

October 30, 2016

## Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *He Who Has Ears to Hear*

Mark 4:1 – 34

We've just read this very long passage from the word of God and responded by thanking Him for this word, but I wonder, have we really heard it? Everything in this passage turns on hearing what Jesus is saying. He begins by telling the crowd, '*Listen up, pay attention here*', and He tells them a parable and ends by saying '*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*.' And when He gets alone with His disciples He continues to hammer away by saying, '*If anyone has ears to hear let him hear*' and '*Pay attention to what you hear*'. And Mark ends this passage by telling us that Jesus continued to speak the word to them '*as they were able to hear*'. My prayer this morning is that everyone here under the hearing of this word today would have ears to hear and hearts to respond to what they hear. I pray that as we hear again the words of Jesus, that our ears would not be deaf and our hearts would not be dull so that we would not be those who see but do not perceive and hear but do not understand.

To understand this passage, you need to keep in mind the context and the context is that Jesus has come on the scene preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand and you need to repent and believe in the gospel. Great crowds are following Him around, listening to His teaching and watching incredible miracles happen at His hands, seeing sick people healed, lepers cleansed, paralytics raised up, demons cast out, and hope building in them that this was at last the promised Messiah. And on the other side of that we see resistance to Him was building as well. We watch as the sceptical scribes begin by labeling Jesus a blasphemer, despising Him as a friend of sinners, accusing Him of being a lawbreaker, and plotting to kill Him. This culminates in a charge against Jesus of being in league with Satan and being possessed by an unclean spirit. And chapter three ends with Jesus making a clear distinction between those who are His and those who are not: '*For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother, and sister and mother.*'<sup>1</sup>

And then Mark launches into the first of only two extensive passages on Jesus' teachings in this gospel; this one here in chapter four and another in chapter 13. Most of Mark is much like a Cliff Notes edition on the life and times of Jesus, but in this section and in the other, Mark spends a great deal of time to lay out a bit of what Jesus was preaching and teaching, so we must conclude that this is a pretty significant section in Mark's mind. And we must also recognize that it has a lot to do with what he has just got done telling us in the previous bit. Mark sets us up, as it were, in chapter three talking about who it is that makes it into the kingdom and who it is that doesn't. And then he gives this long section where Jesus gives the explanation of why they do or don't in three parables.

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1 Mark 3:35 ESV

The word 'parable' means something that is placed alongside something else for the purpose of clarification. But I think as we will soon see, His parables are not that simple or even clear sometimes. I think that is so because Jesus taught in parables in order to make a clear distinction. I think it is closer to the truth to say that Jesus used parables as a kind of filter. Among the thousands that have come out to see Him for all the wrong reasons, there are some who are genuinely open to the truth. A tiny minority perhaps among that vast, spiritually deaf multitude. But they did have ears to hear. His parables act as a filter to identify those true disciples. Those who came to Jesus looking for a political leader, a nationalist revolutionary, a conquering king, or something else, went away disillusioned. But those who were drawn to Him by something deeper stayed, and in their hearts, the Spirit of God began to work.

These parables were meant to divide those on the inside from those on the outside. In fact Jesus tells His disciples: *To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables...*<sup>2</sup> Those on the outside cannot see or apprehend the beauty on the inside. One commentator put it like this: *Parables are like stained glass windows in a cathedral, dull and lifeless from the outside, but brilliant and radiant from within. Or to borrow an analogy from Jesus (1:17), they are like fishing. There is a hook hidden in the bait. The hook is the word of God, which is personified in Jesus. Parables cannot be understood apart from the one who tells them. Parables are not simply good advice, they are good news; for the life of Jesus is itself a parable, indeed the greatest parable.*<sup>3</sup>

So what is Mark trying to tell us here in this section? Or more accurately, what is Jesus trying to tell us? After all He tells His disciples in verse 13: *"Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"* In other words, understanding now is the key to future revelation. You've got this story of different kind of soils, three of which are fruitless and three of which are productive. Then you have a break where Jesus tells His disciples that if they don't understand this parable, they won't understand any parable, and follows that up with private instruction on the meaning of the first parable. He then repeats the injunction to hear: *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*, and follows that with a common proverb and two more parables. From the way in which Mark orders this section, we should understand that he meant it all to go together.

