



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Gospel According to St. Mark

## Chapter 4

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# Introduction

- In chapter 2, Jesus told the short two-part parable of the "Old Cloth and Old Wineskins," and in chapter 3 He told the short parable of the "Strong Man"
- There are four more parables in chapter 4
- The English word "parable" is *parabole* in Greek
- A parable is a short story that is a comparison based on a familiar life experience that is used to teach a lesson



# Introduction

- When the Pharisees began to oppose Jesus, He started speaking to the people in parables
- When Jesus' disciples asked why He taught them in parables, He told them, *"The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables ..."*  
Mark 4:11
- Those in opposition to Jesus are like the Old Covenant leaders to whom God had not given the ability to understand the message





# Introduction

## Chapter Outline:

- The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9
- The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12
- The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20
- Light Under a Basket 4:21-25
- The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29
- The Parable of the Mustard Seed 4:30-32
- Jesus' Use of Parables 4:33-34
- Wind and Wave Obey Jesus 4:35-41



# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- This return to the seaside is mentioned by St. Mark only
- From this time our Lord's teaching began to be more public
- Jesus can no longer teach within the towns because of the size of the crowds, so He uses the open areas around the Sea of Galilee
- *He got into a boat*, St. John Chrysostom believes that the Lord did not do that without purpose
- He sat on the boat, facing the multitude who sat on land, to have all people in front of Him and none of them behind Him



# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- Jesus begins by commanding the crowd to "Hear/Listen" in verse 3 and He will end the parable with the same command in verse 9
- The reason He begins and ends the parable in this way will become clear in Mark 4:12 when He quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10
- There may also be a connection to God's command in Deuteronomy 6:4, known to the covenant people, "*Hear, O Israel!*"
- The people are commanded not to respond to Him with closed ears and eyes in the way their ancestors failed to respond to the message of God delivered by His prophet Isaiah





# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- To "hear" means to absorb and to appropriate Jesus' words by responding with open hearts to understand His message and His mission, and their understanding must transform them and redirect their path in life
- *by the wayside*, The common path where the surface was hard and smooth, the grain lay on the surface
- The word was dispensed among some men comparable to it, on whom it lighted, but made no impression
- There it lay, though not long, and was not inwardly received, and took no root, and consequently was of no effect



# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- *the birds of the air*, The devils, who have their dwelling in the air, especially their prince and leader Satan
- Satan, who goes about seeking what he may devour; attends where the word is preached, to hinder its usefulness
- So not only could the seed not get beneath the surface, but it was trampled down, Luke 8:5, and afterwards picked up and devoured by the birds





# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- *stony ground*, This must be compared with “the rock” mentioned by St. Luke, Luke 8:6
- What is meant is not a soil mingled with stones, for then there would be no hindrance to the roots striking deeply
- Places where the underlying rock was barely covered with earth
- The hot sun striking on the thin soil and warming the rock beneath would cause the corn to spring up rapidly and then as swiftly to wither
- And because it had no root, *it withered away*



# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- *fell among thorns*, This case is that of ground not thoroughly cleaned of the weed, etc.
- *and choked it*, Excluding light and air, and drawing away the moisture and richness of the soil
- Hence it "becomes unfruitful" Matthew 13:22
- The seed fell on ground full of thorn seeds or roots
- The thorns sprang up as well as the corn, and growing more vigorously gained the upper hand



# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- The goodness of this last soil consists in its qualities being precisely the reverse of the other three soils
- From its softness and tenderness, receiving and cherishing the seed
- From its depth, allowing it to take firm root, and not quickly losing its moisture
- And from its cleanness, giving its whole vitality and fluid to the plant





# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9

- In such a soil the seed "brings forth fruit," in all different degrees of abundance, according to the measure in which the soil possesses those qualities
- St. Matthew says *some a hundred-fold, some sixty fold, some thirty*
- St. Mark begins from the lowest return, and ascends to the highest
- *He who has ears to hear, let him hear*, Not externally only, but internally; he that has ears given him to hear, so as to understand, let him make use of them, and seriously consider of, and diligently attend to the use and importance of this parable

