

November 6, 2016

Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *Parables of the Kingdom*

Mark 4:13 – 34

Jesus, as He has already done several times, begins to teach the multitudes by the seashore. And they get a parable without explanation. But it is the inner circle, the twelve, and some other followers who are not explicitly named, who get the parable and the explanation of the parable. And it is clear from the context that Mark means us to understand that what Jesus is doing is training His disciples who will carry out the work when He is gone. The mission of Jesus is to go to the cross. The mission of the disciples however, is to spread the good news of the kingdom of God in the world. And Jesus uses three parables to show them how that is done.

He begins with the parable of the seed and the sower, or more accurately, the parable of the soils; He follows that with a parable about planting and harvest; and then ends by talking about the nature of kingdom growth. What Jesus seems to be doing here is giving His disciples some keys to understanding the kingdom of God. He's telling them something about this great work in which they will be engaged when He is gone. He emphasizes the importance of what He is telling them by admonishing them several times to 'Listen, take care what you listen to, He who has ears to hear let him hear'. In other words, 'You need to get this, you need to understand what I'm saying here'. And He presses this in verse 13: "*Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?*" In other words, understanding now is the key to future revelation.

The first thing He teaches them comes through the parable of the soils: *14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."*

If you stand back and look at the context of this, you begin to see that Jesus is telling them two main things. The first is that 'Your job is to sow the seed generously'. The fact that He doesn't identify the sower specifically leads us to conclude that He meant them to see themselves as those who go around sowing the word. And He doesn't tell them, 'Now just scatter the seed where you know it will grow. Just scatter it on the good ground'. What He says is 'Sow the seed. If it lands on pathway places, fine. If it lands on rocky ground, also fine. If it lands on thorny ground, don't worry about it. Just sow the seed. Because in your sowing, you're going to throw some on good ground as well'.

What Jesus was teaching them here is something about the nature of the mission. Their mission in the world, and our mission in the world, is to be sowers. We are to sow the seed of the word of God in the world. But Jesus probably leaves these people wondering just what kind of farmer He thinks He is. This was an agrarian culture and these people were very familiar with the rhythms and customs of planting. They knew about seeds and soils and sowing and they would have been right there with Jesus as He begins the parable: *'Listen, behold a sower went out to sow'*. But they would have been a bit baffled by what happened next. What happened next didn't fit their concept of good husbandry. This guy who started sowing the seed must have appeared fairly reckless in their eyes. He didn't seem to have any plan at all to his planting. Jesus describes how he sowed good seed on soil they knew wouldn't produce anything. This sower scattered seed on hard-packed pathways; on shallow rocky soil; and on ground that hadn't been cleared of weeds.

But Jesus was not trying to teach His disciples anything about farming. He was telling them something about the nature of the kingdom of God and of their mission in the world. And the primary task of His followers is to sow the seed of the word of God indiscriminately, generously, lavishly, liberally. Their job was not to prepare the soil for the seed, or scout out the best ground to plant, or stay away from hard places or rocky places or thorny places. Their job was to scatter the seed everywhere they could.

The second main thing Jesus was teaching His disciples was 'Don't get discouraged when you don't see the results you're looking for'. Don't get discouraged when some of the seed lands on hard ground and gets eaten by the birds. Don't get discouraged when some of it lands on shallow, rocky soil and after what appears to be a great beginning, withers and dies. Don't get discouraged when some of it lands on hearts that are so full of other things that it chokes out whatever was started. Don't be discouraged when you don't see the fruit of your labors. The results are not contingent on the sower. You are called to sow generously, not to produce the harvest.

Jesus was pointing out the realities of sowing, the realities of gospel proclamation. You see there are hearts that are simply so hardened that they simply reject the gospel. Jesus likens these hearts to the footpaths that bordered the fertile fields in Palestine. Footpaths were beaten hard as concrete by the feet of those who walked on them and any seed that fell there couldn't penetrate. It just lay there waiting for the birds to come and eat it. Luke adds in his account of this parable that what the birds didn't get was crushed under the feet of those who used the paths. Jesus seems to be describing the kind of hearts the religious leaders of the day had. They thought they held the truth and therefore rejected out of hand what Jesus had to say. They were unmoved by His words, unfazed by His miracles, and unimpressed by His credentials. The Old Testament said of them, 'This is a hard-hearted, stiff-necked people'.

