

Mark 4:21-34, The Parables (cont.)
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A. To understand what follows, we need to recognize that once again Mark has arranged his material chiastically. Follow Greg Fay's chiastic analysis (*CBQ* 51 [1989] 65-81) (except for 13, see Standaert 203 n.1):

1. Setting	1-2a	33-34
2. Agricultural Parables	2b-9	26-32
3. Discourse on Method	10-12	21-25
4. Interpretation of Soils		13-20

B. 21-25, Method

The Lord returns to two themes of 10-12, which are also the themes of the parable: the good news is proclaimed to all, but people differ in how they receive it. Here each theme is the focal point in a separate paragraph, 21-23 and 24-25. The structures of the two paragraphs are mirror images of one another. The first begins with a contrast, continues with a parallel, and ends with an exhortation; the second has the same three kinds of elements, in reverse order. *Actually, the contrast in the first is a negated antonym paraphrase, not quite the same as the true contrast in the second half, but both are built around an opposition.*

1. 21-23, The Word is proclaimed to all (cf. the method of the sower, broadcasting rather than planting seed; and the fact that in 11 the truth is spoken even "to them that are without").

a) 21, Contrast

1) That is, two statements that are the opposite of one another, one affirmed and the other denied.

2) "Candle" here is what we would call a lamp, a small dish of olive oil with a string wick hanging over the edge. The purpose of the lamp is to illumine. So you wouldn't put it under another piece of furniture, but rather on a stand from which its light can fill the room.

3) In sending his Son into the world, the Father does not desire to hide him, but rather to spread his glory abroad. *In Matt 5:15, the saying comes in a different context and has a slightly different application: to the good works of the believer, rather than the word of God. It was no doubt a common proverb, and the Lord uses it in different places with different emphases.*

b) 22, Parallel

1) Structure: this time, two statements that paraphrase one another. No contrast or inner tension here.

- 2) Again, Matthew records a different use of the expression by the Lord. In Matt 10:26, the hidden thing that becomes revealed is the sinful action of unbelievers. In the context here, it is the revelation of the Word of God. His purpose is to glorify himself: that is, to make his perfections manifest throughout his creation. Man-made religions teach that the knowledge of God is esoteric and hidden, accessible only through long study and the knowledge of secret lore, to be guarded from the uninitiated. The true God displays himself at every turn, both in his Word and through his creation.
 - c) 23, Exhortation: the same as in 4:9, at the end of the parable. It's not God's fault if you don't understand what he is saying. He has spoken openly (cf. John 18:20; Isa 45:19; 48:16; Acts 26:26), and he gave you ears to hear; use them.
 - d) *Application*: Our Lord's desire to manifest himself lies at the heart of the Great Commission. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," and will be fulfilled when "every knee shall bow, ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Our service to him should promote those ends.
2. 24-25, Differences of reception (cf. the different soils, and the two groups in 10-12). This time we start with the exhortation, and then pass by way of the parallel to the contrast.
- a) 24a, Exhortation: "Take heed what you hear."
 - 1) Our perceptions are shaped by our knowledge and expectations. One of my father's favorite sayings is, "You don't know what you see; you see what you know." A potato is food to a hungry Irishman, something to plant, grow, and sell to a farmer; and a cork for a jug to a mountaineer.
 - 2) So when we approach the revelation of himself that God has made, our expectations will strongly condition what we take away. If we come critically, we'll find faults. If we come academically, we'll find dry facts. If we come with spiritual hunger, we'll find nourishment.
 - 3) Luke records the saying as, "Take heed how you hear." From this perspective, the two are virtually identical.
 - b) 24b, Parallel
 - 1) The first half (about a measure) is probably a common proverb, originating in an economic setting. As before, it is used differently here than in Matthew's context (Matt 7:2). There, the "measure ye mete" is what you use in selling to others, and that determines what others will give you. Here, it applies rather to the measure you apply to the revelation God sets before you. The measure you

apply to the Word of God determines what you will receive from it. (RSV's "the measure you give is the measure you get" is too restrictive, and does not allow this meaning.)

- a> If you apply a historian's measure, you will learn ancient history.
- b> If you apply a critic's measure, you will find flaws.
- c> If you apply an artistic measure, you will find great poetry.
- d> If you apply a linguist's measure, you will find fascinating patterns.
- e> If you apply an ethical measure, you will find a code of conduct.
- f> If you apply the measure of a repentant, hungering soul, you will find new life and refreshment.

(This point is one on which seminaries fail abysmally: they give people the wrong set of measures with which to approach the Word of God!)

- 2) The parallel: "unto you that hear shall more be given." It is the hearer who receives more. That is, if you are receptive to what God is trying to say, you will understand more of what he is in fact saying. (Egyptian text drops out "that hear," losing the parallel entirely.)

c) 25, Contrast

- 1) Like the "measure" saying, this is probably a commonplace saying or proverb, originating in an economic context. Our modern-day equivalent is "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer," or, "It takes money to make money."
- 2) In the context of this paragraph, the "riches" in view must be spiritual ones.
 - a> Spiritual understanding leads to more spiritual understanding. The more of the Bible you know, the clearer it is to you. Spiritual disciplines in the daily life bring compound interest.
 - b> But if we approach the Word of God without such a spiritual basis, the limited understanding we may have borrowed from others will erode; cf. the student who abandons his parent's faith.

