

# Dr. Mark Jennings, Mark, Lecture 8, Mark 4:1-34, On the Parables

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This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 8 on Mark 4:1-34, On the Parables.

Hello, good to be back with you as we continue our study through the Gospel of Mark.

Up to this point, the first three chapters, most of our attention has been focused on actions that Jesus did in his public ministry. We've seen a wide variety of miracles, exorcisms, and confrontations between him and religious leaders. With Mark chapter four, we shift a bit to a particular form of his teaching, which is done in parables.

Now, one of the things we see with Mark, typically Mark with his parables, he uses them throughout; you'll see Jesus use them throughout his ministry as ways of speaking against, if you will, the religious leaders. In Mark chapter four, though, the use of parables is a bit different. It has a more teaching aspect quality designed for his disciples as well.

And Mark does something similar to Matthew, which is to take these parables and locate them primarily in one chapter. Matthew does this in Matthew chapter 13, and we see this in Mark chapter 4. So, we shift a little bit from Jesus' actions to some of Jesus' teachings in a specific form of his teaching, which is the parables.

For that reason, it may be useful for us to spend a little bit of time just thinking about parables and Jesus' use of parables before we look at a couple of the examples in Mark chapter four. Jesus's parables are perhaps the best-known of his teachings. Even if one doesn't know anything about Jesus, there's a chance that one knows something about his parables.

For example, good Samaritan, prodigal son, mustard seed. These are terms that have found their way into our vernacular, our understanding of things. There are societies or groups, for example, who call themselves good Samaritans.

That's now a compliment, or the prodigal son returns, which is a phrase often used in conversation. And Snodgrass, Professor Snodgrass, who does some wonderful work on parables, has a book out there called *Stories with Intent*, which is, I think, a very good summary. He makes the following statement.

If it's true that Jesus is the receptacle in which every theologian pours his or her ideas, parables are the pitcher they often use to do the pouring. The point is that

there's something about parables that is an entry point, if you will, into discussing Jesus. And you can understand why.

They're effective. They're effective in part because they're stories. And as a narrative, they envision a world where a person can be confronted with an idea, absorbed in to an idea.

They're a specific form of discourse in which the truth is clothed in story. You know, I think of good preaching. Often good preaching has an illustration that is powerful, that communicates a truth or a story, or it communicates a truth in story.

And so it conveys an idea through a method other than just the direct proclamation of a truth. And I think that's one of the draw of parables. There's an indirect route that happens between a teacher and their disciples, in the case of Jesus, or the crowds with parables.

It's very easy to make a statement, and when one makes a statement, there's resistance. It almost becomes natural. I live in New England in the northeastern part of the United States, and suspicion and skepticism are virtues in this area.

If one says something, the natural response is probably not true. But the story does something different. The story gets in the back door if you will.

Kierkegaard talks about the force of the story, where you almost become a part of the truth-telling without even knowing it. There's something about the story that is less offensive or more engaging. But, of course, a parable is not simply a story.

In its broadest sense, it refers to an expanded analogy. And I'll come back to talking about the definition of parables a little bit later. But it's an expanded analogy.

It seeks to make a rhetorical point. You know, the parables of Jesus assume a common referent for the most part. They presuppose the kingdom of God.

Jesus will often use parables to explain the nature and the quality or the characteristics of the kingdom of God, or to at least present a picture of the kingdom of God. They are told with intent, in other words. And they're historically anchored.

They come from within the context of the first century. They make sense in the context of the first century. And that's always one of the challenges in interpreting parables: trying to understand the historical context of the parable without simply pouring in a 21st-century understanding of things.

Some are rather straightforward. Some are nuanced. You know, there's a great variety.

Others find it difficult to determine exactly what the intent is. And even parables that are mostly about understanding something it's not rootless knowledge. They're interacting with the hearer in a way that the hearer would understand.

Now, when we look at the interpretation of parables, for example, historically speaking, I think we need to be aware of two general tendencies in recent centuries. First, the tendency of most interpreters of parables until the end of the 19th century was to allegorize them. That is to make the different elements of the parable stand for something or represent symbolically something.

This is a reading into the story. It wasn't necessarily there, something that wasn't necessarily there, a part of Jesus' intent. Now, the allegorizing approach does seem to have some root in Jesus himself.

There are some parables, one we'll look at today, where Jesus very much gives symbol and meaning. When we look at the Parable of the Sower, for example, he gives representative meanings. And that would seem at some point to justify an allegorizing approach.

