

“The Kingdom of God is Like . . .”

The Thirteenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 4:21-34; Joel 3:1-16

When Jesus first appeared in out of the way Capernaum, he began to proclaim that God’s appointed time had come and that the kingdom of God was at hand. The kingdom of God was present, because Jesus was present. The signs of this were everywhere. John the Baptist had come as the messianic forerunner. Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness and then Jesus began casting out demons upon command. Jesus healed all manner of sickness and disease, demonstrating amazing compassion upon the suffering. But perhaps the clearest sign that the kingdom of God was at hand was the fact that Jesus actually declared that a paralyzed man’s sins were forgiven, before healing the man. Who alone can forgive sins but God? And even though Jesus had been preaching a gospel centered in the arrival of the kingdom, and even though we have seen these many dramatic and powerful signs that the kingdom of God had come, Jesus has not yet defined the kingdom. When Jesus begins telling parables about the kingdom, we learn a great deal about what the kingdom of God is like.

As we return to our study of Mark’s Gospel, recall that when we left off last time, we covered the first 20 verses of Mark 4, the so-called “Parable of the Sower.” Jesus was out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, preaching to the huge crowds along the shore that were now following him everywhere he went. It was during this phase of his ministry (the later Galilean phase) that Jesus began to preach in parables. This change in content, as we have seen, was a form of judgment pronounced upon the religious leaders of Israel—the scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the law. These same men had accused Jesus of being demon possessed and were already working with their sworn political enemies (the Herodians) to find some way to have Jesus killed. Jesus had already pronounced the ultimate covenant curse upon the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem—no forgiveness in this age or in the age to come because they had blasphemed the blessed Holy Spirit. But Jesus also hid the truth about his messianic mission in plain sight from these men, so to speak, by now preaching in parables.

Not only did the religious leaders of Israel begin to actively oppose Jesus—a clear sign that Israel would reject his messianic mission and that Jesus’ messianic mission would take him to the cross—but even Jesus’ own family did not understand his true identity or the nature of his ministry, thinking that Jesus was not in his right mind. And then there were the huge crowds which had come from throughout the entire region, tracking down Jesus because of his reputation as a miracle worker. Most of these people were not interested in who Jesus was or whether or not he was the Messiah. All they knew was that Jesus had the power to heal them and ease their suffering. And so multitudes of poor, suffering people swarmed around Jesus and hounded him to the point that he was unable to eat or rest. Sadly, just like the religious leaders of Israel, these people did not understand who Jesus was nor did they understand the nature of his mission.

When Jesus tells the first parable in the series recorded in Mark 4, Jesus is doing two things. First, Jesus is offering an explanation to his disciples as to why the people of Israel were not responding to him in faith. Second, Jesus is also laying out a map of sorts to the future course of the age. This is what the parables are designed to do—simultaneously explain Israel’s current unbelief and at the same time reveal to God’s people the big picture of what lies ahead. Therefore, when Jesus speaks of a sower and certain kinds of soils and then refers to a harvest, it is clear that on one level, Jesus is using vivid language and well-known images to make a point about sowing and how certain kinds of soil will effect the harvest.

The sower deliberately sows his seed (which was a very precious commodity in the ancient world) in a number of different places. The first place where the sower sows is hard-packed ground (a path) where there is no topsoil for the seed. Any seed sown here will be eaten by birds even before it can germinate. Then there is seed sown in rocky soil, where there is enough topsoil for the seed to germinate, but not enough soil for the seed to survive. Once the afternoon sun hits the seed, there's no root system to sustain it and so the seed quickly dies. And then there is seed sown among the thorns. It grows to maturity but never produces a crop because the thorns will choke it out. And then finally, there is seed sown in good soil. This seed germinates, puts down roots and bears a crop, thirty-fold, sixty-fold or one hundred-fold. A thirty-fold return is what would be expected, sixty-fold would be beyond expectation, while one-hundred fold would be considered quite exceptional.

When Jesus' disciples hear this parable they know that something much more profound is going on than Jesus merely telling a clever story about sowing and the harvest. In fact, once they are alone with Jesus they ask him about the meaning of this parable. As we saw when we went through this parable, in the parables of the kingdom Jesus is, in part, explaining to his disciples why it is that he is not being accepted by religious leaders of Israel. He tells them that he is the sower, the seed is the word of God (specifically his preaching about the kingdom), that he is intentionally sowing in specific soils (a reference to the people throughout Israel, including the religious leaders and the multitudes who either oppose his ministry or who are following him for all the wrong reasons), and that the seed sown here will never produce a crop. While telling the parable, Jesus is, in a sense, hiding the truth about his mission from the religious leaders of Israel as well as from the multitudes who have been seeking him out only because of his ability to perform miracles. These people see, but don't perceive. They hear, but don't understand. This was not only predicted by the prophet Isaiah, it is clearly a form of divine judgment upon unbelieving Israel.

