



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Hearing Is Believing  
(*Parables*, pp. 44-50)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Mark and the Biggest  
Parable of All  
(*Parables*, pp. 76-80)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
[Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu)

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2006 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Hearing Is Believing

Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by "entering" into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us. How do we drop our guard so parables may have their intended effect?

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-20, 26-34

## Meditation<sup>†</sup>

Our forbears' belief that the slow digestive process of cows was well-suited to describe the process of engaging with Scripture stands in marked contrast to the language and expectations of a fast-food generation. Their wisdom calls us to a more gentle rhythm of prayerful reading in which patience, silence and receptivity are vital ingredients. In a world of sound-bites we need to learn again the art of listening with the ear of the heart.

## Reflection

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus rarely slows down enough to teach in parables. Why would this Gospel, which frequently calls Jesus "the Teacher," so sparingly record his instruction? Mark is preparing us to *hear* Jesus' teaching, James Edwards suggests. "The teaching of Jesus is like a precious gem that requires a proper setting to accentuate it. We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark's mind, if we first see it demonstrated. The spoken word is, of course, necessary, but as an interpretation of what Jesus does rather than as a substitute for it."

In Mark 4, Jesus underscores three parables – the Sower (4:1-9), the Growing Seed (4:26-29), and the Mustard Seed (4:30-32) – with instruction on how to *hear* the gospel. He teaches us that

- ▶ *the gospel will flourish in unexpected ways.* In the first parable, "A farmer hoping to eke out a meager harvest, at best, ends up reaping a bumper crop!" Edwards notes. "The hardpan, rocks, and thorns of the parable seem to symbolize the hard-heartedness, false hopes, and misunderstandings of Jesus' hearers.... Nor do things seem to have changed much today. We cannot help but be distressed by the self-interest and hedonism, materialism and militarism, evil and violence, cowardice and compromise that imperil the gospel and Church." Yet Jesus' story reminds us of the gospel's power "to supersede 'the facts' and do something wholly unexpected."
- ▶ *we do not determine the gospel's effect.* While the farmer works around the farm, the scattered seeds "sprout and grow" automatically. The farmer is like "a messenger or a midwife: both mediate a process, but the messenger is not the message delivered, and the midwife is not the child delivered," Edwards writes. Likewise, as we share the good news of God's kingdom, "human goodwill and intentions neither assist the gospel nor do human failures render it ineffective. We too may go to bed each night and get up each morning assured that this world belongs to God, and that God is secretly, mysteriously, and ineluctably working out his redemptive purpose in the world, despite everything to the contrary."



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2006 The Center for Christian Ethics

- ▶ *we “enter” into the parables and receive the gospel by HEARING.* The reception of the seed in the Parable of the Sower represents ways of hearing the gospel. Why does only the fourth way bear fruit? “The Greek text gives us a very important clue,” says Edwards. “In the first three hearings the verb ‘to hear’ is in the aorist tense,” which signals “a casual hearing that fails to register, a quick and superficial hearing, ‘in one ear and out the other.’ The hearing that results in a good harvest is...in the present tense, [which] signifies an on-going, sustained activity.... The hearing that bears fruit engages the gospel, ties up with it, even wrestles with it.”
- ▶ *our understanding of Jesus’ ministry is essential for discipleship.* If we understand the Parable of the Sower, which describes Jesus’ ministry, we will understand Jesus’ teaching and call (Mark 4:13). “Mark will stress this central truth at the mid-point of his Gospel in the all-important teaching on the road to Caesarea Philippi,” Edwards writes. “Once Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah of God, then Jesus can explain to Peter and the Twelve what it means to be his disciple (Mark 8:27-38). That is to say, once Peter and the Twelve stop being mere observers but enter into the life and mission of Jesus by authentic confession, then they can begin to learn what it means to belong to Jesus and follow him as disciples. As Jesus must go to Jerusalem and die on a cross, so too must Peter and all who would follow him deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus. Right confession leads to right discipleship. The cost of being the Messiah determines the cost of discipleship.”

### Study Questions

1. Why, according to James Edwards, does the Gospel of Mark record so few words of Jesus’ teaching? How does this make the Parable of the Sower even more significant?
2. Do you see the four sorts of hearing mentioned in the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower in our culture?
3. In Jesus’ parable, the farmer waits patiently for the seed to bear fruit. What are the dangers today of Christians being impatient and trying to determine the gospel’s effect?
4. “If the entire Gospel of Mark isn’t a parable, and particularly a parable about power,” Martha Sterne writes, “I don’t know what it is” (*Parables*, p. 77). According to Sterne, what does Mark teach about the nature of God’s power in Jesus Christ?
5. In Mark Moeller’s hymn “Christ’s Parables,” what does it mean for us “to hear these stories” of Jesus? How would truly *hearing* Christ’s parables change us?

### Departing Hymn: “Christ’s Parables”

† Robert Atwell, “Introduction,” *Celebrating the Seasons: Daily Spiritual Readings for the Christian Year* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), v.

