

## 6-26-24 Notes

### *THE GOSPEL OF MARK* *Mark 4:1—5:43*

*By*  
*Dr. James E. Potts*

The synagogues were fast becoming closed to Jesus, so, He began to teach by the sea. The crowd described in Chapter 4:1 was so large, “***He entered into a ship and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land.***” Jesus was a energetic and exciting teacher, not just a healer, as the crowd’s response suggests.

In Chapter four we have Mark’s largest single collection of Jesus’ teachings. Jesus taught primarily in parables—a method very familiar to His Jewish listeners. By definition, a parable is a story used to illustrate a teaching by comparison, and the story is usually about a common-place event. Jesus knew that His listeners were accustomed to thinking in pictures, and by using parables He could take theoretical/select ideas and convert them into concrete and readily understandable truths.

We come now to Mark’s account of Jesus’ parable of the Sower and the four kinds of soil (4:3-9). No doubt, from His vantage point in the boat that day, Jesus had a ringside view of a very familiar sight in first-century Palestine—a sower working in one of the fields near the seashore.

Building on this vivid picture, He pointed out that as the farmer sows his seed some of it falls on the hard-packed walkway along the edge of the field and is gobbled up by birds. Other seed falls on rocky sections of the field where there is so little dirt, the seed cannot really take root, and the little growth that does occur soon withers in the hot sun. Some of the seed lands in patches where thorns will eventually choke out any possible growth. But that seed which is planted on fertile, productive soil will produce a good harvest. He then concludes the story with this comment, “***He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.***”

Next, we see that apparently the disciples were not clear as to His meaning, so, in verse 14 through 20 Jesus carefully explains the meaning of the parable. The general picture of the parable is being able to hear and understand Jesus’ message. Mark’s earliest readers knew that without a faith relationship to Jesus His teachings might not be clearly understood. But with a faith relationship the parable was a source of encouragement and hope—the kingdom of God had arrived with Jesus, and it is growing among us! From small beginnings come great endings.

## 6-26-24 Notes

The message for Mark's readers and us is, even though at times our witnessing to the gospel may seem to have little effect and may even appear to harden the hearts of those who hear it (4:12), the end result is in God's hands. We are responsible for our faithfulness; God is responsible for the outcome. Despite the unresponsiveness of some, and even the direct opposition of others, sharing the Good News of Jesus is a wonderful privilege.

This is a good passage to read if you feel discouraged over your efforts. Believers who find themselves spiritually dry, or congregations going through periods of barrenness will profit from reading this parable. Nothing is quite disheartening as having tried as hard as possible and exhausting every idea without any observable signs of progress. This is especially true in our success-oriented society. We want to be able to measure or chart results as we understand them.

But our call as believers is to be very alert to every means and opportunity to share our faith. Our call as disciples of the Lord is to action, and our mission is to respond to the deep needs of people—next door, in the neighborhood, across town in neglected areas, or any place in the world where there is suffering and ignorance.

At the same time, we ought never to feel discouraged or defeated if our efforts are misunderstood or our words rejected. Again, and again as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus through these Gospel lessons, we see Him misunderstood, not listened to, ignored, and even violently opposed. But that did not stop Him. And it did not stop Mark's earliest readers as they reflected on the truth of this parable. They had every reason to be discouraged because they were being persecuted for their faith. But the outcome of their lives was in the hands of God.

But the parable of the Sower and the soils does more than encourage the discouraged. It also challenges us: Jesus' words echo from the story as we seem to hear Him ask, "Do you hear Me? Am I making myself clear?"

Let us look at Jesus' explanation of the story and interpret it for today. It is about four kinds of soil (hearers), and we may be more like the soil than the sower. There are those who hear the message but reject it outright (4:15). The soil of their hearts is packed down and hard—the seed cannot take. In our experience, the gospel is often dismissed as irrelevant and not practical: "You cannot be a believer and make it in this dog-eat-dog, competitive world of business" ... "If I am nice to those children they will take advantage of me." So often we hold to old ideas and patterns and reject a new word or dismiss it as unworkable, simply because to accept it would call for us to change.

