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Text: Mark 4:1-34

Title: Listen!

Place: Swansea/Charlestown

File: Mark 4

Preacher: Stephen Taylor

Slide 1

Growing up, my Dad and Mum taught us kids a love of reading. My Dad was a librarian, my Mum always had a book next to her bed. And so they were always reading to us growing up and then borrowing books for us as soon as we could read ourselves. And one of the series I read through when I was young was CS Lewis’ “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”.

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Now I really enjoyed those novels, they were really great stories but about 15 years later I got into a huge argument with a Christian friend of mine about these books. For he was trying to tell me that they were Christian fiction. That beneath the story of Aslan and the four English children was a tale of God and his world. That Aslan was a type of Christ. And the White Witch was like the devil. And I just didn’t believe him. Until I reread them. And he was right. Underneath the story was a deeper meaning that I never knew existed. I hadn’t been brought up in a Christian household so I didn’t have eyes to see the Christian imagery. But it was there. And on my first reading I missed it completely! Completely.

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You see the Christian gospel can be a bit like that. Some can see it and others can’t. Which is why some people can come to church and go away saying God has spoken to me. That message was truly life changing. And another person can go to exactly the same service and say, that was boring, a complete and utter waste of time.

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Which is why when Jesus started to preach, some people heard what he said and got it. We saw last week he choose 12 disciples who were willing to leave everything to be with him. And yet others didn’t get it at all. They came along for the ride. For the miracles. And others still completely missed what Jesus was saying and wanted to stop him, kill him, destroy him. Why such a difference? Well that’s where Mark’s gospel goes next.

As Jesus begins to teach in parables. **4 “***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.*

When Jesus was in the synagogue he taught from the OT. But in recent times he wasn’t welcome in the synagogue so he goes to the people and when he teaches the crowds, he mainly uses parables. Simple stories about sowers, plants, birds and trees. Stories with a deeper message. Stories that those who wanted to hear could find out more and those who wanted to be in the crowd were left on the outside. And the first parable that Jesus taught, the parable that helps explain the other parables was all about a man who went out to

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1. **Sow (verses 1-9)**

*“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.****4****As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.****5****Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.****6****But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.  Slide 6*

***7****Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.****8****Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”*

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It’s about a sower sowing his seed indiscriminately. Not ploughing first and sowing later. But just scattering the seed in every which direction. And most of the seed fails to produce any sort of a crop. None at all. But some falls on good soil and that seed produces a good crop.

The aim of the sower is fruitfulness, it’s about getting a crop. And he does get a crop, there is a result from his sowing. But not from every seed. Some seeds land on the rock & doesn’t germinate. Some seeds land in the shallow soil & does germinate but soon dies. The 3rd lot of seeds produce a plant & no grain but the last lot brings home the bacon. There is a return on the sower’s investment. A crop with a good return, actually a great return is harvested.

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This parable is telling us the kingdom of God through the preaching of the gospel will break into the world and produce a crop. As God’s word goes out in different circumstances to different people it will receive different responses. But there will be a harvest. God’s word is that powerful. So in this part of the passage the message is to sow. Sow the seed. Get it out. Don’t keep it in the barn. Don’t be too precious about preparing the soil. Get it out. Let it loose. Ensure the word of God is released as far and as wide as you and I can possible get it.

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1. **Sow & Know (verses 10—20)**

But do know that one person will respond and another won’t. Some will become disciples, others will go with the crowd and others still will be like the Pharisees & reject God’s word. That is not because there is any problem with the seed. The issue lies with soil, with the hearts of the people who hear Jesus message, who come in contact with his parables

Jesus says, Don’t you know? Don’t you understand what’s going on? ***14****The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes & takes away the word that was sown in them.****16****Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word & at once receive it with joy.****17****But since they have no root, they last only a short time.* ***Slide 10*** *When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.****18****Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;****19****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.* ***20****Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it & produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”*

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We have to know that not everyone will respond to the word of God positively. Some will and some won’t. Some will hear the word and Satan snaps it away from them straight away. Satan is opposed to God and His ways. These people have hard hearts and because there is nowhere for the word of God to lodge, Satan has a field day.

Others have shallow hearts. The gospel comes to them and they are open to it, at least for a while. Then it begins to cost them something. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, there is not enough depth to keep them interested. So when we come to some tough times these people won’t be in it for the long haul.

Others still have a divided hearts. Yes there is room for Jesus in their hearts but it is not

exclusively his. Yes they like the bible, they are willing to follow the bible but they like money as well and they like fun and pleasure and the good life and bit by bit these good things strangle out the best thing. There is no spiritual fruit in their lives.

And lastly there are people with good hearts. And God’s word does a powerful work in their lives, producing 30, 60, 100 times what went in.