# The Parable of the Sower 4:1-9



- The description of the land in which the sower carried on his operations would present no difficulties to the hearers
- The beaten paths, the rocky spots, the thorny patches were all familiar features of the fields in Palestine, and the fate of the seed in each case was in accordance with common experience
- But why paint the picture?
- What is the moral of the story?
- That Jesus left them to find out

# The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12



- After Jesus has dismissed the crowd, His Apostles and the other disciples ask Him to explain the parable
- The key to understanding what Jesus is saying is in understanding what Jesus means by "the mystery of the kingdom of God."
- The word "mystery" is used in the Gospels, only here in the singular but it is also used in the plural in Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10



# The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12



- In the Old Testament "mystery" refers to God's divine plans that are secret not because God wants His plans to remain unknown but because the way they must become known is through divine revelation
- Jesus tells them that "the mystery of the kingdom of God" will be withheld from those who oppose Jesus and understanding will only be granted to them and others who receive the Gospel of salvation with an open heart

# The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12



- This response, raised a lot of questions from many scholars: How could that be?
- Does not the Master wish for all humanity to understand His teaching, to enjoy His salvation, and to have their sins forgiven them?
- The scholars say the words of the Master distinguished between two groups of people: those belonging to Him, together with the twelve, and those who are outside
- The mystery of the kingdom of God, was not only revealed to the twelve, but also to those who gathered around the Master in His Church

# The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12



- As to those outside, they are the Jews who refused to believe in Him
- The word of God is given for free; yet it is not proclaimed except to him, who eagerly seeks the knowledge of “the mystery of the kingdom of God.”
- This is something that we strongly recognize in the life of our teacher the apostle Paul, who says, *“But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory”* 1 Corinthians 2:7
- And he calls the gospel “the mystery” Ephessians 6:1



# The Purpose of Parables 4:10-12



- *And hearing they may hear and not understand*, This verse in this instance, at first sight, suggests the thought that our Lord's purpose was to produce the blindness and deafness of which He speaks
- This cannot really have been the aim of Jesus
- It is evident, that the speaking in parables was not the cause, (for many besides the apostles heard and understood) but themselves, who would not hear and understand, and believe and thus they were the real cause of their own willful blindness

# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- *Do you not understand this parable?* That is, "How, then, can you expect to understand all parables, as they ought to do who are instructed unto the kingdom of heaven?"
- It is St. Mark alone who recalls and records these words
- They are striking and vivid, as illustrating the condition of mind of the disciples at this time - slow of apprehension, and yet desirous to learn
- The seed is the "word of God," the Gospel message of salvation
- Jesus is the sower. Jesus' teaching plants seeds of faith, like the sower in His parable

# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- *are the ones by the wayside* , Such hearers are represented by the way side, in which the seed fell
- They hear and do not understand
- The word does not penetrate their hearts or make any impression on them
- Their hearts are hard and are not fit soil for the word of God
- The devil immediately takes notice of such hearers, and gets very busy with them filling their minds with other things suitable to their character



# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- He also put before them other objects, whereby their minds are, at once, taken off from what they have been hearing; so that all that they have observed, and laid up in their memories, is lost at once, and never thought of any more
- *the ones sown on stony ground* , Their hearts superficially impressed and are capable to receive the truth with readiness, and even with joy
- But, they have not applied the word to their life
- They have no internal stability "roots"

# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- They continue hearers and professors of the Gospel but for a small season
- In a time of hardship, they abandon their faith in God
- As soon as any small degree of trouble comes upon them, and especially when there is a persecution because of the Gospel; such hearers are stumbled at these things, and cannot bear the loss of any thing, or endure any thing severe for the sake of the word they have professed
- Therefore, rather than suffer, they give up at once their profession of it

# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- *Now*, It fixes attention on the third type of hearers as calling for special notice
- They are such as, lacking the thoughtlessness of the first and shallowness of the second class, and having some depth and earnestness, might be expected to be fruitful
- The thorns present less obstacles to the growth of the seed than the rocky ground does
- This resemblance indicates the heart of that hearer who is overwhelmed with the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things



# The Parable of the Sower Explained 4:13-20



- This person hears the word but does not love God above all else; the secular world pulls him away from faith and he bears no good fruit/works
- *the cares of this world*, literally, of the age; that is, temporal and secular cares, incident to the age in which we live, and which are common to all
- These, like thorns, distress and trouble, and often wound the soul; while, on the other hand, the care of the soul and the thought of heavenly things compose and establish the mind

# The Parable of the Sower

## Explained 4:13-20



- The good ground represents the heart which receives the Word of God with joy and desire, and true devotion of spirit, and which steadfastly retains it, whether in prosperity or in adversity; and so yields fruit, *some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred*”
- St. Jerome remarks that, as of the bad ground there were three different kinds - the way side, the rocky, and the thorny ground; so of the good ground there is a threefold gradation indicated in the amount of its productiveness
- There are differences of conditions in the hearts both of those who believe and of these who do not believe
- Those who accept "the word" are known by the "fruit" deeds/works they bear, James 2:14-26



# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- That saying came directly following His explanation of the parable of the Sower and seeds to His disciples
- He probably meant to tell them, that His words are “a shining lamp,” that common people hear without spiritual comprehension, thus putting them under a basket or under a bed
- But as for His disciples, He set them, as a lamp-stand, to carry the divine Lamp, to give light to the world
- Jesus’ preaching by parables is not designed to obscure the truth, but to throw light on it





# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- The disciples should understand those parables, and, understanding them, should impart the truth to others also, as a lamp throws its beams upon a dark world
- If the Lord Jesus Christ has come to the world to minister to it by His practical love, without seeking glory for Himself; yet, His glory would never be hidden
- He set for us a plan to labor for inner glory, away from appearances or worldly dignities
- While so laboring in His Spirit, He would be glorified in us publicly



# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- The Christian does not generate his own "light;" it is Christ Himself who generates the supernatural internal light of the Christian soul
- We reflect the burning love of Christ within us
- In John 12:36, Jesus tells the disciples *"...believe in the light so that you may become children of the light."*
- Jesus Christ is "the light" and it is Jesus who empowers us to be "children of the light" who pass on His teaching



# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- A Christian should be like a lamp set on a stand that gives light to the whole house just as a the righteous life and good deeds of Christians witnessing the life of Christ in acts of love and charity that are visible to all who know or observe that Christian or the works of the Christian community
- Jesus is the Light of the world and we are called to reflect His light so that we can live as "children of the light"





# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- A light put under a basket or a bed is a Christian that suppresses the Gospel and quenches the power of the Holy Spirit
- Such a Christian does not teach and uphold the doctrine of the Church and do works of charity in outward signs
- This person is not sharing the light of Christ and is doing nothing to illuminate the darkness of those who have not heard the Gospel or who have not seen Christians acting Christ-like



# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- *Take heed what you hear,* Diligently attend to it, seek to understand it, and lay it up in your minds and memories, that it may be of use to you in time to come, and you may be useful in communicating it to others
- *With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you,* If the disciples carefully hearkened to what they heard from Christ, and diligently labored to understand it, and faithfully dispensed it to others, in return, a larger measure, and greater degree of spiritual knowledge, would be bestowed upon them



# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- Whatever we sow here, we shall reap
- So if we sow the heavenly things, we shall enjoy their glories, with much more added, and if we collect earthly things, we get double corruption...
- Eternity is an extension of a life chosen by man for himself, and lived in the depth of his heart
- And as St. John Saba says, “Everyone has his inheritance in him, and his inheritance within him.”





