

SOWING AND... SLEEPING? Mark 4:21-34

One of the questions we must ask ourselves as a church and as individuals in ministry is, “How do we define success?” Do we define success by the number of people coming to church? By how many converts are made? How many names are on the church member list? That’s usually how the world often defines it. Success is defined by it’s three s’s: size, speed, spread.¹ But if that’s the case, then after studying the Parable of the Sower (better called the Parable of the Soils) we’re in for some serious trouble in ministry because only 1 out of 4 soils actually received the Word of God and bore fruit in the end.

In our journey through the gospel of Mark, we’ve reached a point where Jesus is beginning to prepare the disciples for ministry – ministry for the long haul that can cope with the highs and lows. And to do that, He teaches them some key parables they will need to remember for the rest of their life. What we find is some serious freedom from the pressure of the success syndrome.

Mark 4:21-34.

“And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on a lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”

And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

And He said, “How shall we picture the picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.” With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.”

I. **THE REASONS FOR THE PARABLES. (VV. 33-34)**

Again, last week in Mark we took notice of a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. He was still teaching the multitudes on the seashore from a boat like we were familiar with, but something had changed: His manner or style of teaching had changed in that **He began to speak in parables**. Our text says, “He did not speak to them [the public] without a parable.” And again, there’s two reasons why someone might speak in a parable: The **first reason** being that parables could be used in a such a way that it actually makes the truth more clear and easier to understand. And the **second reason** being that parables could be used in such a way so as to make the truth more obscure. And it’s the second reason that is why Jesus has begun to speak in parables to the religious establishment who has rejected Him and is out to kill Him, and then to the crowds who have ears but they aren’t hearing what He says. They aren’t taking it in and applying it. So that’s why He says things like “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

❖ **If you really hear it, it means you receive it and apply it.** You embrace it.

It's your disposition to what's being said. The idea of having "ears to hear" is a reference to the OT judgements on Israel because time and time again, the Lord would send Israel prophets and warn them about coming judgment but they wouldn't listen and listening was equated with obedience. Well it was the same way with those in Jesus' ministry.

However, when Jesus was in a more private place with His closest followers (as we saw in verse 10 last week), including the 12 apostles and the 70 some disciples, they would ask Him to explain the parables. And that's where we find ourselves in today's context: a private setting where Jesus is explaining parables to them. You have to put yourself in their shoes to really understand what is going on because with everything going on, the disciples are left scratching their heads. Why is He concealing truth? Is the kingdom not coming now? Did I leave everything behind to follow Jesus for nothing? Is the new plan to call down judgement? Basically, where is all of this going, Jesus? And that's what Jesus is explaining to them now – what the experience is going to be like for the sons of the kingdom until the kingdom actually comes.

The first explanatory parable is...

II. **THE PARABLE OF THE LAMP (VV. 21-25)**

He says, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on a lampstand?" And a lamp during this time was a common object, like light bulbs today. They were something everyone could relate too and would have been something like a bowl-shaped clay dish with a spout on the end and that spout would hold a wick or piece of fabric that soaked up the oil in the dish. It would be a lot like a kerosene lantern today you might use when the power goes out. But no one would light a lamp and put it under a basket or under their bed – that would be incredibly unnatural and against the entire purpose of the lamp. You light lamps so you can see, and put them somewhere higher where they will light up the room, just like lamps in your home.

Well, that's the way it is with the truth of the God's Word. It was meant to be lifted up and to shine so that it would be useful to those whom it shines on. You don't hide truth, you proclaim it.

❖ **If you have the light, shine it!**

This answers their questions about why He is concealing truth the way He is. He is doing it out of divine judgment right now but *it is not something for them to do*. When He says, "For nothing is hidden except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light," He is saying is that right now some parts of what I'm doing must be hidden and secret, but there is coming a perfect time when you guys will be called to reveal it and expose it. Before long, after being trained by Jesus and after witnessing His death, burial and resurrection (which they don't understand yet), this is going to be their main responsibility in ministry! Their main job will be to reveal the truths from God's Word about salvation in Jesus Christ.

And this tells us a little something about the OT, right? The gospel is in it, hidden in passages like Isaiah 53, Genesis 22, the animal sacrifices, etc. It was hidden in the OT and not totally understood, but it will soon be revealed in all of its wonderful glory after the resurrection. The entire purpose of it's being hidden is so that it would eventually be revealed – just like a Christmas present or birthday present – you buy it ahead of time and hide it until the perfect moment when the time comes to reveal it.

This is something apostle Paul emphasized repeatedly. He understood his main responsibility was to reveal the light. He said to Timothy in 2 Timothy, "...do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but **now has been revealed** by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality **to light through the gospel**, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher." The light is the gospel and we are to reveal it to people.

