

Ears to Hear (Guide) Small Group Guide

Warm-up Question: (Choose one, make up your own, or skip this part all together, depending upon the nature of your group.)

1. What is one small thing in your life that you are really grateful for?
2. Do you like to take naps?

Read the following passage: Mark 4:1-23.

We were made to know God. But, for many of us, God often feels distant. Or maybe we struggle to believe that God exists at all. Why is this? In the parable of the soils, Jesus describes some of the forces that keep us from God. He calls them the birds, the sun, and the thorns. And then, in a private conversation with his disciples, Jesus says something unexpected: the reason he teaches the people with parables is so that they won't understand, won't turn, and won't be forgiven! What?! Why would Jesus say that?

The people of Israel had been hardhearted for a long time, and Jesus knew that judgment was coming to Israel. Sometimes we, too, need to experience the consequences of our sin. But this wasn't the whole story. In fact, Jesus would use the hardheartedness of the people to bring about a great salvation. One scholar sums up what we read in Mark 4 this way:

God intends the outsiders to be blinded by Jesus' parables and his parabolic actions (Mark 4:11-12), so that they oppose him and eventually bring about his death; in his death, however, the new age of revelation will dawn. Thus the hiddenness of Jesus' identity (Mark 4:12) leads to his death, which in turn results in the open manifestation of his identity (Mark 4:22).

J. Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom*, quoted in *To See and Not Perceive* by Craig Evans

God's plan was big enough to handle the sin of the Jewish people, and his plan is big enough to handle our sin. When we turn to God in faith, he replaces our hard hearts with hearts that are receptive to his voice and his will.

Questions for Discussion (Choose several that are relevant for your group):

1. Jesus explained to his disciples that the thorns represent "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things." How do these distractions show up in your life? How do we keep from being distracted if we have very real responsibilities that we need to manage? What is one unnecessary thing in your life that currently occupies a lot of time, energy, or focus? What is one important thing in your life that threatens to take on more importance than walking with God?

2. Do you regularly struggle with worrying? Explain. What are some practical things we can do to worry less?
3. What are one or two of the biggest challenges you are facing right now? Do you find that these challenges are hindering your relationship with God? Why or why not?
4. Do you ever play the villain in your own life? (That is, do you ever attack, demean, or sabotage yourself?) If so, what does this typically look like? What can we do to avoid acting like a villain toward ourselves?
5. Do you think there are any areas of your life in which you are experiencing demonic influence? Explain. What should we do if we think we are being harassed by demonic spirits?
6. Why do you think God sometimes (often?) allows us to experience the negative consequences of our actions?
7. When we are not confident that God's plan can handle our sin, we may be tempted to deny our sin or to sink into despair because of our sin. Which of these unhelpful paths are you more prone to take? Explain.
8. How should the reality that God's plan is big enough to handle our sin impact our lives? Is this reality impacting your life?
9. Read Romans 8:1-4. What does Paul say about the means and effects of God's salvation in this passage?

Pray