

GOD IS STILL WORKING IN THE WORLD

Mark 4:14-32

What do you “really” see when you look at something? That could qualify as a strange question, by the way. If you were to see a busy street in a downtown area of a large city, what do you “see” in addition to the obvious cars, trucks, people, trash on the street, traffic signals, buses, etc.? For example, you might see mindless pursuit of wealth and people rushing to go nowhere. You might see the “masses” struggling to survive in hard economic times. You might see “hope” in that people are working to accomplish something.

Getting closer to home, when something happens in your life, how do you interpret what is going on? Your lawn mower won't start and you check the gas tank and find that it is about a quarter filled, but you notice that there is a lot of cloudy stuff in the tank. So you empty the tank, flush it and fill it with fresh gasoline. You might even check the old gas cans you have setting around to see if any those have contaminated gas in them. Do you make a spiritual connection to your life regarding the need to be careful to allow only the “right stuff” to come into your mind and heart lest things get all clogged up in your thinking and your values? You might even take an inventory of what you normally watch on TV or what books you read and toss out the contaminated things that could pollute your mind. You might even make a physical body connection and think about how important it is to eat only healthy foods. The deeper question might be, do you see God working in such simple things to draw you closer to Him.

Jesus said on several occasions, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” He used the everyday things that he saw to teach the people principles of the kingdom of God and to point out how things worked with all kinds of people. When Jesus taught, there was **not** a lot of teaching that involved opening the Scriptures, reading a passage and doing an exegetical analysis of what Moses or David or Jonah said. You may have heard some people criticizing a few preachers for using the Readers Digest as their sermon text as if that was a terrible thing to do. Well, Jesus did not have the Readers Digest, He just look around and saw something going on that was fairly routine and He saw lessons in life and Kingdom principles in the simple things. He was a story teller and some people heard the stories and were entertained by them and learned nothing and others got the message. These others had “ears to hear.”

Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded many of these stories or parables that Jesus used as he taught. Most of us are familiar with the stories and we have the benefit of centuries of analyses that scholars have done to explore the meaning of these parables. In Chapter 4 of Mark we find several interesting parables. We will look at these and see how we can apply the truths to our lives.

The first eight verses of Chapter 4 Jesus related the story of the sower sowing seed. Depending on the condition of the ground upon which the seed fell, there were a variety of results. When you are planting oats or wheat, you broadcast the seed like you would plant grass seed on your lawn. Some of the seeds get in the flower beds and some get on the sidewalk. Jesus told the story and afterwards His disciples wanted to know the meaning or the moral of the story. This request was probably somewhat frustrating for Jesus. These disciples had already shown good perception in that they recognized that Jesus was worthy to be followed and listened to. In other words, they had “ears to hear.” This was a fairly straightforward story and its meaning should have been obvious to them. In fact, Jesus commented that “if you can't understand this parable, how will you be able to understand any parable?” This was an admonition for them to get their minds in gear! Think in spiritual terms! Look for life lessons!

Learn!

God's Word is Sown (4:14-20)

¹⁴“The sower sows the word. ¹⁵“These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. ¹⁶“In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky *places*, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; ¹⁷ and they have no *firm* root in themselves, but are *only* temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸“And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, ¹⁹but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. ²⁰“And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” Mark 4:14-20 (NASB95)

The sower was sowing the word: In the simplest and most straightforward sense, Jesus was talking about the proclamation or formal preaching of the good news of the kingdom. This was exactly what He was doing in talking with the crowds and in the discussion He had with the disciples. There are other ways in which the “word” is sown. In a more comprehensive sense, the application could be for any and all the ways the message (the good news) of the reign of God in all of life is declared. From other passages of scripture we have learned that the creation itself declares the glory of God. John told us in his account of the life of Jesus that the word or Logos was God Himself and dwelt among men in the person of Jesus. If we wanted to stretch a point, we could make the case that we can find the gospel message that “God reigns” in everything we see and experience.

Some have argued that this parable is the key to all the other parables, because in all of them Jesus preaches or ‘sows’ the word. The way parables work is that some people will look and listen and not really see or understand, but others will “get it” and turn to God, embrace His kingdom and seek His mercy and forgiveness. D. A. Carson observes

Even in the case of those ready to listen, shallow response is a danger. Careless or superficial listeners, who have no root, or those whose lives are too full of worries or pleasures (sometimes, these are equal dangers) will bear no fruit. Only those who listen, accept and act will be fruitful.

I guess that I’m somewhat at a loss to come up with actions people need to take in order to remedy the situation of having a hard heart and listening to the wrong advice, being shallow in that no thought is given to anything other than the pleasure of the moment, or being infested with so many worldly things and cares that there is no time for spiritual values other than to repent and take the first steps of letting God have top priority in your life. Wait! That was the message that Jesus was preaching! “Repent and believe the gospel of the kingdom of God.” You can read all the self-help books in the world but nothing is going to work unless you die to self and be born again. That is the only way to have the right kind of “soil” in our hearts that will bear fruit unto God.

