



## THE GOSPEL OF MARK

### A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

### Session Three – “4 Stories, 3 Saves, and a Storm”

Mark 4—5

*Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.*

*St. Francis of Assisi*

If words ever epitomized Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, the words of St. Francis were the ones. There is no Sermon on the Mount in Mark, no long speech about the Pharisees’ hypocrisy, no long speeches at all. These 16 chapters feature far fewer red letters – the words of Jesus – than Matthew or Luke or John.

#### Words of Jesus in the Gospels

Matthew	13,609
Mark	5,495
Luke	12,342
John	8,102

In Mark, Jesus walks the walk far more than he talks the talk. But he does talk “if necessary.”

In this session, we will notice in chapters 4 and 5 a powerful mingling of speech and action, as we read Jesus’ parables alongside the very action-oriented scenes on the Sea of Galilee.

Before you read further here, take a few minutes to read these two chapters carefully with an eye for when Jesus talks and when he acts and how each of those functions communicates his message to the people around him.

## Tell Me the Stories of Jesus

Jesus is famous for telling stories. We call them parables, because these stories have a specific purpose beyond entertainment. As the Cambridge Online Dictionary definition suggests, they “teach or explain a...moral or religious idea.” Jesus isn’t the only teacher who has used parables, of course. Buddhist tradition, for example, draws heavily on parables to communicate its deep truths. And Aesop’s fables feel awfully parable-like. But google the word “parable” and your first fifty hits will likely relate to Jesus’ parables. As I said, he’s famous for them.

### **The Sower**

In Mark 4, Jesus sees the now-enormous crowd that has come out to see him, steps in a boat so he can be heard, and tells a purposeful story that I imagine you’ve heard before.

*Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 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 seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. (4.3-8)*

As you hear this familiar story, your mind likely goes wherever it has gone before. Perhaps you riveted early on the oft-detected mandate here to “be good soil”; or maybe you riveted on the character of the sower, so profligate with the seed that he throws it on asphalt and car hoods and skyscrapers and airplane seats. This parable has been heard spiritually and devotionally for two millennia, so it’s hard to imagine it meaning anything else but “I should be more receptive!” or “God really wants to give people a chance to grow!”

Parables practically beg to be taken out of context and treated as eternal spiritual truths. I wonder, though, if we can put ourselves inside the drama of Mark’s narrative setting for a moment. Our last session together gave us vivid appreciation for the meteoric rise in Jesus’ popularity over the very brief span of two-and-a-half chapters in this Gospel. In fact, when we shifted our focus from the bricks of Mark’s episodes to the mortar that connected them, we found that this narrator clearly emphasizes the size of Jesus’ crowds.

Is it any wonder, then, as all the region seems to show up wherever Jesus is, that he would pause with them to assess their staying power?

- Picture yourself in that ancient throng on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, curiously following the most recent buzz with the guarded or unguarded hope that the hype is true.
- Or picture yourself as one of the disciples, feeling like the person who bought Apple stock in the early days. You left your boat or tax booth on a whim, but now you’re in tight with the greatest show on earth.

- Or picture yourself as Jesus, already aware of potentially violent opposition from powerful authorities in town and anticipating the time when these sell-out crowds will turn their affections elsewhere.

These are the dynamics of the narrative setting for this parable. This is the context of the story.

Now let's read it again. This time, lay aside the "moral or religious idea" you've got filed away and hear the story fresh from one of the three vantage points we've just surveyed: crowd, disciples, or Jesus. And as you do that, remember that these are the very first words out of Jesus' mouth as he stands in that boat offshore. He begins by shouting...

*Listen!*

Then he begins his tale.

*A farmer went out to sow his seed. 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 seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. (4.3-8)*

Laying aside 2,000 years of Christian tradition, taking this out of the devotional or churchy settings in which you and I have most often heard these words, what did they mean on that beach – for the crowd? for the disciples? for Jesus?

Take a moment to write whatever comes to mind.

### ***What I Meant Is...***

Authorial Intent has become a controversial issue in literary scholarship. Here's a quick description of the topic from Oxford Reference. Authorial Intention is...

A position that argues that the creator of a text possesses a privileged understanding of its meaning and that consequently any interpretation that contradicts this understanding must defer to the author's intentions. This position has been criticized for its assumption that authors can ever be fully conscious of the meaning of what they produce and for ignoring or underplaying the contribution that the purposes of readers make to the understanding of a text.

