Mark 4:1-20 Parable of the Sower and the Secret of the Kingdom

[Youth: what’s questionable about this passage? Any critical thinking/skeptical questions?]

We looked last week at how Jesus “began to speak in parables” in Mark chapter 3. By this time, early in Jesus’ ministry, was he getting invited to appear on Oprah, or provide a half-time show for the Superbowl? No, actually, the Pharisees were plotting with the Herodians about how to kill him, the impure spirits were leaking his identity as the Son of God, his own family was trying to take charge of him, thinking he was out of his mind, and the lawyers from the nation’s capital were asserting that he was colluding for the enemy. So even though his rallies were well attended, the internet trolls were posting fake news about him all over Racebook and Splitter.

So how can Jesus get his message out to the people who wanted to hear it? This passage is notably about the **Parable of the Sower**, but I believe I should focus on the **Secret of the Kingdom**, and try to understand how God communicates to us, and helps us to obtain helpful information for the flourishing of humanity, and ultimately for his glory.

Let’s pray: *Father in heaven, thank you for sending Jesus, the Logos, the Word, the Wisdom of the ages, your communication to us. Please give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and minds to perceive; help us to be receptive so that we actually turn from evil ways, to be forgiven and brought to a loving relationship with You.*

**Part 1: Preaching from the boat**

How did it help Jesus address a huge crowd by speaking from a boat out on the water? I can think of 3 ways: First, he may have been in a cove of the lake shore, so the people were arranged in a semi-circle around his boat. Second, there may have been steep banks along the shore, so the people behind could hear him if he had some distance from the front row. Finally, he could use the natural acoustics of sound traveling over water… [see slides of acoustics]

**Part 2: Telling the Parable**

I’m sure you’re all familiar with the parable of the sower. I believe God provided all three gospel accounts for a purpose, and if we dig a little into the data, we will get a better picture.

[See slide of Mark 4. Youth: what’s questionable about this passage? Can you use some critical thinking to pose questions a skeptic might ask? …

See slides of Matt 13, Luke 8]

I’m particularly interested in what we can learn here about the human mind, about reason vs. revelation, about deductions from evidence vs. subjective faith -- partly because I find myself in a great adventure with Gemechu, who is studying neurology at Wash U, along with a few Bible topics at UBF. I have this idea that God provided us with the Scientific Revolution, fostered with the Greek culture of reason, and fueled by the publication of the Bible in Europe: people can learn from the Bible to test each hypothesis by looking at evidence and data that is accessible to everyone. Is that correct?

By examining my assumptions against scripture such as Mark 4:11-12, I find it’s not as simple as I imagined, so I need to think about this more deeply.

I believe this is a “meta” parable, a parable of parables, since Jesus is actually explaining what he is doing while he is doing it. If you had never heard of a microphone or speaker, and I told you a parable about how a microphone and speaker work, do you suppose it might help if I told it while using a microphone and speaker?

**Part 3: Why are there secrets to “those on the outside”?**

Jesus’ parable has some pretty clear meaning at a surface level, but it has some deeper things to teach me, which I would have totally missed if the disciples hadn’t asked Jesus to explain it. Let’s dive right into a troubling passage, where Jesus starts his explanation by quoting from Isaiah, in **Mark 4:11-12**:

*He told them, “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!’*” [from Isaiah 6:9,10]

Is Jesus saying that he doesn’t want people to know about God, or to turn and be forgiven?! That would not be consistent with what we know about Jesus; for instance, Peter tells us

*The Lord is ... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*. [**2 Peter 3:9**]

If we unpack this a bit, starting from the end of v12, we see:

* The people on the outside need to be **forgiven**; we start off in a state of rebellion, heading in the wrong direction, away from God, so we need to **turn** and head in a new direction.
* Even though Jesus can do miracles, we can’t normally do miracles; he’s probably demonstrating to us some tactics that he mentions in the sermon on the mount: “*Don’t give dogs what is holy; don’t throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.*”
* Even though the demons in chapter 3 accurately said he was the Son of God, Jesus suppressed this proclamation, because it was clearly not the right way to present this news to humanity.
* Isaiah’s prophecy was consistent with what we find in Romans 1 and John 1. [see Rom 1 slide] Initially the truth is accessible, but it becomes less accessible when we suppress it by our wickedness, when we exchange the truth for a lie, when we discard the knowledge of God.

***Rom 1:18*** *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* ***19*** *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ***20*** *For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

***21*** *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* ***22*** *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools* ***..****.*

***25*** *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie...*

***28*** *Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.*

**John 1** seems to say similar things to what we just saw in Romans 1:

***1*** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ***2*** *He was with God in the beginning.* ***3*** *Through him all things were made; ...* ***4*** *In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.* ***5*** *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it. ...*

***9*** *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.* ***10*** *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.* ***11*** *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* ***12*** *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he* ***gave*** *the right to become children of God—* ***13*** *children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*

***14*** *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

***...16*** *Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.* ***17*** *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* ***18*** *No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known*.

Is it fair to say that this “gift” -- the right to become children of God in v**12** -- is similar to the gift of the secret of the kingdom of God that Jesus mentions in **Mark 4:11**?

