

Four Parables with Purpose  
Mark 4:1-34

Christian, how should you be responding to the conditions in the world around us? Some say, "Protest with us!" Others say, "Vote for us!" Still others advise, "Boycott them!" While other voices command, "Engage them!"

Whatever position you find yourself tending toward, there is an essential preliminary commitment every Christian, every true believer, every devoted follower of Jesus ought to practice: **"Listen. Listen to what Jesus says, and keep listening until you understand His priority for Himself and His disciples in the world."** The one voice every follower of Jesus ought to be seeking to hear and understand is the voice of Jesus Himself. No voice should capture our attention more soundly than His. No teaching should encompass our heart more completely than His. No notion should fill our minds more certainly than His. No obedience should engage our time and effort and resources than obedience to Him.

It is not so difficult to look out at our world and wonder, "What God is doing?" Violence, division, uncertainty, anger, anxiety, impatience, sarcasm, lies, jealousy, these sins and more rage through the masses that surround us and threaten to sweep away grace and truth and love and hope. But **Jesus reminds us, while we interact with what's happening around us, not to lose sight of what God is doing within us and will do through us.**

The parables Jesus speaks in Mark 4 reveal God's plan to change the world by the changing the heart and mission of His people in the world. These parables are God speaking to us now through the words of His Son speaking back then. Joachim Jeremias: "We stand right before Jesus when reading His parables." Warren Wiersbe wrote, "The parables are not bedtime stories to put you to sleep, but rather bugle calls to wake you up!"

Parables are short narrative stories that use a comparison to make a point. Find the comparison in one of Jesus' parables and you'll find the purpose, the reason Jesus tells the parable in the first place. Mark collects four parables of Jesus here in chapter four. Each contains a comparison. Each makes a point. And together, **the four of them make another point that reveals Jesus's purpose for you and me and for all those who put their faith in Him and follow Him with their whole heart.**

Let us look, this morning, at these four parables told with purpose, and discern through the Spirit of God what the word from God is for us today.

Each of these parables makes a comparison that conveys the message. The first parable compares the adequacy of various soils to produce a useable harvest. The second compares the function of a lamp with the placement of the lamp. The third compares the kingdom of God and agricultural reality. The fourth parable compares the kingdom of God and the potential of a tiny seed.

Each parable contains a comparison. Each comparison conveys the point of the parable. Consider the first parable in the series, the parable of the soils. In this parable there is but one sower and

one seed. There are four soils and yet, only two outcomes. There is the hard-packed soil of the well worn path; the shallow, rocky soil; the fallow, thorn-infested soil; the fine, arable, fertile soil. Four soils, but there are only two outcomes: harvest or no harvest. The point of sowing is not to determine soil composition. The point of sowing is harvest. The comparison here is about harvest. What soil produces an abundant harvest? The answer is: prepared soil. The only real difference, in terms of harvest potential between these soils, is the degree of preparation made for the seed.

Every one of these soils behaves exactly in accord with its natural condition. The hard soil resists the seed. The stony soil provides no depth for the seed. The thorny soil overgrows the seed. Only the prepared soil, by virtue of its condition, can bring forth the harvest expected by the sower of seed. The prepared soil produces the most abundant harvest.

Jesus explains to His disciples that each soil represents a condition of the human heart. Which begs the question, how does the good soil ever get prepared for the seed? It cannot prepare itself. It cannot plow itself. A heart, dead in its trespasses and sins cannot resurrect itself or grant itself life in order to respond to the word. How then can there be hearts prepared to bring forth a harvest of grace and truth when the gospel is sown into them?

Remember that question. We'll come back to it in a little bit.

When the disciples ask Jesus about the parable, He makes a startling and revealing statement. He tells them, "***To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.***" With this revelation He gives them not only the key to this parable, but to understanding His purpose for all these parables.

***To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.*** That word "secret" translates the Greek word *musterion*, from which we get our English word "mystery." In most cases in the New Testament, when the word *mystery* or *secret* is used of God's eternal plan of salvation, the word denotes something that was always intended to be revealed but was kept hidden in time until it would be revealed in the God given time and God given way.

For example, turn to Colossians 1:24-27.

