



WESTLAKE HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Seeds of Hope **Sermon Series: “The Way of Jesus”**

Mark 4:21-34

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January 10, 2010

Mark 4:21-34 (NIV)

A Lamp on a Stand

²¹He 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? ²²For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

²⁴"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³²Yet 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."

³³With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Introduction.

My wife Lorie comes from a long line of teachers. Her mother was a teacher, her grandmother was a teacher, all of her aunts were teachers, both of her sisters-in-law were teachers, her cousin was a principal and others were teachers, her uncle was the superintendent of schools...you get the picture! In fact, her great-great-great-uncle was William McGuffey of the *McGuffey Readers* fame. At the end of one school year when Lorie was teaching 6th grade many years ago, one of the parents of a student she had gave her this inscription in calligraphy. "A teacher affects eternity: she can never tell where her influence stops."

Jesus was the consummate teacher. He was a master communicator who had the ability to capture the attention and imagination of His listeners, and one of the most common methods of teaching Jesus employed was that of telling parables. Most of Mark 4 records parables Jesus told. Last week we looked at the parable of the soils; this week we consider three additional parables He told.

The word "parable" literally means "something thrown beside something else." That is to say a parable is essentially a comparison. Another definition perhaps you have heard is that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." That's a good way of putting it. Something on earth is



compared to something in heaven so that the heavenly truth can be more easily understood and grasped. C.H. Dodd, a great New Testament scholar, wrote the following about the parables: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, yet leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”

Have you ever wondered why Jesus taught in parables? There are a number of reasons He did so. First, I think He taught in parables to make people listen. He got their attention with the stories He told. He also told parables because they were relevant, and people could relate to the things about which He spoke. There were common, ordinary, everyday events or people about which He talked.

However, we are also told in Scripture that Jesus taught in parables in order to veil His teaching to some degree. We usually think the parables were easily understood, but this was not the case. You and I look back with 20/20 hindsight and things appear obvious to us, but as Jesus said earlier in Mark 4, “*The secret of the kingdom of God have been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables.*”

Having said this by way of introduction and background, I want to look at the three parables Jesus told in our passage and draw out a few principles of the Kingdom we can learn from them.

I. Parables of the Kingdom.

There are three parables Jesus told – the parable of the lamp, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed. There is also an additional saying thrown in which is widely quoted, and it is the saying about the measure. In each of these parables, Jesus presents His listeners an insight into the Kingdom of God, and He points out that the ways of the Kingdom are very different from the ways of the world.

In the parable of the lamp, Jesus refers to a little saucer-shaped object which was common in Palestine in the first century AD. It had a small handle on one end, and on the other there was a nozzle-shaped extension with a hole for a wick. There was also a hole on the top for adding oil and to allow air to flow inside. The lamp stand Jesus mentions was usually a very simple object. It might be a shelf extending from the pillar in the center of the room which supported the crossbeam, or it might be a single stone projecting inward from the wall on which a lamp would sit.

In the parable, Jesus speaks about the way in which it would be foolish to light a lamp and put it under a bed or a bowl. The purpose of a lamp is to provide light for the room so you can see properly. To conceal a lamp prevents it from fulfilling its intended purpose and makes no sense at all.

In the saying about the measure, Jesus warns His hearers about the standards of judgment in the Kingdom of God. Whatever measure one gives will be the measure one receives, and the standard we use to judge others will be the standard by which we ourselves will be judged. In this saying, Jesus cautions against the kind of judgmental attitude with which all of us struggle from time to time.

The parable of the growing seed in verses 26-29 talks about the fact that growth is a mystery to some extent. We don't know why or how it works exactly, only that it does. Botanists can explain the process of photosynthesis and the like, but they still can't explain why it works that way and not another. It is a mystery to some degree. The other thing the parable reminds us of is that in a seed there is a great deal of potential. From a little seed comes first a blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. There is quite a bit of power in a tiny little package.

