

Jesus preaches in parables from a boat

It was during this time that Jesus went to the lakeside and started giving concentrated teaching in parables. He made use of a boat again. Perhaps before^{□1} the boat was used simply to take Jesus out to sea when He needed a rest. Now He uses it as a kind of platform from which to speak. It must have been quite a large boat; and Jesus must have had an unusually strong voice. He sat in the boat and addressed the crowds in parables^{□2}.

□1 3:9-10

□2 4:1-2

• **Parables**

A 'parable' is any kind of teaching which in some way is not straightforward. It includes stories that illustrate, puzzling questions, any kind of riddle or saying that is amusing or surprising. 'Parable' includes sayings that get us to think and raise questions in our minds. A 'parable' is the opposite of ordinary uncomplicated straightforward teaching. There have been some parables already in Jesus' ministry. We have seen the illustration of the doctor and sick people^{□1}, the picture of a wedding^{□2}, and the illustration of the patch on an old garment and the wine in wineskins^{□3}. Jesus has used the picture of the strong man who needs to be overcome before prisoners in his house can be released^{□4}.

□1 2:17

□2 2:19-20

□3 2:21-22

□4 3:27-28

• **The Parable of the Sower – first and most important**

Jesus' first parable at this point is the most important one, the parable of the sower^{□1}. The largest circle of listeners is the great multitude mentioned in Mark 4:1. Then there is an inner group consisting of those who do God's will (as Mark 3:35 puts it). They are Jesus' spiritual family. They are also called '*the Twelve and the others around him*'^{□2}. The innermost circle is the Twelve.

□1 4:3-9

□2 4:10

Mark 4:10-20 jumps forward to what Jesus said later to His disciples when they were alone with Him; Mark 4:21-32 continues what He said when preaching from the boat.

1. Parables are about the Kingdom

1. The parables are about the kingdom. The 'kingdom' is God's powerful activity in which He acts as King. It is not a place; it is more an action. The kingdom or the 'royal rule' of God, is God Himself working in power through Jesus. Those who trust Jesus 'inherit the kingdom'. They experience God's saving sovereignty in their lives.

2. Parables are an invitation to experience the Kingdom

2. Parables are an invitation to experience the kingdom. Jesus says '*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God*'^{□1}. It is slightly odd language. We would expect Jesus to say 'To you has been **revealed** the mystery...', but that would be saying something quite different.

□1 4:11

According to Mark 'the kingdom' was the central theme of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is the King. When Jesus comes, God's King comes. And if God's King has come then we may expect God to be acting in royal power.

• **A secret**

But the kingdom remains a 'secret' even when it is given to us. Imagine I give you a sealed envelope. I give it to you and I give it to no one else. You have something that no one else has. Inside the envelope is something valuable. But the envelope is sealed! You

have been given something – but you still have to open it to know what it is. Jesus says He has given His disciples something that no one else has, but that it is still a ‘mystery’, still a ‘secret’. This is why they must ‘*take heed how they hear*^{☞1}. They, unlike others, have been given the secret but they still have to discern what it is. They experience the kingdom as they experience the King’s voice. They must take heed how they hear.

☞1 see 4:9

Parables reveal the difference between the saved and the lost

3. Parables reveal the difference between the saved and the lost. The people are a mixture of admiration and blindness. Although Jesus is popular many have not really submitted to Him. They admire Jesus. He heals people. Who can complain about that? But the point of the healings is to draw attention to the kingdom of God. It is not simply a kingdom of healing. It is a kingdom of receiving the Word of God and a kingdom of righteousness and loving relationship to God. The people know that Jesus heals but they do not fully appreciate His kingdom.

Jesus chooses to put His teaching in parables. He had taught plainly that the kingdom was coming^{☞1}. He had taught in the synagogue and had told people about the forgiveness of sins^{☞2}. He had taught by the lakeside^{☞3}.

☞1 1:14–15
☞2 2:5, 8–11
☞3 2:13

Jesus had a large crowd with Him by the lake^{☞1}, and He decided to use this kind of indirect teaching. ‘*He taught them ... by parables*^{☞2}. The most important one was the parable of the sower^{☞3}. Then He said ‘*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*^{☞4}. The parable was given to the crowds without explanation.

☞1 4:1–2
☞2 4:2a
☞3 4:2b–8
☞4 4:9

Parables are a punishment

4. Parables are a punishment. This point (in 4:11–12) is often not appreciated. Jesus’ teaching had been as much rejected as it had been much admired. There had been a plot to take His life^{☞1}. Some had blasphemed the Holy Spirit by refusing the powerful wonders that demonstrate Jesus’ genuineness^{☞2}.

☞1 3:6
☞2 3:22–30

So parables help His disciples but, they are given to others to prevent them being blessed any further by God’s Word. The parables prevent understanding because they are perplexing. To some they are a blessing. To others they are a judgement. For some, the parables block the way to understanding.

Parables reveal that some people are enabled to see the things of God but others are not. The parables are not simply illustrations to make Jesus’ teaching clear. Rather, they are indirect teaching that judges some people but has mercy on others.

• **Some people see the point but others do not**

Some people do not see the point of Jesus’ teaching. It does not speak to their hearts. It does not change their lives and make them new people. The teaching comes to them. They see it but somehow they do not see it. They hear with their ears but somehow they do not hear. God does not work equally in the heart of every person. It is a mysterious subject and I do not claim to understand it. Yet there is no doubt that God gives understanding of His saving revolutionary power to some people but not to others.

The Parable of the Sower explained

The main point of the parable of the sower is that the kingdom has varying degrees of effectiveness. Some hardly hear at all the message of Jesus’ saving royal power^{☞1}.

☞1 4:15

• **Enthusiasm that soon wears off**

Others hear the message about Jesus' royal power and they are enthusiastic, but they have no deep conviction about the matter and the enthusiasm soon wears off. There was no real faith. The word did not take root. No response to God's word really took place¹. The first appearance of opposition reveals their unreality.

1 4:16-17

• **Sometimes things prevent the Kingdom having an effect**

Others hear the message and truly receive it but worries, wealth and other preoccupations prevent the kingdom from having great effect in their lives¹. They are unfruitful as a result. Despite the great power of the kingdom of God it is resistible, and it may fall short of its intended purpose in the lives of some believers.

1 4:18-19

• **Fruitfulness**

In the lives of others the message of the kingdom produces fruitfulness in the lives of those who hear it¹. Not all people have ears! *'He that has ears to hear...'*. Even among those who do have ears, not all actually hear! *'He that has ears to hear, let him hear!'*

1 4:20

• **Those with ears must press on to hear!**

Those on the outermost circle of Jesus' listeners do not have spiritual ears. The inner circle have been given a secret. They have ears to hear. The inner circle must press on to hear what God is actually saying. They have ears; now they must hear!

The main parable and the key to all of them, is the first parable. If the disciples do not understand this parable, they will not understand any¹.

1 4:13

• **Varying responses**

Some people have God's Word but they do not have much interest in it. The Word is taken from them almost instantly¹.

1 4:15

Some people have God's Word and take it in briefly but they lack perseverance and God's Word does not do them much good¹.

1 4:16-17

Others have and heed God's Word but other things come along (*worries ... wealth ... desire for other things...*) and as a result the Word does them no good either.

• **Blessings and fruitfulness for those who hear, persist and hold on**

Only those who hear, persist, and put their commitment to God's Word above anything else are fruitful in experiencing the blessings of the kingdom of God.

The message of the kingdom produces fruitfulness in the lives of those who hear it, hold on to what they hear, and let nothing distract them¹.

1 4:20



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