

# Unexpected Wisdom

August 23, 2020



## Daily Devotionals Introduction

As you read about Jesus in the Gospels, you might see some things that perhaps you weren't expecting. For this 13-week series, we'll open the Book of Mark together and study the life of Jesus—The Unexpected King. During this series, we will gain a better understanding of who Jesus is and what it really means to be his disciple.

As an individual or as a family, use these daily devotionals and reflection questions to connect with Jesus each day this week.

Each day, there will be a thought stemming from our Scripture passage along with 2-3 questions. Our hope is that as we journey together through the book of Mark, we'll be able to come out the other side knowing more about the life of Jesus.

Be sure to prayerfully consider each day's truth, passages, and each of the questions. If you are a part of a life group, let these devotionals stir your thinking and be the foundation for your group conversation.

Our prayer is that these devotionals, questions, and reflections will help you love God, love people, and make disciples.

## Day 1

Three weeks now into Mark's gospel and for the first time we arrive at one of Jesus' parables. Parables can admittedly sometimes be hard to comprehend. It feels odd that Jesus, coming with a message of love and hope, would share some of his most important teaching in a form that comes across as confusing. Why not just lay everything bare?

Parables are unique because they aren't just illustrations that a coach or pastor or teacher might use to make a bigger point. Part of the reason why Jesus spoke in parables was because he wanted to *reveal* to those who had ears to hear what the Kingdom of God was like and because he wanted to *conceal* the bold claims he was making to those who might want to kill him on account of his bold words.

That's why, in **Mark 4**, Jesus says to his disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.'"

This isn't a statement meant to say that Jesus is intentionally keeping the gospel from people, but rather an acknowledgment about human nature. Jesus knows that we tend to affirm what we want to hear and we deny what we don't want to hear. It happens all the time!

Put yourself in the shoes of a Jew in the first century. Your Scriptures have told you about God's Kingdom. Your expectation is that one day a King is going to come, beat up all your enemies via military victory, and reign forever and ever bringing you and your family peace and prosperity. You would have a lot of feelings and emotions tied up with these expectations. In fact, these expectations are what all of your hope is riding on.

But now here comes Jesus talking about God's Kingdom having come *in Him*? And this Kingdom comes through forgiveness and healing and turning the other cheek and going the extra mile and sacrificial love culminating in the horrid death of this Messiah?? What in the world?! Um...Jesus...that's *not* the plan.

It's totally unexpected and upside-down from the way in which everyone thought God's Kingdom would be inaugurated.

Jesus uses unexpected wisdom by using parables because the people that desire to truly see what God is up to will be able to understand him. The people who are close-minded will be confused just enough to not do not do anything rash.

Later in **Mark 4**, Jesus says, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure that you use, it will be measured to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

If we are truly desirous and open-minded to what God is doing, we will understand – and not just understand, but we will *grow* in our comprehension. BUT if our hearts are hard and we are close-minded to Christ and His Kingdom, we will grow in callousness to the truth of the Kingdom.

Questions for reflection:

1. Imagine being a first century Jew and having your expectations and hopes turned upside-down about what God's Kingdom would be like. What feelings would you have towards Jesus upon hearing his words and actions? Would you be more like the confused-but-"in"-for-now disciples, the angry Pharisees, or the uncomprehending crowd? Explain.
2. When you think about Jesus or the Christian life, what expectations do you hold of them? Upon reflection, which expectations do you feel are justified based on Scripture? What expectations do you have that may not be justified?
3. How do you tend to generally respond when you have expectations that are not met in life? How might faulty expectations of Jesus or being a follower of Jesus have gotten in the way of you truly loving God, loving people, and being a disciple?

## Day 2

The Parable of the Sower has been called the “watershed” of parables. It’s the first one we come across in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in each gospel, the writers give a significant amount of real estate to this parable in particular.

If you’ve been a Christian all your life, you are probably familiar with this parable, but upon closer inspection you can see why this would have been confusing to the crowds and to the disciples.

In **Mark 4:1**, Jesus gets in a boat in the sea and a great crowd gathers round to hear his wisdom. Then, Jesus shouts, “Listen!” You can imagine the silence that ensues. The wind whistles. Everyone is wondering what Rabbi Jesus is going to say.

Will it be more about God’s coming Kingdom? Will it be a heartfelt sermon on Isaiah? Will he announce the next town he is going to go heal in?

And what do they get? A lesson in agriculture.

### **Read Mark 4:3-8.**

As He is talking, you are utterly confused. You think to yourself, “Man, Jesus, farming knowledge is good and all, but not quite what I was hoping for.”

Jesus pauses. Then He picks up again with one last sentence. Your ears perk up.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” He says.

The wind continues to glide across the waves. Jesus steps out of the boat. Class has ended. Just like that.

Wouldn’t that be a weird experience? To hear Jesus’ brief farming manifesto about sowing seed, bad soil, good soil, and a harvest of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold (which admittedly was kind of intriguing because you know from the farmers around you that usually a good year’s harvest is only ever about tenfold. The average was about sevenfold).

