

Study Notes: Mark 4:21-34
May 2, 2021: “The Kingdom of God”
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He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”

- After explaining His first parable to the disciples, Jesus tells another parable which explains the mystery of the Kingdom of God. Just like a lamp is meant to give off light, Jesus has come to disclose or reveal the mystery (what was once hidden) of the Kingdom of God.
- Anyone who is hearing Jesus' voice should pay close attention to what He is saying. The Pillar New Testament commentary explains: “The kingdom of God—and the parables that witness to it—are like a piece of embroidery: one side is a mass of knots and tangles, while the other is a finished pattern. So, too, is the figure of Jesus. To outsiders he is a homespun rabbi without the credentials of a rabbinic school, a Galilean upstart. How might one detect in the ordinary threads of such a life the emerging pattern of the kingdom of God? Only by *hearing*.”

“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

- Hearing the words of Jesus involves more than simply the physical act of hearing. His words are meant to be heeded and put into practice. We must take the words seriously, rather than casually.
- Those who do heed Jesus words, and put them into practice will be blessed. Those who refuse to hear the words of Jesus will lose what little that they have.
- The Faithlife Study Bible explains this parable: “The parable of the Lamp following the parable of the Sower—and Jesus’ teaching about who is able to receive His message and who is not—implies that the mystery of the kingdom of God is already revealed by Jesus (compare v. 11). Those willing to embrace it are able to receive it. The idea conveyed in these verses is given more extensive treatment in the parable of the Talents (or bags of gold; Matt 25:14–30) and the similar parable of 10 Minas (Luke 19:11–27). These passages clarify that embracing the kingdom of heaven means obediently acting according to God’s purposes.”
- In regarding to hearing, the Pillar New Testament Commentary notes that understanding the words of Jesus is not an act of human effort, but instead a gift from God: “Understanding the kingdom of God is not a human ability but a capacity created by Jesus Christ within the heart of the believer”

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

- In this parable, Jesus begins by making it clear the point of comparison. This parable helps to explain what the kingdom of God is like. In this case, rather than some grand image, Jesus uses the image of seed for the Kingdom of God.

- Much like the first parable recorded in Mark's Gospel (see Mark 4:1-20), this parable begins with a man scattering seed. However, rather than focus on the conditions of the soil, this parable focuses on the process of growing. Without human intervention, the seed and the soil produce grain and a harvest. Jesus' purpose in telling this parable is a reminder that much of the work of the Kingdom of God is taking place behind the scenes, and it will continue to grow and will fully come regardless of what man may do. God alone produces growth for the Kingdom.
- The New American Commentary notes: "The success of the Christian message similarly does not depend upon human effort or understanding—though Christians certainly need to scatter the seed—but upon divine power. It will succeed precisely because God is active. The kingdom cannot be precipitated by revolutionary activity or any other human effort unaided by God"
- The Pillar New Testament Commentary explains how Jesus' parable contradicted what many different Jewish factions believed about the Kingdom: "The Zealots tried to force the kingdom on stage by revolution; apocalypticism hoped by careful observations and reckonings to portend the future; the Pharisees believed that the emergence of the kingdom could be midwived by scrupulous legal observance. The parable of the growing seed warns against wedding the coming of the kingdom to forecasts, projections, timetables, and strategies."

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

- Once again, Jesus uses a parable to describe the Kingdom of God. The theme is again agriculture, but this time Jesus chooses a specific type of seed, the mustard seed. The mustard seed is only about 1/10th of an inch in diameter, and without much intervention some mustard plants can grow up to 25 feet tall. Even smaller varieties grow to be upto 10 feet tall, which are clearly large enough to sustain a place for birds to roost in.
- Jesus' point in this parable is explained by the Pillar New Testament Commentary: "The greater point, however, is that the kingdom of God arises from obscurity and insignificance. That which no one would imagine—or if one did would seem utterly impossible—will in time loom inescapably before us. God's reign will not only be more real than the world can imagine, but it will also be larger and more encompassing."
- Though not the main point of the parable, scholars point out that the birds are often an Old Testament allusion to the Gentiles (see for example: Ezekiel 17:23, 31:6). In that case, this parable is also a prediction that the Gentiles will be included in the Kingdom of God and a reminder that God's grace is for all people.

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

- Several of Jesus' other parables are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (for example, both Matthew 13 and Luke 15 are full of Jesus' parables). When Mark speaks of Jesus not saying anything without a parable, he is indicating that this was Jesus' primary style of teaching. Of course, not every word was meant to be taken as a parable.
- Mark also notes that Jesus spent time explaining the parables to His disciples privately. He wanted to be sure that they were understanding the mystery of the Kingdom of God.