Mark Lesson 11 (2022)

**CONSIDER CAREFULLY WHAT YOU HEAR!**

*(The Importance of Good Listening)*

Mark 4:1-25

Key Verse: 4:24

“Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you- and even more.’”

In previous passages, we’ve learned that people responded differently when Jesus proclaimed the good news of God’s coming kingdom. Many people seemed to have welcomed it with great joy, while others rejected it without further consideration. Particularly, the Jewish religious leaders objected to Jesus and his teachings and contemplated getting rid of him. Even Jesus’ family members were upset and reluctant to support him and his ministry due to the anxiety and pressure they felt. Only a few people treasured his teachings and followed him as his disciples.

 In last week’s passage, Jesus made it clear that the genuine members of his family in God’s kingdom are not limited to physical ties but are those who obey God’s will (3:35). He also warned Jewish leaders who demonized him and his ministry by saying that God would forgive all the sins, except those against the Holy Spirit. Jesus was deeply concerned with the hardness of their hearts.

 In chapter 4, we see Jesus speaking many parables. Chapter 4 includes four different parables, the Parable of the Sower (1-20), the Parable of the Lampstand (21-25), the Parable of the Growing Seed (26-29), and the Parable of the Mustard Seed (30-34). These parables are about the secrets of God’s coming kingdom. According to 4:33-34, Jesus spoke to them with many other similar parables besides these four. In fact, he didn’t say anything to them without using a parable. We wonder why Jesus spoke parables to the people. We will know why while trying to understand the parables' meaning in today’s passage. This morning, let us think about the first two parables, the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Lamp.

 Look at verses 1-2. “Again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. He taught them many things by parables.” At the beginning of his Galilean ministry, Jesus used to teach people in the synagogues or the house. Yet, as more people gathered around him, he needed a bigger space (3:9-10). Despite the criticism and objection of Jewish religious leaders, Jesus remained popular among people. People came from all over Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, and surrounding areas to see a new preacher named Jesus. Unfortunately, most were not interested in Jesus’ message of God’s coming kingdom. They were interested more in his magical performance of healing and driving out demons. The fact of the matter is that they were pushing forward to touch Jesus, thinking that if they touched him, some miracle would happen to their life (3:10). They were highly enthusiastic about Jesus, but their zeal was without knowledge. They were not different from some shamanistic people. Jesus had to keep his physical distance from them by sitting in the boat as he taught them in parables. Chapter 4 records at least four different parables of Jesus. But he spoke more than just four.

 In verses 3-20, the parable is repeated twice: the story in verses 3-8 focuses on the farmer who scattered seeds, while the story in verses 13-20 focuses on four different soils, elaborating the meaning of the parable. I included the parable of a Lamp on a Stand (21-25) in my sermon on the Parable of the Sower because it explains the parable's underlying point.

 Look at verses 3-9. “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no roots. Other seeds fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.’ Then Jesus said, ‘Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.’” This story is just an ordinary story of a farmer who randomly spreads seeds on the field. It does not seem to convey great spiritual wisdom or skills concerning good farming. A wise farmer would not waste precious seeds by scattering them at random. But the farmer in the parable spread seeds all over the place, a path, a rocky soil, soil among thorns, and good soil.

I wonder what Jesus would have expected people to learn from the farmer's story. I don’t think people were impressed by this parable at all. But Jesus began the story by saying, “Listen!” and ended it with the phrase, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” It shows that Jesus had his point in speaking the Parable of the Sower. Yet, it’s hard to figure it out. What do you think is the meaning of the parable? My best guess is that Jesus simply illustrated his messianic ministry in Galilee through the parable. His messianic preaching and healing ministry were to give all people a chance to receive the seed of the kingdom of God. But only one kind of people could bear fruit, some multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.

Jesus spoke many other parables, which people couldn’t understand. I am sure their initial excitement and expectations went down. Probably, many of them lost interest and left Jesus one by one (Jn. 6:66), even though some people may have wanted to know more about the meaning of the parables. However, we don’t find any indication that Jesus tried to keep them by performing miracles. Look at verse 10. “When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.”

Look at verse11a. “He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.” Here, the phrase “the secret of the kingdom of God” is “God’s mystery,” which refers to the gospel truth – the forgiveness of sins and the everlasting life. It is a secret because it cannot be known to men apart from God’s revelation through the Holy Spirit. It’s also secret to those who harden their hearts. Look at verses 11b-12. “But to those who 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.’” In saying about hardened people, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10. It’s hard to deal with people who have many problems. Yet, nothing is more challenging than dealing with people who harden their hearts, whether it's because of prejudice, preconception, misunderstanding, selfish ambition, pride, anger, excessive worries, anxieties, bitterness, and especially fear. Unfortunately, for some people, it’s not their intention to harden their hearts, but they still do.

Yet, people can neither enter nor experience God’s kingdom when they harden their hearts. That’s why the people of Israel were told repeatedly in the wilderness not to harden their hearts when they heard God’s voice (Heb. 3:8-4:11). Due to the pandemic, economic downturns, and many personal and global challenges, we feel distraught. It’s easy for people to harden their hearts due to hardships. Yet, it’s not the time to harden our hearts. It’s time to soften and open our hearts to God and the truth of his gospel. We must remember that God’s coming kingdom is not external but internal.