I think the key to understanding this whole thing is found down in verse 12, where Jesus applies the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to the present day situation: *10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."* This has to be one of those hard texts that we run across in the Bible all too often. Jesus actually says, 'I'm going to speak the truth in parables so that they won't get it.' He links His ministry to the ministry of Isaiah to whom God gave the mission to go and preach the word of the Lord to people who will not listen.

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2 Mark 4:11 ESV

3 James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 127.

And my first response is 'Why are you telling these people to listen, and then speaking in a way that guarantees they won't get it? How does that work? I want you to remember what we said a few minutes ago. The context here is important. You won't understand this apart from context. And the context here is the situation of people who are rejecting Jesus and attributing His works to the devil. There is a wholesale rejection of Jesus as Savior and Lord. You must ask yourself a question here, and that is, what will happen to those who reject the offer of Jesus to be their Savior, their Deliverer? And the answer is, if He's not your Savior, He will be your judge. You will either meet Him one day as your Savior or your judge. If you leave the service today without embracing Him as your Savior, you run the real risk of meeting Him one day as your judge. And what does judgment look as we read the pages of the Bible? How does it show up? It always shows up looking like division and separation. And that is what we have here. Jesus essentially divides people into two groups: those who have submitted to Christ and those who haven't.

He tells those who have submitted to Him, *"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,*. A secret in the Bible speaks of a truth that you cannot know outside of revelation to you from God. It speaks of something we cannot find out by ourselves, but that He is pleased to reveal to us, quite apart from our efforts. In other words a secret has to be revealed; it cannot be simply found out. And this is what Jesus told His disciples. 'I'm giving you the secret here. You haven't found this out by yourselves. It's been given'. And the great question is, 'Why do they get it and the crowd doesn't?' And the answer is, because they are His. They belong to Him. They've become the insiders. Jesus gives the truth to those who are His. If you are not His, you'll never learn the secret.

And then for those who are not His He says, *but for those outside everything is in parables*. Because you are Mine, you get to understand the secret; you're on the inside. But those on the outside only get the parable and not the secret. It is an ironic twist. The ones Jesus says are on the outside are the very ones who had considered themselves on the inside, the Jews, God's people. And they are on the outside precisely because they have rejected their Messiah. They not only do not get the secret, they not only do not get the truth, Jesus goes on to say that they are given the truth in parables **12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."**

This passage quoted from Isaiah appears six times in the New Testament which tells us that these early Christians viewed this passage as solving what must have been an incredibly important puzzle for them, namely, the failure of Israel to welcome her long-awaited Messiah. How could it be that after having been prepared to welcome their Messiah for so long, they failed to recognize Him when He came? And Isaiah solves that puzzling dilemma by showing them that there was hardness that came over Israel, born of pride and prejudice and disobedience, resulting in deaf ears and blind eyes. And moreover, this hardness, this deafness and blindness was providential in the plan and purpose of God.

To see how this works, let's look at a couple of those passages. The first is in the gospel of John, chapter 12. In verse 40 John quotes the exact same passage as Mark does: *"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them."* And he does that to justify his words in verse 37, where speaking of Jesus, John says, *Though He had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"* And then he concludes: *Therefore they could not believe.*

Do you see it there? *'...they still did not believe in Him...therefore they could not believe'*. On the one hand, there is the human responsibility to submit to Christ. We must believe. We must submit to Him. God has a plan, but we are responsible. On the other hand, God is divinely sovereign, but also, we are humanly responsible. These people were responsible for seeing who Jesus was, and for listening to His voice. But they did neither. They would not believe in Him and therefore in the end they could not believe. John, and Mark do nothing to ease the tension between divine sovereignty and human will in the carrying out of the plan of God. They simply shows us how it is. On the one hand the plan of God spoken of in the prophecy of Isaiah would be fulfilled. And yet on the other, it was the responsibility of these people to accept the Messiah and they refused. *They would not, therefore they in the end they could not.*

That is true even today. There is a sense in which people who continue to refuse to believe the truth, eventually lose the capacity to believe the truth. Their continued rejection of the truth becomes the truth of their existence and their ears become deaf, their eyes become blind, and their hearts are hardened. The second place we see this is in the book of Acts, chapter 28, and Paul is in Rome under house arrest and he calls the leading men of the Jewish community together to explain his situation to them and they set a day for him to talk about the kingdom of God to them. And the Scripture records that *From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.*<sup>4</sup> The NASB actually says it better – *and some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.*

And at that point Paul turns to them and quotes this same passage from Isaiah, saying, *"The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: 26 "Go to this people, and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. 27 For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' 28 Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."*<sup>5</sup> The implication is clear. The truth had been given to Israel and they would not listen. So now the time for their listening is over, and the truth is taken to the Gentiles and they will listen. They have hardened their hearts and God grants them what they desire.

