

MARK 3:22-30 and 4:1-34 – FIVE PARABLES OF JESUS

Today we are going to be continuing our study in Mark and looking at five parables of Jesus. In his Gospel, Mark tells us primarily what Jesus did during His three-and-a-half-year ministry. About one-third of Mark contains Jesus's words, which is the least amount of any of the gospels. Of Jesus's 39 known parables, only six are recorded in Mark. One of those is in Chapter 12 and we will look at the other five today.

What is a parable? It is simply a short story that illustrates a moral or spiritual truth. Every parable is trying to drive home a point. Parables are an effective teaching tool and they were commonly used by the Jewish rabbis of Jesus's time. So then, Jesus teaching in parables was not that uncommon. In Jesus's parables He uses examples from everyday life – things that ordinary, mostly uneducated people could understand and relate to.

This morning, we are going to be looking at these five parables from the Gospel of Mark: (1) Subduing the Strong Man, (2) The Sower, The Lamp, The Seed Growing Secretly, and The Mustard Seed. So, what truths does Jesus teach us from these parables? Well, let's find out. We will begin in Mark Chapter 3 and verse 22...

READ Mark 3:22

Beelzebul here is the ancient name of one of the Canaanite gods. It later became synonymous with the devil. If you will remember, Jesus had been observed earlier in Mark's gospel casting out demons. So basically, what they are accusing Jesus of is having cast out the demons by the power of Satan. Well, Jesus quickly responds to this false charge by the scribes.

READ Mark 3:23

Their accusation against Jesus is completely illogical. It makes no sense. Why would Satan do battle against himself? Why would he do

something that would hurt his own cause? The obvious answer is: He wouldn't! Jesus goes on to say...

READ Mark 3:24-26

Q1: What kingdom did Jesus say cannot stand? One that is divided against itself. That is what He says in v 24.

Now there is a historical note about this passage that I want to bring to your attention, for those of you who like history. In 1858 Abraham Lincoln quoted v 25 – “If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand” – a famous speech to enforce his position that, if slavery continued, it would divide the nation and thereby threaten our union. He proved to be right. The Civil War broke out 3 years later. Our nation was split over the issue of slavery and it ended up that 620,000 people were killed. They say that was about 2-3 percent of the total United States population at the time. What a tragedy that was! It was only by the grace of God that our republic survived.

So, getting back to our passage here in Mark, what possible motive would Satan have for wanting his own demons removed? None. So obviously, the One who is creating all the disorder in Satan's domain is NOT Satan but Satan's enemy, Jesus. Jesus is most certainly NOT in collusion with the devil. Rather, He is on a collision course with him. He and Satan are enemies. They are on opposite sides.

Jesus uses a parable to drive home His point. This is called the Parable of Subduing the Strong Man.

READ Mark 3:27

So, there you have the answer to Q2. You must first bind the strong man, restrain him. You have to make sure that he can't do you any harm when you do what you were planning to do in his house. If I go into Tom's house this week and I want to steal some of his stuff – if I am going to do it while he is there, I need to make sure that I somehow subdue Tom (tie him up or restrain him somehow) because he is going to beat me up if I try

to take his stuff! And you would do the same thing. You would defend your property against someone who was trying to steal from you. So, you have to restrain them first.

Now, in the parable of the strong man here, the strong man represents Satan. We human beings do not have the power to go into Satan's domain and defeat him. We are no match for the devil. He is an angelic being and is much stronger than we mortals are, as are his demons. However, Jesus DID enter Satan's domain and He DID bind him up and plunder his house. When did Jesus do this? When He cast out the demons. That is the point of this whole parable. Jesus encountered people who were demon-possessed, under Satan's power and control. He restrained Satan by His will, then He commanded the demons to come out of the people and what happened? They came out – not very quietly at times – but they came out, as we saw earlier in Mark. There was nothing Satan could do about it because he had been restrained by the power of God.

The religious leaders of Jesus's day are clueless as to who Jesus is. They are spiritually blind. They have closed their minds to Jesus's claim (several times in the Gospels) to be the Son of God. Back in Mark Chapter 2 we saw, when He healed the paralytic, that Jesus was strongly implying that He was God. Only God can forgive sins, right? And what did Jesus do? He forgave that man's sins. Of course, the scribes and Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus was implying, what He was claiming, when He did that. They were not very happy about it as we saw. Later Jesus would explicitly state who He was in John Chapter 10 and in Mark Chapter 14 (we will look at that later). But the religious leaders will not believe Him when He does.