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And this message rings true in my life. So let me tell you a bit about my family. My mum is like the seed on the path. Hard to the things of God. When I have talked to her over the years you get nowhere. She’s the first seed. But I remember a time when my younger brother was open and he came to Church and he became a youth bible study leader. But then peer pressure came and a non Christian girlfriend and the initial enthusiasm wore off.

He’s the second seed. Which is a bit like my Dad, brought up in Church, a Methodist lay preacher who was a believer and went to Church until I came along and life got so busy something had to go and that was his faith. He’s the third seed. And in the midst of all this, there is my cousin who has gone through divorce and good times and temptations but there is spiritual fruit, a crop of good things God has done in her life. She’s the fourth seed.

The same gospel. The same word of God but different responses. Which should remind us that hearing God’s word is dangerous. We are hearing it today. So if we don’t have the right heart, if we don’t see fruit from the work of the sower then we will find ourselves in danger. Today is critically important. Today is a day we can follow Satan or avoid trouble or be ensnared by good things or we can allow God’s word to take root and bring about change.

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1. **Sow, Know & Show (verses 21-3)**

But Jesus continues. ***21 “****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 & whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.****23****If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”*

If God has sowed his word into our lives. If God is producing fruit in our lives, then it should show. And we should want everyone to see it glow! The light has come into our lives. Darkness has been chased away. So don’t hide that lamp, don’t put your light under a bushel as William Tyndale translated it so long ago. Let it show. Let is show!

For it easy for us to say, my light is so little, it’s so small. It’s a big world out there, a dark world out there, a different world out there. What good is my little light? It’s like one of those candles on a birthday cake, the breeze blows and it looks like it’s going to go out. But it’s not really our light, we are not the light. Jesus is the light & our light is to reflect his light.

The Gospel is the Light. And it shines so brightly there is no shadow so difficult it cannot dispel. There is no one beyond the reach of Jesus Christ. There is no heart so hard His grace cannot soften it and change it forever. The light will pierce the darkness; we just need to let it shine. The future is bright for the cause of Jesus Christ here & all over the world. After all it changed our lives and it can and will change the lives of many others. But more than that

Slide 14

1. **Sow, Know, Show & Flow (verses 24-5)**

***24****“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.****25****Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”*

The more that you allow this gospel message to flow in your direction, the more that it will flow from you. The more you listen, the more changes God will make. The more you allow the light to shine in your life, the more it will shine into other’s lives.

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So pay careful attention to what you hear. Let the measure of your response to the Word be full and complete and heartfelt and diligent and real. As preacher David Strain says **Slide 16**

“*Those who give themselves to the Gospel Word, they gain much. They gain new life. They gain pardon of sin. They gain adoption by God into His family. They gain grace to change and to persevere through every trial. They gain comforts that the world cannot know and they gain hope that no tragedy can touch and they gain heaven. But to those who do not respond to the Word, who shrug in indifference, who hear about Jesus and His obedience and His blood and yawn at the old, old story of Jesus and His cross, to them even what they have will be taken away. Oh, pay attention to what you hear. The Word of God proclaimed, no matter how familiar it may be to you, can never safely be ignored. What joy and peace you miss, what hope and happiness you forfeit when you ignore the Word of God*”.

The more you use your muscles, the more your muscles will be built up. The less you use them, the more they waste away. The more you use your brain, the more it develops. The less you use it the more you lose it. And the more you allow God’s word into your life. The more you listen, carefully listen, ponder, meditate, think it over, the more you unleash its power into your life. The more the Spirit will work in your life.

Slide 17

Every Sunday is then some sort of test, will I allow the flow of the word of God to come & go out? Every day when you ponder having a time with God or not is a test. Am I open to God’s imput or do I know better than God? So often today we lend our ears & give them to the internet, the TV, the radio or to our friends. When we should be big eared, jug-eared to what God is saying. Sow the seed. Show the light. Know the truth. Allow it to flow and

Slide 18

1. **Grow (verses 26-32)**

***26 “****He (Jesus) also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.****27****Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.****28****All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.****29****As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”*

Slide 19

The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of growth. A man scatters the seed, we sow the seed of the word of God. We shine the light of the light of the world and there will be growth. The harvest will come. It may not look like it. The farmer scatters seed and for a while nothing happens. Nothing at all is seen. And then a green stalk puts it head above the ground. The head is formed. The kernel fills it out and then the wheat crop is ready for harvest. Then the crop is brought in and the resultant bread is baked.

Once the seed is sowed and it goes to the good soil, it will happen. For God will make it happen. Our job is to scatter. God’s job is to grow. Our job is to get the word of God out there. God’s job is to bring about the change. God’s job is to bring people into the kingdom. And it is God’s job to ensure that all the harvest comes in.

Slide 20

Often when we do the work of the sower nothing seems to happen. William Carey the father of the modern missionary movement went to India and preached the gospel for 7 years before he saw his first convert. He ended up being there for 40 years only seeing a handful of people becoming Christians but he could still say “*the future is as bright as the promise of God.”* And *“Expect great things from God and attempt great things for God*”.