But note 2 essentials for being a good light-bearer:

1. Take care what you listen too because it affects your light bearing. (v. 24)

It's a small phrase but especially for these men in the context where the Pharisees were continually saying things like Jesus was Satanically inspired. And it's important for us to understand today because we could say it this way: "You are what you eat." Whatever you take in the most, that is going to shape you and form you. I had to tell a young man that on a mission trip once. He was really struggling with some lust issues and I told him it would help if he changed his diet. "What do you mean," he said? I said, "You've had those headphones on your head every free moment you get on this trip and I've noticed what you're listening to is not good for you spiritually." I said, "How can you *not* think of that stuff constantly when that's all you're listening too?" **What you listen to or expose yourself to really will affect your ability to shine the light.** And I would challenge anyone to just listen to Christian music for a month like on MyBridge Radio (102.3 & 105.3 Chadron) and see if it doesn't affect your day to day faithfulness to the Lord.

There's never been a time where we have to pay more attention to what we listen to than today. We have more listening options before us than any previous generation: tv, radio, youtube, podcasts – you name it. And that makes it hard already. But then you throw in everything that's been going on in 2020 – apart from years where we've had great personal crisis's, I bet there's never been a year where it is more critical for us to make sure we're listening to the Word and wholesome things that lift us up. I don't know how anyone – any believer – could make it through this crazy year remaining faithful to the Lord without getting into the Word of God regularly and attending a church regularly where they are preaching the Word of God. Even my cashier at the store the other day had this shirt on that read, "Not Today Satan" and I told her I liked her shirt but that that battle seems like it's getting harder all the time... and if we're going to win it, **we have got to be getting in the Word where we're refreshed, refocused and reminded that we are looking for and living for a world that is not this one (Rev. 21).**

Secondly, remember this:

2. The more light you shine, the more light you are given. (v. 25)

"By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." So if you have the light and shine it, He will give you greater light. The more you apply, the more He gives you. But He won't keep giving you more light if you aren't applying it – make sense? It's easier to grasp in agricultural terms: You reap what you sow. **If you have the seed, sow it – scatter it –**

because there is reward for that. He rewards us for what we do, not for what we intend to do.

The next parable is one that only the gospel of Mark shares.

III. **THE PARABLE OF THE SEED GROWING INCOMPREHENSIBLY (VV. 26-29)**

“The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows – how, he does not know. The soil produces the crop by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest is ripe.” I don’t know if there is a parable that I like more than this one in this series of parables. A farmer can work the soil and plant the seed, but **the farmer can’t make the seed grow**. After planting in the spring, all he can do is wait. The tractor that was used to plant the seed often doesn’t touch that field again until harvest because it’s waiting for the crops to grow. And the seed sprouts and grows and matures but the farmer really doesn’t have anything to do with that part. All he can do is make sure it has the nutrients and resources needed to grow.

By the way, that’s one of the great proofs for creation we have looked at this summer in Sunday school: no one can explain the **mobility of life** in this world. They can make observations about it, but neither farmer, nor scientist, nor theologian can give you a complete definition of life. We all see it and know what each other means by it, but it is fleeting and mysterious. What’s causing your heart to beat and stomach to digest those donuts you ate this morning? How does one little seed of corn that’s been sitting on the shelf in my garage for three years not doing anything, when I put it in the ground all of the sudden becomes a giant plant taller than me producing more seeds? The only worldview or truth system that can answer it is Creation because God is life inherent and life only comes from life – it can’t come from non-life. He is the Life. Just like when God created Adam from the dust – it was His breath that brought life to Adam’s body.

But this is the point of the parable:

❖ **The sower is responsible to scatter the seed but God is responsible to grow it.**

Because only God can grow it. The apostle Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 3, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.” So we can plant and water, and we should, but God must cause the growth.

One thing I love about this is that you can always rest assured that God is working. How comforting it is for these disciples to know that even with everything going on right now (like Christ’s rejection by the false religious establishment) that God is still working! Things certainly weren’t going as they planned... but from a divine perspective, things were going exactly as planned and resulted in the greatest thing ever – the cross where Jesus died for our sins. And you and I need to take note of this right now. Things are not going as we planned this year... but we have a limited perspective. And we need to trust that God is working and working even more so in difficult times when men are forced to reconsider spiritual things. Every disciple needs to know that they can scatter the seed of the kingdom and then **rest, knowing there are powers at work that are way beyond them.**

❖ **The sower can rest knowing God will grow the seed.**

Too many Christians today put too much pressure on themselves trying to do something that only God can do. What this parable is teaching is that you've been a good sower, then trust God and go to sleep. That's not passivity – that's faith. That's doing things God's way. We don't need to sit up at night chewing our fingernails and wondering what we should've done different. Or be like some churches and ministries that turn to pressure tactics to get people to convert or bring in some sort of secular things to the church to draw people. You have to accept the parable of the soils as a reality and accept the fact that God grows His Church. Ray Stedman said one of the most destructive forces at work in the church today is our insistent demand for instant results. We want instant conversions and immediate responses to the messages and lessons we teach, rather than allowing time for the Word to take root and to grow and to come to harvest.ⁱⁱ Our job is to sow the seed and go to sleep while God works beyond our comprehension. What a freeing truth this is from the fatal success syndrome!

