

Listen up
Mark 4:1-20

What is the secret of making spiritual progress?

We know what's required in many other parts of our lives.

Whether it's learning a new musical instrument, learning to drive or developing new skills to play a sport. We know the mantra. **Practice makes perfect.**

But what about spiritual growth? What's the key ingredient to making progress in our spiritual development?

If may be as **someone who isn't yet a Christian** but you want to know if there is a God, what is he like and what does he think of you. This is a great place to be. There are many people who never get into this spiritual starting position because they are kept so busy and distracted by a million things that demand their constant attention. But what's next if you're on the starting line? How do you keep on making progress so you find the answers that you crave?

And **what if you are follower of Jesus?** How do we avoid staying in the spiritual crèche throughout the decades? How can we keep on growing in our faith, love and hope?

The secret according to **Mark chapter 4** is **proper listening to the word of God.**

This is true whether we are a person of faith **or** a person seeking faith. The way of progress is attentive listening to God's voice in God's book. Or put simply, we need to really listen to the Bible.

Let me who you this from this from **Mark chapter 4.**

Look at verse 1. **Read verses 1 to 3a.**

At the beginning of verse 3 Jesus is not asking a question. He doesn't say, are you listening? No, **he gives a command.** Listen! Give me your full attention as I speak words that you need to hear.

Who does Jesus think he is to give such commands?

Can you imagine the response if you walked into a crowded bar or restaurant and shouted out, "Hey everybody pipe down, stop what you are doing, and listen to me." I think it would be legitimate for people to say, "Who do you think you are?"

What about Jesus? Who does he think he is? Coming into the middle of our lives and telling us to listen up.

He's the king who created us. He's the one who loves us. And he's the one who wants to invite us to experience life in his better kingdom.

So for the good of our souls, let's listen to what Jesus says.

In verses 3 to 8 Jesus tells a parable about a farmer scattering seed out in his field. And later on in the chapter he goes through the detail of the story and explains what it means. However, in verse 9 he gives us **the big headline.**

Listen to this. Verse 9. **Read verse 9.**

This is the **big application** of the story he has just told.

If you've got ears, use them.

That is, we've got to make sure we are **properly** listening to the word of God.

It's very possible to be the presence of the word of God, which of course is a good thing, and yet not **attentive** to what is being said.

The words are spoken but they are not heard.

It's a bit like having a new radio in your house but you haven't tuned it in. The sound waves are all around but until the radio is actively tuned no sound is heard.

Or to use the words of Jesus, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

What does this mean in practice? How can we be proper listeners to the word of God?

Let me point out **five ways** from the rest of **Mark chapter 4**.

First, we are to listen inquisitively (Vs 10-13)

Look at verse 10. **Read verses 10 to 12.**

Did you notice there are two groups of people? We've got the **insiders** and the **outsiders**.

Let's start with the **outsiders**. Who are they? The outsiders are the people who hear what Jesus says but the truth bounces off them like water off a duck's back. They hear but they don't understand. Critically, they don't make any effort to find out more.

By contrast, the **insiders** are those who come to Jesus and ask for an explanation. They are the inquisitive ones. They are the ones who know they don't get it but they don't leave it there.

They proactively come to Jesus and seek his help.

According to verse 13, this is exactly what they need. Listen to what Jesus says. Verse 13. **Read verse 13.**

It's almost as if the parable of the sower is story level 101. It's basic. It's not advanced doctrine. It's baby milk. And yet here's the point. Without Jesus' help none of us can understand basic spiritual truth.

But here's the encouragement. Jesus is so keen to help inquisitive people discover what they need to know.

So here's **the application for us** as we seek to grow our faith, whether this means finding a faith or strengthening a faith, be inquisitive.

Ask questions. Talk about it with other people. Have discussions. Don't be afraid of digging deeper. Because spiritual progress is accelerated as we listen inquisitively.

And let me say something to those of us who instinctively right ourselves off as not having the brains to work it all out, you don't. But none of us do. In fact, it's not about academic ability. It's about Jesus working inside us by the Holy Spirit to turn on our spiritual lights one by one.

So let's listen inquisitively!

