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Mark 4

midweekchurch

File: Mark 4 (mid)

When I was growing up, my Dad worked as a librarian. He and my Mum always had a great love for books and for reading and because of his job he also had a great access to the best literature going around. So they were always borrowing books for us kids to read. And one of the series I read through when I was young was CS Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe".

Now I really enjoyed those novels, they were a great story but about 15 years later I got into a huge argument with a Christian friend of mine about these novels. For he was trying to tell me that they were Christian fiction. That beneath the story of Aslan and the four English children was a tale of God and his world. And I just didn't believe him. Until I reread them. And he was right. Underneath the story was a deeper meaning than I had ever knew existed. And on first reading I missed it completely!

So when we come to the parables of Jesus, many have made the same mistake that I made with the Narnia stories. They see them as simple stories about sowers, plants, birds and people falling on hard times. But they fail to see that these simple stories actually point to a deeper reality. They are really a challenge for those who have ears to hear. These parables are not there to make it easy for his listeners, but to make it hard. And according to verse 34 we read "He didn't say anything to them without using a parable. "

Why would he do that? Why does Jesus make it so hard for people to understand? Well according to verses 10 to 12, The SECRET of the Kingdom of God has been given just to the disciples. But to those on the OUTSIDE, everything is said in parables... SO THAT they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding... OTHERWISE they might TURN... and BE FORGIVEN."

Did you hear that? A parable is not a SIMPLE STORY to make things EASY at all. It's not a little MORAL FABLE. It is a RIDDLE. And the disciples are saying to him, HOW COME YOU'RE TALKING IN RIDDLES ALL THE TIME? And the answer is... to SET THE BAR HIGH. To TEST whether we are GOING TO LISTEN.

So whenever we hear a parable it is some sort of test for us. Are we interested enough to think deeply about what Jesus is saying to us? Are we willing to put it into practice? Will we use the brains and the intellect that God has given us so that we are motivated to live radical lives of faith. Or do we just take them as quaint little stories, as good sermon illustrations and continue on as if nothing has happened?

It's a bit like a scene from the movie "The Fellowship of the Ring." As the fellowship of the ring is trying to make their way to destroy the ring of power, they reach a point where they have to go through a series of mines. The problem is that the door of the mines is locked, and they can't get in. The wizard Gandolf doesn't take the time to read the inscription on the door, and instead he tries all the secret passwords that he knows. Of course none of them work, so he sits down in frustration, giving up. But the hobbit Frodo reads the inscription, and he sees that it's a riddle. He then solves the riddle, and the

solution to the riddle opens the door.

The parables are like that: A person must invest himself into the teachings of Jesus to get anything out of them. We can't sit on the sidelines forever scrutinizing and analyzing. We must cast aside our assumptions and agendas, opening ourselves up to his agenda, to his kingdom. When we do that, the door will open, and much more understanding will come. But until we do that, we'll be frustrated and the door will stay stubbornly closed.

So let's begin to do that and look briefly at the five parables that Jesus gives us in Mark 5. Firstly in verses 3 to 9 is the parable of the sower or probably better named, the parable of the soils. This is not just a story about a farmer scattering seed, it is a picture of God speaking his word to the world.

Well, some people are like seed along the path, verse 15; as soon as they hear it, SATAN comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Do you know anyone like that? You try to share your faith with them, you drop the seed; and boy, it hits the ground for about a millisecond. Before it's brushed away. Gone. A complete and utter waste of time.

But sometimes, though, you might think you're getting a bit further. Others, like those in v 16, are like seed sown in rocky places. They hear the word, and they say, 'That's great'. Straight away, they receive it with JOY. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. And so when things get tough, or when trouble comes or any sort of persecution because of the word, they're out of here. Jesus says they too have wasted their God-given opportunities. They are quitters. God's word doesn't get very far with them.

But there are two more categories. Verse 18; still others, like seed sown among THORNS... they hear the word; it takes root; even grows. But it's growing up in the middle of a whole lot of other COMPETING THINGS. Thorn bushes. And these other priorities CAN CRUSH ALL THE FRUITFULNESS out of the word that's been sown in you. Jesus says THE WORRIES OF THIS LIFE... like the mortgage that's actually way more than you could really afford, but you NEEDED the bigger house. Like the PROMOTION that means you've got no time for anything else anymore but you've got to get ahead. Jesus says, the DECEITFULNESS OF WEALTH and the DESIRES FOR OTHER THINGS... they come in and CHOKES THE WORD, making it unfruitful.

And then there's the REAL LISTENERS. Verse 20. Others are like seed sown on GOOD SOIL... they will hear the word and accept it. And be very, very fruitful. Producing thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown. Seed producing seed. The word sown in you producing the word sown in someone else. Over and over again.

The point is that we have to listen to what God is saying. Not just turn up to Church. Not just open our Bible's. Not just know those Christian songs. We have to listen, really listen and let God's word take root inside of us. Let it change us from the inside out. We have to get rid of the hardness we have towards the things of God. Ensure that the shallowness of our society doesn't rub off on our spiritual life. Make sure that we are not so self-indulgent that our wants take our eyes off of what God wants.

Now while I was preparing this message and thinking about these things, I got a call from a guy called Nathan Plugge. Now Nathan is a young man, say 24-5 who was a part of our Church for a couple of years until he left and went back to Perth in 2005. He was ringing to tell me that in the last couple of years he had got his act together. He was now not just hearing the word but studying the word. He realized that when he was with us he was just going through the motions and had heard the word of God but done nothing about it. Now he was growing and producing fruit.

