

November 20, 2022

“The Expectations for Disciples”

Mark 4:1-32

FCF: The problem of wrong expectations

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The kingdom of God is not what we expect.
(anchor) So we need to listen carefully to what Jesus says.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Artemis I launched this past week. This is an un-crewed test flight which will circle and fly past the Moon. The main mission goals are to demonstrate the Orion systems in a spaceflight environment and ensure a safe re-entry, descent, splashdown, and recovery before Artemis II, the first crewed flight. This is a shakedown cruise. And, as such, preparations and expectations need to be straight, corresponding to reality. We’re going back to the moon. And NASA can’t afford to have any daylight between our ideas about life on the moon and the moon itself.

The same is true for discipleship, for following Jesus. Jesus wants our expectations set correctly. And He speaks to that. This is the last in our series on discipleship per Mark’s Gospel.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Mark 4:1-9, 14–20, 26-32](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

The mission briefing - that moment before a team sets forth to carry out an assignment, a new task, likely dangerous. Think of *Star Wars - Episode IV*. The Rebels are preparing for their assault on The Death Star. Think of *Toy Story*. Woody briefs the attack on Sid, using a model built from dominoes and other objects from Sid’s room. Think of *Maverick*. Pete Mitchell’s team is tasked with destroying an unsanctioned well-defended uranium enrichment plant. In each case, the group needs the objective to be clarified, any flawed expectations to be corrected.

It’s the same with Jesus and His disciples as He teaches about the Kingdom of God - the eternal touching the temporal, the future invading the present. The rub was the expectations of the time. Many thought it would be sudden and total. So to curtail the disappointment, minimize the discouragement, eliminate the disillusionment, Jesus spoke to this. For we need far more than our limited expectations. We need more than a boulder rolling through the land, crushing all in its path. We need a seed planted, changing the whole field. Which takes us to this teaching on the kingdom. Note how important this is ([READ Mark 4:3a](#)). Jesus starts with a command. The kingdom is not what we expect. So we need to listen carefully to what Jesus says.

We’re going to look at these three parables in Mark 4. What do we learn? The response depends on the hearer. The growth comes in stages. And the beginnings may seem small.

I. THE RESPONSE DEPENDS ON THE HEARER

The first parable is of the soils. Here’s the question. “If Jesus is the King, as seen with His mighty miracles, how can some be against Him?” The response depends upon the hearer.

A) *Along the Path*

1. Background

(**READ Mark 4:3-4**) This was a common method of the day, “broadcasting” seed as you walked. So it was natural to have seed fall on the path where birds could come swoop in and eat it up.

2. Significance

Well, how does Jesus explain this? The path stands for those with hardened hearts who refuse to believe. The birds stand for Satan and his labors as he seeks to thwart the growth of the seed.

B) On Rocky Ground

1. Background

(**READ Mark 4:5-6**) There were areas with shallow soil upon layers of rocks underneath. The rocks absorb heat in summer, release that heat in winter, causing the seeds to spring up. But they have no root system. So, when the intensity of the sun comes, they dry up and die out.

2. Significance

The explanation? The rocky ground is a shallow belief. The quick growth is an initial joy that proves to be superficial. The rocks are anything that prevent the roots from going deep. The heat is the persecution and trouble that comes from belief. And the withering is a falling away.

C) Among the Thorns

1. Background

(**READ Mark 4:7**) Think about it. Thorns do allow for growth. At least, to some extent. The problem is that they compete for nutrients and light, taking away the strength of the plants.

2. Significance

The point? The problem is not what’s absent but what’s been added – the thorns of worry, the snares of riches, the desires for things outside our reach. And because of this competition for the affections and attention of our hearts, it has a choking effect on the Word, making us unfruitful.

D) On Good Soil

1. Background

(**READ Mark 4:8**) In those times, a 5 to 15-fold gain was typical, 10-fold was good. All quite normal. But Jesus speaks here of a 30, 60, or 100-fold gain. This was unheard of in Galilean soil - especially in those days - far beyond what was expected and what folks were used to.

2. Significance

What is Jesus saying? He is speaking of fruitful soil and of the fruitful disciple. It’s in utter contrast to the other responses - now hearing the Word, retaining, persevering to produce a crop.

The response depends on the soil. This is the reason some stand opposed to this King.

Application:

It’s quite possible that, even as Jesus was speaking these words, there was a farmer within view sowing his seed. It’s possible. It’s certain that while Jesus was speaking, He was sowing seed. As He is now. We want to ask, “How can this be?” His response is, “Which soil are you?”

