



Sermon Transcript January 21, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus Secrets of the Kingdom Mark 4:1-34

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 21, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Mark 4:1-34

¹ Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ² And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” ⁹ And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

¹⁰ And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹² so that “they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”

¹³ And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰ But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

²¹ And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? ²² For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” ²⁴ And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. ²⁵ For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

²⁶ And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.
²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.
²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.
²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

Introduction

In Mark 4, we find Jesus sitting in a boat with a great crowd surrounding him. Mark tells us he was teaching them. This is one of the largest units in the Gospel of Mark dedicated to the teachings of Jesus. Mark describes these teachings of Jesus as parables. It says in verse 2, “*And he was teaching them many things in parables.*” “Now what is a parable?”, you might ask. It is nothing more than an analogy, an illustration or a story that makes a spiritual point. Often the parable would be drawn from an experience that the average person would readily understand. In fact, all three of the parables that Mark records for us have to do with planting a seed, the growth of a plant and the anticipation of a harvest. Given the agrarian culture of Israel at the time, people could readily resonate with the picture Jesus would paint for them through his words.

There is something else you should know about these parables before we look at them this morning. Jesus says in verse 11 that the parables contain “*the secret of the kingdom of God.*” The word “secret” does not mean that what Jesus is telling them is to be kept quiet. He is not saying to them, “can you guys keep a secret?” Rather, it is the word used for “mystery.” In Scripture, a “mystery” or a “secret” was something that was hidden in the past but now was being disclosed or revealed. In other words, through these parables, the disciples were receiving new information about the kingdom of God that they didn’t know before. It wasn’t new to God. Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us, “*That the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever.*” Not everything has been revealed to us by God. In fact, we

are told that “*no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.*” We know what has been revealed to us through the Scriptures and that revelation from God has been progressively revealed over time. And so now through these parables, these “*secrets of the kingdom of God,*” something new regarding the kingdom of God, were being disclosed to the disciples.

That really gets to the heart of one of the major themes of the Gospel of Mark. The disciples did not yet understand the hidden mysterious nature of the kingdom of God. Don't get me wrong. They were waiting for the Messiah to come. But they were anticipating that with the coming Messiah, God's kingdom would come in force. Israel's enemies would be vanquished and God's promised peace would come to earth. In fact, the prophet Daniel spoke of a time that was to come when “*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed.*” The image in Daniel is of a massive stone that smashes the kingdoms of this world and from this stone grows a mountain that fills the earth. And now Jesus comes along with this “*secret of the kingdom*” and he says, “it is kind of like a little insignificant seed that falls to the ground.” That is an entirely different picture than a massive stone that shatters things when it is hurled to the earth. Did you ever hear the sound a seed makes when it hits the ground? There is no sound that is audible to our ears when a seed hits the ground. That tells us something about the nature of the kingdom of God. Through these parables, Jesus is telling the disciples that the present form of the kingdom of God does not look like what they were expecting.

I wonder about the people who first received the Gospel of Mark. Remember, this book is being written to the church in Rome that is facing terrible and cruel persecution under the hand of Nero. Many Christians at that time were rounded up and made sport of as their lives were taken. I wonder, if this what they were anticipating when they gave their lives to the resurrected Jesus Christ. Is this what they expected would be required of them when they identified themselves with Jesus and his church? What is God up to? Where is this triumphant kingdom of God?

And then, here we are, two thousand years later. It has been two thousand years since this kingdom of God has broken into this world in the person of Jesus. And yet, you look around and you are forced to wonder, “where is it?” It is not a hard question to ask when you live in New England. This is the area of the country where a Great Awakening once emerged that impacted an entire nation and an entire generation. And now here we are, considered by many to be on the frontier of the mission field. The spiritual temperature of New England is of such that we are classified as an unreached people group. Those who attend an evangelical church in New England hover between 1 to 3

percent of the population of New England. All six states in New England are among the top ten least religious states in the nation.¹ Where is this kingdom of God?

In addition to that, I am not exactly sure what rubric you would use to compare one generation to the next. But since the time of Christ, every epoch of history and every culture tells the story that evil still has significant sway in this world. Are things worse than they were before? I am not sure how you can determine that. But it sure doesn't seem like things are getting better. So, what is this kingdom of God? Or better yet, "Where is it?" Like the disciples, we are kind of left scratching our heads and coming to terms with the fact that the kingdom of God doesn't always look like what we would necessarily expect.