The difficulty with that is that Jesus doesn't offer an interpretation of all of his parables in the same way. There's a great variety of parables. I tend to assume that Jesus gave the interpretation for those parables that necessitated an allegorical approach.

And those that did not, he did not. However, we also need to understand that this allegorizing tendency to the end of the 19th century was largely based on the assumption that there was a fourfold meaning of Scripture. For a long period of the Church, Scripture could be interpreted to have a literal, what it actually might have said, an allegorical meaning, that is, that symbolic meaning of what different elements might represent, an ethical approach, which would talk about how one then changed or understood their world, and a heavenly idea, which is how it might describe a spiritual existence.

So, you had in this fourfold meaning of Scripture, all of Scripture being interpreted for many centuries according to a process that included allegorical understanding. So it's not surprising that the parables, especially, would be found to be very supportive or receptive to competing allegories. Interestingly enough, competing allegories could be accepted.

It was not uncommon to have different allegorical interpretations of parables, and that somehow seemed to be a fine and acceptable approach. So, for most of the centuries of the Church, interpretation of parables, you interpreted them by

allegorizing them. A second approach, though, that started to come about the 19th century was a rejection of allegorizing by modern scholars.

Most notably, Adolf Julicher, in the late 19th century, posed the question of how Jesus, as a simple Galilean, had even taught in such a complex manner. This was the beginning of the response to the Enlightenment and a challenge to Jesus as a teacher who would have a method that would allow for larger allegorical teachings. So, especially those parables that were long and drawn out of which symbolic meaning was given to started to be the idea that this must be the product of the Church.

Perhaps the very simple parables, the ones that seem more proverbial in nature, might make more sense from a simple Galilean. In many respects, even though Julicher's arguments no longer hold sway, the debate for interpreting parables has been set between allegorizing and a rejection of allegorizing or allegorical methods as any part of Jesus' intent with the teaching. And I bring this up because this debate then centers around the question of how much of a parable is significant for understanding.

Do the elements in the parable actually stand for something? Is there a correspondence between image and reality? If there is a correspondent, who's responsible for that correspondence? Is the reader responsible for that correspondence? Is Jesus responsible for that correspondence? This gets me back to this question. What is a parable? Keep in mind there's hardly anything that I could say that would be true for all parables. In fact, any definition that is too broad to cover all parables may hardly be helpful at all.

And each parable must be examined in its own right. We just can't settle, for example, for definitions that parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. That's true, but there's more.

It's not as helpful. Many of the parables aren't about heaven. They're about life on this earth.

They're more than illustrations. They certainly are that. Some parables are metaphors.

Some are similes, but some parables do more than that. They can be vivid. They can be strange, and sometimes they can be quite plain and boring.

Kenneth Bailey, a poet, perhaps, I think provides the best definition I've ever heard of a parable. He called them imaginary gardens with real toads in them. I like that.

I like the idea of imaginary gardens with real toads in them because I think that creates a picture in my mind about what a parable is, and that is what a parable is

trying to do, which is to create something in the mind of the audience that is both fictional and imaginary, but yet true as well. Parables are designed to prompt thinking and consideration. That's one of the things that we see in parables.

They aren't simple fables, but they're provoking a response. They desire to stimulate and prompt an action, specifically an action towards God or Jesus. We see that throughout the parables.

They compel, in other words. And so, I get back to this idea of parables as an expanded analogy used to convince or persuade. As an analogy, it makes sense that they can easily become allegorical.

There is some sort of correspondence between what is being said and what is being desired to be known. You have different types of parables. You have similitudes, extended similes, and little plot development in those.

They tend to be straightforward. Some parables are very much question parables where the entire parable is a question. Who among you, et cetera, is often the form such a parable would engage.

And these interrogative parables force the reader to answer the question, often with a no. No, I would not act like the person in that parable. There are parables that are more expansive, that have plots, that narrate a particular event, and that often create a problem or possibility.

There's usually dialogue that indicates where the resolution begins. Some parables very much hide their reference. In other words, the parable is told in such a way that it is only at the end that the readers receive a self-condemnation of what the story was told, but they do not realize until the end that they are, in fact, standing in judgment of themselves.

There are many other types of parables. A very common type is the "how much more" type, which would have been common both in Jesus' teaching and in Second Temple Judaism.

