

**“The Secret”**  
Mark 4:1-20

*<sup>1</sup>Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup>And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup>“Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup>And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (ESV)*

Right after Christmas we picked up again in the Book of Mark starting at Mark 3:7. We’re looking at the life of Jesus. Mark is what I like to call the patron saint of those of us with ADHD, and he tends to pivot rather quickly from one thing to another. You hear the word “immediately” over and over in the Book of Mark. This week we see another drastic pivot, and it’s a pivot that you see in all three of the Gospels, the synoptic Gospels at least – Matthew, Mark and Luke. That pivot is that Jesus, all of a sudden it would appear, begins teaching in parables. Not only is He teaching in parables, but from this point on He only teaches in parables. So, something has caused Jesus to switch gears and to not only teach in parables, but to only teach in parables all the way until He gets to the cross.

This week as I was studying for this text, it took me a long time. Those of you who know me well know that I’m big on asking questions. I think most conflict in church could be resolved if people would just ask questions instead of making statements. I believe that when I study, too. When I study the text I probably ask 20 or 30 questions of it. Sometimes the answers come to me and sometimes they don’t. This week as I was studying this text I felt like Will Smith in the movie, “I, Robot.” Will Smith is the detective who’s trying to solve the murder of a scientist, and that scientist has left a holographic image of himself that Will Smith can ask questions of. So he’ll ask, “Did this person do it?” The scientist will say, “You’re asking the wrong question.” He’s a hologram. He can’t interact. He’ll either tell you, “That’s the right question,” or he’ll say, “That’s the wrong question.” Through the whole movie Will Smith is asking the wrong question, and eventually he asks the right question and the crime is solved.

All week long until yesterday afternoon I thought the question that this text was answering was, “Why is it that some people respond to Jesus positively and some people respond to Jesus negatively?” I kept hearing back, “You’re asking the wrong question.” Finally it came to me. The big question that this passage answers is, “Why parables anyhow?” That’s it. Why parables? Why did Jesus teach in parables? The text gives an answer that on one hand seems to move us in one direction but it’s really the exact opposite direction.

We’re going to look at two things this morning. We’re going to look at the purpose of parables and then we’re going to look at the point of this particular parable. The first thing you have to do is define exactly what a parable is. In the whole New Testament, and even in most of the Ancient Near Eastern literature, there’s only one person who taught in parables exclusively. That’s Jesus.

What is a parable? I thought that in order to help you get inside of what a parable is exactly, I would actually tell you my own parable. Picture in your mind if you will a very gracious, loving, humble, handsome pastor who had three lovely daughters. One day that pastor went to take a shower. Just as he turned on the water, one of the daughters turned the shower on in the other bathroom across the house. At the same time another daughter decided to start a load of laundry, and at the very same moment another daughter decides to start the dishwasher. Great was his wrath in that day. You understand what a parable is now. First of all, a parable almost always involves the person telling it, usually as the object of it. The question you have to ask yourself is, “How are they the object of it?” You probably figured out when I said “handsome” and “pastor” together that it was me! But also every parable has an insider dimension and an outsider dimension. The outsiders: if you’re not in my family and you hear that parable you can identify with it. You laugh about it and think, “Oh, that’s happened to me.” You have some sort of connection. But if you’re in my family and you hear that parable you don’t laugh as much, maybe, because you know when he says, “Great was his wrath in that day,” that means something. Insiders and outsiders look at the same story a little bit differently, sometimes a lot differently. So, a parable is a story usually about the person telling it that points to some greater truth. People on the outside, if nothing else, are sort of drawn in and they can connect with it. But for people on the inside, it actually means something deeper.

Why parables? What’s the purpose of parables? To answer the question you have to look at the context of chapter 4. Of course the context of chapter 4 here is chapter 3. We looked at the purpose last week. Basically, Jesus interacted with two groups of people. You had his family and you have the scribes and Pharisees. Mark makes a sandwich. He starts talking about Jesus’ family and then there’s an interruption with the scribes, and then we go back to Jesus’ family. Jesus’ family thinks He’s crazy. Jesus’ family thinks He’s off his rocker and they come to seize Him and stop His ministry. On the other

