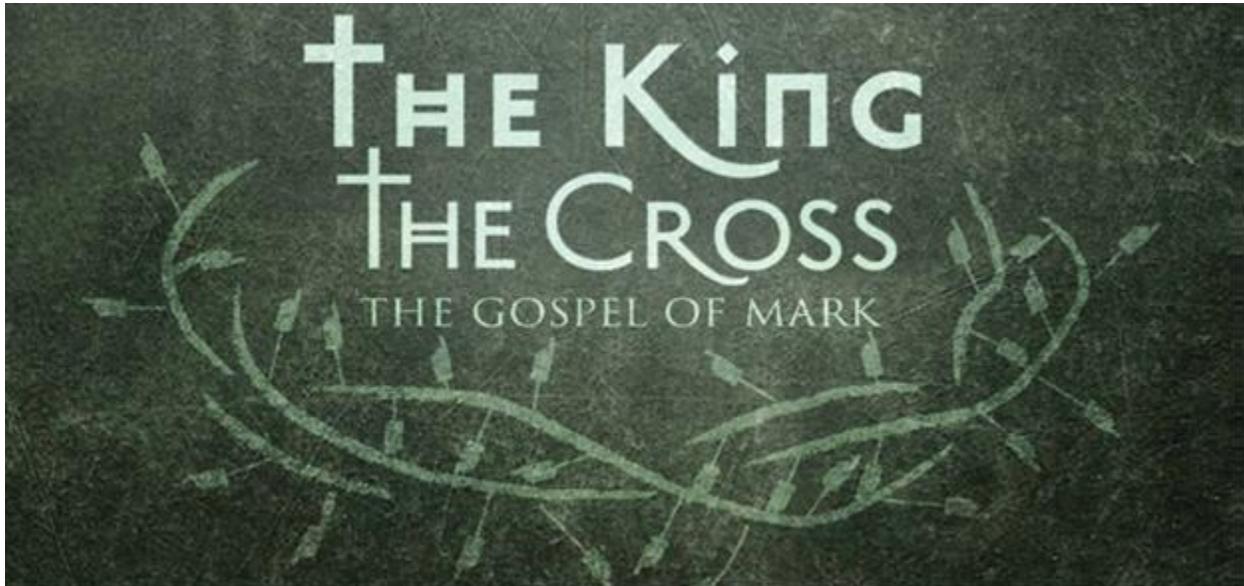


The King The Cross Part 4
Sermon Series on the Gospel of Mark
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
June 24, 2018

TEXT: Mark 4:1-34



Good morning, Kenwood. It is a joy to be back and to reenter into the summer series on the Gospel of Mark. For those who didn't know, we just retraced Paul's missionary journeys with 45 people through Turkey, Greece, and Rome. We flew 12,000 miles; we traveled overland 2,500 miles and crossed 12 miles of really important water that divides the continents of Asia and Europe. It was a very powerful time. We had 10 people from our church and a number of faculty from Gordon-Conwell Seminary, graduate students, alumni, and friends. There were several pastors, and God also in placed, right in the midst of our group, a very gifted and intelligent graduate student doing cancer research who was not yet a believer but had an interest in ancient history. She found this trip and signed up. It was amazing to see how God wove mission opportunity right inside the trip. We had a chance to visit some amazing sites and see the setting where the New Testament took place. Sometimes we don't think of it this way, and yet more than half of the New Testament takes place in Turkey. Today is a big day for the country of Turkey. A very significant election is happening, so please keep this country in your prayers. We also had a chance to see Christian workers and missionaries in each of the places where we went. It was really the ultimate transition for me to come from Istanbul to Babylon, to come flying back from Istanbul, change my clothes, and get to be a participant in the drama at Vacation Bible School. It was fantastic! I really recommend this transition the next time you

travel from Istanbul. Try to time it just perfectly with the VBS week! There are 13 panels of the Ishtar Gate in the city of Istanbul Museum, and so I told Pastor Sara we are ready. We just saw the real panels. We were there. Thank you for praying for us while we were gone.

