

The Conflict Widens

Jesus' fame spread like wildfire beyond the bounds of his Galilean homeland. The power of his message was confirmed by signs and wonders, drawing people from as far away as Idumea to the south and the port cities of Tyre and Sidon to the north.

Yet, as quickly as his popularity spread, so did the controversy that surrounded his ministry. Religious leaders from Jerusalem journeyed northward to confront the challenge Jesus brought to their way of life. And even Jesus' own family saw him as a stumbling block.

Instead of retreating to avoid conflict, Jesus quickly moved forward, appointing twelve select followers to minister in his name.

It was upon a mountaintop that Jesus called certain individuals to meet with him, appointing them to be apostles. The word "apostle" is from the Greek, *apostolos*. It means "one who is sent on a mission." The apostles had a specific ministry to perform for the Master in his Kingdom. So it was imperative that they spend time with Jesus and that they be available to be sent out to "preach and to have authority to drive out demons."

What a mixed group of men this was! Matthew was a tax collector and, therefore, an outcast. Then there was Simon the Zealot. Zealots were a band of fiery, violent nationalists who were pledged to rid Palestine of its foreign yoke, even if it meant murder or assassination. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had the nickname "sons of thunder," probably descriptive of their personality. And of course, there is Judas Iscariot, the dishonest treasurer of the group who will eventually sell his loyalty for 30 pieces of silver.

This was a strange group of men. Four were fishermen, one a hated tax collector, another a member of a radical political party. Of six, we know practically nothing.

These men had no special qualifications at all. They were not wealthy; they held no special positions in the government or society. They had no special education and were not trained theologians. They were ordinary men, who had the extraordinary privilege of being trained for their mission by Jesus, the Son of God.

Insane?

Jesus was continually being pressed by the crowds. Even when he entered the house where he was staying the crowds came along. It was so bad that Jesus and his disciples were not even able to eat. You can understand why. Jesus was healing people and there were a lot of people who needed help. Jesus' family must have heard about everything that had been happening and they came to the conclusion that he was out of his mind. They came to "take charge" of him.

Why did his family believe that he had taken leave of his senses? Here are a few possibilities.

1. Jesus had left home and the carpenter's business at Nazareth to go and preach all over the countryside.
2. Jesus was in direct conflict with the religious leaders of his day. While everyone else was conforming, he was seemingly rebelling.
3. There were reports that he was healing people and casting out demons. Since Jesus' family acted the way they did might be an indication that when Jesus was growing up he did not perform miraculous signs and did not grow up differently than most of his peers.
4. Jesus had gathered around him a group of his own, composed of fishermen, tax collectors, and some fanatics.
5. Jesus had thrown away his security. He left his job, his home, his family and what material possessions he had accumulated in a lifetime.

There are many other possibilities that could be added, but suffice it to say that Jesus was not acting like a normal sane person. What other possibility could there be except that he was insane?

Lord of the Flies?

Not only did his family think that Jesus was insane, the religious leaders thought he was possessed. Jesus had been driving out demons and the only possible way that the religious leaders could rationalize this was to attribute Jesus' power to Satan. They claimed the Jesus was being empowered to cast out demons by Beelzebub. Beelzebub is the Greek form of a Hebrew name. You will readily recognize the first part of the word in Hebrew, "Baal." Baal in its simplest form means, "lord." "Zebub" mean "flies." Thus, "Baal-zebub" means, "lord of the flies." This is very close to the Hebrew word "Baalzebul" which in Hebrew is a name for Satan ("prince of Baal"). It may be that there is a play on words in this passage, but the intent is extremely clear. The religious leaders are claiming that the power Jesus possesses and is using to cast out demons is from Satan himself.

To answer their charges, Jesus turned to parables. "Parables" in this context is referring to a comparison being made and is a bit different from the use of the word to which we are accustomed. His comparison goes like this: I have just cast out demons. Now if I am doing this by Satan's power, then Satan is actually working against himself. But that would be absurd. Just as a house divided against itself cannot stand, so Satan would bring about his own destruction by working against himself. Furthermore, in order to enter the house of a strong man and plunder it, one must first tie up the strong man.

Here are the obvious conclusions to his "parables."

1. Jesus cannot be in collusion with Satan.
2. Jesus is actually destroying Satan's work, which means that he is more powerful than Satan is.

The Teachers of the Law should have had enough spiritual discernment to reach these conclusions.

And then Jesus makes a powerful pronouncement. It is solemn, by virtue of the fact that Jesus begins it with these words, “I tell you the truth.” A person can receive forgiveness for every sin and blasphemy of men, but if a person blasphemes the Holy Spirit he cannot be forgiven.

