

Mark 4:21-41
July 2, 2023

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: How open are you about your faith in Jesus? If we had a hypothetical continuum numbered 1-10, and 1 = “keeping quiet about your faith” and 10 = “verbalizing your faith every chance you get,” where would you rate yourself and why? [Let people engage]

Transition: We are light-bearers who reflect the light of Christ. We should not be ashamed of our faith. We should not keep it a secret. If we do, we are wasting the opportunity for influencing others for Christ and instead allowing them to influence us. Not only should we not keep it a secret, but we should live our lives in a way that is like a light to the world. This is our responsibility. We are called to be different. If we are the same as the people around us and they can't tell the difference between us, then we are not being a light! Let's read the text.

BOOK:

A Lamp on a Stand

²¹ He 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? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. ²³ If 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. ²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

The Parable of the Growing Seed

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

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet 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.”
³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Jesus Calms the Storm

³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” ³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. ³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. ³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Our job is merely to sow the seed. We tell people the truth and give them an opportunity to hear and understand. But we cannot change them. Neither can we predict who will change or when they will change or if they will change. So we keep praying and we keep sowing.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 121-125). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

He Announced a New Kingdom (Mark 4:21–41)

The lamp (vv. 21–25). In this parable, our Lord used a common object (a lamp) in a familiar scene (a home). The lamp was a clay dish filled with oil, with a wick put into the oil. In order to give light, the lamp had to “use itself up”; and the oil had to be replenished. If the lamp was not lit, or if it was covered up, it did the home no good.

The Apostles were like that lamp: they were called to shed God’s light and reveal His truth. But they could not “give out” without first “taking in”; hence, the admonition of Mark 4:24–25. The more we hear the Word of God, the better we are able to share it with others. The moment we think that we know it all, what we think we know will be taken from us. We must take heed *what* we hear (Mark 4:24) as well as take heed *how* we hear (Luke 8:18). Our spiritual hearing determines how much we have to give to others. There is no sense trying to “cover things up” because God will one day reveal all things.

The seed growing (vv. 26–34). The first parable reminds us that we cannot make the seed grow; in fact, we cannot even explain *how* it grows. There is a mystery to the growth of the seed and the development of the harvest. It takes a good deal of faith to be a farmer, and also a good deal of patience. In the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, the Lord suggested that much of the seed scattered would fall on unproductive soil. This fact could discourage His workers; so, in this parable, He reassured them “in due season we shall reap if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9).

The second parable gave the disciples both warning and encouragement. The encouragement was that, from very small beginnings, the kingdom would eventually grow in size and in influence. While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, it was probably the smallest seed that the Jews sowed in their gardens. It was a traditional symbol of that which is tiny. Our Lord began with 12 Apostles. Later, there were as many as 500 believers (1 Cor. 15:6). Peter won 3,000 at Pentecost; and throughout the Book of Acts, that number steadily increased (Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). In spite of the sins and weaknesses of the church, the message has been carried to other nations; and one day, saints from *every* nation shall worship before His throne (Rev. 5:9).

But the growth of the seed is only one part of the story; we must also account for the birds in the branches. In the Parable of the Sower and Soils, the birds stood for Satan, who snatches the seed (Mark 4:15). If we are to be consistent in our interpretation, we must take this into consideration, for both parables were taught on the same day. The growth of the kingdom will not result in the conversion of the world. In fact, some of the growth will give opportunity for Satan to get in and go to work! There was Judas in the disciple band, and Ananias and Sapphira were in fellowship with the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:1–11). Simon Magus was part of the church in Samaria (Acts 8:1–24), and Satan’s ministers boldly invaded the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:13–15). The bigger the net, the greater the possibility of catching both good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47–50).

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become citizens of the heavenly nation, children in God’s family, and subjects of the King of kings and Lord of lords. What a privilege it is to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

God's Servant, Jesus Christ, is the Master of every situation and the Conqueror of every enemy. If we trust Him and follow His orders, we need never be afraid. *Victory* is the major theme that binds this long section together. Mark recorded four miracles that Jesus performed, and each miracle announces even to us today the defeat of an enemy.

Victory over Danger (Mark 4:35–41)

“The same day” refers to the day on which Jesus gave the “parables of the kingdom.” He had been teaching His disciples the Word and now He would give them a practical test to see how much they had really learned. After all, the hearing of God's Word is intended to produce faith (Rom. 10:17); and faith must always be tested. It is not enough for us merely to learn a lesson or be able to repeat a teaching. We must also be able to practice that lesson by faith, and that is one reason why God permits trials to come to our lives.

