

Mark 4:21–35 — Parables Of The Kingdom

January 27, 2019

Open your Bibles to Mark 4. We are in Mark 4:21-34. Last week, we covered the parable of the soils. It was 20 verses long. The middle of the parable held one of the toughest verses in the entire New Testament about God hardening hearts against those who consistently reject him. What at first appeared to be a simple parable, was more challenging than we realized. Today, the terrain is easier, but we still have 15 verses to cover so I won't pre-read the text. Before we get to business, let me take a moment to review what we learned in the parable of the soils, because that is important for helping us understand the parables we are about to study today.

The Parable of the Soils

Last week, in the parable of the soils, we learned when it comes to sharing the good news of Jesus with others around us, there are four different responses we will receive to Jesus. Those four responses can be pictured like four types of soil upon which a farmer throws his seed.

Some hearts are like hard-packed soil. They are unresponsive to the gospel.

Some people have hearts like hard-packed soil on a walking path. We can tell them how much God loves them. We can tell them that Jesus died for them all day long, but they will either ignore us, laugh at us, or even be hostile against us. The gospel is like a bullet off a rock when it comes to penetrating their hearts. We need to expect this kind of hard-hearted response from some people. It is the same kind of response the scribes and Pharisees gave to Jesus. We also need

to remember their negative response to Jesus and to us is not happening because we shared Jesus the wrong way. It is not happening because the good news of Jesus is ineffective. The problem is with the hardness of their hearts. When we tell people about Jesus, don't be shocked when we receive this kind of resistance from some people. Expect this kind of resistance from some people.

Some hearts are like rocky soil. They respond superficially to the gospel and fall away when the gospel costs them something.

There are other people that respond to the good news of Jesus like seed planted on rocky soil. Seed planted on rocky soil springs up but quickly, since it has no root because of the rock, withers when it is exposed to the harsh summer sun. In a similar way, some people will initially be excited about the good news of Jesus, but once they realize that following Jesus involves sacrifice and suffering, they quickly fall away because they have no root.

In Jesus' day, these were the crowds following Jesus. They were excited to follow Jesus when he healed them and provided free food for them by multiplying a little boy's lunch. As soon as he said, "Take up your cross and follow me," they fell away. They didn't want to follow Jesus if it cost them something. In a similar way, when we tell friends about Jesus, some will be initially excited about church and the gospel, but as soon as following Christ involves sacrifice of their money, their free time, or their popularity,; these people will quickly walk away from Christ and his church. Don't be surprised by this. Expect this kind of reaction. Jesus told us it would happen.

Some hearts are like weed-infested soil. The cares of this world choke their faith. They never produce spiritual fruit.

Other people, when we share the good news of Jesus, will have interest in Jesus. The seed of the gospel will take root in their hearts, but like seed growing in weed-infested soil, they will ultimately be unfruitful for Jesus. Just as weed-infested soil chokes out the fruitfulness of a farmer's plants, a heart that is living with its greatest priority on comfort, riches, popularity, and the pleasures of this world will never be fruitful for Christ. The desire for worldly things will overwhelm their desire for pleasing Jesus. At the end of their lives, they will look back on it to see no spiritual fruit. They never multiplied the faith they were given by spreading it to the lives of others.

Some hearts are good soil. They are prepared by God and produce an abundant spiritual harvest.

The last soil is a soil that is not hard, because it was broken up by God to make it is soft and receptive. It is a soil where God has removed the rocks and pulled the weeds. It is good soil. It is a receptive heart. A heart with good soil only needs to have the seed of the gospel. The seed of the gospel will take root and produced great life and abundant spiritual fruit. That life will lead many other people to Jesus.

This parable has hard news and good news. The hard news of this parable is that we should expect some people to be hard against Jesus when we tell them about him. This is because of the hardness of their own hearts. We should also expect some people to begin with Christ but then walk away from Christ. We should also expect some to begin with Christ but never produce fruit

for Christ. They will never multiply themselves. That is discouraging. Thankfully there is good news.

The good news of this parable is that we should expect some people will have hearts prepared by God to receive the good news of Jesus. All they need is for us to share the seed of the gospel. They will be supernaturally born again and their lives with Christ will take off, producing much fruit for God and leading many to know him. It is incredibly encouraging to know God goes before us and prepares people's hearts to receive the gospel message. For some people, our sharing about Jesus cannot fail! God prepared the soil of their hearts. All we need to do is share the good news with them.

While the parable of the soils teaches us about the results we can expect when we share Jesus, for the rest of this chapter, Jesus gives us four additional parables about the kingdom of God. In these parables, he tells us the importance of sharing the good news of Jesus. He tells us the importance of listening to the good news of Jesus. He tells us how people grow in the good news of Jesus. He tells us how the good news of Jesus will eventually impact the entire world.