What is this sin? What is so terrible that it cannot be forgiven? The explanation, “because he has an evil spirit” suggest an explanation for the unforgivable sin. Jesus has done something that any unprejudiced person would agree is a good thing. He had freed an unfortunate man from the power and bondage of evil. This he did through the power of the Holy Spirit, but the Teachers of the Law attributed it to the power of Satan. There are several theories about why this sin is unforgivable.

1. Some believe that in attributing Jesus activities to the power of Satan is a perversion of the Holy Spirit, which in defiance of moral values elects to call light darkness.
2. Others believe that to call good evil when you know that what has been done is good, because of prejudice and ill will, shows a hardening of the person's heart. Because the person will not accept the truth, forgiveness for sin is not possible.
3. Still others contend that to claim that a work of the Holy Spirit was done by Satan is to sin directly against a member of the Godhead, which is an unforgivable sin.

Whatever the ultimate reason, there is one thing that is evident. These Teachers of the Law had hard, intractable attitudes that would not allow them to even consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit could be working through Jesus of Nazareth. Their minds were made up and they would not be swayed.

The strong words of Jesus, “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will *never* be forgiven; he is guilty of an *eternal* sin.” (emphasis mine), have been a source of great anxiety and pain in the church throughout the ages. Many have wondered if they have committed the “unpardonable sin.” Surely what Jesus is speaking of on this occasion is not an isolated act, but instead it is a settled condition of the soul – the result of a long history or repeated and willful acts of sin. And if the person involved cannot be forgiven it is not so much that God refuses to forgive him as it is that he refuses to allow God to do so. J.C. Ryle wrote, “There is such a thing as a sin which is never forgiven. But those who are troubled about it are most unlikely to have committed it (J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*). On the other hand those who actually do commit the sin are so dominated by evil that it is unlikely that they would even be aware that they have committed it.

We Are Family!

Remember before the discussion of the unpardonable sin, Jesus family had determined that they needed to come and take charge of Jesus because, they believed, he had lost his senses. He was out of his mind. They finally arrived and send someone in to tell him that his mother and brothers were there. Remember, Jesus had a huge crowd around him, so dense that he and his disciples could not even eat.

Jesus takes this opportunity to make an important point about the Family of God. He was not being rude to his earthly family at all. He simply wanted to point out several things about the coming Kingdom.

1. It will be a Kingdom of close relationships. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Jesus asked. Family is the description that will best signify relationships in the Kingdom.
2. It is a relationship built on obedience to the Father. “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus is calling people to a family, not just an organization.

In the Kingdom, those with the common goal of glorifying God are a part of his Family.

Teaching in Parables

Jesus is no longer teaching in the synagogues. He is now among the people and is using unusual methods to present important truths about the Kingdom of God.

This is one of the few sections in Mark’s Gospel devoted to teaching. Although Mark often shows us Jesus teaching, only here and in 13:2-37 and possibly 7:1-13, do we have any sustained account of the content of his teaching.

Chapter 4 contains four of Jesus’ parables: the parable of the sower and its interpretation, the parable of the lamp, the parable of the secretly growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. The word parable literally means “to throw or to lay along side of.” It is a comparison. Some have called it “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Something on earth is being compared with something in heaven. Most parables are stories taken out of ordinary life, used to drive home a spiritual or moral truth. Most of them have one major point. They are not like allegories in that not ever person or event has a deep underlying meaning.

Why did Jesus use this method to teach the people? I think there might be several reasons.

1. Parables made people listen. It was not dry doctrine or intricate formulas that Jesus presented to the people. He told simple stories that were sometimes humorous, sometimes sobering, and always challenging. He was dealing with a crowd in the open air. They were not in a synagogue service where they would be obligated to remain to the end. They could leave at any moment, but their curiosity about Jesus’ stories compelled them to stay.
2. Additionally, using parables was familiar to the people. There are many parables in the Old Testament. One of the most familiar is the “Ewe Lamb” parable Nathan told to King David. Some of the Rabbis loved to use parables as well. One of the most famous was one by Rabbi Judah the Prince. When Antoninus, the Roman Emperor, asked him how there could be punishment in the world beyond, the Rabbi answered in a parable.

A certain king had a beautiful garden in which was excellent fruit; and over it he appointed two watchmen, one blind and one lame. The lame man said to the

blind man, “I see exquisite fruit in the garden. Carry me over there that I may get it and we will eat it together.” The blind man consented and both ate of the fruit. After some days the Lord of the garden came and asked the watchmen concerning the fruit. The lame man said, “As I have no legs I could not go to it, so it is not my fault.” And the blind man said, “I could not even see it so it is not my fault.” What did the Lord of the garden do? He made the blind man carry the lame and thus passed judgment on them both.

3. Jesus used parables to try to make abstract ideas concrete. Most people think in pictures. Parables make abstract ideas clear by picturing them in daily life.
4. Parables encourage a person to think for himself. All the answers are not supplied. He must make his own deduction and come to his own conclusion.

