

With the message today, Jesus will teach us his main point—how do we hear? I don't know if I'm alone in not being a great listener. We live in a world of noise. We live in a world of distraction. We are accustomed to filling those quiet spaces, as my heart does, with noise. We fill those moments because I think there's a part in which when we try to listen, we are constantly thinking more about ourselves or trying to bring our agenda into the conversation around us. Jesus, I would argue, as we've been looking at through the first four chapters of Mark, is bringing a message in which he's inviting people to hear of the Kingdom of God.

We often think of Jesus as holy. We think of him as powerful. But one of the categories we don't usually place him in is brilliant. I would argue that Jesus is the most brilliant teacher ever. He is utterly brilliant. I mean, what other teachers from 2000 years ago do we quote as frequently as Jesus, whether you are a Christian or not. The enduring quality of Jesus continues to permeate our world and evoke a response when we stop and hear him.

And so when we get to chapter four, we're going to see one of the longest sections of Jesus' teachings, and it's Jesus' teachings that seem to endure, maybe even more so than the rest of what we understand about Jesus.

Think of how something like the parable of the good Samaritan has endured. It's become common vernacular in our world. We often say, whether we are a believer or not, "I was just trying to be a good Samaritan." See, Jesus was utterly brilliant. And when we come to a text like this morning, I think we have a couple of things that will challenge us. It's 2000 years later, and we're still gathering to learn from this brilliant teacher, Jesus. But if we're not careful, most of us in this room, if you've been in church for quite a while, you have the disadvantage of being quite familiar with Jesus' teachings. There is an advantage to that, of course, but yet in that familiarity, it breeds unfamiliarity.

We come to the Gospel of Mark and see chapter after chapter of people encountering Jesus, walking away either comforted, confused, or angry. Those tend to be the responses we see. If we walk out apathetic, I wonder if we, too, are not good listeners. I wonder if our response that comes out like, "That was great, but I'm ready for brunch," is more because we've lost the art of hearing, of deep understanding. Because the responses I see from people who encounter Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of Mark, usually evoke an emotive response. A few chapters ago, Jesus encountered the Pharisees, ending with them plotting to kill him. Don't lose sight of Jesus' brilliance. He's going to teach and evoke a response out of us. He invites us to listen, but what makes him, I think, all the more brilliant is he never does it coercively.

You'll see in the message that he's going to teach. He's going to lay out his teaching, and he's just going to let you deal with it, and yet something in there is causing us to still speak to it today.

We're entering the section of Mark where he slows down. We've been talking about the pace of Mark. He's very quick, very fast-paced, but what we see here is he slows down, and for 20 verses, we're going to hone in on one scene of Jesus' teachings. It opens up a section in which Jesus is going to teach in what's called parables. Dan talked a bit about parables last week, but this is one of those areas where familiarity breeds unfamiliarity.

The Obstacle of Familiarity

I think there are two challenges when we approach Jesus' parables that we have to overcome. Again, in some of these parables, the first obstacle is familiarity; some of these parables are the most iconic teachings and sayings of Jesus. We can become very accustomed to them. For example, when I talk about the parable of the soils, your mind immediately jumps to everything you've ever heard about it.

A good method of studying the Bible is to constantly lay aside what we've previously known, come afresh to the text, and allow Jesus to speak to us from that perspective. We have to overcome this familiarity because, in that familiarity, it tends to flatten our understanding of what Jesus is doing. We rely on what can be trite, religious statements, and we flatten the very evocative thing Jesus is doing through the parables.

The Obstacle of a Moral Story

The second obstacle we have to overcome is we tend to approach the parables as simple, trite, moral stories. We think of them as just illustrations in a larger teaching of Jesus. We have to overcome that. There's more going on beneath the surface of these parables.

Jesus didn't invent parables; by the way, this was a common way of teaching that would leave the listeners with questions and, at times, confusion and evoke a response from his listeners. The parable functions much more like, what we would call, science fiction. A story depiction into an alternative world, but it gets you thinking about the very world we are in today. And this parable is functioning at that same level. It's supposed to evoke our imagination and see what is happening beneath the surface. I ask that you would listen fresh to Jesus' words. Come to the text and say, "I want to hear well," because that is the center point of this text.

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 in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them

many things by parables, and in his teaching said: Mark 4:1-2

The scene is becoming quite familiar. Jesus is now growing in popularity. Where before he was trying to evade the crowds, it's futile now. And so he finds himself with this large crowd. It was so large that he got into a boat to allow more room for people to come to the edge. But it was also a common practice that on a boat off the water's edge, it would function like a megaphone. It would propel the voice a little louder so he could be heard.