Finally, the parable of the mustard seed is probably one of the best known sayings of Jesus. We see it elsewhere in the Gospels when Jesus talked about faith. Here again we see the way in which there is a great deal of power packed into such a tiny little package. Among the seeds sown in a garden, the mustard seed was considered the smallest, but from this smallest of seeds would come a



shrub which in turn could grow taller than all the other plants in the garden. Ultimately, it looks like a tree, and it sends out branches large enough for birds to settle on and rest. The Kingdom of God, Jesus said, is like that.

What can we learn from these parables? How might we apply their truths to our lives?

II. Principles of the Kingdom.

If we take these sayings of Jesus, there are at least three principles of the Kingdom which emerge from the passage, and I'd like us to consider each of them respectively. The **first principle** is taken from the parable of the lamp. This parable reminds us that **in the Kingdom of God the light of God in us should be visible and not concealed to benefit those around us.** It should be a matter that is open and not hidden from view.

A light in a lamp is first and foremost something to be seen, and our Christian faith is also something that should be evident to everyone. As someone has said, "There can be no such thing as secret discipleship, for either the secrecy destroys the discipleship, or the discipleship destroys the secrecy."ⁱ Our commit to Jesus should be evident in the way we treat the bank teller or the clerk at the grocery store, in the way we order a meal in a restaurant, in the way we treat our employees or our employer, our teachers or our students, and in the way we play a game or drive a car. A believer should be just as much a Christian in the courtroom, in the boardroom, in the classroom, in the office, and in the kitchen as he or she is in Church! Jesus did not say, "You are the light of the Church." He said, "You are the light of the world!"

One of my favorite memories of the Advent season last month was the Christmas Eve candlelight services here at our church. At the end of each service, I held the Christ candle and from it Peter and Carol lit their candles. Then the elders and deacons who served communion came forward, and they tipped their candles and lit theirs from the ones Peter and Carol held. And so on, it went until the entire room was full of light. We dimmed the lights in the sanctuary and sang *Silent Night* with the candles providing the only light. During the last verse of the carol, our voices came to a crescendo, and we lifted our candles higher in the air to mark our commitment all the more. I couldn't help but pray, "Lord, may the light of this congregation shine as brightly tomorrow out in the world as we are shining tonight here in this sanctuary."

Our light is a borrowed light, and the light we have is a light in a secondary, or a derived, sense. Think of the sun and the moon. The moon has no light of its own; it simply reflects the radiant light of the sun. In a similar way, you and I have no light by ourselves, and we only reflect the light of God in a world of darkness. There are times when we are a crescent moon. Other times we are a full moon. Sometimes we may be an eclipsed moon, and we should remember that if anything stands between us and God, we will not reflect His light. We remain in darkness. You and I can't take credit for the light of God that shines in lives. Its source is the Lord, and it comes to us only by His grace. In what ways is your witness for God shining brightly in the world for Him?

A **second principle** I want to mention is taken from the parable of the growing seed. It is this. **In the Kingdom of God spiritual growth is a process that takes time, and there are no shortcuts to growing a life in Christ.** Our spiritual growth as believers is just as much a work of the Holy Spirit as is our salvation, and we should be careful not to think that it is up to us to make ourselves, or even our church for that matter, grow. Growth is a work of God, in the individual and in the church.

One of the things I have observed since moving to Westlake, and one of the things I admire, is that the people in this community, and the people in this church, tend to be Type-A, hard-working, hard-charging, entrepreneurial individuals with a can-do spirit. It's an exciting environment in which to be, and I find it a stimulating place to live.



However, one of the things we have to caution against in this community, and in this church, is to remind ourselves that spiritual growth in the Christian life can't be caused simply by hard work and a can-do attitude. It isn't the result of hard work. There is no formula for becoming a more faithful follower of Jesus. There is no recipe for growing strong in Christ whereby we mix all the right ingredients from a how-to cookbook, and presto, the mature disciple pops out of the oven! Growth as a Christian is a process and it takes a lifetime, and there are no shortcuts to maturity in Christ.

