**PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM  
Mark 4:21–34**

***“‘Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued.   
‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.’” (24)***

It’s that time of the year when students are the busiest: preparing for final exams. In the last passage we studied in Mark’s gospel, Jesus gave us a sort of practice problem, giving us the parable of the sower and working out the solution for us by explaining what the four soils represent. In today’s passage, Jesus gives more instruction on how to understand parables, and then he gives us a test—parables with no explanation given, which we need to interpret based on Jesus’ instructions. Getting an A on Jesus’ test is very rewarding, for the prize is deep spiritual truth about the kingdom of God. Through Jesus’ teaching, we can learn how to receive the secrets of the kingdom and how God’s kingdom grows.

1. **A Lamp on its Stand (vs. 21–25)**

Jesus changes the scene of his parables from a harvest to a home. Look at verses 21–22: “***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.’***” Jesus highlights an obvious truth about the purpose of a lamp—it isn’t meant to use up excess oil, but to bring light to a house. In Jesus’ time, an oil lamp was commonly the only source of light after sunset, so putting your lamp under a bowl or a bed would plunge the room into darkness, whereas putting it on its stand would fill the house with light.

So what does the lamp represent in this passage? Verse 22 gives us a clue: “***whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.***” Putting a lamp under a bowl would be concealing it, but putting it on its stand is bringing it out into the open. In the context of this chapter, what is hidden yet meant to be disclosed? It is “*the secret of the kingdom of God*” (11)—the hidden spiritual meaning in Jesus’ parables, which Jesus wants to reveal to anyone who is willing to listen.

Light imagery in the gospels represents life, hope, truth, revelation, glory, and most of all Jesus himself, who is the light of the world (Jn 8:12). Light by its nature reveals what is hidden and dispels darkness. We learned last week about how the Word became flesh to reveal God’s grace and truth. Jesus made his Father known to us through his actions and his teachings, which he likens to a lamp. Jesus’ light exposes our sins and sinfulness, which is unpleasant and an affront to our pride. But Jesus’ light also brings life, hope, joy, and salvation. Jesus invites everyone with ears to hear to receive his radiant truths. Those who receive his teaching have a choice, whether to hide the lamp under a bowl or a bed and forget about it, or to put it on its stand to illuminate the house.

So how can we put the lamp on its stand? How can we bring out into the open the secrets of God’s kingdom? Let’s read verse 24 together: “***‘Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.’***” Jesus first teaches that we must apply careful consideration to the word of God, meditating deeply, not superficially. Jesus then gives a universal principle, “***With the measure you use, it will be measured to you***”. Jesus is promising that we will get out of his teaching in proportion to what we put it, here specifically based on the measure of each one’s careful consideration of his words.

To show how this works, let me offer an illustration. Imagine a benevolent king who asked his subjects to bring to him their measure of grain to show their gratitude for his kind rule. In ancient agricultural societies, containers of various sizes were used to measure out different amounts of grain. So some brought large containers with great joy and expectation; some brought medium containers; some brought a tiny one very reluctantly. After receiving their measures of grain, the king surprised them all by refilling the containers they’d brought with gold coins and jewels from his treasure vault. Each person received as much as his container could hold. Imagine the joy of those who measured out generously and the regret of the ones who measured sparingly. In the same way, Jesus teaches us how God rewards each person according to his attitude toward his words: God lavishes his rewards upon those who invest in his kingdom according to the measure they use for him.

God promises to reveal himself to those who put in wholehearted effort to know him in Jer 29:13 “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*” But we can't obtain a good spiritual result without investment. Because Jesus wants us to receive rich spiritual blessings from his gracious Father, he commands us, “***Consider carefully what you hear***”. When we hear Scripture preached or taught, Jesus encourages us to measure out our time, energy, and heart generously regarding his words. We can think of the depth and width and length of our own measuring container as our time, energy, and heart we give to God. God is pleased with those who seek his truth earnestly and with great effort, and he blesses them with abundant spiritual treasure.

What does this careful consideration look like practically? First, we need to carefully observe the Bible text to know what God says. The Bereans in Ac 17:11 show us a good example of this attitude: “*Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*” The Bereans had a strong spiritual desire for the truth, so not only did they eagerly receive the gospel message, but every day they carefully examined the Bible to verify for themselves what was being preached. We should imitate their noble example by reading God’s word daily—and not just skimming it, but carefully examining it.