Q3 is a very interesting question. In our study of Mark's gospel thus far (this is our third chapter), who was it that affirmed the deity of Jesus by saying: "You are the Son of God!"? A direct quote. Who said that? It was the unclean spirit, a demon. Does that surprise you? Do you remember that? That quote is found in Mark 3:11. Another demon in Mark 1:24 proclaimed, "You are the Holy One of God!" That is a Messianic term. So,

the demons see Jesus as the Son of God, as deity, and as the Messiah. That underscores James 2:19 which says, "You believe in God? You do well. The demons also believe and tremble." I find it fascinating that the demons have a better theology about Jesus than most people do!

By contrast, the religious leaders of Jesus's day had all this knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures – what God had said about the Messiah through the prophets, what he was going to do and what he was going to be like. They had heard Jesus's words. They had witnessed His miracles and all those things that we have been reading about. And yet, they DID NOT believe that Jesus was the Messiah or the Son of God. The demons DID! But the scribes and Pharisees did not. Very interesting.

READ Mark 3:28-30

So, what is the answer to Q4? What does Jesus say is the unforgiveable sin? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. A person can blaspheme different ways. Here the religious leaders have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit by attributing HIS work to Satan. Earlier they said, "By the prince of demons He [speaking of Jesus] casts out the demons." In reality Jesus cast out demons by the power of God the Holy Spirit who was empowering Him, right? They had accused Jesus of blasphemy, but in reality, THEY were the ones who were guilty of blasphemy.

Why is blaspheming the Holy Spirit unforgiveable, but not blaspheming the Father or the Son? I think that if you interpret this passage to say, "You can blaspheme the Father and the Son, but don't you dare blaspheme the Holy Spirit!" is a misunderstanding of Who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. The Spirit is the One that speaks to our conscience and convicts us and draws us to God. The Spirit reveals to us many things including God's character, His goodness, that He wants to forgive us and that He has provided a way to be saved, to have a relationship with Him through His Son Jesus, and on and on, right?

I am going to you ME for an example. If I reject Him and say, "I don't believe all that. Leave me alone. I want to do things my own way. I want

to believe what I want to believe. You can believe that if you want, but I don't believe it." If I do that and say that, what more can God do more for me? I have hardened my heart. This is precisely the sin that the Jewish religious leaders were guilty of. They rejected Jesus and His message. They resisted. They rejected the Holy Spirit's conviction. This sort of sin is unforgiveable because it rejects God. The conviction of sin is a gift given to us that will allow God to transform us. I want you to hear this – without the conviction of sin, by the Holy Spirit, I would never change, you would never change. That is necessary. To reject that leaves nothing for us except death. That is what the Bible teaches. When you blaspheme the Holy Spirit, you are, in effect, closing your heart and mind to what He is trying to tell you. To push Him away, to resist the Holy Spirit's revelation and prompting, is to reject the Father and the Son as well. Remember, the triune God may be three Persons (Father, Son and Spirit), but He is ONE God.

So, all that being said, blasphemy goes beyond just attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan (that is part of it). Blasphemy has a broad definition, but it includes resisting His convicting work.

Mark Chapter 4, beginning in v 1. Most people know this as the Parable of the Sower, but a better title is the Parable of the Soils. The emphasis here is on the different kinds of soils that receive the seed (the same seed) rather than on the sower himself (the same sower in every case). The sower, of course, is the one who plants the seed. This is what we refer to as broadcast seeding. He simply scatters it by hand out onto the ground.

READ Mark 4:1-9

The sower in this parable represents anyone that shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "A sower went out to sow." He or she sows seeds. The seed represents the message that is being shared. Later in v 14 Jesus says, "The sower sows the word." That, of course, is speaking of God's word, the Good News. So, here you have the answer to Q5 – God's word.

The different soils represent the hearts and minds of people, the various environments, attitudes that people have as they receive the Gospel message. It is clear from this parable that some people are more receptive to the Gospel than others. Same message, but different results.

READ Mark 4:10-13

I am going to come back to these verses I just read later. I have a reason for that which you will see. For now, I want to move on and listen to Jesus's explanation of the parable we just heard because He has been asked about it by His disciples here. That is going to help us answer Q6.