Part of the reason that you and I want to be good soil or appreciate God's generous seed-spreading is that Mark makes us privy to Jesus' private, post-performance explanation of his intention for the story.

*When Jesus was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables... [He told them] "The farmer sows the word.*

- *Some people are like seed 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 seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.*
- *Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.*
- *Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."* (4.14-20)

Do you picture Jesus as the kind of guy who explains his jokes? You know, the sort of comedian who sees that the audience isn't laughing and says, "Get it? Ducks don't usually walk into bars...and they don't really know how to talk so they can't order drinks, but this one..." Should we gather from the private session that Jesus leaves the audience flummoxed but gives his disciples insider info?

Some readers of Mark have pictured Jesus speaking the jokes without the explanation – just telling the story and letting the chips fall where they may. These folks wonder if our little explanation in 4.14-20 might be a product of Mark's Bible Study group, rather than an original saying of Jesus. "What the good master is trying to tell us is..."

The folks who see Mark 4 this way picture a Jesus who is very comfortable with mystery. They don't picture a Jesus who explains his jokes, but rather one who may even purposefully leave people a bit baffled. Ironically, this picture of Jesus comes from this very same chapter. When Jesus confides the purpose for his parables, he says a shocking thing. In that private sessions with his inner circles, he says,

*"The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"* (4.11-12)

It looks to any plain reading like Mark's narrator has Jesus speak in order NOT to be understood. The last bit is a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, who bemoaned the people's hardness of heart and failure to understand. Sometimes prophets speak knowing they won't be received or understood, so that their speech becomes a form of judgment on their audience. Is that what Jesus is doing here? Could that be why four chapters on, when Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" the disciples will say "One of the prophets?" (8.27-28)

It's enough to leave a person unsettled. And maybe that's part of Jesus' M.O. I suppose the old call to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable might have half a home here. Has Jesus ever unsettled you?

### ***The Parable as Answer Key***

With mystery hanging in the air, let's return to more concrete matters and probe the function (if not the author's intent) of the parable of the sower. Mary Ann Tolbert, a New Testament scholar from Vanderbilt Divinity School, wrote a book two decades ago called *Sowing the Gospel* that sees this story of Jesus as central to the impact (and she would probably say "design") of the book. She suggests that Jesus' description of these four kinds of soil should become the reader's structure for understanding people's response to him for the rest of the Gospel. Her reading helps us to see some things about the parable that we may have missed.

Picture elementary students playing out this parable in science class. Did you notice that early in the seed experiment, three of the four plants look exactly alike? Sure, the footpath remains barren start to finish. But look at the other three:

- *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 seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.*
- *Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.*

Looking around the beach as Jesus spoke from the boat, seed had "sprung up/grown up/come up" quickly, and no one could tell which person was which kind of soil. How could you? This is a rock concert and Jesus is U2. Everyone looks like good soil today

So how will the soil types be sorted? What will be the shallowing that makes some plants dry up? What will be the thorns that choke growth? We don't know yet. But it sure makes a person lean forward. So, let's read on!

### ***The Rest of the Stories***

I'll leave to you the close reading of Jesus' other three parables in Mark 4. We've learned from a closer look at the Sower not to trust our file-folder labels for Jesus' parables.

- As you read the parable of the lamp on a stand (4.21-23), for example, you might be tempted to hear echoes of Jesus' "You are the light of the world!" speech from the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5.14-16) Look closer.
- Again, Mark's seeds growing quietly (4.26-29) looks very different than Jesus' wheat and tares of Matthew 13. Be careful to let Mark be Mark.
- What significance does the mustard seed parable have for Jesus and his audience at this point in the Gospel?

When Mark summarizes after the last parable, he reiterates the pattern of the sower: Jesus speaks to the world in parables, then explains their meaning carefully to the disciples in private so they can understand. I wonder how much they will retain...

### **Stormy Weather**

A great old black and white cartoon shows a man and his dog walking toward the office door of a professional agent. As they trudge through the snow toward the building, the master calms and encourages the dog, then they open the door and step inside. When the master claims, "This here's a talking dog, sir! You ain't never seen anything like him!" the agent, understandably, looks skeptical but the master is enthusiastic.

