

Parables of the Kingdom: Mark 4:21-34
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The Word of God is certainly a treasure for us, and it's a great privilege to be able to study it and learn from it together each week. I do want to encourage you to come to these worship services eager to learn from God's Word, eager to dig deep into this treasure, and eager to apply what we learn. And to that end I would encourage you to discuss these passages with others—maybe over Sunday lunch with your family, maybe on the phone with a friend in the church, maybe at your small group. If you have questions about a particular verse that we've looked at, please contact me or one of the other elders or bring it up in your small group. I want us to get as much out of God's Word as we can. I want us to be good soil. I want the seed to go down into our hearts and produce much fruit. And it's a great privilege for us as a church to be studying through the Gospel of Mark together. We're all looking at the same passage together on Sunday morning and hearing a sermon on it, and so it gives us the opportunity together to really wrestle to understand each passage and apply it to our lives.

I also want to exhort you to be in the Word on a daily basis. Don't let Bible study be something that only happens for you on Sunday mornings. It is necessary and good that we are here together for corporate worship each week, but this time is far from sufficient. We each need to be in the Word on a daily basis, and we need to be studying it for ourselves and discussing it with other believers. So please cultivate this in your life. Be a student of the Word. Be like the Bereans. In Acts 17:11 it says that the Jews in Berea "were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." They were studying and examining the things Paul was preaching to them. And that's how we should all be. That's how I want you to be. Don't take my word for it. Go to the Scriptures and search these things out on your own. I study hard each week and try to explain for us the meaning of the text, but I want all of you to be students of the Word. Don't be a second-hander, just feeding off of someone else's study. Study the Word for yourself, too. Let's be a people of the Book.

And now let's turn to this great Book, and to the Gospel of Mark that we're so blessed to be studying right now. We're in chapter 4, and last week we finished looking at the parable of the soils. In the section we'll study this morning, verses 21-34, there are four more parables. These are parables of the kingdom. If you look back to verse 13, just before Jesus explains the parable of the

soils to His disciples, He says to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” That’s what makes the parable of the soils so significant. We have to understand what Jesus is saying there, and then we’ll be able to understand these other parables as well. They are closely related, and we’ll see that as we go through our passage this morning.

There are four parables in this section: the parable of the lamp, the parable of the measure, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. And we can label all of these as parables of the kingdom. Remember in verses 10-12 Jesus explained the purpose of the parables, and He said that they both reveal and conceal. As the Kingdom of God is arriving in the person of Jesus Christ, there are some who are being drawn to Him to follow Him and submit to Him and to do the will of God. And to this group of people the parables will be explained, and they will be a means of great revelation. But many others are being hardened to the things Jesus is saying about Himself and about the kingdom, and to that group the parables are a means of judgment. They are not explained, and are thus nothing more than riddles. This is why Jesus says in verse 11, “To you [meaning the disciples, those who followed Jesus, those who were doing the will of God, those who are Jesus’ true family] has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.”

That explanation of the purpose of the parables is right in the middle of the parable of the soils. And the parable of the soils communicates the nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus is revealing to His disciples the secret of the kingdom of God. He’s telling them that the kingdom is coming like a seed. And in some hearts that seed will not bear fruit, but in other hearts that seed will take root and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixty fold and a hundredfold.

These are parables of the kingdom. Jesus is explaining the nature of the kingdom of God that is being inaugurated in His ministry. And that’s the key point, that it’s being inaugurated but not yet consummated. It’s not here now in all of its fullness. That will come later. The kingdom did not come as a military force. It did not come as a political power. It came as a seed. That’s the profound message of these parables, and the message is revealed to those who are seeking Jesus but concealed from those who are rejecting Him.

The Lamp (verses 21-23)

Let’s look now at these four parables of the kingdom. The first is the parable of the lamp. The way Jesus words this seems kind of odd, and unfortunately the translations obscure the oddness of it. Our English versions have the lamp as the object of the sentence. It’s a lamp that is being brought in, which makes perfect

sense. But in the Greek the lamp is the subject of the sentence. It says literally, “The lamp comes in.” And the definite article is there in the Greek, too. So it’s not *a* lamp, but *the* lamp. And who do you think the lamp is? Who is the light who is coming in? Jesus says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” This parable of the lamp is about Jesus. He’s referring to Himself in this. He is the lamp who is coming into the world, and the point is that He’s going to shine. There may be elements of hiddenness and concealment in His ministry, but ultimately He’s going to be placed on a stand and shine for all to see. You don’t put a lamp under a basket. You don’t put a lamp under a bed. You put a lamp on a stand. And that’s what happens with Jesus.

