And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.
- But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.
- And he said to them, is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.
- If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them, pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.

[3 : 53] For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. So for a number of years, there have been articles and studies coming out saying, that human attention span, the human attention span, is dwindling, is dropping.

Given social media, the always-on news cycle, constant interruptions and notifications hitting us through our smartphones and on and on, it seems that we're just more distractible than ever.

In fact, one study in 2015 argued that people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds. I've already lost you in this sermon.

Supposedly, according to this study, that's a shorter attention span than a goldfish. Now, that study didn't really hold up to scientific scrutiny. After all, how does one measure the attention span of a goldfish?

But, you know, even if that particular article was discredited, the general observation seems true. Paying attention seems harder than ever. There's oh so much to distract us, and we are oh so used to being entertained.

[5 : 09] Combine those two things together, and sure enough, really zeroing in, really paying attention, it's hard. Unless, of course, something seems worth our attention.

We've been watching a lot of baseball as a family lately, and I have to be honest, that is not something I ever thought I would say. Why?

Because baseball is so boring. Unless, unless your team is in the World Series.

And lo and behold, the Phillies made it to the World Series this year. They were in the World Series. And so, we've been glued to the TV, watching pitch after pitch of the world's slowest game.

Why? Because we really wanted them to win. So, there we were, paying attention to baseball, of all things, because we think it's worth our attention.

[6 : 16] In our passage today, Jesus tells us a string of parables about hearing. Hearing and paying attention. Just glance through the passage for yourself.

How many times do you find the word hear? I counted at least ten. Jesus says in verse 24, pay attention to what you hear.

That's the big idea of this passage. Now, as we look at the context in the beginning of chapter four, we see again that great crowds have gathered. Many are attracted to Jesus and his ministry.

And at this point, this has been happening for some time now. Many have been gathering, hearing, so much so at this point that Jesus has to find a place along the shore of Galilee that's a bit like a natural amphitheater, where he can sit on a boat on the water, and his voice can be carried up across the water, up in the surrounding cove into the hillside.

And what does Jesus do here? At this moment, when the crowds are gathering, when he's become so much of a draw, when he's become so famous or infamous, that as we saw last week, his family thinks that he's out of his mind, and the religious authority are trying to explain it away, that he's demon-possessed.

[7 : 34] At this moment, what does Jesus do? With this great crowd. The crowds upon crowds that gather. Well, Jesus doesn't sort of stoke them into a fervor or applaud them for their enthusiasm.

Instead, Jesus tells a parable about hearing, about paying attention to what you hear. Because, you see, it's not enough to just go along with the crowd, to be swept up in the enthusiasm.

It's not enough to just come to church and enjoy the singing and enjoy the relationships. Jesus looks at us and he says, pay attention to what you hear.

Now, let's look at why. Why does Jesus want to make this point? Well, first, what we see in our text is that Jesus says, pay attention to what you hear because it's the word that's being sown.

Pay attention to what you hear because what's being sown is the word. Now, the first parable in our passage is what we often call the parable of the sower. Now, sowing here is not a needle-pulling thread, right?

[8 : 51] That's S-E-W. This is S-O-W. It's planting seed. The parable of the planter, of the sower. And in first century Palestine, this was done by literally taking handfuls of seed and just scattering it quite liberally across the field.

Now, that practice might seem a little strange to us today, but that was normal in the first century. And as Jesus explains in verse 14, this is all a metaphor for the ministry of the word.

In particular, Jesus' own ministry. He has come declaring the good news, the message, the word about the arrival of God's kingdom, ultimately in and through his own person and work.

So you see, Jesus didn't come to give people seven steps for successful living or eight ways to conquer your biggest fears and achieve your wildest dreams, right?

You probably wouldn't have found Jesus' teaching in the self-help section of the bookstore. The sower isn't sowing a bunch of good advice that you can try out and modify and paste onto your own life agenda.

[9 : 58] He's sowing the word, the news, the agenda-shattering message that God's kingdom is at hand, that God is breaking into enemy territory to reclaim what was lost and to set up his reign of freedom and joy in the place of sadness and death.

And this news was just too important to gloss over or ignore or hold at arm's length or just be enthusiastic about, but not really hear.

I think most people don't really give much attention to Christianity because they don't really think it's all that worth paying attention to. Often we misunderstand it as just another way of telling people to be moral.

As if Christianity is just love your neighbor wrapped up in a bunch of religious beliefs that don't make much sense anymore. And if that's all that Christianity is, why pay attention to that?

Do we really need all these religious beliefs to convince us to love our neighbors? But friends, Christianity is so much more than that.

[11 : 19] But aren't we guilty of this too inside the church? Do we really think it's worth our attention, this word, this news?

Is it worth turning off the countless distractions and really hearing it? Really giving it our full attention as if life and death really depended on it?