God's Word is Heeded (21-25)

²¹ And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not *brought* to be put on the lamp stand? ²²“For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has *anything* been secret, but that it would come to light. ²³“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ²⁴ And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. ²⁵“For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.” Mark 4:21-25 (NASB95)

If you have a light, then use that light to illumine where you are. In all of creation, the one thing that sets humans apart from all the rest of creation is the “light” that has been given to

man as a result of his being created in the image of God. In John's gospel, he wrote of Jesus, "In Him was life and the life was the light of men." John Gill observed:

At the creation, when Christ, the Logos, breathed into man the breath of life, and he became a living soul, He filled him with rational light and knowledge. Adam had a knowledge of God; of his being, and perfections; of the persons in the Trinity; of his relation to God, dependence on him, and obligation to him; of his mind and will; and knew what it was to have communion with him. He knew much of himself, and of all the creatures; this knowledge was natural and perfect in its kind.

The tragedy of all tragedies occurred when Adam and Eve lost this relationship by choosing sin rather than obedience. The light was greatly dimmed but not extinguished and restoration was needed. I base my argument regarding the light not being extinguished in that man is still capable of knowing that God IS and that man is without excuse as Paul wrote in the first chapter of Romans.

I think that Jesus was challenging those listening to Him to use the light they had to discover the hidden things of God that were all around them. Failing to use the light you have as a result of being created in the image of God is like putting a lamp under a bed or under a basket. No one would do that! Yet, so many people fail to see what God is doing in the world around them.

You could make the argument that so much of what God is doing is not that obvious or it is hidden. What hides it? The darkness! That's why you have the light. Turn it on!

Don't you find it curious that Jesus said that things are hidden so that they can be or will be discovered (perhaps at the right time)? This could also simply mean that everything that is hidden will eventually be revealed. Another possible meaning is that none of the truths that are inherent (hidden) in the created world are beyond discovery. We can have a part in that process also. In our role as being the light of the world, we are to teach what the word of God says. We should be ready at all times to be able to respond to whatever questions there may be in life or about life with what the Word of God says. Many people are in spiritual darkness because they do not know God's way and we have an obligation to let the light we have been given shine.

Why do you think Jesus cautioned us to be careful with regard what we listen to? (In Luke 8:18, this is rendered "be careful **how** you hear.") Jesus just reminded them to "have ears to hear." What you hear is greatly influenced by how you hear. We could say the same thing about what you see and how you see. Everything we hear and see is processed through a set of filters that let certain bits of information come through and blocks out other information. We could call such filters "prejudices." We have prejudices as a result of the experiences and other influences to which we have been exposed. Such filters (or judgments) will influence the message our brain receives as a result of hearing and seeing.

Mark used the term "measure" in this verse where it says "By your standard of measure it will be measured to you." Matthew used this same idea in 7:2 which reads: "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."

In summary we could say that we are to use the God-given rational light we have to discover the hidden meanings in what we see and hear, **but** we must be careful to not miss the real meaning because of our prejudices and inaccurate judgments. Jesus quoted this common Jewish proverb which simply means this: When we see someone doing something, then we will conclude that his actions are either good or evil based on what **our** intentions would be if we were doing the same thing. If you were in some sort of volunteer organization and had the

disposition that you wanted to always be helpful wherever you could be, then some might interpret what you were doing to be helpful as “just trying to control everything.” What the critics would be doing in their criticism is letting everyone know what their agenda would be if they doing the same thing you were doing. This is the basis of Jesus’ statement “judge not, lest you be judged.” In judging or measuring a person’s actions or judging an event, we are judging and measuring our own self. The irony of being judgmental of others is that the person who is doing the judging will eventually be judged even more harshly by God and by others. By constantly being critical of others and everything that is going on, a person will develop such a reputation that he will be ineffective in whatever he tries to do.

If we use the God-given light we have to properly assess what is happening and to discover the hidden truths and principle of the Kingdom of God, then we will begin to see more and more. Our insight will grow and our faith will increase. If we don’t use it, then we (in effect) lose it.

God’s Kingdom Grows (26-32)

²⁶ And He was saying, “The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; ²⁷ and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know. ²⁸ “The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. ²⁹ “But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” ³⁰ And He said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? ³¹ “*It is* like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, ³² yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR CAN NEST UNDER ITS SHADE.” Mark 4:26-32 (NASB95)

The first of these two parables about the earth bearing fruit by itself is found only in Mark’s account. The lesson of this parable is that the power to produce change is inherent in the seed or the word of truth. If the condition of the soil is right (if the word is believed in the heart), then plant growth or spiritual growth and fruit bearing happens without any further action by the farmer or the one who shares the gospel.

The parable of the mustard seed is such a well-known story that it has become part of the vernacular in the Western world. Invoking this picture immediately brings to mind the fact that most significant changes start out very small and if there is any life force in what is happening and under the right conditions, then it will grow and have influence in (at least) the immediate area. This (mustard seed) principle was used by Jesus to describe how the Kingdom of God would grow from the small beginning there in Galilee to eventually impact the entire world. This principle is so universal that it can be applied to the good that can happen (such as the Kingdom of God) AND it can also be applied to the evil that can happen. While this truth was not part of the mustard seed parable teaching, it is worth noting so that we can be watchful and try to recognize what is growing in the garden of our lives and in the world around us.

God is at work in the world around us and we have the capability to see what He is doing if we will shine the light on it and discover the hidden truths that are all around us. Once we see what He is doing, then we need to join in and participate in the work of this Kingdom.