

# Listen!

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, we're going to... It was quite a long reading today if you're following it in the church's Bible on page 8, 3, 9. If you have that, there's Bibles at the side. You're very welcome to take one and follow it through. We looked at... well, Anne Redford is chapter 4, right through to the end of that section, verse 34. But it's really all one section.

And so, I'm going to do an overview. I'm not going to go into any great detail, but it's meant to be one section. And so, we'll take it as one of the different parables within it and there's different things that happen. And if you look to the bulletin sheet, or if you ever look at the bulletin sheet or the Wednesday email, you'll notice the sermon title that comes up. And the sermon title this week is, Listen with an exclamation mark.

And you may look at that and think, oh my goodness, there's a sermon title of a weary preacher who's frustratingly calling his congregants to attention and say, for goodness' sake, listen. It's not like that at all. But it does remind me of... sometimes ministers give poor responses or think weirdly about things. When someone at the end of the service came up to them at the end and thanked them very heartily for what a great sermon that was.

And as the way ministers are, they don't really know how to react and they get all, you know, false, kind of piety. And they're, well, that's not really me, it was the Lord. And the response from the person was, well, it wasn't that good. So, you know, you have to recognise sometimes that when I say the title is, listen, it's not coming from me and it's not me demanding that you hear what I'm saying. But it's actually a good principle that God often uses in the Bible, which we often talk about here as repetition. And in this passage, he uses the concept of listening a lot. And he begins by saying, you know, listen, it's important as he starts teaching them. Verse 3, listen, he says, as he introduces the parable. And then in verse 9, if you follow with me, he says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. And he repeats that in verse 23, where he says, pay attention to what you hear. And if anyone has ears to hear, he says again, let him hear. And then in verse 33, he says, with many such parables, he spoke the word to them, as they're able to hear it. So we've seen that quite a lot, haven't we, in the Scripture, that when God repeats something, when the authors repeat something, it's because it's important and it's worth repeating. And that is really both what God and what Mark is wanting to get across, even in the whole emphasis of what the parables are about. They're all about listening to God and listening to His words.

And the focus of these parables is having the right kind of ears. It's all about having the right kind of ears, not physically, obviously, but having listening ears or having hearing ears. Now, I'm going to kind of slightly, to help get across, I'm trying to say, I'm trying to say there's a slight difference between listening and hearing. Jesus doesn't make the difference between the two words. But just for sake of emphasis, I'm going to say there's, we can listen or we can hear. And there's a difference between how we listen to God's word. I think there's a visual hearing of God's words or a physical hearing of God's word where we see the truth, we visualize and understand it, and then we act on it.

[ 3 : 42 ] And that's tremendously important because that's the kind of listening that Jesus wants from us, listening that is attentive with a view to change and transformation. So there's two questions that a passage like this brings up for us in our own, your own mind and my own mind as we come to God's word, either reading it or we come to church and hear sermons or podcasts or whatever it might be in God's word.

First is, do you listen with your mind already made up? Because it's very easy for us to do that. And that's really what the majority of the crowd we're doing here, because that big crowd had come to listen to Jesus. We're told that in verse one, a large crowd gathered.

And then after the parable was told that he was alone. So the majority, there's one or two people left, but the majority of people just went away. And there's something powerful in that whole message which comes through in the parable itself that many people in Jesus time were attracted to his, the drama of Jesus, what was happening. He was almost becoming a folk hero. They liked pursuing the idea of, you know, as we've seen before, as Jesus coming as the Messiah. And there was political and social undertones towards that. It was intriguing. And they joined the crowd. So when a crowd came, they followed the crowd to hear Jesus. And they liked the stories. They were hearing these parables, these stories of Jesus. But they weren't really listening. They weren't interested in following up what these parables meant. They listened to them, said, well, that's a nice story. And then they went home. And they were unchanged by what they heard. They didn't really want to hear what Jesus was saying and what he was meaning through the parables and the challenge he was bringing them. And there's a history to that because they were God's people, primarily of the Old Testament, who were not listening to what God was revealing about the coming Messiah and who rebelled against God and turned against God and were idolaters. They missed out. We're looking at that in the evening in Isaiah. They came under God's judgment.

