

“More Seeds”

Mark 4:21-33

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.” (ESV)

For the past month or so we’ve been looking at the Gospel of Mark. At the beginning of chapter 4 Jesus makes a significant turn in this Gospel, Mark’s Gospel. But he makes the same turn also in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The significant turn is that He decides that He is going to teach in parables and nothing else. In other words, from this point its parables and not “Sermon on the Mount,” not, “You’ve heard it said but I say . . .” “Why?” If you’ve been in church for a while, or if you’ve read the Bible, we tend to take the parables for granted. We tend to just think they’re part of Jesus’ teaching. We don’t really think about where they fit into the big picture. But unless you understand when they were told and why they were told, you really don’t have as deep an insight as you might otherwise have. So the question is, “When were these parables told? When did Jesus begin to tell them?” In all the Gospels Jesus began to teach in parables at the point in His ministry when the people, especially the religious leaders, had become so hard-hearted that not only had they refused to believe His teaching, not only did they refuse to deal honestly with what He taught, but they were beginning to seek how they might murder Him. The religious authorities and people were not only just hard-hearted but they had become proactive in their hard-heartedness and they decided that they were going to kill Jesus. At this point He says, “From now on it’s just parables.”

“Why parables?” The easy answer is that it’s really hard to argue with a parable. When He taught the Sermon on the Mount they became very upset because He said, “You have heard it said . . .” In other words, “All these jokers are saying this, but I say it’s this.” You can see how that might be frustrating. Now they’re plotting to kill Him. Now they’re plotting together. The beauty of parables is that they’re just stories and they’re nearly impossible to argue with. So, they wouldn’t be able to argue with the parables because they weren’t sure what He was talking about. On the other hand, if you’re on the inside, if you had “ears to hear” you did understand what He was talking about, or at least you were able to ask Him later, “Hey, what were You talking about back there?” The parables weren’t told just to be a sort of a Bible code—if you’re on the inside you understand and on the outside you don’t. There’s a sense in which the parables were given not to conceal, not to hide from the religious leaders, but in fact to reveal Jesus, to draw them in. Imagine that Jesus wants to come in to someone’s heart and they slam the door shut and bolt it and lock it and slide the bolt and they put the catch on. Jesus will not enter this place. Jesus talks in parables as a way for Jesus to come in through the back door. Or they’re a way for Him to come in through the side door. In other words, they’re a way in because when people hear the parables they’re drawn in. The hope is that they ask questions. To the extent that people are able to hear, they understand parables and they are helpful and fruitful in revealing the Gospel.

The first parable in all the Gospels is the parable of the sower. We looked at that last week. It’s very famous and it’s very simple, but Jesus says it’s the paradigm for the rest of the parables, or it’s the starting point. The reason, in some ways, is because of what it teaches. He says, “The seed the sower throws is the Word or the message of the Gospel.” We saw last week how four different groups of people respond to it. For one group of people it’s as if the seed were thrown on a path and birds immediately snatch it away. He says, “That’s what Satan does with some people.” Some people, when the word is sown in them, rejoice and immediately receive it but eventually that wears off and they are like plants that grow on rocky soil with no roots, so eventually they die. He says, “Other seed falls among the thorns and while it does grow, the worries of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth eventually choke it out and it is not fruitful.” On the other hand, some seed falls on good soil and produces a crop thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. That would have been amazing to them to hear. They ought to be encouraged by that. On the other hand, if you’re one of Jesus’ disciples back then or even today, you had to spend a lot of time wondering, “What is this guy talking about? He’s talking about some seed that falls on soil

that's going to produce a crop that's thirty, sixty, a hundredfold." And you look around and it's still just you and Jesus and Peter (who can't keep his mouth shut), "Sons of Thunder" (James and his brother John) whom Jesus keeps telling to keep quiet. "What in the world are You talking about? What harvest is coming? You keep talking about the kingdom of God, in fact, You said You're the king. If You're really the king, why don't we just get on with it? If You're really the king, why is the response to the Gospel so slow? If You're really the king why do all these people hate You and the prostitute and tax collectors follow you, and what in the world could they ever accomplish?" Well, Jesus answers those speculative questions with the three parables that we're going to look at today.

