

Jason Upchurch - Mark 4:10-12 -The Good News is Sometimes Hidden

I want to jump out of order just a little bit this morning - we're going to tackle verses 10-12 this week and then come back and work our way through chapter 4. And I'll explain that in a little bit.

And I want to do that because Vss. 10-12 are difficult passages and many times when we come to difficult passages we need to be reminded that they aren't icky. They're not to be avoided. They are good for us.

Psalm 19:7: The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.

Psalm 119:160: The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever.

Psalm 119:162: I rejoice at your Word, like one who finds great treasure.

Over and over the Bible is called sweet honey that tastes sweet and we always want more. The Bible is to be treasured more than silver or gold because in it is eternal life and joy and peace.

I think we know those things and on the surface acknowledge those things especially when on almost every page of the Bible is lurking some truth or some reality that is difficult to digest.

I remember talking to a guy who had walked away from his faith for a season because he was reading in the OT about how God commanded the Israelites to destroy all their enemies in the Promised Land: men, women, children, everything. How could God do that? I mean, he's God and every soul belongs to him.

Our family is reading through Exodus and we're in Chapter 21 this week and the Lord is giving guidelines about a man selling his daughter as a slave - basically a concubine wife. And God stipulates what to do if the husband doesn't like her or if he wants to give her to his son in marriage. And in our 21st century American view it's hard to comprehend such a thing.

In **1 Sam. 2:25** it says that the sons of Eli were wicked and that it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.

These are all hard truths and we're just scratching the surface of what is in this book. And I think if we didn't believe that this was truly the Word of God we would reject these truths. Our flesh pushes back against a God who doesn't fit our imagination.

And yet here they are, plain as day. These are not secrets that somehow God let slip on accident. These are truths that God has revealed to us for his glory and for our good. Truths that we should rejoice in.

That needs to be the bedrock of our understanding of God's Word. We should rejoice in all of it. Not just in the **John 3:16** parts that make good Christmas cards, but all the parts - maybe even especially the parts Hallmark would never dare put on Christmas cards.

I bring this up because we're diving into parables in the book of Mark this morning. And if you're like me you love the parables of Jesus. A parable is a fictional story that usually seeks to convey one specific truth. Mark only records 4 parables; Matthew and Luke both have a bunch. John's gospel has no parables at all.

We love the parables because they are memorable stories. This parable of 4 Soils was the first parable I ever read.. I actually read it in Luke's gospel, but it is incredibly memorable and one of the parables I recite most often from the pulpit.

But as we dive into parables what you need to understand is that there is a dark side to parables. This is the dark side: God sometimes hides the gospel from unbelievers. So before we unpack the parable - which we'll do next week - we need to understand why Jesus is even using parables in the first place and he gets to that in **Vss. 10-12.**

Now by way of background Jesus is once again preaching by the sea. But his sermons have now changed. He used to preach very clear and plain messages. He used to preach what we know as the Sermon on the Mount basically everywhere he went. He laid out a very clear ethic of the Kingdom of God.

And then at some point in his ministry he just starts preaching these stories, these parables. And what we see here is that Jesus is preaching in parables in **Vss. 1-9**.

But **Vss. 10-20** are kind of a side note to the whole story that actually happens later in the day. Later that day Mark tells us why Jesus preaches in parables in **Vss. 10-12**. And in **Vss. 13-20** he explains the parable to his disciples privately. But Mark goes back to the original beach scene in **Vs. 21-34**. So what's happening is that Jesus is on the beach and telling these stories but with zero interpretation. The interpretations are happening in private.

Look at Matt 13:10-17. Here in Matthew we have basically the same story. But notice Matthew adds a detail. **Read 10**

Matthew adds that the disciples ask Jesus why he's teaching in parables. "Why are you doing this, Jesus? Everyone is confused - we're confused - it doesn't make any sense."

And for Matthew's gospel **Vss. 10-23** are the side note, and Matthew goes back to the beach scene in **Vs. 24** and following.

So just imagine you've been following Jesus for months and you're telling people all the great sermons he's preaching and come listen. People finally show up and instead of the sermon on the mount, Jesus is telling random farming stories. "A sower sows and seed gets scattered, some doesn't grow, some grows a little then dies, some grows for a while and dies, others grow and produce a ton of fruit. Amen?"

"The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows and then birds live in the tree. Hallelujah!"