And so Jesus gets in the boat, and begins to teach. Now, what is Jesus' teaching about? Well, it's the very thing he proclaimed earlier in Mark. It's the thing that he taught every single day. It was about the Kingdom of God. If you were to come across Jesus' teaching on some random day, most likely what he'd be teaching about is the Kingdom of God. That's what Mark has been trying to present to us. Now the Kingdom of God and its arrival, as we've seen in the first four chapters, brings about two responses—good news, or it's bad news.

The good news is that the Kingdom of God is moving. God is inviting us into that world. The bad news is it also proclaims a judgment on the world because the Kingdom of God does something with the world's brokenness, and if we perpetuate that, then that may not be good news. It's going to necessitate change. It's going to challenge us. It's going to convict us.

See, the response to this teaching depends on the posture of your heart. Are you ready to open up and receive this gospel? And what's so brilliant about Mark is that we've seen these mixed responses thus far, and the ones who tend to respond as if it is bad news are the ones we would consider the "in" crowd. They're the church folk. They're the ones, like us in this room, who Mark continually depicts. They hear this Kingdom of God message and get very angry about it. It appears to them like bad news because Jesus is disrupting the status quo. But it's those that we would typically consider and read as outsiders who are openly receiving this message as good news.

And so, the reception of this message depends on the posture of your heart, which is what Jesus will teach about. Some people love him. Some people hate him. Others are intrigued by him. Most are a little bit confused by Jesus.

Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on the rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." vv. 3-9

That's the end of the message. "Ah, very clear, Jesus. Now I understand." Think about it. The scene is this massive crowd who's been following

and hearing about Jesus. For us, with our addiction to efficiency and clarity, we would read this moment as, "Jesus, now is the chance to clear the air. People want to kill you because of what you're saying. People are confused by this idea of the Kingdom of God. Some people who used to be outsiders are now following you, Jesus." This is the moment.

I can almost imagine the 12 disciples saying, "Jesus is going to clear the air now. It's the PR moment we've been waiting for." Here's the time in which the message of the kingdom can be made clear, and Jesus gets up and ends it with, "Those who have ears, let them hear." This is where he leaves it. And this is where the disciples are asking the same question that maybe we are as well.

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" vv. 10-12

To which the disciple said, "That clears it up. Perfect." No, they are confused. They come, and they ask the same questions. "Jesus, why are you talking in parables? What do these parables mean? What is the purpose of these parables?" And note that again, in this change of scene, you have these disciples and those around him. There's this smaller group that was taken from that larger crowd. They are pursuing Jesus and seeking out understanding. They're going to Jesus thinking, "What does this all mean? What do you mean about the soils, path, rocks, thorns, and the good soil. Jesus, what does this mean about the kingdom of God? What is the understanding you want us to get from this?"

I think the key to understanding what Jesus is doing here is in verse nine, when he says, "Whoever has ears, let him hear." Do you have ears? Let you hear. So I think Jesus is saying, "Listen, the secrets of the Kingdom of God are available to you, but you're going to have to dig for it." It's not quite as plain a reading as you would think.

You see Mark brilliantly illustrates it happening in real-time. The disciples have ears to hear. They're trying to understand. They're pursuing Jesus. "Tell me more." It's drawing them in. The disciples seem to be that good soil who are seeking out what Jesus is talking about.

There is to follow Jesus, a work that has to be. It doesn't just happen. Understanding the complexities of the Kingdom of God will take time. It will take discipleship. It will take immersing ourselves in the very life of Jesus because it requires change. It requires this reorientation. The Kingdom of God demands that we reorient the whole of our life around that reality.

Why do we think it will happen naturally or just by happenstance? To follow Jesus will require us to love him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. It will require everything about us coming before our rabbi, Jesus, sitting under his teaching, allowing us to be baptized, immersed into the understanding of the Kingdom of God. And Jesus says those who have ears; they're going to hear. Those

who are interested. Those who long to know this Jesus, who catch the vision of the Kingdom of God, they'll hear and pursue. And I'll reveal that to them. He says that others will have ears that don't want to hear, and they're not going to hear.

It's fascinating to me that Jesus never descends to coercion or manipulation. He simply teaches with enough self-confidence in who he is and what the Kingdom of God is. He says, "Here is the Kingdom of God; do with it what you will." He will not coerce. He will not force. He will not manipulate. He will simply say, "This is the reality about this world right here and now." Giving us the opportunity to hear. Those who have ears, let them hear. Then he gets to the seemingly troubling verse 12.

so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" v. 12

Now, this is a paradoxical idea. He's quoting Isaiah 6. It's one of Jesus' favorite chapters to quote. He's pulling on the tradition of the prophet Isaiah. We should know that in the first part of Isaiah, what's happening is God is pronouncing a twofold message—one of judgment and one of hope. He's confronting the people of God, the Israelites, and saying how they have failed. They have lost the plot. They've given in to injustice. They've lost the way in which they were supposed to be that distinct alternative community of God.