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Likewise Adoniram Judson went to Burma waiting 7 years before he saw his first convert. He would die bitterly disappointed because humanly speaking there seemed so little fruit from his labours. But towards the end of his life he said these words *“In spite of sorrow, loss and pain, our course be onward still, we sow on Burma’s barren plain, we reap on Zion’s hill*”

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Friends it’s hard to keep sowing, to keep serving, to keep switching on the light. But this is God’s way and God is the one who will bring the growth. When I was ministering up at Tweed I would often go and visit my non Christian brother for dinner. He owned a business and every week they seemed to break their sales targets, every month a new record, every year another holiday overseas. And he would talk about success and he would say after a while and how is the church going?

And what was I doing? Preaching, teaching, serving, loving, often without seeing much fruit. At times I was bitterly disappointed at the lack of change. But our job is not to reap but to sow. As Paul says “*one man sows, another reaps, but it is God that gives the growth”*.

And according to this parable the way he normally does this is not usually through the spectacular but through the every day. God’s kingdom doesn’t come from a tidal wave or a bolt of lightning. No God planted it in the coming of a peasant from Galilees. He gathered around him a bunch of nobodies. And with the help of the Holy Spirit that kingdom grew.

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Like a mustard seed. ***30 “****Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?****31****It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.****32****Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”*

Slide 24

God’s Kingdom might begin small, but it will grow large. It might look insignificant but it will be highly significant. It might be overlooked like a mustard seed but it will overcome all sorts of time and trouble like a mustard tree. For in the end the kingdom will be bigger than you can ever imagine. The book of Revelation says there will be people from every tribe, colour and nation all around the throne giving praise and honour and glory to God on that last day.

It may look insignificant but it is going to swamp the nations. Now what did God’s kingdom look like at the beginning of Mark 4? Jesus speaking from a boat with a handful of disciples, with Pharisees who thought he was blaspheming, a family who thought he was bonkers and crowds that were only there to see him do the miraculous. And yet where has that Kingdom gone to? It has spread to the very ends of the earth.

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When I grew up there were maps which showed the British Empire covering the globe. They used to say the sun never sets on the empire. But where is the British Empire today? It’s gone. It’s history. It’s no more. And yet Jesus says the seed I plant will last forever. It will grow and it will continue to grow.

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And it is growing in China, they say upwards of 120 million Christians. In Africa, in South America, there is phenomenal growth. Even in Islam, in Iran and parts of the Middle East, that seed planted by missionaries, planted by radio, being planted over the web is growing. Yes it may not be growing in Australia, it may not be growing in our suburb but it is growing.

Slide 27

So we are to continue to sow. Sow the seed. Spread the word. In every direction. We know that not everyone will respond but that those whose heart is open to God’s word will come into the kingdom. We are to continue to show off the light of Christ in all of our relationships. We are to allow the flow of God’s word, the flow of God’s love, the flow of God’s grace to come into our lives and then flow out to the lives of those are around us.

And we do that, day in and day out. And whether it looks like it is effective or not, God will bring the growth. God is responsible for the growth. God promises that there will be growth. So we leave it in his hands. We sow, show, glow, know and let him grow.

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Let me end by telling you about Helmut Thielicke who was a German theologian when Hitler came to power. Because he was outspoken in his criticism of Hitler, he was removed from his university post and sent to a small town, where he began pastoring a very small church.

He says that when he became a pastor, he decided to have his first midweek Bible study. For he held high hopes for making an impact in the church, and on his community, but he was extremely disappointed when only three people came to his Bible study: Two elderly ladies and an elderly man. He says as he sat looking at these three elderly people, outside the church he could hear the marching of the battalions of Hitler youth who’d swore their allegiance the Third Reich.

In that moment he wondered about the future of the Christian faith, as it seemed that the faith was dying while the Hitler war machine was growing stronger and stronger every day. Was it really true that the kingdoms of this world will one day become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah? Then Pastor Thielicke thought of this story, the mustard seed that grew into a plant. That gave him encouragement and hope, and of course when the dust settled, it was Hitler’s kingdom that fell, not God’s kingdom. The kingdom of might and force it didn’t last, but the Kingdom of grace continued to grow. In effect those three elderly people meeting as a Bible Study were stronger than the armies of Hitler just out the door.

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Friends, do we believe this? Have you ears to hear? Are you listening? God is speaking to us today. And the way we hear will determine the level of growth in our lives into the future.

**4***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.****2****He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:****3****“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.****4****As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.****5****Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.****6****But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.****7****Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.****8****Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”*

***10****When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.****11****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****12****so that, “‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”*

***13****Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?****14****The farmer sows the word.****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.****16****Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.****17****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.****18****Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;****19****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.* ***20****Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”*

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***30****Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?****31****It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.****32****Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”*

***33****With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.****34****He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*