

CONSIDER THE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 4:21-34

Key Verse: 4:24

“Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.”

Chapter 4 is full of parables of the kingdom of God: the parable of the sower, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. Verse 33 says, “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them....” We can find many more parables in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels. Mark uniquely includes the parable of the growing seed. One common thing in the three parables in this passage is the seed. A seed has life and grows and bears fruit. In the same way, the word of God has life and grows and bears the fruit of the kingdom of God. When we hear “the kingdom of God,” it is natural to think of a geographical location and a fixed system. But the kingdom of God is ever growing and bearing fruit. It is working beyond time and space. It is vibrant, dynamic, and influential. Though it is invisible, it is not a mirage; it is very real and effective in our practical lives. The kingdom of God can be planted and grow through the words of God. Wherever the word of God is preached, the kingdom of God begins. However, when we look at the world, it is hard to see the kingdom of God. Rather, Satan’s kingdom seems to prevail. Because of this many of God’s people have become discouraged and have almost given up preaching the word and making disciples. But in truth, God’s kingdom never diminishes, but is always growing, even in the worst times. In today’s passage let’s learn the nature of the kingdom of God. Let’s have a conviction that the kingdom of God is advancing and bearing fruit through the word of God.

First: a lamp on a stand (21-25). Jesus’ words in verses 21-25 are not parables, but lay between parables to explain their purpose and teach us what attitude we should have toward Jesus’ words.

In the first place, the purpose of the parables is to bring light to people through the words of God. Jesus said in verse 21, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?” These days we use electric lights that we can turn on with a switch. But in Jesus’ day, people used small clay lamps which burned olive oil drawn up by a wick. The typical lamp in a Jewish home was fairly small and was placed on a stand to give maximum illumination. During the night, when there was no need for the lamp light, people covered it with a bowl and put it under the bed. The lamp light refers

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to Jesus himself and his words. Jesus' purpose in telling parables was to bring his light to the world, dispelling the darkness.

The world without God and his word is in utter darkness. Those who are in the darkness do not know where they come from or where they are going. They do not know the meaning of their existence or the purpose of their lives. They are ruled by the power of sin and the devil without really understanding it. They do what they do not want to do and are full of agony. They have no vision or hope. They need the light desperately. Jesus said, **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”** (Jn 8:12). Jesus' words give us life and light. Jesus' words give us guidance and direction. Jesus' words give us hope and vision. Jesus' words have power to dispel all the darkness. Darkness has its own power. We cannot dispel it with our strength. But when we accept Jesus' words, they have power to drive out all the darkness from our hearts. For example, during morning prayer we may firmly decide not to hate a certain person. Yet, the moment we see that person, we feel stress. Then we find ourselves irritated by their voice, their manner, and everything about them. Through this we realize that we cannot overcome the darkness by our own strength. We need Jesus' light. When Jesus, who is the light, comes in newly, darkness disappears. Then we can accept and love others as they are.

Verse 22 tells us that the destiny of the truth is to be made known. It says, **“For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.”** This can be applied to the truth in general, but especially to the kingdom of God. Right after the fall of man, God announced his plan to send the Messiah to restore the kingdom of God to mankind. God's plan of salvation was so valuable and mysterious. People could not understand it. So it needed to be hidden until it could be fully understood. God revealed it progressively through his chosen servants. Finally, when his set time came, God fully revealed his secret so that whoever hears and believes may have eternal life in Christ Jesus (Ro 16:25-26). Now the kingdom of God is an “open secret.” God wants us to proclaim the gospel so that those who don't know may hear it and be saved. This gospel truth can only be accepted by those who are humble enough to hear it. Those who are proud and hard-hearted never understand it. That is why Jesus said, **“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear”** (23).