The kingdom is not what we expect. So we need to listen carefully to what Jesus says.

II. THE GROWTH COMES IN STAGES

Which brings us to the parable of the seed growing. Here the question is not about the opposition to but about the slowness of the growth. What's going on? (READ Mark 4:26-29)

A) *The Background*

1. The harvest will come

The farmer may not know all that is happening beneath the ground. But he knows that, despite all the forces working against the seed that has been sown, the harvest will come. It will come.

2. But there is a waiting

But it doesn't happen all at once. This is no insta-garden. This growth will come in stages.

B) *The Significance*

1. Not immediate

Jesus is speaking here to the expectations of the Jewish people. I've alluded already to this idea that the kingdom would arrive suddenly and all at once. Perhaps even politically or militarily.

2. But incremental

But Jesus says, "No, it will not be immediate but incremental." This is His correction even to us.

That may be hard for us to hear in some ways. But it is absolutely necessary.

Illustration:

Let me illustrate the point of this story with a story. Some of you may be familiar with the children's books featuring Frog and Toad. One is called "The Garden." Toad sees Frog's garden and wants to grow one of his own. But he has no idea of what is involved. And so when the plants refuse to grow at his pace, he gets mad and starts to yell at them. It's rather comical.

Application:

But what of our impatience? Think of the realm of personal change. We say, "This isn't working. Spiritual disciplines are too hard. Holiness is too hard. And it's cost me so much."

Or think of the realm of cultural change. We say, "This isn't working. Look at what's happening to the world around us. Enough of this love for enemies. It's time to take off the gloves and get mean." As though there were conditions given to Jesus' clear commands.

The kingdom comes in stages, like a seed. We need to listen carefully to what Jesus says.

III. THE BEGINNINGS MAY SEEM SMALL

Here's another question. "Why does the kingdom appear so insignificant?" The answer is that its beginnings may seem small. But those are just the beginnings (READ Mark 4:30-32).

A) *The Background*

1. The size of the seed

Again, let's start with the background. The mustard seed is not literally the smallest of seeds known to man. But it was the smallest known and used at the time. Remember, Jesus' point is not a botany lesson. He is making a comparison between small beginnings and great endings.

2. Its surprising growth

For this little seed, smaller than a sesame seed, can grow to be a bush so large that it's often thought of as a tree – sometimes 8 to 12 feet in height with branches spreading out from there.

B) The Significance

The point? (READ Ladd), *“Rejected by religious leaders, welcomed by tax collectors and sinners, Jesus looked more like a deluded dreamer than the bearer of the Kingdom of God.”*

1. Small beginnings

Jesus and His disciples made up a movement of very small beginnings. As did the message.

2. Dramatic growth

But those small beginnings exploded with dramatic growth. That's an objective historic fact.

Why so small? Jesus' answer to our concern is this. First the tiny seed, later the larger tree. The kingdom starts off small but in the end it will be astonishing how great it becomes.

Application:

Which is to say, “Don't overlook this message.” The kingdom has come. Don't overlook the good news of the kingdom - the king who accepts us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That has life-giving implications. Don't overlook it. In your broken relationships, the burden of the guilt you carry, the shame you feel because of what's been done to you, the bondage of your addictions – alcohol, prescriptions, porn, food, fitness, pleasure, sex – your hope is the gospel. The problems we face as a nation - racial divides, moral confusion, political tension, deepening cynicism, an inability to hear and speak with love - our hope is the gospel.

The beginnings of this kingdom may seem small. We need to listen to what Jesus says.

CONCLUSION:

Let's take a step back and consider this. The counter-intuitive nature of the kingdom should not surprise us. The fact that the responses depend upon the soil, that the growth comes in stages, that the beginnings seem small, none of that should surprise us. In fact, really the argument should go the other way. If indeed Jesus is God come in the flesh, we should expect the ways of the exalted Creator to be surprising to us. We should not be surprised at our surprise.

Jesus refuses to be boxed in by our little agendas. We read of His dealings with people - how He lays low those who think themselves great and lifts up those who have been pressed down. We read of His anger never erupting when He was mistreated but only when others are mistreated. He shows mercy to sinners - to people like us. All confounding our expectations.

This view of God is so different than any other worldview. It is harder in its demands but softer in its mercy. It is more exclusive in the one way to be saved but more inclusive in who it is that can be saved. Jesus does not stop at our expectations. The kingdom is so very expansive.

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