The last parable mentioned is the mustard seed/tree.

IV. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD TREE (VV. 30-32)

“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds when sown upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.” To understand this you need to know that the mustard seed is as small as a grain of salt. However, someone said when it is sown it has the power to move stones as it grows and can grow so big that they would call it a tree or even be able to climb on it.ⁱⁱⁱ So it grows very large and forcefully.

And there has been a lot of debate over whether this is good growth or bad growth and good birds or bad birds. It's certainly credible to say that this is all good growth. If you trace that saying “the birds of the air can nest under its shade” to the OT prophets, that's what you'll come away with. In Daniel 4:12, Ezekiel 17:23 and Ezekiel 31:6 each time it is used it is a reference to the nations. So according to the good growth interpretation, the gospel is the seed that grows and reaches all the nations. And this is what happened quickly and basically in one generation of apostles. The book of Revelation reveals people from every nation worshipping around the throne.

But there are **two other contexts that would teach us to believe that not all of this growth may be good**. If you look at **the context that Jesus and His disciples are in**, it is clear that the ministry is growing and people are coming from all over the place to see and follow Jesus but not all of it is good and not much of it. An herb growing into a tree is a monstrosity and what is happening in Jesus ministry what's happening with the great crowds is becoming a monstrosity and it's being infiltrated by false teachers claiming that Jesus is doing His miracles by the power of Satan.

The second context is the other parables in this series of parables from Matthew 13. The birds in the parable from last week were symbolic of Satan. And you can guarantee wherever God is at work, Satan is working on building his nest in that ministry as well – just like in Judaism with the false teachers and when Christianity grew, it turned into Catholicism. Both of started out well but ended up morphing, like and herb into a tree, and became something they shouldn't have... works-based systems that preach a false gospel message. This is why we had the Reformation 500 years ago, because the birds had almost completely overtaken the tree. So if this parable includes bad growth, it's representative of Judaism and Christendom (you can't just call it the Spiritual Kingdom

because it can include believers and non-believers. The Spiritual Kingdom aspect of God's Kingdom is only made up of believers so that's why some call it the **Mystery Kingdom**).

In the Parable of the Wheat & Tares (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43), Jesus said the kingdom of God is like, "a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also." And the workers wonder if they should gather the tares but the master said, "Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn." This is explained later by Jesus: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth in the kingdom of their Father."

❖ **The mystery kingdom (Judaism/Christendom) will include good and bad growth.**

Another parable that hints at the bad growth may be the parable of leaven (Mt. 13:33). "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took a hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." Well, no where else in the Bible is leaven a good thing. It's symbolic of sin and false teaching. That's what had happened to Judaism and why Jesus said to them in Matthew 16, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They leavened the whole thing and that's some we should expect in the Church too – apostasy intensifying the closer we get to the Lord's return. 2 Timothy 3 says difficult times are in store for the Church.

Another similar parable is the dragnet (Mt. 13:47). "The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it is filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." So good and evil are caught in the same net and must be separated. All of these parables about good and bad growth, good and bad fish, prepare us by way of warning for ministry. So that's the parable of the mustard seed we can learn a lot from.

But I think our main takeaway this morning is again, God doesn't measure success by numbers, but by faithfulness. All He asks is that we shine the light and scatter the seed. He'll take care of the rest, while we rest.

I want share this story with you from one of my devotionals on this passage from a pastor who had the privilege of watching a young man's journey to faith:

"I have watched a boy in Peninsula Bible Church growing up since grade school. I watched him come into adolescence and enter into a period of deep and bitter rebellion against God. I watched his parents, hurt and crushed by attitudes, yet nevertheless praying for him – but above all holding him up in prayer. I watched the whole process as the seed that had been sown in his heart took root and began to grow. There were tiny observable signs of change occurring. Gradually he came back to the Lord. And as an adult young man, he asked me to fill out a reference for him to go to

seminary. That is the Word growing secretly. The sower know not how it happens but can rest secure in this.”^{iv}

ⁱ Nathan Knight, *Sow and Sleep, Pastor. Let God Define Success* (November 10, 2019: TGC), accessed 18 July 2020.

ⁱⁱ Ray Stedman, *The Power of His Presence* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2006), 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective: Volume 2* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2017), 437.

^{iv} Stedman, 19.