

A Word of Life or Death? - Mark 4:1-20

Evangelical Christianity has always held that the essential ministry of the Church in the world is to preach God's Word. But today there are many who would question this. The thing is, Jesus in His ministry, did not preach for goals many people today would assume are the right goals for the local church. Jesus' ministry of the Word, as we see in Mark 4, did not aim to educate ignorance, or enlighten, or improve lifestyles, or grow church attendance, or meet felt needs. He aimed at nothing less than seeing the Word make dead people live. Our culture tempts us to think that's not enough. This is not new.

- Jesus' brothers wanted Him to grow His popularity and show Himself off to the elite in Jerusalem. But in 3:20, He was managing His ministry all wrong. [read 3:21]
- His brothers likely wanted Him to make it as easy as possible for people to follow Him, because obviously a large following means more money and more influence. Jesus challenged this way of thinking when He said, in 3:33-35, [read.] God does not do what His people want; God's people do what He wants ("what God wants" is what the "will of God" means).
- People want God to meet their felt needs, His Church to do their best to attract and keep the attention of the crowds, to teach the Bible if we must, but to make it so simple that any child can understand--don't go too deep, don't offend, don't make it too hard. But Jesus, when the crowd gathered again by the sea, did not teach plainly and simply, instead He taught in parables. A parable is a form of instructive comparison; a story that makes a point. But it is not like some think a genius way of making His teaching easy to understand. Homer used the word "parable" speaking of throwing an obstacle or trick in someone's way.¹ And even though people found Him very, very hard to understand, Jesus seemed to think His Word was enough. [read vv2-9].

The same teaching was given to both the crowd and the disciples, though when asked He explained it to the disciples. But not to the crowd. He gave them no study guide, no powerpoint, no children's storybook version, no explanation at all. But then to His disciples He explained that He teaches people very differently based on whether they "have been given the secret of the Kingdom" or are outside the Kingdom [read v11]. Notice in verse 11 He does not say whether people are in or out. He says "you have been given the secret of the Kingdom" but others are "outside". Those aren't exactly opposites are they? So there's room to say that there are people not yet in the Kingdom to whom God still plans to give this same "secret of the Kingdom of God", and there are those outside whom God has judged. That's why He quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10. In that text, Isaiah is told to announce God's verdict on a nation God had already judged. And Jesus quotes that passage (v12) alongside verses 13-20 to show that God's Word always accomplishes two different purposes: it confirms judgement of those who reject Jesus, and it gives life to those who accept Jesus.

The Word Judges Outsiders

I want you to try and remember that the crowds Jesus was speaking to on that seaside were not new to God's Word. They had heard it all their lives, and so had their parents and grandparents

¹ Homer. Cited in LSJ Lexicon, #32390.

and great grandparents. They were like the people about who Jesus quotes (in v 12) from ancient Israel who had been given many opportunities to repent of their evil but time after time refused, until finally the punishment God had warned about happened. If you look at the first words of His parable, we can see what Jesus means: [read v 3, and then v 14] He is talking about God's Word being preached and taught, right? First He commands the crowds in no uncertain terms: "Listen!" The first time you heard me preach, what would you have done if I had started like that? Commanding you to listen? I would have been talking to your backs in no time! Because who am I to command you? I'm just a sinner like you saved by grace. But when God speaks we need to listen and obey. So in this parable, after hearing God's Word many times, Jesus gives this crowd one last chance to respond to the Word: by showing them in parable that everything depends on how we respond to God's Word. And this was not new. What Jesus says here in parable is similar to what Moses preached to the crowd's ancestors 1400 years earlier:

"But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live... But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life..." (Deu 30:14-20 ESV)

These crowds had these words in their Scripture. And if they had listened to Moses' teaching, His Gospel, His promise of life, if they had clung to God's Word and hung on to it and kept it close to heart, they would have heard what Jesus was saying and found themselves among the last kind of soil: the seed of the Word would have penetrated, grown and brought life and fruitfulness. But not even Jesus' brothers had kept God's Word close, so that they did not recognize either God or His Word when He came to them in the familiar form of their half brother, Jesus son of God and Mary, adopted son of their father, Joseph. As Jesus said in 3:35, "whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and my sister". But like the seed that fell on the path, on the rocky ground, and among the thorns, most people did not understand the parable of Jesus because they had not listened to God's Word and kept it. Sometimes God's Word should make us break out in a cold sweat, realizing how close we came to rejecting Him and choosing death. It's never too late to turn and listen and obey the will of God.

