

“Lampstands, Seeds, and End Results”

Mark 4:21-34

It has been said that we should never underestimate the power of small things. Things that are little in size, but not little in significance. For instance, sometimes overlooking small things can lead to massive consequences. Or, small words that we speak may seem unimportant, but they may in fact change the entire course of our lives. Who of us can testify to the power of a small word of encouragement, or a small word of concern spoken to you by someone at a time when you needed it the most? The little things matter. Those small actions and words can make a major impact. Little decisions made today that have a major impact on our lives tomorrow. And sometimes, what starts small can end up impacting the world.

William Carey (1761-1834), father of the modern missions movement, labored in India for seven years before seeing his first convert. He shared the gospel for more than 40 years, while the fruit of his labor was minimal at best. Yet he would say things like this, “The future is as bright as the promise of God,” and, “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.” While it is impossible to measure William Carey’s full impact, historians all agree that his influence is enormous. He helped launch the modern missionary movement by advocating that Christians should actively take the gospel to unreached people groups. Since then, Christianity has grown from an estimated 250 million believers worldwide in the late eighteenth century to well over 2.5 billion today. He translated the Bible in whole or in part into more than 40 languages, making God’s Word accessible to millions of people. When Carey set sail for India in 1793, no one knew the impact it would have at the time. It went unnoticed by the

world, happened under the radar, and seemed so small and insignificant. That's why God tells us:

Zechariah 4:10—“Do not despise the day of small things.”

What could be smaller and more insignificant than things like lampstands and seeds? And yet these are the word pictures that Jesus used in describing the kingdom of God, how it begins small, but will one day fill the earth. (Read)

The subject of the kingdom was frequently talked about by Jesus. Remember how Mark says He began His ministry:

Mark 1:14-15—“Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’”

Jesus came preaching the message of the kingdom. And to say to that ‘kingdom of God is at hand’ is to say that it has come near. What the prophets had wrote about has now come near in the person of God’s Son. Jesus is King, and He has come to usher in the kingdom. When the Bible refers to the kingdom of God, it is referring to the complete and total rule of God over all of creation. He will usher in the plan and purpose that He has always had in mind for His creation. In this fourth chapter of Mark, Jesus presents a series of parables that are known as ‘kingdom’ parables because they explain the nature of God’s coming kingdom. The longest of these is the Parable of the Sower found in the first part of the chapter. In this first parable, Jesus is explaining how the kingdom rule of God is established in the heart of the one who truly receives the gospel, much like a seed that takes root in good soil will produce its fruit. He will follow this up by three additional parables that also expand on that same theme. Which means these parables are not disconnected, but are intended to make this truth about

the kingdom clearer to His disciples. Jesus will go on to describe the kingdom in terms of lampstands, seeds, and end results.

There are three principles about the kingdom of God from what Jesus teaches in these parables—its secret is shared, its spread is subtle, and its success is sure.

1—The SECRET of the kingdom is shared (4:21-25)

“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? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.’ 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. 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.”

When the disciples asked Jesus about why He spoke in parables, verse 11 says that He said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables.” He used parables both to reveal truth to believing hearts, as well as to conceal it from unbelieving hearts. For those with receptive hearts, parables reveal the mystery of God’s kingdom which Christ has come to establish. You might could think of them like stained glass. In the first church I served as pastor, the sanctuary had several stained glass windows. During the day, the sun would come through those windows and you could see all the colors and artistic details. It was beautiful on the inside. But if you were outside, they seemed sort of dark and colorless. Like the outside of those stained glass windows, Jesus’ parables conceal certain truths about His identity and purpose from those who refuse to believe. And like the inside of those same windows, His parables reveal these truths about the kingdom to

those who seek to know and trust Him as their Savior. The key to understanding is faith in Jesus!

He is saying to His disciples that the secret of the kingdom is hidden, but it will be made known to those who believe in Him. As His disciples, they now have the responsibility of carrying the light of divine truth to the world around them. To illustrate His point, He tells them another parable about a lamp. Verse 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?’ You don’t take a lamp and put it under something else. No, you put it on a lampstand so that its light will illuminate the room. What this means is that you and I as believers have a responsibility to share the message of the gospel with others. Jesus is the Light of the world, and we are His lampstands. The purpose of a lampstand is to hold forth the light that others might see.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 22, “For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.” While certain aspects of God’s kingdom were veiled during Jesus’ earthly ministry, they would one day be revealed. The truth cannot remain hidden forever. The identity of Christ Himself, as well as the mysteries of His kingdom, and God’s redemptive plan would be fully disclosed. He’s saying, “What may be hidden now will one day be made visible.”

There’s an important application here. Even when God’s work seems hidden to our eyes, His purposes are moving toward completion. Right now in your life, there may be some things going on that you don’t fully understand. And for whatever reason, God has allowed certain things to happen. He has allowed circumstances that are beyond your control. And His hand in it all seems hidden to you. But for the one who loves Him, He has made the promise that all things

are working together for your good. And you can be confident that His purposes in your life are moving toward completion. There is a coming day when it will all be made plain for us in the light of Christ. What we don't understand now, and what we can't comprehend now, will one day be made manifest.