In fact, Jesus here quotes Isaiah chapter 6 in verse 12. When he talks about the parables and he says, you know, I speak to them in parables so that they may indeed see but not perceive, may indeed hear but not understand, lest they turn and be forgiven. And we looked at that and what that meant in terms of God's judgment against their continual rejection of His message. The majority of the crowd, they were listening with their minds already made up about Jesus. And the danger is that we can listen and read about Jesus with the same mindset. We come to the Bible, they're just stories. We read a story. It can be enjoyable or otherwise. We come to church and listening in a kind of consumerist way to the nature of the sermon and whether it is enjoyable at 20, 25 minutes or a tremendous drag in our week. But the message and the Word has no real impact on our heart or our lives when we read it. We open the Bible in the morning, we do our Bible reading, we close it. And before we've taken three steps, we've forgotten what was in the Word and we've not allowed it to soak and it hasn't changed us because consciously or unconsciously, very often our mind is closed. Our mind is already made up that basically we're okay, we know what we're going to do and we're just going to carry on the way we are. It doesn't impact our life and impact our heart and revolutionize us from the inside. Do you listen? Do we listen with our mind already made up? Or are we listening or are we hearing, if I'll use a different word to mean the same thing, are we hearing in order to be transformed? Because that's what the disciples did in this story. Particularly the parable of the Sower seems to be critical in all of Jesus' teaching here that He's giving, the central parable. And the disciples stayed after He told the parable and they asked Him, what do they mean? Not just the parable, not just the disciples, but one or two also stayed from the crowd. We're told in verse 10, who was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parables. So they knew that Jesus had something to say to them, something important, and they were frustrated by the parables because they didn't understand them. They were looking for the King and for the message of the kingdom, and they were His followers. We've seen that already. They'd given up everything to follow Jesus and to be His disciples. They didn't want to go home unchanged under God and under His word. They knew that Jesus wasn't a sideshow. He wasn't just telling them pretty stories to send them on their way. They knew that they had things to learn, even though like me and like probably all of us, they're slow to learn. They did want to know. The secret of the kingdom was revealed to them because they were hungry.

[ 9 : 13 ] They asked Jesus, well, what does it mean? What's the importance of this? For them it was spiritual, in other words, life and death issues for them. And that really is the background and the foundation of this whole passage. It's all about listening, the kind of way we listen to God and His word and how God uses that. Now there's a very clear Bible illustration about that in James chapter 1 where James says, you know, we want to be not just hearers of the word but doers of the word. So we're not to be, use the illustration of not going to a mirror and looking at yourself in the mirror and then forgetting what you look like.

I'm not sure exactly what, if you're meant to, if that image is supposed to be, you see something really gruesome about yourself in the mirror and you know, God wants you to change that. I'm not sure. But it's just making that point that you don't just immediately forget what you've seen. If something is needing to be done, like, you know, well, I don't shave but if any of the guys here are shaving, you go in the mirror and there's a big, you've missed out a big bit. It'd be crazy to go back,

