

Parables of the Kingdom

Mark 4:21-34

Key Verse: 4:31,32

“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.”

Jesus’ message is: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” Jesus wanted to explain the kingdom of God to his disciples. How could Jesus possibly explain the mystery of the kingdom of God? How could Jesus possibly explain the amazing future growth of the Christian church among the Gentiles? Jesus did so by using parables. On the surface Jesus’ parables seem to be interesting stories. But they have a deep spiritual meaning that opens our eyes to the kingdom of God. Jesus’ parables are truly amazing in their simplicity, and in their depth and breadth.

In today’s passage Jesus teaches us what kind of attitude we must have to discover the secrets in the parables. Then Jesus tells us two more parables of the kingdom: the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. May the Spirit open the eyes of our hearts to see Christ and his kingdom through these parables.

First, obtain the light and let it shine (21-25).

Look at verse 21. “He 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?’” This verse teaches us Jesus’ purpose in telling parables, and more generally, in teaching the word of God. Jesus taught the word to reveal truth to us. Some people think that since parables are hard to understand, Jesus wants to keep the truth from us. But this is ridiculous thinking. It is as ridiculous as lighting a lamp and hiding it under a bed. Jesus’ intention is not to keep the truth from us, but to reveal the truth to us.

Then what does the lamp represent? It represents the word of Jesus. Jesus’ words shine through the spiritual darkness to reveal the kingdom of God. As a lamp is put on a stand, Jesus’ words should be communicated in the most effective way. So Jesus taught in parables to large crowds. Jesus spread the word of God in every possible way to illumine men’s lives.

The lamp also represents Jesus himself (Jn 8:12). Though being in very nature God, Jesus was veiled in flesh. For one reason, Jesus did this to avoid misunderstanding. Fallen men had their own expectations about the Christ. Their expectations were contrary to God’s will and often disturbed Jesus’ work (Jn 6:15). Jesus wanted men to truly understand his identity as the suffering servant, foretold by Isaiah. It was not easy to educate people about this; it challenged deeply held beliefs. Jesus did not try to educate everyone. Jesus revealed himself clearly to his disciples. Then, when Peter confessed, “You are the Christ,” Jesus revealed his death and resurrection, his

transfigured image in glory, his ascension into heaven, and his coming again as King and Judge. Jesus revealed himself by degrees, to a small number of people, until they truly understood him. Through them, Jesus revealed his true identity and mission to the whole world. In this sense, Jesus himself is the lamp shining through the parables.

Finally, the lamp can represent the servants of Christ. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 5:14a, “You are the light of the world.” The apostles learned of Jesus. Then they taught what they learned, by words and actions. They shone the light of Christ’s presence and brightened the world. All who know Christ must shine his light as well.

Look at verse 22. “For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.” What will be disclosed? Whatever is hidden. The word of Jesus exposes everything as it truly is. This refers to the work of God, including all of his special mercies and acts of grace. It also refers to the schemes of the devil. And it refers to ourselves as we truly are, including all of our hidden sins, as well as our hidden glory in Christ (Eph 2:10). We can come to know these hidden things by the light of Jesus’ word. Sooner or later, everything will be exposed (Heb 4:12-13).

In verse 23 Jesus says, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” Jesus knew that some people would ignore his words. Jesus recognizes their freedom of choice, though he knows they would regret it later. Jesus also believed that some people would take his words to heart and let his light shine in them. Jesus tells them how to do this.

Look at verse 24. “‘Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.’” After hearing the word, we must spend some time to think about it and pray over it until we grasp real spiritual truth in it. Those who study hermeneutics advise us to do four things: observe, interpret, apply, evaluate. To observe we must know clearly what Jesus said in the Bible. For this, Bible memorization is an excellent practice. Then we must interpret the meaning. This requires understanding Jesus’ mind and heart. It also requires understanding how Jesus’ teaching fits into the chemistry of the Bible as a whole. Then we must apply the truth of Jesus to our lives. This means that our thought patterns, behavior and even our desires must change according to the word of God. Otherwise, we deceive ourselves. The Bible warns in James 1:22, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Then we must take time to evaluate our practice of the word. We must constantly correct ourselves according to the word of God.

Jesus teaches us to work hard to consider his word and practice it. Why? Because God blesses those who do so. Jesus said, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.” When we give all our hearts and minds and strength to understand the word of God, God knows this. God is pleased by this. God blesses us with understanding, as much as the effort we have made. In fact, God gives an extra measure of blessing out of his grace. God also knows those who seek him superficially. No one can fool God. Those who struggle little will be blessed little, though it is still more than they deserve. But those who struggle wholeheartedly will receive the full blessing.

The one who discovers great spiritual truth is not necessarily a person of shining intellect or a religious professional. It is the one who gives his heart and mind to study the word of God until he understands it. Martin Luther was a sinful man with many faults. But he studied the Bible, especially the book of Romans, with great devotion. He learned the secret that “the righteous will live by faith.” He solved his own sin problem and became a blessing to the church of God. Christian Norcross wrote her Easter message again and again. Finally, she understood the love of Jesus deeply and how to practice it in caring for others. Brendan Daley wrote and rewrote his message on the resurrection. Finally, he could grasp the faithfulness of God who raised Christ from the dead according to his promise. Nowadays a systematic approach to study is unpopular. Many follow a “stream of consciousness” approach to learning. But we must know that Jesus’ words are not easy to understand. Great effort is necessary to obtain the blessing Jesus wants to give. Let’s make this effort, see the light, and let it shine.

