

LESSON THREE

TITLE The Servant, the Crowds, and the Kingdom

SCRIPTURE Mark 3:13–4:34

MEMORY VERSE

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

MAIN IDEA OF TEXT

Jesus uses parables and power to show that he is king.

BEGIN this time in prayer, confessing any sins you know of, thanking the Lord for the gift of his Word, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide your study.

1 GRAB THEIR ATTENTION

TEACHER TIP

Start your lesson by telling a story that relates to the main idea of the lesson to grab the attention of your participants. In this section, we have provided you with two options, but feel free to develop your own.

OPTION 1: THE GIVING TREE BY SHEL SILVERSTEIN

Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* continues to be one of the most read and cherished children's books of all time. The story revolves around the relationship between one tree and a boy growing up.

[Read the book's text below OR play the audio from the clip of author and speaker Brennan Manning telling the story.]

*Once there was a tree...
and she loved a little boy.
And every day the boy would come
and he would gather her leaves
and make them into crowns
and play king of the forest.
He would climb up her trunk
and swing from her branches
and eat apples.*

*And they would play hide-and-go-seek.
And when he was tired,
he would sleep in her shade.
And the boy loved the tree...
very much.
And the tree was happy.*

*But time went by.
And the boy grew older.
And the tree was often alone.
Then one day the boy came to the tree
and the tree said, "Come, Boy, come and
climb up my trunk and swing from my
branches and eat apples and play in my
shade and be happy."
"I am too big to climb and play," said
the boy.
"I want to buy things and have fun.
I want some money?"
"I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I
have no money.
I have only leaves and apples.
Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in
the city. Then you will have money and
you will be happy."
And so the boy climbed up the
tree and gathered her apples
and carried them away.
And the tree was happy.*

*But the boy stayed away for a long time...
and the tree was sad.*

And then one day the boy came back
and the tree shook with joy
and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk
and swing from my branches and be happy."
"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy.
"I want a house to keep me warm," he said.
"I want a wife and I want children,
and so I need a house.
Can you give me a house?"
"I have no house," said the tree.
"The forest is my house,
but you may cut off
my branches and build a
house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches
and carried them away
to build his house.
And the tree was happy.
But the boy stayed away for a long time.
And when he came back,
the tree was so happy
she could hardly speak.
"Come, Boy," she whispered,
"come and play."
"I am too old and sad to play,"
said the boy.
"I want a boat that will
take me far away from here.
Can you give me a boat?"
"Cut down my trunk
and make a boat," said the tree.
"Then you can sail away...
and be happy."
And so the boy cut down her trunk
and made a boat and sailed away.
And the tree was happy
... but not really.

And after a long time
the boy came back again.
"I am sorry, Boy,"
said the tree, "but I have nothing
left to give you -
My apples are gone."
"My teeth are too weak
for apples," said the boy.
"My branches are gone,"
said the tree. "You cannot swing on them."
"I am too old to swing
on branches," said the boy.
"My trunk is gone," said the tree.
"You cannot climb..."
"I am too tired to climb," said the boy.
"I am sorry," sighed the tree.
"I wish that I could give you something...
but I have nothing left."

*I am just an old stump.
I am sorry..."*
*"I don't need very much now," said the boy.
"Just a quiet place to sit and rest.
I am very tired."*
*"Well," said the tree, straightening
herself up as much as she could,
"Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting
Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest."
And the boy did.
And the tree was happy.*

(Audio clip of Brennan Manning telling the story of *The Giving Tree*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kmyRYwddDs>)

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *What does this story tell you about the character of the tree? How does the tree's character relate to God's character and his relationship with us?*
2. *Recall a time when someone gave sacrificially or acted in a sacrificial way to help or care for you.*
3. *In what ways would you like to model the sacrificial love found in this story in your own life?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Stories are in our DNA and there is nothing that can help us grasp truth quite like a story. *The Giving Tree* helps us see the depths of sacrificial, Christ-like love and what it is capable of.

Jesus often taught in parables to help others grasp spiritual truth and what it means to follow him and live in God's kingdom, which is what we are going to talk about this week in our discussion about Mark's gospel.

OPTION 2: "PARABLE OF THE CHINESE FARMER" BY TOM BRADY

The documentary *Man in the Arena* chronicles pro football quarterback Tom Brady's ten championship game seasons. In each episode Brady and a number of influential teammates, coaches and family members give insight into the quarterback's career and the challenges he faced and the triumphs he was able to accomplish on the gridiron and in his life.

In one pivotal episode Brady recalls the parable about a Chinese farmer—a story that inspired him later in his football career.

[Read the excerpt from the documentary of Brady telling the story or play the video of Alan Watts telling the story from the link below.]

There's a man in a village and he had a horse and the horse ran away and all the people of the village came to him and said, "We're so sorry. We can't believe your horse ran away." His comment back was, "Well, maybe." The next day the horse that had run away returned and along

with that horse that returned he brought ten other horses with him. And all the people of the village came to the farmer and said, "Oh, this is unbelievable. You should be so happy. You lost one horse now you have a lot of horses." And he said, "Well, maybe." The farmer had a son and when they were taming these wild horses the son was riding one of these new wild horses they got and he got bucked off the horse and breaks his leg. All the people of the village come to the farmer and say, "Oh, I'm sorry that your son broke his leg." And the farmer said, "Well, maybe." The next day there was a war and they were coming to draft the young men and they come to the farmer's house and he can't go to war because he's got an injury. All the people of the village said, "Oh, what a blessing because he doesn't have to go off to war," and the father said, "Maybe."

