

Gospel of Mark Chapter 4 – John Karmelich

1. Like the last lesson, I have a one-word title for this lesson. That word is "Faith". Faith is one of those words we throw around without giving a lot of thought to what it means. Hopefully, by the time we get through this lesson, our faith in God will increase a little. That's my goal.
 - a) The essential idea about faith is about putting trust in something bigger than our self. For the Christian, it about trusting in the fact that God will somehow workout and through our lives for His glory. For the Christian, it is also about trusting in the fact that we are eternally saved and eternally forgiven of all sins we have committed as we are trusting in Jesus payment of our sins to fully cover whatever we have done.
 - b) The reason I use that one word title, is I see "faith" as the key word that connects all of the stories that occur in this chapter. Let me explain further, and I'll come back to this topic.
2. In Chapter 4, we have something unusual for Mark: We have recorded speeches by Jesus.
 - a) I stated back in the first lesson that Mark is predominately an "action" based Gospel. What I meant by that is Mark spends relatively little time going over what Jesus said, and focuses primarily on things Jesus did. In other words, lots of action, little dialogue.
 - b) Chapter 4 is an exception. In this chapter, we get four of Jesus' "parables". A parable is a made-up story designed to teach a point. One difference between an illustration and a parable is that an illustration may or may not be a true story. A parable is a made up story designed to teach a point.
 - c) What is also important to understand is that Jesus states blatantly in this chapter that the purpose of the parables is not to teach the truth, but to hide the truth. What Jesus meant by that is that the purpose of parables is to separate believers from nonbelievers. This is because for the most part only believers will understand the meaning of the parables. "God's truth" will be hidden from those who have not been called to follow Him.
 - d) The first parable Jesus gives is the key to all of them. Jesus says in this chapter that if we don't understand the first parable, we won't be able to understand all the parables. Jesus' explanation of the first parable in this chapter is given privately to the disciples, and is the key to understanding all the parables. That means the symbolism used in the first parable is the same symbolism used in the other parables given. Therefore, it is most important to understand the meaning of the first parable.
 - e) The last part of the chapter is not a parable, but a miracle story. It has to do with the disciples all being in a boat with Jesus. Jesus Himself was asleep on the boat when a really bad storm came up. The disciples woke up Jesus and in essence, Jesus prayed for the storm to stop and it did.
 - f) What the parables in this chapter and the story of Jesus calming the storm all have in common, leads me back to my title, which is the word "faith".
3. The reason Mark's Gospel "stops the action" and actually teaches what Jesus said is in effect that Mark has by now, given enough miracles to show that Jesus is God. The next step is to teach what Jesus expects of us, and to do that, Mark needs to explain some parables. If you read this same story in Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 13), there are seven parables. In this gospel, there are only four parables. Mark has fewer parables not be different, but to focus on the specific point Jesus was trying to make about our faith in Him.
 - a) Let me describe the parables from another angle: When one first reads the parables, one assumes the issue is our salvation. For example, the first parable can be interpreted to be about four different types of people, and only one of those four gets "saved".
 - b) Once you start to think about these parables, you realize they are more complicated than that. They are really about us having faith in Jesus and what can happen to our faith at any given moment in time. That is the underlying meaning of these parables.

- c) The first parable is about seed. The seed refers to the Word of God. The parable is about four different types of soil in which the seed can grow. In one type, the ground is so hard, the seed doesn't take root and birds eat the seed. In the second type of soil, the ground is full of rocks, so the seed can't properly take root. In the third type, there are lots of weeds in the area, so that the weeds prevent the growing plants from blossoming. The final analogy is seeds living in good soil and produces a wonderful crop. We as Christians need to be like fourth good soil that makes a big difference for God.
 - d) The second parable is about a lamp. The essential idea of a lamp is that if it is to be used properly, it is to be "on" and placed in a spot where it can be seen. It applies to our faith in that our faith is no good unless it can be seen. In other words, if we say we believe in God, but are not doing anything about it, we lack faith.
 - e) The third parable is about how crops grow from the ground. The idea is that the farmer does not know all the biological facts of how the crop grows, just that it does and trusts that the seed will "do it's thing" and grow. To me, this parable is about the fact that it is up to God to "mold us". Once we commit our lives to Christ, it is God who works through us and changes us so others can then see the change, although others may not understand how we changed. It ties to faith in that we trust that God is working in our lives even we don't understand just how God is going to do it.