## 6-26-24 Notes

Then there are those hearers who receive the message but who do not persist in their faith (4:16). They have ***“no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time”*** (4:17). Among this type are those who see faith as an emotional high. It is a feeling, and if they feel good, all is well. But as soon as that “high” feeling sags, they give up. Unless the emotional high is strengthened by persistence in faith, there is danger that the seed may not take root and grow.

Jesus refers next to a third kind of hearer (4:18-19). These are persons who are distracted by the temptations of the world. Jesus specifically lists three temptations. The temptation to become preoccupied with “the cares of this world,” is mentioned first. This speaks of getting bogged down by the pressures of everyday life—earning a living, getting ahead, being socially accepted. Then, He refers to the temptation to concentrate on making money and acquiring material gain. And third, having a “lust of other things”—anything that takes first place in our lives other than Jesus Christ. In other words, giving in to any of these temptations will choke out spiritual growth.

Jesus also reminds us that there are those who hear, receive, and act on the gospel message (4:20). These have ears to hear and listen with a third ear—the ear of faith. In a secular age like ours when people seem to find it easy to ignore the message of Jesus Christ, the truth of this parable shouts to be heard and understood. In a culture that makes persistence in the Christian life difficult, the parable of the four kinds of soil speaks to our condition. It calls us to “hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit.”

It appears that this parable speaks directly to the necessity of spiritual growth. “Faith-bearing believers”—those whose lives reflect daily the Spirit of Christ—are involved in the work of the church, in prayer and fellowship with other believers, in Bible study, and in ministering to the needs of their neighbors. This is our plan of action as we seek to grow and mature in our faith.

In these next verses (4:21-25) Jesus stresses the importance of His teaching method and the way it is received. So important are the points He wants to make that He seems to be using different images to reemphasize what He has already said, to make sure we understand.

Jesus’ parables are meant to be understood as surely as a torch or flashlight is meant to provide light. What may seem to be a riddle at first will eventually be explained or revealed. Both of those who understand and those who do not are encouraged to keep listening: ***“For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither***

## 6-26-24 Notes

*was anything kept secret, but that it should come about. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear” (4:22-23).*

Jesus understood a point that authorities in communications stress today. Seeing and hearing are alike in the sense that both depend on the faculty of receiving. The kind of hearing Jesus is referring to is really “listening.” We do not necessarily “receive” everything we hear. But listening is an active exercise; it demands attention and concentration. There is a two-way responsibility if communication is to be effective. It calls for a clear “sender” and an attentive “receiver.”

In other words, Jesus is telling us that listening is serious business. It is a gift that can be cultivated. “Active listening” is taught in some places, and the program is built upon the premise that we can learn to hear both ideas and emotions. Failure to listen carefully can become a habit that feeds on itself. The more carefully we give attention to the Word of God, the more profound its message becomes (4:24-25). If we do not use the gift of listening, we lose it—we lose the ability to receive ideas—they go “in one ear and out the other.”

Jesus never felt that everyone who heard His message would understand, much less respond. As persuasive as He was, we are free moral agents, and we may listen—or not. It is up to us.

This parable of the seed that grows while the Sower is asleep (4:26-29) is, in a way, an extension of or an elaboration on the parable of the Sower and the four kinds of soil. In the story of the Sower and the soils we have a picture of God, the Sower; and people, the soil, acting together to bring about God’s kingdom.

Now Jesus gives us the second parable to emphasize the truth that it is God’s supernatural action that makes spiritual growth possible. The story shows that God has made a world in which seeds that are planted grow, and the results do not depend on human effort.

Many worthwhile enterprises demonstrate this truth. Abraham Lincoln was shocked and disgusted when, as a young man, he first saw people being sold like cattle. A sense of injustice of slavery grew like a seed within him, and his response as president changed history.

As Christians began as a tiny seemingly irrelevant movement, it appeared to be just one more pathetic group that was doomed to eventual elimination. When compared with the military and material strength of the powerful Roman Empire, it seemed to

## 6-26-24 Notes

have no chance. Yet the empire that Pilate and Herod represented came to an end, while the small group of Christians not only endured, but transformed the world. It was God's power that change the hearts and wills of people that made the difference then. And it is that same power at work in our twenty first century world that changes people from being hesitant human beings into bold forces for good and for God.