In verses 13-20, Jesus explains the meaning of the Parable. Look at verse 13. “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?’” It indicates that the Parable of the Sower is the key to understanding other parables concerning the secret of God’s kingdom. In verses 14-20, Jesus introduces the example of his interpretation. Jesus explains very well, so we don’t need to interpret too much. Jesus’ explanation of the parable includes four types of heart soils.

***First, a path like heart-soil (15):*** Look at verse 15, “Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ” A path is hardened because many passers-by walk on it. These days, streets in the city are paved with asphalt or concrete, making roads smooth and hard. But our hearts shouldn’t be hard as the path. Some people’s hearts are hardened like a path so that no God’s word can penetrate.

Who might have this kind of heart soil? Good examples of this kind are Jewish religious leaders in Jesus’ time who rejected God’s truth by hardening their hearts due to their prejudice, self-righteousness, and fear. People who think they know everything and are better than others are also good candidates for this soil. Also, people who are preoccupied with the things of this world and pay no attention to their inner life or higher values can be good candidates for this kind of soil.

***Second, a rocky heart-soil (16-17):*** Look at verses 16 and 17. “Others, like seed down on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.” These people seem to be better than people whose hearts are hardened like the path. Yes, they immediately respond to the word with joy and excitement. However, their happy feelings don’t last long. When they face hardships, they are discouraged and quickly fall. The problem is that their heart soil is too shallow and has no roots, and the word cannot penetrate their inner life.

***Third, a heart-soil with thorns (18-19):*** Look at verses 18 and 19. “Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” These people seem to have comparatively good heart soil. The word can grow to a certain degree. Yet, the thorns of lives, such as the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth or pleasure, or the desires for other things, also grow in their hearts, eventually choking the word, making it unfruitful. Probably, most unfruitful Christians belong to this category.

***Fourth, a good heart soil (20):*** Look at verse 20. “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown.” The good soil represents those who continue to have a listening attitude, which welcomes God’s words of truth, allowing it to work out in their lives through a lot of inner struggles. The result of their open and listening attitude is remarkably abundant, which reminds us of Psalm 1:2 and 3, “But whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his lay day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruits in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.”

After learning the four different heart soils in the parable, we might have an idea of what kind of heart soil we represent. Many of us may identify with the second one - the rocky heart soil, or the third one - the heart soil with many thorns. Yet, we don’t want our hearts to remain unchanged and fruitless. We want to be changed and fruitful.

How can we be changed? Ultimately, it’s the divine work of the Spirit of God in us through repentance and faith in him. What do we learn from today’s parable? We notice in this parable that Jesus highlighted the importance of listening. He started the first part of the parable by saying, “**Listen,**” (3) and ended with the phrase, “**Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear!”** Then he also quoted Isaiah, which Mark paraphrased. Isaiah 6:9-10 states, “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make hearts of the people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Why would Jesus quote these words from Isaiah? It was to reemphasize the importance of listening because listening is crucial in our life of faith. He was saying to stubborn people, “Hey, you stubborn people. I don’t want you to listen and understand. I don’t want you to be healed and forgiven!” Jesus applied reverse psychology to help stubborn people to listen.

I believe the parable in verses 21-25 makes an excellent conclusion to the Parable of the Sower. That’s why I want to include it in today’s sermon. Look at verses 21-22. “He said to them, ‘Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.” Here, the lamp refers to Jesus’ words of truth, through which we can see things as they are, exposing even hidden things in our hearts and minds. Psalm 119:105 states, “Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light on my path.” Hebrews 4:12 states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” We know that the change in our hearts and minds does not happen automatically. We must first be aware of the darkness of our hearts through the enlightenment of God’s word or some events. Then, we may have godly sorrow or desire to change, primarily through repentance and faith in God.

Look at verse 23. “If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear” Jesus uses this phrase repeatedly to stress the importance of listening. As if that was not enough, Jesus elaborated it again in verses 24 and 25. Let’s read verses 24-25. “‘Consider carefully what you hear,' he continued. ‘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.’” It’s all about listening. First, what does he mean when he says, “Consider carefully what you hear”? It means that we should not be just mindless listeners. We should be conscious listeners and fully engage in communication. In other words, we must be critical listeners of God’s words.

People like to talk rather than listen. Why? It’s because listening is not easy. It requires a lot of struggle and self-discipline. Because we fail to listen carefully, we misunderstand and have many troubles in life. We should listen to ourselves. We should listen to others, especially our loved ones, like spouses, parents, children, friends, coworkers, neighbors, supervisors, teachers, students, clients, etc. How much effort do we make to listen? Of course, we should listen to God first by meditating on God’s words and prayers. Yet, it does not mean that we can neglect to hear what people have to tell us. We should also read good books besides the Bible. God may be telling us something vital through them. Good listening is critical to our spiritual growth and maturity. It’s our attitude toward God and his people. Good listening leads us to a fruitful life; God’s kingdom can grow in us, and it’s limitless (Gal. 5:23). Let us consider carefully what we hear.