

Mark 4:21-33, Three Kingdom Parables

In our last lesson, we learned that the gospel is hidden from many but revealed to God's elect, who will be used to build the kingdom.

In this lesson we will learn 1) The Kingdom of God, hidden in Jesus, was hidden in order to be revealed; 2) God will provide growth to his kingdom, and, 3) Despite its humble beginnings, the Kingdom of God will grow exponentially and attract many disciples.

I. A Lamp Under a Basket (Mark 4:21-25)

21 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? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 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. 25 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."

1. Gospel Parallels - Both Matthew and Luke also relate parables that employ the imagery of a lamp under a basket or on a stand. But there are differences in the context and the meaning of the symbols. Let's look at these different parables.

a. In **Matthew 5:14-16**, a parable is a part of the Sermon on the Mount in which the lamp appears to be the witness of the life of the true disciple of Christ:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (emphasis added).

b. In **Luke 11:33-36**, in a parable given after Christ is accused of being in league with demonic powers, the lamp represents the eye, the organ that receives light, which is in turn a metaphor for spiritual sight. The disciple is warned against spiritual blindness, or refusing to see the truth. Spiritual sight or blindness manifests in outward behavior:

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."

(Matthew records a similar parable in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 6:22-23.)

c. In **Luke 8:16-18**, the following parable is given just after the parable of the sower, as is our text in Mark:

"No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."

The phrasing is slightly different, but the substance, the context, and the meaning of the symbols are all the same. The differences can be attributed to the fact that both versions of the parable are translations into Greek of Jesus' words spoken originally in Aramaic. This text in Luke 8:16-18, then, is the only true parallel to our text in Mark 4:21-25. The others are different parables using some of the same symbols, but given at different times with different meanings.

2. The Lamp (v. 21) - In the time of Christ, the common house lamp was a clay vessel filled with olive oil, having a handle at one end and a spout at the other, from which a flaxen wick protruded.⁽¹⁾



A couple of peculiar features about the lamp in our text is obscured in most English versions. **First**, many versions read, “a lamp”. But **the Greek has the definite article**, and should be translated “*the* lamp”. **Second**, most versions describe the lamp as being “brought”. In the original Greek, **the lamp actually comes by its own agency**, as in the 1599 Geneva Bible translation, which predated the KJV: “Also he said unto them, *Cometh the candle in, to be put under a bushel, or under the bed, and not to be put in a candlestick?*” Young’s Literal Translation, pub. 1898, is similar: “And he said to them, `Doth the lamp come that under the measure it may be put, or under the couch -- not that it may be put on the lamp-stand?’” According to R. C. Sproul, “There is only one proper way to translate what is in the original Greek: ‘Does *the* lamp come in order to be put under a basket or under a bed?’”⁽²⁾ (emphasis in the original).

NT scholar William Lane explains the significance of the verb:

“The use of ‘come’ is intriguing, precisely because lamps do not come but ‘are brought,’ and this more usual understanding is reflected in the rendering of the ASV and the RSV. Mark’s term at this point is wholly intelligible, however, if Jesus was speaking of himself as the lamp that has been kindled and that has come ... Mark’s placement of this parable after Ch. 4:11-20 suggests further that he has in view the secret of the Kingdom of God which is present in the person of Jesus, whose mission remains for many a veiled enigma ... Verse 22, with its ‘secrecy’ language ... implies that there is something hidden now which shall later be unveiled; there is a secret which shall become known.”⁽³⁾

The lamp is Christ the kingdom-bringer.

3. The Hidden, Manifest and the Secret Come to Light (v. 22) - For most of his earthly ministry, Jesus concealed his true nature and purpose as a judgment upon those in Israel with hardened hearts, and because he must suffer. This may explain the curious idea conveyed by the Greek, which means, according to an old Princetonian, J. A. Alexander, “Not only shall what is now concealed be made known, but it is now concealed in order to be made known.”⁽⁴⁾

Cambridge scholar Morna Hooker writes, “the notion that things are deliberately hidden in order that they might be **revealed and concealed...to be brought into the open** is on the face of it absurd, but it is in keeping with Mark’s understanding of the messianic secret. The concealment of Jesus’ true identity is a necessary part of God’s purpose, which embraces crucifixion and resurrection.”⁽⁵⁾ (emphasis in the original)

The plan was not that Christ remain concealed forever, for he came as “a light for revelation to the *Gentiles*, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). He was revealed in his suffering, both at his trial and crucifixion. He revealed his identity as “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed” at his arraignment before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:61-62), and he was revealed to be “the Son of God” on the cross by the centurion (Mark 15:39). After his resurrection he was openly proclaimed as the risen “King of kings” (Rev. 19:16) by his church. Peter, John, and Paul did not speak in parables, but taught Christ plainly.

Interestingly, the sides have switched. In the beginning, Christ was concealed and the demons did all they could to reveal him. Today he is revealed before men, but “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). But the last day will reveal the truth about Christ even to the unbeliever, though the knowledge will come too late to profit those who have spent their lives rejecting him.