Second, the parable of the growing seed (26-29).

In verses 26-29 Jesus tells another parable, the parable of the growing seed. Let’s read verses 26-29. “He 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.’”

The seed sprouts and grows by its own power. Jesus said in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” When a human being hears the word of God and believes it, the life of God is planted in his soul and begins to grow. This life is indestructible. This life grows continually until one enters heaven.

Once the seed has been planted, the sower’s work is done. The sower’s life goes on. He sleeps and gets up and so on. All the while, the seed grows independently by its own power. The sower can even go away and the seed will keep growing. The Philippines UBF was pioneered by Ron Quilaton, the older brother of Maria Peace and Elena Lomahan. Ron planted the seed of the kingdom in the heart of Dr. William Altobar. Then Ron returned to America to practice medicine. Yet the seed continued to grow and bear fruit. It has given birth to a Christian community that has prospered for the last 20 years, producing 12 mission-aries who are serving in various countries right now.

The word grows by its own power. God makes it grow. The credit and glory for the growth of the word belongs to God. Sowers have the privilege of participating. But their role is limited. Knowing this gives us a right attitude as sowers. It prevents us from trying take the responsibility that belongs only to God. One young woman witnessed the great work of God in her Bible student’s heart. Then she became burdened, thinking that now she must make the

seed grow. But this is not her job. It is God's job. Her job is to faithfully sow the seed through one-to-one Bible study. The word will grow and bear fruit by its own power.

The seed grows into a fruitful head step by step: first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. God is a God of order. God works according to his plan and his laws. We may want to see the seed produce fruit immediately. But before a harvest comes, God must do many things that we cannot see or understand. Sowers must acknowledge that God is at work and learn patience. We must be patient with individual persons and we must patiently pray for North America.

There is a harvest when the grain is ripe. Jesus invested a tremendous amount of time and energy teaching the word to his disciples. Jesus prayed for them continually. Jesus always thought about how to help them. But they did not really grasp what Jesus was teaching until he died on the cross and rose again. They did not change completely in their inner men until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. But when they changed, they really changed. Their fear was gone. They became courageous to preach the gospel, even to the religious leaders. Jesus' long labor of teaching the word bore abundant spiritual fruit.

Ultimately, the harvest refers to the great spiritual harvest at the end of the age (Joel 3:13; Mt 13:39b). There will come a day when God's kingdom, which has been invisible, will be manifest in all its fullness. 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 says, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." This harvest is coming. The kingdom of God grows steadily until Jesus comes in glory.

Third, the parable of the mustard seed (30-32).

In verses 30-32 Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed. Let's read 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.'" We learn two main points from this parable.

In the first place, the kingdom of God begins in a small way. When Jesus came into this world, he was just a tiny baby. He looked so helpless and vulnerable. He was laid in a manger. But in him was the life of God. He gave life to many and produced the kingdom of God. We must learn how to value small beginnings. When I met Shepherdess Marcia Lenthang on the UIC campus 21 years ago, she gave me a wrong phone number. However, her friend, whom

I also invited, came to Bible study and brought Marcia with her. It seemed small. Yet it was the beginning of great work. Through Marcia's influence Maria, Angie and Elena Gutierrez came to Bible study. Now all four of them are married to men of God and serving fruitful house church ministries.

In the second place, the smallest seed grows to be the largest garden plant. Though the kingdom of God looks small in the beginning, it grows in a mysterious way to become the most dominant force. Finally it encompasses all things and fills the whole world with its presence.

The kingdom of God, which began with a baby in a manger and with twelve ordinary disciples has spread to the whole world and covers the earth. According to missiologists, the Christian faith is the fastest growing in the world. There is a mighty work of the Holy Spirit in Latin America, Central Asia and Africa. The kingdom of God is growing in China and India. In America, there are many house churches. They may look small, but their influence is great and it is changing America. Sometimes we feel that not much is happening in the work of God through one-to-one Bible study. But listen to Jesus' parables! The kingdom of God is growing steadily and it will continue to do so until Christ comes in power and great glory to reign visibly forever.

Look at 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." Jesus made a great effort to plant the kingdom of God in people's hearts through parables. Jesus gave his life to plant the kingdom of God. To people who were suffering in this sinsick world, Jesus' words were like pure water to their parched souls. They loved to listen to Jesus even though they might not have understood what he was talking about. Jesus taught them as much as they could understand.

When Jesus was alone with his own disciples, he explained every-thing. The apostles know the secrets of the kingdom of God. They recorded them in the New Testament. To understand Jesus' parables fully, we must study the New Testament as well as the Old Testament diligently, and with a repentant heart. Then we can know the secrets of the kingdom. This study of the parables has whetted our appetites. May the Lord help us to consider carefully what we have heard and to open our eyes to his glorious kingdom.