Master: "Rover, what is the thing that keeps the rain off the living room?"

Dog: "Roof. Roof. Roof."

Master: "Good! Good! Now, what do you call the cover that surrounds the trunk of a tree?"

Dog: "Bark! Bark!"

Master: "Excellent! Now, Rover, who is the greatest baseball player of all time?"

Dog: "Ruth! Ruth! Ruth!"

By now the agent has heard enough. He calls in an assistant who hauls the two to the door and throws them out in the snow.

As they wipe snow from their eyes, the dog turns to the obviously-chagrined master and says, "So, you think I should have said DiMaggio?"

I love it when people show me that they're more than I thought they were. Don't you? It happens in show business all the time. Actors we know for dramatic or comedic roles get the chance to show off their singing voice or athleticism or dancing skills. There's an episode of the Gen X detective series "Psych" in which the by the book Watson character, Gus (played by Dule Hill), shows up as a brilliant tap dancer. Scenes like this can leave us wondering, "What else can these people do?!"

That happened to Jesus' disciples all the time. In Mark 1, Jesus calls them from their boats, and they say, "OK. What happens?" Before they know it, a demon-possessed guy comes running at him in the synagogue and he...fixes him. Double take! Then he starts healing people all around town. Fevers, skin diseases, paralysis, a withered hand, and every other malady goes away when he shows up.

But even that astonishing power probably did not prepare them for this: in the last verses of Mark 4, Jesus stops a storm at sea. This is another level. The cosmos moves – even when he's still groggy from a nap. They must be wondering what else he can do. Flummoxed, they gasp out what you and I would ask: "Who is this?! Even the wind and waves obey him!" (4.41) Whatever the disciples have thought of Jesus before, this ups the ante on figuring out just who this guy is.

Of course, all of this raises again the perpetual question of what to do with the miracles in a scientific-age world. As little as science sometimes matters in current American culture, Isaac Newton and his successors have conditioned our sense of what is possible and explainable. To go long on this topic would probably replicate something you've done elsewhere, and we might not get any further. So, we won't spend a whole lot of time with this question, unless you want to go deeper in our Question and Answer time Monday nights.

For now, I give you the reply of Austin Farrer, an Oxford philosophical theologian who hung out with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and the gang. Farrer wrote a meticulous and complex literary interpretation of Mark's use of miracles in the Gospel. He was, of course, approached by many colleagues and students who asked, "Do you really believe the miracles happened?!" He would answer them with words that work for me: "Whether Jesus healed the leper and stilled the storm, I do not know for certain. I only know that God is the only author who can write with history."

### **Three Saves...and Mark's Sense of Humor**

Speaking of miracles...chapter five features three in a row.

On the rapid one-two-three of this chapter, I commend to you David Bartlett's brief but brilliant read through it in the Yale Bible Study. (Find it here: <https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/the-gospel-of-mark/lessons/thou-art-all-compassion-study-guide/>) In our own progress together in this course, we notice that Jesus has fully transitioned back from his foray into the world of words. By the end of Mark 5, he has stopped a storm into a dead calm, thrown out a gnarly demon, healed a mysterious twelve-year blood disease, and raised a twelve-year-old girl.

For my part, I would like to notice the place of humor in this sequence. Woven through these very serious and very holy moments of salvation in 4 and 5 are some awfully funny moments. (I almost called them comic, which they are in a classical Aristotelian sense, because "all's well that ends well" for these three sufferers who get help. But it's not slapstick or stand-up or sit-com comedy, exactly.) For now, I'll feature three bits:

## ***The Snoozing Savior.***

This one is widely recognized in sermons and Sunday school classes, but if we read too straight-faced we can miss it. As the disciples go frantic in the face of a threatening storm, Jesus snores in the stern. He'll chide them for the fear, but we ought not get past this without a chuckle.

- Demons in Pigs. Dr. Bartlett tells beautifully and poignantly the depth of suffering that has surrounded our Gerasene/Gadarene man – “in trouble every which way. He lives among the dead, which makes him both emotionally unhealthy and religiously unclean. He is isolated from everybody else; when they try to lay hold of him he shakes them off. He is isolated from himself: he hurts himself. He’s in the thrall of powers he did not invent and does not understand. Every one of us who reads this passage knows people like that; every one of us knows that some days we are a razor’s edge of sanity away from that disaster ourselves.”