The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the “sower” (lit. farmer) begins and ends with a call for careful attention. This suggests that its meaning may not be self-evident. In other words, alert minds are needed to comprehend what Jesus is about to say to them. The background of the parable is rural life in Palestine. Seed was sown in broadcast fashion. The sower deliberately sowed in the path, in rocky places and among the thorns because sowing proceeded plowing. However, if plowing was delayed for any time at all, the consequences Jesus mentioned inevitably resulted.

One view of this parable is that the great emphasis is on the act of sowing the seed rather than the soils into which it is sown. The Kingdom of God breaks into the world even as seed, which is sown, on the ground. In the details about the soils there is reflection on the diversity to the response to the proclamation of the Word of God, but this is not the primary consideration.

Another view is that the emphasis is on how prepared the human heart (soil) is to receive the Word (seed). The more prepared it is, the more likely it is to produce a great crop.

Whatever the major lesson is, both points seem to be borne out through the text. The Word is powerful! Wherever it is planted there is great potential for growth and fruitfulness. But, some preparation must be made to ensure a great crop. Weeds must be plowed, hard soil turned over and large rocks must be removed if the seed has the chance to reach its full potential.

The parable of the sower also challenges the hearer to consider the way he responds to times of blessing and times of trouble. Notice in the explanation of the parable that begins in Mark 4:13. Jesus insists that the attitude of the recipient of the seed is important to how well the seed grows. Notice, for example, the rocky soil (vs 16, 17). This is the person who receives the Word with joy, but then trouble and persecution comes and they quickly fall away. The “rocky soil” person lacks perseverance.

And then there is the “thorny soil” person. He is the one who hears the Word, but their lives are so filled with worries of life, pursuing wealth, and the desires of life that very soon the young seedling is choked out.

There are many other valid lessons that may be learned, but what is of utmost importance is that this parable be applied to life. Jesus says, “If you have ears to hear,

hear!” Everyone has ears, but not everyone pays attention to what Jesus is saying. It is important to have “hearing ears” that will process and put into practice every thing that is heard. Otherwise this story makes little sense.

The Parable of the Lamp and Other Sayings of Jesus

What follows the parable of the sower is four sayings that seem not to have much of a connection between them. In verse 21 there is the saying of the lamp. In verse 22 there is the saying about revealing secret things. In verse 24 there is the saying which tells the reader that he will receive back with the same measure that he has given out. And verse 25 there is the saying that to him who has still more will be given. Each of these verses is found in different contexts in the other Gospels. For example, verse 21 is repeated in Matthew 5:15; verse 22 is found in Matthew 10:26; verse 24 is repeated in Matthew 7:2; and verse 25 is found in Matthew 13:12 and in Matthew 25:29.

We may never understand why Mark groups these sayings together in one group, but the message of each is very powerful. The first saying deals with how a person should use a lamp. Lamps obviously provide light and it only makes sense that a person would put his lamp in a place where it would accomplish the greatest good. You would not put it under a bowl or under a bed. Instead, you would place it high on a stand so that it could give light to the whole room.

The meaning of this saying is obvious. Our Christian lives are meant to be seen. We are meant to be in the arena of life enlightening where there is darkness and uncovering what is hidden. In Matthew 5:16, this description of the lamp is followed with the encouragement, “Let your light shine.”

The next saying found in Mark 4:22-23 seems to follow the first well. The meaning is that Jesus’ ministry will enlighten and uncover so that everything that once was hidden will now be brought into the light.

When a person does something that is wrong, his first inclination is to hide. That is exactly what Adam and Eve did after they committed the first sins. But truth always emerges when God is present. Jesus’ light shown like a beacon in a very dark world. No one has any secrets from God. In the end there is nothing that will not be revealed in the presence of God. Jesus’ life revealed the world, mankind, Satan and sin for what they really are.

The third saying is found in Mark 4:24. It begins with a strong command. “Pay attention!” The first thing that Jesus wants them to pay attention to is the way they are apt to judge others. In other places where this verse is found the context is judging others. For example, in Matthew 7, the context is incredibly clear as Jesus begins with the words, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Judgment here most likely refers to condemning another person. If that is the case then the meaning of Jesus’ saying in Mark would be that to avoid critical, condemning attitudes from others, it is best to avoid passing judgment on others. Whatever judgment you impose on others will come back to you and even more. So it is best to refrain from passing judgment on others.

It is important to point out that there are other possible interpretations of this passage. For example, one commentator sees this passage in a totally positive light. If you study more, you will receive more benefit. If you put more into worship you will get

much more out of worship, etc. This interpretation is inviting, but it probably doesn't represent Jesus' concerns here.

