

Mark 4:1-34

THEME SENTENCE:

Jesus explains to his disciples why he is teaching, and why he concentrates on some not all.

Two themes are interleaved throughout this passage, and these two themes answer two obvious questions set by the preceding context.

Why Jesus concentrates on teaching

1:38 begs the question why Jesus has made preaching his priority. It's true that people had been initially struck by the authority with which he spoke, but Jesus' message is less palatable the more it is heard, and the establishment have rejected it and him (2:1-3:6). Is there really no better strategy?

By way of answer, Jesus tells three parables which all finish on the same optimistic note: there will be a massive harvest. Whatever the things that cause us to doubt the effectiveness of this word-sowing ministry, actually, if the word is sown/planted, then we can be confident of the certain and abundant harvest.

3-9, 14-20	a certain harvest despite ... rejection	There is surprising 'wastage' as the word is sown: $\frac{3}{4}$ of those who hear reject the message one way or another. But the eventual yield is extraordinary (an average US grain yield is 20-30 times, not 100!).
26-29	a certain harvest despite ... delay	The farmer here could be discouraged by the apparent inactivity in the soil once he has sown the seed: nothing then seems to happen. But despite this delay, eventually and inevitably, harvest-time comes.
30-32	a certain harvest despite ... an unimpressive start	The potential discouragement here is the apparent insignificance of the seed – 'the smallest of all'. But the harvest that results this time is a plant 'larger than all'.

Application: how often we stress large numbers, popularity, influence and visible success when we talk about Christian work. We need to stress instead that God's ways often seem perverse to the world (and the most obvious example of this is the cross 1 Cor 1:18-25). 'Sowing the word' won't seem spectacular, will not produce quick results and will repel those who do not like to hear it. But, in the long term, it's the only way to produce a great and enduring harvest.

Why Jesus concentrates on 'some' not 'all'

Jesus repeatedly seems to find crowds a hindrance to his ministry (eg 1:37-38, 45, 3:9-10) and avoids public acclamation (eg 1:25, 34b, 44a, 3:12). When he withdraws (twice, in 3:7 and 13), he does so to concentrate on 'the twelve' who are to 'be with him'. Why would the man who could do anything do this?

By way of answer, Jesus explains that he concentrates on thoroughly explaining who he is and what he came to do to 'some' because ...

10-12	... the secret has been given to 'some'	Some remain 'outside' (3:31-35) whilst the true people of God gather around Jesus and his words. The 'secret' given to them is <u>either</u> who Jesus is and what he came to do <u>or</u> that the Kingdom will one day come in power though it seems weak and ineffectual now. Whilst of course this passage emphasises God's sovereign choice, the context is the vicious rejection of ch 3 (and of the prophets through the ages, including Isaiah from where v12 is quoted). Given that rejection, Jesus 'called' the twelve (3:13f).
21-25	... the 'some' are responsible for their understanding	The 'lamp' here is Jesus, and lest we think God was carrying out his salvation plan on the quiet, the point here is that it was always intended to be public. But not everyone will recognise/understand him; we have to 'pay attention'. In fact, the gap between those understanding/not understanding will widen.
[13] 33-34	... the 'some' need to understand	Parables (contrary to what we're normally told) obscure, so Jesus must ensure 'some' get the true point.

Application: Yes, it's true that some are 'in' whilst others are 'out' Some are part of Jesus' family/the new Israel and face an eternity in heaven with God, and others refuse forgiveness, reject Jesus and face an eternity in hell. This stark division is unpalatable to modern PC ways of thinking. All the more reason to 'pay attention to what you hear': those 'inside' are seated around Jesus listening to him (3:34-35) since only there will we get our thinking godly.