Michael Wilkins tells us that these parables are designed to help us understand the nature of the present form of God's kingdom. In its current form, the kingdom of God is a "clandestine kingdom" . . . an "undercover kingdom" . . . it exists in "hidden form."² But make no mistake about it, it is here! It is real! God is at work! And if nothing else, you should get great encouragement from these parables because they help us see how God is at work in this world today. This morning we are going to spend our time in the first parable, but I will allude to the other two parables to reinforce what is being said by Jesus about the kingdom of God in its present form.

The Kingdom of God is Like a Farmer Sowing Seed

So what is the kingdom of God like today? Well, it is like a farmer sowing seed on the ground. Listen to what Jesus says starting in verse 3, *"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."*

It is a pretty simple picture to understand. When a farmer casts seed upon the ground, the seed falls onto four different kinds of soil. You don't have to be much of a farmer to understand that you want that seed to fall on good soil. If that seed falls along the path where people walk it will be food for the birds. If the seed falls on shallow ground where the roots are unable to take hold or if there are weeds and thorns competing with that seed for nutrients, those seeds will not grow into the plant you long for and will not yield

the harvest you desire. But if the seed falls on good soil, well then a bumper crop can be anticipated. Even a city boy can understand such a picture!

And so Jesus says that this is exactly what the kingdom of God is like. Go down to verse 14 where Jesus begins to explain the parable to his disciples. *“The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”*

Let me tell you four important things that this parable tells us about the kingdom of God. These four things tell us something about this “hidden form” of the kingdom of God that the disciples were not expecting. These four truths tell us about life in God’s kingdom today, right now.

It is a Spiritual Kingdom: The first thing I want you to see from this parable is that the kingdom of God in its present form is a spiritual kingdom. The disciples were looking for a very physical kingdom. And that is yet to come. In fact, at the end of each parable is this picture of an unbelievable harvest or a plant growing to an incredible size. This indicates that there is coming a day when the harvest, the judgment, the consummation of God’s kingdom will come in full to this world. So while these parables describe life in the present form of the kingdom of God, they also allude to that future day the disciples thought of when they thought of the kingdom of God. But at this moment in time, Jesus is saying to them that the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom.

In this spiritual kingdom, we discover through this parable that the seed is *“the word of God”* and the four soils represent the condition of our hearts and how we respond to God. In fact, I think part of the purpose of Mark 4 is to explain Mark 3. Mark 3 describes different reactions there were to Jesus. There was the crowd that was enamored with Jesus because of the miracles he did. There were the religious leaders who flat out rejected Jesus. The family of Jesus is mentioned in Mark 3 and they didn’t know what to do with Jesus. In fact, Jesus ends the passage by redefining his family as

those who do the will of God. And then, of course, you have the disciples who are following Jesus as best they know how. This is the way it will always be in this present form of the kingdom of God. Not everyone will respond to Jesus. In fact, only one of four soils is classified as “good soil.” And yet, there is this sense in the present form of the kingdom of God, that there will always be the presence of “good soil.”

You get a picture here in this parable of a real battle that takes place in our hearts. Each kind of soil in this parable describes a certain posture of the heart. The first heart is a “hard heart.” This is a heart that completely rejects Jesus and the message of the gospel. Then there is the “shallow heart.” This is the one who expresses interest in Jesus, perhaps like the crowd, but when they discover it will cost them something to follow Jesus, they fall away. Then there is the “strangled heart.” This is the one who expresses interest in Jesus, but they are easily distracted from the cares and the riches of the world and they fit Jesus in when it is convenient or when it fits their schedule or when there is a problem. And then finally, there is the “open heart.” These are the ones who embrace and follow Jesus and they experience a change on the inside of them that makes them into the kind of people they always wanted to be but never had the power in themselves to become that person.

See, the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom that is played out in the hearts of men. And you get the picture here that there is a very real battle that is going on in the spiritual world for your heart. Jesus speaks here of an “*evil one*” who comes and snatches away the seed. You can even see the corruption of our own hearts as we want God in our lives but we want him on our terms or we want him to serve us. Dallas Willard said, “The ultimately lost person is the person who cannot want God. Who cannot want God to be God. Multitudes of such people pass by every day and then pass into eternity. The reason they do not find God is that they do not want God or, at least, do not want him to be God. Wanting God to be God is very different than wanting God to help me.”⁴