The last of the four sayings in this paragraph is found in Mark 4:25. This may be the most difficult of the four to understand. "Whoever has" might refer to the person who has taken advantage of all the opportunities that have come his way. To fail to respond when opportunity knocks could prevent a person from having other opportunities later on. But if a person does respond and take advantage of what has been given to him, even more will come his way.

The context of this verse in Matthew is the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In this parable a man is preparing to go on a journey and calls his servants together to entrust some of his property to them while he is away. To one servant he gave five talents of money, to another two, and to still another he gave one talent. The first two servants faithfully put their talents to work gaining for the Master double their original amount. They took advantage of the opportunities presented. The third servant dug a hole and hid his talent, doing nothing with the opportunity presented to him.

The Master returned and after praising the first two servants for their faithfulness and giving them even more responsibility and opportunities, he turned with anger toward the last servant. He took away the talent that he had given him and gave it to the one with ten talents and then he punished him severely. And then the saying that is found in Mark is made.

It is obvious that this is serious to Jesus. We must make the most of every opportunity because in the process we will be given more. We are all servants given a sacred trust. How successful we will be depends on how serious we take the most insignificant opportunities.

Week 5:

Day 1/

Trained by the Master

Read: Mark 3:7-18

1. Look at a good map or Bible Atlas and notice the areas from where people were coming to hear Jesus preach. What do you think attracted the people most; what he had to say or the way that he healed? What would have motivated you to go?
2. What qualities did the twelve men have that would have motivated Jesus to select them? Would you classify them a homogenous group?
3. What is the major mission of the apostles? Why would Jesus select such ordinary men for this task?
4. Look up the word Zealot in a Bible Dictionary. What kind of men were usually Zealots?
5. How well do you think this group of men got along with each other?

Day 2/

Insane or Possessed?

Read: Mark 3:20-30

1. Why was Jesus' family worried about him?
2. What was there about what he was doing that led them to believe that he was insane? Do you blame them for feeling this way?
3. How did Jesus' family view him while he was growing up? Did they really know who he was?

Day 3/

Beelzebub!

Read: Mark 3:20-30

1. Look in a concordance and find other places where the word "Beelzebub" is used.
2. How do Jesus' parables answer the charge of the Teachers of the Law?
3. How many "parables" does Jesus use to make his point?
4. What is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Why is it unforgivable?

Day 4/

A State of the Soul

Read: Matt. 12:215-29; Luke 11:17-22

1. Which of the three theories do you think is nearer to being correct? Do you have a person theory about what the “unpardonable sin” is?
2. Is Jesus saying that the Teachers of the Law have already committed the “unpardonable sin?”
3. Can a person commit this sin and not be aware of it? Explain your answer.

Day 5/

Who’s Part of the Family?

Read: Mark 3:31-35

1. Is the idea of a spiritual family a new concept to the Jews? In what ways?
2. In what ways can a person do the will of God? Is it confined to only keeping the commandments?
3. What are some of the purposes and goals of God’s family?
4. Look up the word “parable” in a Bible Dictionary. Write a short paragraph to describe it.

Week Six:

Day 1/

A Comparison

Read Mark 4:1-2

1. What does the word parable mean?
2. Why did Jesus use parables to teach the people?
3. Look at a list of all the parables of Jesus. Can you find any that might have been humorous?
4. What is the difference between an allegory and a parable?
5. How many major points do most parables try to make?

Day 2/

Of Seed and Soil

Read: Mark 4:1-12

1. Why did Jesus plead for the people to give careful attention to the parable he was about to tell them? Is it because it was hard to understand?
2. Why would a farmer first sow the seed and then plow? How does this differ from farming today?
3. What do you think is the major emphasis of this parable: the soil or the seed? Why?
4. What major lesson is Jesus trying to teach the hearer of this parable?

Day 3/

Four Sayings of Jesus

Read: Mark 4:13-20

1. Read Mark 4:11-12. Why is the Kingdom a secret to those on the outside? Is it impossible for them to understand?
2. What keeps the outsiders from “seeing” and “hearing?”
3. Do you see a link between the sayings of Jesus in Mark 4:21-25?

Day 4/

Let Your Light Shine

Read: Mark 4:21-25

1. In your opinion, why did Mark lump these four sayings of Jesus into one paragraph, especially in view of the fact that Matthew records them in four different contexts?
2. What is the meaning of Jesus’ first saying in Mark 4:21?
3. What are the hidden things that Jesus discusses in Mark 4:22?
4. Could Jesus’ opening statement in 4:24 mean that the two sayings that will follow are of utmost importance?
5. What does Jesus want his disciples to consider carefully in the third saying (verse 24)?

Day 5/

Taking Opportunities Seriously

Read: Matt. 25:14-30

1. In the parable of the talents who does the Master represent?
2. On what basis were the first two servants rewarded?
3. How did the third servant fail if he returned the Master's money in full?