

January 23, 2011

The Seeing, Hearing, Scattering, Growing Gospel

Mark 4:21-34

INTRODUCTION

You ever hear the principle that ‘a little bit is a lot’? Well there are some things that if you put it under the microscope, you’d see that the whole makeup of what we see with the naked eye is bound up in what can only be seen by more careful reflection. We can see this in a water molecule (seventy percent of the globe and your body would be done for if it were otherwise) or in the initial act of creation (the mass and other constants). The biggest thing in creation—namely the whole universe itself—is made up of the smallest units, so that to take away the smallest thing is to take away everything. And of course we can also see that to take away the human embryo is to take away the foundation of life for the rest of us. So actually in all created things, in anything with parts, the building blocks are the whole thing. And Jesus is going to give us four glimpses of how this is also true of the relationship between the gospel-word and the kingdom.

- THE SEEING GOSPEL-KINGDOM
- THE HEARING GOSPEL-KINGDOM
- THE SCATTERING GOSPEL-KINGDOM
- THE GROWING GOSPEL-KINGDOM

The Big Idea is that it is *only* by the content of the gospel that the kingdom of God takes over the *whole* world.

Notice that in this big idea and in these four sections that the ‘DNA’ of the kingdom is very exclusive—so one thing, not every-thing—and yet this same kingdom is very comprehensive—so not just one thing, but everything! In other words, when it comes to what works (namely to grow the kingdom) it’s only this one seed that does the trick, but when it comes to what this gospel will do, it’ll do everything. In the end, it will solve all the world’s problems and all of your problems.

DOCTRINE

I. THE SEEING GOSPEL-KINGDOM

A) The Subordinate End of God's Light {21}

1. There is a problem for some commentators. We can tell these are not theologians! The problem is that Jesus just got done saying that the parables are for the paralyzing of the “outsiders” and the pondering of the “insiders.” Now Jesus is saying that you don’t use light in order to keep things hidden! *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? (21)* Now I’m going to argue that there is an unbiblical assumption already floating around in these commentators’ minds. They are assuming, up front, that everyone is like the madman that Nietzsche spoke of, walking around with a lantern asking, “Where is God?” But Jesus said that “light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” [Jn. 3:20], and He refers to this as a “judgment.” If you were to get drunk and sleep in with a hangover, how would you feel when someone pulls open the drapes and lets the morning sun pierce open your eye lids? It shouldn’t be hard to imagine, because fallen man *is* drunk! He is intoxicated with pretending that God has not revealed himself clearly. But what if someone had gotten you up an hour before sunrise, gradually woke you up with a warmer, gentler light, sobered you up with a bucket of water and gave you aspirin? Now how would you see the morning light? So, no, the light which blinds the drunkard is not an obscure thing, even though it has the effect of obscuring. It is called a kind of “hiding.” But daylight is not inherently unclear. Daylight is for seeing. But daylight blinds if you think it’s night; and sinful man prefers to stay in bed and shut the drapes and stay drunk. When the blinded man shuts his eyes harder, he doesn’t make the mountains and the oceans go away does he? No, the darkness and hiddenness are his own to wallow in. Being blinded by light doesn’t mean that the light was not clear, nor that the daytime which the light exposes is unclear. Notice how unwilling we are to blame man, even when we’re trying to get God off the hook!

B) The Chief End of God's Light {22}

1. What’s going on here is that Jesus is pronouncing judgment on his generation by withdrawing his warming, awakening light from them. But He tells the church to be clear and tell everyone: So during his earthly ministry, He told the disciples, “to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead” [Mk. 9:9]. But as the church Jesus tells them: “What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered,

proclaim on the housetops” [Mat. 10:27]. I know this is a lot to get our minds around because Jesus is *visibly* demonstrating an *invisible* act of God: He is visibly piercing his people with his light and passing over others for whom light was already clear enough. And He’s doing it in a historical context, even though He tells us that this is how He works with everyone. But if you’re ever stuck on this and ask: “OK, which is it? Is Jesus aiming his light at the awakening and blinding of individuals? Or is Jesus aiming his light at the illumination of the whole world?” The answer is **both**. (Think of holding a magnifying glass to an ant in the sunlight! Same sunlight—finer magnification) He is aiming his light at the awakening and blinding of individuals (that’s the subordinate end) and He is aiming his light at the illumination of the whole world to himself, or, said another way, He is aiming his light at himself, drawing attention to himself (that’s the chief end). Note that in verse 22 the purpose of keeping information protected is so that it will say the right thing to the max—it is about something. It is not a light going on in an empty room. It is a room full of real things that were already there, that everyone should have already seen: *For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light* (22). So there are **things** to bring to light (For no-thing...nor is any-thing...). So Jesus says to the church: ‘Be like me and open the drapes on the drunkard in his hangover *and* on those who I will wake up in secret! But let all the light in! I’ll do the softening and the hardening.’

