

April 27, 2025

THE MYSTERIOUS NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 4:21-34

(7 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

If you read the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-20 in isolation, as we did last week, you could come away with the wrong impression. Let me show you what I mean. The parable of the sower was the first parable we saw in Mark's gospel, but it won't be the last (as we'll see this morning). And we learned last week that Jesus' teaching via parables is by design. Right in the middle of our text last week, Mark let us in on something Jesus told his disciples about the parables he was sharing. Mark writes, "And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven'" (4:10-12).

Now, that's interesting, isn't it? Jesus spoke in parables, he tells them, at least in part, so that they *wouldn't* be understood. He intentionally wasn't teaching plainly. He was masking these spiritual and eternal realities, burying them within a story. That might lead us to think that Jesus doesn't want his truths to be known. What's more, it doesn't stop there. Jesus also seems to want to hide his identity on many occasions. We've already seen several times where Jesus commands the demons to be silent about who he is, and he commanded the leper whom he healed not to say anything to anyone about what Jesus had done for him (1:44). Again, we could gather from this that Jesus doesn't want anyone to know who he truly is. I mean, it seems that Jesus is bending over backwards to make sure that he isn't known, isn't understood, and isn't obeyed. You could get the picture, if you stopped at this point in Mark's gospel that Jesus came into this world in order to remain a secret, remain unknown, and cause very little in the way of ripples in our world. But it's hard to continue to think that when you look at the parables Jesus gives in Mark 4:21-34.

In stark contrast to some elements we've already seen, the parables we'll look at today speak of Jesus being known, of people being responsible to hear his message and obey what they hear, with the kingdom of God spreading in ways we couldn't imagine, and more. These parables help give us a fuller picture of what Jesus is doing. They help us to see that he wasn't coming to remain obscure and unknown (though Jesus is carefully constructing everything in perfect time, which leads to him making decisions to conceal his true identity and work early in his ministry). He's come to be proclaimed, to be known, and to reign. He didn't come to hide his might but to bring a kingdom and demonstrate his reign all over the planet. In other words, Jesus gives his hearers no excuse to continue to deny him or fail to subject themselves to his reign. He makes that clear in the text we see today. So, I want to walk through these parables and show us these things, beginning with the note that Jesus holds us responsible to hear and receive God's Word.

Jesus holds us responsible to hear and receive God's Word

Jesus makes this point by sharing a parable about a lamp. Mark writes, “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’” (vv. 21-23). As with all the others, the parable makes sense just as a story. You wouldn’t bring a lamp into a dark room only to slide it under a bed or put it under a basket. You want it to light up the whole room, and so you elevate it, putting it on a stand. But, since parables contain a greater truth, we know Jesus’ main goal isn’t giving us instructions on interior design. So, what point is Jesus making here?

I believe the lamp that Jesus mentions here is a reference to himself and, because he is God’s promised king, his kingdom. Jesus is saying that just as the lamp’s purpose isn’t to be concealed but to shine forth throughout the room, so Jesus has come in order to be known and his kingdom proclaimed. Now, it may not look like that now in light of Jesus concealing things and refusing to let others proclaim who he is, but, again, all of this is Jesus controlling when things become known. But don’t be deceived, Jesus’ plan isn’t to remain unknown and his kingdom obscured. He comes into the world to be known and proclaimed. He will reign over all things, and one day the kingdom of this world will be fully transformed into the kingdom of our Christ. One day Jesus will return with an army of angels at his command, and no one will be in doubt about who is king or whether or not he reigns. That’s what Jesus is saying with the parable of the lamp. The light of the world didn’t come into the world so that he and his kingdom might be concealed and kept in secret darkness. Jesus is to be known. In fact, everyone is commanded to bow the knee and acknowledge Jesus as king. But that’s not the only thing he says.

Jesus also gives a command. Mark writes, “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’” (vv. 24-25).

The command is straightforward enough. If Jesus is to be known and proclaimed, then we should pay attention to what he says and what the Word says of him. But what does this second part mean about the measure one uses will be measured to that one and even more added? Well, by “measure” Jesus is referring to the measure of our receptivity to his Word. In other words, if we are receptive to what Jesus says in that we are eager to hear, believe, and obey, we’ll find that same measure in return. That is, he will be eager to reveal more, give more faith to believe, and enable us more to know. The measure shown in our response to his Word will be measured back to us from him. However, he also notes that the opposite is also true.

In other words, if you hear his Word but refuse to receive it, harden your heart against it, and greet any claim of Jesus with a skeptical mind, then don’t be surprised when any knowledge you have of the Lord is taken away. He’ll measure to you as you do to him.

And my guess is that you’ve seen this before. Have you ever known someone who wants to stand in judgment over the Bible, perhaps refusing to believe it on some point, and then

sometime later, they've not only continued to deny that piece but much more as well (if not all of it)? I can think of someone who once just began to doubt that Matthew's report of the events of the resurrection were true, and now that person is an atheist. That's exactly what Jesus is saying here.