Luckily, we’re privy to Jesus’ explanation of this to his disciples because even they didn’t quite get it.

Jesus explains that the sower’s seed (“the word”) lands in different heart conditions. It lands on hearts that are immediately opposed to the word (devoured by birds). It lands on hearts withered by hardship (rocky soil). It lands on divided hearts (thorny soil) and it lands on receptive hearts (good soil).

The seed of the gospel of the Kingdom is lovingly scattered by the Father into all the world. Jesus made clear to the disciples that the harvest results depend on where the seed lands. Once the disciples fully understood the parable, they were faced with the same question we must answer for ourselves: Which soil are we?

Questions for reflection:

1. By posing the parable of the soils to us, Jesus is causing us to reflect on our own devotion to the gospel and on our commitment to being his disciple. How would you describe your disposition towards Christ and His Kingdom? Is your heart unturned and hard? Is it rocky? Does it feel thorny? Or would you say it's "good?" Explain your answers.
2. What are the downfalls of each of the bad soils? What is lacking in the heart of a person where the seed is sown on the path (**Mark 4:4**)? In the heart of a person where the seed is sown on the rocky ground (**4:5-6**)? In the heart of a person where the seed is sown on the thorny soil (**4:7**)?
3. In reflection, what area does your heart need to grow in to ensure you "hear the word and accept it and bear fruit" (**4:20**)?

## Day 3

Yesterday, we looked at the parable of the soils and in that parable found that there will be different people who respond differently to different soils. You were asked to reflect on what was lacking in the heart of each person for whom the seed fell on “bad” soil.

I don't know about you, but that leaves me wondering, “How do I ensure that I'm good soil??”

The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to “Take care...lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (**Hebrews 3:12**).

So what does this “taking care” actually look like?

Paul Carter, a pastor of a church in Canada, has pointed out that there are perhaps a few different suggestions that arise naturally out of the text of **Mark 4** to help us along<sup>1</sup>.

He says that we need to...

### 1. Turn the soil of our hearts

In looking at the first soil, it is obvious that the birds get to and devour the seed because the soil has not been able to penetrate the ground with any depth. Any good farmer knows that for seeds to take, they need to actually be *planted*. They need to infiltrate the ground.

For that to happen, the soil needs to be turned. It follows then that a person who wishes to not allow their spiritual life to be “left to the birds” will allow the soil of their heart to be exposed to disruptive influences (godly ones of course!). This kind of person will seek correction, serve, confess sins, seek wisdom from godly leaders, and they will sit under the preaching of the Scriptures and do their best to live them out.

### 2. Crack the surface of our hearts

If the problem of the path people is that the seeds of the gospel never got into the soil, the problem of the rocky soil people is that the seed never went very deep. There are surface level fans of every sort of sport or hobby or interest group. There are die-hard Colts fans and there are fair-weather Colts fans. The same is true with Christians.

It follows then that if one would wish to not “fall away”, that person should pursue true spiritual depth. This person would seek to truly know God through the reading, memorization, meditation, and application of His Word. This person would pursue silence and solitude with God to hear and listen to His voice. This person would pursue authenticity and vulnerability in community. And this person would pursue health in areas emotional, relational, and mental because of the holistic nature of being human. We cannot be spiritually mature and also be immature emotionally, relationally, and mentally.

### 3. Weed the garden of our hearts

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/will-fall-away/>

Carter points out that if the “path people” were never open to the gospel to begin with and the “rock people” were never very deep. Then the “weed people” or “thorny people” are those who are never really wise. Their problem, he says, is that they surround themselves with influences that are contrary to growing in faith.

As much as we hate to admit it, we are influenced or disciplined by people, advertisements, and the culture around us. To “take care lest we fall away”, it would behoove us to consider what influences help us to grow in the faith and which do not. This means a person would maybe spend some time doing a spiritual audit (look at one’s entertainment choices, relationships, where time is spent, etc.) to then construct a life centered on discipleship to Jesus.

Questions for reflection:

1. Which of these three suggestions most resonate with you? Why?
2. What area(s) of your heart need to be dug up and weeded out? What rocks are still there? What weeds?
3. When have you noticed the people you’re around, the entertainment you participate in, etc. form and shape your heart (whether towards holiness or not)?
4. What is one action step you can take to either turn the soil of your heart, crack the surface, or weed the garden this week?

## Day 4

There are two other Kingdom realities Jesus shows us in **Mark 4**. We'll look at one today and the other tomorrow.

### Read Mark 4:26-29.

The first reality of the Kingdom is this: the Kingdom of God will grow and expand until it is all encompassing. This will happen not because of anything you or I do, but because God will give the growth (**1 Cor. 3:7**).

We are tempted to *make things happen* in our spiritual lives – both in our becoming like Jesus and in our helping others follow Jesus. Part of the temptation is to make stuff happen in relation to God's Kingdom. This doesn't mean that we don't try. We are, after all, "God's fellow workers" (**1 Cor. 3:9**) and "ambassadors" for God (**2 Cor. 5:20**). It does mean, however, that we know our place.

