

Jesus' New World Order

Message 6

The New World Kingdom

Mark 4:1-34

Sowing the Seed

Isn't it nice to come in from the stress and anxiety of classes and exams to hear a pleasant story about a farmer and his crops? I do not know about you, but this parable takes me back to my childhood growing up on a farm in Maryland. Farming is a little different now, with electricity and noisy tractors taking the place of muscle power and docile oxen, and with machines to plant the grain. As a child I helped fill up the large hopper with barley, then my father drove the tractor pulling the grain drill around the field. Notched plates measured out the kernels one at a time, and pointed metal funnels placed each one in exactly the right place in the ground. Clover, however, is a more delicate crop, at least when it first sprouts, so we planted it among the young barley plants. Daddy and Granddaddy each wore a large bag with a long metal snout. They filled the bag with clover seed and walked back and forth across the field, swinging the long snout from side to side, scattering the clover all among the barley plants. I love our farm, but the Maryland terrain is not smooth and flat like the Midwest. We have rocks, trees, and bushes all around and, in some places, in the middle of the field. As they sowed the seed, swinging their seeder from side to side, some seed fell on the rock breaks, some in the bushes, and some on the road by the side of the field. Seed is not cheap, but it would be a monumental waste of time to attempt to pick up all the stray seeds. They would be eaten, or crushed, or die from the heat, but most of the seed fell on good ground, and it would flourish without any trouble.

But perhaps you did not grow up on a farm, and maybe you are a little bored with my childhood memories. Are you a bit impatient to get to the point of this passage? OK, but pay attention. This apparently simple pastoral parable is actually deceptively profound. Let's look at it one aspect at a time.

The Explanation

On one level the parable could not be easier to understand – because Jesus explains it! Jesus does not tell parables to entertain, to warm up the crowd. The parables convey very profound truth. The trouble with them is they can be maddeningly difficult to decipher. But Jesus unpacks this one for us. The sower is a preacher, preaching the word – i.e. the word of God – all over the countryside. Some of the word falls upon people who are like the path. They are not interested in the message or are not paying attention to the preacher. Although they hear the word of God, it does not sink in, and Satan immediately distracts them with other interests. Such people might come to RUF once, but find it rather boring – so they do not return.

The stony ground represents people who hear God's word and find it interesting and exciting. They decide to follow Jesus, but as soon as some trouble sets in, they become discouraged and give up. At Lehigh this might take the form of intense course work or team activities or questioning from their friends. They feel pressured and decide that following Jesus just is not worth the trouble. The third group sticks with it. They continue to follow Jesus, at least on the surface. But their real interest is not with God's word – it is with wealth, power, prestige, comfort, and pleasure. Over time, these desires overshadow God's word until eventually it is squeezed out of their lives entirely. They may still go to church, or even a Bible study, but their heart is not in it. They ignore God all the rest of the time. The last group are represented by the good soil. They not only pay attention and follow Jesus over a period of time, they actually *love* the word. They embrace it, absorb it. God's word sinks deep roots into their soul – so deep that they are transformed. Their lives change, and they begin to become fruitful. Day by day they become more like Jesus and less like those around them.

Are you with me? The purpose of this parable is not to provide a challenging puzzle, but to shine

a spotlight on your own heart. Which soil are you? Is God's word changing you? Are you fruitful? Do you love God's word, or do you merely tolerate it? Has scripture penetrated your heart and mind? Do you think and feel differently now because you read or hear God's word every day? Or does one of the other soils describe you better? Are you easily distracted from following Jesus? Do you find your courses, or the TV news, or computer games, or a cute girl or a handsome guy far more engaging than God? When you look for fruit in your life, must you honestly admit that you are spiritually barren?