READ Mark 4:14-15

You see here that Satan is the birds. Some of the seed falls along the hard path and is eaten by the birds, by Satan. So, Q6: Hard path is what type of person? Person hears the word, but Satan quickly takes it away from them. D – This soil represents the person who day after day embraces the ways of the world. They adopt worldly attitudes and worldly priorities. They have neither the time nor the interest in the seeds of truth that fall their way. So, it falls on the hard path, on hard hearts, and Satan steals it away.

READ Mark 4:16-17

Some of the seed falls on rocky ground. This represents what type of person? C – This soil represents the person who hears the word, receives it with joy, but falls away. The seed germinates in the crevices, but the roots are shallow. They are unable to penetrate very deep, and the tiny plant soon withers in the hot sun. We saw that earlier. This soil represents those who hear the Gospel and react emotionally to it. They initially receive it with much joy. However, they do not repent of their sins and they have a very superficial and non-genuine faith. They are not rooted in Christ. So, as soon as the troubles and the pressures of life come, and they will, they fall away. As problems arise, their true colors are revealed. They follow the crowd. They get caught up in the emotion of the moment without ever truly experiencing the total transformation of life that comes only in Christ.

READ Mark 4:18-19

Some of the seed falls among the thorns. This thorn-covered ground represents what type of person? A – This soil represents the person who hears the word, but the cares of the world choke it away. The seed takes root, but it can only grow so much before being choked out. It fails to produce a crop. Now, I have heard different commentaries explain this passage various ways. Perhaps this person, some will say, actually embraces Christ, receives Christ as Savior at one time. They may become deeply and sincerely rooted in Him. But when they allow the cares of this world to consume their time and energies, they become fruitless. The material things of this world become more important to them than their walk with the Lord. They are, as it were, “choked out” spiritually. Three primary distractions to one’s spiritual growth are mentioned by Jesus in this passage – “the cares of the world,” “the deceitfulness of riches,” and “the desires for other things.” There is a lot in our world to distract us from the things of God, aren’t there?

And now, the good soil, v 20...

READ Mark 4:20

Some seed falls on good soil. The good soil represents what type of person? B – This soil represents the person who hears the word, accepts it and bears fruit. The seed takes root and grows to full maturity, eventually producing a crop. This soil represents those who follow Christ and continue to grow and mature in Him. Most importantly, they bear fruit. The fruit that is produced is the fruit of the Spirit evidenced in everyday life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (reference Galatians 5:22-23). And what does that fruit produce? More seeds!

Now, I want you to understand something from this parable here. Even in good hearts, those who are fully receptive to the Gospel and who are seeking God’s will and are committed to Him, there are varying degrees of fruitfulness. Some Christians bear fruit 30 times what they start with, others 60-fold or 100-fold. It is not to be concluded from this parable that

the one bearing more fruit is necessarily more spiritual. Jesus does not praise one over the other in this parable. In other parables He will talk about levels of being a trustworthy servant, but not here. The Christian life is not a competition. What IS important is that one's life is to be productive for the kingdom of God.

We are going to pick it up in v 21 with the Parable of the Lamp. The lamp represents God's truth found in His holy word. Psalm 119:105 says, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." God's word lights our path. It shows us the right way to go and it identifies obstacles that we must recognize and avoid.

READ Mark 4:21-23

So, what is the answer to Q7? Where should you place a lamp? On a stand, on a lampstand. Why would you do that? That is the benefit you get from light, right? If you cannot see the light, what good is it? The whole purpose of a lamp is to provide light in the darkness. If you hide it, it is not going to serve its intended purpose.

Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew's gospel: "You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14, 16). In other words, do not hide your light. Let others see it.

READ Mark 4:24-25

"Pay attention!" Jesus says. He offers His followers, His disciples, us, several words of admonition here involving the light, the truth that we have been given. First, we better listen to and obey what He is telling us. Second, the measure you and I give will be the measure we get. I have a simple application for that: Do you want love? Then love. Do you want grace? Then be gracious. Do you want forgiveness? Then you need to forgive. Do you want kindness shown to you? Then show kindness to others. Do you want friends? Then be friendly. Do you want sympathy? Then be sympathetic. You get the idea.

Jesus's third admonition is this: If we have heard the truth, and we HAVE, then we need to apply it and share it with others so that we will in turn receive even more truth. However, Jesus warns that if we obtain truth and then refuse to use it, appropriate it, we are in danger of losing the understanding of the truth we once had. I don't understand all that that means, but it certainly is very deep and it is a lot for us to chew on.