Perhaps a lot more of us have more of a deistic view of God than we'd like to admit. Is Jesus somewhere up there in the sky hanging out in Heaven or do we really believe that Jesus is living, reigning, and acting in our world?

If the latter is true then, as disciples, our questions go from "How do we get x, y, or z to happen for the glory of God? How do I save my family member? How do we get our country back on track morally?" and they change to "What is Jesus up to in this conversation, in our city, in our church, in this life group, or in our world and how do I partner with Him in what He's doing?"

As we sow the gospel of the Kingdom (in our own hearts and in our world), we give up control and let Jesus go to work.

If we try and cultivate God's Kingdom through sheer effort and all on our own, that's how we wind up tired and depleted and more like the Pharisees than we ever dared thought was possible. We wind up tying up heavy burdens on ourselves, and, because we hate swimming alone, we put those same burdens on other people too (**see Matthew 23:4ff**). We skirt faithfulness for the sake of "fruitfulness" (as if the two are even opposed to one another!). We end up talking the talk but not walking the walk.

It can be hard to be a Christian and not succumb to being a Pharisee. We can easily forget about grace. But as was mentioned last week, God is the one taking the initiative. We just respond to what He is up to – in our own hearts, in our groups, in our communities, and in our world.

Questions for reflection:

1. Where in your life have you been trying too hard to make something happen, hoping to accomplish something for God out of sheer willpower? What does that feel like? How might a perspective shift of asking what Jesus is up to and then joining him in that work change your perspective on being his follower?
2. In your journal, note what you think sits *underneath* your trying too hard (i.e. how your family viewed work, insecurity, desire to be admired, etc.).



3. If you had to gauge how often you ask some form of the question, “Jesus, what are you up to? How can I join in on what you are doing?” when trying to love God or love others, how often would you say you consider looking into what Jesus is up to? Explain.
4. What would it look like for you spend some intentional time tomorrow or this week asking that question periodically throughout your day?

## Day 5

Jesus and Christianity's impact on our world can be hard to wrap our minds around. Although if you asked Jesus, no way He'd be surprised. He essentially told us as much in the last parable we read in **Mark 4**.

**Read Mark 4:30-32.**

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about Him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost 20 centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?"

Many are the book and articles that have been written outlining how Christianity has changed our world for the better. In fact, as one example, Christian values have become so pervasive societally that it is hard for anyone in the Western world, Christian or not, to comprehend not valuing human life. In the ancient world, children were routinely left for exposure and slavery was as commonplace as the Big Mac.

Another example, think about where you are right now. Odds are you're in the U.S.A. Think about that. You are 2000+ years removed and 6000+ miles from when and where Jesus walked on Earth. And yet, here you are reading a devotional about Jesus and his Kingdom. That's pretty astounding.

The Kingdom of God has had a huge impact on our world, but not in the way the Jews from Jesus' day expected. Pastor Matt Chandler points out that,

"It's important for us to note that this teaching on the kingdom from Jesus would have been extremely disorienting to first-century Jewish ears. They have a view of the kingdom that is geopolitical. They have a view of the kingdom that is about military might and force. They have a view of the kingdom that at the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Christ, Rome would be turned to chaff that would be blown away by the wind and Jerusalem would become the epicenter of the world, the nations would come and worship God in Jerusalem, and every enemy of God would be destroyed. That was their view of the Messiah."

Yeah, the coming of the Kingdom didn't happen quite like that. The Kingdom of God began like a small start-up with one CEO (Jesus), a couple of employees (the disciples), and pretty much no health insurance either!

Early on, Jesus said not to worry because His Kingdom is the real deal. There's no stopping it. It's like Jesus was saying "Be encouraged because this Kingdom may look small and insignificant right now, but before you know it, it's gonna grow into something beyond your wildest imagination. Just watch!"

Jesus in **Mark 4:30-32** isn't making a prediction about the Kingdom of God. He is stating *reality*. God's Kingdom is unstoppable. This kingdom will grow bigger and greater than Apple, Amazon, and McDonald's combined!

Too often, for us followers of Jesus, our perception doesn't match God's reality. To some of us, the Kingdom may seem like it's the size of a mustard seed. We believe it's there, but we can't see it. If that's the case, then perhaps it would do us some good to reflect on some of the questions below:

Questions for reflection:

1. Christianity has made a big impact on the world. There's no debate about that, but how have you seen the Kingdom of God grow and expand in your own heart or in your world lately?
2. What areas of your heart do you feel like the Kingdom still has some ground it needs to cover? What areas of our world do you feel like the Kingdom still has some ground to cover?
3. What needs to happen for you to grow in your awareness of the ever-growing Kingdom of God in your own heart and in the world?
4. Write a prayer based on your thoughts and reflections from questions 1 and 2. Be honest before your heavenly Father. Ask Him to till the soil of your heart. Ask Him where you can serve in His work.