The Fulfillment

But there is more here. The fascinating thing about this parable is that it is being fulfilled even in its telling. Jesus is the preacher, and the parable itself is the seed. As He sows the parable across the audience, some are bored; some are excited initially, but quickly lose interest; some show real interest, but eventually give in to higher priorities. So how can we identify the good soil here? How would we recognize those who are truly embracing the word? They are the ones who seek the answer to the parable! Jesus says as much when He tells them that they will receive the explanation, and says the rest are "outside." Later, He explains the various levels of fruitfulness by saying, in essence, you get what you put into it. He says, "To you who hear, more will be given." In other words, those who hang around for awhile and ask Jesus questions will learn more and become more productive. And the longer you hang around, the more you learn and the more fruitful you become.

Now just as this parable was fulfilled in Jesus' telling of it, so it is tonight. As I preach this word, your hearts will be revealed as you respond to it in various ways. Are you still with me? Which soil are you right now?

But this is just the beginning. The real message Jesus wants to get across has to do with His Kingdom. Although we have mentioned Jesus' Kingdom from time to time in the past few weeks, did you notice that Mark never mentions it after chapter one? Now here in 4:11 Jesus tells the good soil that He is going to give them the "mystery of the Kingdom of God."

The Mystery

Chapter four describes a consolidation of Jesus' ministry. Mark presented Jesus in chapter one as the Son of God. Using prophecies from Isaiah and Malachi, he showed that Jesus was given a royal reception when He came to earth. John the Baptist prepared the way before Him, as we would do for royalty. Malachi declared that after the preparation, God would come, so by the time Jesus arrived on the scene we should expect a divine figure. Jesus initiated His ministry by announcing that "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand." Then, nothing about the Kingdom until now. But the purpose of all the intervening passages is to prove that Jesus is in fact the Divine King. And what else could He be? He called the disciples to follow Him, and they did. He cast out demons, healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, and even forgave sin. He challenged the scribes and claimed authority to interpret the law. Finally, He set up a shadow government. Every passage we have considered this fall has shown that Jesus *must* be the Divine King. Now Mark is going to draw some of this together.

First, let's deal with the "mystery of the Kingdom." On the surface this seems pretty straight forward. The people ask Jesus to explain the parable, and He does. Isn't this the "mystery of the Kingdom?" I don't think so. For one thing, the parable seems to be more about sowing, or preaching, than about the Kingdom. Now of course these are closely related, but still, the focus does not seem right. But what convinces me that the mystery is something else is the verb tense. *Before* He gives them the explanation He says they *already* have the secret. Apparently the secret is not the explanation of the parable.

What is it then? Is it Jesus? Is it the Kingdom itself – i.e. does the "secret of the Kingdom" equal the "secret *which is* the Kingdom?" This is grammatically possible, but in what sense could they *have* Jesus or

the Kingdom? It is not impossible to speak this way, but it does not fit the passage comfortably. Instead, let's ask, "What do they already have?" Now we are on to something, because the passage tells us that they have something the others do not have. Did you catch what it is? The reason they came up to ask about the parable is that Jesus gave an invitation. He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Then we see some of the people come up to discuss the parable. These are people who have ears to hear.

Ears to Hear

What are "ears to hear?" Everyone has ears, right? But some have ears that do not work – they are deaf. The same is true spiritually. Everyone has ears, but some people's ears do not hear God's word. In essence, Jesus was saying, "All you who are spiritually receptive, come up here and I will tell you more." The mystery of the Kingdom is that some hear God's word, and others are deaf to it. The people who came up know that the way to find out more about God's word is to ask Jesus. He is the teacher with divine authority. The secret, the key to God's Kingdom is to listen to Him.

Jesus continues by saying, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" This parable is the key parable. If you do not get this one, you will not get the others either. If you do get this one, you have the key to the others. But the key is not some semantic code, or some symbolic pattern. The key is listening, hearing. The key is using the ears that hear, receiving the word like good soil. The secret of the Kingdom is that Jesus has the word of God, and if you want to enter the Kingdom, you must come listen to Him. If you don't, you are "outside." Remember when Jesus ate dinner with the sinners and tax collectors? Remember how Mark called attention to the presence of the scribes and Pharisees *outside* the house? Did you notice last week, how Jesus' mother and brothers are *outside* seeking Jesus, while those listening to Him are inside? Now Jesus says in verse 11 that those who do not come to Him are *outside* the Kingdom. They do not understand because they do not hear, and they do not hear because they do not have ears that hear.