As if the message was not just one more moral exhortation to do better or to try harder, but a life-giving word like seed in the soil that creates new life from the inside out.

Do we really know this message that's about a God so holy and beautiful that just to gaze upon Him would be either utter rapture or utter ruin?

Rapture because of His inexpressible beauty, but ruin because we've offended Him and stand under God's perfect justice. What a predicament we're in as human beings.

[12 : 26] We long for the infinite, for beauty, for something that would ravish our souls, but that very thing we've offended and we stand over against so that to see God would destroy us.

And yet this God beheld our miserable state and in love took our human nature. The righteous King took the rebel's place and Jesus Christ lived the life that we should have lived and died the death that we deserve to die so that all of our sins could be forgiven and we could be granted eternal life and be reborn by His Spirit and live a whole new life in the midst of this life for His kingdom and His praise, no longer standing under God's wrath, but in the freedom of God's favor and acceptance.

repentance. Pay attention to what you hear, Jesus says, because it's the word that's being sown. But this leads us to our second point.

Jesus says, pay attention to what you hear because there are many who fail to do so. Pay attention to what you hear because there are many who fail to do so.

In verse 10 of our passage, the scene sort of cuts from the crowds by the lake to a scene to a later scene when it's just Jesus with the 12 apostles along with the other disciples and they ask Jesus, they ask Him, Jesus, why are you speaking in all of these parables?

[14 : 01] And Jesus gives a very surprising answer because up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus' illustrations and His parables have been used to try to help people get the point. Remember Jesus talking about the physician who doesn't come for the healthy but for the sick.

Or remember Jesus talking about the wedding guests who aren't going to fast as long as the bridegroom is with them. Or the new cloth that shouldn't be sewed onto an old shirt. Or the new wine that shouldn't be put into old wineskins.

Jesus used all of these quick parabolic sayings to help people get the point. To sort of rattle them out of their complacency and to help them see. But the parable of the sower isn't exactly like that.

The parable of the sower is a solemn warning. Consider again this moment in Jesus' ministry. There were crowds upon crowds who were content to just listen to Jesus on the hillside and maybe see a few miracles and get caught up maybe in the enthusiasm but who refused to really come to him.

They had been listening but not really hearing. Not really heeding what they heard. And that's why Jesus makes the distinction he makes in verse 11.

[15 : 25] He says to his disciples, he says, to you, that is to you who've come to me, to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. Now secret here is a bit of a technical word in the New Testament that means revealed truth.

That is, it's something that you can't figure out on your own but God has to make it known. God has to reveal it to us. And for those who have entered into a relationship with Jesus, who have moved from being a casual observer in the crowd to really hearing and following him, Jesus says, God has revealed to you the truth about the kingdom.

And what is it? Well ultimately, as Mark is unfolding before us that the kingdom, the secret of the kingdom, the revealed truth of the kingdom is that the kingdom is ultimately found in Jesus, the king.

But notice the distinction Jesus then makes. He says, but for those on the outside, that is those who refuse to come to him, everything is in parables. It all remains hidden to them.

And in fact, Jesus even seems to be saying in verse 12 that the parable of the sower functions like a judgment on their hard hearts. Because they have refused to come to Jesus after all this time, Jesus tells them a parable about their own refusal to really, truly hear.

[16 : 48] He confronts them in cryptic picture form with their own spiritual state. How about you, friend?

Are you like the seed on the path? You hear it and it just doesn't make any impact. It just immediately snatched away. Don't you see the spiritual danger that you're in?

Or are you like the seed sown on rocky ground? Maybe you like what you hear, but there's no depth. There's no real engagement. At the first sign of hardship, you'll fall away. Or are you like the seed among the thorns?

You've listened for a while. You go through the motions. Some might even look at you and say, wow, you're really growing. But the real love of your life isn't the Lord.

It's the world. It's career. It's wealth. It's friendships. And there's really no lasting fruit in your life. Is Jesus telling this parable to you to warn you, to wake you up before it's too late.

[18 : 02] We don't have all the time in the world to make up our minds where we stand with Christ. We can't continue to hold him at arm's length forever and ever. We must decide.

Will we stay outside in the crowd or will we come in? Will we surrender our lives to him as our king, as our loving Lord?

In verse 21, Jesus changes the metaphor as he kind of presses the parable of the sower home. In verse 21, he changes the metaphor and he speaks of a lamp. And literally, that verse reads, does the lamp come in to be put under a basket?

Does the lamp come in to be put under a basket? And again, Jesus is speaking here of himself. He is the light. He is the lamp entering the world. And though he may be hidden now, as verse 22 says, that's not how it will be forever.

The lamp doesn't go in to stay under the bed, but to light up the whole house. Christ might seem veiled now, but it won't be so forever.