 - f) The final parable is about a mustard seed. This is the smallest of the seeds that exist in the Middle East and produces the largest of the plants that grew in that location at that time. The faith aspect is about how something "that small" (which is the mustard seed) becomes something "so big". The idea is we apply our faith and God makes our faith grow into something big that makes a difference for Him.
4. This leads us to the final non-parable story, about Jesus calming a storm on a boat ride. Before this trip started, Jesus told the disciples that they are all going on a boat with Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The "faith aspect" is that if the disciples did trust Jesus' words about going to the other side, then they should have trusted they were going to make it there. Because of a storm, the disciples had a lack of faith about making it alive across that body of water. Jesus' miracle of calming the lake (Sea of Galilee) is a reminder that Jesus is in charge of all things. More importantly, the miracle shows us the importance of having faith. If God tells us to do something, we need to show the faith in God that He will make it possible for us to accomplish that "thing".
- a) There, I just summarized the whole lesson. The rest, as they say, is just the details, plus a few jokes and stories to make it interesting. ☺ With that stated, let's go to Verse 1.
5. Chapter 4, Verse 1: Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.
- a) Chapter 4 begins with the comment that Jesus "again" taught by the lake. This comment is made to distinguish this speech from the one made in Chapter 3. Just like Chapter 3, Jesus got on a boat and spoke from the water as a large crowd stood on beach.
 - b) Many commentators like to point out that sound carries well over the water. The point is the way Jesus spoke, is a natural amphitheater as sound bounces off the water.
 - c) OK, so if Mark's gospel focuses on what Jesus does and not what He says as I stated in the first lesson, why does Chapter 4 begin with a speech?
 - i) The answer again is that Chapter 4 is all about Jesus teaching what "faith" is. We as Christians use that term very casually, but rarely think about what it means. That word is a big connector of all the stories in this chapter. I believe the reason Mark gives the details of Jesus' speeches in this chapter is to teach believers about having faith in God and what that exactly entails.
 - ii) With that said, let's move on to Verse 2.

6. Verse 2: He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:
 - a) The parable itself starts in Verse 3. In Verse 2, the point is emphasized that Jesus taught in parables. I thought it would be good for a moment to discuss what is the difference between a parable and an illustration. The best way to understand the difference is to quote Verse 9. That verse says, "Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."
 - i) That statement has nothing to do with literal ears. What it means is that in order to understand a parable, one has to "digest it" and think about what Jesus has said.
 - ii) Back to the question of the difference between a parable and an illustration: An illustration is a story used to make a point. A parable is used to separate those who are interested in learning more from those who don't care.
 - iii) Those who don't care about Jesus or about His teaching won't care about explaining the meaning of a parable. Those who do care (i.e., those who have the Holy Spirit within them) will take the time to think about it.
 - b) Do I believe a non-believer can figure out the meaning of a parable? Of course. But a nonbeliever does not accept the idea of Jesus as God and therefore, does not have a lot of interest in the meaning of the parables. Occasionally one meets a nonbeliever who takes the time to analyze what Jesus does say, but for the most part, people who have no interest in Jesus also have no interest to analyze the parables of Jesus.
7. Verse 3: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."
 - a) The really good news about this parable is that Jesus explains its meaning beginning in Verse 13. I don't have to spend a lot of time explaining what it means as "Jesus does my job for me". ☺ I am just going to summarize it very briefly and save most of my comments for the "explanation section" beginning in Verse 13.
 - b) In order to understand this story, visualize a farmer throwing seeds on the ground. Instead of a farmer digging up the dirt and planting seeds in nice, neat little rows, the seeds are simply scattered around in the hopes that some will produce crops.
 - i) This means that Jesus wants us to spread the word not with "neat, organized methods of farming, but just "scatter it around" and great results will happen!
 - c) Also note the fact that Jesus uses stories (ok, parables) that people understand. Most people, even those who are not farmers, can relate to the simple story of scattering seed.
 - d) In this story we have four types of soil:
 - i) In the first type of soil, the ground is hard. When the seed landed on this hard ground, birds ate up the seed so it never took root.
 - ii) The second type of soil was rocky. When the seed landed on this type of soil, the seeds did have enough soil so that plants could spring up. The lack of soil caused the plants to die, as there was not enough soil for the plant to take root.