In the second place, Jesus teaches us what attitude we should have toward the words of God: **“Consider carefully what you hear”** (24a). When we hear God's word, it is easy to let it go in one ear and out the other. If we do that, the word of God does not work in our hearts. Jesus wants us to pay full attention to

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the words of God, think about them deeply, and meditate on their meaning. Why do we need such intense effort? It is because the word of God is so meaningful, so valuable, so precious, like a hidden treasure of infinite worth. Jesus went on to say, **“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you...”** (24b). In the ancient world, food and supplies were measured out into containers brought by the customer. Thus, they received the measure based on the vessel they brought. If they brought a small container, they received a small measure. But if they brought a big container, they received a big measure. Then the seller was very happy that he made a big sale, and he gave a bonus of even more. In the same way, if we have a desire to know the truth and are willing to invest our time and energy to study and meditate on Jesus’ words, then he will reveal the secrets of the kingdom to us generously. Meditating on the word of God can be compared to chewing our food well. When we chew again and again, until the fiber is completely broken down, every bit of nutrition is easily digested. The more we meditate on the words of God, the more we can experience the kingdom of God.

However, those who only hear, but do not meditate on the word of God, never understand God’s kingdom, and soon, even what they heard is taken from them (25). Spiritually speaking, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. In terms of spiritual growth, there is no neutral. We are always either growing or degenerating; we can never stand still. Our growth is determined by how much we meditate on the word of God. Two people may hear the same message or study the same Bible passage. But one of them grows spiritually and the other becomes harder. It totally depends on one’s attitude toward the word of God. Bible memorization and reflection writing may be the best way to meditate on the word of God. This is good, not only for our spiritual growth, but also for our physical and mental health. In one nursing home, they set a rule in order to prevent dementia. Residents are required to recite one Bible verse from memory before eating their meal. Since then, in contrast to other nursing homes, this one has had no cases of dementia reported at all. It is good to memorize Bible verses, meditate on the words of God, and write reflections faithfully. Jesus’ teaching method was not to spoon-feed his disciples. Rather, he helped them to think for themselves about what he taught. As the proverb says, “If you give a person a fish, you feed him for a day. But if you teach him how to fish, you feed him for his lifetime.” Learning to think for oneself based on the word of God requires intensive labor, and pains. Without this process, one cannot grow to be an independent Bible teacher. God’s word is deeper and broader than the ocean. Many treasures are hidden which teach us the way of salvation, the way of victory, the way of happiness, and more. Those who meditate on the words of God day and night discover these treasures one by one. So let’s consider Jesus’ words carefully.

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Second: the parable of the growing seed (26-29). After explaining what kind of attitude his disciples should have, Jesus told two more parables to describe what the kingdom of God is like (26a). In the first one, the parable of the growing seed, we can find three truths about the kingdom of God. **The first truth is that the kingdom of God begins with the teaching of God’s word.** Jesus said, “**A man scatters seed on the ground**” (26b). People assume that the kingdom of God comes all at once, dropping from heaven miraculously. But Jesus’ parable teaches that the kingdom of God begins in a practical and specific way, as when a man scatters seed on the ground. This means that a person proclaims the gospel by teaching the word of God to others. If one teaches philosophy, history, psychology or sociology, the kingdom of God never begins. God advances his kingdom through those who teach the word of God diligently. That is why Paul gave a final charge to Timothy: “**Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season...**” (2 Ti 4:2). Many have done this. Yet, sometimes we are discouraged when we do not see tangible fruit through Bible teaching. We need to remember that the kingdom of God is being planted through the word of God, even though we don’t see the evidence. When we diligently teach the word of God, the kingdom of God will grow. In 1912, Dr. William Leslie, a medical missionary, went to live and minister to tribal people in the Congo. He taught children how to read and write, and had many Bible studies. After 17 years he had a fallout with the tribal leaders and had to return to the U.S. He was discouraged—believing he failed to make an impact for Christ. He died nine years after his return. In 2010, the Ramsey mission team visited the place where Dr. Leslie had worked, and made an amazing discovery. In each of the eight villages they visited scattered across 34 miles, they found a church. In one of them was a 1000-seat stone “cathedral.” This church got so crowded in the 1980s – with many walking miles to attend — that a church planting movement began in the surrounding villages. There is now a network of reproducing churches hidden like glittering diamonds in the dense jungle. Each village has its own gospel choir. They write their own songs and have sing-offs from village to village.¹ One man scattering the seed of God’s word bore abundant fruit, though he did not see it in his lifetime. Where the seed of God’s word is scattered, there the kingdom of God grows.

The second truth we find is that the seed grows by itself. Jesus said, “**Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain...**” (27-28a).

