

Leader Notes

Text: Mark 4.1-20

The Words of God

Background and Context

Context: This teaching of Jesus takes place early in his ministry. Jesus has recently begun his ministry which has consisted of teaching about the Kingdom of God and healings/miracles. The content and style of Jesus' teaching is not illustrated in the first 3 chapters of Mark, though we can see in these chapters that he was drawing numerous people to himself and that his teaching was creating divisions among people, including his own family (Mark 3.20-34). Beginning in the present text, the style and content of Jesus' teaching about God's Kingdom is illustrated for the first time in length. Jesus taught in parables, short stories drawn from common experience that illustrated deeper spiritual truths. Fittingly, Jesus uses this first parable to indicate both why he teaches in parables and the importance of hearing and responding appropriately to his teaching. As such, this parable serves as an important interpretive key for all of Jesus' parables, both in Mark and the rest of the Gospels.

Parables: Parables are simply stories drawn from ordinary life that are used to illustrate deeper truths. The use of parables to teach was not unusual in Jesus' day. Many Jewish rabbis used parables in their teaching, as did other contemporary Hellenistic teachers. What is interesting about Jesus' teaching is that he seems to have taught primarily through parables rather than using parables to illustrate his teaching. Quoting Isaiah 6.9-10, Jesus indicates that he teaches in this way intentionally, as a means of obscuring his teaching (Mark 4.10-12). Much debate has been had over Jesus' statement, especially his choice to quote Isaiah. It seems strange that Jesus would not want people to understand what he was saying or that he would intentionally hide truth. Perhaps the best suggestion is that Jesus chose to teach in parables to gauge interest. The parables contained truth and could be interpreted. Truth could be teased out, but only by those who took the effort to do so. By couching his teaching in parables Jesus was calling people forward, asking for a level of commitment and involvement from those that wished to follow him. In this vein, Jesus' quotation of Isaiah becomes an ironic statement. The truth is present for all, but many miss it for they fail to move forward and engage Jesus' teaching with any level of effort and commitment. Thus, people miss the forgiveness that is before them, a missing brought about by their own doing.

The Text

The Parable (Mark 4.1-9): Jesus is teaching by the Sea of Galilee. A large crowd has gathered thus necessitating Jesus' choice of a boat as his teaching platform. Mark indicates that Jesus taught many things. However, Mark chose to relate a single parable drawn from this teaching, perhaps because the parable captures the heart of Jesus' teaching that day. Jesus tells a story about a farmer who went out to sow seed. Unlike modern farming, plowing was not done before sowing. Instead, farmers walked through their fields broadcasting seed by hand. The result was that their seed often fell on inhospitable soil and was unfruitful. The result for this farmer's efforts was no different. He went out broadcasting seed. However, some landed on soil that was inhospitable, leading to a lack of fruit. Yet some of the seed did land on hospitable soil. This seed, received by the soil, led to a harvest of unimaginable proportions for Jesus' audience. No farmer ever could have dreamed of a thirty-fold yield much less a hundred-fold. Jesus concludes his story by exhorting his audience to hear, really hear his parable. It was more than just a story about farming. It held deeper truths, but what?

The Question (Mark 4.10-12): Once Jesus had finished teaching and the crowds had dispersed, Jesus' disciples inquired about the parables, both their purpose and meaning. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6, indicating that he has deliberately chosen to teach in parables to obscure his teaching. (See *Parables*.) With the use of parables, Jesus is attempting to draw his audience in, to ask for a level of commitment and openness on their part as a threshold for understanding Jesus' truth about the Kingdom of God. The parables require that Jesus' audience respond honestly to his exhortation to hear what he is saying. Hearing takes more than the audible hearing of his words. Hearing takes openness and commitment, a willingness to wrestle with and act upon what Jesus is saying.

The Interpretation (Mark 4.13-20): Jesus' own disciples respond to his exhortation to hear his parable. They are leaning in, opening themselves to what Jesus is saying. Therefore, Jesus interprets the parable for them. The parable is a story about one's receptivity to the Kingdom message and the results of this receptivity. The sower, probably God, sows the message of the Kingdom broadly. Some hear the message and are closed to it. They fall victim to a greater cosmic struggle with Satan, God's truth taken from them by Satan himself. Others hear the message and accept it. However, they seem to accept the benefits of the message rather than the liabilities of its transforming power. Once the liabilities are experienced, growth in their life is stopped. Likewise, still others hear the message and receive it. Yet this message is received as one of many competing messages and desires. Thus, growth in their life is stymied, leading to an absence of fruitfulness. Finally, some are open and receptive. They readily take in God's Kingdom message and the results are astounding, an amazing fruitfulness that is beyond earthly explanation.

Application: What does it take to experience transformation, true, radical transformation in our lives? Certainly such transformation takes God, but according to Jesus it takes something else. It takes us. Transformation takes an openness, a receptivity on our part, a willingness to hear what God is saying to us in His Word. This hearing is more than hearing the words and knowing them. This hearing is stepping forward to receive them, wrestle with them, act upon and obey them. It is putting these words first in our life and accepting the transformation they bring about, both the pleasant and at times the unpleasant outcomes. It is in this hearing that growth, explosive, radical, transforming growth can occur.

Traffic: What's driving your life?

Discussion Guide 1

Mark 4.1-20

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- When in your life have you ever run into a road block?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *Transformation. Fruitfulness. A life that is changed and new, renewed. It is our greatest desire as followers of Christ and yet it is what most often alludes us. Change comes slowly, if at all. Transformation seems shallow. Fruitfulness is absent. Why? What does it take to experience transformation, the kind we hunger for so deeply? The short of the story is that it takes God. Transformation, real, radical transformation of our lives that leads to fruitfulness is solely the work of God's Spirit within us. If it is God's work, why doesn't He get to work? Well, here's the fine print. God's work is dependent upon our openness, upon our willingness to be worked upon, our receptivity to what He has to say, what He wants to do in us and through us. The trouble is that a good bit of the time, we are not as open as we think. Stuff gets in the way. We close ourselves off to God. We struggle with the balance of positive and negative outcomes and consequences of God's work in our lives. The result is that we do not see the full extent of transformation that could take place in our lives. What if it was different? What if we were totally and completely open? What if we were completely willing, completely receptive to hearing and responding? What if we could clear out the stuff that gets in the way? What then? Maybe it is time to find out.*

- Read Mark 4.1-20.
- What kind of road blocks to fruitfulness did Jesus describe?
- What various forms might these road blocks take today?
- Where have you seen the presence of these road blocks? What has been the result?
- In what ways, if any, do you experience these road blocks in your own life? Can you elaborate?
- What are the results of any road blocks on your own spiritual fruitfulness? Can you elaborate?
- What steps might be necessary to address spiritual fruitfulness in your life? Which of these steps might you be willing to consider?
- Break up into pairs or triads within your group. Spend some time praying for one another. We recommend you consider focusing these prayers on God's Spirit opening our eyes to that which is hindering fruitfulness in our lives and providing grace and strength to respond in complete openness to God.

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)