Therefore, parables are not timeless truths, like Aesop's fables. They explain the nature and purpose of the kingdom of God. Unless Jesus grants us insight into their meaning (by the explaining this to his disciples, and through them to us), we'll be just like the Pharisees who knew enough to know that in the parables Jesus was speaking negatively about them, but who could never grasp the essence of the work of redemption that God was performing in and through the person of his Son. When Jesus explains to the disciples what exactly the parable means, it becomes clear that Jesus is the sower, intentionally sowing in Israel, where 3/4's of the seed will not bear a harvest. This is why the religious leaders and the multitudes just don't get it—understanding has not been granted to them.

But among those who have been granted insight into the mystery of the kingdom (the disciples and those who are following Jesus because they think that at the very least he is a prophet), there will be a tremendous harvest, some of it expected, some exceeding all expectations. While it remains mysterious as to when the harvest will come, it is clear is that Jesus is the sower. After his ascension, his disciples will likewise become sowers of the word. They will face the same kind of unbelief and resistance to the gospel that their master encountered, even until the end of the age when the harvest finally come about. But this parable indicates that there is coming a glorious harvest and until that day, all of Christ's disciples must be about the business of sowing the word of God. And so understanding this particular parable is the key to understanding the parables which follow.

As we look at the way Mark arranges this section of his gospel, it is clear that Mark brings together a number of Jesus' sayings and parables in a topical fashion—these parables all deal with the same thing, the kingdom of God. These include the parable of the lamp and the parable of the mustard seed.

In verses 21-25, Mark places a couple of Jesus' sayings together and it is not really clear from Mark's account if these sayings were part of Jesus' private explanation of these parables given to his disciples, or something he said to the larger crowd—the latter is probably more likely.¹

The first of these two sayings (the so-called parable of the lamp) is found in verses 21-23. “[Jesus] said to them, ‘Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.’” One of the first things you notice about this passage when you look at it in the original language is that Mark speaks of the lamp as coming (not as being brought) to be placed under a bushel bowl or a bed or couch. Lamps do not “come to you,” they are brought to you, the way this is translated by the NIV and others.

But Mark's odd wording here makes perfect sense if Jesus is the lamp who now comes to his people with the light of the truth. Not only does Jesus say this elsewhere—“*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12)—but since there is every indication that in these parables that Jesus is speaking about himself and his messianic mission, this is a perfectly reasonable assumption. Therefore, Jesus is the lamp which brings the light of the truth and the gospel, and when the lamp comes (is brought), no one would even think to take that lamp and then put it under and bowl or place it under a bed (couch) in order to hide it. Rather when a lamp comes (or is brought), it is placed upon a lampstand where everyone can see it and benefit from the light that it provides.² Thus God's purpose in sending Jesus was not to hide him from the unbelievers throughout Israel, but that through Jesus—the light of the world—God is revealing his saving purposes to his people, even if that meant that Jesus would be rejected and eventually arrested and crucified.³

But Jesus' words about the lamp being placing on the lampstand for all to see are followed by an explanation of how the kingdom works. That which had been hidden (God's redemptive purpose in Christ) has now been disclosed and brought out into the open. Those who are members of Jesus' true family by faith (those on the inside) will both see and perceive, as well as hear and understand. They see and believe that Jesus is speaking of himself and that even though his own glory is now veiled, at some point (the coming harvest) Jesus' true glory will be revealed for all to see. Indeed, there will be glimpses of this glory in Jesus' ministry, such as the transfiguration. But this parable serves the two-fold purpose of explaining Israel's unbelief as well as mapping out the course of the future in a kind of general sense. The scribes and Pharisees would be all too happy to keep that light which God has revealed under a bowl or under a couch. Yet no one would think to do such a thing. Furthermore, while Jesus is the light come into the world, his true glory is still veiled, even to his disciples, although one day that glory will be fully revealed. That, of course, is the blessed hope for which we all long, even now.⁴

¹ See the discussions of the structure of this chapter in: Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 146-148; and Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 164.

² Cf. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 164; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 164-166.

³ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 164.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 166-167.

Jesus not only ends this parable with a solemn warning to listen carefully to what he has just said, the next saying (in verses 24-25), opens with the same warning. “‘*Consider carefully what you hear, he continued. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*’” The connection between this saying and the parable of the lamp is the reference to the bushel measure (the bowl) in the preceding parable and is likewise an affirmation of the need for careful spiritual insight. This may even be a challenge of sorts issued by Jesus to look for the deeper meaning of these parables and not just think of them as mere stories. In these parables Jesus is clearly telling a story, but what message is the story trying to impart?⁵ What is Jesus truly saying about Israel and the course of redemptive history? This purpose explains the repeated warning from our Lord to listen carefully and attempt to discern the true meaning of his words.