Some of you will be familiar with these lyrics:

*Farther along we'll know all about it,
Farther along we'll understand why;
Cheer up, my brother, and live in the sunshine,
We'll understand it all by and by!*

Whether it is the temptations and trials we face in life, or the painful experiences of loss along the way, or wondering why the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer. Farther along, we'll know all about it. Understanding will one day come in the light of Christ's glory. I like the third and fourth stanza of that song:

*Faithful till death said our loving Master,
A few more days to labor and wait;
Toils of the road will then seem as nothing,
As we sweep through the beautiful gate.
When we see Jesus coming in glory,
When He comes from His home in the sky;
Then we shall meet Him in that bright mansion,
We'll understand it all by and by!*

For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light. As Jesus explains these words to the disciples, He's looking beyond their current situation in which His identity and mission is hidden and to that time when His purpose is fully revealed in His death and resurrection. He is

looking to a future time when His followers will declare His gospel to the whole world.

Matthew 5:14-16—“You are the light of the world. A city 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.”

Jesus emphasizes that light is intended to illuminate. The truth of God’s kingdom is not meant to be concealed but displayed. Just as a lamp fulfills its purpose by shining the light, the purpose of God’s truth is meant to reveal His will, expose darkness, and guide you and me into life.

Now it will be the task of these disciples to shine forth the truth of the Word to the world! Jesus said to them:

Matthew 10:27—“What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.”

The secret of the Kingdom is not to be kept to yourselves alone, but it is to be held forth as a bright and shining light for the whole world to see. That’s what Paul meant when he said in Philippians 2, interestingly the same passage as the condescension and exaltation of the Lord Jesus, with every knee bowing to Him eventually one day, and then we read in verses 15 and 16: “That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.” As believers, we’re not merely recipients of kingdom truth. We are stewards of that truth, called to let God’s light shine

through our lives. Which means we are to be careful in how we listen. Notice verse 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. 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.’”

What does this mean? A faithful response to God’s truth leads to great spiritual insight and blessing. The ‘measure’ is a word that comes from the marketplace. In those days, a scoop of grain would be set on a scale. The weight of the produce on one side would be ‘measured’ against the weights on the other side of scale. The measurement was done to assure the buyer that the purchase price was equal to the product weight.

The point of the analogy is that God weighs our kingdom work. If we listen to and obey Jesus’ word, He will reward accordingly. There is great reward for the one who pays attention to what he hears. That spiritual deposit will yield rich dividends. When we shine forth the light of the gospel to others, then by God’s grace, the reward will exceed the effort. He will heap on the scale blessing upon blessing. And so the point is to invest in the kingdom, for the rewards will far outweigh the efforts! Friends, that is something that we must remind ourselves of when we grow weary or when we get frustrated, wondering whether or not our efforts are in vain. Maybe we fail to see immediate results, or trials seem unending, or the weight of temptation wears us down. Weariness often happens gradually in our lives by neglect, by trying to carry burdens without casting them on the Lord, or serving in our own strength rather than His. Eventually, it allows disappointment and unmet expectations to cloud our perspective. Even the most mature believer can become exhausted by the ongoing battle against sin, the

pressures of ministry, and the brokenness of the world. But we need to keep in mind the promise we've been given:

Galatians 6:9—“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Psalms 126:6—“He who goes forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bring his sheaves with him.”

1 Corinthians 15:58—“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

And so the first thing we must understand is that the secret of the kingdom has been shared with us as believers, and it must be declared. Lampstands are meant to hold forth the light. Notice a second principle:

2—The SPREAD of the kingdom is subtle (4:26-29)

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

In the next parable, Jesus explains how the kingdom grows like a seed planted in the ground. This is what happens to the seed that takes root in good soil. The farmer scatters the seed on the ground. As he sleeps and rises night and day, the seed slowly sprouts and begins to grow. The life-giving power is within the seed itself, not in his ability as a farmer. Which is to say that he can expect growth because the seed has an inherent power that is unstoppable. Which

means the emphasis here is not on the farmer as much as it is the innate power of the seed. This farmer can sleep at night because he trusts the seed will do its work.

Honestly, I believe this is one of the most encouraging parables that Jesus ever told. He is speaking about how the kingdom rule of God increases and grows in our lives. Those who sow the 'seed' of the Word can trust its ability to produce:

Isaiah 55:10-11 — “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.”

This means that we can trust that God, by means of His Word, will accomplish His kingdom purposes in Christ. If we faithfully preach the Word and we do all that we can to spread the Word, we should expect growth as His Word takes root in the lives of people. Healthy growth doesn't happen overnight. It takes time because its a slow, steady process.

Have you ever noticed those mushrooms in your backyard that seem to come up over night? When its been rainy, or there has been a lot of moisture. The reason that mushroom can show up so quickly is because it is mostly water. They don't grow by dividing cells like plants do. Instead, the tiny mushroom cell is already formed and acts like a balloon when given enough moisture. But as soon as the heat is turned up, guess what happens? It shrivels even quicker than it emerged. However, the growth of an oak tree is a lot different. Let's say you take an acorn and plant it in the ground. It will spend the next century growing!

