

## Mark 4:1-34

### Introduction

1. In our introduction to the Gospel of Mark a few weeks ago, I mentioned that one of the unique features is Mark's use of two explanatory sections in his Gospel:
  - a. It is generally excepted that Mark's gospel focuses primarily on proving Jesus was both the Christ and the Son of God through His deeds and actions
  - b. Mark's gospel contains less details regarding the teachings of Jesus than do the other gospels
  - c. However, there are two sections where Mark does focus on what Jesus taught:
    - 1) One is our passage today, Mark 4:1-35
    - 2) The other is Jesus's teaching on the End Times in 13:1-37
  - d. These are referred to as explanatory sections because they serve to explain something to us so that we might be able to better understand either what has already occurred in Mark's gospel or what is about to occur (sometimes both)
  - e. Here, in chapter 4, Jesus explains some truths related to the nature of the Kingdom of God and he does it through five parables
2. Before we jump into the parables, we need to address Jesus' use of parables:
  - a. A parable is an illustration or short story that uses elements of contemporary culture to convey a spiritual or moral truth
  - b. Jesus told His disciples the reason why He taught in parables (Matthew 13:10-16):
    - 1) To reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of God to those who would receive them (e.g. His disciples)
    - 2) To hide the mysteries of the kingdom of God from those who would not receive them (e.g. Scribes, Pharisees, religious leaders)
    - 3) Note: parables were not designed to hide the means to salvation (Jesus always spoke plainly about that), but rather some of the deeper mysteries regarding the Kingdom of God

### A. The Parable of the Sower (1-25)

1. The parable told (READ 1-9):
  - a. This parable is about a farmer (sower) who went out to plant his crops
  - b. Some of the seed fell beside the road and was eaten by the birds
  - c. Some fell in areas where there were more rocks than soil, so the plants couldn't grow roots deep enough to survive
  - d. Still other seed fell in areas infested with thorny plants (the equivalent of weeds) which choked off the plants and killed them
  - e. But, some of the seed fell on good soil which yielded bountiful crops "**thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold**"
2. Jesus explains His use of parables (READ 10-12):
  - a. Jesus's followers ask Him about the parables:

- 1) Mark doesn't tell us what they asked, but Matthew does "And the disciples came and said to Him, 'Why do You speak to them in parables?'"
  - 2) Them is important here because it indicates someone other than Jesus's followers (e.g. the masses and religious leader)
- b. Jesus's answer to this question is straightforward (11): **"To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,"**
  - c. Jesus differentiates between two different groups of people here:
    - 1) His followers to whom He revealed the **"mystery of the kingdom of God"**
    - 2) And the rest to whom He didn't
  - d. In the Bible, the word **"mystery"** refers to things that God had not previously revealed—it's a reference to further revelation—so in this sense, only Jesus's followers were granted the right and ability to understand more about the kingdom of God
  - e. Jesus's reference to Isaiah 6:9 indicates that this is ultimately a fulfillment of prophecy—some would listen but ultimately not hear, look but ultimately not see
3. The parable explained (READ 13-20):
    - a. The sower is one who sows the Word—a clear reference to Jesus
    - b. The seed that fell on the side of the road refers to those who hear the Word but ultimately have it stolen by Satan
    - c. The seed that fell on rocky ground refers to those who superficially accept the Word with joy, but reject it when faced with affliction or persecution
    - d. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who also superficially accept the Word but ultimately abandon it in favor of other things
    - e. The final group refers to Jesus's followers—those who are ultimately saved because they **"hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold"** (20) —to these Jesus would ultimately reveal the deeper truths and mysteries of God's kingdom
  4. So, what was Jesus trying to teach them through this parable?
    - a. It explains the diversity of responses to Jesus and the Word—why do some accept Him when others do not?—notice that this sections follows chapter 3 where the religious leaders accused Jesus of breaking the Law and being possessed by Satan before they plotted to kill him
    - b. It reveals and foreshadows the coming bountiful harvest of God's kingdom—it would be easy to focus on the three groups that reject the Gospel, but the real focus of the parable is the promise of a great harvest **"thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold"**

<b>B. The Parable of the Lamp (READ 21-23)</b>
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1. When you walk into a room and turn on a lamp, do you immediately cover it up? Obviously not because the purpose of the lamp is to illuminate the room so you can see what's there
2. In this parable, the lamp is symbolic of Christ and Mark even hints at this by using the definite article (the Greek is literally **"the lamp"**)
3. So, the point of this parable is that just like a lamp lights up the room and reveals what's in it, Jesus Christ is the Lamp that reveals and sheds light on the kingdom of God (22): **"For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light."**

