

FOUR ENCOURAGING PARABLES

4 On another occasion [Jesus] began to teach by the seaside, and there gathered around him a very large crowd. Therefore he got into a boat and sat in it out on the sea, while the whole crowd remained on the shore along the water's edge. ²And he taught them many things in parables. In his teaching he said to them, ³Listen carefully. A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the pathway, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some [seed] fell on the rocky ground, where there was not much soil. The seed immediately sprang up, because it had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other [seed] fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked [the young plants], and [so the seed] yielded no fruit. ⁸But other [seed] fell into the good soil, and yielded fruit. [That seed] sprouted, grew, and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundredfold. ⁹Then he said, Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear. ¹⁰When he was alone, those who stayed with him along with the Twelve asked him [the meaning of] the parables. ¹¹He said to them, The mystery of the kingdom of God is given to you. But all these things are spoken in parables to those who are outside; ¹²so that "by looking they may see, but not perceive; and by listening they may hear, but not understand; so that they should not repent and be forgiven." ¹³He said to them, Do you not understand this parable? [If not,] how shall you be able to understand all the [other] parables? ¹⁴The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵These are the [people] along the pathway where the word is sown: as soon as they have heard [the word], Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that has been sown in them. ¹⁶Others are like seed sown on rocky ground: when they have heard the word, they immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷but they have no root in themselves. They endure for a while; but then, when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, they immediately fall away. ¹⁸Still others are like seed sown among the thorns: these are people who have heard the word; ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the intense desires for other things come in and choke the word, and so it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰But others are like seed sown upon the good soil: they hear the word, and accept it, and bear fruit—thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold.

²¹And he said to them, Is the lamp brought into [a room] in order to be put under the bushel [basket], or under the bed, and not to be put on the lamp stand? ²²There is nothing hidden that is not intended to be revealed; there is nothing secret that is not intended to be brought to light. ²³If any man has ears to hear, let him hear. ²⁴And he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear; [for] the [same] measure with which you measure shall be used to measure for you—and [even] more shall be given to you. ²⁵To the one who has, to him shall [more] be given; but the one who does not have, from him shall be taken away even that which he has.

²⁶And he said, The kingdom of God may be compared to a man who scatters seed upon the ground. ²⁷He goes to sleep at night and gets up in the morning, and the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces crops by itself; first [appears] the stalk, then the head, then the mature kernel in the head. ²⁹But as soon as the crop is ripe, he immediately gets out the sickle, because the harvest has come.

³⁰And he said, What shall we say the kingdom of God is like? Or with what parable shall we describe it? ³¹It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown upon the ground—though it is smaller than all the seeds you plant—³²nevertheless, after it has been sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the plants of the garden and puts out large branches; so that the birds of the heavens can nest under its shade.*

³³Using many similar parables, [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as much as they were able to understand. ³⁴He did not say anything to them without using a parable; but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. (Mk. 4:1-34)

*Literally, “*smaller than all the seeds upon the ground*”

Introduction

One summer, in the course of his study for the gospel ministry, Mark served as a pastoral intern at a church in Hershey, PA. At the conclusion of his summer ministry the congregation bid him farewell and expressed their appreciation. Among them was a teenage girl named Meta; she silently pressed a small note into his hand and passed on in the crowd.

One month after he left Hershey to continue his studies at seminary, Mark plunged into a black depression. He testifies concerning that time, “Everything I tried seemed impossible. I didn’t think I could do anything right again. I thought seriously of dropping out of seminary. I struggled daily with the impulse to commit suicide.” Mark prayed that someone would come up with the solution that would lift him out of his depression. But most of his friends did not understand. Some of them began to avoid him.

One night Mark thought back on his summer spent at the church in Hershey: Had he influenced them for good? Had he had any affect on their lives? Had he done anything in the name of Christ to advance the kingdom of God? Then he came across the note from Meta. It was a simple note, but it was a word of encouragement, explaining to Mark the way God had used him in her brother’s life. To this day Mark still holds onto that simple little note from Meta. In his words, “It was and always will be a little piece of God’s help in time of need.” (*POWER*, 11/18/90, pp.4-6)

Because of the fierce opposition of the devil and the world, we, too, like Mark, need to be assured with regard to our spiritual work and the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. Jesus provided such assurance for His disciples and for us by means of the parables recorded in the fourth chapter of Mark. These parables told by the Lord Jesus were intended to encourage His disciples—and us—by explaining the way God works and the certain triumph of His kingdom.

At those times when we become discouraged in our Christian life, ...

- being frustrated by our own personal sins and failures
- being disappointed by the actions of fellow believers

- being burdened by the spiritual lethargy we witness within the church of Christ
- witnessing the forces of evil drive the church to the very fringes of society

...let us consider what our Lord has to say by means of these parables.