It is a blessing to be back and to turn our attention to the Word of Christ. As I said, it is this Word that was heard, believed, and put into action. This summer we are being challenged as a congregation to hear the Word of Christ in the Gospel of Mark. Using the material of *Christianity Explored*, we want to have people in conversation with us about the Word of Christ. *Christianity Explored* is being used throughout the world today as a way to help people read the Gospel of Mark and answer three questions: Who is Jesus? Why did He come? and, What does it mean for us? We want to hear these questions as well, as we pay close attention to Jesus' teaching for us in Mark 4. The first question of *Christianity Explored*, Who is Jesus? is answered in this way: "He is the Christ. He is the King God promised to send, who would put everything right by setting up a kingdom of righteousness and love." Jesus is the promised King, and as the promised King, He announces the arrival of the kingdom of God in Mark 4. Keep your Bibles open. If you don't have your own copy of the Bible, we would love for you to walk right out of here with that copy. But, keep the text open. Mark 4:1 begins by saying that Jesus began to teach. This is the first large block of teaching that we have from Jesus in the gospel narrative. Mark 4:1 continues:

"And a very large crowd gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land."

Mark 4:2 says He was teaching them many things in parables. Parables are a very consistent method of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. There are 40 parables of Jesus, and yet we often misunderstand parables.

We are ill-equipped, increasingly so in the context in which we live, to hear the parable as a means of instruction and announcing the kingdom. Some of us misunderstand parables because we think they are moralistic stories like *Aesop's Fables*. They are not. They are not earthly metaphors to illustrate spiritual truths. Parables are a prophetic way of speaking. Parables are a way that Jesus uses to announce the arrival of the kingdom, and parables invite you into the story in a way that you must respond. You cannot remain neutral to a parable. We are increasingly hard of hearing parables because we are not used to the genre. Parables made a splash appearance this week in *The New York Times*. David Brooks, who writes editorials for *The New York Times*, wrote a piece this week that was called "The Fourth Great Awakening." In this editorial piece, David Brooks contrasts two ways of speaking. He says:

"One way of speaking is the language of myth, and myth tries to instill in us competitive virtues. The other way of speaking is to speak in compassionate virtues, and compassionate

virtues are told through parables.”

David Brooks says:

“Myths respond to our hunger to do something heroic. Whether it is Zeus, Thor, Luke Skywalker or Wonder Woman, myths trace the archetypal chapters of the heroic quest or combat: refusing the call, the meeting of the mentor, the ordeal, seizing the sword and so on. The core drama is external: fighting the forces of evil, enduring the harsh journey, developing the skills that make you the best.”

Brooks go on to say:

“A parable is a different kind of story. Parables are usually set in normal time and reality. Parables have ordinary human characters, never superheroes. The parable introduces a story that is relatable and instructive. Parables are about a moral dilemma and the key question is about faithfulness, forgiveness, commitment, and love.”

Brooks writes:

“All of a sudden, in 21st century America, we are surrounded by the discourse of myth. I’ll just mention three forms that are immensely popular today. The first is mythic movies: ‘Avengers,’ ‘X-Men,’ ‘Star Wars,’ ‘Transformers,’ ‘Justice League’ and the rest. The Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Extended Universe franchises alone have grossed about \$20 billion at the box office worldwide so far this year. This is the environment we’re in.”

He writes:

“I regularly run into people (men, mostly) who are deeply immersed in these mythic worlds. They can entertain you with long disquisitions on the merits of different characters, the moral lessons of each film, whether ‘Black Panther,’ say, is an accurate rendition of injustice today.

A second form of myths is video games. Again, this is David Brooks in *The New York Times*:

“Then there are video games, which are myths you can enter into through technology. The video game industry is two or three times bigger than the movie industry. Gamers don’t only play the games; they gather to watch others play the games. Last year, according to *Rolling Stone*, 360 million people watched the League of Legends Mid-Season Invitational (an audience three times larger than the Super Bowl).

David Brooks says, “It’s a mythic world.” Then, he says:

“Finally, there are sporting events like the World Cup where sport is living myth. Myths are moral narratives. There are many virtues to the mythic worldview—to stand heroically for justice, to be loyal to friends and fierce against foes. They tend, however, to give short shrift to relationships, which depend on the fragile, intimate bonds of vulnerability, trust, compassion and selfless love. They tend to see life as an eternal competition between warring groups. They tend to see the line between good and evil as running between groups, not, as in parables, the line runs down the middle of every human heart.”

Our Lord Jesus did not teach us in myths. Our Lord Jesus chose parables to invite us into a conversation that we have to respond to. Parables are a dramatic confrontation. They have a binary structure. There is an either-or to Jesus' teaching. There is no position of neutrality. Jesus' parables invite us to one desired response, so let's look at the first of Jesus' parables in Mark 4. Jesus begins with a call, "Listen," in the ESV. The Greek says, "Hear." Hearing is so important. "Hear," Jesus says, "a sower went out to sow." Mark 4:4:

"And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it."