There are also hearts that are like rocky ground. It is not ground studded with rocks, but rather ground that has a superficial layer of soil over bedrock. And when you sow that kind of soil, there is some initial growth, but it can't go deep because underneath it is all that rock. The roots of the plant have no where to grow so they spread out underneath that thin layer of dirt, and never get down to where the water is.

When the sun comes up, that is, when trouble hits, when tribulation or persecution comes, there is no well of sustenance for them to draw on and they fall away. You see they received the word with an initial joy, but there is no root development because underneath it all is this hard, rocky heart. What this describes is an emotional response to the gospel message. There seem to be tears of joy and evidence of genuine conversion. But it only lasts as long as things go well. The real test is when things go south.

And then you have those who embrace Christ as an addition to their lives. *They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.* You see, they've simply added Christ to all the other stuff they are holding. They've said yes to the invitation of the gospel, but they haven't rejected the invitation of the world. They're holding on to Christ, **and** all these other things. And eventually, just like weeds will take over a garden if not rooted out, the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for stuff will choke out the beginnings of gospel growth.

And Jesus is saying, 'Don't be discouraged when you see this, because I've got good ground for the seed to take root.' *But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."* The focus in this parable is not so much on the unproductive soil as it is on the productive soil. There are three kinds of hearts that won't produce fruit, but there are three kinds of hearts that produce incredible fruit. Be encouraged by this. You've got ground that produces 30 times as much as you plant; ground that produces 60 times and ground that produces 100 times as much. Now for those of us who don't know anything about crop production, that might not impress us very much. But I guarantee you that to those around Jesus that heard this it was bombshell. A ten-fold increase would have been considered phenomenal, but no one ever heard of a 30, 60, or 100 fold increase. Which informs us again that Jesus is not trying to teach these people new farming methods.

What He is saying is that the gospel will have incredible results. Generous sowing will be followed by phenomenal increase. Don't be discouraged when you do not see the fruit from hard hearts, shallow hearts or choked up hearts. Your job is to sow the seed of the word in the world and God will cause the fruit to grow. We don't have to try and develop new styles of sowing. We don't have to manipulate the right conditions or massage the contents of the message. The key is the condition of the hearts that hear the word. There will be hard hearts; there will be shallow hearts; there will be hearts that are full of every other thing. But there are hearts that will produce 30 fold; there are hearts that will produce 60 fold; there are hearts that will produce 100 fold. Be encouraged. Sow the seed.

Consider the increase in the kingdom from the five little seeds that were sown on a sandbar in the middle of a river in Ecuador in 1956. Jim Elliot and four other men were speared to death for the sake of the gospel; and today the kingdom of God has spread throughout that whole region in countless ways. Or consider the relatively few number of missionaries who brought the gospel to China in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before 1949, there were some 2 million Chinese Christians. By this new century, the number has grown to over 100 million. In fact last year the Daily telegraph predicted that China was on course to become the world's most 'Christian nation' within 15 years.¹

1 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian->

In 1900 Korea had no Protestant church. Today, there are over 7,000 churches in just the one city of Seoul, South Korea. At the end of the 19th century, the southern portion of Africa was only 3 percent Christian. Today, 63 percent of that population is Christian.² In 1900, there were approximately 10 million Christians in all of Africa. By 2000, there were 360 million. By 2025, conservative estimates see that number rising to 633 million. Those same estimates put the number of Christians in Latin America in 2025 at 640 million and in Asia at 460 million.³ According to 2011 Pew Research Center survey, there are 2.18 billion Christians around the world in 2010, more than three times as much from the 600 million recorded in 1910.⁴ And a 2015 study says that by 2050, the Christian population is expected to be 2.9 billion.⁵

Somewhere in the Middle East, there is a man named Zamil. He had been a very successful businessman in his city; employed a lot of people in his business; was very influential in the community; a respected leader at his mosque. One night Zamil had a vivid dream in which Isa al Masih (Jesus the Messiah) appeared to him and told him that He, Jesus, was the Light of the world. In the morning, when he awakened, he couldn't see anything – he was blind. Over the course of time, Zamil came into contact with some Christians who took him to a prayer camp where they prayed for him to regain his sight. Zamil did not regain his sight, but he did find Jesus, the Light of the world.