What can we do about this? If someone does not have ears to hear, how can he enter the Kingdom? It seems pretty hopeless, doesn't it? It makes you realize that if you are here, paying attention to God's word, God has given you a priceless gift. We cannot get into God's Kingdom on our own. God gives us the ability to enter. If that does not move you to the profoundest gratitude and worship, nothing will. I hope you will always remember that you would be wandering aimlessly through life, straight toward hell, if God had not given you ears to hear; and I hope you will always be brimming with gratitude for His great mercy toward you.

Still, what about those who are not in God's Kingdom? Is there no hope for them? Of course there is! Not the kind of self-congratulating hope, as if they are going to manufacture ears that work and paste them on their heads. Their hope is that God does give hearing ears to many people, and He never turns anyone away. Look at this passage. The after-meeting discussion included "those around Him with the twelve." Jesus did not say, "Sorry folks, this is a private meeting for the special twelve only." No way! Everyone was called and everyone was welcome. Even sinners and tax collectors are welcome! Do you want to understand Jesus? Do you want to be part of His Kingdom? You can be. Just ask, and follow, and keep asking and following Jesus.

Think of the leper, the paralytic, the man with the withered hand. Jesus has compassion on the lost and hurting. Do you have friends who are deaf to God's word? There is hope for them. You cannot make them willing to hear God's word, nor can you coax or push them into God's Kingdom, but Jesus can take them in. Your role is like the friends of the paralytic – to bring your friends into the presence of Jesus and His word. Invite them to church, bring them to these RUF meetings, read the Bible with them, and above all, pray for God to have compassion on them, just as He had compassion on you. He can give them ears to hear just as easily as He gave you ears to hear. In fact, it's likely that some of your friends and classmates already

have ears to hear – are actually good soil – are receptive to the gospel right now. So how can you tell? What is the way to tell who is ready to hear God’s word? It does not matter! Remember, the job of the sower is to spread the seed everywhere, not to test the soil – and in sowing the seed everywhere, some of it falls on good soil. Likewise, as you tell everyone about Jesus, the gospel will fall on those who are ready and waiting to hear you. The bottom line here is this. You cannot get yourself or your friends into God’s Kingdom on your own, but if you and they come to Jesus, He will surely take you in.

Kingdom Growth

Jesus concludes this session with two short parables about God’s Kingdom. The first is about a sower, but it has an entirely different focus than the one we have been studying. The sower is identified simply as a man, and his sowing is rapidly passed over. Instead, the focus is on the seed and the ground. The man does nothing but sleep and rise. All the action is with the seed which sprouts and grows. Only at the end, when the growth is complete, does the farmer come back on stage to harvest the grain. The heart of this parable is the phrase, “he himself does not know how.”

The whole point of this parable is that seed grows – and this is a parable of God’s Kingdom. So God’s Kingdom is growing. But wait, you say. How can anyone believe that God’s Kingdom is growing? Open your eyes and look around. Isn’t it obvious that the world is getting worse? Immorality is spreading like malignant cancer throughout our land. Murder, dishonesty, perversion are rampant and increasing. Overseas there are the terrible problems in the Mideast, North Korea, Russia – actually almost everywhere. Christians are persecuted in China and raped, murdered, and sold into slavery in the Sudan. Islam is on the rise and is overtaking even the west. No, the world is rapidly collapsing, and only the return of Christ will stop it.