Time is compressed in the parable, Mark 4:5-6:

"Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. "

It didn't have any roots. He continues in Mark 4:7-8:

"Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

This is the parable. It is not a fable. It is not a simple agrarian illustration. It is a prophetic way of speaking that invites you into the narrative and to respond. Jesus, as He begins says, "Hear well," so He ends in Mark 4:9:

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Here we have to hear well. This is something that's increasingly difficult for us in a distracted age. Jesus is prepared to explain the parable to His disciples, but they must move towards Him. We note the importance of proximity to Jesus in Mark 4:10:

"And when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parables."

Jesus speaks this parable publicly, but when He was alone, all those who were gathered around Him, including the 12 and also a group of others, were moving in closer to Jesus. This is instructive for us. If you want to know Jesus' teaching, if you want to understand His voice, you have to move closer to where He is. You have to hear Him speaking well; you have to turn down the volume of other voices around you. So, they move in closer to Jesus and they ask Him: "What does this parable mean?" Jesus responds somewhat surprisingly in Mark 4:11. He says:

"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables. . ."

So, we know already that the parable is about the kingdom of God. But Jesus says that for those outside, everything is in parables, and He gives this warning line from Mark 4:12:

“ . . .so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.’”

This word seems like a harsh word from Jesus. It almost seems at first glance that Jesus teaches in parables to hide the kingdom from those around us, but actually, Jesus' words here are a quotation. They are a quotation from Isaiah 6, one of the great prophets who lived 700 years before Christ. Isaiah was the one who saw a vision of God. He saw the seraphim around God's throne singing: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord God of Israel high and lifted up. He taught the profound sinfulness of his own life, and in this vision, one of these angelic creatures touched his lips with a coal from the altar, and he heard God say in Isaiah 6:8:

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”

Isaiah's response was: “Here am I! Send me. Send me into this world that doesn't realize the full glory of the Lord.” Isaiah says: “I am available for Your service,” and the Lord says to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9-10:

“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’”

You see, Jesus' statement is a quotation, underscoring for us just how crucial it is to hear Jesus well. Isaiah's commission was to speak to a people who were seeing all the right things but not really grasping them. You can be surrounded by truth; you could hear it, but it doesn't go into your heart. You can see Christ; you can see people who know Christ, and it doesn't pierce your understanding. Jesus' quote from Isaiah underscores the urgency of listening closely to Him.

Those gathered around then ask Him to explain the parable. This is a great gift for us because the Parable of the Sower is the first of Jesus' parables, and He wisely doesn't leave us on our own. The very first set of His teaching He explains to us. He doesn't provide the interpretation for all the parables, but this first one, He does. So, let's listen to Him as He explains it more fully. He says: *“The sower sows the Word.”* The seed in the parable, in this story, is the Word of God. It is the Word about the kingdom. The centerpiece of Jesus' teaching is that the kingdom of God has arrived and we must repent and believe the gospel. As the sower casts the seed of the Word, then we realize that where the seed lands describes the response of various groups of people. Jesus says that these, that is the seeds that have landed on this type of person, if you will, are like seeds that have fallen along the path. In the middle of fields there would be well-worn paths where the ground is hard. The word is sown there, but the soil is not prepared. It is hard. It lies there, vulnerable on the surface, and Jesus says that Satan comes and takes away

what is sown. This is true for some of us. We are nearby; the Word is cast; it lies there on our lives, not penetrating the surface. We are distracted; we are not attentive to the spiritual state of our soul, and this life-giving Word is lying there vulnerable. It's just taken away, and we don't even seem to notice. They hear the Word, but they are so distracted that without noticing or perceiving, the enemy snatches away the Word that was sown, and there's no life.

Jesus says the second type of person are those that have the Word sown on rocky ground. They hear the Word and receive it with joy. They grow up immediately, but not down. They think they understand Jesus' teaching. You see, Jesus' Word for them seems to be trending, so they jump on board. They are fair-weather fans. They have no loyalty, no roots, but they wither away at the first sign of affliction. They chase the next stream, and again, there's no fruit.

