

Truth for Today

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God's Servant in Mark's Gospel: Mark 4

Today we continue with our consideration of Mark's Gospel. In the talks so far, we have noted that Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as the Servant compared with Jesus as King in Matthew, as the Son of Man in Luke and as the Son of God in John. Mark's is the shortest of the four Gospels as things move quickly, in keeping with the constant action of a servant and the frequent use of words such as "straightway" and "immediately."

It is noteworthy that, at least in the Authorised Version of the Bible, most of the chapters begin with the word "and", as though to emphasise that the life of Jesus was one continuous work of service. Unlike the other Gospels, there is no earthly or heavenly genealogy in Mark because the test of a servant is not his background but his ability actually to do the job well. It is also remarkable that the Holy Spirit chose Mark to write this Gospel about the perfect Servant, Jesus, when Mark himself failed in his early years of service for God – see Acts 13:13 and 15:37-38.

In the first three chapters, chapter 1 introduces Jesus, emphasising that, though a Servant, He is the Son of God. In verse 1 Mark mentions the gospel, that is the good news, a term used more frequently in Mark than the other three Gospels. The remainder of the first three chapters deal mainly with the call of the twelve disciples and a number of miracles.

We come today to chapter 4 and incidentally we shall not immediately continue our studies in Mark next week but will return to it at some stage in the future, God willing. Mark's Gospel contains far more miracles than parables, more actions than words, in keeping with this presentation of Jesus as a Servant. Four of the relatively few parables in Mark are contained in this chapter, and, with a miracle, chapter 4 breaks down neatly into five parts:

- the parable of the sower, from verses 1-20;
- the parable of the candle or lamp in verses 21-25;
- the parable of the secret growth of a seed in verses 26-29;
- the parable of the mustard seed in verses 30-34; and finally
- the miracle where Jesus calms the storm on the lake from verse 35 to the end of the chapter.

First of all, then, the parable of the sower which Jesus tells in verses 1-9 and explains in verses 10-20. This parable and its explanation are also recorded in Matthew 13 and Luke 8, with slight changes of emphasis. The story was one to which all the listeners could relate. It would be a common sight to see a farmer spreading seed by hand. Inevitably, as he threw the seed out, it would fall on different sorts of ground with differing results. Jesus mentions four types of ground in His parable. First of all in verse 4 there is the way side or the pathway, uncultivated land where the birds came and ate the seed which just lay on the hard surface. Then some seed landed on stony ground with very shallow soil. The seed sprouted but as soon as the sun rose the fragile plants withered away because there was not sufficient soil for strong roots to form. Thirdly, in verse 7, some of the seed fell among thorns which were far stronger than the seedlings which the farmer wanted and those seedlings were smothered by the thorns. Lastly, in verse 8, some seed did fall on good ground and there was fruit of varying yields for the sower.

Now let me read 4:9-12: "And he (Jesus) said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them."

The parable had been spoken by Jesus from a boat to the whole crowd gathered at the lakeside. To them, in verse 9, Jesus indicates that only some of the individuals in the crowd will have the spiritual ability really to hear and understand what is the spiritual message of these parables. Jesus explains this further to His disciples in verses 10-12. In the Bible, a mystery is something not revealed previously but now shown by God to those who are His own, those who have really heard and accepted His word. But those who are "without", to use the word in verse 11, that is those who don't belong to God, they look but they don't see, they hear but they don't understand and the parables of Jesus to them are merely interesting stories without conveying the underlying spiritual message.

There is a basic if unpopular principle here for Christians today: we can't expect people who are not born again Christians to understand the truth of God as set out in the Bible. Only those who have the Holy Spirit, that is all Christians, have the capacity to understand the things of God – as Jesus said in John 16:13: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth..."

So, the explanation of the parable was not offered by Jesus to the crowd but only to the twelve disciples and some others who remained with them. That explanation begins with the statement in verse 14: "The sower soweth the word." You may find it interesting to note the different introductions to the explanations of the parable of the sower. In Matthew 13:18 the emphasis is on the sower, it is "...the parable of the sower." In Luke 8:11 the explanation begins with "The seed is the word of God", the emphasis being on the seed. Here in Mark 4:14 the act of sowing is emphasised, consistent with Jesus being presented as the Servant working at sowing.