The point [of the story is] we don't have the perspective of what's going to happen in the future. We don't understand whether what happens in our life is good or bad. We just have to understand that there are a lot of things at work and what we think is good may not be good and what we think is bad may not be bad because the future will tell whether the history of the past is good or bad.

When I reflect back on things that happened in previous years maybe I would not have appreciated where we were at had I not been through what I had been through the previous year. As difficult as it was, to go to the Super Bowl, to have a challenging year and lose, that experience gave me more perspective on the moment I was in. And I enjoyed that year, and I enjoyed those relationships and I enjoyed the opportunity to compete again in the Super Bowl. Maybe that's not the best thing that could have happened but that's the way life is.

(Play clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4TZMxkxySc> (fade in at 0:08 and fading out at 1:15) If you have access to ESPN+ the clip of Tom Brady telling the story is at the beginning of Episode 9 titled 'Maybe.')

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *What is the essential truth of this parable in your own words?*
2. *Based on this parable, how might a change in perspective help you see your current circumstances differently?*
3. *What is one way God is challenging you to see your life from his perspective right now?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Stories are in our DNA and there is nothing that can help us grasp truth quite like a story. The Parable of the Chinese Farmer illustrates important truths about the way life works and we would be wise to learn from these truths and apply them.

Jesus often taught in parables to help others grasp spiritual truth and what it means to follow him and live in God's kingdom, which is what we are going to talk about this week in our discussion about Mark's gospel.

2

SET THE STAGE

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find the historical, cultural, and literary context you need to properly interpret and apply the text.

OUTLINE

1. Jesus Appoints His Disciples (3:13-19)
 - A. Jesus sends out twelve of his disciples with authority to preach and drive out demons (vv. 13-14)
 - B. The disciples sent are named (vv. 15-19)
2. Jesus Responds to His Family and the Crowd's Misunderstanding (3:20-35)
 - A. Jesus' family and the religious leaders think Jesus is crazy and blasphemous (vv. 20-22)
 - B. Jesus responds to accusations against him through parables (vv. 23-30)
 - i. Parable of a Divided House (vv. 23-26)
 - ii. Parable of the Strong Man (vv. 27-30)
 - C. Jesus proclaims a new kind of family in God's kingdom (vv. 31-35)
3. The Parable of the Sower (4:1-20)
 - A. Jesus tells the parable (vv. 1-9)
 - B. Jesus says why he teaches in parables (vv. 10-12)
 - C. Jesus explains the parable to his disciples (vv. 13-20)
4. A Lamp on a Stand (4:21-25)
 - A. Jesus encourages his disciples to let their light shine (vv. 21-23)
 - B. Jesus explains how receiving his teaching will result in blessing and fruitfulness (vv. 24-25)
5. The Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29)
 - A. Jesus tells a parable about a farmer scattering seed (vv. 26-27)
 - B. Jesus explains that the kingdom of God is like the seed being scattered and producing a harvest on its own (vv. 28-29)
6. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-34)
 - A. Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a mustard seed, which is small but becomes one of the largest plants (vv. 30-32)
 - B. Mark recalls how Jesus taught in parables to help others understand his message (vv. 33-34)

CONTEXT

Jesus has demonstrated God-given authority to teach, heal and drive out demons early in his ministry. This authority has amazed others but has also caught the attention of the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders in Jesus' day, who are plotting against him.

FALLEN CONDITION FOCUS

We want to figure everything out and organize our lives into nice categories. We fail to understand the truth Jesus proclaims to us, often through parables.

GOSPEL RESPONSE

Jesus's parables and ministry challenge our attitude and ways of thinking. They break through to help us understand spiritual truth, our fallen condition and our need for God's grace and mercy.

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find exercises you can use to lead your class through the process of Observation, Interpretation, and Application. As the teacher, work through all the exercises below to ensure you gain a good understanding of the text.

The earthly ministry of Jesus was filled with spectacular displays of Jesus' authority over the natural and supernatural world. We saw that authority through his teaching, healing and ability to cast out demons. However, the most important aspect of Jesus' ministry was his teaching, which helped others understand their fallen condition and need for God's grace and mercy.

As a master teacher, Jesus often taught in parables, which were simple and short stories and images used to illustrate a spiritual lesson. Parables were relatable to an audience that was not well-educated and well-versed in theology. In this section of Mark's gospel, we see how Jesus used parables to teach others about God's kingdom and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Jesus' parables displayed the wisdom of Jesus, King over God's kingdom, and how he came to show others what a real relationship with God looks like. Time and time again Jesus challenged people's attitudes and ways of thinking with ideas and concepts that revealed God's truth in powerful ways. Some understood what Jesus taught and accepted it while others could not understand it and rejected Jesus.

13 And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons. 16 He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

20 Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

28 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— 30 for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

31 And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. 32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." 33 And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

4 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. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 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. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

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."

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 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. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 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. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 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. 20 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."

21 And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be

measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 25 For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

26 And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

30 And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. 34 He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

OBSERVATION: WHAT DOES IT SAY?

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 1: IDENTIFYING KEY THEMES

Read the passage and write down what you think are the key themes in the passage as single words or short phrases. Remember that identifying key themes at the beginning of your study will help you develop a good overall grasp of the passage.

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 2: ASKING QUESTIONS OF THE TEXT

Ask and write down important questions from the text like:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- How?

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 3: PARALLEL PASSAGES

Read Matthew 13:1–46 where Matthew records some of Jesus’ parables about the kingdom of God. What is similar to Mark’s account? What is different?

INTERPRETATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 1: IDENTIFYING KEY THEMES

Refer back to what you wrote down as key themes in the passage.

