

KING JESUS' SURPRISING KINGDOM

Mark 4:21-34

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It's easy to become discouraged, especially if you follow the news of the world. There's such an enormous gap between the way things are and the way they ought to be:

- **Ignorance.** The light of Christ dawned 2,000 years ago, and yet much of the world, including most of our city, still lives in utter darkness. God opened the door to salvation and reconciliation through his Son Jesus Christ, but most of the world hasn't entered in.
- **Injustice.** Some 4 billion people around the world remain unprotected by their justice systems.¹ The Gospel promises of jubilee simply haven't been realized, even here in our own city, where so many suffer from fear or hunger or alienation.

Our church has a front row seat witnessing the problems of our city and our world. We believe God put us here on Capitol Hill for a reason: we're ambassadors of Christ to a world suffering without apart from God. But it can be very discouraging to think of what we might do to turn the tide. In fact, the more we ponder the challenges of our broken world, the more frustrated we may become with our own situation:

- **Impotence.** All the worship services and small group gatherings and retreats and programs can feel like spinning wheels. We're an active church, and we've been at it for a decade. Why isn't the light of Christ shining more brightly in the world? Why isn't there more justice "out there?"
- **Insignificance.** Our church is so small. Even if we were to join with all the others in the city, we would still be a drop in the bucket in comparison with all the other alternative voices.

If you've become discouraged about such things, Jesus' message in Mark 4 can be a message of encouragement for you. In these parables, he aims to set our minds at ease and keep us from throwing in the towel. He offers us words of comfort and assurance, saying "Take heart, for regardless of appearances, God is truly in control."

¹ Gary Haugen, *The Locust Effect*, 2014.

THE CONTEXT OF JESUS' PARABLES IN MARK 4

Here's a recap of the story in Mark's Gospel leading up to chapter 4: At first, Jesus made a dramatic entrance as the new King and Emperor of the world. He amazed the crowds with his speeches and miracles, casting out demons and healing people right and left. But then he began to face some very stiff opposition. The religious authorities said he was demon-possessed, and they made plans to murder him. Meanwhile Jesus' mother Mary and his younger siblings concluded that he was insane. They came to collect him in a straightjacket and take him home.

In Mark 4, Jesus calls a press conference. But unlike political leaders today, Jesus doesn't apologize for or even mention the decline in his approval ratings. Instead of groveling, he begins to teach in parables. As Matthew Mason explained in his message on February 9, parables work like filters; they strain out those who have hardened their hearts against Jesus, while allowing through everyone else. Those who have ears to hear are able to interpret the parables and better understand God's kingdom.

Mark 4:21-34 contains four such parables. As I read them, these four parables address the discouraging problems we've just surveyed: ignorance, injustice, impotence, and insignificance. As we work through these four parables, consider what the Lord is saying to you through them. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."² Let Jesus' teaching become the framework for how you understand what God is doing in the world.

THE PROBLEM OF IGNORANCE: THE LAMP UNDER THE BASKET. Mark 4:21-23.

Why isn't the light of Christ shining everywhere and scattering the darkness throughout the world? Think of Muslim regions where Christian evangelism is against the law and conversion is punishable by death. Why are so many people ignorant of the good news about Jesus?

Jesus' followers had a similar concern back in that day. As Jesus healed and delivered people, repeatedly he commanded them to keep silent about him. His family thought he was crazy. The authorities wanted him dead. So in Mark 4:1ff Jesus began to teach in parables (rather than plain speech) because of the hardness of hearts against him. Jesus' followers were wondering, "Why all the secrecy?"

Unfortunately, what Jesus says in Mark 4:21 is unnecessarily obscured by our English translations, where the lamp is rendered as the object rather than the subject of the sentence. (e.g. The ESV reads: "Is a lamp brought in?") But for Jesus, the lamp isn't brought. It's the actor in the drama of the parable. The lamp is the subject of the sentence because it's the Lamp with a capital L, another Old Testament symbol for the Messiah.³ So Jesus is asking why he, i.e. The Lamp, comes. A more literal translation reads this way:

"Does the Lamp come that it might be placed under the bowl or under the bed?"

² Psalm 95:7.

³ Isa 9:2, 60:19-20; 2 Samuel 22:29; 1 Kings 15:4; Psalm 132:17.

By the way, the lamp under the bowl/bed describes how the disciples perceive Jesus' preference for secrecy in his ministry. And Jesus agrees that it's hidden right now. But the thrust of the parable is the opposite: the reason the Lamp comes isn't to remain hidden. No! It comes, rather, to be placed on a lamp stand (4:21).