Did Jesus know that the storm was coming? Of course He did! The storm was a part of that day's curriculum. It would help the disciples understand a lesson that they did not even know they needed to learn: Jesus can be trusted in the storms of life. Many people have the idea that storms come to their lives only when they have disobeyed God, but this is not always the case. Jonah ended up in a storm because of his disobedience, but the disciples got into a storm because of their *obedience* to the Lord.

The geographic location of the Sea of Galilee is such that sudden violent storms are not unusual. While crossing this very sea one summer afternoon, I asked an Israeli tour guide if he had ever been in such a storm. “I certainly have!” he replied, throwing up his hands and shaking his head. “And I never want to be in one like it again!”

The storm described here must have been especially fierce if it frightened experienced fishermen like the disciples. There were at least three good reasons why none of the men in the ship should have been disturbed, even though the situation appeared to be threatening.

To begin with, they had His promise that they were going to the other side (Mark 4:35). His commandments are always His enablements and nothing can hinder the working out of His plans. He did not promise an easy trip, but He did promise a guaranteed arrival at their destination.

Second, the Lord Himself was with them, so what was there to fear? They had already seen His power demonstrated in His miracles, so they should have had complete confidence that He could handle the situation. For some reason, the disciples did not yet understand that He was indeed the Master of every situation.

Finally, they could see that Jesus was perfectly at peace, even in the midst of the storm. This fact alone should have encouraged them. Jesus was in God's will and knew that the Father would care for Him, so He took a nap. Jonah slept during a storm because he had a false sense of security, even though he was running from God. Jesus slept in the storm because He was truly secure in God's will. “I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep, for Thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

How often in the trials of life we are prone to imitate the faithless disciples and cry out, “Lord, don't You care?” Of course, He cares! He arose and rebuked the storm, and immediately there was a great calm. But Jesus did not stop with the calming of the elements, for the greatest danger was not the wind or the waves: it was the unbelief in the hearts of the disciples. Our greatest problems are within us, not around us. This explains why Jesus gently rebuked them and called them “men of little faith.” They had heard Him teach the Word and had even seen Him perform miracles, and yet they still had no faith. It was their unbelief that caused their fear, and

their fear made them question whether Jesus really cared. We must beware of “an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12).

This was only one of many lessons Jesus would teach His disciples in the familiar environs of the Sea of Galilee, and each lesson would reveal some wonderful new truth about the Lord Jesus. They already knew that He had the authority to forgive sins, to cast out demons, and to heal diseases. Now they discovered that He even had authority over the wind and the sea. This meant that they had no reason ever again to be afraid, for their Lord was in constant control of every situation.

Grassmick, J. D. (1985). *Mark*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 120-122) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

3. THE PARABLE OF THE LAMP AND THE MEASURE (4:21–25)

Jesus used the parabolic sayings of these verses on various occasions (cf. above references). Mark put them here because their message reinforced the message of Jesus’ kingdom parables and demonstrated the need for a proper response to them. Mark 4:23–24a recalls verses 3 and 9, indicating that Mark understood these words to be part of Jesus’ parabolic teaching to all (cf. vv. 26, 30) rather than the continuation of Jesus’ private address to His disciples.

4:21–23. In this parable Jesus pointed out the self-evident fact that **a lamp**, a lighted wick in a shallow clay bowl full of oil, was not meant to be lit and then hidden **under a measuring bowl** (as was done at bedtime) **or a bed** (lit., “dining couch”). Rather, **it** was to be placed **on its stand** where it would give light. Then Jesus explained (*gar, for*) **whatever** was **hidden or concealed** (during the night) was **meant to be brought out into the open** (for use in the day). This story from everyday life conveyed a spiritual truth for **anyone** willing to learn from it.

4:24–25. If a person accepts His proclamation (cf. 1:15), God will give him a share in His kingdom now **and even more** will be added in its future manifestation (cf. 4:21–23). But if one rejects His Word, that one suffers absolute loss because even the opportunity he has for a share in the kingdom now **will** someday **be taken away from him**.

4. THE PARABLE OF THE EARTH BEARING FRUIT BY ITSELF (4:26–29)

This is Mark’s only unique parable. Like the Soils Parable, it presents a comprehensive picture of the coming of God’s kingdom: sowing (v. 26), growing (vv. 27–28), and harvesting (v. 29), with emphasis on the growing phase. Only one person, the sower (not identified), appears in all three phases.

4:26. The initial words in this parable could be rendered: “**The kingdom of God** is as follows: it **is like...**” In phase one, the sower **scatters seed on the ground**.

4:27–28. In phase two the sower appears but is not active. After planting **the seed**, he leaves it and goes about his duties **night and day** without anxious thought for the seed. Meanwhile it germinates, **sprouts, and grows** in a way **he did not know** and cannot explain.

