

Session 4: Mark 3:7–4:34

SESSION GOALS

Every session has a point—what each participant should walk away from the discussion knowing, feeling, and doing.

Main Idea: True disciples have a heart condition that is committed to God's kingdom rather than the applause of people.

Head Change: To recognize that discipleship is about advancing the kingdom of God.

Heart Change: To feel confidence in our acceptance through Jesus.

Life Change: To work at bearing fruit in keeping with our discipleship.

OPEN

When you first came to know Christ and followed him, what did you imagine he would ask of you? What sort of sacrifices or adventures? What strange lands or people did you expect to be asked to serve for God? How did you react to those ideas?

In this portion of Mark, we'll begin to understand what it looks like to actually walk with Jesus. Scripture never promises an easy time following Jesus, but it does make it clear that exchanging obedience to the Savior for worldly comfort is a cheap trade.

READ

Read Mark 3:7–4:34.

[illegible]

WATCH

Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Francis's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions:

What sort of followers were the primary focus of Jesus's ministry?

What did Jesus require of those who wanted to follow him?

What kind of “crop” will true disciples produce?

Show Session 4: Mark 3:7–4:34 (11 minutes)

DISCUSS

Francis started off the video by explaining Jesus's discipleship model. He explained why the varied terrain near the Sea of Galilee was ideal for illustrating the different kinds of soil in the Parable of the Sower. Not everyone was privy to the true meaning of Jesus's teachings. He chose just a few to mentor up close.

We could make a big deal about the suitability of the disciples but take a closer look at Mark 3:7–19. **What sets the disciples apart from the crowds following Jesus?**

Discipleship is no “add-on” program. It’s not something we can have in addition to the rest of our pursuits. Francis summarized Jesus’s message in chapter 4 by saying, “You want to follow Jesus? You have to give everything up.”

Think about that for a second. **If you were to pursue true discipleship, what would you**

identity and his mission. In the third section (3:22–30), the scribes attempt to invalidate Jesus’s ministry by saying he does his miracles by Satan.

What's the irony in the way those two passages work together? What do you think Mark is trying to say about the scribes?

This passage comes with a significant warning—be careful in dismissing Jesus. Most of us don't set out to attribute the work of Jesus to demons like the scribes did. And most of us won't call him insane.

But Jesus has placed a demanding call on each of us. When that demand runs up against our expectations for how our lives should go, we have a choice to make—do the will of the Father and follow Jesus, or dismiss him.

Reflect on a situation in which life did not meet up with your expectations. **How did you reconcile those events with your faith?**

In the video session, Francis pointed out that Jesus intentionally taught in parables to limit his audience. The massive crowds that followed Jesus for what he could do for *them* would miss the point, but the disciples who'd given up everything for Jesus would get it.

[Note: For further study on Jesus's parables, see the Go Deeper section 2 at the end of this session.]

Read Mark 4:1–20. The Parable of the Sower is one of Jesus’s most famous parables, and for good reason. It lays out the path of true discipleship for us along with all the possible pitfalls along the road.

In your own words, describe the dangers of each of the problematic soils.

Jesus is describing discipleship, a journey that is constantly challenged. **Choose one of the soils in the parable and apply it to someone today. If he or she were like the soil with thorns, for instance, what might be happening in that person's life? Use your imagination.**

Think about the four soils. If you're a believer—or even just starting out learning about Jesus—chances are you're not the first soil where the call to discipleship never takes root. But even if we don't fit the first category, that doesn't mean we automatically fit the last one.

For each of the three kinds of soils after the first, reflect on your spiritual journey. **During what times in your life did your faithful following of Jesus struggle to take root?**

Has there been a particular struggle or temptation that has threatened to entangle your discipleship?

We live in an era—particularly in the United States—where we’ve come to expect our lives to make a big impact on the world. Our professions, our talents, our churches—we want it all to make a difference. But in the last three parables in our text for this week, Jesus paints a slightly different picture of success.

Read Mark 4:21–34. As you do, consider what Jesus is saying about the way the kingdom grows. The kingdom definitely grows into a world-changing enterprise. But notice what Jesus likens each of his disciples to: not the whole city, not the whole harvest, and not the whole tree.

Instead, the kingdom grows with the small contributions of many parts: a single lamp, a single grain, or a single mustard seed.

Would you describe your life as world-changing? Why or why not?

Will you continue to follow Jesus even if it means a lifetime of obscurity?

What would that kind of faithfulness look like for you in your context?