# Hearing Is Believing

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Mark 1:14-45
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss “Mark and the Biggest Parable of All”
Questions 1, 2, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the “seed” parables which are a key to Jesus’ teachings in Mark’s Gospel.
2. To consider why the Gospel of Mark presents Jesus’ instruction so sparingly.
3. To discuss how we are “hearing” Jesus’ parables and sharing the gospel today.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Comment

“Today we are particularly conditioned *not* to hear things. We have trained ourselves to reduce advertisements, commercials, background music, television, telephone solicitations, and countless other public sounds and intrusions to ‘white noise,’” James Edwards observes. “Next time you are on an airplane, watch people during the seatbelt demonstration. They are intent not to hear a spiel that is intended to save their lives.... But how can we ensure that we do not reduce the proclamation of the gospel to white noise as well?” (*Parables*, pp. 44 and 48).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God would use Jesus’ parables to open our eyes, unstop our ears, and heal our hearts so that we might turn toward God and our neighbors in love.

## Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Mark 4:1-9, 4:10-20, and 4:26-34 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

This discussion of parables in Mark is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus’ parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are “Violent Parables and the Non-violent Jesus” (Matthew) and “Hazmats or Good Gifts?” (Luke).

Mark records only eleven parables. The four collected in Mark 4:1-34 are bounded by Jesus’ explanation of why he tells parables. (This study focuses on the three “seed” parables.) The Parable of the Sower anchors the unit. Matthew and Luke also record some of the parables:

<i>Sower</i>	Mark 4:1-9, 13-20	Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23	Luke 8:4-8, 11-15
<i>[Lamp and Measure</i>	Mark 4:21-25		Luke 8:16-18]
<i>Growing Seed</i>	Mark 4:26-29		
<i>Mustard Seed</i>	Mark 4:30-32	Matthew 13:31-32	Luke 13:18-19

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review the three “seed” parables in Mark 4 and explore how we are hearing and sharing the gospel today. In the other session, study Mark 1:14-45, which describes a day in Jesus’ ministry, and discuss Martha Sterne’s suggestion that we should interpret the Gospel of Mark as “the biggest parable of all.”

### Study Questions

1. “Mark is sparing with the content of Jesus’ teaching,” Edwards suggests, “because he wants to prepare readers for Jesus’ teaching.... We stand a better chance of understanding the gospel, in Mark’s mind, if we first see it demonstrated.... Mark’s vigorous narrative is designed to prepare us to hear what Jesus has to say. But hearing is difficult, and especially so when it is our first contact with Jesus. Mark postpones the teachings of Jesus until our familiarity with him puts us in a position to *understand* him.”

The Parable of the Sower is significant for several reasons: it is the longest and most developed narrative parable in Mark, it anchors the central set of parables in chapter 4 that present Jesus’ ministry in relation to the Kingdom, and its interpretation is the occasion for Jesus to explain how we should *hear* the gospel. Once we have seen Jesus in action (in chapters 1 through 3), we are prepared to hear his call to respond to the good news revealed through his ministry and teaching.

2. Divide into three groups to brainstorm how the gospel is being distorted today and our hearing is reduced to “in one ear and out the other” because (1) Satan takes away the word, (2) we are so rootless that tribulation or persecution causes us to beat a hasty retreat, or (3) we are so concerned for wealth and possessions that the word becomes fruitless.

Discuss specific strategies, given the problems mentioned by these groups, for engaging the gospel in an ongoing, sustained way. Do we best hear and heed the gospel in this way that bears fruit when we listen as individuals or as members of an attentive community?

3. Members might discuss how Christians can distort the good news into a pushy and domineering legalism when they try to “enforce” the gospel in their homes, at work, or in society. Or, how Christians may dilute or modify the gospel in an effort to make it more attractive to people today. A proper balance of “faithful love and judgment” (in Mark Moeller’s words) is more difficult to realize when we are not patient and trusting of the gospel’s power.
4. Mark 1:14-45 shows the shape and pattern of Jesus’ ministry, Sterne says. “You can look at the whole parabolic arc of his life or just the parable of a day and you find that the power and the glory radiate the same,” she writes. Jesus exhibits a new understanding of power, “the power of self-giving, self-sacrificing love.” Jesus “didn’t approach folks the power way, which is to terrify them with what will happen if they don’t please you or to seduce them with what will happen if they do please you.... He didn’t gather other people’s power to himself. Instead he gave power away from the get-go to some very unlikely, weak people.... And Jesus didn’t stay in one place long enough to build a power structure.”

Sterne labels the entire Gospel of Mark a “parable” because its entire rapid-fire report of Jesus’ ministry leaves us “with the joy and wonder of figuring out *What was that?*”

5. Christ’s parables give us glimpses of God’s “Kingdom that both is and is to be” (verse 2), which “spur us to reflect in fitting ways/on [God’s] faithful love and judgment” (verse 1). The hymn is a prayer to God, asking that God will use these stories to move us toward faithful discipleship in three ways: “move us from complacency” about ourselves and the world (verse 1), “challenge us anew / to repeat your wondrous story, calling humankind to you” (verse 3), and change “our hearts to live your story ‘til your holy Kingdom comes” (verse 3).

### Departing Hymn

“Christ’s Parables” is on pp. 51-53 of *Parables*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.