The Parable of the Lamp

And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." Mark 4:21–23 (ESV)

Jesus was talking about a clay pot lamp. This is a clay bowl with one end pinched to a point for a floating wick. It was filled with oil. In the ancient world, they didn't have electricity. When



the sun went down, it was really dark. Imagine walking around your house at night with all the lights out. That was life every day in the ancient world. The way they illuminated their homes was with clay lamps. You obviously didn't light a lamp to put it under a basket. If you covered your only source of light with a basket, you couldn't see anything. The basket talked about in this parable was the basket they used to measure grain. It was a little more than two gallons in size. You didn't dump your grain basket then put it over your lamp. If you did that, there would be pitch black darkness. That made no sense. In an ancient home, everybody wanted and needed light.

In addition, Jesus said you wouldn't put your lamp under your bed. Jewish beds were mats that were rolled on the floor, then rolled back to the wall during the day. Roman beds were on legs, so they were off the ground in the air. That way, you didn't sleep on the floor. Obviously, you wouldn't put your lamp under your bed. You could see a little light but most of the light would be obscured by the bed. Lamps were put on a stand for everyone to see so they could light up a room. The goal was to spread the light because everyone needed light. The goal was never to hide the light. Here is what Jesus taught us about the kingdom of God.

Everyone who has the light of the gospel has an obligation to share the light of the gospel, not to hide it.

Imagine you and a friend are driving on a dirt road through a field during the middle of the night on your way home. In the middle of nowhere, you have a flat tire. You get out of your vehicle and realize you have no lights, not even a cell phone. You work on changing the tire in pitch-black darkness for 30 minutes,

trying to feel your jack, lug nuts and spare tire without killing yourself as you change your flat. After a half-hour of frustration, your friend reaches into his pocket and pulls out a flashlight. He casually asks if you would like him to help you with the flashlight. What would you say to him?

“Why didn’t you shine your light earlier! I respected needed your light.”

This is the same scenario we have today. We have the light of Jesus. Everyone around us desperately needs the truth of Jesus, but because of cultural pressure that tells us to be silent about Jesus, we hide our faith in public. We do not shine our light.

Jesus says to us, “Everyone needs the light of the gospel. I didn’t give you the light to put it under a basket or under a bed. I gave you the light to share it with others around you.” This is a great challenge for us in a world that tells us to be silent and keep our light under a basket. Jesus tells us to shine our light brightly for all to see.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus used this parable about shining our light to illustrate the importance of sharing the gospel message. In Matthew, Jesus used this same parable to illustrate the important of doing good for others. We are to shine our light with our words and our works.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:14–16 (ESV)

Nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. — This is a perplexing ending to Jesus’ teaching about

our lives needing to shine like lamps for the gospel. What was Jesus talking about?

In essence, he said there is a right time to reveal things. At Christmas, many of us purchase presents for our children. We don't give presents as we purchase them, we save them for the right time — Christmas morning.

Last week, we learned there was a decisive shift in Jesus' teaching strategy. For almost two years, he taught publicly and clearly about the kingdom of God. At this point, the religious leaders had rejected the abundant evidence of his teaching, healings and casting out of demons. They were running around telling people Jesus was demon-possessed. From that point forward, Mark told us that Jesus did all of his public teaching in parables. The purpose of parables was to conceal God's truth from the hard-hearted religious leaders. Jesus's parables then served to reveal God's truth to his disciples in private.

When Jesus told his disciples the parable of the lamp and the importance of shining their light for all to see, the obvious question that came to their minds was, "Then why are you concealing your light from the religious leaders by publicly teaching in parables, mere riddles to everyone that didn't have them privately explained?" Jesus' answer was that while he was not shining his light publicly right now, there was coming a time when his light would be manifest and he would shine his light for all to see.

Soon after this, Jesus' apostles would be openly and publicly shining their light. In Mark 6:7, the 12 apostles were sent out to shine their light and share the truth about Jesus two-by-two. This was their first short-term mission trip. When

they taught, they did not teach in parables but taught clearly, for all to understand. Eventually the apostles were sent to the world in the Great Commission. We are not there yet.

In this little phrase, Jesus said that while the message of the kingdom was being hidden from the crowds and religious teachers then, that message would not be hidden permanently. There was coming a time when the gospel would be revealed like a shining light for all to see.

The Parable of the Measure

And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 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.” Mark 4:24–25 (ESV)

Notice this begins with the words:

Pay attention to what you hear. — Jesus was talking about the attitude we have about him and about the truth given to us about his kingdom. Those who take the time and energy to hear and respond to Jesus’ kingdom teaching will receive back their investment, and even more.