go into the workplace with just that big lump of hairy mess without changing it, shaving. You know, you don't forget what you see. You act on it is what James is saying. And that's exactly what Jesus is saying about how we listen. The scripture is like a mirror into our hearts and it challenges us to change and be transformed by His grace. Now my illustration is slightly different from that but it's the difference between how we listen, say you're in a classroom for whatever reason or in a lecture hall and someone is explaining how an incendiary device is made and they're talking about the colors and the wires and how it's put together and you're kind of half listening and you're doodling and it might be or might not be of interest to you. You're kind of hearing it in the background. It's the difference between listening to someone explaining that and as opposed to hearing the remote instructions of a bomb disposal expert who is telling you about this ticking bomb that is right in front of you about the right wire to cut so that it doesn't explode. You see the difference the way you'd listen in that situation? You listen intently to what you say, what color? Where? When do I do it? You want to listen because it's a life and death matter and you might be blown up by that incendiary device but if you're just listening in a classroom, eh, take or leave it, it's not that important. And so Jesus is trying to get across the difference between how we listen and how we hear His word. And as we've seen already in Mark's gospel, there are two major themes that run through the gospel of Mark. His emphasis is Jesus, revealing Jesus and allowing Jesus to reveal Himself. So there's, the emphasis is very much on immediacy and learning all about Jesus towards the cross and also discipleship. He's teaching these two things, teaching about Jesus and He's teaching about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. You know, follow me, He says, and then He goes on to explain discipleship through the gospel. And that's briefly how we're going to look at this section for a few minutes. As Jesus teaches about Him, He asks us to listen as He teaches about Himself and also as He teaches about discipleship and through these parables and through this section. And so I'm going to, I'm not going to go through them in detail but I'm going to try and pull out the major themes that Jesus is teaching about Himself and about being His followers. And when He teaches about Himself, He's reminding us that He is the one that alone gives understanding and discernment. So when the disciples don't understand the parable, it's to Jesus they must go. It's not kind of some intellectual knowledge that will enable them to unpack or unlock the meaning of the parables. It's Jesus who gives understanding and discernment. He's the one who reveals the secret of the kingdom of God. And we see that in our lives and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, He gives us to understand and open up Scripture. So when we read Scripture, when we come to seek to know more about Jesus, we can't just do it on our own. It's not simply an intellectual exercise. It's not just about theological knowledge. We need the Holy Spirit and we need Jesus Himself. We need to ask Him. It's His kingdom. It's His harvest. He's the judge. And He's well aware, as we see in the parable of the Saur that there's an enemy, spiritual enemy, who is willing to snatch away the truth and the knowledge from us. And so there's a spiritual unseen element every time you open Scripture, every time you do whatever you call your quiet time or your time with God. It's never just an exercise. It's a spiritual war each time. And we need the King of Kings. And we need to recognize there's someone willing to snatch that word away from us. And we will see it, won't we, again and again. I'll read something and I can, before I've reached the door, I'll say, what did I just read? Completely gone. Because unaware, unalert, not dependent on Jesus. He alone gives spiritual understanding. But we recognize also in the parable of the Saur and the parable of the seed growing and the mustard seed. Actually, particularly in the parable of the Saur, we're told that the word, the seed is the word, that Jesus is the word. So He is the seed. And that is also hugely important that when we come to the word, we don't look at it like it's a moral code. We don't look at it like it's just a set of kind of independent commands that teach us how to live. Primarily, the word is not a moral code for us to accept. It's good news, moral code to obey. It's good news to accept. It is a Savior to embrace. So when we come to listening to the word, we're listening to a person, we're listening to a Savior, we're listening to a Redeemer. We're not primarily simply learning a set of rules by which to live or lies because it's impossible for us to do that. The laws are there to convict us of our need of a Savior. Jesus is the word, He's the seed in all of these parables. But [16:10] Jesus is also the secret in verses 11 to 13. He speaks about the interpretation of the parables, and he says he talks about the kingdom of God for those outside will not understand, but for those on the inside, they will receive the secret of the kingdom of God. And Jesus Himself is the secret. We often think and wonder about what the secret is. The parables were hidden to the listeners because they didn't really want to know. They were walking away. They were going home for their tea. They didn't wait to find out what the message meant. They wanted an easy Savior.

They wanted their kind of Savior. There was no cost, no mystery, no learning, no change. But the secret of the kingdom that Jesus held was being revealed as He was living His public ministry, revealed towards the cross, towards His resurrection, and towards the ascension. And the secret was being unfolded before the mephoenaly they would see it. He talks about that in the parable of the lamp and the basket. A lamp brought in verse 21 to be put under a basket or under a bed, but on a stand, for nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, not as anything secret except what's come to light. And He is bringing to light. He is revealing to those who will listen the secret of the kingdom, which is that He is the Savior and He is the Redeemer. And He is open and available to any who honestly seek Him, who look for Him, who cry out to Him. And maybe you're in that place today. Maybe you're in a place where, eh, I'm not sure about Jesus. I'm not sure about the gospel. Maybe you've professed Jesus for many years and you're saying, eh,

I'm not sure about Jesus anymore. He's the secret. We keep going back to Him. He is the Word. And what we really made clear in these parables is He alone empowers life and growth. You've got that little parable of the seed growing, where the farmer's seed throws out the seed and he sleeps and rises and night and day and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how the earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain and then the harvest. And Jesus is saying that He's the one that empowers spiritual growth and life in our lives. It's the mystery, isn't it? That maybe there may be two people sitting together here in the front seat. Well, there's nobody sitting in the front seats because I don't want to highlight anyone. But you can imagine if there was two people sitting in the front seats and the Word is preached well or indifferently from the front.

And one person might fall on their knees weeping at the end of it. And one person might go completely unchanged, unmoved, because there's mystery to the way the Word is received because God is at work and we recognize that God is at work. And so what might seem flat and dead like a seed in our hands, might seem there's not much life in a seed. As we sow the seed, as we live our lives, as we reflect Christ, as we share His Word, then we can leave the growth and the harvest to Him. And even in our own hearts and lives, we need to recognize that He is working in us and through us and transforming us, transforming us by His grace.

Say a little bit more about that just as we close. So He's teaching us that He's the one who gives discernment, He's the Word, He's the secret. He empowers life and growth.

[ 20 : 05 ] And also, He's teaching us here that spiritual life comes through death. It comes through primarily His death, obviously, but there's a parallel in our own lives as Christians.