Jesus goes on in verses 15-20 to explain what meaning there is in the four types of ground on which the seed fell. The way side or pathway tells us that the seed doesn't sink into the ground and, like the birds, as soon as the seed is sown Satan comes and takes it away.

The stony ground is a picture of people who initially receive the word of God gladly but as soon as adverse conditions such as opposition arise, there is no root and so those people are upset and fall away. Thirdly, the people represented by the thorny ground are those who hear the word of God but the cares of the world and the desire for other things creep in and suffocate the word of God so that there is no fruit. Thankfully, there is a fourth ground, the good ground in verse 20 where the seed, the word of God, is genuinely received and welcomed, resulting in fruit for God.

This is a solemn parable because it tells us that most who hear the word of God do not really receive it. Most hearers are either hard hearted and indifferent, or shallow with no depth to their response, or are so preoccupied with worldly things that the word of God is choked out. Dear listener, I do hope that you are among those represented by the good ground because you have genuinely received God's word into your heart by taking Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. But even in the good ground we note that the seed brought varying levels of fruit for the sower. There is a challenge here for every Christian: am I totally committed to the Lord Jesus in my heart and life so that there is the maximum fruit for God? I suggest that fruit for God means becoming more like Jesus. In the context of Mark's Gospel, this would involve being wholehearted and ceaseless in my service for Him.

It is important to see how fundamental this parable of the sower is. In Matthew chapter 13 it is the first of seven parables dealing with the kingdom of heaven. In Mark 4 it is the first parable in a chapter containing four parables in a Gospel which has relatively few parables. In Luke 8 it occupies a prominent position and is far more detailed than any of the parables previously recorded by Luke. It is one of the relatively few parables recorded in all three of what are often called the synoptic Gospels, that is Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In Matthew and Mark the parable of the sower follows immediately after the statement by Jesus as to His new relationships. No longer would His brethren be those with whom He had natural links, such as Mary His mother or the Jewish nation, but His brethren would be those with whom He had spiritual ties. Having stated that, as recorded in Mark in the last five verses of chapter 3, Jesus immediately goes on to tell this parable of the sower which emphasises that that new relationship comes about by hearing and receiving the seed, the word of God. Anything and everything else of a spiritual nature flows from that fact, which is why this parable is so important. God's kingdom grows through the spreading of the word.

The second part of Mark 4 is verses 21-25 which I will now read: "And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick? For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath."

In this parable of the candle, I suggest that Jesus is emphasising two matters. First of all, receiving the seed, the word of God, not only produces fruit but also light. One of the great Bible chapters about bringing light is John 9. In that chapter Jesus miraculously gives sight to a man who had been blind since he was born. In verse 5 of that chapter Jesus says: "...I am the light of the world." When the previously blind man was questioned by people, he could not provide all the answers but he was certain of something, as recorded in verse 25: "...one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see." The evidence of his dramatic change could be seen by everyone. Psalm 119:130 says: "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." So, receiving the word of God enables me to see and understand spiritual things which previously were hidden to me and in the dark, so to speak.

This parable of the candle also emphasises a second point. Light isn't much use if it is hidden. As Jesus said, a candle isn't bought to be put under a bowl or hidden under a bed but to put on a candlestick so that its light is seen and is of use. If I really have received the word of God then my light should be evident at home, at college, at work and to my friends and neighbours. Certainly in the context of Mark's Gospel, my service for God should be seen. Not that any Christian should be seeking to impress people with his or her service for God, but that service, conducted for God's glory and not mine, should be visible to all.

Again, there is the challenge in verse 23 to have ears that really do hear what Jesus is saying. However, in this case Jesus goes on in verses 24 and 25 to warn those listening then, and us today, to be careful what we are hearing. If we listen to the truth of the Bible we will gain in spiritual understanding and be able to understand even more. But if we listen to anything other than that truth, what little of spiritual things we do know even that will be damaged and effectively taken away from us.