How do these themes help you understand Jesus' parables and the truths of God he taught through them?

How do the themes develop through the different parables?

How do these themes connect to the larger teaching of Jesus that we have seen?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 2: ANSWERING QUESTIONS OF THE TEXT

In the previous section, you made a list of the questions you had concerning this text. Take some time to find the answers to your questions and answer the big 'Why?' question. Why is everything happening? What might be God's purposes behind the events that unfold in this passage?

When you answer the questions, reflect on your answers and what they have to say about Jesus' ministry and his teaching through parables.

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 3: PARALLEL PASSAGES

Based on your reading of both Matthew and Mark's accounts of Jesus teaching in parables, what do both authors reveal about the truths of God's kingdom?

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find questions to choose from that will help your group consider how God is calling them to respond to the text. Help your group set measurable action steps.

APPLICATION: HOW DO I RESPOND?

QUESTION 1: Jesus appointed and sent out the twelve to do ministry in his authority. Where in your life do you have opportunities to minister to others? How might you access Jesus' authority in those opportunities?

QUESTION 2: Your ultimate allegiance and strongest family ties are to Christ and the body of believers that make up the Church. How does understanding this truth shape the way you interact with those closest to you, including your biological family?

QUESTION 3: What changes could you make to ensure that God's truth for your life falls on good soil and bears fruit?

QUESTION 4: Where in your life are there opportunities for you to let your light shine before others?

QUESTION 5: Where do you currently see God at work for his kingdom purposes through bearing fruit in your life and in the lives of others?

4

CHALLENGE

TEACHER TIP

End your time of study with one final challenge and prayer. Your final challenge should pull together everything you covered in this lesson and call your participants to action.

The truth of God's Word spoken through Jesus' parables continue to challenge us today. Through his parables Jesus challenges us to consider what it really means to follow him and live for God's kingdom. Just as he did in his earthly ministry, Jesus gives us a choice: to accept him and his teaching or reject him and his teaching. Jesus does not force us to accept him and his teaching but gives us the opportunity to receive what he says and live by his ways. When we acknowledge his authority and live by his ways, we experience spiritual fruit and blessings.

You and I are daily presented with a choice to follow Jesus' teaching and his ways or choose to follow another teaching or think our way is the best. Naturally, we are inclined to think we can figure our lives out and can organize everything into nice categories. But we fail to understand what Jesus declares to us – that we cannot figure it out or solve our biggest problems on our own. We need help and Jesus' teaching gives us the help and perspective we need.

If you want to understand spiritual truth and what truly matters in this life, receiving Jesus' teaching is the best way to go. Through them we are able to grasp spiritual truth, our fallen condition, and our need for God's grace and mercy. The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus came and defied the expectations and plans of the people. And all that it takes to be like him is to receive him and his teaching in our lives. Our biggest problems are all solved in him and we get to live in the power of his grace.

LET'S PRAY

COMMENTARY

MARK 3:14-15

In his commentary in the ESV Study Bible Hans F. Bayer helps the reader understand the significance of Jesus' calling the twelve disciples into ministry on his behalf.

As is often the case, Mark presupposes further actions of Jesus without narrating them. Here it becomes evident that Jesus had, in the meantime, selected and appointed the **twelve**, whom he called out of the larger crowd that had been following him (vv. 7-9; cf. v. 16; 4:10; 14:10, 17, 20, 43). The Twelve have a specific, twofold task: (1) that **they might be with him** (reinforcing the call to discipleship [see 1:17, 20; 2:14; 3:13] and to being shaped by Jesus [4:33]), and (2) that **he might send them out** (1:17; 9:37; thus suggesting the sense of the term **apostles** as those who are "sent out"; see note on Rom. 1:1). In their function of serving as Jesus-dependent emissaries, they are to do what Jesus did and taught them: (1) **preach** (Mark 1:14, 39; 6:12) the word of the kingdom of God, and (2) **cast out demons** (1:34, 39). Mark 6:13 will clarify that (3) healing is also part of their commission. This commission is put into action in 6:7-12. Initially, Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God to descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel, and the selection of the 12 apostles probably represents these tribes (Rev. 21:14). The disciples' experience of being under the immediate oversight of Jesus will be important for them, as they themselves will soon oversee the ministry of others after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

MARK 3:16-19

The catalog of names listed in this passage regarding the twelve disciples Jesus appointed is important because we find out who it is that will carry on Jesus' ministry after his ascension into heaven to be with the Father. Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss, in their commentary in the Expositor's Bible Commentary, delve deeper into each of these men listed.

There are three other lists of the apostles in the NT (Mt 10:2-4; Lk 6:14-16; Ac 1:13). Simon Peter always heads these lists as the most prominent disciple, and he appears throughout the Gospels and Acts as representative of the others. Mark notes that Jesus gave Simon the nickname "Peter," meaning "rock" (Gr., *petros*; Aram., *kephas*; cf. Jn 1:42), though no explanation for it is given here. The gospel's narrative depicts Peter as impetuous and wavering—anything but a rock! Yet Jesus saw in him great potential. Peter will be the first disciple to acknowledge Jesus is the Messiah (Mk 8:29). In Matthew, Jesus entrusts to Peter the "keys" of the kingdom and, according to one common interpretation, predicts that he will serve as a foundation stone for the apostolic church (Mt 16:13-20; cf. Ac 2:14-41).