We're going to look at three things today. It's basically three parables. One of them is technically not a parable but I'm going to call it a parable. It's the parable of the lamp, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. Jesus teaches them after the parable of the sower what I'm going to call the parable of the lamp. Let me read it to you.

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. (ESV)

Jesus asks a question which on the surface is just a rhetorical question, "Do you light a lamp to put it under a bed? Do you light a lamp to cover it?" You've probably all sung the song, "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine." We think in terms of letting our own light shine. Do we light something in order to hide it? He asks a rhetorical question but then He sort of catches you off guard because what He says next really makes no sense compared to the rhetorical question. He says, "Do you light a lamp to hide it?" The disciples were probably sitting there saying, "Ohhh, nooo." He says, "Exactly. Everything is hidden. You do hide the lamp in order to reveal it. You conceal the lamp in order to make it manifest." That's when you can imagine the disciples look at each other, "Do you have any idea what that guy's talking about?" Or nudging one another. They did that all the time. What is Jesus talking about here? On one hand it's common sense. Do you light a lamp to put it under a bushel? Absolutely not. You light it and set it out in the house and it gives light to everything around it. But the reason I think this is actually a parable and not just a rhetorical question is because if you remember the definition of parables, at some level they refer back to the parable teller. In every version of the Bible, the translator has to make a decision. "Am I going to translate something this way or translate something that way?" Most translators translate this section that way, which I think is the wrong way. If you look at the Greek in this text, (this is going to be a lesson for those of you who weren't English majors so you have to hang in there with me). If you look at this text, "Lamp" is the subject of the sentence, not the object of the sentence. When you think about it that way it changes everything. Now you guys are just like the disciples nudging each other, "What is he talking about?" You bring a lamp – object. But really what the Greek says there, and it's awkward which is probably why they smoothed it out, it really asks this question, "Does the lamp come in order to be hidden?" The lamp is the subject of the sentence. Does the lamp come? The lamp is the thing that is moving. The lamp is the thing that is arriving. It's not brought by anybody. He says, "Does the lamp come in order to be hidden?" It's almost as if the lamp were a person because the lamp is personified in the Greek. "The lamp comes."

Now does that imagery have any place in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the life of Jesus? "Absolutely yes." When you look at the Old Testament and begin to hear language about a lamp, it generally refers to one of three things. It either refers to God Himself or it refers to God's Word. Remember the Amy Grant song, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet." Or, it's the Messiah from the line of David. When the Old Testament talks about a lamp coming, it's one of those three, or all three things. If you want to know what the New Testament says about Jesus being the lamp, or Jesus being God, or Jesus being the Word, the only place you have to turn, the first place is the Gospel of John. Let me read to you the first few verses of the Gospel of John.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (ESV)

If you remember later on in John chapter 9, Jesus stands up at the Festival of Lights in which they would have had lamps lit all over in Jerusalem, and He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness.” So Jesus says here, “Does the lamp come in order to be hidden? No, the lamp comes so that whoever would follow Me would not walk in darkness.” The question is, “Why doesn’t everyone embrace You? Why doesn’t everyone grab You? What’s the deal here?” Jesus would say, “Well, that’s what the next verses mean.” Let me read to you verse 22 again.