The Word Brings God's People to Life

It's impossible to overstate this importance of this truth for making disciples. Like in Creation, the Word creates. It "calls into existence that which does not exist" (Rom 4:17).

- "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." (Joh 5:24-25)
- "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1Pe 1:23 ESV)

- And the Word keeps us alive--it sustains true, spiritual life in us who hear it: "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples," (Joh 8:31 ESV).
- "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (Joh 14:23-24)
- About this Word, Peter said, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." (1Pe 2:2-3 ESV)
- Finally, Jesus said, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"(Mat 4:4 ESV)

All of the people in the crowd, then, who hear the word and do not ultimately keep it and live, those on whom the Word falls like on the path, the rocky ground, and the thorns, ultimately choose death because they neglect the Word, that is, they don't hang on to the Word of God but, like Moses said, worship false gods instead. The author of the book of Hebrews said, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." In His explanation of the parable for His disciples, Jesus showed 3 kinds of things that can cause us to drift away from God's Word so that we miss out on eternal life after all. All of these people who end up drifting from the Word of Life, are people who at first do hear God's Word-- "the sower sows the Word" (v 14).

- Some people have the Word snatched away by Satan (v 15). I think John Piper was right when he said that Satan does this mainly through "ill will, inattention or ignorance."² The devil works to keep people distracted or too tired to pay attention to God's Word when they hear it. The devil prejudices people against the preacher, creates hostile bias to the God and the Bible, or blinds people's eyes so that they just can't see what Christians are talking about.
- Some people happily receive the Word, but only in a superficial way (vv 16-17). When things get hard, then, like Heb 2:1 says, they drift away.
- Some people receive the Word, but worldly cares, deceitfulness of money and other desires choke the life out of them--Jesus says these are the people who, in the end, "prove unfruitful" (vv 18-19). In other words, people in the end who don't bear any fruit as a result of the Word in their lives, are those people who ultimately choose to hang onto sin instead of to God's Word.

Piper said, "Ultimately what is at stake if Satan takes away the Word of God is our salvation. Without the Word of God abiding and taking root in our heart we cannot bear fruit, be disciples, or inherit eternal life."³ True discipleship is proven when we bear fruit from God's Word. And the inheritance of all true disciples is eternal life. All of this depends on how we respond to hearing the Word of God, whether taught, preached, written, sung or prayed. Jesus said to the crowds, "Listen!" (v3) So listen now to Him. He's already given you a great gift by letting you hear "the secret of the Kingdom of God" that He shared privately with the disciples in verse 11 and following. In Mark 3:35 Jesus said God's children are those who "do the will of God." Jesus said,

² Ibid.

³ (John Piper, sermon, Mark 4:1-20)

“this is the will of my Father,” in John 6:40, “that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” That’s why when the disciples didn’t understand Jesus’ parable, they came to Him--they drew closer to Jesus for understanding, they asked Him to teach them, they trusted Him--11 out of 12 of them anyway. Does hearing God’s Word pull you toward trusting Jesus? Some of us will no doubt read this passage and wonder, “what if I’m one of the outsiders who won’t prove fruitful? What if God’s Word will only judge me and not save me?” My friends, you and I are not all-knowing like God, to be able to read His mind and see who in the end will be in the Kingdom or outside the Kingdom. We are not saved by what-ifs or by knowing the future. You are saved by accepting the seed of the Word when it falls on the soil of our hearts, by doing God’s will and trusting in the Saviour whom we discover in this glorious Word, by hearing His voice to sinners like us and coming to Him as the Spirit calls your name. We are saved by the discovery that the Word of Christ, the Bible, contains the very words of life! Where else should we go? In Christ we have all we need, forever. No devil, no distraction, and no sin can even compare to the glory we see in our Saviour!

[read v 20] Some true disciples will be more fruitful than others as God’s Word works in their lives. 30, 60 and 100 times is a broad spectrum on purpose. Living seeds grow and living plants grow and reproduce more seed. True disciples eventually help to spread the Word of God. So when God brings a friend into your life and he sees the change happening in you but doesn’t know where it comes from, or he sees the hope that you have and doesn’t understand it, and he asks you about it, what will you say? Will we as a church of disciples sent on a mission to make disciples, will we try to compete with the distractions of the devil? Will we deceive them with lies about an easy life and meet their felt-needs, and a God who caters to us, or will we tell them about grace that gives power to endure suffering and live forever with Christ in Glory? Will we let our own sinful hearts lure us away from the life-giving Word, and will we pander to the sinful desires of the hearts of seekers who still have no appetite for the words of the Living God? Or will we tell the Good News, offer to read Scripture together, and make disciples?