In Mark's list (cf. Ac 1:13), Peter is followed by James and John, the sons of Zebedee, though Matthew (10:2) and Luke (6:14) place Peter's brother Andrew second. The elevation of James and John before Andrew likely results from their functioning with Peter as a kind of "inner circle" of disciples (cf. 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). James and John were nicknamed by Jesus Boanerges, an Aramaic term that Mark interprets as "Sons of Thunder" (v. 17) and that probably described their disposition, i.e., as having something of the thunderstorm in it (cf. 9:38; 10:35-37; cf. Lk 9:54). Andrew was called with Peter to be a disciple (1:16-18) and plays a more prominent role in John's gospel (1:40-44; 6:8-9; 12:20-22). In

Mark he appears only incidentally at 1:16, 29 and 13:3.

Philip appears only here in Mark, though (like Andrew) he is more prominent in John's gospel (1:43–48; 6:5–7; 12:21–22; 14:8–9). Philip is a Greek name, and John 1:44 tells us that Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter and Andrew. Bartholomew (v. 18) is not a personal name but a patronymic (identified by the name of his father) meaning "son of Tolmai." It has often been speculated he is the Nathanael of John 1:45 (cf. Jn 21:2, where Nathanael appears with others who are apostles). Matthew is doubtless to be identified with Levi (2:14; cf. Mt 9:9), but Mark makes no point to that effect. Thaddaeus is probably the Judas son of James of Luke's lists (Lk 6:16; Ac 1:13). Some MSS in Matthew refer to him as Lebbaeus, perhaps in an attempt to identify him with Levi the tax collector. Simon is called the *kananaion*, a Greek term sometimes mistranslated as "Canaanite," a place name (from Canaan or Cana). In fact, *kananaion* is a transliteration of an Aramaic term meaning "the Zealot." Luke accurately calls him "Simon the Zealot [z lot s]," which may describe his religious zeal (cf. Gal 1:14; Ac 22:3) or could refer to his association with the party of Zealots, who were bent on the violent overthrow of the Roman authorities (see Martin Hengel, *The Zealots* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989], 69–70). The problem with the latter view is that it is uncertain whether the term "Zealots" was used of insurrectionists prior to the Jewish revolt of AD 66–74.

Judas's surname is given as *Iscaiot* (v. 19), and he is identified as the man who betrayed Jesus. "Iscaiot" probably means "man from Karioth." The location of Karioth (*Kerioth*) is uncertain but may be identified either with *Kerioth Hezron* (Jos 15:25), twelve miles south of Hebron, or *Kerioth in Moab* (Jer 48:24). If either identification is accurate, Judas may have been the only non-Galilean among the Twelve. Other, less likely, possibilities are that "Iscaiot" comes from the Latin *sicarius*, referring to an insurrectionist or freedom fighter, or that it derives from an Aramaic term meaning "the lie" and refers to his status as a false disciple. In this latter case it would be an epithet given by the church after the fact.

MARK 3:20–35

In his commentary in the *New American Commentary* James A. Brooks provides clarity on this passage and why it was that Jesus received such opposition what true allegiance to God means.

Mark 3:20–35 is the first clear instance in the Gospel of intercalation or bracketing or sandwiching, a literary and theological device used to indicate a lapse of time, heighten tension, draw attention to, contrast, and most importantly to use two accounts to interpret each other. In other words, the purpose of intercalation is primarily theological. Other examples are 4:1–20; 5:21–43; 6:7–29; 11:12–25; 14:1–11; 14:53–72 (or 14:53–15:15; possibly 14:17–31; 15:40–16:8).

In 3:20–35 a story about the scribes accusing Jesus of being possessed by a demon (vv. 22–30) has been inserted into a story about Jesus' family in order to allow for the family's travel time from Nazareth (cf. 1:9) to wherever Jesus was and—more importantly—to show that Jesus' family as well as the religious authorities misunderstood and opposed him. Mark portrayed opposition by one as serious as opposition by the other. Both stories contrast those who opposed Jesus and those who embraced his teaching. Both are pronouncement stories (vv. 28–29, 34–35, respectively).

The story about Jesus' family redefines who constitutes his family. Jesus' true family consists of those who respond positively to him rather than those who are physically related to him. The story also suggests that being a part of Jesus' family may require adjusting or even severing relationships with

an earthly family.

MARK 3:28-29

Jesus' words about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in Mark 3:28-29 have resulted in no small amount of debate. What did Jesus mean by these words? Is there an unforgivable sin? R.C. Sproul, in the Reformation Study Bible, gives his commentary to answer these questions.

That the Bible describes one sin as "unforgivable" sparks fear in the hearts of those who worry that perhaps they have committed it. Although the gospel freely offers forgiveness to all who repent of their sins, there is a limit reached at the door of this one crime. The unforgivable or unpardonable sin of which Jesus warned is identified as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus declared that this sin cannot be forgiven either in the present or in the future:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matthew 12:31-32).

Various attempts have been made to identify the specific crime that is unforgivable. It has been assigned to such grievous crimes as murder or adultery. However, though both of these sins are clearly heinous sins against God, the Scripture makes it clear that they may be forgiven if earnest repentance is made. David, for example, was guilty of both of them, yet he was restored to grace.

Frequently the unforgivable sin is identified with persistent and final unbelief in Christ. Since death brings the end of a person's opportunity to repent of sin and embrace Christ, the finality of unbelief brings the consequence of the termination of hope of forgiveness.

Though persistent and final unbelief does bring about such consequences it does not adequately explain Jesus' warning concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy is something one does with the mouth or the pen. It involves words.