 - iii) The third type of soil fell in areas where there were lots of thorns. Think about weeds: We pull them from ground as they take away good soil from the plants we want to grow. That's the point here. The seed that was planted among the weeds didn't last long as the weeds "overtook" the good plants, which died off.
 - iv) The fourth type of seed landed in healthy soil. Jesus said the good seed produced a yield of thirty, sixty or one hundred times the original amount of seed thrown. A good farming yield is considered eight to ten times the amount of seed thrown. Therefore, Jesus point of "thirty to one hundred" is an exaggeration that the farming oriented audience would understand as being "beyond reality".

- e) I have to admit, the first time I heard this parable, I assumed it was only about who is saved and who is not saved. In order to understand a parable one has to think about it.
 - i) One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to get believers to draw closer to God. One way the Holy Spirit does that is He gives us the desire to study God's word. My simple point here is that a sign that one is a true believer is that one is interested in studying God's word to apply it to one's life. Does that mean only devout Christians study God's word? No, but in most cases, it does show the Holy Spirit working in the lives of believers.
 - ii) Another point is the Holy Spirit convicts us that God's word is true. A nonbeliever can study the bible, but not be drawn to obey what is taught. True believers study the bible to help draw closer to God and learn what He expects from our lives.
 - f) This leads me back to the parable itself. The point I made earlier is that this parable is not so much about salvation, (although it can be taught that way, accurately) as it is about having faith in God and growing closer to Him. I'll cover that point more when we get to the explanation of the first parable beginning in Verse 13.
8. Verse 9: Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."
- a) Jesus' point is if you can hear these words, let them "sink in" and digest what they mean.
 - b) Remember that Jesus is speaking verbally to an audience. Those of us reading these words on a printed page can translate this verse as, "Those who can read these words, should consider them and digest their meaning". That's the idea behind this verse.
9. Verse 10: When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" "
- a) The first thing I want you to notice is that the explanation of the parable was not given to the crowd that just heard Jesus speak. The explanation was only given to the disciples privately. So why is that? Didn't Jesus want the crowd to understand His teaching and learn what Jesus had to say? The answer is "no" at this point in time.
 - i) The no answer goes back to the definition of a "parable". That style of teaching is not designed to teach everyone it's meaning. The idea of a parable is to separate those who are interested in the "truth" from those who are not interested.
 - b) What are we to learn from this Isaiah expression? It is the concept of "constantly living by faith" and trusting that Jesus is God and He wants to guide our lives.
 - c) With that said, let's look at verse 11 again. It says, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables."
 - i) What Jesus meant by that statement is that the disciples were handpicked to understand what Jesus meant by the parables and the rest of the crowd was not.
 - ii) The important thing for us to understand is that we as believing Christians were also "handpicked" to understand the meaning of the parables. If we believe that Jesus is God and we want to live our lives to make a difference for Him, then it is God's intent that we too, learn the meaning of the parables.
 - iii) That is why the parable was not just orally explained to the disciples, but also the explanation was written down for us to study and learn. This leads us to Verse 12.
 - d) In Verse 12, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. I should also say that this quote is a paraphrase. If one reads this verse in Isaiah, it is a little different. Remember that Mark's Gospel was written roughly 20-30 years after Jesus death and resurrection. The source was Peter, who was probably telling the story from memory.
 - i) If you read this same quote in Matthew 13, the quote is more literal. Matthew was one of the 12 disciples and he may have written down as Jesus quoted it. Matthew also could have looked it up on an Isaiah scroll.

- ii) My point here is that it is not a contradiction if Matthew quoted Isaiah more "literally" and Mark paraphrased it. Both writers are trying to get across what Jesus said. If one gospel is more literal than the other, it doesn't make the other wrong. It is just two different people recalling what Jesus said. In a court of law the words of both witnesses would be accepted even though one's words were a paraphrase of the other's words.
- e) OK, now that I have finished my technical point about the Gospels not contradicting, ☺ let me discuss the meaning of that phrase which is a quote of Isaiah 6:9-10. The essential idea is that the reason Jesus is speaking in parables is to separate the believer from the nonbeliever. If one studies the evidence that Jesus says who He claims to be (God, in the form of man), the evidence becomes obvious. In order to prevent the nonbeliever from figuring this out, God "hardens the heart" of the nonbeliever.