And that's the third parable He speaks about here, the parable of the mustard seed. Again, worry. Well, it's not mentioned in this actually, but all three parables which talk about the seed remind us of John 12, 24, which is implied in all these parables, where Jesus says, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Verily, I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. So all that Jesus is teaching here is kind of summarized in that image that He gives about the seed dying, speaking about His own death and His own resurrection. And that's tremendously important because remember, Mark is moving us quickly towards the cross immediately, immediately, immediately. So often we hear that in Mark's gospel, taking us to the greatest act of love that has ever been seen in the universe, in heaven or in hell, anything that we could ever imagine. Where the infinite God becomes flesh, lives, kills Himself and then is nailed to the cross and does so for His enemies, taking God's wrath upon Himself. And through His death, obviously we know, comes spiritual life because He took God's wrath and God's punishment in our place. And He's reminding us of Himself that spiritual life comes through death. And that's not only as we accept our need of a Savior and that it's my sins that nailed Him to the tree, but also that we have to crucify our sinful natures and repent of our sins in order to know His life in our hearts. And it's hard for us to do that. We want, I want the victory without the battle. I want the glory without the cross. And the people didn't want a crucified Savior. They wanted a singing and dancing Savior. It was an abomination to think about a cursed, crucified Redeemer.

And often we implicitly recoil from the idea of life coming from death, that we need to die to ourselves and our sinful, selfish, proud, arrogant natures before God and fall in our knees for Him to receive His love and to receive His grace. We want the blessings but not the battle, the trouble, the persecution and the worries.

So I think Jesus is teaching us very much about Himself here and about the nature of His ministry and of His salvation and of the counterintuitive way in which we are redeemed.

[ 23 : 29 ] And the mystery, let's not lose sight of the mystery. Let's not have it all wrapped up in A to Z. Let's remember that there is mystery when we share our lives in the gospel with people. And there's mystery in God redeeming and His work and how He transforms. There's great mystery and these parables speak of that, speak of our impotence, our inability to really...

You can't, you can't by the greatest act of the will, you can't throw a seed into the ground and say, come on, grow. Nothing. No amount of science and knowledge and insight and wisdom can enable you to make something that's dead grow. And Jesus is reminding us that there's a spiritual lesson for our own lives that we're not self-service Christians in His sight. So, teaches about... And I've kind of strayed there into discipleship.

Finish with Jesus teaching about Himself, finish with Jesus teaching about discipleship, what it means to be a follower of Jesus and kind of in a little sense repeating what we've looked at. He reminds us that discipleship, that some people will struggle with discipleship because they're not really listening to Jesus. They'll listen for a while. The parable of the sower reminds us of the different kind of seeds, one that there's no growth at all.

Satan takes the word away, right away. But the others, there's some kind of growth, but only one where there's fruitfulness. And he's saying, some people listen to Jesus and like Jesus until they hear something better. So, wealth or other desires are more important and they listen to them. And so, it chokes out Jesus and there's no fruitfulness, there's no growth. So, he's saying that if we're listening to something better than Jesus, then Jesus becomes insignificant and unimportant and is relegated and we can't bear fruit. So, if we're listening and find something better than Jesus, we'll reject Him. But also, if we're listening and then something worse comes along, then we'll blame God. So, the parable speaks about that as well, whether it's opposition or rejection or trouble or life itself. All these things that come in and Jesus says they're all going to be there. You're not going to come in Jesus and it's going to be just a garden. There's trouble and persecution and difficulty and opposition and illness. And it all comes into our lives and he says, if these things sound worse than Jesus and are stronger than Jesus and more overwhelming than Jesus, then we'll also not listen to Him. We'll reject His promises. We'll walk away from Him and say, well, He doesn't really care. He's not really interested. And I'm not... I don't care about what He says about growth in my life through these things because it's either something worse coming along that we listen to and we'll listen to Satan saying,

Jesus doesn't really love you. He would never let this happen if He loved you. Or something better comes along and saying, hey, you don't need Jesus anymore because now yourself, yeah, you're independent. You've got all the wealth you need. You've got a great house. You've got a lovely family. All these things may come in, other desires or difficulties. Either end of the spectrum. Are we listening to Jesus? Jesus is saying there'll be no fruit if you respond negatively in either of these situations to what Jesus is saying. The danger is that we become fruitless because we're choked. We're choking Jesus. We're not listening to Him. We're not responding by faith because the point of the parables is saying that as we respond to Jesus, think of the incendiary example and the importance for our lives of responding. When we listen to Jesus, we bear fruit for Jesus because we recognize Him as

[ 27 : 47 ] Christ and as Lord. And we bring forth an amazing, overabundant, unexpected fruitfulness because the commentators do seem to think that the idea of, in the ancient Near East, of fruit that was 30-fold, 60-fold and 100-fold is really unusual, really blessed. At best, it would be maybe 10-fold in a really good context. So Jesus is saying, He's talking about the importance of fruitfulness and also the miraculous nature of being fruitful when we look to Jesus, when we trust in Jesus. And He's saying that therefore when we do this in our own weakness and come to Him and listen and respond, we experience that fruit of the Spirit, which of course the Bible goes on to use as illustrative, love and joy and peace and patience and goodness and faithfulness and kindness and gentleness and self-control.