²² *For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. (ESV)*

Why would Jesus, if He is the light of the world, the Lamb of God, have to be hidden in order to be revealed? The answer is actually pretty simple. God in all of His glory and all of His power—like when you look at the prophet Isaiah—when people come into the presence of God’s awesomeness and His glory and His power, they’re simply crushed. They say, “Woe is me. I am undone.” We can’t stand to bear the weight of the glory of God. Somehow we want to conceal it, somehow we wish He could put us in a rock and only show us His hind parts like Moses. What He does in the person of Jesus is He takes on flesh not to conceal Himself but so that we, finite beings, might understand Him, that He might reveal Himself to us in the person of Jesus. Why does He do that? Because nothing else worked. Remember throughout the whole Old Testament God told Israel of redemption and forgiveness of sins, and He sent prophets and dreamers to them. How did Israel treat the prophets? They killed them. Then if you’re a disciple you say, “Okay, they killed the prophets, but what if He wrote the message of salvation in the clouds, or at least wrote Your attributes and who You are in the clouds?” God did that, too. Read Romans chapter 1. It says, “All of His invisible attributes, everything was made plain to them. Yet they suppressed the truth in unrighteousness.” So the prophets didn’t work. Revealing Himself in creation didn’t work. What is He going to do? Hebrews chapter 1 tells us.

¹ *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (ESV)*

In these last days God has sent us His Son, full of grace and truth, full of glory and majesty, and yet to the disciples sitting there—completely incarnate, completely able for them to embrace and understand and see and hear—at least for those who had ears to hear. That’s where Jesus goes next with this. This is the kind of passage where it’s really confusing or you can kind of make it real simple. Notice in verse 23, Jesus says,

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.” (ESV)*

The first thing you need to notice is if you think that the parables are given to conceal things, in the Gospel of Mark in this one chapter, chapter 4, Jesus exhorts people to “hear” or “listen” or “pay attention” ten times. Whenever Jesus repeats something it’s probably important. Ten times He says, “Listen, pay attention, he who has ears let him hear.” “With whatever measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Then what he says next almost sounds harsh, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” If you have, you will be given more and if you don’t have, even what you do have will be taken away from you.” In order to understand this you have to realize He is speaking theologically not economically. He’s not talking about capitalism, He is talking about theology. What does He mean, “For those of you who have ears to hear”? If you see Jesus for Who He is. Some people see Him as an out-of-work carpenter, some people see Him as a myth. But some people look at Him and they see the Savior of the world. They see the One Who has taken away their sins. Those of you who see that, who have that much, more will be given unto you. You embrace Jesus as a carpenter from Galilee who died for your sins and eventually you will have Him as king of the universe, co-heir with Him,

reigning side-by-side with Him. Those of you who have Him, more will be given to you. To those of you who look at Jesus and say, “I don’t buy any of it,” Jesus says, “Those of you who don’t have, even what you have will be taken away.”

One of my professors, Steve Brown, used to always say, and I think he’s quoting C. S. Lewis, “Hell is the ultimate demonstration of free will.” In other words, for those who say, “Jesus, I want no part with You. I don’t want to have anything to do with You,” those of you who have none, even what you have will be taken away. Ultimately the destination is hell because hell is ultimate separation from God. God says, “You don’t want Me? Then I’m going to give you exactly what you want for all eternity. You choose freely.” To those of you who have, more will be given; those who have none, even what you have will be taken away.

Jesus continues with two more parables. He goes back to, “What is the kingdom of God like?” On one hand He’s the lamp who comes and the lamp gives light to the world. If the lamp gives light to the world, why don’t things change quicker? Have you ever thought about that? If Jesus really is the king, if Jesus really does reign, why in the world is there so much suffering now? Why in the world is there so much hardship? Why doesn’t He just get on with it? I think that all the time. Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus just came in glory and everything was done with and we worship forever and “The End,” or “The Beginning” (whatever you want look forward to it as). That has to come to your mind, especially when Jesus tells us two parables to sort of set us straight. The first parable is the parable of the growing seed.