[19 : 12] One day, the glory of Christ will be clear for everyone to see. When he returns in splendor, what seems so hidden now will be uncovered. The king in all his glory will be unmistakable.

And where will you find yourself on that day? When the God of glory comes to finally and fully reclaim his creation. And his glory covers the earth like the waters cover the sea.

that glory that is rapture or ruin. Where will you find yourself on that day? Still in the crowds? Still on the hillside?

Still among the shallow rocks? Still chasing the world and its passing pleasures? Friend, if that is you, don't let another hour go by in such a dangerous spiritual state.

Take Christ as your king, as your light, as your all. Believe that he is God in the flesh, crucified for your sins, risen for your life, seated and reigning at the Father's right hand, ready to receive in mercy all who come to him.

[20 : 27] Pay attention to what you hear because there are many who fail to do so. Let that not be you today. But there's one last point Jesus makes here in our passage.

Pay attention to what you hear, Jesus says, because those who do will flourish beyond measure. Pay attention to what you hear because those who do will flourish beyond measure.

You see, the parable of the sower isn't just a warning. It's also a promise. It's not just a parable about the many who fail to hear and receive this word. It's also a parable about the power of this word that despite all the obstacles it faces, despite all the obstacles the word faces from the world and our own flesh and the evil one, that still the word will achieve its saving purpose in those who hear.

What an encouragement this parable must have been to the early church as they brought the gospel to a new city, to a new place and as they sadly saw some simply ignore it altogether, as they saw some quickly fall away, as they saw some profess belief but then chase after the world as if nothing had changed.

What an encouragement this parable must have been. An assurance from Jesus himself that the word will find good soil and it will produce a harvest and it will create new life and it will flourish beyond measure thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.

[22 : 02] And this parable should still encourage us today. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to those who believe and we know that our great God has set his saving love on a countless multitude from every tribe and tongue and nation and city who will hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit.

So don't lose heart, brothers and sisters. But this parable is not just an encouragement for our witness. It's an encouragement to keep on hearing.

In verses 24 and 25, Jesus again supplements the parable of the sower with what we might call the parable of the measure. He says, pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you and still more will be added to you.

The degree to which you give yourself to engaging with this word is the degree to which you will grow in it. To be clear, Jesus is not teaching works righteousness here.

We are saved by grace from first to last. Rather, Jesus is teaching us a principle of the spiritual life. And even this principle of the spiritual life is overflowing with God's grace.

[23 : 15] Notice, Jesus says, with the measure you use, it will be measured to you and still more will be added to you. For the Christian, growth in Christ-likeness is more than just proportionate with our engagement with Christ and his word.

It's super abundant. So, brothers and sisters, do we hear it when it is preached? And do we meditate upon it when it is read?

And do we apply it when it is understood? If we pay attention to what we hear, Jesus promises, the growth will be abundant.

Brothers, sisters, are you longing for peace? Jesus has revealed himself as the prince of peace. So seek him in his word. Are you longing for strength to endure, to run the race?

Jesus is the almighty one. Seek him in his word. Do you long for wisdom? Jesus is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

[24 : 28] Seek him in his word. The measure you use, it will be added to you and still more will be added to you. You will come looking for wisdom and Christ will also make you patient.

You will come looking and longing for strength and Christ will also make you compassionate. You'll come looking for peace and Christ will also give you a passion for his glory and still more will be added to you.

Are you willing to put this promise to the test? How will you engage with God's word this week? What is one way you can take this promise to heart and let God demonstrate his faithfulness to you?

We started out by saying how much distraction technology has produced in our lives. But you know, we also live in a time when we have more access to God's word than ever before. Why not listen to a Sunday school class you may have missed?

Put yourself under the teaching of God's word this week. Why not download a prayer app? There are lots of good ones out there. And put yourself under the meaningful prayer of God's word this week. If you don't have a regular pattern of reading God's word, start this week.

[25 : 47] You can pick up reading the gospel of Mark. That's a good place to start. Read slowly and ask God to reveal more of himself to you and how you might keep in step with his spirit this week. How will you take God at his promise this week?

Pay attention to what you hear because those who do, Jesus says, will flourish beyond measure. Let's pray. Lord, we pause before you and we acknowledge that in these moments when we sit before you and your word, a great spiritual battle is taking place between our proud hearts that want to do things our own way and your mighty grace that wants to capture our hearts and make us new.

So, Lord, we pray that the power of your word would be at work converting us, drawing us to faith, growing us and changing us.

God, how we long to be a church where we see this growth, not just in number, God, but in depth to see our own lives flourish 30, 60, 100-fold with the character of Christ.

Oh, Lord, we acknowledge that we're utterly dependent on your spirit to do that work. So, would you do it, we pray, for Christ's sake. Amen.