We all know that we can be in church thinking about lunch and the rest of our day. We all know we can read our Bibles and skim to get it done instead of actually reading, thinking and trying to learn. We all know how we can keep Jesus and the truth of his kingdom at arm’s length rather than genuinely pursuing knowing Christ and letting him speak to us. We have to be careful how we hear.

With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you — The more seriously we pursue knowing Christ and his kingdom, the more Jesus will reveal himself to us and the more we will grow in

Christ. The best part of this promise is that God doesn't just reveal himself to us and mature us in equal measure to how we pursue him but he gives us far more than we deserve when we pursue him. God is so good. He always gives us more than we deserve.

If you want to state this principle another way it would be:

The spiritual growth we experience will be in proportion to the spiritual maturity we pursue.

We need to ask ourselves, how much are we pursuing knowing Jesus? Do you have a time of personal Bible study? Do we take time to read a chapter of the Bible throughout the week? If we cannot read the Bible every day, do we try to make time to read the Bible most days? When we read, do we race through a chapter or do we read and reread it? Do we think about it? Do we roll it around in our minds? Do we ask God to teach us about himself from what we read? Do we highlight our Bibles? Do we use notebooks to write down what we observe? The more we pursue knowing Christ, the more he will reveal himself to us.

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. — Those who hear and respond to the message of God's kingdom will receive even greater revelation. Those who reject what they hear will find the little truth they have slipping away. While the first part of this parable describes God giving more truth and spiritual light to those who seek it, this part describes the trajectory of those who ignore the little bit of spiritual light they have. They will find themselves losing the little light they possess because they didn't take the effort to hear and respond to the spiritual truth they know.

Here is a memorable way to state this truth.

When we are careful to hear and obey God's word, we will be given more. If we ignore the little bit of God's word we have, what we have will be taken away.

If we hear the truth of God's word in preaching, Bible study, or life group and we ignore it and don't try to obey it and absorb it, we will end up in spiritual atrophy. The little truth we have will begin to fade away. If we put effort into hearing, applying and obeying the truth of God's Word, God will continue to mature us and he will reveal to us even more truth about himself.

It matters how we hear the word of God, when we read it and when we hear it taught. This is why Jesus tells us to be careful how we listen.

I beg you, make pursuing Jesus a serious thing in your life. Too many of us follow Christ half-heartedly. We go to church and don't put effort into hearing and applying. We listen and quickly forget. Jesus begs us to listen. Learn and apply. You will experience spiritual growth in even greater proportion than the spiritual growth you pursue, but we must pursue growing in Jesus.

The Parable of the Growing Seed

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." Mark 4:26–29 (ESV)

Like the parable of the sower, the next two parables are about the growing plants. Growing plants was something the farmers in Galilee understood. This parable teaches us the kingdom of God is ultimately a work of God. God is the one who sprouts the seed of the gospel in people's lives. God is also the one who grows the seed of the gospel to full maturity in people's lives. The only role

we play is to share the seed. God takes it the rest of the way. Just as the farmers who plant corn in Iowa know that God sprouts the seed and grows it to full maturity, all we do is share the gospel. We watch God change lives so people are reborn, and then God will continue growing them to spiritual maturity.

I love the way it tells us the farmer plants the crop then goes to bed. What a great picture of doing nothing while the crop grows to maturity. All the farmer can do is watch the seed do what God programmed it to do.

Jesus said the kingdom of God works the same way. When we share the gospel, all we can do is go home and go to bed. We don't need to panic to make seed germinate. We don't need to panic and instruct seed to put out leaves, then to bear fruit. The seed takes care of itself.

God asks us to scatter the seed of the gospel. He will take care of growing the gospel seed and bringing it to full maturity.

This is such a comfort because it takes the pressure of spiritual maturity off our shoulders. Since spiritual growth is a work of God, just like spiritual conversion is a work of God, that means all we can do is provide a healthy environment that has opportunities for spiritual growth. We don't need to freak out trying to force spiritual growth. That is God's work.

We provide sermons, CrossWinds University classes, and Life Groups. These are opportunities for growth, but only God provides spiritual growth.

