**The Parables of the Kingdom**

February 23, 2020

Mark 4:21-34

Key Verse 4:27 “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

In today’s passage, Jesus teaches the secret of the kingdom of God through two parables; the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. It is about the mysterious form of the kingdom, where the kingdom of God is in the hearts of men and women who believe in Jesus, but the King will be absent. It is an invisible kingdom. These parables teach us what the invisible kingdom will be like until Jesus comes again. Jesus anticipated the misconceptions people would have about the type of the invisible kingdom. What is the kingdom of God like? It is glorious, full of wonders, pomp and power, right? Jesus says, “No, it is more like a mustard seed.” A mustard seed is not very impressive. It is very small and insignificant compared to the glorious kingdom. Even though it starts small, it grows into a big tree. The seed has a growing power. It will grow regardless of whether we sleep or get up. In order to understand parables of the kingdom, we need to pay close attention to God’s word. May the Holy Spirit open the eyes of our hearts to see Christ and his kingdom through these parables.

**First**, obtain the light and let it shine (21-25). Look at verse 21-22a. “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.’” One who puts his lamp under a bowl or a bed is very stupid. He is a man without common sense. For example, we waste energy if we turn a flashlight on and hide it in the drawer. What will happen if we hide a burning lamp under the bed. There is a danger that we will burn our hands and fingers and legs when the bed is burned by the lamplight. Therefore, we draw an obvious conclusion: we must put the lamp on its stand to brighten the entire room. Here the lamp represents Jesus himself (Jn 8:12). Though being in very nature God, Jesus hid his true identity on earth. Jesus did this to avoid misunderstanding. Fallen men had their own expectations about the Messiah. Their expectations were contrary to God’s will and often disturbed Jesus’ work (Jn 6:15). Jesus wanted men to truly understand his identity as the suffering servant, that he came to die for the sin of the people. It was not easy to educate people about this; it challenged deeply held beliefs. Jesus did not try to educate everyone. Jesus revealed himself clearly to his own disciples. Then, when Peter confessed, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus revealed his death and resurrection, his transfigured image in glory, his ascension into heaven, and his coming again as King and Judge. Jesus revealed himself little by little to a small number of people, until they truly understood him. Through them, Jesus revealed his true identity and mission to the whole world. Jesus, who was hidden, was not revealed.

When we receive this truth, we should not hide it, but let it shine. We should let the light of Jesus guide our lives. We should let the light of Jesus to transform us. We should preach this truth to the whole world. Anyone who tries to hide the light of Jesus is a foolish man. James 1:22-24 says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” We must take time to evaluate how we live according to God’s word. We must constantly correct ourselves according to the word of God. When our action matches what we teach, our testimony will have power and authority. However, due to our hypocrisy, we do not live up to our own teachings. Sometimes, we fail to teach properly. Also we feel that we are not competent enough to teach. Then we don’t even try to teach the Bible. We don’t let the light shine. But Jesus gives the assurance that the word of God itself has power. God will work despite our weaknesses. We do not need to worry about what will happen after sharing God’s word. 18 years ago, we had a woman missionary named Esther Lee. She felt that she was not qualified to invite students and teach the Bible due to her broken English. But she prayed and God gave her strength to go out and invite students to Bible study. She met Paw Wah, who then brought Sheila and Wah Paw. God’s word planted in their hearts through M. Esther Lee bore fruit despite her broken English. It is precisely what the next parable is about.

**Second**, the parable of the growing seed (26-29). Look at verses 26-29. “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.’” Here the man refers to the Bible teacher or the messenger. Without scattering the seed, nothing happens. Paul said in Romans 10:14c, “And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” We see the vital role of the man who scatters the seed on the ground. We must appreciate someone who scattered the word of God to our heart.

Look at verse 27. “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.” Here we see the role of God once the Bible teachers or shepherds scatter the seed. The Bible teachers do not know how the seed grows. All they have to do is to scatter the seed and watch how the seed grows. They don’t need to stay up all night to find out how the seed grows. They need faith that the seed will grow. Why? The seed has life in itself. This parable tells us that the kingdom of God grows in our hearts day after day, month by month, year by year. Once the man scatters the seed, it is not his responsibility to grow the seed. It is God who makes the seed grow. God provides a proper temperature for the seed to geminate and a right amount of rain and sunshine for the seed to grow. It is a great mystery that the seed grows and becomes fruitful. God grows the seed mysteriously. If the man tries to dig the ground to see what is going on to the seed, he may ruin the seed before it sprouts. The Bible teachers must be patient and wait for the seed to grow. The main role of the Bible teachers is to water the plant and make an environment for the seed to grow. 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 says, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