Second, we are to listen actively (Vs 14-15)

Look at verse 14. **Read verses 14 and 15.**

Jesus now focuses on the detail of his parable and explains what it all means. **In summary**, the sower is the person who speaks the word of God, the seed is the word of God, and the soils represent people who listen to the word of God in different ways. How they listen determines the effect of God's word in their life.

Jesus starts with the seed that falls on the path.

These people are the ones that don't actively listen to the word of God.

They hear it but their listening is so passive that it doesn't penetrate at all.

This leaves them wide open to **a Satanic attack**.

I'm not sure what comes into your mind when you hear the phrase Satanic attack. Maybe it's a scene from a horror film.

But notice how the attack is described in **verse 13**. Satan takes away the word of God.

There is no smoke. There are no convulsions. But the attack is spiritually deadly. The precious word of God is removed from the mind and so it cannot do its wonderful work of transformation.

I've seen this happen many times in my time as a church minister. People who have forgotten everything by the time they get to the back of the building. Why? They haven't actively listened and the enemy has taken advantage of their passivity.

Can I plead with you to be active in your listening whenever the Bible is read, discussed and proclaimed!

There are lots of different things we can do. Sit up. Pay attention. Get a good night's sleep. Pray for help. Take notes. Remember who is speaking. Do whatever it takes to be **an active listener**.

Third, we are to listen deeply (Vs 16-17)

This emerges as Jesus explains what kind of people are represented by the rocky soil.

Listen to verse 16. **Read verses 16 and 17.**

It's obviously that these people don't have any deep roots. The result is that they don't last course. We're told they fall away. They give up on the faith.

The question is why? Or to put it slightly differently, what does it mean to have shallow roots in shallow soil?

I think it's about having a **superficial understanding** of what the normal Christian life will be like. Indeed, an understanding that doesn't have a place for suffering.

I say this because we're told that these people receive the word with great joy but when trouble or persecution comes **because of the word** they quickly fall away.

It's easy to get excited about certain parts of the gospel. Forgiveness of sins. Grace. Adoption. Eternity with God. But what about the place of suffering in the Christian life? We are not immune from the troubles of the world. More comes our way because of the gospel life we seek to live.

If we are not prepared for trouble, then we will easily give up.

It was said that before one of his expeditions the famous explorer Ernest Shackleton put this advert in a newspaper: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success."

We need to be honest about the nature of the Christian life.

God wants to and will end all suffering for the people of faith. But this is in the future.

But for now we must expect difficulties. If we do, we will keep on going.

If we want to grow spiritually over the long term, let's listen deeply.

Fourth, we are to listen regularly (Vs 18-19)

Look at verse 18. **Read verses 18 and 19.**

The picture here is of thorns choking the life out of the plant.

What strikes me is how **ordinary** and **common** they are.

- The worries of this life
- The deceitfulness of wealth
- The desires for other things

These can easily become the dominate influence in a Christian's life and left unchecked they can kill spiritual progress.

How can we avoid this spiritual choking? Quite simply, by regularly listening to God's word.

We prioritise the Bible and allow God's voice to be the denominated voice in our heads.

The result is that **God's word drives out the other dangers.**

If we want to grow, let's be regular listeners.

Fifth, we are to listen humbly (Vs 20)

Listen to verse 20. **Read verse 20.**

This is the soil we want to be. It's bountifully fruitful.

How do we become this kind of person?

We must be the kind of listeners we've already described.

But what's the extra detail from verse 20? These people **accept** what they hear.

This means they listen humble.

This doesn't mean they listen uncritically or without questions.

No, it means they come to the text assuming that God is right, and if there a disagreement between God and us then God will be right and we will be wrong.

We are not to be like a judge on a popular TV entertainment show.

We are not to judge God's word. It is the very reverse. God's word exposes, challenges and judges us.

In summary

Let me try and draw all this together.

I'm convinced that these verses allow me to predict your future.

Mark 4 is the script of our lives. It explains the different responses to the same message being heard.

It challenges us to make a choice to determine the outcome we want.

Here's the choice.

If you don't want to make much spiritual progress, then here's what you need to do. Choose apathetic, passive, shallow, irregular and proud listener. This is guaranteed to kill any chance of spiritual life.

However, if we do want to make progress and see much spiritual fruit then the way is clear. With God's help, we must be inquisitive, active, deep, regular and humble listeners.

If we are then listen to the promise of verse 20. **Read verse 20.**

Let's pray.