C. 26-32, Parables of the Seed

- 1. Audience: With "he said," v.26, contrast "he said to them" in 11, 13, 21, 24, to the disciples, and compare "he said" in 9 (MT, though not AV). Here Mark returns from the private explanation with the disciples, to the public teaching.
- 2. Subject: the Kingdom [or "rule"] of God. This was also the

subject of the parable of the soils, cf. v.11. But why isn't the parable of the soils introduced this same way? Answer: it emphasizes human responsibility in responding to the Scripture; these two parables emphasize God's sovereign power in the matter.

3. 26-29, Self-Growing Seed

"So is the kingdom of God ..."--this is how God's Kingdom manifests itself and spreads abroad.

a) The farmer's duties:

- 1) 26, he sows the seed.
- 2) 27, he patiently waits.
- 3) 29, he eagerly reaps.

No mention is made of weeding, cultivating, fertilizing, or irrigating. These can help, but are not absolutely necessary: cf. the agricultural patterns of the Bedouin or the migrants of Valais in Switzerland, where a seasonally nomadic group plants crops on the way through and harvests them on the way back. The only actions things that are absolutely necessary are faithful planting, patient waiting, and diligent reaping.

b) The seed's power: the images emphasize the intrinsic power and life within the seed.

- 1) 27, it springs and grows up, while the farmer waits.
- 2) 28, the earth bears fruit "automatically."
- 3) 29, the fruit "presents itself."

The farmer does not know how this all happens (27). The life is in the seed, which is (14) the Word of God. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:23, "incorrutable [seed], ... the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever."

c) Interpretation:

- 1) The Sower, as in the previous parable, is the one who spreads the Word of God. The Lord Jesus is one such (as in the parable of the tares, Matt. 13:37), but so are the apostles, just chosen in ch.3 and about to be sent forth in ch.6. They MUST sow; they WILL rejoice in the harvest; they CAN do nothing else.

- 2) The Seed is again the Word, and this parable urges us not to be complacent about its power.

a> Isa 55:11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper [in the thing] whereto I sent it.

b> 1 Cor 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

c> 1 Thes 2:13 For this cause also thank we God without

ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received [it] not [as] the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

d> Heb 4:12 For the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Too often we fear to share the Word of God with others; we hasten to defend it, when we should wield it. The reason people are so uncomfortable hearing it is that it does cut into them. It has a life and power of its own. We need to be better about letting it work on its own.

- 3) The comment about the sower's ignorance of how the seed grows (27) emphasizes that this parable is intended to instruct the disciples and us in our ministry, and cannot be restricted to the Lord Jesus. He surely understands, but most sowers of the word, those who will do "greater works than these" that he did, do not. What an encouragement to us to know that our labor is not in vain; that the Word will work in God's good time, and our part is to sow and be patient. Gal. 6:9, "in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."
- 4) What is the harvest? In Rev. 14:14-16, the Lord himself gathers his saints before God's great judgment comes, but here the saints are involved with him in the harvest, and the reference is to bringing convicted folk to the knowledge of God:
 - a> John 4:35, the fields white unto harvest
 - b> Matt 9:37-38, pray the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest.

4. 30-32, Mustard Seed

The previous illustration describes the MEANS of the kingdom's spread: by God's power, not man's efforts. This illustration emphasizes the MAGNITUDE of its expansion.

- a) Smallness of the seed (less than 1 mm): from its outward appearance, no one would suspect that the Word of God could have such profound and widespread effects.
 - b) Extent of its influence: can become a bushy shrub ten feet tall. The nesting of birds reflects Dan 4:21,22, the metaphor of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom as a great tree with dominion over other nations. The Lord's kingdom will have the extent and power for which earthly tyrants can only hope.
5. Note the shifting emphasis from seed-as-Word to seed-as-kingdom. The point seems to be that the kingdom of God is exhibited in the

spread and growth of the Word. Corresponds with the emphasis we have seen already on teaching and preaching over healings and other miraculous activities. "Thou has magnified thy WORD above all thy NAME," Psa 138:2.

D. 33-34, Conclusion

Three characteristics of the Lord's teaching:

1. Parabolic: 33 "many parables" reflects v.2 "many things by parables." Cf. John 3:12, earthly things presumed to be easier to understand than heavenly things, and yet the effect of sin is so great that even these are not readily understood without explanation.
2. Proportionate: "as they were able to hear." He does not cast his pearls before swine. cf. v.25.
3. Progressive: "he expounded all things to his disciples." Where there is understanding, he gives more. This and the previous point show that he remains in control of the word as it goes forth.