

# Best Small Group Ever

## Session 1 – WORD

It's not hyperbolic to say that Jesus started the Church with a small group ministry. That sounds like an exaggeration, doesn't it? Yet isn't it surprisingly true? How many disciples did Jesus recruit? 12. Just 12. Now, he spoke to large crowds and at another point in the gospels we read about 72 disciples and so there's no doubt that Jesus taught and influenced larger groups and had large followings through different times in his ministry.

But what was Jesus' primary focus? Who did he spend the most time with? 12 disciples.

As we start off this short series on the BEST SMALL GROUP EVER. It's my desire for us to look at Jesus' small group ministry as a model and to see what insights we can glean for us today. I want us to be continually asking the question: How can we be the best small group that we can be? How can I be the best small group member that I can be?

On numerous occasions throughout the Bible Jesus is called "teacher" and his closest followers are called "learners" or "disciples." And a euphemism back then for being a disciple of someone was to "sit at their feet." The Rabbi would sit on pillows or a chair and the disciples would sit on the ground or the mats around the Rabbi and this would be the formal "classroom" setting if you will. And there's no doubt that the disciples would have spent a large portion of their time, sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning from Him.

Let's take a look at Mark 4:1-11

Here's a passage where we get a peek at some of the workings of this inner circle of Jesus and his 12 disciples.

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. <sup>2</sup> He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: <sup>3</sup> "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables.

So we see that there's this large group teaching where Jesus preaches to a crowd yet we also see that there's an intimate setting where Jesus gets alone with the Twelve and with some others who are around and they ask about the meaning of the parables. Maybe they don't

understand any of it or maybe they just want to make sure they're getting and understanding all of his words absolutely right.

Either way, what we see here is a small community that doesn't just listen to the Word of God being preached but they also discuss and dissect the word of God together in a small and intimate setting. They ask questions and they dig deeper.

And as Jesus explains the parable to his disciples, we begin to learn even more about Jesus' expectations for his disciples when they study God's word. Here's what He says the parable means:

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? <sup>14</sup> The farmer sows the word. <sup>15</sup> Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. <sup>16</sup> Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. <sup>18</sup> Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; <sup>19</sup> but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

Interestingly enough, in verse 13 Jesus says "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? And some people take that to mean, "This parable is so obvious and if you don't get it, you surely won't get the others." I don't think that's what he's saying here. I think he's saying something more.

And the reason I think this is because of the content of the parable itself.

Jesus reveals what the seed is – it's the word of God. And people are a type of soil. Either you're the sort of soil that's hard and packed down, the seed never penetrates, God's word never enters your mind, it just stays on the surface. Jesus says that Satan comes and takes away the word as soon as it hits the ground. These people, they received the word, in other words, it fell on them but they would not hear it.

Or you're another type of soil – you're soil that's on rocky ground. There's no depth. The seed can't bury its roots down deep enough to. So when trouble or persecution comes, the person falls away from the faith. We know this type of soil. Circumstantial faith. Faith based on circumstances. When things are going okay, I'll follow God. But when I experience heartache or troubles or pain, I'm out. These people, they received the word, and they heard the word but they couldn't fully accept it. Living for God, loving God, surrendering to God, all of that makes sense if it means that everything in my life will be pain free and worry free. But worshipping God and following Him and obeying Him even through trials and tribulation? That's so much harder to accept.

And there's another type of soil. This is soil that's untilled. It's got weeds and thistles growing in it. Jesus says that this represents worldliness. He says when the worries of this life, when the deceitfulness of wealth, when the desires for others things come in, they choke the word and make it unfruitful. We know this soil too. People that claim to be Christian but aren't living with any real significant difference

in their lives. Maybe they used to! Maybe they got it once. They lived a transformed life. They helped others to live in freedom and to know the love of God. But now... they look like the world, talk like the world, act like the world, and bear fruit like the world. They're unfruitful. These people received the word, heard it, and even accepted it, but worldliness kept them from bearing fruit.

Jesus says that there's a fourth type of soil. This is good soil. Presumably, it's deep, it's been tilled and weeded and when God's word lands on it, it sends out deep roots and produces an enormous amount of fruit.

When Jesus says "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" I think what Jesus is saying is, "If you understand this parable, you'll work hard to be this type of soil, and if you're this type of soil, then you'll have what it takes to learn from me, to understand all the other parables."

So when we think of the BEST SMALL GROUP EVER, we think of Jesus and his disciples who were wholeheartedly concerned with being the type of people who would a) receive the word b) hear the word c) accept the word and d) allow the word to produce fruit in our lives through a life of holiness.

And so for any small group to be all that it can be, it needs to be a community of Christians who value the Word of God. And we're not just talking about reading it once a week when we get together. We're talking about people who receive the word of God regularly, who hear it when they receive it (they allow it to penetrate the surface), who accept it when they hear it (they allow it to grow deep roots), and who structure their lives in such a way that the word they receive can thrive and produce fruit (they nurture the plant and protect it from worldliness).

Take a moment together, open your Bibles to Mark 4:1-20 if you haven't done so yet. And reflect on this passage and this message. What does it mean for you? How are you challenged to live differently? What's something that's new for you? Sit at the feet of your Rabbi Jesus and do the work of a disciple and consider what it would look like to be the BEST SMALL GROUP EVER.