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4 Acts 28:23-24 ESV

5 Acts 28:25-28 ESV

I think the point of this passage is that in speaking to the people in parables, the real condition of people's hearts is confirmed: insiders who belong to Jesus are given understanding; outsiders who reject Jesus are further blinded and confirmed in their refusal to believe. There is a great divide created. This was a great characteristic of Jesus' ministry. His proclamation of the gospel served to bring division, or a sword into people's hearts. It created a dividing line between those on the inside and those on the outside. You see, these people were expecting a Messiah, one that conformed to their idea of a conquering hero. They eagerly devoured all the bits in Scripture about the coming one who would destroy all their enemies and heal His people and set up His everlasting kingdom over the kingdoms of this world.

They did not, however, understand the kind of kingdom this Messiah would be bringing in. It is a kingdom of transformation from within, not from without. It is a revolution of the heart and mind, not politics. You see, the real condition of the hearts of these people was an unwillingness to accept the Messiah as He appeared. He wasn't what they expected. They were looking for something else. The truths of the kingdom of God were heard by them but not understood. It was not so much that God was hiding the truth from them; it was hidden from them because they did not want to hear. The purpose of the parables was to both reveal and conceal the truth. They reveal the truth to those who embrace this Christ; and they conceal it from those who don't really want to know the truth of who He is.

Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 11:25. *At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;* Jesus must mean that these things are hidden from those who are wise in their own eyes. That is, the truths of the kingdom are hidden to those who think they know something. He can't be saying here that smart people don't stand a chance. He had just been lamenting over the stubborn pride of the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida who had rejected Him as Messiah. And so He's making a statement about the self-righteous, those who think they are wiser than God, those who think they know more about divine things than God does, He won't reveal the truth to them.

We know people like this. They've got it figured out. Talk to them about spiritual things and they have a theory about who God is. They've worked it out. They easily disagree with the God of the Bible. They find no problem with saying that God has got it all wrong and they have got it all right. People who continue in this kind of unbelief will never believe. They remain blind and deaf to the truth because they're wiser than God. But look at who gets the revelation. The little children get the truth. Not because they're so innocent. If you have any experience with children you know they're not; and if you've not had any experience, we'll give you one of our children for ½ hour and then you'll know. But revelation is given to those who know that they know nothing; to those who are absolutely dependent on others for their understanding; and therefore ask and receive like a little child.

Unless we come to Jesus like a little child, unless we receive His word as divine truth, unless we hear with ears unblocked by pride and prejudice and rebellion, then we will never know the truth and we will be confirmed in our unbelief.

You must know this morning that God is not intent on keeping you on the outside. On the contrary, He's calling you to be on the inside. Jesus ends His words in Matthew 11 with these: *27 All things have been handed over to Me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. 28 Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.*" On the one hand Jesus says, 'The revelation of the kingdom is for whomever I choose'. On the other hand He says, 'Come to Me – whosoever will'.

An invitation like that deals with our independent pride and our rebellious autonomy. Our minds and hearts wrestle with the thought that Jesus is in control, even of our salvation. But we'll never know the the glorious blessings of the gospel and the joy of salvation until we surrender to His sovereignty and embrace the gracious invitation to 'Come to Me, all who are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.

***He who has ears to hear, let him hear.***

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*Grant that we would have ears that hear and eyes that see the glories of the gospel and the blessings of salvation. Deal with the pride and rebellion that stops our ears and blinds our eyes, that we might turn and be forgiven. Let Your invitation to come to You rend our hearts and work repentance in our souls. Let Your word reveal the beauty of Jesus and melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God, and let us see our Savior, His arms outstretched and His heart big for us so that we would commit our souls to Him without reserve, we pray in the precious saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*