

Hearing Is Believing

BY JAMES R. EDWARDS

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect? The answer, repeated throughout Mark 4, is that we enter parables by hearing.

One of the ironies of the electronic revolution is that the more we are bombarded with noise, the less we hear. Concert halls can be carried around in iPods, movie theaters in laptops, and libraries in PDAs. We need never be alone or out of touch, whether we are on top of Mount Everest or stuck in a traffic jam. Public surround sound necessitates, however, that we become selective hearers in order to protect ourselves from auditory overload. We do not need to work at hearing; we need to work at *not* hearing. Next time you are on an airplane, watch people during the seatbelt demonstration. They are intent not to hear a spiel that is intended to save their lives.

We inevitably bring these hearing filters into public worship as well. In worship we thus need to condition ourselves to do the exact opposite of what we do in the public square. We need to *work* at hearing. Unless we make a conscious effort to listen differently, to listen with uncommon attentiveness to the reading of Scripture, the singing of the anthem, and the preaching of the sermon, we may very likely do to public worship what we do to the seatbelt demonstration in the airplane.

JESUS' LIFE PREPARES US FOR HIS WORDS

The Gospel of Mark has a lot to teach about hearing. Indeed, it can teach us how to hear the gospel, which Mark 4:11 calls "the mystery of the king-

dom of God.” Ironically, Mark’s Gospel does not initially seem to be about hearing at all. Its fast-paced narrative puts one episode after another, like a row of bricks with little if any editorial mortar between them. Mark portrays Jesus as a man of action and determination, “immediately” going there, “again” doing that. Mark seldom tells us what Jesus taught, however. In so far as possible, Mark allows the narrative – the account of Jesus’ deeds, movements, encounters, and travels – to carry the weight of the message he wishes to convey. If Mark were an American he would hail from Missouri, the “Show-Me State.” In Mark, the essential truths and convictions are *demonstrated* rather than spoken.

Jesus was, of course, an itinerant Jewish teacher, and Mark must inevitably present a body of Jesus’ teaching. He presents two bodies, in fact. In chapter 4 we find a collection of Jesus’ parables in typical Markan fashion, set one after another like beads on a string. And chapter 13 preserves Jesus’ teaching on matters related to the end of the world and the events preceding it, commonly known as eschatology. But compared to the long discourses of John’s Gospel, or to Jesus’ many parables and teachings in Matthew and Luke, Mark pares Jesus’ teaching to the bone.

Why is the actual content of Jesus’ teaching in Mark so minimal? It is certainly not because Mark was unacquainted with Jesus’ teachings. His most frequent designation for Jesus, after all, is “Teacher.” Mark is sparing with the content of Jesus’ teaching, rather, because he wants to prepare readers for Jesus’ teaching. The teaching of Jesus is like a precious gem that requires a proper setting to accentuate it. We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark’s mind, if we first see it demonstrated. The spoken word is, of course, necessary, but as an interpretation of what Jesus does rather than as a substitute for it. Mark’s vigorous narrative is designed to prepare us to hear what Jesus has to say. But hearing is difficult, and especially so when it is our first contact with Jesus. Mark postpones the teachings of Jesus until our familiarity with him puts us in a position to *understand* him.

HEARING FROM THE “INSIDE”

In this article we want to focus on the first body of teaching, the parables of Mark 4. Parables are deceptive. A common understanding is that parables are simple earthly stories with heavenly meanings. That is a common *misunderstanding*. Parables cannot be understood by standing outside them and peering in. They can only be understood by getting out of our seats and entering into the drama. Jacob had to wrestle with his mysterious opponent in order to receive a blessing from God (Genesis 32:22-32), and we must likewise wrestle with parables if we are to receive God’s blessing through them.

In order to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is like, Mark includes three parables in chapter 4. All three parables have two things in common.

The first thing they share in common is that they are about seeds, and the second thing is that they are surrounded by the admonition to *hear*. We need to consider both elements, but let us begin with seeds. In themselves, seeds are unremarkable. If we knew nothing more about them, we would value them no more than we value a handful of dirt or a few grains of sand. We know from experience, however, that seeds have tremendous potential. They may become giant firs or stately Delphiniums or golden grains of wheat. But they must be planted and watered – and waited for expectantly. This is an important first clue to the gospel. Like seeds, the gospel can be easily overlooked and underestimated. All sorts of things in the world seem more powerful and important. Like seeds, however, the negligibility of the gospel conceals a surprise, for the gospel has the potential to grow into something entirely unexpected.