***Colossians 1:24-27 (ESV) <sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.***

When Paul writes of the *mystery* of Christ, he writes of God's plan to redeem human beings through Christ, who, after his death and resurrection, would live in His followers through the Holy Spirit. This was always God's plan. It was revealed in God's timing and God's way. It was

a plan hidden in time, for ages and generations, until the time of God's choosing, when it was revealed exactly the way God had eternally determined.

Here's another example of what we mean by *secret* or *mystery*. Christmas presents. I love Christmas presents. There's one thing that is always true about Christmas presents. The person who wrapped it and hid it from me, intends for me to know the contents of the gift at the right time and in the right way. In that way, a Christmas present is a mystery like the gospel is a mystery, something hidden that is intended to be revealed.

Jesus says that the *secret*, the *mystery* of the kingdom of God has been given to the disciples, His chosen and appointed followers. These are the ones prepared by God to receive the seed of the Word. These are the ones through whom God will bring forth an abundant gospel harvest of grace and truth.

There are those lives to which the mystery of the kingdom of God will come, and because of the spiritual condition of those hearts, the word will have little impact relative to any real, God-intended harvest. But, where hearts are prepared by God to receive the word, the gospel of Jesus, the secret of the kingdom of God will be understood, embraced, and will reach its full potential for personal transformation. Where hearts are prepared by God, the word will produce an abundant harvest.

Cornerstone, to you, in this day, in this hour, under the conditions prevailing in this community and in this nation in which we live, God has wonderfully and mercifully, in His sovereign and perfect will, for His own divine and eternal purpose and glory, given to you the secret of the kingdom of God. God has prepared your hearts for His word, and is, in His time, bringing forth the abundant harvest of His desire in your lives.

How does the soil of the human heart become ready for the gospel and the ensuing spiritual harvest? By the Holy Spirit working through the Word. This is what God is doing in your lives, those who are loving God's word; those who are seeking and obeying His will. Others will not receive the word or produce a gospel harvest because of the natural condition of their heart, but to you, to you in whom God has and is working, you have been given the mystery, the secret of the kingdom of God, the life building gospel of Jesus Christ. **Cornerstone, bring forth the gospel harvest of God!**

But let's quickly collect three more truths from these parables of Jesus in this chapter. Let's gather them under this question: *What are the implications of receiving the secret of the kingdom of God, the gospel of Christ?* What does receiving such a gift mean for us? What responsibility and opportunity is God setting in our hands and hearts and lives?

1. First, from the parable of the lamp and the comparison between the function of a lamp to provide light and the placement of lamp to enable the function, we learn that it is the nature of those who receive the secret of the kingdom of God to share it boldly and brightly without reservation or obstruction, just as the natural function of a lamp is served by placing it where it will best shine.

2. Second, from the parable of the seed we discover that it is the nature of the secret of the kingdom of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, to flourish and reach its full potential, producing its harvest, without additional human effort beyond proclamation.
  - a. The gospel does what it does because it is the gospel of God.
  - b. Paul writes that he is ***“not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .”*** (Romans 1:16)
  - c. The power for growth and expansion is in the seed, not the farmer.
  
3. Finally, we find in the parable of the mustard seed that it is the nature of the secret of the kingdom of God, the gospel of Jesus, to multiply and flourish beyond all expectations.
  - a. The tiny seed, so small, seeming so insignificant in light of the obstacles that might present its growth, overcomes those obstacles
  - b. The tiny seed become a mighty tree, exceeding all expectations
  - c. All that is required is that someone sow the seed.

Share the gospel, church. Share the secret you have received, the mystery God always intended to reveal. Share it like a lighthouse on the dark and stormy shore of the world. Share it widely. Share it boldly. Share it confidently. Trust God to use your witness and your life to build His kingdom and exceed your expectations beyond all you can ask or imagine.

A final word here. Back to that question we sort of answered but sort of left hanging. Soil does not prepare itself for sowing. Soil must be ploughed and tilled and raked and hoed and weeded and have the rocks picked out.

This is the day to day work of the Holy Spirit in the believer as God prepares your heart and life for the gospel harvest. Yield to the work of the Holy Spirit. Surrender to spiritual discipline as God brings it. Engage in spiritual pursuits like prayer and Bible study and worship and fellowship and faithful obedience. Give thanks for the word of God and the work of God in every situation as He prepares you daily for an abundant gospel harvest. Love Jesus and don't give up, for to you is given the secret of the kingdom of God, the soul-saving, life-changing, mission-giving gospel of Jesus Christ.