It takes time for harvest. It took three years for Jesus to raise up his disciples. We wish that our Bible students become a shepherd after one year of Bible study. We shout to our Bible students, “Grow, grow fast.” If they don’t grow fast, we become nervous and impatient and then students get exasperated and quit Bible study. We ruin the young plants because of our impatience. Most farmers usually wait for 6-7 months to harvest. Look at verse 29. “As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” Here harvesting refers to saving of souls. John Newton was a slave trader, and he lived a wild life, killing and raping slaves and in drunken orgies. One day, during a severe storm, he remembered his mother’s prayer and prayed for deliverance. The seed down by his mother bore fruit, and he was saved. He wrote the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” He said that there would be three great surprises in the last day. First, there would be people there with Christ that we never expected to be there. Second, there would be people not there that we felt would be there. But the greatest surprise of all was that an old slaver named John Newton would be there by the grace of God! We never know who will be harvested in the end. Only God knows because he is the one who grows our faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. We should not give up our Bible students because of many bad habits, thinking, “They are the same yesterday, today, and forever. He will never change.” Many missionary parents despair when they do not see their children grow in faith. But they don’t know what is going on in their hearts. They need patience in their spiritual growth and pray and wait for them to become the full kernel in the head. This parable encourages us to trust God in our shepherding life.

Hudson Taylor, that great pioneer missionary to China, said that there are three qualifications for missionaries: patience, patience, and patience. That is a qualification for anyone in the work of God. Someone has said that the secret of patience is doing something else in the meantime. This man was sleeping, getting up, at night going to bed, doing his day’s work - the thing we can be doing while we are waiting and patiently looking for the harvest, is to keep sowing, to keep watering, that is our job! Some go a lifetime without seeing much fruit, but God’s word promises that a harvest will come. What a challenge: we need to be sowing, we need to be watering, we need to be waiting. But there is also not only a challenge, but a cause for hope: do not despair. The life is in the seed! Rather than being anxious, wondering, “I should have done this or that; I should have shared that particular Bible verse,” we should trust that the word of God has power and wait on God, and sleep well.

**Third**, the parable of the mustard seed (30-32). In verses 30-32 Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed. Look at verses 30-32. “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 seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.’” A mustard seed is not the smallest seed that you can get - what Jesus was speaking of was in Israel, concerning the usage of seeds in his day; it was the smallest seed generally that could be bought and sown. You have heard this parable explained in terms of something very small growing rapidly into something big; as a metaphor for how the Christianity started with the baby Jesus and grew to most dominant religion in the world. After all, a tiny mustard seed does quickly grow into a bush that can reach as high as ten or twelve feet. But this parable is speaking about more than just the church starting small and growing rapidly. According to a rabbi, it was not allowed to plant a mustard seed in one’s garden, because of the law which prohibits planting different kinds of seeds together. What would happen if you put a mustard seed in your garden? It would very rapidly spill out of its row into other rows, mixing and mingling with the other plants, dropping seeds everywhere which would sprout up more mustard plants, and before long it would take over your garden! Also mustard plants produce lots of seeds. Seeds attract birds. Who wants birds in their vegetable garden? Most gardeners do everything they can to keep birds out! In the parable Jesus told, the birds perched—in other words, they found rest—in the branches of the mustard bush. They felt a sense of security within the bush, being less exposed to predators and weather.

The parable of the mustard seed is about the power of the kingdom of God. Once it is planted, it will grow to take over the garden. It will mess up your neatly maintained garden, and many people will come and find security. As we studied, that is exactly what Jesus did. In order to value people over the rules and traditions, Jesus disregarded the tradition of the Sabbath. He disregarded the law and touched the leper. He disregarded the social norm concerning fellowship with despised tax-collectors. In Jesus many despised people came and found security and rest. Jesus says, “That is what God’s rule and reign look like! If you allow the Kingdom of God into your heart, it is going to make a mess of your neat, tidy garden. It is going to break down your neatly planned life. It is going to attract and shelter the ones that everyone else tries to keep out. It is not going to look majestic and neat and impressive, but rather, common and unremarkable and initially very small. But it will spread like crazy.” Will you insist on maintaining our neat little doctrinal gardens? Or will you allow God’s rule and reign to mess things up? Each of us as individuals and each church community is the man with the mustard seed in his hand. You have only to let go and drop it into our garden and then watch what happens. If you allow it, it will grow to take over your garden and you will be a blessing to so many people.

Finally, look at verse 24. “‘Consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you–and even more.’” After hearing the word, we must spend some time to think about it and pray over it until we grasp real spiritual truth in it. There are three things in Bible study: observe, interpret, apply. To observe we must know clearly what Jesus said in the Bible. For this, Bible memorization is an excellent practice. Then we must interpret the meaning. This requires understanding Jesus’ mind and heart. It also requires understanding how Jesus’ teaching fits into the chemistry of the Bible as a whole. Then we must apply the truth of Jesus to our lives. This means that our thought patterns, behavior and even our desires must change according to the word of God. Otherwise, not only we do not understand the spiritual truth, we will be even more confused. Jesus teaches us to work hard to consider his word and practice it. Why? Because God blesses those who do so. Jesus said, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you–and even more.” God blesses us with more understanding, as much as the effort we have made. God knows those who seek him superficially. No one can fool God. Those who struggle little will be blessed little. But those who struggle wholeheartedly will receive the full blessing. We will be true disciples of Jesus. May the Lord help us to consider carefully what we have heard and to open our eyes to his glorious kingdom.

Big Idea: The Kingdom of God grows by itself