

Two Parables¹
Mark 4:21-25p
ABC 11/6/22

Nothing remotely compares to the wonder of the good news that God gave His Son to die as a sin offering so that we, sinful rebels could be reconciled to Him through Christ (2 Cor 5:18–21). The fact that salvation is entirely a work of God’s grace apart from any self-righteous effort only adds to the wonder. The utterly underserving are given a position of highest privilege through no merit of their own (Eph 2:4–7). God rescues former slaves of sin from the kingdom of darkness & transfers them **to the kingdom of His beloved Son** (Col 1:13). We become citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20), heirs of eternal life (Titus 3:7), & the adopted & beloved children of God Himself (Rom. 8:14–17). In light of the fact that no news can compare to the good news of salvation, the reality that most refuse to accept it is shocking & tragic. Jesus Himself illustrated that truth by telling the parable of the soils that we looked at last week (4:3–20). Some people reject the gospel as soon as they hear it. The hardness of their hearts was likened to the impenetrable, hard soil by the road (15). Others respond with superficial excitement. But when times of hardship or persecution arise, they fall away. Jesus likened these people to shallow, rocky ground in which faith never takes root (16–17). A 3rd type of soil also looks good on the surface but is actually infested with thorns. These people’s hearts respond to the gospel with initial interest. But the cares of the world & the pursuit of riches, like suffocating weeds, choke out any love for Jesus (18–19). By contrast, the good soil represents those who embrace the gospel & are fruitful for Christ (20). The good soil is comprised of those who **hear the word & accept it & bear fruit** (20). Those who truly hear the gospel are those who **accept it & bear fruit**. Many may profess to **hear** the gospel but true hearers are always characterized by fruitful obedience.² I pray that describes each of us. As you think about it, you can’t help but conclude that we are a privileged people. We have the privilege of God making Himself known. We have His very Word in our hands. We’re privileged to be able to gather together & worship & approach God. We have many privileges & blessings. We’ve been adopted into God’s

¹ I know this is not a word. I’m using to mean *a short parable*.

² John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, pp 210–211

family, redeemed, forgiven, no longer outsiders, but privileged people. With privilege comes responsibility. That's where we find Jesus addressing His disciples in Mark 4 today. Open there & read with me vss 21-25.

As we saw last week, there was a dual purpose in why Jesus shifts to teaching in parables. One is to continue to instruct His followers & give them more information, knowledge, & understanding regarding Himself & the kingdom of God. At the same time, He wants to hide or conceal this message from those that who don't believe & are hostile to Him & His message. We saw this at the end of chapter 3 where the spiritual & religious leaders, the ones everyone looked up to, were accusing Jesus of working with Satan. Then there were the crowds that were coming to Him only for the show, to be entertained, or helped in some fashion. Even His own family was trying to rescue Him from Himself, thinking He was crazy. All these different responses were present & so Jesus begins speaking in parables. To those who rejected Him these parables wouldn't help. They wouldn't understand what He was getting at. But for those who followed Him, for those committed to Him, these parables instructed & continued to build upon what He'd already taught about the kingdom & Himself. Last week we looked at the parable of a farmer sowing seed in different kinds of soil & how the seeds, people's hearts, responded to the gospel message. This morning, we come to 2 short parables, analogies, sayings, or parablets. Unlike the long & detailed parable of the sower, these are short & concise, clearly communicating something about the kingdom of God.³ They shouldn't be looked at as disconnected stories. They're interrelated illustrations carefully arranged by the Holy Spirit through Mark to make a divine truth clear. Having identified His disciples as those who are both able to hear divine truth & equipped to proclaim that truth to others, Jesus used these parables to further teach them. The sayings of vss 21–25 are structured into 2 groups, each introduced by the clause, & **He was saying to them** (21a, 24a). In each saying, an analogy is given followed by a proverbial saying explaining the analogy. The 1st parable ends with an exhortation to listen (23), while the 2nd group begins with one (24b; cf 4:3, 9, 12, 20).

³ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, p 82

1. The Parable of the Lamp on a Stand⁴ 21

A. The Analogy (21) Mark doesn't identify the **them** that Jesus was speaking to. It could be the crowd (1–2) or His close followers (10–12). The grammar suggests it's those believing in Jesus. But vs 33–34 indicate Jesus is again teaching the crowds. It seems these vs are given to the disciples, while the parables which follow them are to the more general audience. This would fit the twin themes of consistently teaching the crowds in parables (11, 34) while interpreting their meaning & the secrets of the kingdom for the disciples privately (11, 22, 24–25). Jesus speaks from the common experience of people of that day whose homes were illumined by oil lamps. These were pottery, something like a bowl, with a couple of the edges pinched together. Oil was poured into the bowl, & a floating wick came up through the point where the edges were pinched together. In order to maximize their usefulness, lamps were set on lampstands or shelves protruding from the wall where their light would fall throughout the room. Jesus asks 2 rhetorical questions in vs 21. The 1st expects a negative answer. **A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Of course not!** The 2nd expects a positive answer. **Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? Yes, or course.** The Greek grammar of the 1st question is unusual, reading something like, *Does not the lamp come...?* Some take this to mean that Mark is referring to Jesus Himself as the lamp or light, which we know He does elsewhere (Jn 1:4; 8:12; 9:5). Both Matthew (5:15) & Luke's (8:16) accounts of this speak of someone lighting a lamp. They also don't include the definite article, indicating they're not thinking specifically of Jesus. In context, the lamp most likely represents either the message of the kingdom of God or the kingdom itself both of which is present in the person of Jesus. The **basket** refers to a common household bowl. The **bed** may be a sleeping bed or a dining couch. The meaning is pretty simple: A lamp belongs on a stand. You elevate it. You place it so that it can shed light & illumine a room. A lamp isn't meant to be stashed away or hidden. It's meant to shine forth and reveal. Jesus is speaking to this inner group and using this simple picture and saying you don't hide a lamp. You want light to be seen. Everyone would think, *well, yeah, duh!* Would it make any sense for God to send the ultimate Light of lights, the gospel

⁴ Outline adapted from Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p 194

of His kingdom through His Son, & keep Him covered up? Of course not. That makes no sense. The message of the kingdom of God, the gospel, isn't meant to be permanently hidden, but to eventually be fully revealed. Just as a man wouldn't light a lamp just to conceal its light under a bowl or a piece of furniture, it shouldn't be thought that God has brought the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus for the ultimate purpose of concealing it. Even though He's teaching through parables, concealing some things from some people, there will come a day when the veil is taken away & Jesus will be known by all.⁵ Some people try to link this little parable with Mt 5:14-16, where Jesus says:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp & put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, & it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, & glorify your Father who is in heaven.

The purpose of the metaphor of the lamp on the stand in Mt 5 is that others may see good works & glorify God. But in Mark, the light shining isn't our good works, but the gospel message brought by Jesus Himself.

B. The Proverbial Application Vs 22 continues the thought but takes it further. **22**

In Luke's version, the point is that what is presently hidden will one day come into the open: **For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor *anything* secret that will not be known & come to light** (Lk 8:17).⁶ The kingdom of God, though presently partially veiled, will one day be revealed fully. For the present as Jesus is speaking, the kingdom of God, & Jesus' role in it, remain largely hidden (22). Yet even the concealment of that present time (reflecting back on 11-12) contains the seeds of what will be revealed. If the beginnings of God's kingdom look inauspicious & unpromising, that serves God's purpose. The very humanness of Jesus veils the glory of God from overwhelming & blinding the world, & invites people to discover the kingdom by experience. The rather baffling activity of God in Jesus is like hide-and-seek: only that which is 1st hidden can be found.⁷ When a parent hides a gift from a child for their birthday or Christmas, they don't keep it

⁵ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p 166

⁶ Matthew has a similar saying (10:26), where believers are encouraged not to fear persecution, since they will be vindicated in the end when all truth is revealed.

⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, p 140

hidden forever. They'll reveal it on that day. They don't hide the gift until they're an adult and say, *Tough, you never found it. That's too bad.* No, they hide it for the purpose of revealing it at a later time. If there's a secret surprise party for someone, it's secret until the time of the party when it's revealed and made known, right? The same thing is true with the teaching of Jesus. This teaching regarding the kingdom, this teaching He's bringing and giving now in terms of parables to His disciples, is to be made known.

The word **secret** can also mean a valid but not commonly known truth. For example, when someone talks about *the secret of a happy marriage*, they're talking about a valid but not a well-known truth that makes marriages successful. The same is true about the **secret of the kingdom of God**. Jesus has come to make known a valid truth about salvation & eternal life that isn't yet well-known. This is what the disciples & we are to do. As *a lamp* of God we're to make known the valid truth about Jesus, about God's kingdom, about the gospel to those who it isn't well-known among.

When this will take place isn't specified. It could refer to the disciples' preaching of the gospel following the resurrection (9:9) or the revelation of the Son of Man at the consummation of the kingdom (13:26–27). Though Jesus presently commands silence from some concerning His words & actions & while He speaks in parables to conceal the truth from some, & explains privately the meaning of the parables to His disciples, the day will come when all will be revealed. Yet Mark's language here is somewhat different from Luke's & may carry unique undertones. In Mark, Jesus says that the present hiddenness is for the purpose of being revealed. The 2nd part then says that the present concealment is literally *in order that it might come into view*. Paradoxically, the present hiddenness of the kingdom serves the purpose of revelation. While this might seem contradictory, it fits with Jesus' teaching earlier in this chapter about the purpose of His parables. To those open to the kingdom of God, the parables reveal the truth. But to those who reject Jesus' kingdom message, the parables conceal the truth (11–12). This blindness & rejection, however, is all part of God's plan & is the means by which He'll accomplish His salvation purposes (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).

By way of application, those who've received the light of the gospel aren't to conceal it but to let it shine for others to see. Throughout Scripture, light is variously used as a metaphor for truth (Ps 36:9; 119:105, 130; Prov 6:23; Acts 26:23; Eph 5:9; 1 Thes 5:5), holiness (Rom 13:12), & life in Christ (Jn 1:4). Here, however, Jesus used light to illustrate the message of the gospel. Faithful hearers have an obligation, to proclaim it to those around them. Those who've been transformed by the gospel are themselves to present that truth to others (Mt 5:14-16; Rom 1:8; 16:19; 1 Thes 1:8).⁸ Jesus wanted to conceal the truth from His enemies for a time but not from His disciples, not from those who loved Him. The truth isn't to be received & kept hidden in secret. The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is hidden from those outside the Kingdom, but one day those hidden glories will be revealed for all to see. At the revelation of Jesus Christ, as Paul says in Phil 2:

Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, & being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, & bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven & on earth & under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (6-11).

To those whom that truth was hidden from when He was on the earth, it will be manifested to them when He comes again.

It could be the disciples, observing the shift in Jesus' strategy, wondered if they were also to obscure or keep hidden the gospel as a judgment on Israel's unbelief. That wasn't what Jesus planned for them to do. In a short time, He'd send them out in pairs to preach the gospel (Mk 6:7-13; Lk 9:1-6). This was part of the preparation for their full commissioning after His resurrection (Mt 28:18-20). As Jesus told His disciples before He ascended, **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; & you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, & in all Judea & Samaria, & even to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8).** That Jesus didn't intend for the gospel to be permanently obscured is made clear in vs 22. As He told His disciples, **For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light.** In other words, there was an occasion when the truth was hidden & obscured from some obstinate rejecters. In a coming

⁸ MacArthur, p 213

day the **hidden** things were to be revealed & the **secret** things disclosed to the world. That era of unveiling mysteries would begin with the preaching ministry of the apostles (starting while Jesus was still with them, Mt 10:26), continue on the other side of the Great Commission, & last until His return (Mt 24:14).

Whatever the response to their gospel proclamation, the disciples were to faithfully sow the gospel seed, to spread the light of Jesus. The seed of saving faith in their hearts was to produce the fruit of gospel witness. That mandate didn't end with the apostles. It began with them & has fallen on all believers, in every generation since. As Christians, we are called to eagerly **proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called (us) out of darkness into His marvelous light** (1 Pt 2:9).