This is the how much more than would God type of parable. When we look at it with definitions of a parable, we just need to realize that what could be called a parable has no very specific form. The parables exist in very different structures.

And so, each parable, in a lot of ways, has to stand on its own. Now, this doesn't mean that we can't identify any characteristics of parables. Some of the things we can say about many parables is that they are often brief, sometimes even terse.

It often excludes unnecessary details. Parables are very thin, if you will, even in the larger stories. There isn't thick storytelling in parables.

Motives are rarely given. Rarely do we get a reason why certain characters in a parable act the way they do, though sometimes we get some. They're marked by simplicity.

Rarely, if ever, are more than two groups or two persons together in the same scene. It's usually a very simple structure, often balanced. Parables focus mostly on humans, unlike Aesop's fables, for example, where it's animals that tend to play the main role.

Parables, for the most part, will focus on humans. And it's this humanness that makes them a useful mirror for people. They're fictional, but they're from everyday life.

There can be, of course, some pseudo-realistic elements to it, some extreme elements that are part of the story. One of the key things, I think, in interpreting parables is trying to find the question that's implied that this parable is attempting to answer. So, for example, when a parable begins with, The Kingdom of God is like... What is the question driving that answer? We'll talk about that a little bit in looking at some of Mark's parables.

Parables often carry elements of unexpectedness or reversal. To see the unexpectedness, though, one has to be aware of the historical context. Often, the surprise moment is from the context in which it's being told.

Very often the crucial matter is at the end. If you want to know where the climax of a parable is, usually it comes towards the end. With Jesus' parables, they are almost always theocentric about God and His Kingdom.

There will frequently be an allusion to the Old Testament in it. Often, a parable is best understood as a whole and not in individual parts, especially if I return back to the idea that the Kingdom of God is like parables. A mistake that is frequently made in interpreting those parables is to then start to allegorize all the different individuals when really it's the sense of the whole thing.

The Kingdom of God is like a woman who, you know, then fills in, who is lost, searches, and frantically finds. And so, we don't want to say, well, the pearl represents this, the woman represents this, the house represents this. It's the whole picture of that event that is what the Kingdom of God is like.

There is an exactness in parables. There are limits to them. We have to be very careful about filling in what we might think is omitted.

Parables do not want us to impose real-time on them. We have to be very careful in thinking about a parable saying, well, there had to be a passage of time between when the servant could get there and report back and get back, and all of a sudden, we end up making a big deal about what was left out instead of what was stated. And I often think that in the end, we have to realize that parables are a teaching element of Jesus.

This is extremely helpful because the assumption then is that we can find connections between what Jesus said in his non-parabolic statements and the parables, that they should coincide together. And so, if we find interpretations of parables that have little to no connection at all with any of Jesus' teachings, we're probably on delicate, dangerous ground in terms of interpreting the parables, again, assuming that Jesus was a consistent teacher. These are just a couple of the elements I just wanted us to think about a little bit as we get into parables, parables that can seem so simple, yet also so problematic.

So, when we look at Mark chapter 4, in which we have a collection of parables, I want to look a little bit at Mark 4, 1 through 20, and then at a couple of parables in 21 through 34. I'm not going to go through each of them, but to get us a sense of how parables work in Jesus' teaching. I want to point out just a few highlights.

So let me begin by starting with the Parable of the Sower, which, incidentally, I've always thought is a misnomer. It has less to do with the sower than it does the soils, but publishers in church history have all called it the parable of the sower, and so thus, we go with that. Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake.

The crowd had gathered around him so large that he got into a boat and set it on the lake while the people that were along the shore at the water's edge. This is in the first verse, and this is consistent with what we've seen in the Gospel of Mark, which is popularity as a teacher. Therefore, the setting up of this teaching is consistent with what we know.

And this is when we get to his first summary statements. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said, listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed, and as he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on 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 seeds fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so they did not bear grain. Still other seeds fell on good soil.

It came up and grew and produced a crop, multiplying 30, 60, or even 100 times. First eight verses. So, the first eight verses here describe seed falling on different soils.

It's interesting. There's lots of time that's spent on trying to figure out exactly how this reflects Palestinian agricultural practices or not. And again, I think there's a little bit of trying to force into what is clearly an analogy and what is describing seed falling on prepared and unprepared soil.

And the sense of the parable then is this question of external conditions. Notice it's the same seed, it's the same sower, the only variable is where the soil is falling. Verse nine, the yield.