In the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) Jesus tells us how the world is really changed. It is not remade by external forces but the seeds that are planted, ideas and movements that have the power to convince people and change lives. And the word picture He gives us to illustrate this is the smallest of seeds, yet when these seeds sprout and grow, they become tall and useful trees. The growth of the Church Universal from its small beginnings in the first century, to what it has become today, may well be the greatest miracle of all.

Small beginnings remind believers, also, to not take themselves too seriously. Some groups pride themselves on smallness. They have small beginnings, and, unfortunately, they experience small ends as well.

The parable of the mustard seed underlines the truth for us that the size of any of our beginnings is not especially important. Instead, it is God's presence and power that allows a seed to grow and bear fruit. Without God's participation, and despite our best efforts, ideas turn, and movements die.

Jesus had been teaching by the seashore all day. Now, when evening came, He sent the crowds home, and Jesus and His disciples got in a boat and started across the Sea of Galilee. Mark gives us next the story of what happened when a violent storm caught them out in the middle of the sea (4:35-41).

On the surface this seems to be totally different material from what went on before in chapter four. Until this incident is reported, Mark is calling attention to Jesus' teaching in parables and the importance of hearing and understanding. Calming the sea appears to be out of context with the rest of the chapter.

Not so. As we continue the story, Mark tells us that when the storm struck, Jesus was asleep in the rear part of the boat, not the least concerned about anything that might happen. But as the wind and the waves beat on the boat, the disciples panicked. They woke Jesus with the question, "***Master, carest thou not that we perish?***" Their question indicates that while they had been "hearing" Him all day long, they had not been "listening." His words throughout the day had stressed the power of God in all kinds

## 6-26-24 Notes

of situations, but now they were paralyzed with fear because they had not really listened and understood what He has been saying.

Jesus' command, "***Peace, be still,***" which quiets the storm, is evidence of His authority. Jesus says to His frightened disciples, "***Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?***" (4:40). His question implies amazement. All day Jesus had been teaching about the importance of hearing God's word about hope and trust, and the first storm they face frightens the disciples clear out of their sandals.

Marks' first-century readers would have found another level of meaning in this episode. A storm-tossed boat with Jesus in it was an accurate symbol of their circumstances. They were continually facing persecution, and this event reminded them that Jesus, Lord of history, was still in control. It was intended to reassure them, for they, too, were asking: "***Master, carest thou not that we perish?***" (4:38). Jesus' answer is simple, "*Trust Me.*"

Calming the sea is a story that also speaks to our condition. As individuals, we hear that God is One in whom we can put our trust but trusting is not always easy when the "waters are rough." Jesus was with the disciples, and still they were afraid. Jesus is with us too, and our lives are often loaded with worry. What is our answer? Again, I believe we have our answer as the Word of God takes root and grow in our lives, as we not only hear but actively listen to what He is saying to us and we really come to know through experience that nothing can come between us and the love of God.

After Jesus muzzled the storm and calm the sea, He and the disciples continued across the Sea of Galilee to its southern shore. This was a remote area occupied by gentiles. As soon as they landed in the country of the Gadarenes than Jesus was challenged to calm another storm—this time in a man whose mind had gone out of control (5:1-19). Mark describes him as having "*an unclean spirit,*" and says the man was living among the tombs.

The creature who confronted Jesus was more than man: "***No man could bind him, no, not with chains, because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces; neither could any man tame him*** (5:3-4). In many respects it is difficult for us today to identify with this scene. But it was a familiar one to the people in Jesus' day. On the other hand, anyone who has worked in the more violent sections of a mental hospital or who has attempted to control a person overdosed on certain drugs will agree that Mark's description is not unbelievable. Insane people provoke in others, feelings of both pity and fear. And both elements are present in this story.

## 6-26-24 Notes

It seems clear from the words and actions of the man that the demons were in complete control. Matter of fact, he was so under the control of the demons that at times he seems to be speaking while the other times the demons are speaking through him. But as desperate as his condition was, this poor man had become comfortable with his condition because he asks Jesus to let him alone (5:7).

But as strange as this setting is to us, there is an important lesson for our times. The evil lies behind the demoniac is just as destructive today as it was in Jesus' day even though it takes different forms. But the power of Christ provides the answer now even as it did then.