Verse 22 elaborates this point. “For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light.” Concealment will give way to revelation. Hiddenness will give way to manifestation. What is secret will come to light. Do you remember the confusing thing Jesus said to the man whom He cleansed of leprosy? In Mark 1:43 it says that “Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’” And do you remember how Jesus silenced the demons when they were testifying to His identity? There was this element of secrecy in Jesus’ ministry. He was not fully manifesting His glory to everyone. And later in Mark, after the transfiguration, Jesus gives a similar charge to Peter and James and John. Mark 9:9 says that Jesus “charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” So there was to be a certain level of secrecy concerning Jesus’ identity, but only until His resurrection. Then the lamp would be put on the stand. The time of hiddenness would then be over.

It’s fascinating to think about how the secrecy of Jesus’ ministry played an important role in the divine purposes for which He was sent. This was part of the sovereign design for Jesus’ life and teaching and ministry. His identity was not clearly revealed to everyone. His parables were riddles if not explained. And in this way there were many people who fit the description of that prophecy from Isaiah quoted in verse 12. They could see but not perceive and hear but not understand, and they would not turn and be forgiven. And it was those individuals who did the worst thing imaginable which was simultaneously the most glorious event in history. They put to death the sinless Son of God, the most wicked crime ever committed. But at the same time we recognize that this is the Good News of the Gospel, that Jesus died on behalf of all

those who will repent and believe in Him.¹ These are the mysteries and the glories of the Gospel. Jesus came in a veiled way, inaugurating the kingdom of God. And by virtue of His coming in this way, many rejected Him and eventually crucified Him. But this only served to accomplish the very thing he came for: to die for sinners. Nothing is outside of His control. Even those who openly oppose Him are unknowingly serving His purposes. The point of this first parable, then, is that Jesus is the lamp that will shine forth. The brief hiddenness of His ministry will quickly give way to openness and a clear manifestation of His identity.

Jesus adds the exhortation in verse 23 to encourage His followers. “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” For those who can understand the meaning of this parable, they should take heart. What is now hidden is going to be made manifest.

The Measure (verses 24-25)

Verse 24 transitions to the second parable: the parable of the measure. And here is another exhortation to hear. “Pay attention to what you hear.” What we’re about to read in verses 24-25 is very similar to the point of verses 11-12. There are those on the inside who are following Jesus and doing the will of God, and they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God and have everything explained to them. Then there are those on the outside who have rejected Jesus and receive the punishment of parables (because without explanation the parables are incomprehensible riddles). Verses 24-25 are making the same point. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.” If you are a follower of Jesus, if you are teachable and eager to learn from Jesus and submit to His authority in your life, then you are going to be greatly rewarded with understanding and insight. The parables and teaching of Jesus will be a blessing to your life.

Then verse 25 may seem a little strange. It may seem completely backwards. It may seem cruel and unfair. “For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” Robin Hood wouldn’t like that statement. His motto was, Rob from the rich to give to the poor. But this statement sounds like the opposite. The rich will get richer, the poor will become poorer. And that is precisely what

¹ Robert Stein, *Mark*, BECT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), page 226: “Thus Mark intends his readers in 4:21-22 to understand that the blindness of the unbelieving world to the Son of God and the arrival of his kingdom was not accidental but intentional. All this lay within the divine providence, for in their unbelief, those who opposed Jesus unknowingly carried out the divine plan that the Son of God give his life as a ransom for many (10:45).”

Jesus is saying, except He's saying it in terms of spiritual insight. For those who follow Jesus and seek Him, more will be revealed to them. But for those who reject Jesus and walk away from Him, the truth will be concealed from them.

This truth is portrayed in a wonderful way in C. S. Lewis's book *The Magician's Nephew*, which is the first book in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In this book Aslan the Lion (who is the Christ-figure) creates Narnia. And two children, Digory and Polly, are there to experience this amazing event, and they are in awe of what happens. But Digory's uncle is there also, Uncle Andrew, who is skeptical and hard-hearted. Listen to how Uncle Andrew experienced this. "When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ("*only* a lion," as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing—only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. "Of course it can't really have been singing," he thought, "I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing?" And the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, "Narnia, awake," he didn't hear any words; he heard only a snarl."²

That's what Jesus means by the words, "from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." For those who are skeptical and hard-hearted, they will become dull of hearing. Their hearts will become calloused. Their consciences will be seared. And the beautiful words of Jesus will sound to them like nonsense. Let us be warned not to respond like that. Our desire should be to receive more and more revelation, which comes from humbly submitting ourselves to the Word of God, being willing to do what the Word says and desiring to know more of our great Savior, Jesus Christ. "To the one who has, more will be given." What a great promise that is for us!