 - i) Let me put this concept another way: If one chooses to reject God, He in turn makes it more difficult to accept the Gospel message. You or I could explain very clearly and obviously how the Gospel is true and what we should be doing about it. Yet despite that "perfect explanation", the people we are talking to make excuses or laugh at our stories and reject the message. That's the point. God "hides the truth" from those who don't want to accept the Gospel message.
 - ii) But doesn't God want all people to believe the gospel message? Yes He does, but at the same time, God will not violate our free will. The point is it is up to God to soften people's hearts and not us. It is not a matter of us saying the right words at the right time. It is a matter of God working on people's hearts and the truth of God's word convicting them of that truth.
 - iii) An example I like to use is, "Don't go down that path. If you do, it will be harder for you to come back". That is the idea of those who don't care about pleasing God. Those who reject God over their lifetime then have a harder time trying to "come back" as God hardens the hearts of those who continually reject His message. That is the underlying idea of God "hiding the truth" in parables.
 - iv) Since parables are written for believers, they teach us how to live our lives to make a difference for God. We as believers need to study the parables to know how to live a life that is pleasing to God. That is what "faith" is all about. With that convicting point made, I can now focus on explaining the parables.
- 10. Verse 13: Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?
 - a) Now begins Jesus' explanation of the first parable. Jesus makes the specific point that it is essential to understand the first parable, because the explanation of the first parable has applications for all the parables.
 - i) Let me explain: What will be obvious in the parables is the plant seeds described in the first parable represent the Word of God. Therefore, understand that when the word "seed" is used in the other parables then that too refers to God's word.
 - ii) Jesus point here is the explanation of the first parable holds the key to understanding all the parables. Therefore, if there is a place one needs to really pay attention, it is to understanding this first parable. Therefore, take a deep breath, get a cup of coffee if needed and let's move on. ☺
 - b) By the way, the first parable is the only one in which an explanation is given. Jesus is saying in effect, it is only the first parable that requires a detailed explanation. If one understands the meaning of the first parable, then deciphering the other parables is easy as the analogies are the same as used in the first one.
 - c) With that said, we can begin analyzing the first parable, beginning in Verse 14.

11. Verse 14: The farmer sows the word.
- a) The explanation starts with the fact that the farm sows the "word" as opposed to seeds. With that said, what is the "word"? I will argue it does not refer to the whole bible. When this parable was given, the bible was not organized as it is today.
 - b) However, the "word" does refer to the "core, gospel message". It is not referring to the entire bible, but simply to the message that Jesus is God and that by believing that He is God and His payment for sin is sufficient to cover all of our sins, we can have eternal life. That is the Gospel message and the key point being made here.
 - i) In other words, we don't have to read the entire bible to people in order for them to get the message about Jesus, but just convey the "key message". Again, some people will get it, and some will not. The "some" who do not, do include those people who may get it later in life.
 - c) The next question is who is the farmer in this parable? We know it is not literal, or Jesus would be saying that only a farmer could spread the word about Jesus.
 - i) If you say God is the farmer or the Holy Spirit is the farmer, you are technically correct and I can't argue with that answer.
 - ii) I would also say that we as believers are the farmers. God calls on us to spread the word about Jesus to others so therefore believers become the "farmers".
 - iii) If we believe the Gospel, then we too are called to spread the word about Jesus. It does not mean all of us are to be professional evangelists. It does mean that all of us are called to be witnesses for Jesus and no believer is exempt from that duty. When witnessing situations arise, God does call on us to share Jesus with others.
 - a) In this parable, we will discover the four types of soil can apply to believers, but also, the "farmer" himself can apply to us as well.
12. Verse 15: Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.
- a) Now we get to the actual "results" of the seed being sown. The first result of the seed is Verse 15. It is describing ground so hard, that the seed cannot penetrate the ground. Visualize a non-paved walking path that is well worn from many people walking on it.
 - b) The idea is the ground (our "conscious") is so hard that when God's word is preached, Satan Himself takes away the seed so that it does not penetrate people's mind and hearts.
 - i) On one level, this is describing the heart of the nonbeliever. For such a person, when we share the Gospel with them, the seed is essentially "gone" before it ever takes root. To see this for yourself, try preaching the gospel message to someone and just watch how "things happen" to prevent the message from sinking in.
 - ii) Now let's apply this to our faith: Have you ever gone to church or a bible study when you are in a bad mood? All we can think of is that "bad thing" and whatever was said in that church service or bible study couldn't even penetrate us due to our anger. I suspect if we are honest, we can all recall moments like that.