The soil (lit., “the earth”) **produces grain** which develops to maturity in successive stages. The soil does this **all by itself** (*automatē*; cf. the English “automatic”). This key Greek word (emphatic by position) could be translated “without visible cause” implying “without human agency,” and thus refers to work done by God (cf. similar situations in Josh. 6:5; Job 24:24; Acts

12:10). God works in the life-bearing seed which, when planted in good soil, grows stage by stage and produces grain without human intervention.

4:29. The sower's ultimate interest is phase three, the harvest. Whenever (future) **the grain is ripe, he** immediately (*euthys*; cf. 1:10) **puts the sickle to it** (lit., "sends forth the sickle," a figure of speech for "sending forth the reapers"; cf. Joel 3:13) **because the harvest has come** (*parestēken*, "stands ready").

Some interpreters view this parable as a picture of evangelism. Some take it as depicting spiritual growth in a believer. Others see it as a picture of the coming of God's kingdom by the mysterious, sovereign work of God. Its emphasis is on growth under God's initiative in the interim phase between the proclamation by Jesus (the lowly Sower) and His disciples and the ultimate manifestation of the kingdom by Jesus (the mighty Harvester). The third view is preferred in light of Mark 4:26a and the overall context of the kingdom parables.

5. THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED (4:30–32) (Matt. 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19)

4:30–32. This parable has an elaborate double-question introduction which states in essence that the emergence of God's **kingdom** is similar to what happens to **a mustard seed** (the common black mustard, *sinapis nigra*) after it is sown on **the ground**. In Jewish thinking, its small size was proverbial since it was **the smallest** of all the seeds sown in the field. It took 725–760 mustard seeds to weigh a gram (28 grams equal one ounce). The mustard shrub is an annual plant which, growing from seed, **becomes the largest of all garden plants** (*ta lachana*, "large, fast-growing annual shrubs") in Palestine, reaching a height of 10–12 feet in a few weeks. **Birds of the air** (undomesticated fowl) are attracted by its seed and the **shade** of its large **branches** (cf. TDNT, under the word "*sinapi*," 7:287–91). This parable emphasizes the contrast between the smallest of the seeds growing into the tallest of the shrubs. It contrasts the insignificant, even enigmatic beginning of God's kingdom, embodied in the presence of Jesus, with the greatness of the end result to be established at His Second Advent when it will surpass all the earth's kingdoms in power and glory.

The reference to the birds may simply indicate the surprising size of the end result. Or perhaps they represent evil forces (cf. v. 4), but this would indicate an abnormal development of God's kingdom. Probably they represent the incorporation of the Gentiles into God's kingdom program (cf. Ezek. 17:22–24; 31:6). What God had promised to do (Ezek. 17), He began to do in Jesus' mission. (The kingdom, however, is not to be identified with the church; cf. comments on Mark 1:15.)

6. CONCLUDING SUMMARY (4:33–34)

4:33–34. These verses summarize the purpose and approach of Jesus' parabolic teaching (cf. vv. 11–12). His practice was to speak **the Word** (cf. 1:15) **to them**, the crowds plus the disciples, through parables which He adapted to their levels of understanding.

Because of misconceptions about God's kingdom, **Jesus ... did not** teach about it **without using a parable** (in figurative speech). **But to His own disciples** privately (*kat' idian*; cf. 6:31–32; 7:33; 9:2, 28; 13:3) **He explained** (lit., "kept on explaining") **everything** about His mission as it related to God's kingdom. This dual approach, illustrated here in chapter 4, is assumed throughout the rest of the Gospel.

E. Jesus' miracles demonstrating His sovereign power (4:35–5:43)

Mark's selection of parables is followed by a series of miracles, indicating that what Jesus *did* (His works) authenticated what He *said* (His words). Both relate to the presence of God's sovereign rule (kingdom) in Jesus.

With only three exceptions Mark put all the miracles he recorded before 8:27. (Cf. the list "The Miracles of Jesus" at John 2:1–11.) This was to highlight the fact that Jesus would not tell His disciples about His coming death and resurrection until they openly acknowledged Him as God's Messiah.

This section contains four miracles that clearly show Jesus' sovereign authority over various hostile powers: a storm at sea (4:35–41); demon possession (5:1–20); incurable physical illness (5:25–34); and death (5:21–24, 35–43).

1. THE CALMING OF THE STORM ON THE LAKE (4:35–41) (Matt. 8:23–27; Luke 8:22–25)

4:35–37. The vivid details indicate that Mark recorded an eyewitness report, probably from Peter. On the **evening** of **that day** of teaching by the lake (cf. v. 1), Jesus took the initiative and decided to cross **over to the other** (east) **side** of the Sea of Galilee with **His 12 disciples**. Though not stated, He probably desired relief from the crowds and rest. Perhaps also He sought a new sphere of ministry (cf. 1:38). Even so, **other boats**, carrying those who wanted to remain with Jesus, tagged along.