Since Jesus told us that “the farmer sows the word”, we can probably interpret this as God sending Jesus as the **Word** to us, and we are the soil. I think that’s a good place to start, but I recommend a broader interpretation, since the word of God comes through other people carrying the message, and since we are called to be fruitful in character (not just repeating the message), so God’s message shines through our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Let’s look at how Matthew recounts this explanation in chapter 13 [slide]:

*Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables:*

*“Though seeing, they do not see;*

*though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

*In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:*

*“‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding;*

*you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

*For this people’s heart has become calloused;*

*they hardly hear with their ears,*

*and they have closed their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*

*hear with their ears,*

*understand with their hearts*

*and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.* [**Mt 13:12-17**]

This shows me that Jesus is talking about privileged information, which only certain people are authorized to know. We encounter this concept in many places:

* You have to pay for the subscription before you are allowed to read certain magazine articles. You have contributed money to support those who write and publish the information.
* You have to register for a course in college before you are given access to the course content; sometimes if you only audit a course, you have no commitment to learning the content, and the professor’s material will be poorly understood, and perhaps his work will be misrepresented.
* In Kuk Sool Won, you are only taught the advanced techniques of the martial art after you have mastered the foundational techniques; otherwise you would apply them poorly, and may risk injuring yourself and others unintentionally.
* In major corporations, only privileged executives are given access to certain trade secrets or marketing plans; others might use the information to buy or sell shares for their own benefit, while undermining every other shareholder’s investment in the corporation.
* When I learned to present the gospel on campus at Dartmouth College, we were instructed to explain the bad news before we explain the good news. Then, we ask the listeners if they can think of any way to resolve the problem of humanity’s sin before a perfect, holy God. If people express no curiosity, or think they already know the answer, then they have little motivation to hear the gospel. But, if they have some genuine curiosity and concern for the severe danger their souls face, then it is profitable for them to hear what Jesus has done. Otherwise, his death on the cross sounds meaningless and odd.

Paul told Timothy to “*gently instruct opponents, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth*” [**2 Tim 2:25**] -- implying that the truth isn’t always evident before we submit our hearts and conduct to God.

Paul explained to the Colossians about the commission God gave him to present the word of God in its fullness—

"*the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" [**Col 1:26-27**]

Ultimately, our path to truth is entirely dependent on God. As our Creator, he wired us to learn through a long period of childhood, and this learning is greatly shaped by the type of bond we have to our parents. We are also wired to connect to God himself, and our relationship with him will in some way affect how we acquire knowledge and understanding. [Prov 1 slide]

*1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:*

*2 for gaining wisdom and instruction;*

*for understanding words of insight;*

*3 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,*

*doing what is right and just and fair;*

*4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,*

*knowledge and discretion to the young—*

*5 let the wise listen and add to their learning,*

*and let the discerning get guidance—*

*6 for understanding proverbs and parables,*

*the sayings and riddles of the wise.*

*7* ***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge****,*

*but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

*8 Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction*

*and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.* [**Prov 1**]

So what have I learned about testing each hypothesis with evidence and data? My head is not simply a repository to accumulate knowledge. Gemechu pointed out that we are encouraged to believe using personal faith. We tend to put our faith and confidence in people, based on good relationships. If I **trust** my professor, I will pursue the good data that he recommends. If I trust the internet trolls, I will pursue fake news and conspiracy theories. We are wired with hearts that should help our minds find reliable data.

**Part 4: How Jesus explains the parable**

How does Jesus explain seed along the path? What do those birds represent? As in **Rev 18:2**, they represent demons, the spiritual enemy, lurking to steal the word sown into people. These birds don’t fit into my model of scientific inquiry, but they remind me of what we saw in Mark 3 last week: Jesus gave his disciples authority to drive out demons. I tend to forget all about this reality, as I ponder the laws of physics that govern this life. People in general have a much better chance of understanding if they stay away from the occult, and Jesus’ followers in particular need to be on guard for spiritual attacks, and pray for his power to prevail over such enemy forces.

How does Jesus explain the shallow soil? Clearly people need commitment and perseverance to follow through on what they’ve learned. Good soil supports deep roots -- so we all need an environment where we’re fortified to withstand adversity. To quote an eminent theologian of Minnesota [named Ben]:

Deep roots represent strong commitment to Christ and his mission. Consider, "How much heat could I handle for Jesus?" The question has become very relevant for believers in Afghanistan, and it may become relevant for American believers before too long if vaccine passports become climate passports then “woke” passports... Another way to conceptualize rocky soil might be the depth of one's personal relationship with Christ—can you find strength in him and his word even when other things you used to rely on for strength or refreshment or identity are removed?

I lost my job last month, and found it quite distressing; but it helped me learn to trust God under a little pressure. I hope I can trust him under a lot more pressure.

How does Jesus explain the thorns? Three influences press in on us -- #1: Deceitfulness of wealth: Ads may tell us we’d be happier with a nicer car, for instance -- not so true. #2: Worries of “this” life. There’s actually a far better life awaiting us, so I don’t want temporary troubles to prevent me from bearing fruit. #3: Desires for “other things”. Anybody here ever desire other things? We can pray for God to show us what things we need weeded out.

The gospel accounts together describe how Jesus completes his explanation of this parable:

“*The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word and understand it, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop, a hundred times what was sown.*”

How do we obtain such a noble and good heart? I suggest the answer is in God’s loving heart toward us. He is the one who takes hearts of stone and turns them into hearts of flesh, whose Holy Spirit pours love into our hearts. If we want eyes that see and perceive reality, I suggest we ask him in worship, “Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart!”

May God grant each of us a noble and good heart, to hear the word, understand it, retain it, and persevere to produce a crop, yielding a hundred times what was sown.