God is calling a prophet to go speak out to those people, and in that, he confronts them. Isaiah 6 talks about how the Israelites' hearts have grown callous. They've grown cold. It says just what he quotes here. They're seeing, but they're not really seeing. They're not perceiving. They're listening, but they're not understanding. They can hear the words, but the words are landing just like Linus' teacher, "wah wah woh wah wah."

God is saying, "I've been calling you to be this people, to reject injustice, to be my unique alternative community that's bringing about and embodying the Kingdom of God. And you're not hearing me. You're missing it. And your heart is growing more and more callous and cold."

When we come to something like this in verse 12, that word "so that" is the word *iva* in the Greek, and it's very slippery to translate. I think the connotation is much more "Otherwise they'd be seeing and would perceive; otherwise, they'd be hearing, and they'd be listening." When you get down to the second half of that, it says, "Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven." I don't think that means, "Let's keep it a secret, or else they might be forgiven." It means much more "If they heard, if they saw, they would turn and repent and be forgiven."

Jesus is saying, as he looks at these disciples, as he looks at this crowd, which is this mishmash of people, that some in the crowd are going to hear and understand, which is more than just mentally coming to belief. It's a whole life reorientation, where you live in the light of that new reality. So some in this crowd, they're going to hear, and they're going to perceive. Others are going to see, and they're going to understand it, but others aren't. They're going to miss it. Not that it's secretive, but that it's something they reject. It's something they do not understand in the

way that says my whole life needs to reorient around this. It somewhat hinges on this idea of the secret of the Kingdom of God.

Remember what's happening in the first century. The people of God are desperately longing for the Messiah to come. There was a kingdom fever that was striking the area. They were desiring the Messiah, the Kingdom of God to come. And so, everyone is on the edge of their seats. God has been silent for too long. They're waiting for God to move and arrive. And they're looking out, saying, "When will they crush Rome? When will they crush those who are oppressing us?"

They're looking out on the horizon, and Jesus comes on the scene. He starts talking about the Kingdom of God. But the Kingdom of God, as he's been teaching, looks a lot different than what they anticipated. It looks like a seed buried in the ground, which is what he was just teaching about.

You see this in a few different scenes. Think of the scene in which Jesus says I have to go to Jerusalem to die. And remember Peter's response? He says, "Jesus, that's not the way this works." He rebukes Jesus because that's not the Kingdom of God that he had been waiting for. They had been waiting for one that was full of might and pride, that was going to crush the others. But Jesus says, "No, this kingdom operates through me going and laying down my life for the sake of others, through loving my enemies, not hating. Jesus' response to Peter's rebuke was just as strong. He said, "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus is saying, "That is not how my kingdom operates." I think of the scene in the garden of Gethsemane when the armies were coming to arrest Jesus, and the disciple pulled out the sword and cut the Roman official's ear off. What was Jesus' response? "Put that sword away." And he picks the ear up and heals the man.

Because the secret of the Kingdom of God is that it works entirely counter-logical to the world around us, it is foolishness to the world. This teaching of love your enemy, which becomes the litmus test, the high point of living in the Kingdom of God, is utterly counterintuitive. Jesus says the Kingdom of God works utterly differently. It's better if you're last. Jesus came not to conquer all but to serve. If the first are last and the last become first. It's better if you take up your cross and lay your life down; that's where you find life. See, this is utterly counter logic to the world around us.

Which is why it should continually confront us because we don't descend to worldly means. We understand this self-giving, self-sacrificial love is the means by which the Kingdom of God continues to spread throughout the world. And listen, we gather with people around the globe from 2000 years ago who believed this message, and it keeps spreading. Maybe there's something to this counter logic. When we think of the need to coerce, to use power over instead of power under, I just wonder if we're not hearing Jesus. Is it our lack of faith that doesn't believe that the Kingdom of God is like this little tiny mustard seed? It's going to get dropped in the ground. It's going to almost disappear. And yet this giant tree is going to come from it. That's the Kingdom of God. That's what it looks like. It's paradoxical. It doesn't make sense. The disciples didn't get it. So let's not be too quick to think we fully get it.

