

Mark Core Study #5

Mark 4:1-34 – What is the Kingdom of God like?

Leader's Preparation

Read each parable over at least three times (perhaps in NASB or The Message versions), noting some of your own initial questions and what you feel to be the main point of the parable.

Through out this week, read the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke:

- Parable of the Sower: Mt. 13:1-15; 18-23; and Lk. 8:4-15
- Parable of the Mustard Seed: Mt. 13:31,32; and Lk. 13:18,19

Try reading a good commentary by N.T. Wright or William Lane.

Here's some questions and answers to help you as the leader dig deeper:

Remember, these are to help your study, not to give you, the Core leader, all the answers. Your job is to facilitate discussion. Try answering the questions on your own before reading the answers.

- 1. Write out in your own words the four types of responses Jesus describes of those who have heard him proclaim the Kingdom of God.**
- 2. Compare and contrast each parable in this section.**

Notice how, although it might seem like Jesus is saying in verse 11-12 that he tells parables to keep people from understanding his message, that the following parable teaches that the reason for announcing the kingdom, for bringing God's light into the world, is so that everyone will see it.

- 3. What are some of the keys to understanding the parable of the sower that Jesus explains to his disciples?**

Jesus locates the roles of those listening, to whom the Kingdom of God has been proclaimed. Jesus also points to what aspect of the parable is being used as an analogy for the "word" or the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus also describes reasons why his listeners fail to accept the word. Finally, Jesus also names the antagonist in the parable as Satan (the deceiving one).

- 4. Mark tells us that Jesus taught many things by parables. Why do you think he uses this form of teaching?**

Parables were Jesus' preferred teaching form. Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God, and intentionally choose to use subversive riddles to get the message out. Part of the reason is that Jesus was avoiding immediate political and religious reaction to his challenging message. Jesus' stories portrayed his vision of God's Kingdom as something that was happening, not just a timeless truth, and enabled his hearers to step inside the story and make it their own. As well, what was intrinsic to Jesus' message what that God's reign on earth is not exactly like what many of the first century Jews were expecting. Jesus desired that to understand the message one would need to wrestle with it. This would not be "Kingdom of God"-lite.

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5. **Jesus interprets the first parable for his disciples. Does that interpretation help you understand the following parables?**

Notice the question is asked by the disciples concerning “the parables” although only one parable has been mentioned. Perhaps this is an indication that Jesus is giving insight into understanding the Kingdom parables in general.

6. **What do you think Jesus means by “with the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more”?**

In our culture people often say: “what you put into something, that’s what you’ll get out of it.” But Jesus is saying much more than this. Jesus is saying that if they grasp what Jesus is saying and go deeper and deeper into it, they will get more and more from it. But if they remain at the superficial level, like the incomprehending crowds, they will lose even that sense of God doing something new in their midst ... which they have at present in Jesus.

7. **Often Jesus would echo the Torah (the Old Testament) in his story-telling. Look up these passages for some help to hear these echoes:**

- Joel 3:13
- Genesis: 1:4-13; 8:22
- Isaiah 40:18
- Ezekiah 17:23, 31:6
- Daniel 4:12, 21

Certainly this parable describes a familiar picture of everyday farming life, but it is also an echo of a picture from the Old Testament. It is a picture of God sowing Israel again in her own land after the long years of exile; of God restoring the fortunes of his people, making the family farm fruitful again after the thorns and thistles have had it their own way for too long. There is even a hint of restoration of the garden of Eden.

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INTRODUCTION

Ice Breaker and/ or an introductory question before reading the text:

- **Why did Jesus tell parables?**

Parables were Jesus preferred story-telling device to which he used as a vehicle for challenging Israel in their understanding of God's reign and rescue of his people. His purpose in using these subversive riddles was to break open and realign his contemporaries world-view, and invited them to share his vision of God's kingdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Pretend you're a first century Jew, listen to Jesus teach for the first time. What would this first parable mean to you (4:1-20)?**

Often we tend to immediately jump to interpreting what the passage means to us in our present context. This parable isn't simply a comment on the way in which people in general sometimes listen to sermons from their pastor or sometimes don't. Jesus is describing his listeners response to his initial proclamation (1:15), that the waited time has arrived, the Kingdom of God is here!

2. **In vv. 11-12 it sounds like Jesus tells parables in order to intentionally exclude "those on the outside" from understanding the message of the Kingdom of God. But doesn't Jesus want everybody to get the message? (Try explaining the yes and no answer to this question from the text).**

What Jesus is saying is such dynamite that it can't be said straightforwardly, out on the street. Any kingdom movement was dangerous enough that if word got out that Jesus' kingdom-vision was radically unlike what most people wanted and expected, the ordinary people would be furious. If Jesus were to put this 'political cartoon' parable in ordinary prose, somebody might sue or worse yet. So yes, in some ways, Jesus intends to conceal the truth from those who don't believe. The context of the Isaiah passage (Is 6:9-10), which Jesus quotes, highlights Isaiah's responsibility to keep on proclaiming the truth despite the people's refusal to hear it.

But at the same time, it is a 'mystery', not a puzzle. It is a divine secret which Jesus is revealing. And with all divine revelation, you can understand it if you believe, if you trust. So Jesus' ultimate goal was that all would break through resistance to the truth. From the context it seems more likely that Jesus is trying to express what happens when he speaks in parables, rather than the reason he speaks in parables. Like a farmer sowing seed, it is coming in a slow and subversive way.

3. **Describe your interpretation of each parable in your own words by finishing this sentence: The Kingdom of God is like ...**

If you have a large Core, try splitting into three groups and tackle each a separate parable. Then return to the larger group and share the sentence they came up with.

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4. What are some similarities between these three parables?

Each parable describes the small potent nature of the kingdom (seed being sown, a lamp, growing seed, and a mustard seed). Each begin quite small but end up having a large effect.

RESPONSE:

Summarize what the members of your Core have collectively been learning about these parables.

5. In light of this study, how would you answer what is the “secret of the Kingdom of God” (v. 11)?

or

6. What kind of soil would you describe yourself being this past week?