Next, we see Jesus dealing with the deranged man by attacking the trouble at its evil source, ***“For He said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit” (5:8).*** Then Jesus spoke again and asked, ***“What is thy name?”*** And the response came, ***“My name is Legion: for we are many” (5:9).*** The answer gives us a vivid word picture of the multitudes of demons that were in control of this agitated and desperate man.

With a command of authority, Jesus then instructed the demons to leave the man and enter a herd of swine, which were grazing nearby, ***“... and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea (there were about two-thousand swine) and were choked in the sea” (5:13).***

The swine herders reacted to their loss by demanding that Jesus leave. They did this basically out of fear and resentment over the destruction of their property. The reaction is like the first response of the demon possessed man—they did not want to be disturbed by Jesus either. Jesus represented a threat to the way things were, and no status quo is safe from the Great Disturber. We would think that they should have been happy over the man's miraculous healing, but instead they were more concerned about the loss of their pigs.

So, Jesus left. Here, as we have seen elsewhere, Jesus does not force Himself on people. He honors our freedom to receive or reject Him because He knows that those who do not want help will not receive it. The healed man is a different story. The difference between the man possessed and the man healed is dramatic. The language of conversion is appropriate for describing the change: he was born again. He was transformed. He was a brand-new human being.

He wanted to join Jesus and the disciples. He wanted to sustain contact with the One who had made him whole, but that was not what Jesus had in mind. ***“Go home to***

## 6-26-24 Notes

*thy friends,” Jesus said, “and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee” (5:19).* Jesus knew that this man’s life validated His message, for all those who had known him as insane would come to know him as whole and learn the reason why. At this point, a gentile could best minister to gentiles.

The calling of the demon-possessed man is instructive for the rest of us. “Before” and “after” conversion experiences are effective witnesses when they are tested day-to-day among friends and acquaintances. If our attitudes, behavior, and life-styles are constantly different, so much so that the hometown folks are impressed, a conversion experience is completed. We may be able to convince strangers rather easily that we were once lost but now are saved. But with the people next door and down the street, the standard is higher, and, therefore, the authenticity of the conversion is more powerful.

It is sometimes easier to go to a distant place to serve God, but Jesus often calls us to stay home and minister where we are. Mark reports (5:20) that the man *“began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him; and all men did marvel.”*

When Jesus and the disciples returned by boat to the Galilean side, a familiar scene greeted them. Crowds gathered on the shore even before the boat was docked. Mark blends two stories together. The story of a sick woman (5:25-34) is sandwiched between the beginning and ending of the story about the healing of Jairus’ daughter (5:22-24, 35-43).

Mark’s Gospel again demonstrates the ring of truth. One could hardly expect crowds of sick and hurting people to wait in orderly lines, like customers who take a number and wait in line to be called. We would expect them to get in each other’s way and compete for Jesus’ time and attention.

And this is exactly what happened. Jesus is presented with an emergency while He is on His way to an emergency. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, has come to Jesus in desperation, begging Him to heal his young daughter. We can be sure this was a dangerous step for Jairus to take, as he was opening himself up to public embarrassment and ridicule for kneeling at Jesus’ feet. The ever-present Pharisees most likely noted his desperate actions and would no doubt use them against him.

Yet, Jairus’ action was true-to-life. Even a stubborn synagogue ruler will set aside his prejudices when his daughter’s life is at stake. The drama of the situation could



## 6-26-24 Notes

have been made for television: Will Jesus get there in time? And the tension is increased when His journey is interrupted by another person seeking help.

The way Jesus deals with interruptions is important. A little girl is dying, yet Jesus stops to ask a question His own disciples think is ridiculous. Busy believers will recognize His dilemma. We are often confronted with new needs while in the process of dealing with old ones. So often we confront suffering on the way to the hospital. But I believe one of the hardest lessons for any of us to learn is that when it comes to meeting human need, there are no such things as interruptions—only opportunities to help and serve.

A woman approaches Jesus from out of the crowd. She has a blood disease—possibly some form of menstrual problem that would have made her ritually unclean as well as physically ill. Mark says she had been ill for twelve years, and ***“she had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse” (5:28)***. And to make matters worse, it had been necessary during all that time for her to have no physical contact with another person (Lev. 15:25-27). She had broken the Law by touching the fringe of Jesus’ robe.