Second, we need to interpret what Jesus meant, contemplating God’s mind and heart. In this process, we need to ask the Holy Spirit’s help in understanding God’s words. Because Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, we should acknowledge our inability to correctly interpret and understand Scripture without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In practice, we depend on the Spirit’s illumination through approaching the word prayerfully and humbly.

Third, we need to apply the truth of Jesus’s teaching to our lives. This is the ultimate goal of Bible studies and listening to messages. Studying the Bible without applying it is like learning all about some delicious food, yet not actually eating it and receiving its nourishment. Application involves submitting our thought patterns, behaviors, and even our desires to the authority of the word of God. In our ministry, God has granted us a good way to carefully consider the word of God through writing reflections on a daily and weekly basis. So when we reflect upon Scripture, we should set aside enough time, spend the energy, and give our hearts to write a deep reflection—not just superficially saying what we think others want to hear. We should expend the effort to dig out the spiritual truths that God wants to reveal to us, asking, “What does this passage mean for me?” We should allow God’s word to shine on all areas of our lives so that we can repent and find forgiveness, healing, and new direction in Jesus.

Jesus gives us a promise and a warning in verse 25: “***Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.***” If we don’t have spiritual desire or interest, then after being given Jesus’ teaching, we will quickly become distracted by the cares of life and forget what we heard, losing even what we had. But if we listen to Jesus’ teaching with spiritual desire and continue to consider it carefully, then not only will we retain that lesson, but God will reveal more to us. God promises blessings and fruitfulness in Psalm 1 for such a person: “*Blessed is the one… whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.*”

When we consider carefully Jesus’ teaching, then his spiritual truth illuminates our lives. The light of the gospel transforms us and shines in us and through us. In Mt 5:14–16, Jesus teaches, “*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*” Just as Jesus intends the hidden truths of the kingdom to be disclosed, Jesus intends for the recipients of his revelation, his followers, to shine his light in the world. The reason Jesus saved us is that we might shine through good deeds that glorify our Father in heaven, especially testifying to the gospel.

The one who discovers great spiritual treasure is the one who gives his heart and mind to study the word of God until he understands it. Martin Luther was a sinner tormented by his guilty conscience. But he studied the Bible, especially the book of Romans, with great devotion. He learned the secret that *“the righteous will live by faith”* (Ro 1:17)*.* The light of God’s word shone in, melting his legalism and self-condemnation, and he devoted his life to serving God and the church out of love and gratitude and became a shining light in the world. Searching out the treasure hidden in God’s words requires great effort. May God bless us to make this effort, receive the wonderful light of Jesus, and shine his light to the world!

So now that we know how to extract the kingdom truths from Jesus’ teaching through careful consideration, let’s listen eagerly as we consider Jesus’ next teaching so that his light may shine into our hearts.

1. **The Growing Seed (vs. 26–29)**

Jesus returns to agricultural metaphors, probably continuing his parable of the sower, now focusing exclusively on the good, fruitful soil. Look at verses 26–27: “***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.***” This parable teaches how the kingdom of God—that is, God’s rule—comes into a person’s heart. God’s kingdom begins with the sowing of God’s word—the preaching of the gospel. Paul emphasizes the importance of preaching with a series of rhetorical questions in Rom 10:14: “*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*” Without our preaching, people cannot be saved. Just as Jesus continually preached to the crowds and taught his disciples, we should scatter the kingdom seed of the word wherever God sends us. We can have faith that God will grow the seeds we spread if we sow faithfully by sharing our faith and inviting people to study the Bible.

The farmer in this parable doesn’t understand how the seed grows, but he has confidence that it will grow. Likewise, though we don’t understand how God works to expand his kingdom in hearts and in the world, we can know that his kingdom is growing inexorably whether we rest or wake. The sower can only do so much. He can plant the seeds and prepare a good environment for them to grow, but he cannot force the seeds to grow. In the same way, a preacher or Bible teacher is dependent upon the Holy Spirit to cause the kingdom of God to grow in each person’s heart. Only God’s divine power can give a spiritually dead sinner new birth into God’s kingdom; only God’s Spirit can cause a young believer to grow to spiritual maturity. This is cause for earnest prayer for God’s supernatural work in people’s hearts.

Jesus teaches another lesson about spiritual growth in verse 28: “***All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.***” Just as grain grows gradually in stages, so the growth of believers is step-by-step, not all at once but taking time. In a healthy spiritual environment, young believers can grow into disciples and then into shepherds. Some people take longer than others—it is a very individual process. But we know that God is working to make his kingdom grow in our hearts. Sometimes I wish that Bible students could mature faster, but I must remember how patient my shepherds were with me as I grew very slowly. Then I can serve others with patience and hope, trusting that God who helped me to grow is causing spiritual life to sprout and grow in the hearts of students.