What is the lamp stand? We won't find out until we get to the end of Mark's story, to Good Friday and the passion of Christ. When, at the end of the story, we discover that Jesus' lampstand is a cross—a symbol of shame and an instrument of horrific torture and death—then it makes complete sense that the Lamp would remain hidden for a while. Jesus has much more work to do before he goes to the cross.

Of course, as Jesus says in 4:22, "nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light." In other words, this secret won't stay a secret forever. Rest assured, this Lamp will shine up on its stand, and it does by the end of Mark's Gospel. It has continued to do so through the ages, even to the present day.

So the lampstand in 4:21 is the cross, the enduring symbol of Christianity. Think how different things would be if our symbol had been something else. Consider the other symbols of world religions like the yin-yang, the buddha, the crescent moon and the sword, etc. I can think of no other religious symbol that better communicates sacrificial love than that of the cross. It's the sign of the cross that has been shining ever since the Lamp was placed on its stand.

*Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?*⁴ by Tom Doyle is a thrilling book that describes how the light of Christ is penetrating the darkness in Muslim countries around the world. The reason for the title is that in many cases the way Jesus first reveals himself to Muslims today is through a dream or a vision in which they know him to be Jesus and they know that he loves them. Again and again, people who have never known or experienced anything like sacrificial love literally come face-to-face with Jesus in their dreams, and they repeatedly say, "I've never felt loved like that before." It's then because of the overwhelming sense of love that they've experienced that they're willing to do what Jesus tells them, which usually involves somehow making contact with other Christians who give them Bibles and teach them about the Lord. Isn't this amazing news? For every region in the Middle East, Doyle tells story after story of people risking their lives to convert to Christianity.

Satan wants us not only to be discouraged, but also to label all Muslims as terrorists and hate them. But the truth is that Jesus is reaching them in love, and he invites us to do the same. One Christian I know who lives in the Middle East shared with me, "Don't believe everything you read or hear in the news in the West. Remember, it's a commercial industry, and they have to be sensational to keep your attention. And to be honest, we don't mind at all, because it keeps the heat off, enabling us to continue to do our work loving others in Jesus' name."

When I heard this it was like a light bulb coming on in my brain. Previously, I had thought that the light wasn't shining in the darkness, and it was pretty discouraging. What I discovered was my own ignorance regarding all that the Lord is in fact doing "out there" in the world. This is not to

⁴ Tom Doyle and Greg Webster. *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* Thomas Nelson, 2012.

say that there's no need for people to go and serve others as Christ's ambassadors here and there and everywhere. But I find it so encouraging to know that the Lord is at work even in what seems to be the darkest places.

The point of the parable is this: don't be discouraged. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the Lamp is shining far more than we realize.

THE PROBLEM OF INJUSTICE: MEASURE FOR MEASURE. Mark 4:24-25.

Why is there still so much injustice in the world? Remember the Gospel promises of jubilee when Jesus came? Our world still suffers persecution and oppression. Slavery and sex trafficking are thriving here and abroad. Forced abortions in China, apartheid in Israel, corruption in every government in every nation. Why doesn't God's justice roll down like waters?

Back in the day, Jesus' followers were also concerned about justice, since they so routinely suffered injustice personally. Living where they did, at the global crossroads on one of the most contested pieces of real estate in the world, they were almost continually oppressed by enemies, abused by thugs, and overtaxed by crooks. So naturally, when they put their hope in Jesus, the new king, they were looking for justice in the here and now.

Jesus responds in 4:24-25 with the same message that he has already shared in several contexts, including most recently in the parable of the sower. Jesus says, if you listen and presumably keep my word, then you'll get better than justice.

What could be better than justice? At the end of 4:24, Jesus says, "it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you."

What's better than justice? Grace. Because if we all got what we deserve, we would all be a lot worse off than we currently are. Instead, Jesus promises his hearers grace, and that's what we really want from him, not only for ourselves, but for the whole world.

I have a friend whose an undercover Christian missionary in the Islamic world, in a place where Al Qaeda is in power and Christians are murdered without reprisal. Do you know how he got there? After 9/11, he was so angry that he said, "The only good Muslim is a dead Muslim. All Muslims deserve to die." And from that moment on the Lord started working on his heart, rooting out the seeds of anger and replacing them with love. My friend realized that apart from Christ, he was no better than those whom he hated. He too deserved to die. But instead of justice, the Lord showed him mercy. And so it was with a heart softened with love that he ended up serving those whom he once hated.

The more we see ourselves and the world through the eyes of Jesus, the more generous we become. He who is forgiven little, loves little.⁵ But those for whom much is forgiven become generous with their love.

⁵ Luke 7:47.