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.” (ESV)

That’s what the kingdom of God is like. If you understand that parable, you’ve got it. You can sleep soundly tonight. That parable is not rocket science. Everyone in His audience of those days would have understood it. You plant seeds, the seeds grow, you harvest the seeds. End of story. Yet somehow Jesus says, “This is what the kingdom of God is like.” In fact this passage contains one of the two great mysteries of all of theology wrapped up in this one little parable. Those mysteries, the tension between human responsibility and God’s sovereignty, or God’s being in charge of all things. Did you notice here what the farmer is supposed to do? The farmer is supposed to do something, and the farmer in this parable isn’t Jesus (that we know of), he’s just a farmer. The farmer sows the seed and then he goes to sleep night after night, day after day, and somehow after he sows the seed, boom, he goes out into his field and there are plants there. He has no idea how that happened. In the Ancient Near East that would have been especially true, but even now with all the science we have, no one knows exactly why. What happens, happens. They can explain how it happens – all the different cell structures. They still don’t know why it functions like it functions. But what you do know is after it’s grown, the farmer then has another responsibility. He goes out and harvests it. So what’s the point of this parable? The point of the parable is, on one hand, the farmer is responsible for sowing and for gathering. On the other hand, God is responsible for everything else. God is the One Who is responsible to make things grow. Our responsibility once we have sown the Word (remember that which is sown in these parables is the Word), is simply to wait.

We can’t force God’s hand, yet we try and do it. In fact, from the church history and even into the Old Testament, you could read it as one big story of people trying to force God’s hand. In Jesus’ day there were three groups that are very much like three groups that exist today, that were impatient with the coming of God’s kingdom and with God’s work.

The first group is the Zealots. There were others, but the Zealots were the main ones we know about. Zealots thought that we needed to impose God’s kingdom by force. We need to impose God’s kingdom by way of military power and by way of legislative action and these kinds of things; in taking over the government we need to force God’s hand. That didn’t work, and it still doesn’t work. You meet lots of people today who think the primary way to get God’s kingdom to reign on earth today is to get the right laws past in Washington, D.C.

Today is Sanctity of Life Sunday, and we think if we could just make the laws right there would be no more abortions. You know what, that's just not the case. Now, I'm pro-life and would love to see the law changed, but the only thing that will change the number of abortions in our country is if people's hearts are changed toward that. Just legislating doesn't work. It didn't work for the Zealots; it doesn't work for us.

The other group of people in Jesus' day (and we have them today, if you ever watch religious television), is the group I'm going to call the Apocalyptics. What are Apocalyptics? They're people who sit around looking for signs, and claiming that everything that happens is a sign that the end is near. I can't tell you how many e-mails and things I get that talk about, "War in the Middle East. The end is near. Jesus is getting ready to come back." News flash! There has been war in the Middle East forever. On top of that, even if you recognize the signs and somehow you are right, how is that actually helping the kingdom of God expand? Unless it's motivating you to go out and share the Gospel because you're so worried that people are going to get caught unawares, who cares?

The third group is the one we know probably most intimately, the Pharisees. The Pharisees thought they could usher in God's kingdom if they could just get people to be good. If you can just get people to obey God's law then everything will be copacetic. You know what? That didn't work back then. And guess what? It doesn't work now. You can be as obedient as you want, you can try and be as good as you want but two things will happen. One, you will inevitably fail, and secondly, inevitably it won't give the results that you want because your own goodness isn't going to necessarily usher in the kingdom of God.

What is it that will usher in the kingdom of God? The only thing that will usher in the kingdom of God is sowing and gathering. Have you ever heard the word "gathering" around this church? It's part of our vision. Our job as this church is to gather and grow. Our job as Christians is to simply share the Gospel with people, to sow the Word if you will, and then wait on God. When the time is ready to harvest, we harvest, we gather, we invite people, we bring them. Are all those other things important? At some level they all have their place, but the most important thing if you really want to see the kingdom of God ushered in is to make sure everyone knows about the kingdom of God. You will be surprised how many people don't. I didn't know a thing until I was eighteen years old. So that's the parable of the growing seed. The reason it takes so long is because God is patient and God is at work. God is doing things in His own good time, not willing that any should perish. If that discourages you, then Jesus has another parable for you. You can't be patient and wait on God—the parable of the growing seed—unless you understand the parable of the mustard seed. The parable of the mustard seed is an inherent promise, but it's also an inherent challenge. Let me read to you 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. (ESV)