The three parables in Mark 4 illustrate this truth in different ways. In the longest and best known of them, the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3-9), a farmer sows seed widely and indiscriminately. Some of the seed falls on pathways, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. Farming in Palestine was a hazardous livelihood, and the farmer sows unsparingly – even wastefully – in hopes of reaping a harvest. Even so, according to the parable, three-quarters of the seed is lost to rocks, thorns, and the elements.

Those are discouraging odds. But the parable, ironically, does not end on a discouraging note. Far from it! Some of the seed falls on good soil, and it grows and produces a harvest of thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. In a part of the world where a harvest of tenfold was better than average, that is a breathtaking harvest. Indeed, it is no human harvest at all. A harvest so abnormally high indicates the hand of God. The irony is typical of Jesus' parables, upsetting our expectations and stock responses. A farmer hoping to eke out a meager harvest, at best, ends up reaping a bumper crop!

A parable, of course, is a story about one thing by likening it to another. The Parable of the Sower is not really about farming and harvest yields, but about the ministry of Jesus and the fate of the gospel. Until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' ministry has met with opposition and rejection from religious leaders, misdirected enthusiasm from crowds, and misunderstanding from his disciples. So far, not a single person has understood – nor seems close to understanding – the Kingdom of God that Jesus is introducing. The prospects of Jesus' mission look as precarious as the prospects of the Palestinian farmer. The hardpan, rocks, and thorns of the parable seem to symbolize the hard-heartedness, false hopes, and misunderstandings of Jesus' hearers.

Nor do things seem to have changed much today. Anyone who prays earnestly for "God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven" cannot help but be distressed by the self-interest and hedonism, materialism and militarism, evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the gospel

and Church today. The facts of first-century Palestine seem to be the facts of the twenty-first century as well. The Parable of the Sower is about more than human facts, however. It is about the power of seeds, the power inherent in the ministry of Jesus and in the gospel to supersede “the facts” and do something wholly unexpected.

A second parable furthers this point. Another farmer sows seed in the ground and then attends to other matters (Mark 4:26-29). He goes to bed at night and gets up in the morning, he tends his flocks and mends his equipment, all in confidence that the seed he has sown will sprout and grow and produce fruit “automatically,” as the original Greek suggests. The farmer does not need to dig up the seed and inspect it; he does not need to stand over it and wait; he does not need to worry or coax or fret. Indeed, once he has sown the seed the only thing the farmer must do is allow the seed to do what is inherent in it—to grow of its own accord.

God’s work through the gospel is like the seed. Human agency plays a role in introducing it, but human agency does not determine its effect. The role of the farmer is like that of a messenger or a midwife: both mediate a process, but the messenger is not the message delivered, and the midwife is not the child delivered. The farmer, likewise, does not determine the seed, and human goodwill and intentions neither assist the gospel nor do human failures render it ineffective. We too may go to bed each night and get up each morning assured that this world belongs to God, and that God is secretly, mysteriously, and ineluctably working out his redemptive purpose in the world, despite everything to the contrary.

The third parable is about a mustard seed, proverbially the smallest of seeds (Mark 4:30-32). Though insignificant, indeed almost invisible, the mustard seed grows into a shrub large enough for birds to nest in. That something so large could come from something so small is

unfathomable. That is an analogy of the gospel. When we first hear the gospel, when the gospel is first declared to the world, it seems small and insignificant. How many other things seem more pressing and important! There are plans to be made, careers and investments to be considered, proposals and marriages and children to reckon with, houses to build, relationships to pursue, and entertainments—yes, in our world always entertainments to

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enjoy. In comparison to such things, the gospel seems like a dark speck in the palm of one's hand, something to be looked over for a moment, and then overlooked for good.

But, remarkably, the gospel will not be relegated to insignificance. If it were only a human work, it could perhaps be dispensed with. But it is something more than a human work. It is the seed of God's creative, redeeming, and restoring presence. Its beginnings, to be sure, are inauspicious, but slowly and inescapably it grows and intrudes in our lives. Like a bush or tree, it becomes something we can no longer ignore, despite the many other things in life that at first seem more important. The transformative power of the gospel produces the qualities of love and joy, peace and patience, goodness and kindness that we most long for, but that most elude us.