The point of this saying is that according to the measure of your response to the word of God, so will be your blessing from God. If you respond to these words in faith, “*who ever has, more will be given.*” God is exceedingly generous to all those who hear his word, believe his promises and then obey him with a grateful heart. But to those who do not listen to the word of God, will lose even what they already have.⁶ Instead of blessing, such a person will receive the covenant curses, making this a matter of utmost seriousness. This saying may very well draw upon the parable of the sower for its meaning. That one (the good soil) who receives the word of the kingdom when it is sown will produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even one-hundred-fold. But that one (the three poor soils), who hears the word of the kingdom and reject will suffer loss on the day of the harvest. In Matthew 13, this is depicted in terms of the tares being thrown into the fire. The point is that when the kingdom draws near it not only demands a response—choose this day whom you will serve—the presence of the kingdom demands that we listen carefully to the word being sown, that we receive it with faith (that is, we believe and embrace what it promises). But if we do not receive the word when it is sown, we will forfeit all that we already possess.

The following parable—the parable of the growth of the seed—is found only in the Gospel of Mark. No doubt, Mark includes it here because of its obvious connection to the parable of the sower and our Lord’s statement regarding the measure. While the parable of the sower focused upon the need to sow seed before the coming of the harvest, in this parable Jesus ties together the identity of the sower with that of the harvester. As we read in verses 26-29, “[Jesus] also said, ‘*This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 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—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.*’”

That Jesus is speaking of the final judgment becomes clear when we notice that in verses 29, Jesus is directly alluding to Joel 3:13, part of our Old Testament lesson this morning. In Joel 3:13 we read, “*swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow— so great is their wickedness!*” When Jesus speaks of the harvest, and mentions the sickle as the harvesting tool, there can be no doubt he is speaking of the final judgment at the end of the age, that day when he will return to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. In this short parable then, Jesus is speaking of how his work in sowing the seed of the kingdom throughout Israel, actually

⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 166.

⁶ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 166.

sets in motion certain forces which bring about the ultimate purposes of God.⁷ The same will be true of the disciples when they preach the word. Indeed, once seed is sown, it sprouts and grows regardless of what the sower does subsequently. But once sown, the harvest is inevitable. Therefore the two actions—sowing and harvesting, are necessarily connected. Jesus is both the sower and the harvester, and when he sows the seed of the gospel of the kingdom he is also ensuring the harvest. The seed will germinate and will ripen, and then comes the harvest. The same will be true for his disciples. This fits perfectly with the blessing-curse principle.

The next parable included by Mark is the parable of the mustard seed, in which Jesus likens the kingdom of God to the smallest of seeds.

This was more than likely a parable which Jesus told on a number of occasions and it is found in all three synoptic gospels. As we read in verses 30-32, *“Again he said, ‘What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.’”* As some of you may know, there was a huge debate over the inerrancy of the Bible in the late 1970’s, with one famous Evangelical seminary professor rejecting the concept of inerrancy because of this parable. In this parable, Jesus says the mustard seed is the smallest seed when in fact it is not. Therefore, according to this professor, the Bible has factual errors. But this professor—learned as he was—missed the whole point of the parable. Jesus is not giving a lecture in botany. He’s make use of a very prominent Jewish proverb, which spoke of the mustard seed as the smallest seed.⁸

Notice that this parable doesn’t speak about the process of the growth of the seed or of sowing. It is parable about the contrast between what starts out as something very small, seemingly insignificant, and yet ends up producing a very large shrub. The kingdom is not like the mustard seed, small and unassuming. The kingdom is like what happens to the mustard seed. What appears insignificant at the beginning, grows beyond all expectation, given the size of the original seed, and becomes so massive that birds perch on it. The point is simply that the kingdom has arrived in a small and seemingly insignificant way out in the backwater of Capernaum. But the day will come when this kingdom’s glory will surpass even the mightiest kingdoms on the earth.⁹ This glory of the kingdom is presently veiled—even as Christ’s glory is veiled. One day, the kingdom’s true glory will be manifest.

Some believe that the reference to the birds perching in the branches is an allusion to Ezekiel’s cedar tree parables (cf. Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6) and even of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 4:9, 18, indicating that many nations will find their place in the kingdom of God and that the kingdom’s influence will extend far beyond the narrow confines of Israel.¹⁰ This is not an unreasonable assumption. We should also understand Jesus to mean that while the word and the sower (Jesus) appear insignificant to those who see but do not perceive and who hear but do not understand, especially in light of Roman military might, that

⁷ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 169.