hand, the scribes think Jesus (they say at least) is possessed by a demon and that He casts out Satan by Satan. Jesus warned them about being guilty of the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees and the Scribes were guilty of being hard of heart. Not only did they not believe in Jesus but they were proactively out to not believe in Him, if that makes sense. You can be forgiven for believing in the wrong things about Jesus. Maybe you think He's not as faithful as He really is. That's one thing. It's another thing to say that Jesus is something completely different from what He is. They proactively sought to not believe in Jesus, and their hearts were hard. So how do you teach people? How do you reach out and grasp people who on one hand think you're just nuts, and on the other hand just hate you and think you're possessed by a demon, and they will do everything they can to not believe in you. Up to this point in the Gospels Jesus has been teaching them, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, literally teaching them about the law with the Sermon on the Mount, for example. He says, "You've heard it said not to commit adultery, but I say . . ." "You've heard it said not to commit murder, but I say . . ." He's just teaching the law like any other rabbi would do, but there is something that makes Him turn a corner and say, "I'm not going to teach them plainly anymore. I'm not just going to tell them 'You've heard it said but I say . . .' As of right now I'm going to teach only in parables." Verse 34 in Mark chapter 4 says that. What is it that makes Him do that? The answer I think is actually pretty simple. How do you reach people who won't listen to the truth anymore? How do you reach people who are completely and utterly hard, and whenever you start talking about religious things or spiritual things they immediately shut down or become aggressive or become hostile? The answer, of course, is parables. You can argue with Jesus' interpretation of Deuteronomy chapter 6 but you can't argue with a parable. It's just a story. You can argue with Jesus' interpretation of what He says about the Book of Numbers and how He says the Mosaic Law should be interpreted. But it's extremely difficult to argue with a parable, because if you argue with a parable you come out looking like an idiot because it's just a story. So why is Jesus telling parables now? It's because He's reached a point in His ministry where people's hearts are hard. The insiders certainly believe, but how do you reach those on the outside? You've got to use a different strategy, and that's what Jesus does, by beginning to tell parables. The first parable He tells in all three Gospels is this parable, the Parable of the Sower. Jesus said, "If you don't understand this parable how can you understand any parable. When Jesus is talking to His disciples you get the feeling that He sighs a lot. They ask Him, "What's that mean?" And He goes, "Ohhhhhhh. If you can't understand this parable you can't understand anything. You don't get it." I'm not going to explain this parable right this minute; we're going to do it later. I'm going to do what Jesus did. I'm going to tell you the parable, and then I'm going to tell you the reason, and then we're going to explain it because Mark does the same thing here that he does in chapter 3. He makes a sandwich, and he sandwiches his explanation of "why parables" in between the parable and the explanation. There are a few things I want you to notice about this parable before we go on to the explanation. Let me read it to you.

<sup>3</sup> *"Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup> And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."* <sup>9</sup> *And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (ESV)*

The first thing I want you to notice about that parable, and just file it away for later, is how Jesus begins the parable and how He ends the parable. He begins the parable by first saying, "Listen," and He ends the parable by saying, "He who has ears, let him hear." That's not something you would say if you expect people to listen. If someone is so hard of heart that you think there's no chance of reaching them, you don't say, "Listen," you say, "Scram." Jesus opens His parable by saying, "Listen" and He ends the parable functionally by saying, "Listen." The other thing that's not easy to notice in the English translation here, and you can understand why, is that the word "seed" in English is a funny word. The plural for "seed" is "seeds." In English it makes it awkward to translate because in the first three soils that you see here the word "seed" there is actually singular. That's important for what comes later. He said, "some seed" or "a seed" fell on the path. Birds came and snatched it away. "A seed" (one) fell in rocky soil and it withered because it didn't have any root – nowhere to go. "A seed" (the third one) fell among the thorns and even though it sprouted eventually it was choked out and it produced no grain. It's interesting: when He gets to the good soils, all of a sudden it's plural. He said, "Now some seeds fell on good soil and they produced a crop that was thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold." That is important because, among other things, oftentimes when you hear this parable preached you're left with a very pessimistic view of the kingdom of God, are you not? The sower is going along and scattering seed everywhere and some falls on the path, some falls on rocky soil, some falls on good soil, and some among thorns. But of all the seed that is sown, only a quarter can count on anything happening with it. Yeah, it's going to produce a lot, but most of the seed that is cast out is wasted. But that's not what it says when you look at the tenses of whether these things are plural or not. The seeds that fell in good soil are just as many as the seeds that fell in bad soil. Three seeds fell on bad soil and produced nothing. Three seeds, at least one-half of the seed fell in good soil and produced these incredible amounts of produce. Thirtyfold would have been a good harvest in those days. When they say thirtyfold that means it's thirty times the amount of grain they sowed, so if they sowed one grain, they got thirty grains in return for it. A hundredfold would have been unheard of. And Jesus said, "The harvest will be a hundredfold." Then Mark changes gears on us again. If you notice, he not only changes gears but he's in a different place geographically. That's how you know it's a sandwich. He's not out in the boat anymore. It's some other time and His disciples ask Him about these parables. Let me read to you verses 10 through 12.