He says, "With what should we compare the kingdom of God?" And He says, "It's like a mustard seed." Now, some skeptics have said, "We know the New Testament is wrong because Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest seed and it's not the smallest seed." You know what? In all of Jewish literature the mustard seed was proverbial for the smallest seed in the garden. He wasn't trying to be scientifically precise. He was trying to help people understand. They would have understood the mustard seed to be the smallest seed in the garden. It is what all the rabbis talked about. His point here is you have the smallest seed in the garden, and it eventually becomes the biggest plant in the garden. The most insignificant thing in the garden, or apparently insignificant thing, at some point becomes an almost incomprehensible thing. The thing that you can barely see eventually will become something that all of the birds of the air can build a nest in. That's pretty big.

Both of these parables are parables of surprise in a way. In the first parable the farmer is surprised because he wakes up and the plants have grown. He knows not how. In this parable there is surprise at the contrast between the meager beginnings of the mustard seed and the ultimate outcome as the biggest plant in all the garden. Jesus

says, “This is what the kingdom of God is like.” Jesus is saying, “What this means, disciples, is that I’m going to use Peter who’s going to deny me, and the ‘Sons of Thunder’ who think they’re a little too big for their britches, and all of these prostitutes and tax collectors to change the world, that eventually someday the Gospel will cover the face of the earth and even before My reign, My followers will outnumber anyone else. It will be the greatest faith in all of history.” Do you think the disciples would have believed that? I don’t think so. Do you and I believe that? Not really, I don’t think. Otherwise we’d live a little bit differently. You can’t understand the kingdom of God going from being something that’s almost insignificant to being something that’s incomprehensible until you understand that that very thing happens in your own life. To the extent that you understand that principally being applied to yourself is the extent to which you will see it applied to the kingdom. What do I mean by that?

One of my family’s favorite movies, and I qualify this by saying it’s one of my family’s favorite movies if the vote were taken and won by a majority – four to one. The movie is (I’m almost ashamed to say it) “Princess Diaries.” Everyone loves that, almost everyone. What is “Princess Diaries” about? Basically it’s about a nerdy (frankly), relatively unattractive, frizzy-haired, coke-bottle-bottom-glasses-wearing, fifteen-year-old girl named Mia Thermopolis. She’s completely insignificant even in her own eyes. Then one day out of the blue Julie Andrews shows up. You know it’s big when Julie shows. She’s the Queen of Genovia, and she shows up to tell Mia that she is the crown princess of Genovia. You spend an hour and a half trying to convince Mia that in fact she is a princess, because when she looks at herself she’s not a princess. When she thinks about what she knows, she’s not a princess. When she thinks about her manners, she’s definitely not a princess. What eventually convinces her that she is a princess? It’s not what she did or how she looked, it was by being persuaded of whose she was. She was her grandmother’s granddaughter. She was her father’s daughter. Once she understood that, she was able to embrace her princess-ness. The point at which she embraced being a princess, is when she began to change, and she was gorgeous. What’s that have to do with the Gospel? Well, the Gospel says that you and I by nature are not just insignificant, but we’re sinful and depraved and in fact odious in the sight of God. Our sin makes us ugly, and yet Jesus comes and takes our sin from us and gives us all of His glory, all of His righteousness, all of His beauty for those who would trust him. In the moment you trust Jesus you’re now co-heirs with Jesus. You’re a king or a queen or a prince or a princess. If you spend your whole life trying to be good enough to be a princess or a prince, or doing the right things in order to show you’re a prince or a princess you’ll never get it. As soon as you realize that you are a prince or a princess or a king or a queen because of what God has done for you, that you are His son or daughter, at that point you begin to realize something insignificant can become something incomprehensible. As soon as you realize that you look out onto the world and see the whole world could be different because, “If I can be changed, anything and anyone can be changed.” Think about that.