C. Call to Hear Jesus' teaching in parables demands spiritual discernment, so the command of 4:9 is repeated here. **23**

In other words, everyone should hear & respond to Jesus' message or more specifically, those who have been given **ears** by God should listen & understand. This again underscores the importance of what He's just said. It was imperative that the disciples carefully consider the implications of being a diligent and, therefore, fruitful hearer.

2. The Parable of the Measure (24–25) The 2nd group of sayings begins with another call to hear.

24a

A. Call to Hear Vs 24 literally says, *See what you hear!* It's a combination of vision & hearing. The truths He was explaining to them were to be understood & established in their minds. The parable that follows is taken from the market place where a person's integrity was seen in the accuracy of their scales & measuring bowls (Lk 6:38). **24b**

B. The Analogy In Jesus' day, items weren't purchased in prepackaged amounts but were measured out in standard-sized vessels. The merchant could be generous or could try to cheat customers. The saying reflects the consumer's wish that God would reward the generous and punish the cheater.⁹ **By your standard of measure** is a reference to a different size of a bowl or basket that one might use to go get grain from the market. It's pretty simple. You have a small bowl, a small

⁹ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary

basket, you're going to get a small amount of grain; a larger bowl, a larger basket, and you'll have a larger amount of grain. Essentially, this means you get back what you give. This saying occurs in both Matthew & Luke, but in different contexts & with different applications. As a matter of fact, 3x in the gospels, we find the same expression that we find here, **with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.** & yet there are different applications of that statement. For instance, in Mt 7:2 that statement is used as a warning against a judgmental attitude towards others. If you judge other people harshly, you'll be judged harshly. Then in Lk 6:38 the same statement is used to encourage liberality among God's people in their giving & stewardship. The more you give to the cause of the gospel, the poor, & those who are needy, the more will be returned to you. & in rabbinic literature the proverb often related to divine judgment given justly.¹⁰ But there's a different context here in Mk 4:24, where it's quoted as an encouragement for us to appropriate God's Word to ourselves. So the more we receive & assimilate God's Word, the more light from God's Word we will have. Those who take the time & energy to hear & respond to Jesus' kingdom teaching will receive back their investment & even more. The last phrase, **& more will be given you besides,** is unique to Mark & prepares for the following sentence about the insiders who receive even greater revelation. **Will be measured & will be given** are divine passives, meaning God will measure & God will add.¹¹

C. The Proverbial Application 25

Again, a common proverb is applied to the hearing & receiving of the kingdom message. These sayings also occur in different contexts in Mt & Lk. In Mt's parable of the talents (25:29) & Luke's parable of the minas (19:26), similar sayings refer to good or bad stewardship of God's resources. Those who steward wisely the resources God has given them will be given even more responsibility, while those who squander their resources will lose even what little they have. Again, there in Mark, the proverb refers to the receiving of divine revelation. Those who hear & respond to Jesus' message of the kingdom of God will receive even greater revelation, while those who reject

¹⁰ Mishnah *Soṭah* 1:7; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanh.* 100a

¹¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p 196

what they've heard will be blinded even further. This parallels Jesus' explanation for why He teaches in parables in vs 11–12. To those who are responsive to Jesus' teaching, the parables provide even greater spiritual insight. But for the hard-hearted outsiders who reject the message, they will **see & not perceive, & while hearing, they may hear & not understand** (4:12). Their spiritual blindness will only increase. Again we have divine passives meaning God will give & God will take away. The parallel statement in Lk 8:18 makes the intent of Jesus' statement clear: **Whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.** False converts (as illustrated by the rocky & weedy soils) may claim to have spiritual life, but in reality they don't have it. They may profess to know God but through their works they deny Him (Titus 1:16).¹²