The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. — This is another great part of the parable. The words “by itself” are the words automate in Greek. This is where we get our English word automatic. Once God sprouts the seed of the gospel in someone's heart,

Christian growth from that point forward is on automatic. That doesn't mean everyone grows at the same rate. Some grow faster than others. Of course we know from the parable of the soils that some will fall away or be unfruitful. Those who have truly received the gospel will continue to grow until they produce fruit. This will happen automatically. It is built into the genetics of the gospel seed.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

It is incredibly relieving to know Christian maturity is ultimately God's work, not our work. We don't need to carry that burden.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

And he said, "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." Mark 4:30–32 (ESV)

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of the seeds on the earth. Unfortunately, some people get hung up on this verse. You see, the mustard seed is not the smallest seed on the earth. The mustard seed is about the size of a grain of sand. Scientists have discovered in the rainforests of the Amazon orchids that have seed which are 1/300th of an inch in length. They are like specks of dust. Some people claim this is evidence the Bible is in error because the mustard seed is not the smallest seed on the earth. How should we answer their question? Does the discovery of seeds smaller than a mustard seed prove the Bible is in error?



This isn't a hard question to answer. At the time of Jesus, the smallest seed anyone knew about in their part of the world was the mustard seed. Nobody in ancient Israel had the foggiest idea about the size of orchid seeds in the rainforests of the Amazon. As far as everyone in that part of the world was concerned, the mustard seed was the smallest seed on the earth.



The size of the seed isn't the only thing amazing about the mustard seed. The size of a mustard plant is what makes the seed amazing. A tiny mustard seed grows into a huge bush that can be 15 feet high.

I haven't done a lot of research on plant genetics but when I googled "mustard seed," I kept getting mustard trees as a result. I am not sure, but if this mustard tree came from something as tiny as the mustard seed, which is the size of a grain of sand, that is amazing.



Jesus said this is a good picture of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God at this point was Jesus, his apostles, and some additional disciples. The crowds eventually fell away from Jesus. After Jesus' crucifixion, the group gathered in Jerusalem in Acts 1:15 was 120. After three years of ministry, few were following Jesus when he died. This was a small group, like a mustard seed. Then the mustard seed sprouted with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. At Pentecost, 3,000 trusted in Christ at the birth of the church. Soon the gospel went from obscurity to spreading the good news of Jesus around the

ancient world with thousands coming to Christ week after week. A little more than 200 years later, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Today, a third of all people on the planet claim to follow Jesus. Look what Revelation tells us about the size of the kingdom of God in heaven.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Revelation 7:9–10 (ESV)

The kingdom of God will start out small but will be huge. He said the kingdom of God will be so big, that like the mustard plant, the birds of the air will be able to nest in its shade. That is the fulfillment of a prophecy from Ezekiel 17 which pictures nations like birds coming to lodge in the tree of God's blessing.

The good news of the gospel may have had a small beginning, but Jesus promised it is an enterprise that will not fail, because God won't let it fail. God's kingdom will become so big that it will be a blessing to the nations.

Mark ended by telling us these are only a few of Jesus' parables.

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. Mark 4:33–34 (ESV)

Let's review what we learned about God's kingdom.

Application

1. **The good news of Jesus is like having a lamp. We are to shine it around others, not hide it under a basket or bed.** If we have light, it doesn't make sense to cover it. We are to shine the light for others to see. In a world that tells us to keep our faith in Jesus to ourselves, we want to obey God rather than man. We want to shine the good news of Jesus bright for all to see.

2. **We must not just hear God's Word but we must apply it to our lives if we want spiritual growth.** The more we apply God's truth, the more God will reveal himself to us. If we hear God's truth but ignore it, we will end up in spiritual atrophy, not spiritual strength. We will lose the little bit of spiritual truth God has given.
3. **God calls us to plant the seed of the gospel. God will take care of germinating the seed of the gospel and bringing it to full maturity.** This is incredibly freeing. We are not responsible for every step of Christian maturity in someone's life. God takes care of that. He is growing his gospel seed in hearts. He may use us to help others along the way but spiritual growth is ultimately God's work, not our work. This is incredibly freeing to know spiritual maturity in other people is not our burden to bear. We cannot force it to happen.
4. **The kingdom of God may start out small, but it will grow to bless the nations of the world.** God's kingdom may have started small but because God is behind the growth, it will grow to immense proportions, even blessing the nations of the world.

Communion

We are going to close our service by celebrating the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was begun by Jesus the night before he was crucified. It brings us back to the truth that the only way we can be forgiven of our sin and to know God is through our trust in Jesus.

We practice open communion, which means we invite everyone who has trusted in Christ to take communion with us.

While the elements are being passed, I would like you to take those moments of quiet to talk with Jesus about the first two of his parables we studied today. How are we shining our light for others to see? What measure are we using to pursue the spiritual truth offered to us by Jesus? As you reflect on that, repent of anything God brings to your mind. Make a decision to follow through on anything the Holy Spirit prompts you to change, then join your church family in celebrating the Lord's Supper.



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