Jesus teaches about the end result in verse 29: “***As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.***” The harvest is a time of great joy, a time of seeing the fruition of hard labor and long waiting. I believe the greatest joy we can experience on earth is through seeing sinners come to faith in Christ through our sowing or evangelism or prayer, or through seeing believers grow and bear fruit through our faithful shepherding. The joy of spiritual harvest makes all the laborious toil seem more than worthwhile.

Apostle Paul takes up this metaphor of agriculture applied to ministry in 1Co 3:6–9a: “*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. 9 For we are co-workers in God's service…*” As God’s servants, we are united with one goal. There is no need or warrant for competition, for we are but servants, and God will reward us based on our own labor, not relative to others. Paul knew the limitations of his own work and the necessity of others’ labor and especially of God’s work to make the seed Paul planted grow. So Paul was very humble, even as God used his sowing to produce a bountiful harvest.

1. **The Mustard Seed (vs. 30–34)**

Continuing with an agricultural setting, Jesus moves into the garden with his fourth teaching of this chapter, further describing the kingdom of God with the parable of the mustard seed. Let’s read verses 31–32 together: “***It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.***” Jesus is teaching here the spiritual principle that God takes something that is seemingly insignificant, even the very least, and raises it up to be the greatest. Mustard seeds are very small—1–2mm in diameter and less than 2mg—and were the smallest cultivated seed in ancient Palestine. Yet that tiny mustard seed could grow into a mustard plant up to 12 ft tall—the biggest plant in the garden.

Like a mustard seed, God’s work often seems almost vanishing small at the start, yet it can grow to have tremendous stature and influence. The nation of Israel exemplifies this. God chose Israel’s ancestor Abraham, a childless and hopeless old man, to father his chosen nation. When Abraham believed God’s promise to him, God made his name great and his descendants like the stars in the sky and through his seed blessed all nations.

Last week, we learned how Jesus, in his incarnation, took the most insignificant place, coming to earth as a baby placed in a feedbox at birth. He lived a humble life of poverty; ministered as an itinerant, homeless preacher; died the most painful and shameful death on the cross; and was buried in the ground like a mustard seed. But Jesus had a purpose for such a lowly life and humiliating death. Before his crucifixion, Jesus taught, “*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*” (Jn 12:24). Jesus laid down his life in order to give us new life, and from the earth his powerful new life sprouted and grew, spreading throughout the world as the largest and most influential movement in history—the kingdom of God, the church.

When we look around today, though, we can see so much spiritual need of the lost and directionless. On the U of M campus of 50,000 students, I feel very insignificant, like a small mustard seed in a big garden. But insignificance in our own eyes is no obstacle to God, who delights in choosing “*the things that are not to nullify the things that are*” (1Co 1:28). We shouldn’t be discouraged by outward insignificance. If we persevere in sowing the word, I believe God will use the small seeds we plant to transform lives and use our small ministry to have a great spiritual influence on campus. Because of the transformative power of the kingdom of God working in a person’s heart, we serve others with great hope, recognizing by faith the inestimable value of one person in God’s economy. Just as the large branches of the mustard plant provide shade and rest for the birds, so one seemingly insignificant person who receives God’s word can grow to bless and nurture and influence many others for the kingdom.

Look at verse 33: “***With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.***” Jesus spoke many parables, wanting to reveal more and more of the wonders and glories of the kingdom of God. The limiting factor was not Jesus’ ability to communicate, but the poverty of their understanding and faith. Likewise, it is only our spiritual immaturity that limits what treasures we can receive from the word. However, Jesus shows how we can broaden our spiritual capacity in verse 34: “***He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.***” When Jesus was alone with his disciples he explained more to them than the crowds could bear or accept. We can mature spiritually when we commit follow to Jesus as his disciples and spend time alone with him, listening carefully to his words in Scripture and responding in prayer.

Now that we have heard Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom of God, we have a choice—to hide the lamp under our beds or to put it on its stand, to forget his words and lose them or to consider them carefully and gain even more. May we each measure out our time and effort wholeheartedly to the study, consideration, and obedience of God’s word. Then his kingdom can grow in our hearts like a mustard seed, the largest of garden plants, and his light can shine through us to the world.