See, this kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. The disciples thought their real enemy was Rome. But in reality our battle is not against flesh and blood. Our battle is against the principalities and the power of the air, against the evil one. And when Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God he had to do battle with Satan and death and sin. In fact, the three miracles that follow this passage give demonstration to how Jesus has vanquished the powers that are hostile to God. He calms the storm. He delivers the man possessed by a demon. He raises a girl from the dead. When Jesus went to the cross and rose from the dead he defeated Satan, death and sin. That is the nature of the

kingdom of God in its present form. The disciples were right to think of the kingdom of God as being a time when evil is defeated and righteousness rules and reigns. The “secret” though, that they didn’t get, was that the evil that needed defeated was the evil that lives inside our hearts. Jesus came to establish his kingdom inside our hearts and it is a very real and present spiritual kingdom and it is living within us.

It is a powerful kingdom: The second thing I want you to see about this kingdom is that it is a powerful kingdom. But I am using the word “power” in a different way than what you might think. I would like to refer to the work of the kingdom of God in its current form as a “soft-power” as opposed to a “violent-power.”

Here is the “secret” of this current form of the kingdom of God. It is spreading today by the power of God into the hearts of people. But it is a “soft power.” By that I don’t mean “weak.” Rather, I mean gracious and gentle and loving. Here the power is in the seed. You can’t even hear a seed hit the ground when the farmer sows the seed. But it is amazing to see the power of a seed as it turns into this magnificent plant. Isn’t it rather amazing to see what comes from a seed planted in the ground? It is a wonderful display of power. It just grows. It just comes out of the ground on its own without any noise. And there it is.

That is the point of the second and third parable Jesus tells. In verse 26 Jesus says, *“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how.”* In other words, we simply plant the seed and God is powerfully at work in the lives of people. Or, like the mustard seed, at times it can seem like the kingdom of God is of little consequence in this world. Jesus says it is the tiniest of seeds. At times it seems like the church or God’s kingdom is insignificant. And yet, it becomes the largest plant. God is at work!

The seed is the word of God. I can’t explain it. Just like I can’t explain how this tiny seed turns into a glorious plant. When the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is planted into the hearts of people, it has the power to bring kingdom life. Paul writes, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.”*

God is so gracious the way he does it. Through the seed, the word of God, we confront the realities of the evil of our hearts. We come to see how we have made a mess of the life God has given us and how we have made a mess of others. We know the guilt that lies within. And yet, we discover in the word of God a God who is a God of love. He has

made a way for us to be rid of our guilt by defeating our enemy at the cross. And through faith in Jesus he makes us his children and he changes us on the inside. It is a “soft-power.” It is an invitation that sounds like this, “*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.*” This kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace and mercy and love. It has the power to change you forever.

It is a kingdom of choice: Bracketing the explanation of the first parable is this call for us to listen to the words of Jesus. Jesus says in verse 9, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” And then he reinforces this thought in verse 23, “*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*” Therefore, in this parable of the four soils we discover that entrance into the kingdom of God is a matter of choice. You need to respond to the invitation to be part of the kingdom of God. This parable is a call for you to examine the condition of your heart by first listening to what God has to say.

Do you have a hard heart against God? Sometimes a hard heart is the product of a painful experience in life that causes a person to be angry with God. I have seen people carry that anger to their grave with their fists literally clenched with defiance and anger against God. Or, sometimes, a hard heart is the consequence of coming to that fork in the road in life and just deciding that you are going to go full steam ahead living life without God. My concern for the hard heart is that the conscience gets so seared and so calloused that it no longer feels the prick of God’s Word. It is not to say that the power of the kingdom of God can’t break up that hard ground. And yet, at the same time, for those who have ears to hear, don’t persist in your hardness of heart to the point where you no longer can hear and respond.

The rocky and the thorny soil represents kind of a middle ground. I would think churches are filled with this kind of soil and it can be more dangerous, I think, than hard soil. Because the practice of religion without the power of it can deceive you into thinking that everything is alright. In fact, Jesus defines this soil as a heart initially receptive to the Word of God. But hardship comes along or the things of this world distract us and it chokes God out. And we can find this kind of soil in our lives from time to time. God is not looking to be convenient to us. God is not asking if we could please fit him in somewhere in our lives. God is not just the God of the “good times.” God is calling us to give him our lives. I find this to be a daily decision I have to make.