And so this parable wants us to look at what God's word is doing in our life, right now. Is it producing the fruit of good works inside of us? Is it changing us, making us more like Jesus? Or is it falling on hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground and so being lost? For that is the test of the parable. Not whether we understand it, but which kind of soil are we like? And can my kids, my wife, my family, my neighbours see the fruit of what God is doing in my life? Or am I in the end producing nothing?

But Jesus continues with, a story about a lamp on a stand. And he says lamps are not meant to be hidden. Torches aren't meant to be turned on and then placed in a closed cupboard. They are there to share their light around. And likewise when God has placed inside of you the light of the world, you are not meant to try and extinguish that light. Instead you are to make sure that everyone around you gets to see that light.

Once again, if you have ears, let us hear. Don't try and hide what God is doing inside of you. Don't try and suppress the work of His Holy Spirit. Don't be embarrassed about your Christian faith. Let it shine forth. Or more correctly, make sure that Jesus shines through you into everything dark corner of your life. Make sure that people around you can see the difference that Jesus makes?

So can I ask you, is Jesus making a difference? In the way that you treat people at work, in the way that you care for your family, in the way that you are committed to your Church, in the way that you use your money, in the way that you live? Is part of the fruit that God is producing within you are a life that is full of Jesus?

But Jesus continues with his third parable. For he says consider carefully what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. So if you don't give out to anyone else, wow, you won't be getting anything from God either!

Because it's important that you chew over what you're hearing. That you work at it. Because if you listen in big truckloads, you'll RECEIVE in big truckloads. If you listen in TEASPOONFULS you'll receive in TEASPOONFULS. He says "With the measure you use when you're listening, it will be measured out to you.

Ahh, I hear you say, but that stuff takes up too much time. And I'm too busy. I've got to work every day, then on the weekend there's sport, then I mean, you've got to have time to RELAX on top of that. But, Jesus says that sort of attitude is going to be exactly the attitude that gets dished back to YOU. A teaspoon of interest in Jesus and the Kingdom, a

TEASPOON of listening; you're actually choosing the spoon that's going to be used to dish up the GOOD THINGS for you.

Jesus is now on a roll with these parables and the next two provide us with some balance. Yes you have to make sure your heart is open to God's word. Yes you ensure that the measure you use with others is a generous one, but it isn't all up to us. For God is also doing his own quiet work amongst us all the time.

For, Jesus says, the Kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. Yes he plants the seed, but it's not all up to him. For while he sleeps or gets up, the seed grows. It produces grain. You see in the end God's word will achieve its purposes. It has power. And while men may be doing nothing, God is still at work, his purposes to achieve. Working through his word.

Which is why we have such an emphasis on the Bible at midweekchurch. It is the word of God not men. And when it is preached and studied and read and obeyed it produces fruit within us. A full harvest will come its way by the time Jesus returns.

So this parable is the answer to discouragement in our prayer life, in our service of others, and in evangelism. Success is simple, just cast the seed, proclaim the good news of Christ, keep praying. That's our job. We don't grow the kingdom, God does. The only human work is casting the seed. From that point on it's entirely a God thing. He's the one that causes the seed to sprout. He's the one that causes the plant to grow. He's the one that brings forth the harvest, and He is a great harvester.

And his will is to bring about growth. That's what the last parable is all about. The Kingdom is all about growth, its designed to grow, like a plant. Now maybe your house is like ours where you mark the kids growth with a pencil on the wall. Kids love to see the fact that every couple of months they are growing taller. And it is no accident is it? For God has designed their bodies to grow bigger and bigger. And that's true also with us. We are designed to grow spiritually, so that as we listen, as we trust, we grow in both our faith and our actions. But God has also designed the Church to grow as well.

If you think about it, it started with just 12 disciples and a few more hangers on. Now up to a third of the world, some 2 billion people, say they are Christians. Now that's pretty spectacular growth, isn't it! So in the same way that a mustard seed, the smallest of all Jewish seeds, becomes the largest of all Jewish shrubs, some 5-6 metres tall. So the tiny seed of the Kingdom of God will grow and grow until it becomes the most important kingdom in the whole world.

But it comes down to us. Whether we are going to listen, obey, follow. Or whether what Jesus is saying is going to go in one ear and out the other. Whether we are going to allow God to grow inside of us, whether we are going to be open to the power of the Holy Spirit or whether we are going to hide the light of the world and ignore God's specific teachings to us.

Let me end by telling you about Helmut Thielicke. Thielicke was a German theologian when Hitler came to power before World War 2. Because he was outspoken in his criticism of Hitler, so he was removed from his university post and sent to a small town, where he began pastoring a very small church.

He says that when he became a pastor, he decided to have his first midweek Bible study. For he held high hopes for making an impact in the church, and on his community, but he was extremely disappointed when only three people came to his Bible study: Two elderly ladies and an elderly man. He says as he sat looking at these three elderly people, outside the church he could hear the marching of the battalions of Hitler youth who'd sworn their allegiance the Third Reich.

In that moment he wondered about the future of the Christian faith, as it seemed that the faith was dying while the Hitler war machine was growing stronger and stronger every day. Was it really true that the kingdoms of this world will one day become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah? Then Pastor Thielicke thought of this story, the mustard seed that grew into a plant. That gave him encouragement and hope, and of course when the dust settled, it was Hitler's kingdom that fell, not God's kingdom.

Don't despise the little things my friends. It's often in the little things where God is working the most in. He is saying to us tonight, that if we prepare our hearts, like good soil. If we listen and obey. If we show the world the light that God has placed within us, then the power of the Kingdom of God will produce growth, fruit, abundance. It may seem small, it may seem insignificant. But that is the way that God works through us.

So let us have that sort of confidence in what God is doing. And let us be found to listen and obey the very word of God that He has given to us again tonight.