The third type are those where the Word is sown among them, and they are like those where the Word is sown among thorns. They are those who hear the Word, and the Word germinates. It starts to grow. But as the Word of God, the Word of the kingdom, this life-giving, life-transforming Word that can set the right up in our lives, as it starts to grow, the cares of this world grow up with a rapid pace. I've had a five-year battle with thistles in my yard, and I feel like I'm just getting the upper hand. It took me a while to figure out where all these thistles came from. Then I remembered that about five years ago, I had a passing interest in goldfinches. I remember reading that goldfinches love thistle seed, and so I installed a couple of thistle feeders and I delighted in the goldfinches for about six months. Then I thought, "Where is all this thistle coming from in my yard, in our flowerbeds?" Thistle is actually a grotesque plant—no offense to God as the Creator. The thistle is prickly and it so arrogant as a plant. It grows so fast, and it sucks the resources around it. You pull up this large tall plant, and it has this pitifully small root structure that proliferates underground. It's dangerous, and it can take over beautiful plants, and this is the imagery here. Jesus says that likens this to the cares of this world, and this can be anything. You know what you care about. Some of us care about our career more than we care about our growth in faith. Some of us care about our grades more than we care about progress in godliness. Some of us are more concerned with our reputation than we are with what Jesus thinks of us. Jesus also warns about the deception of riches. Wealth is deceiving. We all think this is what we need to be happy: if I just could provide for my family, or if I could just move into this neighborhood, or if I could just put my children this school; if I just had a little bit more income, then I would be happy. Jesus warns that riches are deceptive; they do not provide what they promise. He also says it can be the desires for other things, things like safety and security, or the right position. Sometimes we stay in a relationship that's not good for us just for the security that it seems to provide. Jesus says that the kingdom seed that is sown in these lives is growing up, and yet the thistles are destroying it and ultimately they choke it and kill the Word of the kingdom, and again it proves unfruitful.

But, in Mark 4:20, Jesus says:

“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

Some of the kingdom seed was sown on good soil, and these are the ones who hear the Word of the kingdom, that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus is the King of this kingdom. This is the good news of God, the reign of God. They hear the Word and accept it. It presses into the soil of their lives, and this kingdom seed is potent. One grain can produce plants that flourish and grow and produce thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. Can you imagine that? One seed and then 100 fruit-bearing outcomes! It is no wonder that the enemy is so intent on devouring every single seed. All you need is one to germinate and new life begins.

Who is Jesus in this parable? Jesus is the Sower of the Seed. Jesus is the proclaimer; He is the speaker; He is the teacher; He is the one sowing, and again, those more familiar with the Bible will catch in this imagery an allusion again to the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 55:10-11 where the Lord Himself speaks:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Jesus Christ stands in the position of God Almighty in this parable. If we had only Mark 4, we would know the divinity of Jesus, because He is the one sowing the Word of God. He is the Sower of the Word of the kingdom. Again, Jesus' parables are not moralistic stories, like *Aesop's Fables*, and they are not the discourse of myth. Jesus is not asking you to strap up arms and wage a heroic battle. Jesus is asking you to hear His Word closely, receive it into your life, that it would bring forth new life, fruitfulness for your sake and those around you.

The parable shows us three ways to die and one way to live. The parable has a binary structure. You can die by distraction—the enemy devours the seed. You can die because you think you know Jesus' Word, and you have an initial enthusiasm that is not rooted. You can also die by being choked by the cares of this world, But, there is one way to live and one way only—just like the kingdom announcement: the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe. The only way to live is to receive Jesus' Word of the kingdom.

Who is Jesus? He is the divine Son of God, the anointed King, the Sower of the Word of God. Why did He come? He came to give us new life in Him. What is required of us in response? In response, Jesus tells us more. Jesus tells us that what is required of us in response is not only a

hearing of the Word and a receiving of it, but what is required of us in response is to be fruitful people, and this is very challenging. Jesus doesn't give us the Word of the kingdom so that when we die we go to heaven. That is true and that is a blessing, but the imagery of the parable is not so that you receive the kingdom, have the Word of the kingdom, produce a loaf of bread and feed yourself and then leave this world. The Word of the kingdom comes into our hearts and it bursts forth in fruitfulness for the sake of other people around us.

Look at how Jesus continues in Mark 4:21. He uses the imagery of a lamp. He says:

"Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand?"

No one puts it under a basket or under the bed. You put it on a stand. Light works and functions to bring light to those around it. Again Jesus stresses in Mark 4:23:

"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

In Mark 4:24, Jesus says:

"Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you."

This is something that confounds our expectations. We all tend to be hoarders at one level or another, and Jesus says the way the kingdom of God works is "the more you give away the more I will entrust to you." This is very counterintuitive, and yet true. Jesus says that "*with the measure you use, it will be measured to you and still more will be added to you.*" Then He says with a very sharp, warning tone in Mark 4:25:

"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."

