



A LAMP AND A MEASURE

Catalog No. 1113
 Mark 4:21-25
 Twelfth Message
 Brian Morgan
 May 3rd, 1998

In our studies in the gospel of Mark, we are the place in Jesus' ministry when the leadership of Israel has stiffened and fixed themselves in dead opposition to Jesus. At this critical juncture, Mark records that Jesus makes a dramatic shift in both the arena and the method of his teaching. He departs the traditional location of the synagogue for the open air, and forsakes the open announcement and proclamation of the kingdom for the more cryptic metaphor of the parable.

His reason for taking these actions is clear. Everyone in Israel welcomed the announcement of the kingdom of God, the great age when the exile would end, Israel would be vindicated from her enemies, the temple would be rebuilt, the law internalized in the hearts of the people, and all nations would stream to Zion. Yes, everyone was eager to behold the dawning of the kingdom. Why, then, the controversy? The dispute arose over the way Jesus taught that the kingdom was coming. This was what aroused controversy, anger, and even violence. But, undaunted, Jesus refused to do it any other way.

Tom Wright explains why:

Jesus was not underwriting any one else's ambitions; in fact, far from it, he was challenging them. He would come to rescue his people, not in a blaze of triumphant glory, but in the sowing of seed, the long-promised prophetic "word." This plan of judgment and mercy was to be put into operation, not through the Herodian dynasty, nor through the Pharisaic movement, nor through high priestly activity in the Temple, nor yet in the plottings of holy revolutionaries, but in Jesus' own proclamation and activity.¹

This kingdom would not be inaugurated through sword, politics or ceremonial ritual, but with a farmer's bag of seed! This image of the seed comes from the book of Isaiah. The prophet envisioned a time when Israel would go through a devastating judgment. The land would be left desolate, like a forest burned to the ground. But then there would come a time of mercy:

**"Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,
 and it will again be subject to burning,
 Like a terebinth or an oak
 Whose stump remains when it is felled.
 The holy seed is its stump"** (Isa 6:13).

**"Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
 and a branch from his roots will bear fruit"** (Isa 11:1).

It is not without significance that these parables in Mark's gospel all focus around the word *seed*, which is used twelve times (the number of the tribes of Israel) in chapter 4. This seed would give birth to a new nation.² Knowing the way of the seed, then, is to know the way of the kingdom and how it grows. There is nothing more important to the church today. Great damage is done by well meaning Christians who are eager to advance the kingdom, but they attempt to do this the wrong way.

In the first parable, that of the sower and his seed, Jesus explained that the inauguration of the kingdom would not look promising at first. Much seed would be snatched away by an enemy. Other seed would be scorched and left without root, or choked by worldly pleasures. However, the fertility granted those who did responded positively would far outweigh the initial rejection. The eye of faith would look past that rejection to the fertile fields of the remnant, knowing that the future lay with them.

The next two parables, concerning the lamp and the measure, are addressed by Jesus solely to his disciples. This is what would give them the tools to enter into the parables. It is the critical stopping point before they go on. No more can be given them until they pass through this gateway. When they acquired the necessary tools, what was concealed in the parables and hidden from others would be readily available to them. These stories would give them eyes to see the way of the kingdom of God, present, right before their eyes.

Teaching this truth is one of my passions as a pastor. Christians often regard their lives as ordinary and routine, punctuated now and then by bouts of affliction and inconvenience. My joy comes on the day they get a new lens through which they see the kingdom of God right in the midst of their ordinary circumstances. Transcendence permeating the mundane! That is what the parables were designed to accomplish.

I. The Parable of the Lamp (4:21-23)

And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a peck-measure, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus says that no one brings a lamp into a room and puts it under a peck-measure³ or a bed. Why would

anyone do such a ridiculous thing? A lamp wouldn't fit under a peck-measure; and if it were put under a bed, the bed would catch fire. No. A lamp is placed on a lampstand to illuminate the room. As we saw last week, the parables of Jesus were carefully designed to elicit the attention of hearers by alluding to images and stories that were familiar to Israel, accounts that evoked her hopes and dreams. But, once the hearer had been drawn into the story, Jesus would add a surprising new twist to shatter existing world views.

The image of the lampstand evoked deep emotions in Israel's memory. It reminded them of the seven-branched golden lampstand whose purpose was to illuminate the holy place inside the temple (Exod 25:31-40). It reminded them, too, of the dark days of Judges, when the light was almost extinguished in Israel. It was then that God sent Israel her first prophet, Samuel, who would fan the flame of God's word once more in the nation.