Though any form of blasphemy is a serious assault on the character of God, it is usually regarded as forgivable. When Jesus warned of the unforgivable sin, it was in the context of His accusers' declaring that He was in league with Satan. His warning was sober and frightening. Yet, on the cross Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who blasphemed against Him on the grounds of their ignorance, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

If, however, people are enlightened by the Holy Spirit to the degree that they know Jesus is truly the Christ, and then they accuse Him of being satanic, they have committed a sin for which there is no pardon. Christians left to their own devices are capable of committing the unpardonable sin, but we are confident that God in His preserving grace will restrain His elect from ever committing such a sin. When earnest Christians are fearful that perhaps they have actually committed this sin, it is probably an indication that they haven't. Those who do commit such a sin would be so hardened of heart and abandoned in their sin as to feel no remorse for it.

Even in a pagan, secularized culture like our own, people seem to be reluctant to go too far in their blasphemy against God and Christ. Though the name of Christ is dragged through the mud as a

common curse word and the gospel is ridiculed by irreverent jokes and comments, people still seem constrained to avoid linking Jesus with Satan.

Though the occult and Satanism provide a context of perilous danger for the commission of the unpardonable sin, if radical blasphemy occurs here it may still be forgiven because it is committed in ignorance by those unenlightened by the Holy Spirit.

MARK 4:1-34

How are we to understand Jesus' parables? Geoffrey Grogan, in his commentary in the Focus on the Bible Commentary, offers insight into the significance of Jesus' parables and how they are to be understood.

Everybody loves a story.

It all starts when we are small children, and most of us never really grow out of our early delight in a tale well told. Many an adult would admit that one of the good things about being parents is that we can at last find a good excuse for reading again the stories we so much enjoyed as children!

A story may hold us, so that we cannot put it down, and this whether it is 'Cinderella' or 'Wuthering Heights', whether 'Winnie the Pooh' or 'War and Peace'. In many cultures of the past, and some still today, the storyteller in the market square is a familiar figure. With the contemporary growth of street festivals in our cities, this figure could well be on the way back even in our own land.

A strange thing about stories is that the best of them continue to grip us even after we have heard them times without number. Try to shut the book of familiar stories before the end and Tommy or Mary will cry out, 'Oh, don't stop! We've got to hear what happened!'

Can truth be served by fiction? The answer must be 'Yes!' stories that are fictional can still be true in a very important sense. A credible tale about an admirable character may teach truth, for it may teach lessons about courage or fidelity or even godliness. This is one reason why, in every culture, great fiction has been used in education. The Greek philosophers knew this when they employed the tales of Homer to illustrate the ideas they wanted to promote. Truth is often best understood and recalled through the concreteness of a tale. The twists and turns of a book's plot may teach us something about the twists and turns of life, its characters may show us the importance of moral decisions. It is a method appropriate in every culture. Of course, stories can also convey untruth dressed up as truth, and do so in a way that will stay in the mind. That is why we should be concerned about the stories our children read or hear or see.

The Saviour knew well how powerful a story well told can be. Most people know that his characteristic method of teaching was the parable. But what are parables? They are fiction used in the interests of truth, God's truth.

1. The Method

'Parable' means 'something placed beside', so it is a story placed alongside a truth to illustrate it. The Bible is a perfectly true book, the Word of the God of truth, inspired by the Spirit of truth, finding its great theme in the One who is the Incarnation of truth. Most of its stories are of course true in

every sense of the word, not only true to life but also conveying accurate historical and biographical information. When it does contain fiction, this is presented with no pretence that it is historically true.

The prophet Nathan told David a most moving story (2 Sam. 12:1-7) and the Spirit of God used this to secure a spiritual result. Isaiah actually sang a story (Isa. 5:1-7), at first in dulcet tones and then with an increasingly sombre note, and when it ended his listeners found that, despite the fact that it was fiction, they were actually in the story. It was really about them! We will see an outstanding example of this kind of thing when we come to Mark 12, for one of the parables of Jesus recorded there is like a further edition of Isaiah's parable in which the same story is taken further on and powerfully applied to contemporary listeners. The rabbis also often conveyed their message by the use of the parabolic method. This means then that the hearers of Jesus would be familiar with the method.

The Saviour told a great many parables. All those recorded by the Gospel writers are fairly short, although it is not impossible that we have some of them in abbreviated form, while some occupy no more than a verse or two in one of the Gospels. This chapter contains a major cluster of them, but we have come across some brief ones already. In chapter 2 we found a tale about a special event, a wedding, and two from the ordinary life of the home, about mending clothes and bottling wine. In chapter 3 there was the disunited kingdom, the divided household, the violent robber. Of course, some of these are hardly more than imaginative language, extended metaphors. But they stick in the mind.

A preacher whose sermons consist of nothing but a string of stories deserves the criticism he will get from those who love the Scriptures and long to be fed from them. Nevertheless there is plenty of room for the well-told story, the modern parable, as an illustration of truth within the context of an exposition of God's Word today. Some preachers have been somewhat disconcerted to find that many of their listeners recalled their children's addresses when most of their sermons had been forgotten. Are there lessons to be learned from this?

The stories told in chapter 4 were appropriate for a largely agricultural community. Even the towns of Galilee would have been mostly typical country towns, their relationship to rural communities being quite essential to them. Many of us who preach in places of large and concentrated population will need to seek parables for the city, and yet, as we will see, without the least necessity to abandon those recorded here from the lips of Jesus.

Were all four parables told on the same occasion? We cannot be sure. Only the first of them is given an actual setting in the ministry of Jesus. Mark enables us to picture the scene, with Jesus in a boat on the lake and the people strung out or perhaps even massed along the water's edge. The fact that three of the four parables are about seed may suggest they were told on the same occasion, so that the later ones are almost like extensions of the first. On the other hand, they may have been brought together in this chapter simply because of similarity of theme. We will assume that they do all belong to the same occasion, although little depends on this.