HEARING, RECEIVING, AND BEARING FRUIT

The imagery of seeds in the parables of Mark 4 is thus meant to convey the surprising power of the gospel to grow from small and seemingly insignificant beginnings to something mature, deeply rooted, and lasting. But how does this growth become real and effective in our lives? The answer to this question is given in the second thing the parables of Mark 4 have in common. Parables, as we have seen, cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, by allowing their stories to lay claim on us. But how do we "enter" and drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect? The answer is repeated throughout Mark 4 – ten times, to be exact. We enter parables by *hearing*.

"Hearing" brings us back to the special challenge with which we began this article. Today we are particularly conditioned *not* to hear things. We have trained ourselves to reduce advertisements, commercials, background music, television, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to "white noise." But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?

Fortunately, in the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in 4:13-20, Mark instructs us *how* to hear the gospel. In the interpretation, the reception of the seed is likened to four types of hearing. The seed sown on the beaten path, says Mark, is like people who hear, "but immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown among them" (4:15, all translations of Scripture in this article are my own). Likewise, the seed sown on rocks is like people who hear the word "and immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root in themselves and are impermanent. When tribulation or persecution comes because of the word they beat a hasty retreat" (4:16-17). Again, the seed sown among thorns is like people who hear, "yet the concerns of the world and the deception of wealth and their desire for all sorts of things come and choke the word, and it becomes fruitless" (4:18-19). Finally, the seed sown on good soil is like those "who hear the word and receive it and

bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (4:20).

In all four instances the word is heard, but in only one instance does it bear fruit. In the first three instances the beginnings of the word – even very promising beginnings – falter, fade, and fail. Why? The Greek text gives us a very important clue that is lost in English translations. In the first three hearings the verb “to hear” is in the aorist tense. In Greek, the aorist denotes something that happens once and is done with. The aorist tense is symbolized by a dot or point. With reference to hearing, the aorist connotes a casual hearing that fails to register, a quick and superficial hearing, “in one ear and out the other.” The hearing that results in a good harvest in 4:20 is not in the aorist tense, however, but in the present tense. The Greek present tense signifies an ongoing, sustained activity. The present tense is symbolized not by a dot, but by an extended line. That is to say, the fourth kind of hearing is not quick, easy, and casual. The hearing that bears fruit, rather, engages the gospel, ties up with it, even wrestles with it. When we really *hear* it, then it bears a harvest in our lives. Active hearing, hearing that leads to *heeding*, is how we “enter” into the parables. The Parable of the Sower promises that those who hear the gospel in this way receive it, and “it bears fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20).

RIGHT CONFESSION LEADS TO RIGHT DISCIPLESHIP

In Mark 4:13, Jesus prefaces the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower with these words: “Do you not know this parable? How, then, will you know all the parables?”

This rhetorical question suggests that the Parable of the Sower plays a key role in understanding Jesus’ parables. If we get this parable right, we can understand all the parables.

What, then, do we need to understand? We need to understand that the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:3-9 and its interpretation in Mark 4:14-20 combine the two essential keys of the Christian life: Christology

and discipleship. The parable itself teaches about the ministry of Jesus, and its interpretation teaches about a proper response to it. A proper understanding of the ministry of Jesus is essential for a proper understanding of discipleship. Mark will stress this central truth at the midpoint of his Gospel in the all-important teaching on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Once Peter

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confesses Jesus as the Messiah of God, then Jesus can explain to Peter and the Twelve what it means to be his disciple (Mark 8:27-38). That is to say, once Peter and the Twelve stop being mere observers but enter into the life and mission of Jesus by authentic confession, then they can begin to learn what it means to belong to Jesus and follow him as disciples. As Jesus must go to Jerusalem and die on a cross, so too must Peter and all who would follow him deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus. Right confession leads to right discipleship. The cost of being the Messiah determines the cost of discipleship.

The Parable of the Sower combines both of these key and seminal truths of Mark's Gospel. Though Jesus' ministry is beset by misunderstandings, obstacles, and even rejection, his ministry will, by God's grace, produce a harvest beyond imagination. Disciples, too, will be sent to sow the word, and in so doing they will experience misunderstanding and opposition. Chances of any harvest will seem remote, and chances of a good harvest remoter still. But when disciples hear and heed the word, by God's grace it finds expectant soil in their lives, and they too will bear fruit – thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.



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