4. Ears to Hear (v. 23) - This is both a command to pay close attention to receive what is heard, and a recognition that such receptive hearing is given by God's grace, as even the Old Testament attests: "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear" (Psalm 40:6). The presence of this admonition is another indication that Mark has switched back from Jesus speaking alone to the disciples to Jesus addressing the crowd.

5. The Measure (v. 24) - The "measure" is connected to "hearing" in the previous verse. The promise is that if we listen to and receive God's word, and live it out, we will increase proportionately in our understanding. "Understanding the kingdom of God is not a human ability but a capacity created by Jesus Christ within the heart of the believer."⁽⁶⁾

6. The One Who Has and the One Who Has Not (v. 25) - This verse uses the divine passive, which is a way of implying that God does something without actually mentioning his name. In this case, God is the one who gives to "the one who has" and takes away "even what he has" from the one who has not. To the one who has been given true faith, who hears the word and heeds it, God teaches him more, and he progresses in his faith by degrees. But to the one who hears the gospel and does not heed it, what he has heard will be taken away and prove unfruitful. The latter type of person is like one of the three unfruitful soils in the Parable of the Sower.

Evangelical Anglican scholar and missionary R. Alan Cole gives a good **summary** of the teaching of the parable:

"This section addresses the issue of whether the kingdom of God will always be a secret, hidden from the many and revealed to the few. (Perhaps it still seems that way to some of us today?) Jesus said that one day God's kingdom will be plain to all. Lamps are meant to give light, not to hide it. In the same way, the final purpose of the parables is to reveal truth, not conceal it. However, there is a time when parables are the best way to reveal truth, for they 'filter' or 'strain' the listeners, as we might filter a liquid through fine cloth to purify it. The disciples must first absorb the truth that Jesus taught through parables, so that they would be able to absorb more truth later ... There is no such thing as standing still in the spiritual life; if we cease to grow, then we shrink. This is either a promise or a warning, depending on our spiritual attitude."⁽⁷⁾

II. The Parable of the Seed Growing

26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

1. The Sower - As in the "Parable of the Sower" in our last lesson, the sower is one who proclaims the gospel of the kingdom of God before men.

2. The Growing Seed - The gospel of the Kingdom finds good soil, hearers who have been given faith to embrace the gospel. The faithful hearer becomes a disciple and passes on to others what has been learned.

3. The Harvest - Soon there forms a chain of listeners becoming disciples becoming teachers and preachers, and one day there will be a cluster of spiritual fruit that started from that one seed. All this happens invisibly to the sower, for God is at work through his word:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10-11).

Dr. Sproul writes:

“Once, when I was standing at the church door after a service, a young man came up to me and began to tell me that he had heard me speak fifteen years before at a small church in Pennsylvania. He told me that following that service, he had asked me a question, and he was able to repeat my answer to him verbatim all those years later. He said, ‘When I went home, I could not get your words out of my head, and God used that comment that you made that day to convict me to go into the ministry.’” Sproul concludes, “God can use the smallest words that we speak, the smallest service that we give, and bring a kingdom out of it.”⁽⁸⁾

III. The Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 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.”

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. 34 He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

1. The Mustard Seed - There is some debate about what plant exactly is meant by Jesus in the parable. We can neatly sidestep all that, since it does not affect the basic point of the parable. The plant is simply used to illustrate how something that starts out small can grow into something big. The kingdom of God, though it appears small, will multiply many times its size.

2. The Birds of the Air - Many interpretations of the birds have been offered, including that they represent the Gentiles, or that they are symbols of evil, representing apostate Christendom. There is nothing in the text to suggest either interpretation. The plant has simply become large enough to become a useful habitat for some creatures. The kingdom will start out small but will grow large enough to become a home to many.

What can we learn from these three parables of the kingdom?

- 1) The Parable of the Lamp tells us that we are to be the means of spreading the gospel, so we must pay careful attention to the word of God and receive all that God wishes to give us. Then, we can put Christ, our lamp, on a stand before men so that he will illuminate others.
- 2) The Parable of the Growing Seed instructs us to spread the gospel indiscriminately to all people. We do not grow the kingdom through political activism, emotional manipulation, or sanctified entertainment but by simply preaching the word of God. That is what God has promised to work through.
- 3) The Parable of the Mustard Seed encourages us to be diligent in our kingdom work, not getting discouraged if the results seem meager at best. God has promised to use and empower our faithful labors to build his kingdom that will one day fill the earth.

Notes

1. Image source: <http://www.clker.com/clipart-small-antique-oil-lamp.html>
2. Sproul, R. C. Mark [St. Andrew's Commentary Expository Commentary], p.82.
3. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [New International Commentary on the New Testament], pp. 165-166.
4. Alexander, J. A. The Gospel According to Mark [Thornapple Commentaries], p. 100.
5. Hooker, Morna D. The Gospel According to Saint Mark [Black's New Testament Commentary], pp. 133-134.
6. Edwards, James R. The Gospel According to Mark [Pillar New Testament Commentary], p. 141.
7. Carson and Guthrie, eds. The New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition, p. 958.
8. Sproul, R. C. Mark [St. Andrew's Commentary Expository Commentary], pp. 85-87.