 - iii) The point is the "hard soil" can refer to moments in our life where we are so pre-occupied with something, that we ignore whatever is being taught or said.
 - iv) The parable says that Satan takes away the seed. That does not mean that Satan is everywhere at once taking away what God wants to teach us at the moment. It can mean there are demonic forces blocking what God wants to teach us. I suspect the true answer simply refers to our "closed minds" at that moment in time.
 - v) When such times do come, one needs to pray something like this, "Lord, for the next hour, I can't do anything about what I am worried about. Help me to let go of it, just for say, the next hour, so your word can benefit my life right now."
 - vi) In other words, we need to take what faith we do have in God at that moment to get past the "hard dirt" that is preventing God from teaching us what He wants to teach us at that moment in time. See, this verse does apply to believers! ☺

13. Verse 16: Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.
- a) In these two verses, we have the second type of "soil". It might be best to visualize say six inches of soft dirt, with bedrock under that six inches of dirt. For those of us with a "city background", imagine a cement floor and roughly six inches of level dirt on top. We can plant things in those six inches, but the problem is the plants can't take deep root as the ground is too hard. There is not enough moisture and minerals in those six inches to make the plant thrive and grow. That is the literal picture being painted here.
 - b) With that picture in our mind, we can now talk about the "seed" being the word of God. Jesus says for this type of soil, it does sprout up, but when persecution comes due to the word of God, such a person falls away quickly.
 - i) Again, let's start with the "saved versus unsaved analogy". One can meet a person who gets the Gospel message and accepts it for a short time. If such a person starts to share their faith with others and those "others" persecute that believer, such a believer does not have "deep roots" in their faith and fall away.
 - ii) Going back to the believer, when we are not "deep rooted" in our trust in God, we start to get in trouble. When we slack off on our prayer time or slack off on our time spent with other believers or time spent in God's word, we lose our "depth".
 - iii) This leads to the topic of "persecution". The idea is not about the problems of life that all people experience. Persecution is when we are in a situation where we apply our faith to some thing, and we have to battle spiritual "entities" who are fighting our faith to accomplish what is God's will for that moment in time.
 - c) It might be best to describe this situations with illustrations:
 - i) Suppose for a day or for a week, we ignore God. We skip prayer and skip time with God and other believers. Now a group of nonbelievers want us to join them in an activity, which is not pleasing to God. Our faith to resist that temptation now becomes harder to do, as we have not been "taking root" in God.
 - ii) On a similar note, supposed it is time to go to our weekly church service or bible study. We decide to skip it to do something we are not supposed to do. That could be the type of bad soil here. (By the way, an occasional break from our church routine for some "restful" purpose is different. I'm talking about ignoring God because we just don't want to be with Him or be convicted by Him.)
 - iii) For some Christians around the world, they get persecuted just for believing in Christ. It is tempting for such people to think, "I just don't want to have to deal with that persecution right now, I think I'll just skip church service and avoid the physical risk to my life."
 - iv) A more common type of persecution is "doubts". Every believer goes through periods of doubts. The danger is letting those doubts overwhelm us to where we now want to ignore God. How does one properly deal with doubts? Again, it is back to prayer, God's word and other believers. They all help to strengthen our faith during such times. My point here is during such times we need to stick close to God to get us through such a time when our faith is weak. I heard an analogy I like here. If we are 70% sure of our faith and we have a "30% doubt factor", focus on the "70%" that does believe God is real and trust in that high percentage!
14. Verse 18: Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word;¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.
- a) In the last type of soil (previous verse), what stops the believer from being "fruitful" is persecution from the enemy. In this type of soil as described here in Verse 18, what stops the believer from being "fruitful" is when we start to care about this life more than God.

- b) Again, it can apply to salvation. Most veteran Christians can think of at least one person who did go to church for a while, but then started to care about "things" more than God and stopped believing the Gospel message.
 - i) I know of one famous person who converted to Christianity and spent a few years going to a local church. That person then started going back to his old party life. That person no longer commits their life to Christ. Is that person still saved? Only God knows the answer. I can only pray for him and judge his behavior.