Well, even if this were an accurate picture of the world, which are we going to believe, our own analysis, or God’s word? I don’t know about you, but I would not pit my opinion against God’s. If He says His Kingdom is growing and I do not see it, I suppose something must be wrong with my sight. But let’s reconsider the evidence for a moment. I certainly would not minimize the problems we face and the corruption in the world. But there are signs that God’s Kingdom *is* growing today. Islam is spreading, but more Muslims are converting to Christ than ever before. There is persecution in China, the Sudan, and elsewhere, but the church is exploding in those places. There is unrest throughout the world, but the threat of nuclear holocaust between two major powers has greatly diminished. Millions are coming to faith in Christ in Latin America. Actually, the place on earth where God’s Kingdom seems to be struggling the most is right here in America! But looking across the globe, I would say this parable is indeed being fulfilled.

The problem with us is we do not want to accept the core teaching of this parable – that we do not know how the Kingdom grows. We plan an event, we launch a ministry, we start a church, and all sorts of obstacles get in the way. We try for 30 years to eliminate abortion, yet it is still legal. We look at the world and we cannot imagine how we can solve all the problems that exist. But this is just the point. We *won’t* solve the world’s problems. God will. And as He does, we will not know how He does it. We will not know how God is solving the world’s problems because we aren’t *supposed* to know. Our job is simply to sow the seed. We are like the farmer who has no idea how the seed grows, but faithfully sows anyway. We have no idea how God’s Kingdom can grow in this world, but we sow God’s word anyway, trusting that God is growing His Kingdom invisibly.

The final parable adds to this one. Here we are told that the seed is a mustard seed – the smallest seed of all the herbs grown in the garden. But when it grows, it becomes the largest tree in the garden. How big will God’s Kingdom become? It will become the biggest Kingdom on earth. It will completely overshadow all the other Kingdoms. Impossible, you say. Sure, it is impossible – just like everything else God does is impossible. Just because we cannot visualize it, just because it may not happen in our lifetimes does

not make it impossible.

Jesus' Worldwide Kingdom

By now you can see that the overall thrust of this passage is that Jesus came to do more, much more, than to save a few souls. He intends to establish a whole New World Order with His Kingdom as the central element. Jesus' goal is to take over the earth. He came as the Divine King, He demonstrated His incredible authority and amazing compassion on the hurting, He set up a shadow government – all with world domination His goal. Sinister, isn't it? No. It is not at all sinister, because it is all His anyway! He made it, He owns it. He is merely taking possession of His own property – on a grand scale!

Jesus came and set up a Kingdom which will overcome all other kingdoms. He began by destroying the wicked Jewish rulers who persecuted His followers, the early Christians. Even though Rome took up the persecutions, Jesus kept the kingdom growing until it overwhelmed the empire and even the emperor converted to faith in Christ. He turned the heathen tribes of Europe into a civilized center of Christianity. In this century He has been rapidly converting Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There is no nation or ethnic group which will escape the saving power of the gospel. Jesus came to establish a Kingdom which is growing, and will keep on growing until it covers the earth.

The question to you is this: Are you part of Jesus' Kingdom, or are you an outsider? Do you hang around Jesus to hear what He has to say? Do you worship every Lord's Day with a joyful heart that you have been brought in? Are you eager to hear His word taught? Do you read your scripture everyday? Do you pray daily for His guidance? Is there any fruit in your life – any evidence that you are more like God than your classmates? If not, you are in deep trouble. The end is not a pretty picture for those still in rebellion against the King.

The good news is that Jesus calls everyone, and He never turns anyone away. All of us here tonight fall far short of His requirements. Sometimes I have to give a negative answer to the questions I just posed. But I know and believe that the fundamental requirement is to keep coming to Jesus. I have to repent of my sin and return to Jesus and His word, and so do you. Jesus calls you as well as me, and when He calls, He also gives the power to respond. Are you going to turn your back on the things you have desired more than Jesus, and come into His Universal Kingdom? If you believe this gospel, start tonight. Repent of your sin and commit yourself to following Him with all your heart.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
October 2, 2007