I. Be Encouraged to Know that the Kingdom of God shall have Bountiful Success (Mk. 4:3-9,13-20)

In ancient Palestine sowing occurred before the plowing: the seed was scattered across the field and then plowed into the ground. Consequently, as the farmer scattered his seed, some would fall upon the pathways made by the villagers crisscrossing through the fields—such seed would be devoured by the birds. Some of the seed would fall upon rocky places with no depth of soil, only to wither under the scorching sun. Some would fall among the weeds, where it would be choked and produce no fruit. But the rest would fall into the good soil and produce a crop to be harvested: thirty-fold, sixty-fold, or even one hundred-fold. As we shall see, the point of Jesus' parable is this: the kingdom of God will have a bountiful success—despite the obstacles and disappointments encountered in this world before the final harvest.

The seed that fell along the pathway is referring to those who hear the word of the gospel, but the devil snatches it away before it can even germinate in their hearts. Here is **an unresponsive heart**, one that is disinterested, prejudiced, and antagonistic against the word of God. The seed that fell upon the stony ground is referring to those who make an initial response to the gospel, but do not persevere. Here is **an impulsive heart**, willing to receive the blessings promised, but unwilling to endure the hardships of the Christian life; here is a heart and life that is not rooted into Christ. The seed that fell among thorns is referring to those who allow their relationship with Christ to be choked to death by the burdens and the blessings of this present life, consequently, they bear no fruit. Here is a **pre-occupied heart**, one in which the spiritual life is snuffed out and the relation to Christ is merely formal and superficial, not fruitful; note the teaching of the Lord Jesus contained in John 15:1-2, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."* Finally, the seed sown upon the good soil is referring to those who receive Christ as their Lord and Savior and bear spiritual fruit. Here is **the converted heart**, the heart of the one who becomes a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that the parable does not say that three—fourths of the seed is unproductive—no proportions are actually given. It is not the purpose of the parable to answer the question, "Are many or few saved?" The point of the parable is this: In spite of the devil's opposition, in spite of the hardness and unresponsiveness of the human heart, in spite of the cares and allurements of this

world, Christ shall finally reap a bountiful harvest of souls. There will be a fulfillment of the promise the LORD made to His faithful servant, the Messiah: *“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities”* (Isa. 53:11.) The bountiful spiritual harvest is portrayed in the Book of Revelation,

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count—from every nation, tribe, people and language—standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Rev. 7:9)

When we become discouraged by—the unresponsiveness to the gospel; the desertion of some who once made a profession of faith in the Savior; the apparent unfruitfulness of some who bear the name of Christ—may we be re-encouraged to know that the kingdom of God shall finally have a bountiful success: there shall be a thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and one hundred-fold harvest.

II. Be Encouraged to Know that the Kingdom of God shall have a Full Revelation (Mk. 4:21-25)

In verse 21, by means of a rhetorical question, Jesus reminds us that the purpose of a lamp is to radiate its light, not to remain covered up and hidden. In verse 22 the Lord makes this promise: *“There is nothing hidden that is not intended to be revealed; there is nothing secret that is not intended to be brought to light.”* All that is presently hidden and concealed is intended to eventually be revealed; all that is presently kept secret is intended to finally be brought to light. The point of Jesus’ parable is this: The ways and purposes of God are presently obscure, even to the citizens of the kingdom—but just as surely as a lamp is meant to radiate light, so shall the truth and glory of God be finally revealed in all of its splendor.

In light of this present obscurity and future clarity, Christ counsels us, *“Pay attention to what you hear.”* When we hear the Word of God we are to respond by receiving it, accepting it, responding to the Lord in faith and obedience—allowing the Word of God to be applied to our lives and not resisting it. The reason Jesus exhorts us to pay attention is *“[because] the [same] measure with which you measure shall be used to measure for you—and even more shall be given to you.”* It is wise to give full attention to the Word of God, full allegiance to Christ, because in so doing we shall receive a full share in His grace and truth and glory.

When we become discouraged—by inexplicable trials and hardships, wondering why such things have come into our life; by an inability to comprehend the works of God; by an inability to fathom the ways of God—may we be re-encouraged to know that the kingdom of God shall have a full disclosure: what is

now concealed shall at the last be revealed; as the Apostle Paul informs the Corinthians:

... at present our knowledge is partial ... ¹⁰But when the perfect has come, the partial shall pass away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became a man, I set aside the ways of childhood. ¹²At present we see an obscure image in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. At present I know things partially; but then I will know fully, just as I am fully known. (1 Cor. 13:9-12)

III. Be Encouraged to Know that the Kingdom of God Possesses a Sovereign Spiritual Power (Mk. 4:26-29)

The farmer sows his seed, he plows his field, but he does not cause the seed to germinate; on the contrary, *“the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not know how.”* The whole process of growth is mysterious—the farmer *“does not know how”* it happens. Furthermore, this process of growth takes place independent of human ability: the farmer *“goes to sleep at night and gets up in the morning”*—and totally independent of him—*“the earth produces crops by itself.”*

The point of Jesus’ parable is this: The kingdom of God operates by means of a divine power that mysteriously and irresistibly proceeds from spiritual conception to spiritual maturity, it is the sovereign work of God. Note how the Apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians of this: *“After all, what is Apollos? And what is Paul? [We are] ministers through whom you came to believe; each [doing what] the Lord gave him [to do]. ⁶I planted [the seed], Apollos watered it; but God made it grow”* (1 Cor. 3:5-6.)