And so we have responsibility for how we hear. Yes, he's mentioned God sovereignly revealing as he wills, but don't use that to excuse or dismiss your responsibility. The Bible never lessens our responsibility when speaking of God's sovereignty. You're responsible for how you hear and receive God's Word. So don't reject it, or more will be taken from you. Rather, be eager to hear, believe, receive, obey, and watch the Lord open your heart and mind more and more to his Word. After all, Jesus came to be known and believed. That's one truth Jesus wants us to see.

But, then, we might think that the responsibility to see people repent, believe, and obey Jesus rests entirely on us. We have to convince people in our power to hear or all is lost. And so we might come up with conniving ways to do this. But if we go that route, Jesus shows us in the next parable, we're misunderstanding how the growth and expansion of his kingdom, bringing disciples into the fold, will work. In this second parable Jesus makes clear that Jesus as he is the one who brings God's kingdom, so he is the one who makes it grow.

The Lord is the one who makes his kingdom grow

In verses 26-29, Mark continues sharing Jesus' parables about this kingdom. He writes, "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.'"

This is clearly not a parable about the hard-working, intelligent farmer, is it? There's as much talk about him sleeping, waking, doing nothing, and being ignorant as there is about him working hard. I mean, let's recap. He starts by scattering seed. And at the end, he gets his sickle and harvests the crop. In between, we're told he sleeps, rises, and has no idea how the seed is sprouting. But the earth is just producing a crop, one part at a time, until the grain is fully developed and ready to harvest. What's the point of this story?

The point is that the Lord is the one who makes his kingdom grow. He brings the kingdom. He manifests his reign. His Word is powerful to produce life. We proclaim his Word, and he's the one who makes sure it doesn't return void.

In other words, if we just read of the varied responses to Jesus, then read the parable of the sower, and then heard Jesus say that people are responsible to hear and respond to his Word, or what's been given to them will be taken away, we could feel hopeless. How are any disciples ever going to be made? How will the church have any hope in obeying and fulfilling the Great Commission? And then we read this parable of the not-so-hard-working-or-intelligent farmer, where Jesus shows us that the power is in the seed, and we're reminded that the power is not in

us, our ingenuity, or our abilities, but in God's Word. Proclaim and obey the Word, and Jesus alone will grow and expand his kingdom.

Years ago, when I first started pastoring, you didn't have to convince me that I didn't know what I was doing. I knew I didn't. But I'd read Luther talk about the Reformation, where he famously said, "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philipp and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."¹ And I thought, "Now, I can do that!" Well, not drink beer. I was a Union and Southern Seminary student in those days. But I genuinely took on that commitment.

I mean, I can't really stress how much I made this my mission. Realizing I knew nothing about how to pastor, I just outlined how I could proclaim the whole counsel of God and made my mission to preach the Bible, systematically, Sunday by Sunday, until we worked through the whole of Scripture. God as my witness this is true, I made the passphrase on my banking account, "The Word will do this thing."² Perhaps I was naïve, but I thought, "Lord, if anything is going to happen, it'll be because your Word does it all." And his Word has produced what we could never do if left to ourselves. That's been our entire history, and I pray our entire future. It's why we so consistently shape everything around Scripture and why I find myself bristling so strongly against any threat to that. We've seen this parable play out throughout the entirety of the church's history.

I mean, think about our recent history. A couple of weeks ago we launched a church plant, led by Brennan Kress. If I've counted correctly, Brennan is at least the fifteenth guy we've sent out to plant or pastor. I tried to make a list quickly and probably missed some, which is why I'm not naming them by name. Now, that's amazing, isn't it? And it's entirely the work of the Lord working through his Word.

Let me illustrate how this is true with regard to Brennan. The Bible says that we should pray for the Lord to send laborers into the harvest because the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. Okay, well, we obeyed that command, and we've prayed for that, repeatedly. So, how did God get Brennan here? Well, I got a text one day from a friend who knew I'd pastored while young and struggled, and he wanted to give me the contact info for Brennan, since he was a young, struggling pastor as well. So, I texted this guy I didn't know to let him know that I was praying for him and was here if he needed anything.

Well, eventually things went south at the church Brennan was pastoring, and he came to Cornerstone. Here, you all loved him, encouraged him, and poured into him—just things the Bible commands you to do, right?. And then—without consulting any of us—Ford motor

¹ Martin Luther. "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit." Vol. 51: Luther's Works, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 78.

² I've since moved banks, so there's no need trying access my account!

company decided to bring a plant and thousands of people into Haywood County, which happens to be in our backyard. Meanwhile, we had some members and others visiting from that area who were looking to be part of a faithful, healthy local church. And we had Brennan, who was willing to go help lead a church plant. And so, after pouring into Brennan, we prayed for this group and sent them out two weeks ago.