The third part of Mark 4, from verse 26 to verse 29, concerns the secret growth of a seed. To summarise the verses, they say that if a farmer who sows seed goes regularly, night and day, to see it, he doesn't know how the seed sprouts and grows and fruits. It just does! Then, eventually, the grain is ripe and the farmer sends in the harvesters. Jesus said that this is like the kingdom of God where the Lord's workers may and should work hard in sowing and caring, but the kingdom grows only through Divine influence, unseen by natural eyes.

The words of these verses 26-29 are recorded only in Mark and therefore need to be considered in the context of the theme of this book. Jesus is the Divine Sower and Reaper. However, I believe that there is also an acceptable application of these verses whereby, if my service for God is modelled on that of the perfect Servant, Jesus, it is right that I, like Jesus, should labour hard in the sowing of the seed, the word of God. However, real spiritual growth in hearts comes from an unseen Source which I can't influence. It is the work here of the Holy Spirit.

I am reminded of Psalm 126:5-6: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

Next in Mark 4 is the fourth section of the chapter in which Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed – see verses 30-34. I will read verses 31 and 32: "It (the kingdom of God) is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: but when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it."

This parable contains a warning for us. A tiny mustard seed is shown to grow into a great plant with great branches so that birds take shelter in it. The previous section of this chapter emphasised the Divine Source of the secret growth that takes place in the kingdom of God, the secret, real internal growth. In the parable of the mustard seed, the emphasis seems to be on the external, impressive growth which is clearly visible to all. Part of the clue in interpreting this must be in the statement in verse 32 "...that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it." In verses 4 and 15 of our chapter, it is stated that the fowls of the air represent Satan and it is consistent to carry that interpretation into the parable of the mustard seed.

This external aspect of the kingdom of God includes the influence of Satan and is therefore false and dangerous. It suggests to me something purporting to be the kingdom of God, something big and impressive but not real. Men have built a structure for the church which seems impressive but which actually contains not just true believers, but also those who are professing but not real believers. That structure is actually under the influence of Satan who wants to divert attention away from the truth, based solely on Jesus Christ who is the truth (John 14:6), to a big structure which actually has extended things beyond the word of God. What a solemn warning for the servants of God!

Finally in this chapter of parables, we come to the amazing miracle recorded in verses 35-41. After an exhausting day of talking to the crowds and to His followers, Jesus is taken by His disciples across the lake. Jesus falls asleep in the back of the boat, leaning on a pillow, the only time in Mark's Gospel where the perfect Servant is recorded as sleeping. The lake was susceptible to sudden storms arising and in the words of verse 37: "... there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full." The disciples, some of them fishermen experienced in the storms of Lake Galilee, were concerned for their own safety and awoke Jesus, who rebuked the wind and said only three words to the sea, "Peace, be still." From the "great storm" of verse 37 there was the transformation to a "great calm" in verse 39.

In verse 40, Jesus gently rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith in Him. He was with them in the very same boat, in their very same circumstances. Surely they didn't really doubt His care for them or His ability to deal with those circumstances?

Here is a key message in this section. The One who is the perfect Servant is also the One who has supreme power, unlike an ordinary servant. As the Son of God, He is creator of all things (see Colossians 1:16) and everything must

obey the word of His power. Not only does He have power over the forces in creation as seen in this last section of Mark 4, but if we were to read chapter 5 we would see in His further miracles that He has power over demons, over disease and over death, whether in man, woman or child.

The disciples ask in the last verse of our chapter: "...What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" The wonder of this One whom they followed was being revealed progressively to them.

And what for me? Do I seek to model myself and my service for God on the perfect Servant of Mark's Gospel? Do I faithfully sow the word of God recognising that God alone can give the increase? Do I show the light of my new life to the world around? Can I answer from my heart the disciples' question, "What manner of man is this?"

May each of us who has heard and received the word of God seek to be real servants of the One who is both the perfect Servant and the mighty Son of God.

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