2. The Matter

Here then we have a sequence of four tales, all of them simple in conception and presentation. Despite what we have just said about the need to find parables appropriate to our culture, it should be noticed that although knowledge of the cultural background yields much extra insight, these stories, like most of those told by the Saviour, need remarkably little translation from one culture to another. This is because he so often talked about things that are part of life everywhere. Agriculture

is basic to virtually all communities, so that the stories are universally appropriate. Even in schools located in depressed inner-city areas whose children may rarely or never see the countryside, a teacher will often plant a few seeds in a pot or on a piece of damp flannel in the class-room and get the children to follow the stages of their growth.

The first story is universally known as the parable of the sower, although it might better be called 'the parable of the soils', for it is the condition of the soils that is the focus of attention. Jesus told the whole story first of all, before interpreting it to the disciples. With a story, this is usually a better method than trying to show the meaning on the way along. Tell the story in its own terms first of all, and then, if it seems desirable to do so, point out its lessons, otherwise the attention of the listeners will flag.

Next the Speaker took his hearers from the field into somebody's home. The average one-roomed house of Palestine would be fully illuminated by its central lamp, as Matthew 5:15 ('it gives light to everyone in the house') clearly indicates. Of course, as Jesus indicated in that passage in Matthew, the whole effectiveness of the lamp depends on its position in the room, in a place where nothing obstructs its light.

The great potential of seed, spelled out in verse 20, becomes the basis of two more parables. For this reason, we should not forget the importance of the seed, even in the first parable. The condition of the soils is vitally important, but without the seed there could be no crop at all.

Seed scattered shows amazing vitality if, of course, as the first parable has shown, it gets into good ground. The farmer does not have to have a degree in biology to do his work effectively. In fact even if he did, it is questionable if he would be able fully to understand the awesome mystery of plant growth. His job is to sow and then prepare for the harvest. No doubt there are intermediate activities of a useful kind, but Jesus concentrates here on the two vital elements—the sowing and the reaping. In a fascinating passage, Isaiah ranges more widely over the whole process of crop management from ploughing to threshing (Isa. 28:23–29) and draws lessons from this for his listeners. This shows that, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, the same basic illustration may be employed to emphasise different truths

In the last of the parables, it is the great potential of a single seed that is the focus of the story. Some have objected to the words of Jesus here because there are seeds smaller than the mustard seed and plants larger than the mustard bush. This is a most wooden interpretation, and it misses the fact that hyperbole is an accepted mode of speech in every language. Jesus was simply saying, in a vivid manner, that this seed is very small and yet how great a bush comes from it! Some in the Holy Land grow as high as ten feet. As Paul says, in Romans 1:16, the gospel of Christ is powerful.

3. The Meaning

One feature common to all these parables is their simplicity. In fact, Jesus was pointing out nothing that was not perfectly obvious. Everybody knows that seed needs good soil, grows of itself and can produce great results. They also know that a lamp needs to be visible to be effective. Yet a story based on obvious facts can still be compelling to listen to, and the message may be all the more effectively conveyed. If the physical facts are obvious, there is perhaps a hidden implication that the spiritual facts ought to be just as clear to the listener. No wonder many Christians are able to testify that real discipleship for them began in childhood when the Spirit of God used these and other parables to bring them into the light of Christ!

In this whole passage there is considerable stress on the importance of understanding. It is not simply that Jesus underlines the need for the parables themselves to be understood, but also that some of them have understanding as their actual theme. He called for maximum attentiveness in his hearers (4:3, 9, 23, 24) and Mark's comment also stressed the importance of understanding (4:33, 34). If you look up all these verses, you can hardly fail to see how greatly this is stressed in the whole passage.

At the beginning, there is a most striking call for attention. In verse 3, Jesus says, 'Listen! See!' It is a pity that most English versions (including the NIV) fail to translate the second of these words. Far from being redundant, it adds emphasis. It is not impossible that both words were intended literally. Could Jesus see from the boat a farmer scattering seed in his field and was he drawing the people's eyes to the scene? Possibly. If so, and if all the parables in this passage were uttered on the same occasion, we can see the value of staying with the seed analogy for three out of the four parables. On the other hand, 'see!' might have been an appeal to the eye of the imagination. When the words of a story engage with our experience (and how can we understand them unless they do so at least to some extent?) then they normally present pictures to the imagination.

Now Jesus calls for attention with both sight and hearing once again, for a literal translation of verse 24 would be, 'see what you hear!' Whether seen physically or imaginatively, with the outer or inner eye, however, the audience needed insight into the meaning. The farmer, the seed, the soil, the plant, the fruit, the house, the lamp, were all examples of analogy; each one stood for something else, for a spiritual truth.

The parable of the sower which began with such an unusually strong call for attention ended on the same note, for Jesus says to the crowd, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (v. 9)! These words occur again after the story of the lamp (v. 23). We find him saying this elsewhere (e.g. in Matt. 11:15 and Luke 14:35) and his words in Mark 8:18, ('Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?') simply put the challenge into the form of a question instead of an exhortation. The expression also occurs in the Book of the Revelation, in each of the letters to the seven churches (e.g. in Rev. 2:7, 11). Its presence there is very apt, for the whole book is dubbed, 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him' (Rev. 1:1), in other words it is as much the teaching of Jesus as are the parables here.

Here then we see that physical hearing is not enough. There must be reflection on the stories, because none of them is told as an end in itself, none is intended just to entertain; far from it. Paradoxically though, the story form which can be so illuminating to the spiritually receptive, can be the reverse for the unreceptive. Such people may enjoy it simply for itself and never discern the deeper meaning. A radio transmitter may be perfectly in order, but we may not get the message because there is something wrong with our receiving sets. It is a sobering thought that you or I may remember a preacher's illustration, but not what it illustrates.