4. You cannot understand or experience the kingdom of God without Jesus, which is why Jesus ends this parable with a warning (23): **“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear”** (which is more literally, **“If anyone has ears to hear he better listen!”**)
5. In our context (just after chapter 3), the religious leaders wanted to shut Jesus up, to cover up the Lamp
6. But, He (the Lamp) didn’t come to be covered up, but to shine a light and illuminate the kingdom of God

C. The Parable of Measures (READ 24-25)

1. This third parable is interesting because it ties how one listens to how much one receives—and it again explains why Jesus spoke in parables to the masses and religious leaders
2. In this parable Jesus warns His audience to be careful listeners because the care they use in trying to understand and accept what He is teaching (e.g. their standard of measure) will be rewarded in the same measure
3. In other words, those who are careful to understand will be rewarded by being given more (e.g. further revelation of the mystery of God’s kingdom)
4. Those who are not careful to understand (e.g. the hard hearted, the religious leaders) will not only receive nothing but will lose what they already have

D. The Parable of the Growth of the Seed (26-29)

1. In this parable, Jesus again likens the kingdom of God to a farmer who sows seed
2. Jesus presents this farmer as one who sows and harvests the crop, but does nothing in between to cause it to grow:
  - a. He **“goes to bed at night and gets up by day”** without doing anything else, and yet the crop grows: **“and the seed sprouts and grows”** (27)
  - b. How is this possible? The text tells us that even the farmer doesn’t know (27): **“how, he himself does not know.”**

I’m no farmer but we do have some gardens and I’ve tried re-growing grass almost every summer and know that you can’t just plant and harvest; You have to water, fertilize, weed...and in my case replant grass every year because it still doesn’t grow!

- c. In this parable, **“the soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.”** (28)
  - d. It’s only after this that the farmer in this parable goes back to work and harvests the crop (29): **“But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”**
3. So, what does this parable teach us about the kingdom of God?
  - a. Whereas the focus of the first parable of the sower was on the varied responses to the Word, this parable focuses on the mysterious growth of God’s kingdom
  - b. Once again, the seed represents the Word and the farmer represents the ones who sow that Word (e.g. Jesus, His followers, us)
  - c. Probably one of the greatest mysteries of the Kingdom of God is that the Church continues to grow regardless of constant and ever increasing persecution and attacks against it!

- 1) According to Paul, this is because God, not us, makes the seed grow (READ 1 Corinthians 3:7 and Isaiah 55:8-11)—and grow it does—from a few followers to likely billions over the ages
- c. Finally, this parable is like the kingdom of God because it reminds us that a time will come when God will harvest what He has sown (29): **“But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”** (See Luke 10:2; John 4:35; esp. Revelation 14:15)

#### E. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (READ 30-34)

1. The fifth and final parable once again relies upon a farming metaphor—this time, the lowly mustard seed
2. We need to keep two things in mind here:
  - a) While the black mustard seed to which Jesus is referring is not the smallest seed in all the world, but it was the smallest seed local to Palestine in Jesus’s day
  - b) Jesus is speaking proverbially, not literally or technically
3. The focus of this parable is found in the contrast—the littlest of seeds grows into the largest of garden plants—it typically grew to over 12 feet high
4. So, what’s the point Jesus is making?
  - 1) Remember, Jesus came preaching, **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;”** (Mark 1:15)
  - 2) But, so far it’s just Jesus, a few followers, and a much larger group of religious leaders trying to destroy Him
  - 3) How could the kingdom of God really be at hand???
  - 4) So, Jesus says, “Remember the mustard seed? It too is small—the smallest of all seeds—but remember it grows into the mightiest of plants!”
  - 5) In the same way, the kingdom of God may have begun small, but as William Lane writes, **“The day will come when the Kingdom of God will surpass in glory the mightiest kingdoms of the earth...”**

#### Conclusion

- 1) The kingdom of God is like the sower who scatters seed—many will reject Jesus and the Gospel, but there will be those that accept it will grow into a bountiful harvest
- 2) The kingdom of God is like the parable of the Lamp in that Jesus didn’t come in secret or to be hidden under a cover, but rather to shine a light and reveal God’s kingdom
- 3) The kingdom of God is like the parable of measures in that those who listen carefully and accept the Word will be more, but those who don’t will have what little they do have taken away
- 4) The kingdom of God is like the parable of the growth of the seed in that it grows supernaturally and mysteriously
- 5) The kingdom of God is like the parable of the mustard seed in that it begins as the smallest of movements but will ultimately grow into the mightiest of kingdoms