 - c) Now let's get back to the topic of "faith" and the believer. Of the different types of dangers to believers, I believe this one is the most dangerous. It can refer to a person who stops going to church because they start to care about things other than God. It can refer to a person who is so obsessed with their problems that they can't "handle" God, prayer or being around other believers. The important idea here is to be aware of the danger of putting other things as a priority over God.
 - d) One of my favorite bible teachers likes to say, "God does not want to be number one on a list of ten things. God wants to be number one on a list of one." What he (Chuck Missler) meant by that is God wants us to incorporate Him into every aspect of our lives. If we are going shopping or to a ball game, we take God "with us" and we care about pleasing God at that event. It doesn't mean we have to preach at a ball game or a shopping place. It means we act like a Christian should act when we are doing these activities. In other words, we don't only act like a Christian on Sundays (or whenever). God wants to be a part of every aspect of our lives, not just our time with other believers.
15. Verse 20: Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop-- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."
- a) This line is the final explanation of the first parable. Jesus is saying "good soil" produces thirty, sixty or hundred times what was sown.
 - i) For a farmer, to produce "eight times" is considered a good ratio. At the most, one might get ten times. For example, if one plants 100 pounds of wheat, if once can gather 1,000 pounds of wheat at harvest time, then that is a good yield.
 - b) So why does Jesus specifically say, 30, 60 and 100 times? I believe it is an exaggeration designed to make the point that when one is committed to God, one produces a yield that is far beyond "normal" by farming standards. Why these specific numbers? I don't believe there is any significance to the numbers themselves. Jesus is just picking high numbers that shows the type of yield that can come from trusting God.
 - c) Tying this all together, if one is not worried about "stuff" at the present moment and one is giving our "persecution" over to God to let Him deal with it, then our hearts are now open to listen to what God wants of our lives so we can make a big difference for Him. That, in one big sentence explains how our faith can get us through any and all situations to make a difference for God in our lives.
 - d) OK everybody take a deep breath, it is time for another parable. ☺
16. Verse 21: He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.
- a) The basic idea of this parable is that one puts a lamp in a location where the lamp can "do its job" of lighting up a dark location. One does not hide the lamp under a bed or cover up the lamp, as then it cannot give out its light. A light is meant to be out in the open.
 - b) Remember that Jesus taught that the key to understanding all of the parables is to understand the first one. Therefore, one should keep the first one (about the four kinds of soil) in mind when trying to decipher the meaning of this one.

- c) Since the first parable is about how to have faith and overcome different types of situations, one should read all of the parables with that thought of "good faith" in mind.
 - i) Jesus is not talking about literal lamp stands, but our faith in Him. We should not hide our faith inside of us. Our faith is only good if we use it.
 - ii) I was thinking about people who are scared to tell their family how they now have faith in Jesus as God. In potentially difficult or deadly situations, pray to God about how to handle it. He knows such situations are difficult and one cannot just "blurt out their faith" out of fear of death or severe punishment. I have found that God helps people through such difficult situations and makes a way for such a person to show their faith.
 - d) For most of us, we don't have that kind of excuse. The idea of this verse is that our faith in God should not be limited to "Sunday's only", but it should affect every aspect of our lives. This leads back to the concept of God being "number one on a list of one". If we have faith that Jesus is God, that fact should be part of every aspect of our lives. It does not mean we start preaching Jesus in school and at work. There is a time and place for all things. If one is hired, one should be doing what the boss asked you to do. If one is at school, one is there to learn. The point is God is part of our lives during such situations and not just when we are gathered with other believers.
17. Verse 23: If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."
- a) This is sort of Jesus' tag line. This does not refer to literal ears. It refers to those of us who are believers to digest what Jesus has to say and apply it to their faith in God.
18. Verse 24: "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you--and even more. ²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."
- a) As you know by now, I believe the underlying topic of all of the parables is about our continuing faith in God through all situations. I mention that here because Jesus makes the statement in effect that "if you don't use what (faith) you have, you will lose it, and if you use what (faith) you have, more will be given". If the topic is "salvation", how does one gain more salvation? However, if the topic is "faith", this verse makes sense.
 - b) It might be best here to give an example. If we start living our lives by walking away from God, ignore His word, ignore prayer etc., even whatever faith we have will be lost. Most veteran Christians can think of people who made the life choice to turn away from God with their lives. Were these people ever saved at one time? I don't know and personally I don't worry about what could have been. In other words, we can only judge behavior and we let God judge people's hearts.