This is Mark 4 beginning in v 26...

READ Mark 4:26-29

Q8: the kingdom of God is like what? V 26, like a man who scatters seed on the ground. That is the analogy that Jesus is using in this parable.

Q9: From the time of planting through harvest, who's involved in this process? Both, right? It is a collaborative effort. A person, perhaps a farmer or a gardener, perhaps you, plants the seed, cultivates the ground, waters as needed. Maybe you add fertilizer. The person that plants has a part to play. But God is the One who causes the plant to grow. HE gives the increase. The word of God, when planted into the hearts of people, like the seed planted in this parable, grows gradually by itself (at least the way we see it, from our perspective). The seed sprouts up and grows automatically while the man is asleep. We Christians are to be faithful to sow the seed of the Word. We tell somebody. We share the Gospel. And then we nourish our relationship with that person that we shared it with. They may have questions. So, there is a part that we play, but ultimately God the Holy Spirit convicts their hearts. He is the One who causes that seed to take root and to grow. We share and then we let God take care of the rest. The seed, the word of God, contains everything needed when placed in the proper environment to produce life and growth. When a person's heart is receptive to God's truth, it is like the good soil (in the other parable). The seed is in the right environment to grow and produce fruit.

Now we come to our last parable today, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which begins in v 30.

READ Mark 4:30-32

Q10: What does a tiny mustard seed eventually produce? A large plant or a tall tree! Sometimes you will hear it referred to as the Mustard Plant and sometimes it is called the Mustard Tree. Same thing. The Common Black Mustard Seed is a seed about 1/20th of an inch in diameter. It produces this large plant, this tree that can grow 10 to 20 feet high with a stem the size of a man's arm.

Here's the application for this parable: The kingdom of God grows in numbers. Just as the mustard plant starts from a small seed, so did the kingdom of God. It started from small, seemingly insignificant beginnings and it has grown to be great in number. Jesus and His twelve disciples grew to over 500 strong by the time Jesus returned to the Father (His ascension), after His ministry was over here on earth. Thousands more were added at Pentecost. Countless others were added during Paul's missionary endeavors (which we read about in Acts). There was great expansion of the church during the First Century. The growth has continued down through the Church Age, thousands of years to today where millions of people worldwide profess Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Let me read this passage and then we will talk about. Mark Chapter 4 going back to verses 10 thru 13.

READ Mark 4:10-13 and 33-34

We have looked at five of Jesus's parables. So, why did Jesus teach the people in parables? Well, the obvious thought is these were simple stories that they could understand and remember. OK, that is part of it. But in this passage here, Jesus is alone with His disciples and He explains to them the reasons why He has chosen at this time to teach in parables. The truths He has been presenting are easily understood by those who are spiritually ready to receive it, like His own disciples and other close followers. With Jesus's help, these parables make sense. We can understand them, right? On the other hand, parables also conceal truth from those who are opposed to or who reject Jesus's message. So then in Q11, why does Jesus begin to teach the crowds exclusively in parables? I

gave you a hint from Isaiah 6. This quote was Isaiah's response to the people of his day who were less than receptive to his message. Isaiah, like Jeremiah, had a lot of resistance. It was hard being a prophet in Israel back in those days. They did not like what Isaiah was saying. They were resisting Isaiah. Jesus felt the same way in His day. He was getting some pushback from the religious leaders and many of the people. So, the answer is increasing opposition that Jesus was facing. That is why He spoke in parables during this period.

Five parables – what can we as believers learn from these five parables?

First, it is only by the power of Jesus that we will have victory over the devil – “Victory in Jesus,” right? We sing that. Colossians 2:15 says that Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.” Jesus defeated the devil and sin and the grave by His death and resurrection. His victory bound Satan and delivered us from his control.

Second, as Christians we have a responsibility to share the truth of the Gospel and to let our light shine before all people.

Third, the condition of a person's heart (their attitude and their priorities) goes a long way in determining whether or not the seed of God's truth will take root.

Fourth, after we plant, after we sow the seed, after we share the truth, we must leave the results up to God who gives the increase. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” So, even Paul the great apostle, the great evangelist, It's a collaborative effort. Ultimately God gives the increase.

Finally, it may seem like what we do is insignificant, but God can take it – He can take our little bit that we offer, that we bring to the table, however small it is – and produce some amazing results, far beyond what we ever could have imagined.