

The Word Will Bear Fruit (Part 2)

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 4:21-34

Introduction:

Last week, we began to look at Mark's first extended recorded teaching of Jesus. Thought we had heard of how Jesus' teaching astonished people, Mark had not given details of His teaching until this section, highlighting its importance. We saw last week how Jesus was teaching through parables, and this section opened with Jesus telling the parable of the sower, or soils, to the crowd and explaining its meaning privately to his disciples in Mark 4:1-20. We also observed how Mark links that parable with the ones we see in verses 21-35 revealing them to be connected with the parable of the sower. We will see similar ideas of things being hidden and revealed, the imagery of seed and harvest, and our need to respond to what we are hearing. The parables we will cover today reinforce the truths shown through the parable of the soils. It is though the parable of the sower, or soils, gives us the interpretive key to understanding the rest. It shows how word of Christ will bear fruit in hearts that truly hear it and embrace it, and the parables that follow reinforce that truth. Consider them with me and how they call us to three things. First, in verse 21-25, to,

RESPOND TO THE WORD OF CHRIST FOR THE JOY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Remembering how Mark connects these parables together helps us in our interpretation. Last week, we looked briefly at how verse 24 indicates that connection, now notice the way verse 21 begins, "And he said to them." The "and" signifies a Greek conjunction that reveals this teaching as being part of a series of teaching. Mark also points to "them," showing we should already know who they are. Is this the crowd from beside the sea? Or the disciples Jesus just explained the parable to? I believe the answer lies in verses 33-34. Look there with me. Verse 33 speaks of "them" as those Jesus spoke these parables to, and verse 34 separates the "them" from "his own disciples," indicating the them is the crowd. Look now at the parable in verses 21-23 "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." The parable, like all parables, speaks in imagery recognizable to the crowd. We should understand that parables were a common teaching technique. We see examples of them in the Old Testament, and even some of the fables in the Greco-Roman world resembled parables. So, while Jesus does say the intention was to only give the secrets of the kingdom to some, parables weren't a strange type of teaching that no one had the ability to comprehend. The scriptures show the issue is not the mind's ability to know what is being said, but the heart's ability to understand the truth and respond properly. Notice how the imagery of parable is clear. A lamp hasn't been brought in for the light to be buried under a bed or in a basket. The reason for the lamp being brought in is to make hidden and secret things known. Yet, Jesus does say in verse 23, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." This reminds us we can't just comprehend the parable's point and move on. We need it to provide the truth our hearts need to understand. The questions are what is the lamp, what are the secret things, and how, or when, will they come to light? The original Greek provides some clues that are harder to see in the English. The Greek places the definite article before lamp to point us to "the lamp" instead of any kind of lamp. The word translated "brought" literally means "to come, or arrive." This verb has also been used twice of Jesus in Mark 1:7 and 3:20 up to this point in the gospel, helping us to identify Jesus, and His message, as the lamp that has come. Most commentators suggest a more literal translation would be "Does the lamp come..." This is confirmed when we consider the connection of "anything secret," in verse 22, to the disciples being given "the secrets of the kingdom" in verse 11. The point is the secret of the kingdom will not remain hidden forever but the lamp will come and bring it to light. Jesus, and His message, have come to enlighten and reveal the secrets of the kingdom. Jesus is saying that secret will not be hidden forever but will be disclosed one day. Is that disclosure after the death and resurrection of Christ, or at His final return when everything comes to light? I think it is both. There is revelation that came once Jesus accomplished the purpose of His first coming.

Church History is a testimony to that. We are a testimony to that. We understand the secret of the kingdom of God through our trust in Christ as our Savior King. Yet, there is also a day coming when everything will be made clear, at the consummation of God's kingdom. The rest of these parables point to that truth. That's why the call is to respond to the word of Christ now for the joy of the kingdom of God. Notice how the parable in verses 24-25 drives that call home, "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.'" The focus is on how we respond to what we hear. Notice how the command to hear is given 3 times in verse 23-24, culminating in this call to carefully consider what you hear. The reason to pay attention is because how you use what you hear determines what is given to you, and more will be given to the one who uses what he hears well. Verse 25 makes this more clear, showing that those who do not hear and respond will lose what little they have. Notice the contrast of "given" and "taken" in verse 25. "Given" is the same verb from verse 11 for the secret of the kingdom being given to the disciples. This gift is divine blessing from the hand of God, not something earned. I believe this means three. First, those who hear and respond receive blessing in this life of understanding more of the word of Christ. Second, those who hear, understand, and respond to the word rightly in this life receive eternal blessings in the life to come. Third, those who do not hear and respond rightly suffer the loss of what they thought they had. The call is clear, respond to the Word for the joy of the kingdom of God. This call then leads into the next two parables, focusing on things we, as disciples of Christ, are called to know about the Word and God's kingdom. Both parables that follow connect back to the concept of the seed from the parable of the sowers. The parable in verses 26-29 emphasizes the surprising power of the seed sown. The next, in verse 30-32, emphasizes the surprising result of the seed sown. The parable in verses 26-29 shows we are called to,

UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF THE WORD TO GROW THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As we read through these verses, pay attention to where the emphasis lies, because we will see there is little concern about the efforts of the man scattering the seed, and instead the focus lies on the result of the seed being scattered and how it mysteriously accomplishes its task. Follow the flow of the parable closely in verses 26-29, "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.'" The parable is concerned about showing us something about the kingdom of God. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground." Notice how it describes the man's involvement. In verse 26, he simply "scatters seed." In verse 27, he "sleeps and rises night and day," and "knows not how" the seed sprouts and grows. Finally, he puts the sickle in once harvest has come in verse 29. The man does little work. All the work is pictured through the mysterious way the seed grows. Look again at how Jesus describes the growth at the beginning of verse 28, "the earth produces by itself." The term for "by itself" is where we get automatic from, and in the Greek, it is placed in an emphatic position in the sentence. Automatically, the seed produces the crop, and it is ripe when the harvest comes. Reaping a harvest is one of the most common metaphors in the bible for the judgement of God at the end of time. There is a point when the kingdom of God will reach its culmination and consummation. At that point, the time for growth is complete and it is time to harvest. The main point of this parable is that the growth of the kingdom is and will be taking place until the harvest, and its growth comes from the power of the seed and imperceptible processes of God, not the work of man. Remember the man doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows. As we connect this parable to the rest in this chapter, we recognize the seed as the word of Christ, and the spreading of that seed as our part to play in kingdom growth. That word is what holds the power to change hearts. The word of Christ has the power to produce the right yield. The word has the power to grow the kingdom of God. This doesn't mean we have no part to play in God's kingdom growth, but it shows that we don't ultimately determine the results.

We hear the word, respond to it, and spread it. We pay attention to the whether we truly have ears to hear, but God causes the growth. In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 Paul confirms this process when speaking of his and Apollos' ministry saying, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." It should be comforting to know the growth of God's kingdom is not in our feeble hands. By God's grace, we participate through hearing and sharing, but God causes the growth of His kingdom. And notice again the growth happens and can't be stopped. This parable calls our hearts to understand the power of the word to grow the kingdom of God, so we will lean into that power and wait in faith with confidence in the kingdom's growth. It helps those with ears to hear to not be discouraged when we see the lack of response from this world at times. It helps us to see we don't need to become more cunning or change our methods so people will start responding. The power of the word of Christ will grow God's kingdom, even though that growth will remain a mystery to us. This is a point the final parable drives home, in verses 30-32, calling us to,

TRUST THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD WILL SPREAD ACCORDING TO GOD'S PLAN

As disciples of Jesus Christ, one of the battles we face in this life is to continue to place our hope solely in the promises of God. We wrestle with this because our perception of things is skewed. When we look around at the world, it looks to us like the dominion of Satan is winning the battle. But the reality is the battle has already been won and the outcome has already been determined. Jesus helps us see this truth from the final parable in verses 30-32, "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.'" While a very small seed, around 1-2 millimeters in diameter, we should note from the start that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all the seeds of the earth. That doesn't mean Jesus is lying. Jesus is simply using a common proverbial understanding. The mustard seed was commonly used to indicate smallness during this time period. But the emphasis of the parable is not as much on the size of the mustard seed as it is on what it becomes. There are questions of whether to call it a mustard tree or bush because of the sheer size and structure of the plant. The average size of a mustard bush, or tree, can vary anywhere between 6-20 feet tall, with some able to get up to 30 feet tall. The mustard plant has what has been described as a weeping branch structure that provide a 20-foot spread in circumference. So, not only is it tall but the canopy it would provide in a garden would be massive. The emphasis in the parable is the end result from such a humble beginning as a comparison to the kingdom of God. There also may be an allusion to the nations being welcomed into God's kingdom through the reference to birds, as the nations are linked to birds in Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17. Though we cannot say for certain that is the case. Regardless of whether the nations are in view, the concept of blessing for those under the sphere of the kingdom is clear. The point is that God's kingdom will spread according to His plan, and nothing will stop it from blessing those connected to it. This parable also shows us that God's reign will be grander than it appears at first and larger than the world will be able to imagine. We know this to be true when the apostle John is given the vision of those before the throne in Revelation 7:9-10, saying, "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!'" Church, there is so much comfort in being able to trust that God will accomplish His purposes and build His kingdom. We will get to some of the application of these truths in a moment.