In this poignant context it may feel out of place to notice that Jesus doesn’t simply cast the demon out of our troubled friend. Our narrator would not be satisfied with that. Rather, unlike our earlier evil spirits in chapters 1 and 3, these newly-homeless demons are proactive: they ask to be relocated in a herd of 2,000 pigs. Plenty of space to spread out. Unfortunately for the demons, they’ve quite underestimated their powers of self-destruction, and all the pigs plow into the sea like so many lemmings. If you can’t find a sort of country folk humor in that, you aren’t trying hard enough.

- Jairus Tapping His Watch. You may say that it’s hard to find funny as a twelve-year-old girl’s life is in danger, and you’d be right. I don’t know that this can properly be called humor, but let’s take a look. Jesus gets a visit from the head of the synagogue, who has a household and servants and, one would think, considerable clout in town. We would expect a beeline from their encounter to Jairus’ house. Surely that’s what Jairus expected.

Enter the woman with a hemorrhage, who has not experienced the company of polite society for twelve years, because of her condition. She may have a bit of cash – she’s been seen by doctors – but on the social hierarchy of the town, she’s surely a good lot of rungs beneath Jairus and his family. In fact, she tries to remain unseen. But Jesus detects power leaving him and outs her as the healed one. That could have been the end: healed woman, off to the twelve-year-old. But Jesus abruptly stops the action and brings the twelve-years-alone woman to himself. She was scared enough to tremble and fall at his feet. But once she trusted him, she “told him the whole truth”. (For those scoring at home, that’s 12 years of truth!) What follows must have taken some time. All the while, Jairus quietly frets. He doesn’t usually have to wait.

For whom would this be funny? One of our homeless parishioners at Plymouth Church in Seattle fainted during a Bible study. I rode with him to the emergency room, where he seemed much better, but we needed to wait and see a doc. It took hours – Joseph’s

discomfort didn't rank high enough in the triage – and I pestered nurses and other passersby the whole time. Joseph, on the other hand, was used to waiting. He waited all the time. I wonder, if the mayor of Seattle should have had to wait while Joseph got served, would there have been the slightest chortle from people who knew not the gravity of his circumstance?

I raise these three examples to remind us that Mark has a sense of humor, and so does Jesus. It is entirely too possible for us to slip into a sanctified state that disallows us access. A NT scholar called Dennis Ronald McDonald (the name seems funny, right?) wrote a tome on the Book of Acts called “Profit with Delight” in which he carried a humor-detector through the whole book. We should wish to remember three things:

1. Dr. McDonald wrote his book because he knew what we need to know: ancient storytellers loved to hear their audiences laugh just as much as modern ones do.
2. Jesus and his guys got chastised by the Pharisees for their excessive merriment. (Mark 2.16 and others)
3. H.L. Mencken famously defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

We are offered sheer delight as we hear these stories as artfully crafted, and, when it is full and robust, that delight includes laughter.

### **Final Thoughts**

We've now got a sense of Jesus' teaching and his doing. Anyone hoping to live a faithful life walks the tension between words and deeds. A few minutes here with the way Jesus put those together ought to help us imagine better what that combo might best look like in us.

### **For Next Time**

Four Stories, One Storm, and Three Saves (Mark 4—5)

*Jesus was a master teacher, and he famously used stories (parables) to drive home truth that mattered. But we shouldn't imagine Mark's Jesus as guru at the top of a mountain waiting for inquirers. Immediately after speaking parables to a large crowd in Mark 4, Jesus stills a storm on the Sea of Galilee and then calms storms in three human lives in Mark 5. In this session, we will focus on a Jesus who speaks AND acts.*

Preparation:

- Read the Parable of the Sower (just Mark 4.3-9) carefully and well, as if you've never heard it before. Why do you think Jesus tells that particular story at this point in the action? If you only had these 7 verses, what would you think he is talking about? How does Mark's insider explanation (Mark 4.13-20) line up with your perception of the story?

- Ask the same kind of question for the other three parables. Why does Jesus talk about shining or hiding a lamp, seed that grows unnoticed, and a small seed that becomes a large tree?
- Read Mark 5 and watch how Jesus casts out a demon, heals a woman who has a mysterious hemorrhage, and raises a young girl from death. What do we learn about Jesus through these episodes?