

Discussion Guide for Mark 4:10-41

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Part 1: The Purpose and Explanation of Parables (Mark 4:10–25)

- **The "Secret" of the Kingdom (vv. 10–12):** Jesus says the secret of the kingdom has been given to the disciples, but those on the outside get parables. What do you think is the difference between being an "insider" and an "outsider" in how we hear God's word?
- **Examining the Soils (vv. 13–20):** Jesus describes four responses to the Word (along the path, rocky places, among thorns, and good soil).
 - Which of the negative soils (rocky or thorny) do you feel is the biggest temptation or danger for Christians in our culture today?
 - How can we practically cultivate "good soil" in our hearts during a busy week?
 - Looking at the four soils (the path, rocky ground, thorns, and good soil), which one best reflects where your heart has been lately? What "thorns" (worries, wealth, desires) are currently competing for your attention?
- **A Lamp on a Stand (vv. 21–25):** Jesus talks about hidden things being brought to light and warns, "*Consider carefully what you hear.*" How does our willingness to act on the truth we *already* know affect how much more truth God reveals to us?
- Verse 24 says, "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you." How does this apply to how we listen to and act on God's word?

Part 2: Parables of the Kingdom's Growth (Mark 4:26–34)

- **The Growing Seed (vv. 26–29):** In this parable, the scatterer of the seed sleeps and rises, and the seed grows without him knowing how. When you are praying for someone or working in ministry, how does this parable give you comfort or relieve the pressure to produce results? How comforting or challenging is it to remember that spiritual growth is ultimately God's work, not ours?
- **The Mustard Seed (vv. 30–34):** The kingdom starts as the smallest seed but becomes the largest garden plant. Where have you seen God use a "small" act of faith or obedience to make a big impact? Where do you see God working in "small, seemingly insignificant" ways in your life or community right now?

Part 3: Jesus Calms the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)

- **The Sleeping Master (vv. 35–38):** The disciples panicked while Jesus slept through a violent storm. When you face sudden, overwhelming trials, do you tend to react like the disciples ("*Teacher, don't you care if we drown?*")? Why is it so easy to mistake God's silence for a lack of care?
- **Rebuking the Wind (vv. 39–40):** Jesus displays absolute authority over creation by simply speaking, "*Quiet! Be still!*" How does knowing that Jesus holds complete authority over physical and spiritual "storms" change how you view your current anxieties?
- **A Different Kind of Fear (v. 41):** The disciples went from being terrified of the storm to being *terrified of Jesus* (in awe of Him). What is the difference between a paralyzing fear of our circumstances and a holy, reverent fear of who Jesus is?
- How does experiencing Jesus' power change our perspective on the things that scare us?

Big Picture Application Questions

- Looking back at the entire chapter, how does the **Parable of the Sower** (the word being planted) connect to the story of **Jesus calming the storm**? How did the disciples' response to the storm reveal the "soil" of their hearts at that moment?
- What is one specific area of your life right now where you need to move from **fear** to **faith**?

MARK 4:10 – 41 COMMENTARY

The Parable of the Sower (4:1–20)

*4:1, 2 Again Jesus **began to teach by the sea**. Again the crowd made it necessary for Him to use **a boat** as His pulpit, just a short way from the beach. And again **He taught** spiritual lessons from the world of nature about Him. He could see spiritual truth in the natural realm. It is there for all of us to see.*

*4:3, 4 This parable has to do with the **sower**, the **seed**, and the soil. The **wayside** soil was too hard for the seed to penetrate. **Birds ... came and** ate the seed.*

*4:5, 6 The **stony ground** had a thin layer of dirt covering a bed of rock. Shallowness of earth prevented the seed from taking deep root.*

4:7 The thorny ground had thorn bushes that cut the seed off from nourishment and sunlight, thus choking it.