When we become discouraged—by lethargy within the church of Christ; by the failure of Christian people to exhibit Christ-like behavior; by our own continuing struggles to maintain and develop your Christian life—may we be re-encouraged to know that the kingdom of God possesses a sovereign spiritual power. We should pray that the Lord would exert that power in a mighty way in His church and in our lives, as the Psalmist prays: *“Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?”* (Psl. 85:6.) Note, too, the petition Habakkuk presents to the LORD: *“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day”* (Hab. 3:2a.) Then, too, we must always rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to live out the Christian life, consider the Apostle Paul’s prayer for the church:

I ... do not cease to give thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers; ¹⁷[praying] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation [i.e.; that the Holy Spirit would minister to us in His capacity as the One who gives wisdom and revelation] ... so that you may know ... his exceedingly great power [available] to us who are

believing—just like the working of the strength of his might ²⁰that worked in Christ, raising him from the dead. (Eph. 1:15-20a)

Paul prays that we as Christians may know and experience the power of God at work in our lives, the very same spiritual power by which Christ was raised from the dead. He indicates that we come to experience this power as we exercise faith in Christ and live by faith in Him—this divine power is experienced by those who “*are believing*” (the Greek present participle of the verb, πιστευω, indicates an ongoing activity.)

IV. Be Encouraged to Know that the Kingdom of God shall have Universal Dominion (Mk. 4:30-32)

The mustard seed is one of the smallest of seeds, but, contrary to all expectation, it produces an exceedingly large shrub—so large that the birds can build their nests on its branches. The point of this parable is that, although the kingdom of God may appear to be insignificant in the world today, when it “matures into full bloom” at the return of Christ, it shall cover the universe with the glory and dominion of God.

Consider the interpretation of king Nebuchadnezzar’s dream that the LORD gave to Daniel. The message contained in the dream is the same as that conveyed by Jesus’ parable:

You, O king, saw and observed a huge statue. This statue, which was enormous and whose brightness was brilliant, stood before you. Its appearance was awesome. ³²The head of this statue was made of fine gold, its chest and arms were made of silver, its stomach and its thighs were of bronze, ³³its legs were made of iron, its feet were made partly of iron and partly of clay. ³⁴You continued observing [this statue] until a rock was cut out [of a mountain], but not by hands. [The rock] struck the statue’s feet, which were made of iron and clay, and broke them to pieces. ³⁵Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were [all] broken into pieces together and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. Then the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. ³⁶This was the dream. Now we will make known to the king the interpretation. ³⁷You, O king, are king of kings, the one on whom the God of heaven has bestowed the dominion, the power, and the strength and the glory. ³⁸Into your hands he has placed mankind, as well as the beasts of the field and the birds of the air—wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are the head of gold. ³⁹After you, another kingdom will rise, [one that is] inferior to you. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over all the earth. ⁴⁰And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron. Just as iron breaks and smashes everything, so like iron that breaks things to pieces, [this kingdom] will crush and break all [the others] to pieces. ⁴¹Just as you saw that the feet and toes were made partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided

kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, just as you saw iron mixed with clay. ⁴²Just as the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³And just as you saw the iron mixed with the baked clay, [the people of this kingdom] will be a mixture [of nationalities]; but they will not be united, just as iron does not mix with clay. ⁴⁴In the days of those kings, the God of heaven will establish a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be passed on to another people. It will break all those kingdoms into pieces and consume them, and it will stand forever. ⁴⁵This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of the mountain, but not by hands—the rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy. (Dan. 2:31-45)

The ninety-foot tall, gleaming statue represents the kingdoms of the world. The stone that struck the statue and caused it to collapse represents the victory of the kingdom of God as it was accomplished by Christ at the cross of Calvary. **After** the statue had been ground to powder and blown away, **then** the stone expanded into a great mountain and filled the whole earth; this represents the finally coming of the kingdom of God in all of its glory at the end of history.

When we become discouraged—witnessing the forces of evil driving the church to the fringes of society and in some lands persecuting the people of God even unto death; feeling overwhelmed before the combined forces of humanism and spiritual darkness—may we be re-encouraged to know that the kingdom of God shall at the last rise up to universal dominion. The angelic announcement recorded in Revelation 11:15 shall certainly be fulfilled:

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.” (Rev. 11:15)

Conclusion

These parables told by our Lord Jesus Christ were intended to encourage His disciples—explaining the way of God and the sure triumph of His kingdom. May the Holy Spirit employ these parables to likewise encourage us in our day.