II. THE HEARING GOSPEL-KINGDOM

A) The Obligation Versus the Desperation of Hearing {23}

1. Everyone is morally obliged to hear and everyone is invited to hear. That follows from what we’ve already said. God hasn’t been stingy with his light, and He won’t be stingy with his sound waves either: “There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” [Ps. 19:3-4]. So Paul says that what can be known about God is so clear that all men “are without excuse” [Rom. 1:20]. But this repetition of what Jesus had already said in verse 9 is a command that all human beings are obligated to obey: *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear* (23). Someone may say, ‘Well, this command is not to everyone—He says **if** anyone has ears to hear,’ and we’ve already seen that not everybody does.’ But that mistakes the ability to perform this hearing with the obligation. You’re assuming that God would not command of anyone what they cannot perform, and that doesn’t square with the fact that *everything* that God commands of the sinner is something that we cannot do [cf. Lev. 11:44, Mt. 5:48,

Mk. 12:30]. And don't forget, ears are a physical, bodily thing. He is talking about a *spiritual hearing* where the emphasis is on the act of hearing or understanding what He is saying.

2. And let's also not forget what is at stake in hearing and failing to hear. Let me remind you with a few passages: "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" [Jam. 1:21], "For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" [Rom. 10:13-14]. In the form of another command He says next, *Pay attention to what you hear (24a)*. That's a command.

B) The Exponential Effects of Having and Not Having {24-25}

1. In verses 24 and 25 Jesus uses what a lot of commentators believe are a couple of near-eastern proverbs: in other words principles of practical things that everyone would know to be true about life. Of course they both say the same thing, so let's look at these two little proverbs about 'hearing' and see or hear what they both say: *with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you (24b)*. This is just the same as the biblical principle of sowing and reaping—"whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" [2 Cor. 9:6]: or, as we say it today, "Garbage in, garbage out." Now what makes this interesting is that if a 'measure' refers to seed here, and if Jesus is speaking to the hearer in this case, then now we have to imagine the sower and the soil is the same person! The hearer is being asked to think of himself as an active hearer, using effort and skill to hear the word. And not only that, but the more of this 'measure' of hearing he uses, the more he receives in return: almost like a "magic seed," where the more he pulls out of the supply closet, the more the supply gets filled up. Truth multiplies upon truth. The activity of hearing builds the ability to hear.

2. In the second proverb He says *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 (25)*. If this was a proverb then it would fit the Eastern practice of how to treat the 'haves' and the 'have-nots.' Those who had privilege were supposed to receive more, from everyone, whether honor or gifts or whatever. Those who had none were to be treated with contempt and every square inch on which they rested was also to be removed from them. But don't forget that this is just another way for Jesus to communicate that hearing truth works exponentially. Plug your ears and grow deaf, listen up and you will be raised up to a position of better hearing. Luke's Gospel even has Jesus going as far to say it this way: "Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, *even what he thinks that he has* will be taken

away” [8:18]. Those who do not take action to take in the clearest, biggest amount of biblical truth will not only *lack* the ability to hear; they will start to *lose* the ability to hear.

III. THE SCATTERING GOSPEL-KINGDOM

A) The Passivity of the Farmer is Not for Nothing {26-27}

1. Notice that the farmer’s role has been diminished a little in this parable from the parable of the sower. That is because the emphasis here won’t be on how he skillfully watches the soils, but simply how he trusts the nature of how the whole thing works. It says, *The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground (26)*. So, notice that this is the first parable where Jesus starts to describe what the kingdom of God is like, but He’s also describing it the same way as He described the preaching and hearing of the gospel. Translation: that’s what the kingdom of God *is*—at least in its ‘DNA’ form. The building blocks of the kingdom are the ABCs of gospel information; or, to put it one more way, the information of the gospel in-forms the kingdom, so that the kingdom of God appearing on earth takes the form that in-forms it. Everything about the people of God is shaped like the way that God saved us. So this parable isn’t about good soils versus bad soils or about the farmer’s expertise, but rather about the big picture of how the kingdom works.