*4:8, 9 The **good ground** was deep and fertile with conditions favorable to the seed. **Some** seeds produced **thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred**.*

4:10–12 When the disciples were with Him **alone**, they **asked Him** why He spoke in parables. He explained to them that only those with receptive hearts were permitted **to know the mystery of the kingdom of God**. A **mystery** in the NT is a truth hitherto unknown that can only be known through special revelation. **The mystery of the kingdom of God** is that:

1. The Lord Jesus was rejected when He offered Himself as King to Israel.
2. A period of time would intervene before the kingdom would be literally set up on earth.
3. During the interim, it would exist in spiritual form. All who acknowledge Christ as King would be in the kingdom, even though the King Himself was absent.
4. The Word of God would be sown during the interim period with varying degrees of success. Some people would actually be converted, but others would be only nominal believers. All professing Christians would be in the kingdom in its outward form, but only the genuine ones would enter the kingdom in its inner reality.

Verses 11 and 12 explain why this truth was presented in parables. God reveals His family secrets to those whose hearts are open, receptive and obedient, while deliberately hiding truth from those who reject the light given to them. These are the people Jesus referred to as **“those who are outside.”** The words of verse 12 may seem harsh and unfair to the casual reader: **“That seeing they may see and not perceive; and hearing, they may hear and not understand; lest they should turn and their sins be forgiven them.”**

But we must remember the tremendous privilege which these people had enjoyed. The Son of God had taught in their midst and performed many mighty miracles before them. Instead of acknowledging Him as the true Messiah, they were even now rejecting Him. Because they had spurned the Light of the world, they would be denied the light of His teachings. Henceforth they would see His miracles, yet not understand the spiritual significance; hear His words, yet not appreciate the deep lessons in them.

There is such a thing as hearing the gospel for the last time. It is possible to sin away the day of grace. Men do drift beyond redemption point. There are men and women who have refused the Savior and who will never again have the opportunity to repent and be forgiven. They may hear the gospel but it falls on hardened ears and an insensible heart. We say, “Where there’s life,

there's hope," but the Bible speaks of some who are alive, yet beyond hope of repentance (Heb. 6:4–6, for example).

4:13 Going back to the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus asked the disciples how they could expect to **understand** more involved **parables** if they could not understand this simple one.

4:14 The Savior did not identify **the sower**. It could be Himself or those who preach as His representatives. The seed, He said, is **the Word**.

4:15–20 The various types of soil represent human hearts and their receptivity to the Word, as follows:

The **wayside** soil (v. 15). This heart is hard. The person, stubborn and unbroken, says a determined "No" to the Savior. **Satan**, pictured by the birds, snatches away the Word. The sinner is unmoved and untroubled by the message. He is indifferent and insensible to it thereafter.

The **stony ground** (vv. 16, 17). This person makes a superficial response to **the Word**. Perhaps in the emotion of a fervent gospel appeal, he makes a profession of faith in Christ. But it is just a mental assent. There is no real commitment of the person to Christ. He receives the Word **with gladness**; it would be better if he received it with deep repentance and contrition. He seems to go on brightly for a while, but **when tribulation or persecution arises** because of his profession, he decides that the cost is too great and he abandons the whole thing. He claims to be a Christian as long as it is popular to do so, but persecution exposes his unreality.

The **thorny ground** (vv. 18, 19). These people also make a promising start. To all outward appearances, they seem to be true believers. But then they become preoccupied with business, with worldly worries, with the lust to become rich. They lose interest in spiritual things, until finally they abandon any claim to be Christians at all.

The **good ground** (v. 20). Here there is a definite acceptance of **the Word**, cost what it may. These people are truly born again. They are loyal subjects of Christ, the King. Neither the world, the flesh, nor the devil can shake their confidence in Him.

Even among the good ground hearers, there are varying degrees of fruitfulness. **Some bear thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred**. What determines the degree of productivity? The life that is most productive is the one that obeys the Word promptly, unquestioningly, and joyfully.

The Responsibility of Those Who Hear (4:21–25)

4:21 The **lamp** here represents the truths which the Lord imparted to His disciples. These truths were not to be put **under a basket or under a bed**, but out in the open for men to see. The bushel **basket** may represent business, which if allowed, will steal time that should be given to the things of the Lord. The **bed** may speak of comfort or laziness, both enemies of evangelism.

4:22 Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables. The underlying truth was **hidden**. But the divine intention was that the disciples explain those hidden truths to willing hearts. Verse 22 might also mean, however, that the disciples should serve in constant remembrance of a coming day of manifestation when it will be seen if business or self-indulgence were allowed to take precedence over testimony for the Savior.