There's a big difference in a mushroom versus an oak tree. Spiritually speaking, God isn't looking for mushroom growth in our lives. He is looking for a life that is lived in a God-ward direction for the long haul, one with roots that grow down deep, weathers different seasons, and produces fruit. Verse 27 says the seed sprouts and grows, even though the farmer doesn't know how. Something is happening just beneath the surface, so that the earth produces by itself—first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear, and then will come the harvest. And that's how the gospel goes to work in a person's life. What starts as a small seed sown into the heart as it is received in faith will produce the fruit of a changed life.

James 1:21 —“Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

1 Peter 1:23—“Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

Life comes out of a seed that dies. The seed goes into the ground and dies. And as it dies, out of it comes life. How does that happen? Nobody knows. The farmer doesn't know. He can't make it happen. Nobody can make that happen. The best scientists in the world don't know how that happens. They know it happens, but they can't tell you how or why. Out of a dying seed comes life, eventually a huge crop. Friends, that's the wonder of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation. The only thing you and I can do is plant the seed and wait! Paul explained it this way:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7—“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

The secret of God's kingdom is shared, its spread is subtle, and then notice third:

3—The SUCCESS of the kingdom is sure (4:30-34)

“And He said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 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.’ With many such parables He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to His own disciples He explained everything.”

While the disciples are no doubt still thinking about the previous parables which illustrate the kingdom, Jesus tells another in which He compares it to a mustard seed. It had to have been funny to think about it, for in those days, the mustard seed was the smallest cultivated seed of common garden plants in Galilee. And though it begins with a tiny seed, the mustard plant that grows from it becomes a tree that is 10-15 feet tall. The point is that compared to the size of its seed, the mature plant is immense. That's the way it is with the kingdom of God. It starts small and under the radar, but it will eventually grow into something so massive that it provides shade for the world. In other words, the kingdom may not seem like a massive movement at first, but in the end it will be a kingdom that is made up of people from every nation, language, and tribe.

Stanley Toussaint — *“[It] is a reference to the extraordinary spread and growth of the kingdom message in the age before the kingdom is established as well as the seemingly prosperous growth in number of those who would be heirs of the kingdom.”*

(Reference to both Daniel 4 and Ezekiel 17?)

What began in a boat by the Sea of Galilee would one day encompass a world-wide movement that would include the nations. What begins in secret and a relatively small size will ultimately prove successful so that it fills the earth. It is the kingdom of God under the Lordship of King Jesus. This is a promise of the triumphant growth and the success of the gospel throughout the church age which has been growing since Pentecost, and will ultimately culminate in the millennial kingdom when Christ rules the whole world from the throne of David.

Notice the reference to the birds nesting in its shade. This is right out of Ezekiel 17, a messianic prophecy that says under the rule of God's Messiah, the nations will come to salvation, and the nations are pictured as birds coming to lodge in the tree of blessing. The birds are representative of the nations. In other words, this is going to expand and not only Israel will be a part of this coming kingdom, but the nations of the world will be a part of it as well.

Let me give you a principle for application before we close:

Live faithfully for God's kingdom today, trusting that He is accomplishing far more through His Word than you can presently see.

We are to seek first the kingdom of God in all that we do. We're to be kingdom-minded people in the midst of a world that is confusing and chaotic. We're to be kingdom parents who raise kingdom kids. We're to be a kingdom-focused church, with kingdom-focused preaching and teaching that encourages kingdom living and kingdom mission. What is it that we learn from these little parables?

The secret of the kingdom is shared. You and I know the secret, don't we?

Jesus says to His disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God." But we don't hide the light under a basket. We must place it on a

lampstand for the world to see. The spread of the kingdom is subtle. And as we share the message of Christ, we can trust that it will produce. And we can do so with confidence because the success of the kingdom is sure. That's what we can learn from lampstands, seeds, and end results. That's the power of this message of the kingdom. It reminds me of the last stanza of Martin Luther's hymn:

*That word above all earthly powers
No thanks to them, abideth
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth
Let goods and kindred go
This mortal life also
The body they may kill
God's truth abideth still
His Kingdom is forever!*

When we're tempted to become discouraged, or when we find ourselves growing weary, we need to remember this simple truth about the kingdom. God will finish what He starts! (See Phil. 1:6)

Helmut Thielicke—*“One day, perhaps, when we look back from God's throne on the last day we shall say with amazement and surprise, ‘If I had ever dreamed when I stood at the graves of my loved ones and everything seemed to be ended; if I have ever dreamed when I saw the specter of war creeping upon us; if I had ever dreamed when I faced the meaningless fate of an endless imprisonment or a malignant disease; if I had ever dreamed that God was only carrying out His design and plan through all these woes, that in the midst of my cares and troubles and despair His harvest was ripening, and that everything was pressing on toward His last kingly day—if I had known this I would have*

been more calm and confident; yes, I would have been more cheerful and far more tranquil and composed.”

Has the kingdom rule of Christ taken root in your heart? If not, then trust Him now as your Savior. Let's pray.