2. Now let me say a few things about how to read and misread the imagery. First, the fact that *He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how (27)*—the fact that he is pictured as passive and even ignorant—is not meant to say that he is passive in every way and ignorant of everything. Jesus is emphasizing, or highlighting this passive ignorance about the thing that the gospel-farmer is not to obsess over. So also, *The earth produces by itself (28a)*. Of course this doesn’t mean that the earth is producing by itself *without* the seed or rain! It is picturesque language to show the good simplicity of the farmer. He doesn’t spend all day staring at the dirt, sweating. He sows like a man; then he sleeps like a baby. Of course it is still the seed where the life comes from! It is the *word* that is growing in the soul and therefore the Bible talks about the church increasing by saying that the word increased: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” [Acts 6:7]. But this passivity and ignorance is meant to communicate simple trust in the nature that God has made of the gospel and the kingdom: “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” [1 Cor. 3:7]. And this is so that our faith will be in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the

things that do not exist” [Rom. 4:17], and the God who builds his kingdom of “things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” [1 Cor. 1:28].

B) Patient for the Long-Haul is Ready for the Harvest {28-29}

1. After the farmer is shown as trusting the way God made gospel-farming, we can see that this trust is built for the long haul: *first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear (28b)*. These stages are meant to show that spiritual life also comes in stages. If you sit and stare at it as if you were expecting it all to happen at once, you will likely give up. A gospel-expectant person is a patient person, and this person is a mature person. By contrast, the person with a lazy expectation only has it for a second, and quickly throws up their hands for a show that will more quickly satisfy them.

2. The end goal is not busying in all the stalks we can get our hands on and throwing it on the surface of the farm and pretending that that’s a harvest. The end goal is referred to as the ripening of the gospel seed: *But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come (29)*. In other words the real work of ministry will be proved out by a real and bigger payoff than what looks “big” today. The ingathering of souls into the kingdom is referred to as a **harvest**: “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’ [Mat. 9:37-38]. But the point here is that if this laborer had not been patient and trusted in the Lord’s method, he would have missed out on the real payoff, the harvest of truly gospel-converted souls. So Paul urges us, because of the truth of God bringing real new life: “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” [1 Cor. 15:58].

IV. THE GROWING GOSPEL-KINGDOM

A) The Whole Kingdom is Bound Up in the Seed {30-31}

1. Notice that the gospel has been compared to a seed that springs forth into the existence of Christians. Now this life that comes from the seed is identified with the kingdom: *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 (30-31a)*. So what is the “it” that is like a grain of mustard seed? It is the kingdom. So, taking everything together from these parables so far, the good news—or how God saves sinners—is to the whole kingdom what DNA is to the whole life of the human body. When people are saved by hearing the stuff of the gospel, these same people, instantly, become the

citizens of the kingdom: He “made us a kingdom” [Rev. 1:6]. Every trait that is natural to you is exactly what is coded into the original, smallest conception: *a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth* (31).

2. Now some people look at this and say, ‘Wait a minute! The mustard seed isn’t the smallest seed on earth!’ But, again, Jesus wasn’t writing a botany textbook. He was making use of familiar proverbs that people in the Near Eastern world were familiar with and using what, for us, would be like the lines of popular songs or even nursery rhymes to set a backdrop for his teaching. The point was that what looks like the smallest, most insignificant thing actually contains the only thing you need to get the biggest thing.