When Zamil's family learned that he had become a Christian, the response was immediate. He was thrown out of the family; his wife abandoned him; he lost his home; his possessions were thrown out; but he never wavered in his decision to follow Christ. After he had spent some time in bible study and prayer and being taught what it meant to be an obedient disciple of Jesus, he found he had an overwhelming urge to go and bring the gospel to others. He told the leader of the group that he was going out to other villages to become a disciple maker for Jesus. The leader told him he couldn't because he was blind. He went to the mission's team that had trained him, asking to be sent, only to be told he couldn't because he was blind.

So one day, Zamil, without telling anyone, got into a taxi and drove away to a Muslim community that God had laid on his heart. A few days later, he phoned his leader and told him where he was and that he had met a Muslim that was receptive to the gospel and things were progressing. About a month later, he called and said that a church had started in that city. Six weeks later, in another community, Zamil planted another church. In a little less than two years, eight new churches have been started as Zamil spreads the good news of the Light of the world. Zamil is still blind – but he sees more than most people that have sight.

nation-within-15-years.html

2 <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/june/1061112.html>

3 <http://www1.cbn.com/how-christianity-growing-around-world>

4 Pewforum: Christianity (2010)

5 The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections 2010-2015

This is what Jesus tells us about the gospel. Sow it generously. And He emphasizes this by briefly switching metaphors from sowing the seed to letting your light shine. If you've been given the seed you have to sow. If you've been given the light, you have to let it shine. **21** *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? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."* Jesus stresses the fact that the light has come into the world to shine, not to be either hidden beneath a basket, nor to be put under a bed, but to be put up on a stand. How are we doing with that? Is our light shining? Or have we got it under the bed?

Jesus presses them on this, going back to the agricultural model: **24** *And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 25 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."* In other words, the more you sow, the more God will add His blessing to your sowing. Not only will there be great increase in the kingdom, He promises to bless the seed you sow exponentially. The more you let the light of the gospel shine, the more illumination comes to others and the more light you will have. As you sow the truth in the world, you will be given more truth, more light, more joy, more fulfillment, more of Jesus Himself, who is the word.

So the first thing is to **sow the seed liberally**. The second is that we must **sow the seed patiently**. Because the second great truth of gospel proclamation is that the results of sowing the seed take time. Have patience. Don't be in a hurry. **26** *And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."* Look at the dynamics of the verse here. You've got the farmer scattering the seed on the ground. And then he just goes to sleep and gets up, goes to sleep and gets up, while the seed sprouts and grows all by itself. In fact Mark uses the Greek word, **automatos**, automatically, all by itself. The farmer's not doing anything here. He's done the work, now he just waits. He's waiting for the seed to ripen.

That takes patience. That takes endurance. That takes waiting and trusting in the life that is in the seed to finally produce what it should. In 1912, medical missionary Dr. William Leslie went to live and minister to tribal people in a remote corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. After 17 years he returned to the U.S. a discouraged man – believing he failed to make an impact for Christ. He died nine years after his return. But in 2010, a team led by Eric Ramsey with Tom Cox World Ministries made a shocking and sensational discovery. They found a network of reproducing churches hidden like glittering diamonds in the dense jungle across the Kwilu River from Vanga, where Dr. Leslie was stationed. Ramsey reported, "When we got in there, we found a network of reproducing churches throughout the jungle. Each village had its own gospel choir, although they wouldn't call it that," he notes.