That is the secret of the Kingdom of God. It happens in a way that we could never fathom. The moment in which it looked like Jesus had lost, as he breathed his last, was the height of the Kingdom of God. So the cross isn't just the way to the Kingdom of God. It is the Kingdom of God. It is the way in which God operates in the world. Jesus laid his divinity aside, emptied himself, and came and descended to be with us so that he could create the way for us. So we receive that, and then we embody that in the world around us.

Now, imagine that crowd who's sitting there listening to this parable, those who are powerful elites, who are in the position in which they can impose power over Jesus, and he comes proclaiming this kind of kingdom. Is there any wonder they wanted to kill him? He was threatening their very status. They'd worked their whole life to get to this place of power, but yet somewhere along the way, they missed the plot. And Jesus comes proclaiming a different kingdom. Is it any wonder that they want to kill him? Because that's what happens when you confront the status quo. It does provoke.

When Jesus comes along and begins to flip, what I'd say, flip the world right side up. It has been upside down; it has been the parody. And Jesus comes along announcing this kingdom. He says, "Listen, those who have ears, they're going to hear. Others who want to see, they're going to see. They're going to understand. But many people aren't because it's foolishness to the world around us.

I think it is the process in which Jesus is helping us unlearn the logic of this world. When we begin to follow Jesus and live into his teaching, and take seriously the commands and the teachings of Jesus to reshape who we are, when we immerse ourselves and baptize ourselves into the way of Jesus, we're trying to saturate our minds and imaginations in this counter logic because it doesn't make sense. And we have to unlearn so much to learn about the Kingdom of God. Jesus says, "Listen, there will again be those who see, but they don't see, those who hear, but they don't hear. In that process, we learn to hear; we learn to see. This is what we see so beautifully in the lives of the disciples.

That scene where I talked about where Peter is trying so hard. He's rebuking Jesus about this idea of the Kingdom of God that comes later in Mark 8. He still doesn't get it. They'll fail again and again. They will start to figure it out, the Holy Spirit descends, and they grow and learn, but they still don't have it all figured out. Because this logic of the world is so ingrained in us that sometimes we can't hear this message of the Kingdom of God. But Jesus is inviting us into this because what prevents us from hearing, the reason that some will hear and not hear, the reason some will see and not see, is that they are worried about their agenda.

The logic of the Kingdom of God, it begins to confront us. When it challenges how we interact with our coworkers, the very job we take, the vocations in which we're called to when we receive success and arise to a place with wealth and means, that challenges us to think about what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. It challenges us when the other way happens and the world falls apart. When we don't have the answers, when we get that diagnosis, it challenges us. So, how do I put this together? It's counter logic. We come before Jesus saying, "Jesus,

teach us what does this mean? How do I follow you in this moment?" Whatever that moment might bring, we have to learn to listen. And this is what Jesus gets to.

Let's look as Jesus explains this parable because he's recognizing the disciples aren't getting it. I imagine we're maybe not getting it too. And so look down at verse 13. Remember, he's got the 12 and those around the 12, so it's a smaller subset that is here with Jesus. He's not on the lake anymore. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'" (Mark 4:13). You can hear the angst, the frustration, and a bit of the rebuke in Jesus. "You guys aren't getting it."

He says, "The farmer sows the word" (v. 14). Now be careful. What is the "word"? We tend to think of the word of God, the scriptures, which sometimes it is. But the Greek word here is *logos*. When the New Testament talks about the scriptures, it uses the Greek word *graphé*. And so here we see *logos*.

Now *logos* would bring us back, if we are reading in the Greek, to John 1. When John talks about Jesus, he calls Jesus the *logos*, the Word. And so when Jesus is explaining this parable, he says the farmer sows the word. What was meant by that is that the very life and message of Jesus is sown. And so, as they're listening to his life and his teachings, they're saying, this is what the farmer is sowing. It says the farmer sows the *logos*, the Word. So he goes out, and he begins to just spray the seed, the Word. The message is spreading.

"Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them" (v. 15). This first group, Jesus says, they'll hear the word, but it'll be on a hardened, beaten path where it is exposed. Jesus says the birds taking the seed away is like Satan taking away the word that was sown in them.

Now let's be careful. We don't really like the idea of Satan. We're too modern and intelligent for the idea of Satan. But think about how Jesus is operating here. When Jesus says that Satan takes away the word that was sown, he's not talking about wiping our memory because that would imply that Satan is omnipresent, but that's a characteristic of God, not Satan. Satan is not God's counterpart. He's far weaker. We tend to give Satan far too much credit at times because we have that image of the angel and Satan on the shoulder. And we think he's just an equal counterpart to God. That's not the case. Satan is not omnipresent. Satan operates more at the macro level.