B) The “Little” Seed Takes Over Everything in the Garden {32}

1. He continued that, *yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants* (32a). It is a fact of church history that the latest and greatest methods of culture can always attract a bigger crowd, but always last no more than a generation or two. Notice that this is one garden plant among other competing garden plants. There are other plants in the garden and they look bigger, all summer long, they look like the harvest is coming from them. But take a closer look at church history and what you will find is that the gospel farmers who use the gospel seed work the soil and speak to their generation and are mocked like Noah was. But the movements they begin in the soil last forever, and the movements that are big in their lifetime are big like a firework going off is big, bigger and brighter than anything in the sky. But what looks like expansion is really diffusion—wide, entertaining—but thinning out in the summer night, while under the dirt the harvest grows and grows. But it not only surprises the workers of the garden; it surprises those who pass by. The world stares at the church like a little thing, meeting only one day out of seven, getting older and more irrelevant in culture, waiting for it to pass away and outraged that it hasn’t yet:

The visible church has not yet finished growing... There are undoubtedly many evils. False professions of belief, and corruption, abound. But still, on the whole, heathenism is waning, wearing out and melting away. In spite of all the predictions of Voltaire and Paine, in spite of foes without and treachery within, the visible church progresses—the mustard seed is still growing.¹

2. Finally this little seed does more than just create Christians for another world. It makes them big in this world: *and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its*

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Mark* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL 1993, fp. 1857); p. 59

shade (32b). Christianity is big enough to stay faithful to its message and to meet the weak and weary in the place they're at. If Jesus was like this, He is going to make a people like this. The birds resting in the shade of the tree and even nesting there suggests that the community of Christians should be a value to weary outsiders, even if they don't know the secret of Christianity's value to them. That will be our job to tell them. But we don't stay faithful to the message that's in the seed *by* being inwardly driven and little and irrelevant in the world, by weary, confused, 'dirty birds' plopping down in our pews and spreading out their wings.

These four little parables (proverbs) strike a balance for us about the kingdom and what Christianity is: that it is *only* by the content of the gospel that the kingdom of God takes over; but it *is* aimed at taking over the *whole* world. Mark summarizes this whole section by saying that, *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 (33-34)*. So, again, to those outside everything is a clear-blinding parable—a simple light that blinds to confirm the power of darkness that the unbeliever loves as much as a pig wallows in the mud—then inside Jesus explain the picture to those whom He had awakened by an inner light.

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – Jesus just taught that the purpose of the parables is for the paralyzing of some and the pondering of others: now He seems to say that nothing is true which is not for revealing, out in the open. Which is it! Well if anyone would complain that God has withheld himself, the objection is, first of all, not true, since “There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” [Ps. 19:3-4], and second of all, hypocritical, since, “light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” [Jn. 3:19]. So the same people will complain against God that there is too much that Christians claim is about him, and then turn around and complain that there is not enough evidence. The same person should stick to one irrational objection at a time, since both of these can certainly not be true together. This particular skeptic should be less concerned with Jesus' logic if they cannot even keep their own objections consistent!

To the Saint – Well I don't know how to fake it and pretend that there is some other obvious application to the church. Do you not see, in passage after passage, the clear mission

that Jesus has given to the church, the sure method which works? In the seeing and the hearing, to echo the words of Calvin that Josh quoted last week: “I think (because I think Jesus says so) that it is impious to leave in obscurity things which we were born to ponder.” More light, more open eyes; and the wider open, the more light! God knows what we need to hear. He knows what is good for us to have more of. And with the scattering and growing imagery, what works? One parable teaches us that only the content (the information) of the word of God forms the souls that belong to the kingdom and the other tells us that this seemingly small beginning is actually going to be everything. Someone may say, “But there are other ways! There are other garden plants and they give shade to many right away!” But Jesus said that, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up” [Mat. 15:13]. According to Jesus, there’s only one way to plant a tree that lives in the kingdom, and that is with the content (or the information) of the word of God.

To the Sinner – Let me allow for one more possibility on why all this ‘How to do church talk’ may not be hitting you the right way. Maybe you yourself have never really fully believed in the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe you’re still thinking, ‘I know all this is true, but how can I know that God has sent his Son for me, knowing what I’ve done.’ Well you too have to believe in the stuff in that seed. Here it is: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 Cor. 5:21]. That means that God sent his Son for sinners as a sacrifice to all who would believe and trust him for it, so that on that cross, He would take all our sins—all of our worst sins—and He would give us, through simple faith, all of his righteousness. And that is not natural, because you and I have pride and stubbornness and doubt and so if the Holy Spirit makes you hear these words, and you love Jesus for it and you want that and you are willing to leave behind every sin and every other way, you will have him and no one and nothing can separate you from his love. If you have ears to hear that, let them hear.