The Growing Seed (verses 26-29)

The third parable in this passage is the parable of the growing seed. Verse 26, "The kingdom of God [this is a parable of

² C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983 [orig. published, 1955]), page 147-48.

the kingdom] is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.” It’s another parable that has to do with a seed. But here the focus is not on different kinds of soil, but on the miracle of growth. This is a wonderful little parable, simple as it is. And it’s only found here in the Gospel of Mark. I love this parable. This is such an encouraging word to my soul, both in ministry and in my personal walk with the Lord. Look at verse 27, “He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.” Isn’t that beautiful?! The man scatters the seed on the ground, and then he goes to sleep! And while he sleeps and rises day after day, the seed miraculously grows! He doesn’t even know how it happens. He certainly isn’t making it happen. He can see the connection between the seed going on the ground and the seed sprouting and growing, but he doesn’t know how the sprouting and growing actually happen. He’s not down on his hands and knees pushing on the seed or yelling, “Grow, grow!” There’s nothing he can do to the seed to make it grow. So what does this farmer do? He goes to bed. He goes to sleep. And while he sleeps, the seed grows. That’s the beauty of this parable. The growth of the kingdom of God is not something that depends on our labor or our abilities. The impact of the Gospel in the world is not something that we accomplish in our own strength.

Verse 28 says, “The earth produces by itself [*automatē*, automatically], first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.” It’s not about us. It’s not about our talents or our efforts. It’s about the miracle of God that supernaturally causes the seed of His Word to grow and produce fruit. And then verse 29 concludes the story with the harvest. The focus and point of the story is the mysterious and miraculous growth of the seed and that this happens apart from human activity.

There’s a great lesson for us here about doing things in our own strength versus doing things in the Lord’s strength. We cannot make the seed grow in our own strength. God has to bring about the miracle of growth. We cannot grow God’s kingdom. We cannot change hearts. So what should we do? We should faithfully sow the seed, and then we should go to sleep. And we should sleep well at night and be free from worry and anxiety, because we trust that God is going to do what we cannot do. This is why I’m so encouraged by this parable, because that’s the way I want to live. I want to live my life in the strength of the Lord rather than trying to do things in my own strength. I want to joyfully sow the seed, preaching the Word and ministering to people in Jesus’ Name, and then be able to enjoy peaceful rest. Isn’t that what you want? To do meaningful work, kingdom work, and then be able to rest. And as we rest, God does the real work. What a great picture of the Christian life and Christian ministry.

And God designed it just this way so that He gets the glory. If we produced the crop in our own strength, then we would get the glory. But since God produces the crop, He gets the glory.

So let this be an exhortation to us to rest in God and to serve in the strength that God supplies in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (2 Peter 4:11). I also think of Isaiah 40:30-31 which says, "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

I've seen a great illustration of this, a very vivid illustration that sticks in my mind. There's a man who jogs through our neighborhood from time to time. And it's always humorous to Stacy and me as we watch this guy because of the look on his face as he jogs. He's a tall, slender man, and he's trotting along at a medium pace. But the expression on his face makes it appear that he is on the brink of utter exhaustion. Every facial muscle is tense, he seems to be gasping for air, and it always looks like he's about two steps away from collapsing on the pavement. That is the image that comes to my mind when I think about our spiritual lives and how we so often try to run the race of the Christian life in our own strength. And that's where many of us are at—trying to keep up with a hundred different responsibilities and commitments, feeling anxious and exhausted, and people look and say, "That person seems miserable." That should be a warning sign to us that we are trying to do things in our own strength.

In contrast to the man who jogs through our neighborhood, I think of the Olympic marathoners, who look like they weigh about 65 pounds and are hardly breaking a sweat after 15 miles. Their form is perfect, they're running fast, and they seem to be exerting so little effort. They make it look easy. Now, I know that it's not easy, but for the sake of the illustration, that's an image that represents running the race of the Christian life in God's strength. We are carried along on eagle's wings.