His disciples, several of them experienced fishermen, took charge of the voyage. The words, **just as He was**, refer back to 4:1 and link Jesus' teaching in a boat with His miracle-work in a boat (cf. the disciples' address, "Teacher," v. 38).

The journey was interrupted by **a sudden furious squall**, common on this lake, surrounded by high hills and narrow valleys that functioned as wind tunnels. A storm in the evening was especially dangerous, and on this occasion the boisterous **waves broke over** (lit., "kept spilling over into") **the boat so that it was nearly swamped**.

4:38–39. Exhausted from a full day of teaching, **Jesus was sleeping ... in the stern**, on a sailor's leather rowing **cushion**. The panic-stricken **disciples woke Him** with a cry of reproach (cf. 5:31; 6:37; 8:4, 32) at His apparent indifference to their situation. Though they called Him **Teacher** (Gr. for the Heb. *Rabbi*), they did not yet understand His teaching.

Jesus **rebuked** (lit., "ordered"; cf. 1:25) **the wind and said to the waves**, "Be silent! Be muzzled and remain so!" (the force of the Gr. perfect tense, *pephimōso*) This verb, "be muzzled," was somewhat of a technical term for dispossessing a demon of his power (cf. 1:25) and may suggest that Jesus recognized demonic powers behind the ferocious storm. But at His command **the wind** stopped and **the lake** became **completely calm**.

4:40–41. Jesus rebuked **His disciples** for being **afraid** (*deiloi*, "cowardly fear") in a crisis. Despite Jesus' tutoring (vv. 11, 34) it still had not dawned on them that God's authority and power were present *in Jesus*. This is what He meant by His second question, **Do you still have no faith?** (cf. 7:18; 8:17–21, 33; 9:19)

In stilling the storm Jesus assumed the authority exercised only by God in the Old Testament (cf. Pss. 89:8–9; 104:5–9; 106:8–9; 107:23–32). That is why the disciples **were terrified** (lit., "feared a great fear") when they saw that **even the** forces of nature did **obey Him**. The verb "terrified" (from *phobeomai*, "have awe;" cf. *deilos*, "cowardly fear," in Mark 4:40) refers to a reverence that overtakes people in the presence of supernatural power (cf. 16:8). However, their question to one another, **Who is this?** indicated that they did not fully comprehend the significance of it all.

Church, C.L. (1998). *Mark* In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (pp. 432-433). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

FAITH IN GOD (4:35–41)

Jesus demonstrated His absolute trust in God by sleeping through the storm on Lake Galilee. The disciples mistook Jesus' trust for apathy: "Don't you care?" Strangely, their fear is not mentioned until Jesus had quieted the storm. Here faith is courage based on trust in God's care no matter what. The disciples' question, "Who is this?" suggests their awe stemmed from the realization that some-how their Teacher did what only God could do.

Leavell, L.P. (1972). *Mark*. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The Teacher's Bible Commentary* (p. 622). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

In 4:21–25 the parable of the candle points up the Christian's responsibility for action. Someone may have questioned the value of bearing witness or sowing seed if the response was to be as limited as the preceding parable suggested. Jesus pointed out that a Christian has no choice. The purpose of a saved life is to dispel darkness. In 4:24–25 we are taught that faithfulness in shining will determine reward.

In 4:26–29 we discover the mystery of growth. The point appears to be that we are not equipped to know the results of either our sowing or shining. The results may come many years later, but they come. The Zealots had their own methods of getting results, but Jesus said the kingdom would not come about according to their methods.

The parable of the mustard seed is recorded in 4:30–34. Its connection with the three preceding parables can be seen in encouragement to those who are reaping meager results. It is not up to us to measure the response, but to sow the seed. A well known saying reminds us that "great oaks from little acorns grow." This is another way to express this parable.

Teaching by Miracle (Mark 4:35–5:43)

The passage—Turning from teaching by parable, Jesus began to teach by miracle. In 4:35–41 Jesus established himself as Lord over nature. In withdrawing from the multitude, he and the disciples put out onto the Sea of Galilee. This ordinarily placid body of water was subject to violent storms. The minute details in 4:38 and following undoubtedly came from an eyewitness. Jesus commanded the storm to "be muzzled," using a verb form that implied immediate action, proclaiming the miraculous element of his word. This was not a gradual diminution of the wind and waves, but immediate calm. The disciples were originally frightened by the storm, but 4:41 points out their fear in the presence of One who has power over the storm.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Mark 4:21-41. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.