And what revolutionary zeal could be awakened by the memory of Judas Maccabeus, who recaptured and cleansed the temple from Antiochus Epiphanes! Then a new lampstand was made, one which burned a miraculous eight days—the first Hanukkah (164 B.C.). But it was the apocalyptic visions of the prophet Zechariah that kept Israel's zeal at burning point as she awaited the Messianic Age. In chapter 4, the prophet has a vision of a new lampstand with seven lamps of oil that burned so brightly they illuminated the whole earth. When Zechariah asked what this meant, the reply came, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord of hosts" (Zech 4:6).

Had that moment arrived at last? Had the long expected light come in Jesus? "You who walk in darkness will see a great light!" (Isa 9:2). This was what Jesus was claiming. But why then does he conceal the light in parables? He explains that if he has concealed the light of the secrets of the kingdom, it is only a temporary thing. The divine intention was to put that lamp on a lampstand and, like the lampstand in the temple, enlighten the entire nation and beyond to the whole world. For he says of the coming Servant, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob ...I will also make You a light to the nations" (Isa 49:6). But for now, it is reserved for those who have ears to hear. As Tom Wright says:

If too many understand too well, the prophet's liberty of movement, and perhaps life, may be cut short. Jesus knew his kingdom-announcement was subversive. It would be drastically unwelcome, for different reasons, to the Romans, to Herod, and also to zealous Jews and their leaders, whether official or not. He must therefore speak in parables, "so that they may look and look but never see." Only those who are in the know will be allowed to glimpse what Jesus believed was going on. These stories would get past the censor, for the moment.⁴

So, says Jesus, the truth is hidden for now, but that is only temporary; complete disclosure would follow. The purpose behind its being concealed would be revealed, but only through instruments who have ears to hear—the privileged few.

Lest privilege tempt the disciples to pride, Jesus now goes on and picks up the idea of the "measure" in the next parable, followed by the image of a "bed," in verse 27 (we will take this up in our next study).

II. The Parable of the Measure (4:24-25)

And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your measure of measure it shall be measured to you; and more shall be given you besides. For whoever has, to him shall {more} be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

Here "the metaphors of the lamp and measure (vs. 21, 24) are combined into a double parable by means of the catchword 'measure'."⁵ In this way, Jesus links the theme of light with harvest. This may be an allusion to Isaiah 9:2-3, where the prophet uses these same two images to describe the intense joy Israel would experience when the light of Messiah came:

**"The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.
You will multiply the nation,
You will increase their gladness;
They will be glad in your presence,
As with the gladness of harvest."**

Now that time of light has arrived, and with it a huge harvest that would bring intense joy in Israel. But, says Jesus, that joy is only for those who have "ears to hear." This image takes the disciples back to the first parable of the sower, encouraging them to be the "good" soil. It is not enough to be passive listeners; they must allow the word to go deep, and they must keep it free from worldly competition and distraction that might choke it out. If they are careful to do that, Jesus says, there will be great reward. For the attention they gave to the parable would be the *measure* of profit they would receive from it. The word *measure* is used three times for emphasis, once as a noun, twice as a verb. This threefold alliteration, "*measure of measure it shall be measured,*" resonated so deeply among the disciples, it is quoted exactly the same way in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So to those who are eager to enter into the parable, who delve deeply into these cryptic metaphors, the reward will be commensurate, and even more shall be given besides.

It seems to me that the "more" is not merely more information, but, rather, the spiritual sensitivity to see in an entirely new dimension. To the casual listener, the parable seems a commonplace illustration. But to those who diligently meditate and beg for more, they will see

beyond these common metaphors to the story of Israel, which was being retold and was even reaching its climax right in front of them, in the person of Jesus. To them yet even more will be given, and they will understand how Israel's story is being made new in them! So the parable would draw them into Israel's story, and, as the disciples of Jesus, they would be on center-stage, so that he, who was now the light of the world, would make them light bearers with him! Through the hard work of study, meditation and prayer (Prov 2:1-4), that cryptic mystery shrouding the parable would give way to wonder, awe and appreciation. The disciples would become part of something much bigger than themselves: an incomprehensible harvest, a whole new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

We see this joy in Peter as he preaches his first sermon, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). On that day, the apostle was drawn into the center of Israel's story, her passions and dreams. He saw what Israel's leaders could not see, because he had a new lens to behold the kingdom right in front on him. Thus he entered into what Isaiah predicted, as in one day three thousand new sons were born:

**“Who has heard such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Can a land be born in one day?
Can a nation be brought forth all at once?
As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth
her sons” (Isa 66:8).**

So, take heed to how you listen. By the measure with which you measure, it shall be measured to you, and more besides. But if you are indifferent to the parable, and never look beyond the surface, not only will it yield no profit, it will be detrimental to you. It will lead to a loss of whatever insight you may have had about the kingdom. In this way, the parables could be compared to our muscles: if we don't use them, they atrophy.