"Don't put an oil lamp under your bed or under a basket." "Preach!"

That sounds like Jesus has lost his marbles. No one understood what Jesus was saying. No interpretation is given for any of these parables to the crowd. The sermons are weird now. What is Jesus getting at?

And this is where in private Jesus gathers his disciples together and tells them what's going on. The sermons are designed to sift people out. They are designed to exclude people from the Kingdom on purpose.

That's the hard truth. The parables are not nice stories to bring people in. They are stories that hide the truth of the Kingdom of God and keep people out.

So let's see how this works.

1) Parables dominate Jesus's teaching from here on out. **Read 1-2, 21, 24, 26, 30, 33-34**

Now, as many have noted, Mark's gospel doesn't include a lot of dialogue with Jesus from here on out. There's some back and forth here and there. But almost all of the teaching of Jesus before he enters into Jerusalem is either a parable or it's given in such a way that his disciples need further private explanation.

It's almost as though the longer Jesus is teaching, the more cryptic his teaching becomes. Until he enters Jerusalem in his final week of life. Then he returns to condemning the religious leaders plainly over and over and over.

I mean, if you just read Mark and imagine yourself as the original hearer what Jesus often says is perplexing. We usually understand it because we understand the whole scope of the Bible and the Kingdom of God and salvation history. But the original hearers didn't understand that.

2) The truths of the Kingdom have to be given by God. God has to reveal truth to a person for them to understand. This is where it gets rowdy. **Read 10-11**

So Mark says that they were asking about the parables, Matthew records exactly what they asked. Why are you speaking in parables? What does this stuff even mean?

And what Jesus says is that the plain truths of the Kingdom of God have now been hidden. Jesus is done with clear preaching. Truth is now given in parables only - it's hidden. But ironically they are hidden in plain sight.

Have you ever seen those pictures of a leopard hidden on a rocky hillside. It's there in plain sight but you have to know what you're looking for? You have to know there's even a leopard in the picture. That's how the parables are working. The truth is there in plain sight but you have to know what you're looking for to understand it. Here's the key: the information has to be given to you. **Read 11**

To you it has been given. Who gave it to them? Jesus. Not everyone understands the parables. Not everyone comprehends them. To many of those people - maybe most of those people - they have no clue what Jesus is talking about. Why is this guy so amazing?

Here's the reality: God has to reveal the secrets of his Kingdom in order for a person to understand them and believe them. That was true then, that is true now. No one will ever understand and comprehend and love Jesus and his Kingdom apart from the divine revealing of God.

This is hard truth number 1. For someone to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, God has to reveal that to them.

This is not something people can understand simply by looking at nature. People can know a lot about God from nature, but not the gospel and not the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven.

This is not something people can understand purely by reason or logic or history. We can search those things and those are good. But Jesus's original hearers wouldn't have been talking after the sermon and been able to figure out on their own what he was talking about. They were baffled.

And someone might say: well, yeah, but now we have the Bible complete and all anyone - believer or not - has to do is just keep reading and now they know the secrets of the Kingdom of heaven. It's all here now.

But the reality is that that's not true either. Of course anyone can read the Bible and figure out the meaning of the parables. But how does someone embrace the truths of the Kingdom by faith? How does someone love the Bible and believe in Jesus? It has to be a work of God.

Acts 16:14: Lydia believed God because the Lord had opened her heart to pay attention.

Acts 11:18: The reason the gentiles believe in the Jewish Messiah is because God has granted them repentance.

Philippians 1:29: It has been granted to us to believe.

James 1:18: Of his own will God brought us forth by the Word of truth.

1 Pet. 1:3: According to the great mercy of God, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus.

Matt. 11:25-26: Jesus prays to God: thank you God that you have hidden these things - truths of the gospel - from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for this was your gracious will.

It's God's good and gracious will to hide truths about the Kingdom from some and reveal them to others.

Listen, if you are a believer it's not because you're a genius who cracked God's special code. It's not because you're smarter than others who couldn't quite get it.

And if you love the truths of God and his Word - not just know them - but actually love them and cherish them and love Jesus and desire him more and more - it's not anything inside of you that's done that. It's because God has given that to you.

He has taken out the heart of stone and given you a heart of flesh. He has transferred you from the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of the son of his love. His Spirit has regenerated you. None of this is because of your goodness or merit, but it's all because of his good pleasure. This is all by his grace.