What are all these things? These things are not gifts for a nice day. These are the gifts you'll need tomorrow when the kids are screaming or when your colleague at work cheats again or when you're bullied in school or whatever context you find yourself in. That's the fruit of the Spirit that deals with the battles and that keeps us from depending on the riches and the wealth or damning God when the bad times happen. Because we see primarily that the issue is with our hearts and that Jesus is

speaking into our hearts and searches our hearts and wants us to enjoy the process of dying to sin. Well, maybe not enjoy the process, but He wants us to engage in the process of dying to sin because it's a healthy process.

He's rooting out what damages the selfishness and the pride and that can be His light, you know, it talks about His light, that can be exposing. But it's great, you know. It's amazing because He replaces it with His fruit and with His blessedness and that's why it talks about Jesus offering life to the fool. But it's a work that He does in our hearts. It's a non-going work because the last thing I'm going to say is that fruitfulness takes time.

That's what this passage is also speaking about in terms of discipleship. You know, he's saying that, you know, the farmer waits for the fruit. He doesn't just throw it and whoosh, come up immediately lighting the cartoons. Christian life isn't like that, we come to Jesus, whoosh, all of a sudden we're holy, hey. Because it takes time and it takes effort and it takes dependence and partnership with the Lord. Yes, we're redeemed from day one.

Yes, we're counted legally righteous from day one. But the work of sanctification is lifelong and it takes patience and it takes the farmer has to wait for the fruit to be born and I think that's important for us in our lives. It's important for us to remember that fruit, patience is one of the fruit of the Spirit. And we pray a lot, don't you pray a lot? Are you giving up on prayer because, oh, I prayed for ages about something and nothing's happening. I want to harvest, I want the fruit, I want to change. Don't give up praying because we wait on God and we wait on God to remind us that much of His work involves patience.

[ 31 : 20 ] And I especially mentioned that with regard to evangelism, about sharing your faith, about telling other people about Jesus. We feel sometimes we need a killer sentence every time. Oh, man, he got a killer sentence in here. I need to tell him about the whole thing. I need to tell him about creation, redemption, follow, new creation, all in one. They'll never be saved. And we think we miss the opportunity and we forget that seed that bears fruit falls on ground, it's been plowed, that the stones have been taken out of, it's been worked, you know, time has been taken over it and it's been prepared and God prepares people's hearts. We don't see that. I'm not saying that sentence, he's not saying anything far from it, but don't give up, don't feel that evangelism is just one throw of the dice.

It's one opportunity to get that text rammed down their throat and oh well, somehow mystically or magically, if we just say that, it's like a magic incantation and boom, people will be saved. It generally doesn't work like that, covenantally, and it doesn't work like that relationally. We break down barriers, we gain people's trust, we live out Christ, we example the message, then when we're asked we give a reason for the hope that's within us because people can see that our lives are being changed and that we're going to God's Word and it's transforming us. And they say, well, why do you follow Jesus? Why is it allowing it to change your morality and your life and your patience and the way you respond to your boss, the way you respond to whatever it might be? Fruitfulness takes time. And we spend a lifetime, and I'm sure anyone over 59 here, 58, I'll include myself, anyone over 58 here will say that that is absolutely the case, that to be able to pray, your will be done is the hardest prayer that we ever make because we spend our lives saying my will, Lord my will, and

He's asking us to change the whole basis of who we are and what we do. So, are we spiritually, are we in the classroom listening casually to the words that may or may not change our lives or do we have an incendiary right in front of us that we need to respond to in the right way and listen with a fruitful hunger to be transformed? Are we going to walk away from God unchanged each time we come to Him or are we going to allow Him gently and gradually and patiently to mold us? It's a huge challenge. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to move our lives according to your, that great relationship we have with you by faith in Jesus as we trust you. We trust what you did 2,000 years ago on a cross.

We name our own names there that Jesus died on the cross and took the wrath of God because I can't even make myself right with me, let alone make myself right with God. Maybe claim and know and understand what that means and may our lives be transformed by your loving, committed grace to transform us and to enable us to be fruit bearers bearing your image with our own unique individual lives. So, help us, give us patience and evangelism.

Help us not to give up, help us to keep praying, living, sharing and making Jesus real to the people around us we ask for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.