# Light Under a Basket 4:21-25

- *For whoever has, to him more will be given*, In other words, whoever chose the spiritual riches, more will be given to him; and whoever is negligent in his spiritual life will get poorer
- Jews, with their denial of the Lord, what they already had, had been taken away from them; while those who received Him, have been granted grace on top of grace
- His warning is to be careful how you "hear" and how you interpret, and apply what you hear
- Be the 4<sup>th</sup> person in the Seed and the Sower parable

# The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29



- The disciples might have found it difficult to comprehend how they would present light to the world
- That is, why the Lord confirmed to them that the ministry work is a divine and a continuous labor
- Some scholars call this parable, the Patient Sower
- The Lord scattered the seeds, not worrying, but positive that His kingdom is no doubt coming
- The harvest, surely, will be fulfilled, and the ground will carry fruit

# The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29



- The sower casts seed upon the earth, not without careful preparation of the soil, but without further sowing
- And then he pursues his ordinary business
- He sleeps by night; he rises by day; his work as a sower is finished
- Meanwhile the seed germinates and grows by its own hidden virtues, assisted by the earth, the sun, and the air, the sower knowing nothing of the mysterious process
- Such is the preaching of the gospel



# The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29



- Here, therefore, the sower represents human responsibility in the work
- The vitality of the seed is independent of his labor
- The earth develops the plant from the seed by those natural but mysterious processes through which the Creator is ever working
- So in spiritual things, the sower commences the work, and the grace of God perfects it in the heart which receives these influences

# The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29



- The earth bears fruit of herself
- In like manner, by degrees, the faith of Christ increases through the preaching of the gospel; and the Church grows and expands
- And what is true of the Church collectively is true also of each individual member of the Church
- For the heart of each faithful Christian produces first the blade, when it conceives good desires and begins to put them into action; then the ear, when it brings them to good effect; and lastly the full corn in the ear, when it brings them to their full maturity and perfection

# The Parable of the Growing Seed 4:26-29



- Hence our Lord in this parable intimates that they who labor for the conversion of souls ought, with much patience, to wait for the fruit of their labor, as the farmer waits with much patience for the precious fruits of the earth
- From one point of view the harvest is the end of the world, Matthew 13:39, and the putting in the sickle is the coming of Christ to judge, Revelation 14:14-18
- From the other, the harvest is the end of each man's life



# The Parable of the Mustard Seed 4:30-32



- *To what shall we liken the kingdom of God?*, The question which introduces the parable is in St. Mark and St. Luke, but not in St. Matthew
- It gives us the impression of a question asked, in order to put the minds of the hearers on the stretch, so that they might welcome the answer
- *It is like a mustard seed*, It is more of a comparison than of a parable
- The kingdom of God, that is, His Church on earth, is like a grain of mustard seed

# The Parable of the Mustard Seed 4:30-32



- By this image our Lord shows the great power, fertility, and extension of the Church; inasmuch as it started from a very small and apparently insignificant beginning, and spread itself over the whole world
- In the old times, a great kingdom was referred to as a tree in the middle of the earth, under which the beasts of the field find shade, in whose branches dwell the birds of heavens, Daniel 4:10-12; Ezekiel 31:6, as would the kingdom, so wide, includes countries and nations, which it protects against any foreign aggression

# The Parable of the Mustard Seed 4:30-32



- “The analogy is superb; as it is very fitting to present them with what would happen to the Holy divine missionary work, concerning the gospel, which He calls the kingdom of heaven; as through it we are granted the right of fellowship in the kingdom of Christ. That missionary work was, at the beginning, presented to few persons, and on a small scale, to extend later on to cover all nations. It was first preached only in Judea, where the blessed disciples were very limited in number. Then, as the Jews rejected it, the command came to the saintly disciples to, “*go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...*” Matthew 28:19”  
St. Cyril the Great



# Jesus' Use of Parables 4:33-34



- *they were able to hear it*, Not as though they could have apprehended the inner doctrinal contents of the parables, Mark 4:11, but they were capable of apprehending the narrative form, the parabolic narrative in itself, in which the teaching was veiled, so that they were thus qualified only in this form to hear the doctrine
- He had just been delivering plain and simple illustrations which all might understand