 - c) Those who seek God can grow in their faith. I have found that when we actively seek God, our faith increases. During difficult times, when I pray to Him and I consult with "godly friends", I have found my faith increases. During the times when I turn from God that I find my faith decreasing. That is what Jesus meant by these two verses.
 - d) OK, hopefully you get the concept and we can move on to the final two parables.
19. Verse 26: He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."
- a) Remember the key to understanding all the parables is to look to Jesus' explanation of the first parable. In that first parable, plant seed represents the word of God. Therefore, that same comparison of seed and the word of God applies to this parable as well.
 - b) The idea of this parable is that a farmer does not necessarily understand the biological process of how (say) wheat comes from a seed. All a farmer knows is that the wheat seed sprouts and grows. When it is fully grown, the farmer harvests the grain.

- c) In terms of a "Christian growth analogy", think of this way: Once a person becomes born again, do we know how they are going to serve God? Do we know exactly how their life will change? That is why it is called being "born again". One truly becomes a new person when one has given their lives to Christ.
 - d) A related point is that we as Christians do not literally mold other believers in what God wants for their lives. We simply watch them grow spiritually. The same way a farmer does not physically make crops grow by himself, so one who is a believer grows spiritually through what God is doing and not through some human effort.
 - i) Does this mean we should not study under good pastors and bible teachers, but just trust in God for growth? Of course not. It just means that God is the one who does the changing of our lives and for all we know, God uses those teachers to mold us into the type of person God wants us to be.
20. Verse 30: Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."
- a) This parable comes to life a little more if you have ever traveled to the Middle East. One can see mustard bushes with yellow flowers around Israel. Jesus is talking about one of the smallest seeds one can find, and it has all the information inside of that seed to make it grow into one of the largest plants in that area.
 - b) Again, the key to understanding this parable is to go back to the first parable. In the first parable, the seed represents the word of God. The point as it relates to this parable is that this seed is the smallest of plant seeds, yet it grows into a significantly large bush.
 - c) Let me put it this way, when people give their lives to Christ they start to change in a mighty way. We don't know how they will change, but they do. As long as that person is dependant upon God and letting Him work in their lives, they will "blossom". Nobody has to force them to blossom, it just happens.
 - i) Just like those seeds that have all the information they need to grow, so God provides in the "new person" all they need to spiritually grow. While we as fellow Christians are to encourage one another to grow, it is still up to the individual, (with God working through them) to change and adjust their lives to be in conformity to God's will. That is the idea behind this growth.
 - d) This leads to the discussion of birds. Jesus says in Verse 32 that birds come and rest under the large bush that is formed from the seed. Many commentators see the bird reference as a positive thing. The idea is, as we grow in our faith in God, that "tiny seed of our faith" becomes such a big plant, that birds can use that plant for shade. In other words, the sign of a bird resting under the plant shows how much our faith has grown so others can now "rest" in our faith.
 - i) Other commentators see the bird reference in a negative light. Back in the first parable (again, which is the key to all of the parables) there was a reference to birds that come and take the seed away from those with "hard hearts". Given that connection, some see this bird reference to compromises in our lives with God while we are still growing and trusting in Him.
 - ii) So which is right, the positive view of birds, or the negative one? I don't know, but both views are commonly taught. If you just believe Jesus' bird reference here is simply about the fact the "mustard bush" is so large that a bird can rest under it, then one can see it as a positive reference. If one connects it to the first parable, it is a negative reference. There, now you decide. ☺
 - e) We are now finished with the actual parable stories for the lesson. We still have one more miracle-oriented story to cover, but we are almost done.

21. Verse 33: With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.
- a) These verses say in effect that from this time onward, whenever Jesus spoke to crowds, He spoke in parables. When Jesus was alone with the disciples, He explained the meaning of the parables. This goes back to the point that the purpose of the parables are to hide the Gospel truth from those who are not really interested in what was the purpose of Jesus and His ministry. In other words, if you don't really want to follow Jesus, then for all intents and purposes, you don't care about unraveling what the parables mean.
 - b) At the same time, Jesus explained the meaning to the disciples. Verse 33 mentions that Jesus taught more parables than are listed in this chapter. In Matthew's Gospel, these same parables are given along with other ones. Mark's point here is the parables given are not a complete list of the parables but only some that focus on the idea of our faith.