My experience as a pastor in 20 years is that often times in church the people who are really busy still say, "Yes." When there's a need for ministry, people who are busy say "Yes" because they are used to working for the Lord. You might think, "Well, this person doesn't have a lot going on. They've got lots of free time, so surely they'll volunteer for this place of service or that." In my experience, oftentimes they'll say, "Ah, I can't. I'm sorry." It's a very concrete image of what Jesus is describing. The one who has more will be given because they're really using it. So, if you want more of Jesus, then I want to challenge you from Jesus' own words to get out there. If you're sowing the seed, and your hands are empty, He will give you another load. But, if you have a cluster of seeds and you're just gripping them tightly in your hand and cracking the husks and at the end of the day shoving them back in your pockets, eventually you have nothing to give.

Jesus ends our passage this morning with two short parables that help us understand our role

once we receive the Word of the kingdom. The first one begins in Mark 4:26. Jesus says:

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.”

This should strike us as amazing because in the main parable at the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is the Sower, the divine Son, the promised King, and now in this short little parable it's a person. It's as if Jesus has taken the Word of the kingdom and given it to us. And, He actually does that, doesn't He? We are responsible to sow it. A man now is scattering the seed imitating Christ. How much more can be sown if the 700 people at Kenwood Baptist Church each took their handfuls of kingdom seed? You scatter! And then you say, “Oh, Lord, I need some more seed,” and He will give it. Then you sleep and rise, night and day, and something amazing happens. The seed germinates, and it germinates without you, without me. Jesus underscores this in Mark 4:28. He says that *“the earth produces by itself.”* The Greek text says that the seed germinates automatically. That's what it says. It means that you don't have to wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning and go out into the field with needle-nose pliers and try to break open the husk of every seed. You don't have to stay up late at night watering. The seed germinates. Your responsibility is to sow it. Isn't that freeing? To sow it.

I had the chance on our trip, on one of our connecting flights, to sit next to a man and his wife. They are from a country that I could not visit. They are from a country that is at an ideological war with our country. He explained where he was from, and I told him where I was from, and we started to talk. We found we have many things in common, and the conversation went very well. At one point, we paused and looked at each other and we said: “You know, the fact that we are sitting on an airplane is probably giving us the chance to have this conversation.” We both expressed the hope that the politics would one day change. He invited me to come to his country, and I invited him to come to ours. We talked then about spiritual things, and I had the opportunity to sow just a few kingdom seeds. We shared our contact information and have stayed in touch since our conversation. He works in an area of computers and technology, and after a few days of messages, he figured out who I was and had listened to some sermons at Kenwood. Automatically, just sowing and then see what God does. Your responsibility is to sow the seed, and when the harvest comes to gather it in.

The last parable, and we will close with this, is in Mark 4:30. Jesus says:

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth.”

Mustard seeds are tiny. They are usually about one to two millimeters in diameter, and yet, according to Jesus, when the mustard seed is sown, it becomes the largest of all the garden plants. It is so large that the birds of the air can make their nests in its shade. Brothers and

sisters, if you hear the Word of the kingdom this morning, then receive it. The kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus is the King of the kingdom. He has come to give us new life. What is required of us in response is to receive the Word of the kingdom and then let it bear fruit in our lives. Mustard seeds, when they are sown, are just so small. They are miniscule in appearance, and yet when they are sown into the ground, they germinate, rise up, and bear fruit. So is the Word of the kingdom and so is the call for us this day. Let's pray.



Lord Jesus, we magnify You and we honor You. We praise You for your good work in our lives. We ask, Lord, that You would give us ears to hear the Word of the kingdom this morning, Lord Jesus, that we would trust in You, that our hope would be firmly rooted in You. We pray, Lord, that the kingdom Word would germinate in our lives, not just for our sake, but that the Word of the kingdom would germinate and be fruit-bearing, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. Lord, I pray for each one of us that You would give us opportunities to sow Your Word this week, directly or indirectly, and we pray, Lord, for the places where the seed will land that it might find good soil. Lord, help us to be about You and Your kingdom, and we pray, Lord, that You would help us to do our part, to sow the seed and watch as You make it grow. Help us to be ready, Lord, when the harvest comes in. Sometimes, Lord, when we sow the Word of the kingdom, it looks really, really small. It looks so vulnerable and insignificant, and yet when Your Word is sown, it takes just one seed to germinate to transform an entire life family system, even a nation. Lord, we love You, and we pray that You would make us those who, like You, sow the Word of the kingdom, trust in You, and receive the power of Your Word in our lives.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.