



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Stories for Disciples and Those Who Resist Them

Mark 4.10-12, 33-34

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### *Living in the Mission Field*

We need to be involved in missions. What places come to mind when I say that? Is right here one of them? If it didn't used to be, there is little argument that our culture has become the mission field, and will probably become even more of one. Let's recall some things from the article by Ed Stetzer which I cited in the sermon, "Being Accepting People" (Mark. 4.1-9, 13-20).<sup>1</sup>

- Both the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey and 2012 Pew Research Study confirm a significant decline (15%) in the number of Americans who self-identify as Christians and a corresponding increase in "Nones", all since 1990.
- Stetzer rejects the "settled narrative that Christianity was in precipitous decline." Rather, "the Church is not dying. It is just being more clearly defined."
- We looked at Jesus' parable of the sower against that background, noting especially Stetzer's assessment that even many who do self-identify as Christians are not the "good soil" disciples Jesus commended in 4.1-9, 13-19.

Today, we continue looking at Mark 4's record of parables, focusing especially on the three verses that form a bridge between the parable of the sower and its explanation. To fully appreciate what these verses can teach us, we need to be sure we see our situation clearly. Consider these additional observations by Stetzer.

- "As the trend continues, we will see the 'Nones' continue to grow and the church lose more of its traditional cultural influence. . . ."
- Having acknowledged that, what Christianity is losing is "its top-down political and cultural influence," not our ability to have any influence.

But, we have a dilemma. Most of us can remember when Christianity was unchallenged in "its top-down political and cultural influence." The change we're experiencing leaves us in unfamiliar territory. How can we learn how to engage our culture as it now is? Where many are mildly interested in spiritual things, but ultimately shallow? Where many actively resist the spiritual? Where many appear more interested in entertaining experiences, not real spiritual depth? I suggest we look to Jesus, for the world I just described is the world of his time.

Our main point is this: the receptivity of many in the world will depend on our willingness to completely surrender to the Lord's word in our perception, understanding, and willingness to repent.

### *The Big Question: Why Parables? (4.10-12, 33-34)*

As it happens, our texts complement each other and set the theme for 4.1-34.<sup>2</sup>

1. 4.33-34 - Parables were used frequently, and it was intended that the disciples would know their meaning.
2. 4.33 - Active listening was required; the parables communicated the word "as they were able to hear it." "Parables are not really intended to confuse the crowds, but they are veiled communication forms, requiring active listening and the desire to understand."<sup>3</sup>

The clarity of vv. 33-34 helps when we begin to look at vv. 10-12. Jesus told the disciples that they were being given the secret of the kingdom (v. 10).

But then he said that "for those outside everything is in parables, *so that*" they would not perceive, understand, or turn and be forgiven. What are we to make of vv. 10-12?

1. Verse 12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6.9-10 where the prophet, having been called by God, was told his message would not be heeded.
2. The text in Isaiah is prophetic, taking into account God's knowledge (foreknowledge to us) which already knew that the people would not listen.
3. Matthew 13.13 helps us. Mark used ἵνα (*hina*) to introduce the quotation from Isaiah 6, but Matthew used ὅτι (*hoti*), in the sense of giving a reason (NRSV) or "because" (ESV). Both words "can express either purpose (Jesus speaks in parables with the purpose of concealing) or result (Jesus speaks in parables and the result is a concealed message)."<sup>4</sup>

The early chapters of Isaiah show why. Israel had surrendered to idolatry and abandoned loyalty to God and the covenant (see especially Isa 1.10-17; 5.8-23). In the language of Jesus, they were examples of the rocky and thorny soils. They were dull, had heavy ears, and blind eyes (6.9-10).

Jesus makes the same point Isaiah made: good-soil people are needed to discern and experience the marvelous things of God. In other words, we must be good-soil people.

### *Learning from Some Who Resist*

To fully appreciate what this means for us in Christ's community, we will benefit from looking at the matter from the other end. In an article in *The Atlantic* (June 6, 2013). Larry Alex Taunton wrote a firsthand account entitled, "Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity."<sup>5</sup> As the summary under the title put it, "When a Christian foundation interviewed college nonbelievers about how and why they left religion, surprising themes emerged."

They interviewed students nationwide who are members of Secular Student Alliances or Freethought Societies, atheist equivalents to Campus Crusade. "They are people who are not merely irreligious; they are actively, determinedly irreligious" (Taunton). Most had once been part of a church and held their views "*in reaction to Christianity*" (Taunton, his emphasis).

They asked them to "tell us your journey to unbelief." Here are a few things they learned.

- Many were disillusioned because their churches had encouraged them to be active in social justice causes, be involved in their communities, and “be good,” but often did not directly connect any of those things with Jesus Christ and the Bible.
- They felt their churches lacked depth, were not serious minded, and “offered superficial answers to life’s difficult questions.” (E.g., origins, sexuality, the reliability of Scripture, Jesus as the only way, etc.)
- They expressed respect for their ministers who took the Bible seriously. (One told how things changed for him when the church began to focus on “ceremony, handholding, and kumbaya.” and dismissed his “old youth pastor [who] actually knew the Bible.”)
- They longed for authenticity, didn’t find it, and so left for where there was something that “felt more genuine and attainable.”

What strikes me—and scares me—is that the students didn’t start out as the kind of people who would have been put off by the spiritual truths Jesus taught in his parables. But their churches, well intentioned no doubt, failed to help them be challenged by those truths. They failed to understand the most important thing we see in Mark 4: Jesus was always focused on “the word” (4.33; cf. 14-20).

Taunton concludes with a story of a time when David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic whose criticisms must still be answered, was seen in a crowd listening to the teaching of George Whitefield, the famed evangelist of the First Great Awakening. “I thought you didn’t believe in the Gospel,” someone said. “I do not, replied Hume. Then, with a nod toward Whitefield, he added, “*But he does.*”

How said for our mission field if skeptics understand it better than we show we do: that the receptivity of many in the world will depend on our willingness to completely surrender to the Lord’s word in our perception, understanding, and willingness to repent. The good news is that each of us still has time to check our focus, adjust as needed, and begin to engage our world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ed Stetzer, “Is the Church Dying in the U. S.? Redefining Christians as Cultural, Congregational, & Convictional,” [visionroom.com/church-dying-u-s-redefining-christians-cultural-congregational-convictional/](http://visionroom.com/church-dying-u-s-redefining-christians-cultural-congregational-convictional/) Accessed April 24, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I suggest that verses 10-12 could just as well have been used to introduce the entire section. Mark’s structural organization that begins with the introductory parable in 4.1-9 serves to catch our attention and prompts the question, why parables? The symmetry of vv. 10-12 and 33-34 set the theme for 4.1-34.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 78.

<sup>4</sup> C. Michael Moss, *When God Reigns: A Study in the Parables of Jesus* (Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishing, 2004), 31. See also Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), BibleWorks, v.9.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/listening-to-young-atheists-lessons-for-a-stronger-christianity/276584/> Accessed May 14, 2014. Taunton is a theist who, according to the article, has formally debated the late Christopher Hitchens and had less formal exchanges with Richard Dawkins, two prominent names among the group known as the “New Atheists.” He directs the non-profit Fixed Point Foundation.