<sup>10</sup> And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." (ESV)

This is one of the most controversial (it often is) passages in the whole New Testament. As you read this it almost seems that Jesus, although His whole ministry is reaching out to sinners, is suddenly saying, "The reason I'm telling you parables is to keep people out." Does it sound like that? His disciples ask, "What's the deal with the parables?" and the first thing He says is, "To you" (His disciples) "those who believe in Me have been given the secret of the kingdom of God." The first thing you realize is He says the "secret" has been given you. Not a clue or a mystery for you to figure out, but the secret. The reason the word "secret" is important here in the translation is because a secret must be revealed. You can figure out a mystery. You can figure out things for which you need clues but you can't figure out a secret. You either know a secret or you don't know it. If I know a secret and you don't, the only way you're going to get it is if I reveal it to you. So Jesus says to His disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God." What is the secret of the kingdom of God? Jesus would imply to them, "It's sitting right in front of you that God sent His only Son to bring the kingdom in." The secret of the kingdom of God is that the king is here. "I don't look like it, don't smell like it, but trust me, I'm the One. The reason you're disciples is because your eyes have been opened to that fact. You know that even though I look on the outside like an out-of-work carpenter, you know who I really am. It has been revealed to you. To those outside, tough." Is that consistent with Jesus' ministry? "To those outside, who cares? In fact, to those outside, I'm going to tell them stories that are just going to confuse them so that it will make them less likely to come into the kingdom of God." Does that sound likely? Does that sound like something Jesus would say? I hope you're sitting there going, "Absolutely not." This is one of those places where you need to interpret the Bible with the Bible. Since all three of the Gospels, the synoptic Gospels at least, have this account and they're obviously talking about the same event it's helpful to look at Matthew to understand why Jesus said that. When you look at Mark it seems pretty stark. Mark says that Jesus said, "To those outside everything is in parables so that they may see but not perceive and may hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." In Mark, it sounds like the reason He's doing the parables is to keep people from seeing and understanding. Matthew says something a little different. If you look at the three Gospels, Luke's account of this parable is the shortest. Mark's is the second shortest of the parables. But Matthew has a full exposition of this parable and the events. In a sense, Mark is just giving us shorthand. He's referring us to the verse that Jesus mentioned, but He's not really giving us an explanation of what Jesus means. For that you really need to look at Matthew 13. It's the same context in verse 10.

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup> For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

<sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*"You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.*

*<sup>15</sup> 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.' (ESV)*

Jesus says to His disciples about people outside, "Seeing they don't see, and hearing they don't hear." As I read this, it reminded me of "The Far Side" cartoon where the caption says, "What you say versus what your dog hears." Coming out of your mouth is, "Good boy. Good boy. Come here, rover." And what your dog hears is, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Jesus is saying for those outside whose hearts are so hard and hardened to the Gospel, "Seeing they don't see and hearing they don't hear. What I say is 'Put your trust in me that I am the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' and what they hear is, 'Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. I don't teach in parables in order to bar them from the kingdom or make it harder, I teach in parables in order to draw them in." The parables are a window into the very truth of God. None of the parables, by the way, are rocket science. Every farmer would have understood the parable of the sower and might have been yawning. "Tell me something I don't know, Jesus." Then when he gets to the end where he says, "The crop will be one hundredfold," that would have gotten their attention. Think of Luke chapter 15. The Pharisees are upset because Jesus hangs out with tax collectors and sinners and Jesus says, "Let me tell you a parable. There's a man who lost a sheep; he left everything to go pursue that sheep." And they'd go, "Uh huh. That makes sense. Who wouldn't do that?" "There's a woman who lost a coin in her house; she cleaned up the whole house to find that coin." And they were going, "Well, of course. Who wouldn't do that?" Then there was this son who left his father, took the whole inheritance, and spent it all on debauched living and when the son came back the father ran out to meet him and embraced him." "Who wouldn't do that?" He would have had them by then. It's like when people read the "Chronicles of Narnia." People often ask me, "I have a friend at work who's not religious. What should I do to introduce him to the Gospel?" They're always surprised when I say, "Give them 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.'" They expect something, I guess, a little more academic. Why "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe"? Because much like a parable, if you don't understand the Gospel, if you've