22. Verse 35: That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."
³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"
- a) We are now done for the moment with parables. The chapter ends with another miracle story. In this story, Jesus was on a boat with His disciples. The weather started getting rough. Jesus was asleep, probably from the long day of dealing with the crowds. When the disciples woke Jesus up to tell Him about the storm, Jesus rebuked the wind and waves (Verse 39) and the weather immediately became calm.
 - b) It may help to remember that most of the disciples were experienced fishermen. They were used to storms. I suspect this storm was more violent than the storms they were used to and that is a reason why they woke Jesus up.
 - i) It may also help to learn a little about the Sea of Galilee. This fresh water lake is only roughly 13 miles by 8 miles in size. The lake is below sea level and surrounded by mountains. The wind can kick up around the mountains and "move" that small lake fairly furiously at times.
23. Verse 39: He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.
- a) These verses also teach us that God has power over weather and it is acceptable to pray for good weather. It does not mean God will calm every storm (be it a literal or non-literal storm), but God promises to see us through every storm of our lives. Still, these verses do teach us that Jesus is more powerful than the weather and we can pray for calmness from bad weather conditions as well as pray for other types of non-literal storms.
 - b) The most important line in this story is Verse 35 when Jesus said, "Let us go over to the other side". The reason that is important is Jesus gave the order to go from "Point A to Point B" across the Sea of Galilee. Therefore, if the disciples trusted in Jesus orders to go across the lake, they should have trusted in the fact they were going to make it.
 - c) Do these verses also indicate that Satan is behind our storms? The answer is he can be and the way to overcome that power is pray to God to use His power to overcome the storms we face in life. The reality is we don't know what is behind the "storms" we face. We can and should pray to God to stop the storms, but we have to remember that it is God's right to say no to our prayer request. If He says no, then the one prayer we can get a definite "yes" answer is to ask God to give us the strength to get through that storm.
 - i) In Verse 38, the disciples ask Jesus, "don't you care if we drown"? The point is Jesus does care and we can, and should ask Him at any time to help us face the storms that we have to face in our lives.

24. Verse 40: He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" ⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"
- a) The chapter ends with Jesus rebuking the disciples for not trusting Him. How were the disciples not trusting Jesus? The answer is again, Jesus gave the command to go to the other side of the lake. (Again, See Verse 35.) God never gives us a command that we cannot carry out. If God asks us to do something, He may have us to go through a storm in order to accomplish His will, but God will make it possible to get through the "storms".
 - b) The final line makes the point how shocked the disciples were that the waves obeyed Him. They sort of understood Jesus had the power to heal people, but it "sunk in more" that Jesus was God with the fact He could calm a literal storm.
 - c) So, why is this story given right after the parable stories? This event may have happened right after the parable stories, but to me, the order of things is not that important in terms of historical accuracy. What is significant is to understand that the purpose of this event was to increase the disciples' faith in who Jesus was and what He is capable of doing.
25. Let me end this lesson, by going back to where I started. This whole lesson is about our faith in Jesus. Faith is not a one time thing, but a life long process of learning to trust God through whatever is in front of us, be it a "storm or a calm day". The parables teach us how to grow in our faith and discussed the issues that get our focus off of God and decrease our faith.
- a) The point of all the parables is the way we grow as a person is not only to trust that "God is God" and is capable of working in our lives, but that we must constantly strive to give every aspect (think "every problem") we have over to God to deal with. God in turn never promises the storms will go away, but He does promise to get us through the storms and bring calmness to our hearts no matter what we go through in life.
 - b) There is a line I like about God working in our life that goes, "God is not here to lower our golf score". What that person meant is that God's will is not to get our will done, but His will. The purpose of prayer is to get God's will done. Since we don't always know what is God's will, we can and should ask for things we want, but we have to accept the "no" answer as well as the "yes" answer.
 - c) Faith is all about trusting in God so we can make a difference for Him in this world. That could mean making a difference in our neighborhood or somewhere around the world. The point is, if we don't have enough faith to take on a project we believe God is wanting to do through us, then we need to use the principals taught in this chapter to increase our faith (by striving to stick close to Him) so we can trust God more and more with our lives.
26. Let's pray: May God work to increase our faith in Him and help us to turn away from things that draw us away from Him. Help us to give every aspect of our lives to God and become aware of other aspects that we still have to give to Him. Help us to increase our faith so we can grow in our relationship with You and so You can use us in a mighty way to make a difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.