Parables were much more than information booths or academic Hebrew lectures to be casually listened to. Parables were time-sensitive doorways, given when Israel's history was reaching its climax, entrances or exits that sent people inexorably down one of two roads. The parables either sealed them shut in their shallow, three dimensional universe, or opened them up to a new heavenly world in which they would never be the same. The parables divided the true Israel from the false, endowing people with sight or making them blind. Parables were not philosophical homilies. They were gateways that ushered their listeners headlong to their destinies.

Before the disciples hear the rest of the parables, Jesus hands them the two images of a lampstand and a measure. They must understand that the goal of the lamp is to illuminate the nation and the world, but they must never lose sight of the means. If the lamp is hidden under a “peck measure,” that is only temporary. By the measure of attention they give, they will be drawn into the light, becoming lovers of it, and from the inti-

macy of that relationship they will pass it on to the rest of the world. A lamp and a measure, two simple images, but these are indispensable tools needed to enter into the kingdom of God.

III. Implications of the lamp and the measure

A. With what measure do you measure?

Though these parables were time-sensitive to the inauguration of the kingdom in Jesus' day, we must never become callous to the time honored principle that God's truth is organic and precious. God's word is one hundred per cent relational. It is the intimate unveiling of the personal God. God does not merely dispense information, he dispenses himself, his person, in every text of Scripture. And there is nothing more precious than the saving truth of the gospel. Therefore, at every unveiling of his word, we must be attentive and thoughtful. Just as Constantine, who even as emperor humbly rose to his feet in respect whenever the word of God was read, we must in humility pray for open, receptive hearts, and with active minds go beyond the surface of the text to the person of Christ himself.

In this regard, I see three dangers in our modern world. First, there is the great danger of the computer in our information age. We have the ability to access everything, but, tragically, we possess nothing. The parables don't dispense volumes of information; they give just a few images to grip the mind and heart. But it is people's tenacious grip on those images which God uses to open the kingdom to those who love him. The church is in danger of removing that element from worship—the necessity to think, ponder deeply, pray fervently and meditate, and have everything presented in nicely bound pre-wrapped consumer packages. If that is what you want, you might as well go to an athletic event, where the electronic scoreboards even says when and what to yell. Over the last few years, I have noticed that less and less people bring their Bibles in churches that I have visited. The measure we give shall be the measure we receive.

Secondly, I find that our technological world throws so much at us—voice mail, e-mail, answering machines, fax machines, modems, videos, satellites—it is almost impossible to create that sacred solitude where the still small voice of God can speak to us through his word. All these distractions choke out the word. Yet it can be done. Dick Woike spent twenty minutes every day reading through and reflecting on the Bible. Each year he purchased a new Bible and read it straight through, taking notes and recording his meditations every day. He did that each day of his life for over forty years. The measure he gave was the measure he received, and more besides.

Thirdly, many of us wrongly assume that now that the church has become the bearer of that light, that privilege cannot be lost. Let us remember the haunting words of our Lord to the church of Ephesus, that though her doctrine was good, her first love had grown

cold: “The One who walks among the seven gold lampstands, says...repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place” (Rev 2:1, 5). If you visit Ephesus today, you will see that the Lord made good his word. There is neither candlestick nor church there. In fact, there is no city. Remember that the measure we give is the measure we shall receive.

B. How do you pass on the light of the lamp?

We must also remember that though Jesus is the light of world, and that light will one day illuminate the whole earth, the mystery was entrusted to those who loved him. Jesus refused testimony from those who had no relationship with him (the demons), veiled it to those who opposed him (the religious leaders), but he opened it deeply to those who loved him.

The disciples continued this practice in the book of Acts. The apostles gave themselves diligently to public preaching. But, beyond preaching, they were continually reaching for the deep encounters. Acts is filled with very intimate private encounters, especially when the gospel advanced in new directions. Philip engaged a eunuch in the desert; Paul’s wounds were washed in a jailer’s home; Lydia prevailed on the apostle to stay at her house; Titus Justus opened his home next door to the synagogue; a slave named Onesimus provoked a New Testament letter because his master neglected a personal relationship.

What this is saying is that while we keep the goal of world evangelism in mind, we must never forget the means. The light of the gospel is passed through intimate personal encounters that honor people by taking time with them, welcoming them, dining with them. These encounters do not cheapen the gospel with trite phrases or pat answers. They are honest, and give as much of life as they do the message. These encounters are awash in love. We must never allow our technology to deceive us into believing that we can produce the harvest, bypassing the means of the intimate individual encounter.

Amen.

1 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 237.

2 See also Isaiah 5:1-7, where God inspects his vineyard, Israel, and finds no fruit. But in the new age, his seed will bear abundant fruit (Isaiah 55:10-13).

3 “peck-measure”— Bauer defines this as a “grain measure containing 16 sextarii = about 8.75 liters, almost exactly one peck.”

4 Wright, 237.

5 Richard Schneek, S.J., *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Biblical Press, 1994) 130.

© 1998 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino