

## WHO IS JESUS? THE KINGDOM STORYTELLER (Mark 4:1-34)

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### INTRODUCTION

“Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin...” Let me tell you a story...

We all like a good story, and Christians are particularly fond of the parables told by Jesus. Why is that?

- Easy to remember and understand
- Suitable for all ages, from children to adults
- Simpler than teaching from the rest of the Bible (OT, epistles, Revelation, etc.)

We all know many of the parables, can repeat them without needing to study the details.

But do we really know what parables are for? What is the **purpose of parables**? Our passage today explains quite clearly, and we might be surprised by the answer.

Mark 4 includes four well-known parables, and some other bits. This morning we’re going to focus on the other bits, because they tell us something important about the purpose of parables.

### WHAT IS A PARABLE?

Not a simile, allegory, metaphor, analogy, myth, fairy story, real-life report...

A made-up story with a meaning

- Usually one main point, not intended to interpret every detail
- Told to challenge presuppositions, preconceptions and bias
- Intended to provoke thought and questions

And of course, we know what each parable means, right? (really? are we sure??)

### WHY DID JESUS TELL PARABLES?

Jesus used parables often, though not exclusively. Verses 1-2 – many people, many parables

But why? We assume it was **to make it easier for them to understand his message**, about the true nature of God and his kingdom. But Jesus said something different:

Verses 10-12 – Jesus tells parables for two reasons: **to reveal and to hide**:

- *When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them: “**The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’**” (quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10)*

More detail in the parallel passage in Matthew 13:10-17:

- *The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied: “**Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an***

*abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

*In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘**You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.** For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”*

When Jesus tells a parable, some people get it and others don’t. Everyone sees and hears the same story, but some don’t perceive or understand.

Jesus says that the difference is that some people have been given “the secret of the kingdom of God”, and some haven’t. Without knowing this secret, we can’t hope to truly understand the parables. So, what is this secret?

## THE SECRET OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Greek word used for secret = *mysterion*, used for the initiation rites used to admit someone into a secret society. These are things only known to the initiated, those inside the society. (“This is the voice of the Mysterions...”)

Jesus says that the secret has been **given** to some and not to others. Revelation is a gift from God, a gift of grace, not earned or deserved, and not achieved by human intelligence or reason. We’ll come back to this later...

The good news is that this mystery or secret is an **open secret**. The kingdom of God is not a secret society open only to the lucky few. Everyone is eligible for membership. The Bible says quite a lot about it:

- Romans 16:25-27 *“the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but **now revealed and made known** through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God”*
- Ephesians 3:8-10 *“to **make plain to everyone** the plan of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God”*
- Daniel 2:28 *“there is a God in heaven who **reveals mysteries**”*
- 1 Corinthians 2:7 *“we **declare** God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”*

This secret is available for anyone and everyone. But what is it? People have various ideas about this – it’s Jesus, the gospel... But the NT actually tells us quite clearly in several places:

- Ephesians 3:4-6 *“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”*
- Colossians 1:26-27 *“the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people ... God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*
- Romans 11:25-26 *“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery ... Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.”*

- Ephesians 1:9-10 *“With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”*
- 1 Timothy 3:16 *“Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: Jesus appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”*

The open secret of the mystery of the kingdom of God is this:

God’s purpose goes beyond Israel, and includes people of all nations. Non-Jews can be included in God’s family if they are in Christ. God plans to bring unity to all things in Christ, including his people. Christ in us is the hope of our glory, and this is only possible because Jesus came to earth, lived and died as a man, came back to life and returned to heaven.

Why is this important?

- The immediate hearers of Jesus were Jews, who assumed they were the only people that God was interested in. They’d forgotten the covenant with Abraham to be a blessing to the nations, and show the world what God was like. The inclusion of non-Jews in God’s family through Jesus was a complete mystery, a total surprise. (“They weren’t expecting that!!”)
- For us, it’s really important good news, because most of us here today are non-Jews, we’re Gentiles. If God’s purposes were centred only on Israel, the descendants of Abraham, we’re left outside with no hope. No – the amazing mystery is that this relationship is open to anyone, including us, and all God’s people are united in Jesus.

Knowing this changes everything for the disciples of Jesus and for us, including how we understand the parables.

## THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING PARABLES

In Mark 4:10-12, Jesus tells his disciples that people won’t/can’t understand or perceive the message of the parable unless they understand the secret. The disciples have been given the secret, but those “outside” haven’t.

Jesus explains in verse 13 that if the disciples don’t understand the parable of the sower, they won’t get any of the others. Then to help them know what to do, he uses a classic teaching method, with a series of worked examples: “I’ll show you how to do the first one, I’ll give you a hint to get you started with the next one, then you can have a go on your own.”

He explains this method in verses 24-25: *“Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”* If you start to understand one or two of the parables because you know the secret, you’ll get them all. But without the secret, even if you think you get one of the parables, you’ll soon realise that you didn’t get it at all!

First, he explains the parable of the sower in detail (verses 14-20). This is really familiar and obvious to us – because we’ve heard it many times before. But without this explanation, would we really get the point? (And do we really get it even now??)

Then Jesus tells them three other parables in verses 21-32. For the first one (the lamp on a stand, verses 21-23), he gives a partial explanation (*“whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open”*), and he reminds them that if they are “hearers” able to understand the secret, they should get this one.

Finally, Jesus tells the other two parables (the growing seed, and the mustard seed that turns into a tree) with no explanation at all (although he explains later, verse 34).

Can we interpret these parables in the light of the open secret that God's plan is to unite all things in Jesus, including people drawn from all nations? Here's my attempt – may not be right of course!!

- The sower/soils. God broadcasts his word widely into the world, and it is heard by everyone. He doesn't just choose the good soil (Israel) to plant in. Different people respond in different ways, but if anyone responds by accepting God's word, it will bear fruit in them.
- The lamp. The truth of God's plan and purpose for the world has been hidden within the Jewish nation, but now it will be revealed and shine out for all to see. The Jewish messiah turns out to be the saviour of the world.
- The growing seed and the mustard seed. I have no idea!!

AND FINALLY...

How should we approach the parables as we read them in our Bibles?

### 1. Listen

- Verse 3 "*Listen!*"
- Verses 9 & 23 "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*"

The parables are intended to provoke serious thought and consideration. Are we really listening to Jesus when we hear them, or does our familiarity with the stories prevent us from hearing what he's saying? Let's pray for revelation when we read.

### 2. Think

Verse 13 – Do we really understand this parable?

- What is the main point of this story?
- What did Jesus mean? What did his hearers understand?
- Are these the same or different?
- How does knowing "*the secret of the kingdom of God*" change what the parable might mean?
- Do we really get it, or is it still a mystery to us?

### 3. Pray

When Jesus told the parable of the sower/soils, at first no-one understood it. What was the difference between the followers of Jesus and everyone else? How did they react to their lack of understanding?

- **They asked Jesus.** Verse 10 "*When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables*"
- **Jesus explained everything.** Verse 11 "*He told them...*". Verse 34 "*But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*"

The message of Jesus is an open secret, hidden from those outside but revealed to his followers. Are we asking Jesus to explain his teaching to us, or are we trying to work it out ourselves? Let's not rely on our own intelligence, wisdom, good ideas, experience. Let's ask the author!

And if faith is a mystery to you, and the words of Jesus don't make sense – don't give up and walk away. Come and find out. Let someone introduce you to Jesus, then talk to him yourself. Find out who Jesus is, how to be adopted into God's family, what is the purpose of your life, what the Bible means, and how to live in a way that pleases God.