"They wrote their own songs and would have sing-offs from village to village." They found a church in each of the eight villages they visited scattered across 34 miles. Ramsey and his team even found a 1000-seat stone "cathedral" in one of the villages. He learned that this church got so crowded in the 1980s – with many walking miles to attend — that a church planting movement began in the surrounding villages.⁶

Sow the seed liberally. Sow the seed patiently. And **sow the seed confidently.**

30 And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." You see, first Jesus tells His disciples that they are to go out sowing the seed of the gospel liberally, generously, widely. And they are going to encounter all sorts of difficulties and experience rejection and opposition; it will seem very slow work; their message may seem very insignificant and simplistic in the sophisticated Greco-Roman world of that time; it won't appear clever; people will sneer at it; and yet it will one day overshadow everything else in the world.

Jesus compares the message of the gospel to a mustard seed, which He says is the smallest of all seeds. But He wasn't making a claim of absolute fact here, because it is not the smallest of all seeds. What He was doing was employing a proverbial style of communication. This is what people in His day compared things to when they were trying to contrast big things and small things. Much like we might use the comparison of a mountain and molehill. And here He makes the point that it is this tiny, insignificant seed that grows into a great tree that surpasses all the other plants in the garden. Now Jesus would have known that it wasn't the largest of garden plants because there were larger plants. He was not making a scientific statement of fact. Instead He was saying that the kingdom of God rises from relative obscurity and insignificance to an overpowering presence.

And don't be tempted to think that Jesus simply chose this mustard seed illustration at random. The mustard plant was known to take over areas where it was planted. Contemporary agrarian accounts mention the fact that the nature of the mustard plant makes it a "*malignant weed*"⁷ with "*dangerous takeover properties*". Pliny the Elder, in his book, *Natural History*, published around AD 78, writes that "*mustard... is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.*"⁸ And that has been the testimony of Christianity in the world. You can't get rid of it. And many have tried.

And then Jesus adds to the surprising picture of phenomenal growth, just a hint of gospel grace to all people. He tells them that as this seed grows into tree, the birds of the air will come to its branches and nest in its shade.

6 <http://blog.godreports.com/2014/05/missionary-died-thinking-he-was-a-failure-84-years-later-thriving-churches-found-hidden-in-the-jungle/>

7 Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, (Continuum, 2006), 73-77.

8 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated by Harris Rackham, Loeb, 1950, Book XIX, Chapter LIV.

We see this kind of language elsewhere in the Bible like in the book of Ezekiel. In chapter 17, the Lord likens His kingdom to a small sprig of a cedar tree that He will plant on the heights of Israel. And He says, *"On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."*⁹ And over in Daniel four and the vision of the great tree, the same imagery is used to describe the nations of the world sheltering under the branches of the great tree that is the kingdom of Babylon. And by the time we get to the end of the Bible, we see this little mustard seed has grown into something that has covered the world: *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*¹⁰

If you are a follower of Christ this morning, I trust you have ears to hear, and what you heard was sow generously, sow patiently, sow confidently. Because the one constant in all these parables is the word of God – the seed that is sown. And that word, sown in good ground will produce kingdom life. *since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.*¹¹

William Carey, the father of modern missions and missionary to India once wrote: *"When I left England, my hope of India's conversion was very strong; but amongst so many obstacles, it would die, unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His Word is true. Though the superstitions of the heathen were a thousand times stronger than they are, and the example of the Europeans a thousand times worse; though I were deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on the sure Word, would rise above all obstructions and overcome every trial. God's cause will triumph"*¹²

*Our gracious Father,
May it be Your great cause and not our own that engages our hearts and captures our affections. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Fix our hope on the sure word of God, on Christ who is the very word, and grant that we would be those who sow the gospel seed generously, patiently, confidently. Grant repentance and salvation today for those on whom Your word has landed and let it produce a bountiful harvest we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

9 Ezekiel 17:23 ESV

10 Revelation 7:9-10

11 1 Peter 1:23-25 ESV

12 William Carey, quoted in Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, (Banner of Truth, 1971), 140.