He's working there in what later Paul would call the principalities and the powers, who are infiltrating kind of swaying in the *zeitgeist* of the day; they're working in that space. And what Jesus is saying is as the seed is thrown on that hardened path, you are opening yourself up to these other things that can sway your heart, that can pull you towards other gospels. Satan is operating at that level, trying to create in you a desire to hear these other things. Where you won't listen to the kingdom of God because it is counter-logical, it doesn't make sense. And so you open yourself up to that, and he says some are like that. If we don't allow this message to penetrate deeper into the soil, it just sits on that

hardened surface. And you are opening yourself up to other things. Jesus says Satan's going to come and take it. It's not going to be there.

Maybe you've been in church for decades. You've sat here week after week like I did for the majority of my life. I sat in church. I knew the stories. I knew the answers, but I was like the hardened path. I never dug deeper. And maybe that's you. You've sat here. You've heard of this Kingdom of God. You've heard of this, Jesus. And you've just said, "Nah, there's other things." Jesus says some will be like that. You'll open yourself up, and Satan will come in and swoop it away. Those who have ears, let them hear.

Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. vv. 16-17

He says there'll be others amongst rocks. They hear it and receive it. They're walking it out with joy, but then they get to that place where the Kingdom of God needs to reorient part of their life, and they're a bit resistant. It would cause them to lose social capital. Let's be honest following Jesus in the Bay Area is not easy. Out of everyone in here, I probably have it the easiest. I work with professional Christians all day. You all have a much harder task. You are in spaces where it will cost you things. It may cost you influence, that promotion, or your friendships with coworkers who just don't understand.

It may cost you in your dating relationship to say, "No, I live by a different sexual ethic. I can't partake in that. I follow Jesus." That will cost you something. And Jesus says some are like that seed that lands in the rocks, when persecution or trouble comes, it doesn't take root because Jesus hasn't become the organizing principle of their life—the thing in which everything is operating.

It's not about perfection. We will take two steps forward, and three steps back, of course, but has Jesus taken root in your life? Like these disciples who don't quite get it, trying to figure out what is it going to cost. Think of Peter. He wasn't quite willing to let it cost everything before the cross. He denied even knowing Jesus. There's a sense in which Peter's trying to figure out where his roots are. Jesus says some will be like that. You receive it with joy. It'll sound right and make sense. But church, I promise, it is going to cost something. Jesus says those who have ears, let them hear.

"Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful" (vv. 18-19). He says these people, they hear it, and they too receive the word, yet it isn't the only thing growing in their life. Other things are choking that message out. They're taking other resources and other things that would help the

Kingdom of God flourish and grow in their life, but these other things are choking it out. And Jesus names two. He says there are the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

It seems for Jesus. These things have a particularly heinousness to them in which they can sap the Kingdom of God in your life. Because, here's the beauty and the challenge of the seed among the thorns, there are things growing in our life that are taking us off of the way in which we want to be and the person we want to become. But it takes a process to uproot those things. The hard part is that it's going to take opening our lives up to Jesus and to those around us. Maybe it is a good therapist. Maybe it's a friend that you let into your inner circle to see and view your life, but until you do, those things cannot be extinguished.

And Jesus says that we can't expect the Kingdom of God, this new creation, to be birthed in your life when you're so tangled up in the old creation. The hate, anger, lust, or whatever is bogging you down. Jesus says, "I want to uproot that. I want the Kingdom of God, the new creation, to be birthed in you. But you're holding onto the old creation, and it's choking out my message." He says, "Let me come into your life and help do a little weeding with you and pull those things out to allow the Kingdom of God to get new life in you."

He then speaks about the deceitfulness of wealth. I think he's onto something that all of us should listen to because the deceitfulness of wealth is that it actually presents as "the good life." And it feels pretty good. It not only says, this is how you can arrive, this is what the good life looks like. But in that moment, it actually feels like the gospel. God has blessed me. I've got this and that. And Jesus says to be careful. That's deceitful. It isn't actually the good life. It may be benign and morally neutral, but when we base our entire life and identity on that, he says it becomes problematic. It's choking out the Kingdom of God. It's choking out this new alternative reality in this world. Maybe that's you. Those who have ears, let them hear.

"Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and it produces a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown" (v. 20). Elsewhere, he talks about the narrow path. It's hard to find, but some people will find it. And it is the good life. They'll catch the vision of the Kingdom of God. They'll understand Jesus as the organizing principle of their life, and they'll accept the word. They'll embrace it. They'll take it deep in, and it'll produce roots. Then out of this crop comes thirty, sixty, or a hundred times. It will produce in you that life.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1469-10FC