The stories are simple and clear, but their understanding requires a spiritual dimension in the outlook of the hearer. This is what is meant by 'the secret of the kingdom of God' (v. 11), which is the spiritual reality presented in many of the parables, whether this is explicitly indicated or not. True spiritual hearing is needed for conversion and forgiveness, but, as verses 11 and 12 indicate, this has to be given by God. These verses do not, of course, mean that forgiveness is denied to those who truly seek it, but rather that, beneath true seeking, there is always prior divine activity. It is God in his wonderful grace who takes the initiative.

The quotation in verse 12 is from Isaiah 6:9, 10. In its original context it is God's word to the prophet at the time of his call. He must preach the word God has given him to declare, but he is left in no doubt that many of the people will reject it. The Book of Isaiah gives a salutary example of this in its very next chapter, for there we read of Ahaz and his hypocritical rejection of God's message through Isaiah.

It is a law, an awesome principle of the inner life as God has constituted it, that truth that is meant to illuminate and liberate will, if repeatedly rejected, harden the heart and moreover that this happens because God intends this should be so. It is our responsibility to accept his word, to co-operate with his laws of hearing. If we do not, we have only ourselves to blame, the selves we have become through our failure to respond. Paul brings out the same truth in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 and, as you will see if you consult this passage, by a kind of parable of his own.

Jesus tells his disciples that the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to them (v. 11). How can it be described as a secret when it was in fact the theme of our Lord's public preaching (1:15)? Because by their God-given faith in Jesus they had begun to understand a most important truth, that the kingdom promised in the Old Testament had drawn near in the presence of Jesus among them. This means then that they had the key to the interpretation of the parables, even though at times they could be very obtuse, as we see in verse 13. The questions of Jesus here and the concern they show suggest that there was a degree of culpability in their failure to understand.

In verses 24 and 25, Jesus takes up the theme again. His words here follow on from the parable of the lamp. The room that contained the lamp, the bed and the bowl would also contain some vehicle of measurement and he draws a lesson from it. It is rather like the law of sowing and reaping to which Paul refers in Galatians 6:7-9. We receive new understanding according to the measure of faith we bring to the truth we hear or read, although the phrase, 'and even more' recognizes God's generosity. If we do not bring faith to our listening, we will lose even the small measure of understanding we may have. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer comments on the attitude of the people of Israel to God's word during the period of the wilderness wanderings, and he says, 'the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard it did not combine it with faith' (Heb. 4:2). His great concern was that those to whom he was writing that great epistle should learn something from this that would influence their own attitude to God's word.

One further point may be made from this passage in relation to the interpretation of the parables of Jesus. We should not imagine that every single detail was intended to have a distinct spiritual interpretation. The reference to the farmer sleeping and getting up (v. 27) adds little if anything to the main point of the parable, but it does add extra vividness to the story, and this was probably its purpose. We should also note, however, that it was not a distracting feature that would take the minds of the hearers in some irrelevant direction.

Verses 33 and 34, as well as verse 2, indicate that Mark has simply made a selection from the parables of Jesus, and also that this was the Saviour's normal method of teaching. They were used in his public preaching and the explanation of them was clearly a major part of his private teaching of his disciples.

4. The Message

The parable of the soils is interpreted in some detail by Jesus and shows realistically that the hearers may be heedless, rootless or fruitless. There is nevertheless the clear anticipation of fruit when the word is thoroughly accepted.

Already in this Gospel there have been two references to Satan. It was he who tempted Jesus after his baptism (1:13) and he referred to him in refuting the allegation of the Jerusalem scribes that he was possessed by Beelzebub (3:22–30). Verse 15 recognizes Satan's evil activity when the word is preached, a theme Paul was to take up in the opening verses of Ephesians 2, for 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air' there is a reference to him. The same writer also alludes to the activity of Satan in opposition to his ministry of the Gospel (1 Thess 2:18). Such opposition shows that Satan is aware of the power of the word and also his concern lest it should produce fruit. Sometimes then the word is merely heard and has no spiritual effect at all.

Next Jesus deals with those who receive the word and react to it emotionally. Their rootlessness presumably means that there is minimal understanding and particularly that the will has not been committed to the truth conveyed in the word. Lacking such commitment, they cannot face trouble or persecution, which will seem a contradiction of their joy and so perhaps a denial of what they would themselves regard as the chief value of the word—its power to bring gladness to the heart. This shows that they are still essentially self-centred rather than God-centred in their outlook. This is not, of course, to deny that joy comes when the word is truly and deeply received. The illustration of the wedding feast in the previous chapter (2:19) clearly implies this.

It is not simply unpleasant circumstances that can have negative results when the reception of the word has been superficial, but the attraction of other things, the worldly motives that have never been subdued under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The worries and desires may well be the result of the deceitfulness of riches. The rich man worries as to whether his financial enterprises are going to succeed or fail. As Ecclesiastes 5:12 says, 'the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.' He discovers too that the craving for more does not go away even though his wealth has put him well beyond the threat of poverty. The persecution and the deceitful promise of material things, so reminiscent of the original temptation recorded in Genesis 3, also clearly come from the devil. Here then we are again made aware of a sinister figure in opposition to Christ.