Conclusion:

Before we do, notice the final words of Mark related to these parables in verses 33-34, "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.” This is the tenth time Mark highlights the importance of hearing the truth in these parables. Jesus spoke to the crowd “as they were able to hear.” This reminds us that the parable’s ability to give the truth or hide truth depends on our hearing and response. Then in verse 34, we see the grace of God again on display as we are reminded that Jesus explained everything to the disciples. Everything they have relay to us in this word is the truth we need to know. And as we draw close to Jesus, through the power of the Spirit, He discloses more of Himself to us. As we dig into His word, in reliance on His Spirit, He opens our eyes to see and ears to hear the wonderful truths that lie within it. I want to leave you with two practical takeaways from these parables. The first take away comes from the first two parables in verses 21-25,

1) PAY ATTENTION TO HOW YOU HEAR AND USE THE WORD OF CHRIST

The first and second parables continued the focus on responding rightly to the word of Christ. We are called to pay attention to the Word of Christ and respond. The first response is for the forgiveness we so desperately need. Have you heard the gospel of the kingdom? The good news that Jesus Christ, the righteous Son of God, the eternal King, took on flesh to live the life we could not live, die in our place, bearing the just payment for our sins on the cross, and rose again, triumphant forever over the enemy, so there would be no condemnation for those who believe, and instead everlasting joy basking in the glory of God. Have you heard and responded to that truth? The second response is clinging to His word given to us for the joy and life that we long for. Jesus says in Revelation 22:17, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” His words are the very bread we need. He is the fountain of living water that satisfies. And all He requires for us is to come to Him for true life. Hear the word of Christ, run to Him, receive His truth, we use it and find more and more blessings flowing from Him through that. The second takeaway comes from final two parables in verses 26-32,

2) SPREAD THE WORD OF CHRIST AND LEAVE THE REST TO GOD

Both of these parables focus on the surprising and mysterious way God’s kingdom grows and the truth that it grows according to His plan and purposes. Church, God does not need our help to grow His kingdom. Some suggest knowing that hinders our participation in spreading the gospel. Why would we bother if we know God causes the growth? But, I think it should have the opposite effect. Because I know God causes the certain growth of His kingdom, I can be free to scatter the seed of the gospel and trust Him with the results. You see, God invites us to participate in His kingdom plans. He gives us the joy of being used by Him to spread His kingdom. And don’t forget the rewards He promises to those who respond in faith. Right before recording the certain but mysterious growth of the kingdom of God, Mark records Jesus saying in verse 24, “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.” Our participation in His kingdom work comes with great rewards and the Bible tells us those rewards will be in connection to how we respond in faith to His call. The kingdom will grow into a fruitful harvest and we are called to spread the gospel in confidence of the work God is choosing to do in and through us. Church, let’s embrace that call and watch Him work. As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response to these truths today, how is God moving in your heart to respond? Could it be to trust in the saving work of Christ today for your forgiveness and salvation? What about striving to pay attention to the word of Christ and have it transform your life? Or how about determining to share the word of the gospel to your neighbor, coworker, family member, or the person next to you right now and waiting in confidence for God to work? Whatever it may be, respond to the Lord. Come and kneel before Him if you need. Sing with all your might of His goodness. Or cry out to Him for His grace where you are at. As always there is a team of people who are ready to pray for you and with you if you have any need. You will find them worshipping on the front rows or at the bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. Let’s see what God will do as we seek His grace together. Would you pray with me as we head into our time of response.