

Where we start . . .

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What we read . . .

This idea of really listening is at the heart of the parable Jesus shares with us as recorded by Mark. Read Mark 4:1-25.

Who is the major "actor" in the parable?

What does this individual do?

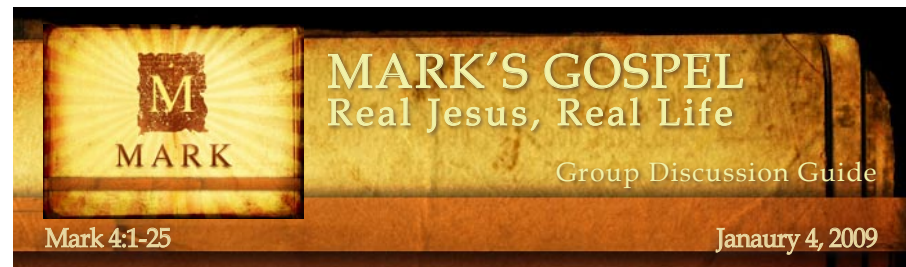
When Jesus gets to the explanation of the parable, what ideas or words are repeated?

How does this repetition help underscore what this parable is all about?

Jesus offers an initial "call" introducing this parable as well as some "commentary" on the parable. How does what He says in 4:3, 9, and 24 help drive home His point?

Why this matters . . .

Primarily, the parable is about the faithful activity of the sower and the certainty of the seed being sown. If that is the case, then what do you think Jesus' call is to you? What are you going to take away from this parable?



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Diving in . . .

Jesus makes it clear—if we don't understand His point in the parable we will be looking at today, we are going to miss a great deal of what He says (4:13). That doesn't mean this parable is necessarily easy to understand; it does mean that understanding it is critical. And, what is at the heart of this parable? The "secret" of the kingdom (4:11)—a secret that is wrapped up in *paying close attention to what Jesus says*.

Discussing . . .

In the passage we read today, we encounter one of Jesus' most well-known parables. That might make things a bit challenging, because the familiarity with the parable might lead us to our own pre-conceived ideas of what it is all about . . . without really paying attention to what Mark tells us. Keep that in mind as your group discusses the parable; pay close attention to what the text actually says.

How are we to approach reading and understanding parables? On a very basic level, they are illustrative stories. It has been said that a parable is a way to tell a "deep truth" through the use of a common image or idea. But as Vincent Taylor wrote, they are not simple "transparent illustrations" but actually stories told "intended to provoke thought" (*The Gospel According to Mark* [London, 1952], 252). This means that wrestling with what a parable really means is the very kind of thing that a parable is intended to provoke.

Parables are like arrows. An arrow has a "business end" (the point). But it also has a shaft (to help drive the point home) and feathers (to help keep the arrow's flight true). But neither the shaft nor the feathers are the "point" of the arrow. Parables often contain details that serve like a shaft and feathers for the purpose of driving home the point. We have to guard against making too much of such details *and in the process ignoring or overlooking the point*.

Our understanding of this parable is enhanced by a couple of things. First, Jesus offers not only an initial "call" (that helps us see what He is after) but also some of His own commentary on this parable and its purpose. He begins in 4:3 by commanding those around Him to "Listen!" He concludes the telling of the parable by calling the one "who has ears to hear" to really listen (4:9). When He later explains a bit more about the parable to His followers, He makes a couple of very important observations.

First, He underscores the fact that telling parables is not for the purpose of obscuring truth (4:21-22). He then emphasizes, again, that what He really intends is for people to listen, to pay attention to what He says (4:23). Finally,

His comments in 4:24-25, although initially perhaps seeming cryptic, simply let His hearers know that the degree to which they pay attention to what He is saying (the "measure you use") is the degree to which they will get more insight into what Jesus is saying.

Although the "soils" in the parable may initially catch our attention, the soil is not really the focus of the parable. As Jesus tells the parable, we need to watch for the "major player" in the story; that figure is typically a key to understanding what a parable is all about. And here, the key figure (in fact the only figure!) is the sower. And the sower's activity is what is crucial; the sower sows seed. Someone hearing Jesus' parable (in an agrarian society) would have listened and nodded; sowers sow seed and seed grows. Yes! That makes sense. But what is Jesus' point?

In explaining the parable, we need again to pay attention to the "action." What words keep getting repeated in the explanation? Two words or ideas are the primary emphases: the seed sown and *the idea of hearing*. The soils are, in fact, part of the shaft and feather of the parable; they are not the major point but the means of driving home the major point. The real issue is "listening to the Word that is sown." This is why Jesus repeatedly emphasizes listening or hearing in the immediate context (4:3, 9, 23, 24).

Some may attempt to apply the parable by trying to discern how it is that a person is one kind of soil or another kind of soil. You might find people wanting to talk about how to grow to be good soil when they fear that they are rocky soil. In one sense, such discussions end up overlooking the one really key thing. The parable is not so much about the soil; the soil merely illustrates what is the key idea: Listening to Jesus!

Some may raise a question about the quote from Isaiah (4:12). It could be read as if Jesus is intentionally hiding the truth from His hearers. But we know from what Jesus says in 4:21-23 that *He is not intending to hide the truth*. So what is the point of the quotation? Both in Isaiah's day and in Jesus' day, there were people who only casually listened to what God had to say and as a result they never "turned" and never understood. The quote is more an observation of what does, in fact, often happen and not a statement of purpose.

One helpful insight into unravelling what this parable is all about is to pay close attention to what Jesus tells those who come to ask Jesus about the parable (4:10-11). He tells them that "to you has [already] been given the secret of the kingdom!" In other words, He is saying, "You've got it!" But certainly they might have been puzzled by this statement, because they came to ask Him about the parable because they didn't feel they had "gotten it!" What is it that they *have* that those "outside" don't have? Perhaps we could put it this way: They *have paid attention*. They have responded as if Jesus' words really mattered! Those who didn't bother or didn't want to understand what Jesus had said really weren't listening; they didn't want to know. And, as a result, they are only left with a parable.

As your group wrestles with what Jesus says, you are being good soil! You are "paying attention to what you hear" (4:24). In the very telling of this parable, Jesus is enacting it. And as we wrestle with what He is saying, we are living out His intended end.