As Gary Haugen says, there are systemic reasons why 4 billion people in the world still remain unprotected by their justice systems. So sign the International Justice Mission's petition online and make your voice heard as we call our global leaders to account. But let's not for a moment become self-righteous about this. The justice we have in this country is unmerited and undeserved. The USA may be a secular country, and the framers of the constitution may have been mostly deists, but make no mistake, what we have here is oozing with God's grace.

The point of the parable is this: don't be discouraged! The Lord loves us so much that he gives us better than justice. He gives us mercy and grace, so that we might become conduits of his love.

THE PROBLEM OF IMPOTENCE: THE GROWING SEED. Mark 4:26-29.

Often within the body of Christ, our sense of discouragement about the world can feed a sense of despair about the church. Impotence is a common way we can lose heart.

Back in the day, Jesus' followers must have felt the same thing. After all that they had already experienced with Jesus, after all the brilliant teaching and the healings and exorcisms, the world was out to get him.

In Mark 4:26ff, Jesus tells the parable of the growing seed as a reminder that we can't muster up God's Kingdom. In the parable, the farmer does his job: he scatters the seed. But then he must be patient, because the growth is in God's hands. Whether waking or sleeping, the seed grows independently of the farmer. He doesn't even know how it happens! All he knows is that when the grain is ripe, it's time to collect the harvest.

So it is with God's kingdom. God doesn't need us for anything. Not one single thing. He has managed without us for a long time, and can continue to do so for eternity. But by his grace, the Lord sometimes allows us to participate in his work. He gives us a task to do, but he never gives us control. We do our jobs, but we have to leave the outcome to him. In fact, it's silly to even try to take control, because we don't understand how everything works. Instead, we should be like the farmer. We should do what God calls us to do, and then we should sit back and wait on the Lord until he brings it to completion.

We live in a land of instant results, among a people of instant results. We want fruit and wisdom and maturity NOW! And yet these things take time, and ultimately our growth is in the Lord's hands.

Jesus prefers these farming illustrations with good reason. Farming is perhaps God's favorite metaphor for explaining our roles in his kingdom. Remember that the Bible story begins in a garden, where we are called to serve as his gardeners. When we really understand farming, it's hard to imagine a universe in which we can control everything.

Some 150 years ago a small group of volunteers left Christ Church Jerusalem and set out across the Arabian desert to plant St. George's church in Baghdad. Today there are some 6500 people at St. George's, half of them from Muslim backgrounds. I don't know what the first ten years were like for them as a church plant, but I can't imagine that they had anywhere near the

numbers or resources we've seen here at Rez. Thank God they didn't get discouraged and give up at ten years in.

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 had ever dreamed when I saw the specter of atomic 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, then I would have been more cheerful and far more tranquil and composed."⁶

The point of the parable is this: don't be discouraged! Do your part, and then sit back and wait on the Lord until he brings it to completion. He really is in control. Trust in him that your efforts won't be in vain.

THE PROBLEM OF INSIGNIFICANCE: THE MUSTARD SEED. Mark 4:30-32.

Finally, the last parable in Mark 4 is perhaps the most famous of all, the parable of the mustard seed. And Jesus speaks it to his followers and to us who are concerned that we don't have the numbers, or the credentials, or the resources to change the world. What difference can our little ragtag band of Christians make?

But God's kingdom, Jesus says, is like a little mustard seed. Isn't it too small to ever account for anything of significance? As a matter of fact, no. Because when it's grown, it becomes huge—so big that the birds of the air can nest in its shade!⁷ Who would have thought something so small could make such a difference?

The idea that "big things come in small packages" didn't originate with jewelers. It's actually a major theme in the Bible, whether from the Patriarch stories of the older serving the younger, or the anointing of King David not based on appearances, but by God looking on the heart. Likewise, David conquers Goliath because, even though he's smaller, he has the strength of the Lord—and therefore is stronger than the giant. This theme of the small becoming great is so important in the Bible that it's ridiculous how often the church completely ignores it. We live in a culture that judges by appearances. The church foolishly often does the same.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And

⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, tr. John W. Doberstein. Harper & Row, 1957.

⁷ The birds have symbolic significance in this parable, representing all the nations of the world. This, of course, is the ultimate aim of God's Kingdom, when every tribe and tongue are joined together under Jesus' banner of love.

because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31, ESV)

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. We put so much emphasis on wisdom, strength, and substance. We make our plans, but the Lord laughs and says, “Surprise! You were expecting the big ones to change the world.” Instead, it’s something he reserves for those who, regardless of size or money or appearance, hear the word and obey. (4:33)

The point, then, is this: Don’t be discouraged by the apparent insignificance of God’s people. Rather, keep listening, keep sowing and watch for the Kingdom Come.