I was really convicted of this last week. I spent the day Tuesday by myself having a personal day of prayer and planning. I found a retreat center where I was able to spend the day alone in a little cabin in the middle of the woods. And I just took my Bible and some paper and a pen, and I spent the whole day reading my Bible and praying and writing out thoughts and goals. It was a wonderful day, and God really answered my prayers in blessing that time in many ways. At one point as I was praying, and I was asking the Lord to reveal sin in my heart, He showed me some things pretty clearly. He put me in my place. He revealed to me that times when I've felt discouraged lately are really just a

manifestation of pride and ungratefulness. I may feel down or depressed about something, but what's really going on in my heart is that I'm not getting something I want. Things aren't going according to my plan. I feel like I deserve something. I have a sense of entitlement. And therefore I feel bad when *my* plan isn't working out. And that's how self-pity is just another way that pride manifests itself.

I was sharing recently with some of the other elders in our accountability time that I can often feel somewhat anxious on Saturdays as I'm making final preparations for Sunday. And then I'm usually encouraged on Sundays, and then depressed on Mondays. We are fickle creatures, aren't we? I can feel discouraged by my own sins and deficiencies and limitations and weaknesses. There are so many things I desire to accomplish, and so little I feel like I'm actually getting done. I want to be a better pastor, a better preacher. I want to see revival in my life and in this church and this city. I want to have an impact for the kingdom. Some of you know that I've been trying to get my dissertation published, which is on biblical manhood and womanhood, and I just heard last week that the publisher I had submitted it to turned it down. And that was a discouragement to me. I thought, "This isn't working out the way I planned." So God's been teaching me about the difference between doing things in my own strength versus doing things in His strength. When I'm trying to grow the kingdom in my own strength, according to my plans, it's going to be all about me, and I'm going to wind up frustrated, exhausted, and depressed. But when I submit to God's plans and serve in the strength that He provides, then my ministry will be for His glory, and by his grace I will run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

I hope this parable will be as encouraging to you as it has been to me this week. Let's all be like the farmer in this parable. Let's faithfully sow the seed, and then go to sleep, and then wake up and be in awe of what God is doing.

The Mustard Seed (verses 30-32)

The last parable, which we'll just look at briefly, is the parable of the mustard seed. "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." This is similar to the previous parable, although here the focus is on the tremendous growth of the kingdom, from such a small seed to such a large plant. The kingdom was not ushered in as the large

plant, but as the mustard seed. It came on the scene in such a humble way, not a dominating way. And it continues to grow in this way. The kingdom of God will be regarded as insignificant and unimportant by the world around us. The blessings of the Gospel will be scoffed at and ridiculed. Therefore when we feel like there is little or no tangible fruit, we have to remind ourselves of this truth. Kingdom work will always start very small and seemingly insignificant. But God is doing His work, and one day we will all be in awe of what He produced from such a small seed.

Let this be an encouragement to you in your own walk with the Lord. Maybe you feel like you're young in the faith and that you'll never have much of an impact for Christ. Have confidence that the seed of faith in your heart, however small it may be, will grow and flourish. God delights in taking small, insignificant things and doing something great through them.

Let this be an encouragement to you in the work of the ministry, however it is that you're serving in the church and reaching out to unbelievers. Maybe you get discouraged sometimes when you feel like there isn't any fruit, or not as much fruit as you hoped for. Remember that the fruit will come in God's time and in God's way. We are living in the time of the already / not-yet. The kingdom is already here, but often it feels like it's only present in the microscopic form of a mustard seed. In ways unknown to us, though, the kingdom is growing and bearing fruit in tremendous ways.

I also want to say a word here specifically to stay-at-home moms. I'm married to a stay-at-home mom, whom I'm very grateful for. And I know that there are many mothers here whose life work is caring for your family and shepherding your children. And you may sometimes feel like the work you're doing has the significance of a mustard seed. As you change diapers and prepare meals and wash clothes you may be tempted to feel like you're living a small life. The world can certainly tempt you to think that way. The world tells women that they need to go out into the work force in order to have significance in life. But, ladies, you are doing kingdom work at home. You are doing the most important work imaginable for your children, and you're the only one who can do it the way it's supposed to be done. So press on in the ministry God has given you at home, and think about the kingdom growth that can occur through the future generations of your family.

Verses 33-35 conclude this section of Jesus' parables, and it reiterates the distinction between the two groups of people who heard them. There were those on the outside who just heard the parables. And they couldn't understand them because they were like riddles. But privately to his own disciples Jesus explained

everything. Let's thank God this morning for giving us the revelation of His Word, and for giving us ears to hear these parables.