Here hope is clearly stated by Mark, ***“For she said, if I may touch but His clothes, I shall be whole” (5:28)***. Despite the crowd pressing about Him as He walked along, Jesus is aware of the woman’s touch. Mark distinguishes between “thronging,” (5:31) which means to push or rub shoulders with Jesus as it were; and “touching,” which is what the woman did, and which Jesus immediately recognized as more than just being close physically (5:30). The crowd and Jesus’ disciples could not tell the difference.

But there was a difference. The crowd has casual contact with Jesus. It is purposeless, accidental. The woman approaches Jesus with hope and expectation, and she is rewarded by being healed. The crowd pressing about Jesus may have been along for the stroll, curious to see if Jesus could pull off another miracle—this time in Jairus’ home. But the woman wanted to “touch” Jesus as an act of faith, hoping He might heal her.

She demonstrated great personal integrity, too. When Jesus called for the one who had “touched” His clothes to come forward, she did so “fearing and trembling.” She could have slipped away and remained anonymous, but she took a risk (after all, she had broken the Law) and was rewarded. Not only was she healed, but Jesus gave her His blessing, ***“Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace and be whole***

## 6-26-24 Notes

*of thy plague” (5:34).* As He had done before with others, Jesus made possible her re-entry into society. He had declared her clean and given her a new outlook on life. Jesus showed that God’s purpose is to make people whole again, which is what “being saved” really means.

Her initial contact with Jesus was an act of desperation. All other attempts for healing had failed. But Jesus’ reaction to her coming out of the crowd was important. She became more than a spectator, and she rose above her fears and “told Him all the truth” (5:33). What “all the truth” included we cannot know. But it is safe to assume that she poured out her feelings of rejection, loneliness, despair, and pain.

Mark writes, *“While He yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue’s house messenger ‘Thy daughter is dead; why troublest thou the Master any further?’” (5:35).* The interruption along the way had taken too long. Jesus did not arrive in time. Why go on with this business? There is no more hope!

Jesus’ response sounds much like His words to the disciples when He calmed the sea, *“Be not afraid, only believe” (5:36).* Then, taking only His most trusted disciples, Peter, James, and John, Jesus went to the house where the ruler of the synagogue lived. The scene He found there was hectic by our standards, although it was typical of what happened during Jewish mourning. Mourners wept, tore their hair, beat their breasts, and ripped their clothing. The difference Mark draws is obvious: the scene of confusion and despair, and Jesus’ words of comfort, *“Be not afraid.”*

Jesus’ statement, *“The damsel is not dead but sleepeth,”* was greeted by scornful laughter and loud chuckles. So, He cleared the room, except for the little girl’s parents, and brings her back to life. Mark’s readers understood death is like sleep; it can be reversed in the resurrection. The word to the little girl was a word for all followers of Jesus.

The personal quality that Jesus’ ministry often demonstrated is captured in this healing. *“Talitha, cumi”* can be translated “Little lamb, arise” (5:41). Jesus could be tough on the Pharisees, intimidating to demons, yet tender with children. Mark’s interest in detail appears again, as he reports that Jesus *“command that something should be given her to eat” (5:43).* Again, Jesus ministers to the whole person. The child had been ill, and she needed food to get her strength back.

In comparison to what Jesus told the demon-possessed man living in the country of the Gadarenes, Jesus instructed the few eyewitnesses to this miracle to say nothing to anyone. He could have taken advantage of the circumstances to promote His own

## 6-26-24 Notes

cause among the scribes and Pharisees. That He chose not to do so indicates His unwillingness to manipulate or pressure people into the Kingdom.

The power and authority of Jesus are implied in the parables of Mark. The Kingdom of God has begun to be seen, heard, and experienced in the presence of Jesus. Yet, it is grasped by only a few and misunderstood by most. The “secret” of who Jesus is continues to be revealed but not all have ears to hear or eyes to see.

Mark also shows that what Jesus teaches is linked to what He does. Jesus tells us to trust Him and not be afraid. His words are undergirded by what happens when He enters our circumstances: a stormy sea is calmed; a demon-possessed man is liberated; a chronically ill woman is healed; a dead child is made alive. And Jesus, the teacher, also brings us peace.

06/19 & 26/24