Here is the good soil. Here is the soil of choice. Here is the offer of the kingdom. Knowing that Jesus is the ruler of this world because he died on the cross for my sin and rose from the dead, I make this choice. I confess my sin. I put my trust in what Jesus

has done for me on the cross. He has paid for my sin. I submit to Jesus as the ruler of my life. I begin a journey of living in his wonderful kingdom. It is a kingdom of choice and I encourage you to check out the condition of the soil of your heart.

It is a kingdom that transforms your life from the inside out: The reason the disciples longed for the coming kingdom is because they very much acquainted with what it means to suffer under the hand of evil. For hundreds of years, they endured injustice from one empire to the next. We get that. We long for a world where good and justice rules the day. We long for a transformed world. It will come.

But do you know what is exciting about this form of the kingdom of God. That transformation has already begun. Where? Listen to how Jesus closes out the parable. *“As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”* When Jesus takes up residence in your life and sits on the throne of your life, he brings with him the blessings of the kingdom of God into your life. He forgives your sin. He frees you from guilt. His Spirit comes inside of you and starts to change your desires and your heart and he fills you with peace.

Do you know what happens? You become “fruitful.” Love begins to rule your heart. You become forgiving. You actually have compassion for people. You love what is right and true. Your words and the tone of your voice are filled with patience and kindness and gentleness. Acts of injustice bother you. The poor and the needy become your brother and your sister. There is even a soft spot in your heart for your enemy because you know deep down that the sin that resides in your enemy once controlled you. And so really your “enemy” is not your enemy but a victim of “the” enemy. In all these things, we call them fruit, when demonstrated from our hearts, God is extending his kingdom through us.

There is a lot of talk right now about the “flu” and the particular strand of the flu that is being passed from person. It is an “undercover” illness if you will, and it passes from person to person. If I could twist this illustration onto a positive note, that is how the kingdom of God is today. Through the change that God does in our lives through Jesus Christ, this world has been “infected” from person to person to person to person. It may not be evident to all, but the kingdom of God has spread all over this world. It is an undercover kingdom, but it is nonetheless real. God’s kingdom is alive and well and it present and active in New England.

Conclusion

I take great encouragement from these parables. In fact, they shape our “way of life” here at WEFC. We say in our “way of life” that “we live with conviction that God is at work in and through our lives.” I stand before you with great confidence that God is at work through this church to advance his kingdom of God in this world. It is these parables that help assure me of this truth.

The parable of the four soils is a defining parable for me. It tells us that the kingdom of God in its present form is a spiritual kingdom and everyone of us has to respond to the words of Jesus. How will you respond? *“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”*

The parable of the growing seed is an empowering parable. It tells us that our job is to plant the seed. It is our job to proclaim Jesus Christ to this world. God is the one who causes the plant to grow and the kingdom of God is growing around the world.

The parable of the mustard seed is an encouraging parable. While it seems like the kingdom of God is of little consequence in this world, it is growing to be the largest plant and someday God’s kingdom will come in full. It will be a time of harvest. It will be a time of judgment. It will be a time when God fully restores this broken world.

Until then, with confidence, let us cast the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May the kingdom of God make its way into the hearts of people all throughout New England. Jared Wilson writes, “Many of us believe God can and will do something great again in New England. As in the days of Amos, we are praying that God will do what he promised to do for his dispersed children: “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.”⁵

¹Jared Wilson “Why New England is the New American Missional Frontier” May 16, 2017
www.thegospelcoalition.org

²Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 493

³James Boice *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983) 16-19

⁴Dallas Willard *Renovation of the Heart* 58

⁵Wilson

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Sermon Date: January 21, 2018

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is a favorite childhood memory you have about winter? Describe a relationship you had growing up that brought a sense of “warmth” into your life. What was it about that person that made you feel this way?
2. Which of these are you most feeling right now and why: sad, angry, scared, happy, excited or tender?
3. What is one thought you had from this week’s sermon?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 4:1-9 and 13-20. Take some time to identify and describe the four kinds of “soil” Jesus identifies in this parable. What lessons do you learn about the kingdom of God from this parable?
5. Read Mark 4:26-29. What is the point of this parable? Compare this parable to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:5-9. What do you learn about evangelism in these passages.
6. Read Mark 4:30-34. What do you learn about the kingdom of God in this passage? What causes you to feel like the kingdom of God today is of little consequence—like a mustard seed? How does this passage encourage you?
7. Read Mark 4:21-25. What do you think God is wanting you to hear from this passage?

Taking It Home

8. In light of what you discussed, how do you want to pray for yourself, WEFC and New England?
9. Can you identify a place or a person where you need to “cast the seed?”