According to the NIV, the fruitful 'accept' the word (v. 20), whereas the rootless 'receive' it (v. 16). This translation reflects a difference in the Greek verbs used by Mark here. The one in verse 20 is distinctly stronger than the other. The change from one to the other is unlikely to be purely a matter of stylistic variation, for Mark as a writer does not seem over-concerned about this. Clearly the word of God has penetrated to a deeper level in the fruitful. The exhortation of Colossians 3:16, 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly', is somewhat reminiscent of this. Such rich indwelling of the word surely implies the engagement of the whole personality with it. Early in the same letter Paul wrote of 'the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth' (Col. 1:5, 6).

The parable has major implications for the preacher. Preaching needs to go to the heart of the matter (which, it has been said, is the matter of the heart), so that it is not simply doctrine unrelated to life nor simply a call to find our happiness in Christ. There needs also, on the preacher's part, to be prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit. Paul stresses the role of the Spirit in preaching in 1 Corinthians 2.

The parable, starkly realistic as it undoubtedly is, also contains encouragement for the Christian preacher, for it clearly implies that, along with disappointments, there will be fruit from the faithful preaching of God's word. Another encouragement emerges from a small linguistic point. The Greek

word for 'seed', like its English counterpart, can be used in its singular form either as a true singular or as a collective. So, we do not normally say that we have bought a packet of seeds, but rather a packet of seed. Also, however, like English, the word can be employed in the plural, and when this occurs in a context where it has also been used collectively in the singular, it can have the effect of underlining the plurality somewhat. Most English translations do not bring out here the fact that in verse 8, for the first time in the passage, a plural word is used in connection with the seed. It is encouraging to find that this applies to the good ground.

No interpretation is given of the other three parables, but there is much in that of the soils to help us interpret them, because of the emphasis it places on receptivity and also because it uses the analogy of the seed, which is central to two of the others also. Probably Mark puts it first in this passage so that it may furnish an interpretative key to the others. This is probably implied in the words of Jesus in verse 13, which may also suggest that this parable was a particularly simple and straight-forward one.

The parable of the lamp shows that God does not intend his truth in Christ to be hidden. The spiritually unresponsive may fail to understand it, but eventually it will be declared openly. He uses the same analogy, in a different context, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:14-16), although there it has a somewhat different application. Here is another characteristic of his teaching, for he used many aphorisms, brief and pithy sayings that stick in the mind like burrs. In some cases he did this in different contexts and with somewhat different applications. This is another way in which the Christian communicator may emulate him, for basic truths of great importance deserve terse, forceful and memorable expression.

The parable of the growing seed is the only parable peculiar to Mark's Gospel. Like that of the sower, it encourages the preacher both in his work of sowing and also in his dependence, for every significant event in addition to the actual sowing and reaping takes place out of sight and is due to divine activity.

The parable of the mustard seed shows the great vitality of the kingdom and its message. Most commentators take the reference to the birds to be simply a way of stressing the size of the tree and therefore the great potential of the seed, tiny as it is. A minority see a sinister meaning in them, comparable perhaps to the reference to Satan in the parable of the sower and to the farmer's enemy and the weeds in another parable recorded in Matthew 13:24-30. This seems unlikely however in view of the fact that the vitality of the seed is very much in view in two other parables in our context here, and that this one can easily be interpreted in the same way.

The phrase, 'kingdom of God', is common to the two final parables. We have already encountered it in the preaching of Jesus (1:15). The modern literature on this expression is immense. It is widely agreed that it means 'the reign of God' rather than 'God's territory', that the emphasis is on his reign over personal beings, and, in the New Testament, over his church, so implying acceptance of his rule by his people. As thus used in the New Testament, it is presented sometimes as inaugurated by Jesus the King at his first advent. Probably, as the commentary will argue, this is in view in 9:1. Sometimes we see men and women entering it through repentance and faith or in the new birth (Mark 1:15; John 3:3, 5), so that this means it is a present reality or at least a future one into which entry is secured in the present. Sometimes it is unambiguously future, as consummated at his second advent (Mark 14:25; Luke 21:31).

In the kingdom of God then there is a sowing, a growing, a reaping. All three stages in the history

of the kingdom as taught in the New Testament are present in the parable of the growing seed, for the seed here is not the gospel planted in the heart of an individual, but rather is the kingdom itself, planted by Jesus, growing over the years and coming eventually to completion. Of course, the kingdom grows through preaching and conversions, although this parable does not go into this. The mustard seed parable too shows the three processes of sowing, growing and reaping.

One feature common to two of the parables is not interpreted by Jesus. Who is the farmer who sows the seed? Are we meant to ask this question? Possibly. If so, the farmer is undoubtedly Jesus himself. He had come into Galilee as the Sower of the seed of the gospel (1:14, 15). In the Gospel of Mark the theme of the kingdom eventually becomes intertwined with the story of the cross, for it was through his death for sin that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. As somebody has truly said, 'O'er hill and dale he sowed his seed, till, on that last bare hill, he sowed himself.' That is why Paul can call the message, 'the word of Christ' (Col. 3:16), for he is its great theme.

Of course, the Gospel later shows Jesus calling his disciples to do what in fact he himself did. They did it first of all within the context of his earthly ministry (6:6-13). Then, after his resurrection, they were sent out to preach the word everywhere (16:15-20; cf. Matt. 28:18-20). We too are to sow the seed and we can take much encouragement from the teaching given here. If we do our work faithfully, God will be at work, bringing about his own purposes through the word, just as Isaiah, who was earlier warned of the sparse results of his preaching, later heard God say, 'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it' (Isa. 55:10, 11).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Hans F. Bayer, *Mark*, The ESV Study Bible.

James A. Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary.

D.A. Carson, *Mark*, The NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible.

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Charles Swindoll, *Mark*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary.

Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary.

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