My tendency in dealing with the problem of sin in my life is to launch a frontal attack and rely on willpower and determination. Whatever the sin or shortcoming may be, I make a resolution (like at New Years!) and determine never to do it again. I pray against it, fight against it, and set my will against it. But all of this is in vain, and I usually find myself doing the same thing once again, and I feel helpless to bring about any real change in my life. Why is that? It's because I can't cause spiritual growth in my life any more than I can cause a seed to grow in the ground.

Richard Foster has written, "When we despair of gaining inner transformation through human powers of will and determination, we are open to a wonderful new realization: inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change within us is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given."ⁱⁱ

A farmer is helpless to grow grain. All he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed in the ground and ensures there is enough moisture through rain or irrigation, and he removes the weeds around the plants that can prevent the growth. All these efforts are to enable the natural forces take over, and up comes the grain.

That's the way it is with spiritual disciplines in the Christian life. They are a way of tilling the soil of our hearts, getting the seed of faith into our souls, weeding out what prevents our growth in Christ, and encouraging the work of God in our lives. They are God's means of grace. The spiritual disciplines of the Christian life (prayer, study, service, fasting, solitude) are the means by which we are placed in a position where God can bless us and where we can let His supernatural forces take over. So quit trying to do this all yourself. Look to God, and yield your heart to Him so He can grow in you the life He desires.

A **final principle** I want to mention is taken from the parable of the mustard seed, and it is this: **in the Kingdom of God a little bit goes a long way.** What looks weak and small initially will ultimately result in strength and power. In the value system of our modern world, we tend to notice the biggest and the brightest. Large buildings, super sized products, stadiums full of people, impressive degrees, and cathedral-like malls all attract our notice. Places like Jerry-World, the Cowboys new stadium outside Dallas, cause our jaws to drop and draw our attention and the crowds.

However, God's value system is very different. Throughout Scripture, God more often than not uses small things to exhibit His glory. He employs otherwise insignificant people, seemingly inconsequential events, and lackluster numbers to accomplish His purposes. That is the way of the mustard seed, isn't it?

We've just come through the season of Advent in which we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Think of all the small and inconsequential people who were a part of the drama of God in sending His Son to the earth – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, Anna, Simeon, Zechariah, and Elizabeth. Nobodies. They were small people on the socio-economic scale from the small places of the world, but it was through them God turned the world upside down!

The mustard seed reminds us that small and weak and tiny things are big in the hands of God, and some of the most powerful things on the planet come in small packages. In your own life remember that God's greatest work may happen in and through the small events and seemingly "unimportant"



means in your life. You and I should not wait for something big to affect our lives. Rather, we should look for the small ways that God uses to open our hearts to His wonder and power. Remember the mustard seed this week.

Conclusion.

On Thursday night, all of us who were watching agonized when Colt McCoy went down after a hit on the 5th play of the National Championship game. I hoped it was just a stinger and that he would be back in the game by the next series, but it was not to be. The winningest quarterback in college football history would not play another down, and UT fans were left to wonder, "What if?"

When the game was over and Alabama had won, there were many interviews and a lot of analysis in the post-game show. But what struck me most profoundly were the words Colt McCoy said when he was interviewed. After fighting back tears, he said, "I've given everything I have to Texas. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think it would've been taken away like that....(But) I always give God the glory. I never question why things happen the way they do. God is in control of my life, and I know that no matter what happens I'm standing on the Rock."

What an amazing perspective by a young man who had just suffered one of the greatest disappointments a person could ever experience. He had trained his whole college career for that one game. I think Colt's witness for Christ on national television in the face of his disappointment and defeat may have been more profound and encouraged more people than the interview he probably would have given had he won the national title. I know it brought my problems into perspective. Perhaps it did yours, too.

Colt McCoy let his light shine in a world of darkness and disappointment. He didn't hide it under a bowl or a bed. May you and I follow his example this week and let our belief in and commitment to Christ shine in all we say and do. Amen.

ⁱSource unknown.

ⁱⁱRichard Foster, *Celebration of Disciple*, p. 5.