4:23 The seriousness of these words is indicated by Jesus' admonition: **"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."**

4:24 Then the Savior added another serious warning: **“Take heed what you hear.”** If I hear some command from the Word of God, but fail to obey it, I cannot pass it on to others. What gives power and scope to teaching is when people see the truth in the preacher’s life.

Whatever we measure out in sharing the truth with others comes back to us with compound interest. The teacher usually learns more in preparing a lesson than the pupils. And the future reward will be greater than our puny expenditure.

4:25 Every time we acquire fresh truth and allow it to become real in our lives, we are sure to be given **more** truth. On the other hand, failure to respond to truth results in a loss of what was previously acquired.

Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26–29)

This parable is found only in Mark. It can be interpreted in at least two ways. The **man** may picture the Lord Jesus casting **seed** on the earth during His public ministry, then returning to heaven. The seed begins to grow—mysteriously, imperceptively but invincibly. From a small beginning, a harvest of true believers develops. **When the grain ripens ... the harvest** will be taken to the heavenly garner.

Or, the parable may be intended to encourage the disciples. Their responsibility is to sow **the seed**. They may **sleep by night and rise by day**, knowing that God’s Word will not return to Him void, but will accomplish what He has intended it to do. By a mysterious and miraculous process, quite apart from man’s strength and skill, the Word works in human hearts, producing fruit for God. Man plants and waters but God gives the increase. The difficulty with this interpretation lies in verse 29. Only God can put forth **the sickle** at **harvest** time. But in the parable, the same man who sows the seed **puts in the sickle** when the grain is ripe.

Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30–34)

4:30–32 This parable pictures the growth of **the kingdom** from a beginning as small as a **mustard seed** to a tree or bush big enough for **the birds** to roost in. The kingdom began with a small, persecuted minority. Then it became more popular and was embraced by governments as the state religion. This growth was spectacular but unhealthy, much of it representing people who paid lip service to the King but were not truly converted.

As Vance Havner said:

As long as the church wore scars, they made headway. When they began to wear medals, the cause languished. It was a greater day for the church when Christians were fed to the lions than when they bought season tickets and sat in the grandstand.

The mustard bush therefore pictures professed Christendom, which has become a roosting place for all kinds of false teachers. It is the outward form of the kingdom as it exists today.

4:33, 34 Verses 33 and 34 introduce us to an important principle in teaching. Jesus taught the people **as they were able to hear it**. He built upon their previous knowledge, permitting time for them to assimilate one lesson before giving them the next. Conscious of His hearers’ capacity, He did not glut them with more instruction than they could absorb (see also John 16:12; 1 Cor. 3:2;

Heb. 5:12). The method of some preachers might make us think Christ had said, “Feed my giraffes” instead of “Feed my sheep”!

Although His general teaching was in parables, He **explained** them **to His disciples** in private. He gives light to those who sincerely desire it.

Wind and Wave Serve the Servant (4:35–41)

4:35–37 At **evening** of the **same day**, Jesus and His disciples started across the Sea of Galilee toward the eastern shore. They had not made any advance preparations. **Other little boats** followed. Then suddenly a violent **windstorm arose**. Huge **waves** threatened to swamp **the boat**.

4:38–41 Jesus was sleeping **in the stern** of the boat. The frantic disciples **awoke Him**, rebuking Him for His seeming lack of concern for their safety. The Lord **arose and rebuked the wind** and the waves. The **calm** was immediate and complete. Then Jesus briefly chided His followers for fearing and not trusting. They were stunned by the miracle. Even though they knew who Jesus was, they were impressed afresh by the power of One who could control the elements.

The incident reveals the humanity and the deity of the Lord Jesus. He slept in the stern of the boat; that’s His humanity. He spoke and the sea was calm; that’s His deity.

It demonstrates His power over nature, as previous miracles showed His power over diseases and demons.

Finally, it encourages us to go to Jesus in all the storms of life, knowing that the boat can never sink when He is in it.

Thou art the Lord who slept upon the pillow,
Thou art the Lord who soothed the furious sea,
What matter beating wind and tossing billow,
If only we are in the boat with Thee?

—Amy Carmichael¹