

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN MARK'S GOSPEL - CHAPTER FOUR

Jesus' battle for the hearts of men continued in chapter three with further challenges from His two opponents, the religious people and the Devil. First the Pharisees again watched His actions on the Sabbath. Would He heal a man with a withered hand, probably the result of polio? Once more their view was that not working on the Sabbath included God not being allowed to heal a handicapped man! Such is the kind of nonsense situation that religious legalism can get us into. Jesus' response was simple. A good God does good when, where and to whom He chooses, and He wants to do the same through us. The Pharisees were so enraged they began to join forces with their arch-enemies, the Herodians, to kill him. He threatened the power they both had over people. The miracle demonstrated the next logical step in Jesus' work in our lives. First He cleanses sin, then He empowers us to walk or live the way He wants and now He equips us to do His work in serving others.(3:1-6)

Once more vast crowds came to be healed which threatened His ability to teach them so the fishing boat became a convenient pulpit. The demons in people recognised who He was and shouted it out but He did not want them to be the proclaimers of the gospel and so He ordered them to be silent.(3:7-12)

The simple secret of reaching great crowds is to share the task, so Jesus began the process of training those who would represent Him as teachers and opponents of Satan. The twelve were an unlikely group. There were four probably illiterate fishermen, two of whom were brothers who shouted at each other, 1 traitor, 1 nationalist guerrilla, 1 doubter, 1 betrayer and four of whom we know little at this stage. Isn't it exciting what God can do with such unlikely material – and with us? Isn't it amazing that Jesus would include Judas Iscariot in His 'development squad' and that He would love him and treat him the same as all the others for 3 solid years?(3:13-19)

At the same time opposition to Jesus and His message became more organised. First it came from the direction which would have hurt Him most, His own family who thought He was crazy and intended to lock Him up to save them embarrassment. Later when He began training His team for outreach He warned them to expect this.(Matt.10:34-36) Before the family could get organised to take Him into custody, the religious people from head office in Jerusalem arrived to check out the rumours about Jesus. They came to an even more serious verdict than the family. He was from the Devil and that is why He has such power over the demons! 'Beezebul' meant 'Lord of the Dung Heap' and was derived from the Old Testament false god Baal. Jesus pointed out with compelling logic that if they were right there must be civil war in hell with Satan fighting himself, in which case our troubles on earth would be over. To enter a life in which demons were controlling, someone stronger would first have to overpower them. Jesus,(I Jn.4.4) is the only one who can do that.(3:20-27)

People have frightened themselves over the years with the terrible warning that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin, and assuming they have committed it. The context here is important. The religious people were so perverted that they attributed God's work to Satan. But there is still a warning here to all of us. If we persisted to the end of our lives in opposing the work of the Holy Spirit by rejecting the work He would do in our lives we would be as these religious perverts. Everyone else will be forgiven.(3:28-30)

Finally His natural family arrived to take Him away but He refused to go out to them, disowning them for the moment as family in favour of His family of believers. Jesus demonstrated what He meant in Matt.10:37-39 by loving Him more than our earthly families.(3:31-35)

Review your titles for the divisions of chapter three to see whether you can improve them. What was the overall theme of the chapter? How did it build on chapters one and two? Read chapter four through several times, and again pick a theme or title for each section. My suggested divisions are: verses 1-9; 10-20; 21-25; 26-34; 35-41. Now taking each section in turn:

4:1-9 Q.1 Again a great crowd gathered. How had their attitude to Jesus changed since Mark 3:7-10? How does this illustrate the starting point of many people's interest in Jesus, and where we need to seek to lead them to? In what four places did the seed land, and with what result? Most of the crowd missed Jesus' explanation to His disciples of the meaning of this parable.(4:10) What meaning do you suppose they would have found in His words? If they missed the explanation what value then or later would there have been in hearing the parable at all?

4:10-20 Q.2 What did Jesus say in verses 10-12 is His purpose in using parables? Does verse twelve mean that He wants to hide truth from people so that they cannot become Christians? Could He be explaining that parables are a first step to real understanding of the gospel? If so what would the next steps be? Can you suggest examples of this process from real life?

Q.3 What is 'the mystery of the kingdom of God'? Look up I Cor.4:1; Col.1:25-27; I Tim.3:16; Rom.16:25-27. Why is it important to understand 'the mystery of the kingdom of God' before anything else in the Bible, including parables, will really make sense? If verse 13 means that understanding one parable will provide clues to the meaning of other parables, how does this work in practice? How for example does verse 14 help to explain verses 26-29?

Q.4 What four things happen to the word sown in our hearts? Take each kind of soil in turn and explain how it looks to the preacher and teacher of the Bible who is wondering what effect his ministry is having? Does it mean that a poor response is necessarily the result of poor preaching? In what condition is your heart to receive the word of God today? How do you know?

4:21-25 Q.5 A peck was equivalent to about eight and a half litres so a peck measure would be the size of a small bucket. The purpose of placing it over a light would be to put the light out. Look up Jn.9:5 and Matt.5:14. What is the lamp picturing to us? What is putting it under the peck measure illustrating? What then does it mean to put our lamp on a lampstand? Why don't we? What kinds of soil in the previous parable are similar to the lamp displayed or hidden?

Q.6 'Take care what you listen to.' There are two basic kinds of message we hear in this world. What are they? What has God given to us without measure?(Jn.3:34; Rom.12:3) What on the other hand does man demand of us in some form?(Mk.7:1-9; Rom.8:2; Gal.1:9; 3:1-3) Why then if we listen to man's message will what we have been taken from us?

4:26-34 Q.7 Jesus returns to the theme of sowing seed in the ground and what happens to it. This time He confines Himself to only one kind of soil; which one? What extra step in what happens to the seed is He discussing? What does it correspond to in our lives? How does this parable comment on the previous one about the lamp?

Q.8 What are the common features between the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the sower? What are the differences? Mustard is grown as an annual crop like wheat. What then has gone wrong if it grows into a tree? If the birds of the air have the same significance as in the earlier parable, what warning is intended by this parable? Relate this parable to the present day situation when the church becomes so preoccupied with other things that it neglects to harvest souls. What were the birds of the air doing in the parable of the sower? How do they still operate today? What circumstances give them greatest opportunity?

Q.9 In many cultures pictures and stories are a much more familiar and effective way of communicating ideas than logical step by step argument. What place did Jesus intend parables to have in that method of teaching? What important conditions did Jesus make about parables being effective as a means of teaching? What happens if we neglect to explain parables or Old Testament stories?

4:35-41 Q.10 Jesus said 'Let us go over to the other side.' In what way do you find change stressful? How could the wind and waves threatening to overwhelm a boat picture our lives in times of stress? Jesus was in the boat - but asleep. In what ways do we leave Him asleep in our lives? Remember that they were fishermen in a fishing boat. Are these the times that we also leave Him asleep in our everyday circumstances? How did the disciples react when the crisis arose? How do we do the same? What was their criticism of Him? Why do we blame Jesus when things go wrong?

Q.11 As Jesus restored calm to the sea so He restores peace to our lives, but what do we have to do? Why did He rebuke them for their lack of faith? Did He really expect them to know that He would calm the waves, or is He referring to something else? Lack of faith made them timid. What therefore is the opposite of faith in this particular story? What question did Jesus' action make them ask? What was the answer? If they had asked the question earlier that day how would it have helped their lack of faith? How should we be asking this question every day in familiar and unfamiliar circumstances?