¹ <http://blog.godreports.com/2014/05/missionary-died-thinking-he-was-a-failure-84-years-later-thriving-churches-found-hidden-in-the-jungle/>

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As we all know, a seed has life in itself. When planted, it grows. We don't know how it grows. This is a mystery. Though technology has been developed a lot, it cannot produce life. The law of biogenesis says that life comes from pre-existing life. No one can create life from inanimate material except God the Creator. Farmers plant seeds because they know that the seed has life that will produce life. So once they sow the seed in good soil, they sleep very peacefully, knowing that the seed will grow. All they have to do is to water it and pull out weeds; God makes the seed grow. In the same way, the gospel message contains its own life-giving power (Ro 1:16). Paul said in Colossians 1:6, **"...the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world...."** Martin Luther said, "I only urged, preached, and declared God's Word, nothing else. And yet while I was asleep, or drinking Wittenberg beer with my Philip Melanchthon and Amsdorf, the Word inflicted greater injury on popery than prince or emperor ever did. I did nothing, the Word did everything."² When we have the conviction that the word of God works by itself, we are not anxious after teaching the words of God. Rather, we sleep well during the night and the kingdom of God grows.

The third truth we find is that the seed grows step by step. Jesus said, **"...first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come"** (28b-29). The seed never skips its stages of growth. It does not go from a sprout to a fully fruitful plant instantly. The seed always grows step by step. We just need patience with the process. This can be applied to our spiritual growth and raising disciples. Impatience is the great enemy. We want to grow quickly and raise others instantly ("bali, bali!"). But it never happens. Rather, impatience makes us stress out and burden others. This impatience comes from unbelief. We need to trust God who is always at work, and be patient. Then, at the proper time, we will reap a harvest.

Third: the parable of the mustard seed (30-34). Again Jesus said, **"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?"** (30). The kingdom of God is so vast and mysterious that it is not easy to explain in a single parable. So Jesus told another parable: **"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade"** (31-32). A mustard seed is so small that it is like one dot of a ballpoint pen. But it grows into a huge plant, reaching as tall as 20 feet, with such big branches that weary birds can perch in its shade. This big plant

² <http://www.movements.net/2006/07/09/summa-summarum-drink-beer-and-let-the-word-do-the-work.html>

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refers to the kingdom of God. Birds perching in the shade refer to weary people all over the world who come into the kingdom of Christ and find salvation and rest. The parable of the mustard seed tells us that God's kingdom starts very small, but grows and gives great influence to the whole world. Jesus came into the world like a mustard seed. He was born as a small, helpless baby and laid in a manger. Compared to the Roman Empire, he seemed to be nothing. But he grew and grew until he swallowed up the Roman Empire and conquered the whole world. Jesus' discipleship ministry is the same. He began with a handful of ordinary, problem-filled people. They went around Galilee without jobs, and looked a little like beggars. At that time, most people ignored them. But Jesus' disciples grew until they became influential people who changed the course of history.

In 1885, Horace Grant Underwood went to Korea as a missionary. At that time, he couldn't see any sign of the kingdom of God. He said in his prayer, "*Lord, nothing is visible at this moment. Lord, you have planted us on this barren and poor land, where not even a single tree can grow tall enough. It is such a miracle that we could come to this land across the wide, wide Pacific Ocean...Nothing is visible...Only stubbornly stained darkness can be seen. Only Korean people chained with poverty and superstition can be seen...Yet, Lord! We will obey. We believe that you begin your work as we humbly obey, and that the day will come when our spiritual eyes will see your work according to your Words, 'Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...' Although there is no church to worship you, no school to study, although this land is filled with doubt of suspicion, contempt, and disdain, we believe that in the near future this land will become a land of blessing.*"³ As he prayed, the seed sown in the barren land grew and grew until Korea became a country of great spiritual influence which sent missionaries all over the world. Our one-to-one Bible study ministry seems small, like a mustard seed. But when the word of God is planted in one person's heart, it can grow until it changes the world.

The kingdom of God is like a person teaching the word of God until it is planted in people's hearts. The seed grows and bears fruit. The kingdom of God is like the smallest mustard seed, which grows into the largest garden plant. Its beginnings look insignificant, but it grows until it influences the whole world. Let's consider carefully what Jesus has said to us, so that we may grow to be influential men and women of God in spreading his kingdom.

³ https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Core_3_2011/conversations/topics/41?var=1