# Jesus' Use of Parables 4:33-34



- These were not perplexing and difficult similarities, but sufficiently plain for them to perceive that there was heavenly and Divine truth lying hidden beneath them, so that they might be drawn onwards through that which they did understand, to search into something hidden beneath it, which at present they did not know
- *He explained all things to His disciples,* He unfolded and explained all these parables to His disciples, and led them into a large knowledge of Himself, and the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; whereby they were furnished for the work He had called them to, and designed them for

# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- Jesus suggests to the Apostles that they sail to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee
- They are probably in the boats owned by Peter, his brother Andrew, and James and John Zebedee
- *And other little boats were also with Him*, This last fact, peculiar to Mark, is added to show that even escaping toward the sea was difficult
- Some of the people had got into boats to be near Him



# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- The Lord Jesus Christ, after comparing His divine labor to extend His heavenly kingdom to the seeds sown on the ground, proclaiming the continuity of His invisible work
- Now, as the evening had come He intended to reveal to His disciples those capabilities, in practice
- Sudden storms springing up on the Sea of Galilee are very common, and without warning a storm overtakes the boats
- *asleep on a pillow*, The word only occurs here
- These details we learn only from St. Mark

# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- He was weary with the labor of addressing the great multitude
- He had sought the momentary rest which the crossing of the lake offered to Him
- *Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?”*, This question expresses impatience and irreverence
- Unbelief and fear made them sadly forget their place, to speak so
- When those accustomed to fish upon that deep thus spoke, the danger must have been imminent and about to happen

# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- All three Evangelists record that He rebuked the wind
- St. Mark alone adds His distinct address to the furious elements
- Addressing both the wind and sea saying *Peace, be still!*
- The storm was very violent, such as no human power could have composed or stilled
- These words indicate the supreme authority of Christ as God, controlling the sea with His mighty power
- Thus Christ shows Himself to be God



# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- In like manner, Christ is able to overrule and control the persecutions of the Church and the temptations of the soul
- St. Augustine says that "when we allow temptations to overcome us, Christ sleeps in us. We forget Christ at such times. Let us, then, remember him. Let us awake him. He will speak. He will rebuke the tempest in the soul, and there will be a great calm."
- He never speaks in vain
- It is observable that, as in His miracles of healing, the subjects of them usually passed at once to perfect soundness

# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- So here, there was no gradual decrease of the storm, as in the ordinary operations of nature, but almost before the word had escaped His lips there was a perfect calm
- *Why are you so fearful?*, There is a natural apprehension under danger; but there was unbelief in their fear
- It is worthy of notice how considerately the Lord defers this rebuke till He had first removed the danger, in the midst of which they would not have been in a state to listen to anything

# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- *How is it that you have no faith?*, He is asking if they do not yet recognize His true identity and have faith that He is the Divine Messiah
- This will be the remaining question from this event until after the Resurrection when Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God!"
- The Lord allowed for that fearful experience
- This happened to proclaim, that His presence in the boat, would not keep His disciples out of temptations, but would deliver them, if they wake Him up inside them



# Wind and Wave Obey Jesus

## 4:35-41



- That is to say, proclaim their faith, and beseech Him by continuous prayers
- St. John Saba says: “The reward of standing fast in wars (temptations), is far greater than that of good deeds consummated in comfort.”
- *And they feared exceedingly,* They were struck with deep awe
- That experience let them enter into a new experience, revealing to them the Person and authority of the Messiah



# Discussion

- How do Jesus' parables both conceal and reveal His message?
- What do you think Jesus wanted His audience to know from these parables?
- The parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed are kingdom parables. What is the kingdom of God like in these stories?



# Discussion

- Parables have many layers of meaning. How do these stories continue to speak to us today?
- As you read about the stilling of the storm, imagine that you are one of the disciples in the boat as the storm begins. Describe your thoughts and feelings at the different points in the story. What is it like to be in this boat?
- What are the storms in your own life, and how has Jesus acted to calm your fears?