All we did was seek to proclaim and obey God's Word. God brought Brennan. God created a city of people in our backyard. God brought people from that area who wanted to be part of a church plant. You know who the hero of this story is? It's certainly not us. It's God alone. We're like ignorant farmers, who have no idea how crops grow. We just scatter the seed and reap the harvest. We just seek to proclaim God's Word, obey it, and watch God do things we could have never dreamed of doing on our own. That's the point of this parable. The Word will do this thing just like the seed did its thing. God makes this happen.

And because that's the way it is, there's no room for pride on our part. And there's no room for ownership on our part. If Cornerstone gets glory because we did this thing, we'll have taken a huge misstep. If we start thinking this is our work, we'll have lost our minds. That would be like a farmer getting praise because he scattered seed. God makes it grow. He brings and expands his kingdom.

But just as there's no room for pride or a sense of ownership from us, so there's no place for hopelessness among a people committed to proclaim and obey God's Word. We should anticipate as we scatter the seed of God's Word that he'll produce whatever harvest he desires. And in the last 2,000 years of his people doing that, he's done some pretty amazing things so that there are followers of Jesus Christ all over this globe. I mean, think about it. There are people in the remotest parts of this planet who know that on Easter Sunday morning Jesus' dead corpse that had been hung on a tree, stabbed through the side, and laid in a tomb started breathing again, his heart started beating again, and his eyes opened again so that our Lord walked out of that tomb alive. And they know that's their only hope. That's what God's Word does. The Lord is the one who makes his kingdom grow. And this leads to our last point, namely, that the Lord is doing more in small things than we can imagine.

The Lord is doing more in small things than we can imagine

The last parable Jesus gives us is in verses 30-32. In verses 33-34, we have a statement from Mark that reminds us that Jesus spoke in parables and then explained them to his disciples, which wraps up the entire section of Jesus' parables, but for our sake this morning, we will focus on verses 30-32, looking at this last parable.

As the parable begins, once more Jesus lets us know that this parable will focus on the kingdom. He says in verses 31-32, "It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is 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."

Now, the parable itself makes sense in that a mustard seed is small, but once it germinates and fully grows, you get a pretty good-sized garden tree where birds can make nests in it. But what does it mean in regards to the kingdom? Well, it means that the kingdom, likewise, can look small and unappealing, but it will expand and grow into something that is great. We can see that in the ministry of Jesus, for example. At this point in Mark's gospel more people are failing to repent and believe than who are actually coming to him to be his follower in life. Jesus is king, but the authorities of the day aren't bowing down to him. In fact, they're challenging him and will work to have him executed—and will succeed in that. Jesus and his kingdom, at that point, are like a mustard seed. He's certainly not causing world-wide ripples in his ministry. But, like that mustard seed, things would change.

Eventually, those who were eyewitnesses to the risen Lord Jesus went about telling others that he not only died but rose from the dead and appeared to them. And people started believing. It started in Jerusalem, then spread to Judea and Samaria, and eventually all over the earth. In fact, Paul says in Colossians 1:23 that the gospel "has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven." It's hard to go to a place in the world and not find a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Disciples are being made among all nations, even among nations where governments try to stop it. And, all of that started here with Jesus, not being heralded as king, but largely rejected by those who heard him, even among his own family. Jesus was saying, "Don't think the king and God's kingdom haven't come. They have. It's just like a mustard seed that will grow into a large tree."

And I think that what we see on the global scale—the growing kingdom starting with Jesus and his followers and expanding to the risen and reigning Jesus having followers all over the globe—we also see in more local ways as well. In other words, we can tell stories of missionary efforts that looked like nothing, and then something like a Great Awakening happened. We see small church plants—like the one we sent out two weeks ago with a dozen or so people—grow into works that reach many, many more. Just think of the church we sent out in Salt Lake. It started with four members, and Timothy told me a story where their dozens and dozens of members witnessed the baptism of a couple that was once entrenched in the Latter-Day Saints movement but have now come to place their faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard read in Zechariah 4:10, do not despise the day of small things.

So, here we have three sections of parables that show us what the kingdom is like. First, we're reminded of our responsibility to hear. If you hear the Word, don't harden your heart against it, because even what you've heard might be withdrawn. But lean in, believe, and obey, and the Lord will lean into you as well, reveal more, and grow you in grace and knowledge. The measure you use will be measured to you in return. But don't think it's all about our effort. Just proclaim the Word and obey it, and we'll watch the Lord do all that he desires to do. And if you look around and it feels the Lord isn't doing much, don't be discouraged. He likes to take small beginnings like the mustard seed and turn it into trees that birds can nest in. So, let's keep at it, and let's keep at it with hope and eager expectation that the Lord will continue to do more than we can imagine. Amen.