If you love the things of God it's because God has put that love in your heart. Praise God! He has given you access to the Kingdom all by his mercy.

So parables dominate Jesus's teaching from here on out. And the only way we understand the parables truly is if God gives us the ability to.

3) The parables also serve as damning judgment. This is the other hard truth. **Read 11-12**

I think you see where this is going. Jesus is now preaching in parables to actually prevent people from understanding Kingdom truths clearly so that they will not repent and believe. The parables are actually a means of judgment.

And can I tell you something? That's how parables often work in the Bible. Remember when David committed adultery with Bathsheba? How did Nathan confront him? With a parable of judgment about a rich man who stole his poor neighbors sheep and slaughtered it. David didn't understand the parable at first but it was given as a judgement of his own sin.

If you remember in Ezekiel there's all these parables. The craziest of which is probably God telling Ezekiel in **Eze. 4** to take some bricks and make basically a toy city that is to represent Jerusalem. And Ezekiel is to lay on his side in front of his toy city for 390 days representing the number of years God will punish Jerusalem. He also has to eat only bread made by a fire. You remember what the fuel for the fire is? Human excrement because that's what Israel will be eating during their time of punishment.

You remember Isaiah's famous living parable? He was told in **Isa. 20** to walk around Jerusalem naked and barefoot for 3 years. It was a living parable of how God would use Egypt to take the surrounding countries captive back to Egypt.

Think about that. What if we saw some guy lying on the side of 395 for over a year in front of a brick saying judgment was coming. What would we think of him? He's a crazy homeless man. What if he was out there dancing naked for 3 years. Lock the crazy man up!

But this is from the Lord. Parables are very often a means of judgement from God. That's what Jesus is doing in giving parables now to the masses. God's judgment is now looming over Israel.

And this will tie into the actual parable of the sower: Jesus's purpose is to sift those who are outside of the Kingdom from those who are inside of the Kingdom. He's got thousands of people following him around. But who's really a disciple? Who's really in? How can anyone know? The parables are designed to separate the true from the false.

He preaches in parables so that 3 things happen:

- 1) They may see, but not perceive.
- 2) They may hear but not understand.
- 3) Lest they turn and be forgiven.

This quote is from Isaiah, we'll look at that in a minute. But notice the first 2 are basically the same. The senses are engaged a little bit but not fully. They see but not perceive. It's like driving by highway sign in the fog. You can see around and maybe see that there's a sign, but you can't read it. The fog is blocking your ability to understand.

And they can hear but not understand. You ever been in a place where people are speaking another language and you have no idea what they're saying? I worked in a warehouse for a year or so with some Mexican guys and we would often make fun of each other - it was all in good fun. And sometimes they'd make fun of the white guys just among themselves in Spanish. And you can tell when people are making fun of you - they'd be smiling and looking. But you couldn't understand.

Jesus is preaching this parable just like that. This parable is a crushing judgment - they're the rocky soil or the weedy soil or the path and they're all going to hell thinking they're fine - and they have no idea what he's even talking about.

They hear but they don't understand. Again what is he doing that? Lest they should turn and be forgiven. NIV/NASB: otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.

There's just no getting around what Jesus is saying here. He's speaking specifically so they will not repent and be forgiven. If he was clearer they might hear and believe. But he preaches in parables so they won't. This is damning judgment.

And this is not unique to how God acts. **Turn to Isaiah 6.** This quote is actually a paraphrase from Isaiah. Remember in Isaiah, King Uzziah had just died. He had been a king for a long time and when he died the country was thrown into turmoil. The country was wicked and God's judgment was coming. And the prophet gets an amazing vision of God. **Read 1-7**

We love this passage, it's called the beatific vision - the vision of God's throne. Actually John's gospel tells us that who Isaiah was actually saw was Jesus. This is Isaiah's vision of the pre-incarnate Christ. And Jesus sends Isaiah on a preaching mission. **Read 8**

Isaiah is to go and preach for God. And he's jazzed! He's seen the glory of the Lord, the holy of holies in the heavenly places and he's going to go proclaim that majesty! What's the message God?! **Read 8-10**

That is one bummer of a message. It's a message of judgement. Keeping on hearing, but you're not going to understand. Keep on seeing but you won't perceive. It's the exact same thing Jesus is doing. Jesus sent Isaiah on a mission that Jesus himself would later actually do himself. And he quotes **Isaiah 6:10** to take us back to this very spot.