I find it to be interesting. It's not an absurd yield, this 30, 60, or even 100 times. It's certainly an abundant harvest.

It reminds me a little bit of Genesis 26, 12, where the Lord blesses Isaac with a bountiful harvest of a hundredfold. And so there is even perhaps a hint or echo there. But then very interesting is after this parable, verse nine, Jesus said, he who has ears to hear, let him hear.

This recalls Jeremiah 5:21 and Ezekiel 12:2, where the people of Israel are said to have eyes but cannot see and have ears but cannot hear. Now the meaning of that statement has been widely debated and there are generally two options. Is it that anyone who has ears, everyone, should pay attention and respond? Or is it anyone who is given ears, spiritual ears, ought to listen? And even Mark isn't as clear necessarily on which of those options.

On the one hand, the context of this is to the crowds. He's speaking to everyone. He's making that statement to everyone.

Yet, in verses 11 and 12, he talks about how to the disciples, the secret of the kingdom and God has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, which might indicate that maybe there's a spiritual reception. Interestingly enough, when we look at the Jeremiah and Ezekiel passages, there is a sense of both in these as well that the people should be responding but aren't.

That puts it more in line with everyone should be listening to this as well as an almost purposeful hiddenness that is being created, and maybe we would be wrong to press too much into that. I think the sense of the passage here is that there is this call to the crowds of if you should be hearing this and responding, that there is a sense that everyone should be listening. We look through here again verse 10, when he was alone, so again not in the crowds, the scene has changed.

The 12 which we've already spoken about, these are the 12 that Jesus prayed and then considered and chose for him and the others around him. So, you have the 12 and the others, which would indicate followers of Jesus who were not the 12, asked



him about the parables. He told them the secret or mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables.

And then he gives a reason, which I'll talk about in a second. But notice what's fascinating here is when we talk about secrets, this isn't the idea of something mysterious or something strange. When the New Testament speaks of secret or mystery being revealed, it's about something that God had kept hidden that now is being made open.

Paul, for example, usually refers it to something that was hidden in the Old Testament that now is being revealed to be accurate and true. Namely, so for example, the gospel going to the nations. What is the secret that's being revealed here in Mark, which is the kingdom of God, is that the arrival of Jesus is the arrival of the kingdom of God.

That is a secret that's now being revealed. And the disciples are clearly being told plainly. There's a distinction.

We're getting this continual in-group, out-group distinction between the 12 and the disciples and the outsiders. We've been seeing that in Mark. The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables.

And so there is, even in the teaching, Jesus is about to give some interpretation that is being uniquely bestowed to the 12 and those around. And then he gives perhaps one of the most controversial statements about parables in the Gospels. So that, verse 12, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding. Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven.

Now, this language recalls Isaiah chapter 6, verses 9 through 10. And the debate is, the question is, is Jesus speaking in parables to purposely keep the outsiders from becoming insiders? When we look at the Isaiah reference, though, I think that helps us understand how Jesus intends this passage. In Isaiah 5 through 6, the context there is a judgment that is coming upon Israel because, and there's a parable that's even told in Isaiah, the allegory of the vineyard because Israel failed to produce fruit because they had already demonstrated a rejection of God.

God removed his protection of them, and now the Assyrians have become agents of God's judgment on Israel. Isaiah's warnings then will fall on deaf ears for two reasons. First, because of Israel's already demonstrated unfaithfulness.

And second, because now their unfaithfulness becomes an agent of God's judgment against them. So, what we see here is God both responding in Isaiah to Israel's rejection, and then solidifying their rejection to achieve his purpose and judgment.

We've talked about this idea already a little bit in Mark, with the hardening idea from earlier in the Gospel, connected to with Pharaoh, of course, as the classic example.

He was hardened, he had a hardened, stubborn response, and then his response was solidified to allow the sovereign plan of God to be demonstrated, to allow God to be demonstrated as the one who brings his people out from bondage. So, I think here, in many ways, Jesus' words are a judgment statement that results from the rejection of him, that he's speaking in parables to a group that is, especially if this is thought about in terms of the religious leadership, in the way the Isaiah passage also works with, to a group that has already rejected him. We saw this earlier with the controversy over Beelzebul.