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 171.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel of the Kingdom, 171-172.

¹⁰ R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark, 216-217.

the power of the word should never be taken for granted. Those who currently oppress Israel will eventually be dwarfed by the kingdom of God.

Mark closes out this section of parables of the kingdom, by making it clear that he has selected certain parables to suit his purpose, which is to offer insight into the kingdom of God. As he recounts in verses 33-34, *“With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.”* It is now clear that Jesus’ use of parables is a form of judgment upon those outside his true family which is the New Israel. While Jesus preached the word of God, his vehicle of communication was now the parable. Jesus would force those who heard him to seek for understanding, to use the measure which he had given them. Those who opposed Jesus would be confounded by these parables and what they already have (covenant blessing) will be taken away. Those who were following Jesus for all the wrong reasons, would find themselves forced to seek understanding, or else go back from whence they had come. But to those who were on the inside—his disciples—Jesus would explain the meaning of all of these parables to them so that they would know that the kingdom of God is like . . .

What, then, is the significance of the Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God for us today?

The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. It does not have a logo, or a world headquarters, a CEO, or a CFO, nor does it have a mailing address or a website. Since these are things the modern scribes and Pharisees and multitudes are looking for, they’ll never recognize the kingdom of God when it draws near. According to the preaching of Jesus, the kingdom of God is directly tied to his person and work. In other words, the kingdom of God is not tied to any human institution or even to any particular denomination. But wherever Christ is present through his word and through his sacraments, so too, the kingdom of God is present. This means that we must not hide the light of the gospel under a bowl or under a couch, but that we proclaim the saving work of Christ to those who otherwise will perish in their sins.

Since the presence of the kingdom is tied to the forgiveness of sin and new life in Christ, when the kingdom of God draws near, the signs of that kingdom will also be present. The broken-hearted are comforted, the sick will witness Christ’s resurrection power, the mighty are humbled, the weak are made strong, and Satan may even be provoked to anger. While the power of the kingdom will be known to the saints, to those on the outside, they will never perceive nor understand, unless God grant them spiritual hearing and sight. This explains to us why it is that people who have every opportunity to respond to the gospel in faith do not see the obvious. It has been hidden from them, even though its truth is in plain sight, right out in the open. But since the harvest is not yet, we must continue to sow the word and pray and expect that God will grant such people spiritual sight and hearing before it is too late.

As Jesus told us in the parable of the sower, the kingdom spreads by sowing the seed of the word of God. In the parable Jesus is the sower, but it is clear that as the course of this age unfolds, Jesus’ disciples will continue to sow seed until the time of the harvest. Indeed, that is what Jesus calls us to do. It is not our business to worry about the condition of the soil, but to be busy sowing seed and proclaiming to all that in Jesus Christ, God has done all that is necessary for sinners to become saints. For once it has been sown, the seed will germinate (sprout) and develop until the time of the harvest. In fact, the very act of sowing will guarantee a harvest. This is what God has ordained, and this is how his purposes will come to pass. God has not only ordained the end (who will be saved), he’s also ordained the means by which they will be saved, the sowing of seed (the preaching of the gospel, or the communication of the gospel through personal evangelism).

Throughout these parables, Jesus also makes it clear that if we listen to his word and desire deeper understanding into the mysteries of the kingdom, he will grant us insight beyond all expectation. But if we hear his word and then blow it off without responding in faith, we risk facing covenant curses and the removal of all his blessings. Thus even though the kingdom cannot be seen, nor controlled, it cannot be ignored. When the kingdom comes, Jesus demands that we repent and believe the good news we have just heard, that God was in Christ reconciling sinners unto himself. And having responded to Jesus in faith, we now witness the kingdom draw near and long for the comfort of its presence and the fulfillment of its promises. Indeed, as Jesus himself tells us, the kingdom may have begun in a small and insignificant way, but even now it continues to grow and spread, and will someday grow beyond all expectation and be home to those who once upon a time were mere strangers and foreigners.

And so beloved, the kingdom is like a mustard seed, or a lamp, or a sower sowing seed. To those on the outside, it makes no sense. But to those of us who trust in Jesus Christ, the kingdom draws near once again this morning. It demands that we repent of our sins. It calls us to renew our faith in Christ. It invites us to come to this heavenly banquet, and it enables us to leave here this morning knowing our sins are forgiven. As the kingdom grows and spreads, we already know a great deal about what the future will hold for God's people. But whatever the kingdom is like, it cannot be ignored. And that kingdom is now at hand through word and sacrament.