Isaiah will be a prophet of judgment to Israel, not a prophet that brings revival to Israel. That's Jesus's ministry too. Now that's a bummer of a sermon he has to proclaim. How long do I need to preach that, God? **Read 11-13**

Isaiah has to preach this until every last person is scraped out Israel by the Assyrian and Babylonian armies. The preaching and the parables are judgments from God. They always have been.

Can I make one practical point here? Many people are afraid to tell others the gospel because "what if they reject?" Brothers and sisters, that's part of our ministry. They're already under the wrath of God, they should probably know about it and learn that there is hope if they repent. But the ministry of the OT prophets and NT apostles and Jesus himself is largely a ministry of judgement even as they offer salvation.

Turn back to Mark 4. I want to show you 2 more things about the parables.

So parables dominate Jesus's teaching from here on out. God's got to give us the ability to understand them and they often serve as damning judgment.

4) The Parable of the Sower is Essential for us to Understand. **Read 13**

What is Jesus getting at? He's saying that of all the parables he will preach, this one is essential for us to understand. In fact, if we don't get this one then we won't really get any of them. This parables and it's interpretation is a key that unlocks all the other ones.

So what do we need to know? That not everyone who claims to follow Jesus actually does. How will we know who is who? By their fruit. **Read 13-20**

Those who are true followers of Jesus can't but help produce godly fruit. In about 6 months the fields across the street will be ready for harvest. There's a lot of things that will grow in that field that might initially look like wheat. How will we know? Because when all is said and done, the true wheat will have a head full of grain.

Same with Christians. How do we know if someone is a true believer? We wait. If they are the fruit will come. It has to.

Just like in the next parable: the light has to shine, no true believer would put it under a basket. Just like in the next parable: the grain will come automatically. Just like the next parable: the mustard seed will just grow and grow and grow.

This parable helps us to understand the essential truth that not all who claim to be of Jesus are actually of Jesus. Those who are will grow til the end.

5) True followers of Jesus will actively pursue Jesus. Here's the rub we find here: Jesus preaches but only those whom God gives the secrets to will believe. So what now? What do we do? How do we know if we're in? We pursue Jesus with our whole heart. **Read 3, 9, 20, 23, 25**

At every turn Jesus says if you have ears to hear, then hear. How is that possible? You can't understand these truths just on their surface. They have to be explained.

Here's what Jesus is really saying: you want the truth? Come and get it. You need to pursue and get it with your whole heart. See here's what happens. He preaches this crazy sermon with all these weird parables that make absolutely no sense. And he says over and over: if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

And that sparks curiosity in some of those who are listening. They don't understand the parables **but they want to**. They desire to. It's God working in them, giving them this desire to know. So they hear this whole sermon, it makes no sense. But get this: they don't give up. They keep after Jesus. **Read 10**

This is why the timing in this chapter is important. After the sermon is over he's there with the 12, but he's there with others too. Who are these others? They are the ones who want to know more. They are the ones who - although confused - desire Jesus. They have ears to hear, and they want to hear more.

The crowds were interested, but only a little. Only for a time. These guys want to know. They want the truth. And so they keep after Jesus until he gives them the truth plainly. They're like Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord until morning and they won't give up until they get the blessing.

See one of the big temptations of Christians individually and denominations and movements is to make the gospel really easy to understand. Dumb down everything there is about Jesus. Don't call out sin, don't talk about hard doctrines, don't call people to repentance. All because we're worried they might not come. We don't want it to be too hard for them.

Jesus does just the opposite. He makes it as hard as humanly possible to come to him. He preaches nonsensical parables of judgment so that no one in their right mind would ever follow him. Why does he do that? So that when they do follow him everyone knows it's a work of who? God.

Listen, as we preach the gospel to people don't hold back. Don't pull punches. Don't leave anything out. Call people to the hard things. Call them to repent of the obvious sins in their life and the secret sins in their life. Call them to truth. Do it in love, but know that it will never push away those who have ears to hear.

Those who have ears to hear, those to whom it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom will love those truths and embrace those truths because God has done a work in them.

And listen: if you know the truths of the gospel and love the truths of the gospel do you know why? It's not because of you. It's not anything in you.

It's because God in his mercy has given you this understanding. He has not blinded your heart. He has opened your ears and eyes to behold the wonder of Jesus.

Pray