Now, that rejection becomes a hardened reality, which will be part of God's purpose. The rejection of the religious leaders of Israel is part of the walk to the cross, and so you even see that play out. And so, I think as we look at this very difficult passage about why Jesus speaks in parables, it has this idea of first demonstrating who actually is responding positively.

The parables provoke a desire to know. We see that in the disciples, where the disciples ask, and they want to know what the parables mean. So, the parables provoke a response that's either towards Jesus or against Jesus.

We'll see this become more and more profound. But also that the parables are another way of Jesus issuing judgment against the current religious leadership that is akin with what the prophets had done as well. And Jesus says this in Mark, comparing often the religious leadership and his people with those who had rejected God in Israel's history.

And so then Jesus poses the question to the twelve and those with them, don't you understand this parable? How, then, will you understand any parable? I think they're even highlighting the ignorance on the disciples' part still to understand exactly what is being said, which we will see throughout the Gospel of Mark. Then he proceeded to explain. The farmer sows the word.

Some people are like seeds 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. Others, like the seed sown in the rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

But since they have no roots, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. So, others, like seeds sown among thorns, hear the word.

But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like the seed sown on good

soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown. I won't go through all of the different ideas there.

The explanation seems pretty clear. But notice it's answering the question of why are people receiving, rejecting, or somewhere in the middle, the teachings of Jesus. And so Jesus creates a picture of what is happening here, that the fault is not with the sower and the fault is not with the seed.

It's the soil that determines the response. Some of the different descriptions then create a picture trying to explain why not everyone is following Jesus, why some follow Jesus very enthusiastically at first and then fall away when troubles come. I believe there is a hinting there, a little bit of what we can expect with the disciples: that they receive with joy, but then when the troubles come, they falter.

We'll see that not only in the Passion but even throughout. And then, ultimately, what is evidence of good soil is sustained fruit, which in this idea here would be faithfulness and commitment. Then we move on to verses 21 through 34.

We get a series of parables. I won't go through all of them at this point. I just want to highlight a few.

Let's maybe look at 4:21 through 22. And he said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

Again, I am returning to that statement. One thing that I think is interesting here is how the parable of the lamp on a stand works in the Gospel of Mark. It's a little bit different than in the Gospel of Luke.

In the Gospel of Luke, the purpose of things that are hidden is that they will one day be revealed. In other words, the stress in Luke is what's hidden now will one day be revealed. Here, it actually speaks to the purpose of hiding things.

It is that it was for whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed. So, there is this idea in the Marken parable that Jesus is saying is divine intent to hide things so they can be revealed. There's a purpose in keeping things hidden.

And that purpose is the reality of revelation. And this isn't to say that Luke and Mark necessarily disagree with each other. It's to show whether Jesus, I believe, could use parables, similar parables, for different reasons, in different ways.

Verse 31 through 32 is a very, very famous parable. Maybe we'll pick it up in verse 30. And again, he said, what shall we say the kingdom of God is like? Or what parable

shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground.

Yet when planted, it becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade. And so, the question becomes, what is this about? The kingdom of God is like one of those picture parables. Well, the emphasis, I think, isn't on the size that it becomes, though there is language about branches and birds of the air.

It would be a very, very strange parable to use if it were to talk about how great the kingdom of God is going to be. Because if you were to look around and look at a mustard seed bush or even a mustard seed tree, it pales in comparison to the size of a great cedar. And I think the parable, if it was to emphasize the size and greatness of the kingdom of God, that would have been perhaps a more likely choice.

So, what is stressed here is actually the smallest nature of its beginnings. Notice the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of seed. And people have quibbled over this scientifically.

They say, well, it's not technically the smallest seed. Is Jesus incorrect? Does he not know his seeds? And it's not the point, not the accuracy of it, but the recognition that the mustard seed was an extremely small seed. And so, what this parable presents a picture of is the inauspicious beginnings of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is like the mustard plant in that it begins in the smallest of ways, which, of course, we've already seen, and then grows and continues to grow. And there's an organic relationship. Finally, in chapter 4, the parables, verses 33 and 34, we get a summary statement.

With many similar parables, Jesus spoke the word to them as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. This speaks, I think, to the importance of parables in his teaching.

But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything. And so there is this parable teaching that's going to everyone, but to the disciples is coming the explanation of the parables. We'll finish with the rest of chapter 4 and Mark next time.

Thank you.

This is Dr. Mark Jennings in his teaching on the Gospel of Mark. This is session 8 on Mark 4:1-34, On the Parables.