LAST WORD

Take a moment to consider the scope of what discipleship is all about. Think back to the scene that Mark has painted for us so far: Massive crowds have been following Jesus. He's drawn both positive and negative attention from nearly everyone—including his own mother and brothers.

Now put yourself in the shoes of the disciples, watching this whole thing unfold. Jesus has been talking in parables to keep the mysteries of God's kingdom hidden from the masses, but still—this new kingdom Jesus has been talking about looks well underway. Doesn't it?

Jesus calls us into discipleship in order to grow the kingdom of God. And that kingdom will, ultimately, change the world. But our contributions are likely to be small—hardly noticeable. And that’s okay, because the kingdom is what matters—not our fame.

The promise Jesus offers is, in the end, a huge kingdom built by God himself. We have the opportunity to play a small part in building it. Is

that enough for you? Are you willing to be a small part of God's great story?

GO DEEPER

The Go Deeper section has two potential functions. It can supplement your small group discussion by providing extra discussion material. We've highlighted a place where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of the study guide.

But you can also use these sections as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting.

1. What Does It Mean: The Unforgivable Sin

In Mark 3:22–30 we find one of the more difficult teachings from Jesus—the so-called unforgivable sin. Here, the scribes confront Jesus about his teachings. They’ve begun to spread the rumor that he is possessed by a demon named “Beelzebul,” which was a high-ranking deity worshiped in Canaanite religion. Jesus easily points out the flaw in their logic, however. If Jesus worked for Satan, why would he cast out demons that *also* work for Satan? He would be fighting against his own cause.

But then Jesus utters a frightening statement: “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (3:29). Clearly, it’s a warning, but what does it mean? And how can we know whether or not we are guilty of such a terrible sin?

Note the verb in Mark 3:30. Most translations say “they were saying” (*erchontai*) and, while that’s accurate, the verb’s tense in Greek implies an action that occurred on a habitual basis. In other

words, this wasn't a one-time event. The scribes *regularly* and *continually* attributed the works of the Holy Spirit through Jesus to the power of Satan, which is what Jesus declares unforgivable.

Despite the seriousness of Jesus's accusation, we should not miss the hope in Jesus's words before his warning: Jesus says, "all sins will be forgiven" along with "whatever blasphemies" when we turn to him. But someone who's has made a habit of declaring Jesus a servant of Satan demonstrates his or her refusal to turn to Jesus in repentance.

So, if you're worried about whether or not you've committed the unforgivable sin, you can be sure already that you haven't committed it. Your heart is sensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and you're chasing Jesus. All the other sins you may have piled up in your life are forgiven in him.

How have you grown in your understanding of the permanence of your salvation?

How would you describe blasphemy to a young believer?

Take the next five minutes and spend some time praying. Thank the Father that, through Jesus, you have complete forgiveness. Then ask the Holy Spirit to continue to prick your conscience over sins in your life so that you never develop a trajectory toward hardness.

2. Peek at the Greek: parabole

In Mark 4, Jesus puts on his Master Teacher hat, assuming the posture of literary expert. Instead of merely telling the people what to do and why they should do it, he begins painting word

pictures: "The kingdom of God is like..." Listeners were forced to engage with the story on multiple levels in order to understand what he was trying to communicate.

These parables (*parabole*) were stories that illustrated a truth, also known as symbolic speech, figure of speech, an allegory, or even a type. Jesus often taught in extended metaphors, appropriating familiar cultural scenes (agriculture, family, weddings, finances) to teach a larger truth about the kingdom of God. He sometimes borrowed language from Old Testament parables (compare Isaiah 28:23–39 with Mark 4:13–20).

But Jesus employed an extra element in his parables: he often included a symbol for himself, inserting himself into the narrative. For instance, in the Parable of the Sower, he is the sower. We know this because he explained it to the disciples privately. That story gives Mark's readers (us) a clear, implicit affirmation that Jesus understood his divine identity. His sense of identification with God was so deep that he consistently incorporated imagery and symbols from the Old Testament that depicted God:

- the bridegroom of the kingdom (Mark 2:19–20)
- the good shepherd (John 10:11, 14)
- the vineyard owner with authority to do what he wishes with what is his (Matt. 21:40)
- the one with authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5)
- and the lord with authority to reward the faithful. (Matt. 25:14–30)

Jesus purposely taught through parables in order to naturally divide those who followed him

around seeking miracles from those who devoted themselves to him. As we read his parables, we are faced with a similar choice.

Read Mark 4:30–32. Identify each element in the parable and the overall message. Ask yourself these questions:

- **What does this tell us about God?**
- **How does it point us to Christ?**
- **How should it change us?**

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