never heard it before you begin reading this book and by the middle of the story you're completely sucked into the story before you realize that Aslan is something more than Aslan, he's something more than a lion, that he in fact is this guy named Jesus. Once you are sucked in then you can now see things for the way they really are. So the parables are given to help draw people in. Jesus uses parables, by the way, for the same reason that people use sermon illustrations today and movie illustrations. Sometimes people whom you know won't listen say, "Don't talk to me about the Bible." When I was at Lilly they'd say, "I don't want to hear anything about the Bible stuff." I'd say, "Cool. Did you cry when Old Yeller died?" "Of course I did. Who wouldn't cry when Old Yeller died?" You're off to the races because people can't argue with a story. Every movie that you see cannot help but try to tell the story of the hero who dies or it looks like he dies, and he comes back from the dead. Everyone's complaining about "Avatar." I'm going to spoil the movie for you, but the hero dies and comes back from the dead.

So what's the purpose of this particular parable? I think the answer is two-fold. Jesus says, "If you don't understand this one you can't get any of them." One, if you can't understand this one you can't understand any of them because this particular one is so easy. I think Jesus at some level is saying, "Guys, this is the easiest parable I'm ever going to tell. Right now." I feel like I don't even need to preach about the soils here because you know them, right?

*<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." (ESV)*

If you've been in church at all, do I need to explain that to you? It's pretty simple, is it not? We all know people who have heard the Gospel and they have outright rejected it – didn't bear any fruit. We know people who have immediately received it with joy and then within months it seems like they're completely gone because of the cares of this world. Most people in this room, I'm guessing, sort of straddle number three and number four, do we not? Some seed fell among the thorns and the deceitfulness of wealth and the cares of this world choked it out and they produced no fruit. But some seed fell on good soil and that seed produced thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

You can think through it, "Where do I sit in that?" But I think there's something more important here in the context of the whole thing. It's the end. The thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold – this incredible ending that no one expected, that no one would believe. What is Jesus saying in this particular parable? The context is people accusing Him and people plotting to put Him to death, and His family saying, "This guy is crazy. Let us get Him out of your hair." What is Jesus telling His disciples? "In the end we win." We can talk all day about whether this guy fell away or that guy fell away, but at the end of the ages the kingdom of God wins. At the end of the age the kingdom of God is going to be the biggest thing that anyone has ever seen, in fact it is going to encompass all things. The reason that this parable is so important is because like every parable it points to the most important parable, and that of course is this living parable who's right in front of them. Jesus Himself is the incarnation of a parable because if the purpose of a parable is to enable you to enter in without being threatened, if the purpose of the parable is to enable you to identify, and then as you identify to him investigate a little bit more, think about the person of Jesus. If you're a tax collector, sinner, prostitute or someone like me, who would seem more approachable to you? Someone who had come in majesty, in glory and on a throne, or an out-of-work carpenter? For me it's the out-of-work carpenter.

Many of you would find this hard to believe but I don't dress as nicely on the weekends as I do on Sunday mornings. I love being in the woodworking store when someone calls "Hey, Pastor Tom!" One of my greatest joys in life is to see other people in the store look over so surprised. "Yep, it's true. Got a business card, too." Why do I do that? Because people are so worried about what pastors think about them, I love that they don't discover that I'm a pastor until after they've already let out a string of cuss words. Now we can talk. I know who you are. You know who I am now. It's the same with Jesus. Jesus as a living parable pursued us. Jesus comes and God has given His Son in the person of Jesus so that we can identify with Him – so that we can actually understand. If you're not a Christian and you want to know what God is like, here is this man Jesus Who says, "Come check me out. Ask questions of me. Investigate me because the deeper you get in, the more you realize that all of that majesty and all of that glory is there, but you have to be inside not outside." The question you have to ask yourself is, "Where am I? Am I inside? Do I know Jesus? Have I trusted Him? Do I see His glory and His grace? Do I see what he has done for me on the cross or am I still on the outside? Do I still hear a lot of the 'Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'?" That's for you to figure out. That's for the Spirit to work in you. Think about that this week.