3. Summary & Application Just as the purpose of a lamp is to provide light to a room, so the message of the kingdom is light for a dark world. Light & darkness are common images throughout Scripture to symbolize good & evil, the forces of God versus the forces of evil. In the beginning God creates the universe by calling forth light from darkness & pronouncing the light **good** (Gen 1:3–4). Paul picks up this imagery when he says that the **God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Cor 4:6). Isaiah predicted that the coming of the Messiah would represent a light shining on those in darkness, a new dawn for those who live in the land of the shadow of death (Is 9:2). Knowledge of God's kingdom & purpose in the world comes through having eyes to see & ears to hear. What will be His means of displaying this light after He's gone? The disciples. In Mt 10:27 we read that Jesus told His disciples: **What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; & what you hear *whispered* in *your* ear, proclaim upon the housetops.** The mystery of the Kingdom isn't to be kept to yourselves but is to be shone forth as a bright & shining light for the whole world to see. Did the disciples do this? Yes, just read the book of Acts. Listen to what John later wrote:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at & touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— & the life was manifested, & we have seen & testify & proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father & was manifested to us— what we have seen & heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; & indeed our fellowship is with the Father, & with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).

¹² MacArthur, p 216

That which was manifested to John & the others they have declared to us. They didn't hide it. Even when the apostles were commanded to not speak or teach at all about Jesus in Acts 4:20, we read that Peter said: **we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen & heard**. Incidentally, you need the Holy Spirit if you're going to be like that, & they had Him & He gave them boldness. Did they hide the gospel, even under the pressure of persecution & death? No! **we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen & heard**.

The present hiddenness of the kingdom is only temporary & a part of God's purpose & plan. While the Jews of Jesus' day would have expected the kingdom to come with the destruction of the Roman Empire & the reestablishment of David's throne, Jesus inaugurates the kingdom by healing the sick, casting out demons, & preaching the gospel, the good news of God. It isn't certain what Jesus means by the disclosure of what's presently concealed (22). It could refer to the revelation of Jesus' glory at His transfiguration (9:3-7), at His entrance into Jerusalem (11:9-10), at His resurrection (16:6-7), or at His return in glory to consummate the kingdom (13:26-27, 35-37). This last is most likely. In any case, the present hiddenness of the kingdom & the rejection of the Messiah are part of God's purpose & plan, & they'll be used of God to accomplish His purposes (8:31-32; 9:31; 10:32-34, 45). Though the kingdom will begin in a lowly & insignificant way, like a tiny mustard seed as we'll see (4:30-32), it will become the greatest transforming power in the world.

Although the kingdom is hidden to many, those who respond positively to the message of God's reign receive eyes to see & ears to hear. The one who has will be given more (25); those who are open to the truth will receive even greater revelation & more discernment into the truths of God. This is an irrefutable principle of spiritual growth. Those who express faith & trust in God find Him faithful & gain greater confidence & trust in Him. The degree to which one hears God's words, the extent to which one allows the kingdom to break upon oneself, will determine the measure of one's understanding. Those who hear, those who knock until the door is opened, will find the kingdom disclosed to them. But those of a quick search, whose knock at the door of life is tentative or brief, will find a once joyous invitation to enter the kingdom to have faded into a mirage of disbelief.¹³

¹³ Edwards, p 141

Finally, in order to give light into that house, that lamp had to use itself up, the oil had to disappear & be burned. What an application there is for us in that. We need to die to ourselves, we need to decrease if He's going to increase. Jim Elliott, meditating on Ps 104:4, **He makes the winds His messengers, Flaming fire His ministers**, said these words:

*Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be aflame. But flame is a transient, often short lived thing. Canst thou bear this my soul - short life? In me, there dwells the spirit of the Great Short-Lived, whose zeal for God's consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.'*¹⁴

You know his story. He was martyred in his 20s by Auca Indians, taking the gospel to them. We still have his testimony with us, & those people thank him & his martyrdom for the spread of the gospel among them. Yet he had to be burned up to shine forth that light. If you want to shine more, you're going to have to die to yourself. Here's another piece of advice: the oil has to be replenished. The wick of the lamp could only give light as long as it had fuel. In other words, we need to be continually filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18) & with God's Word. If we die to ourselves, are filled with the Spirit, & fueled by God's Word hardships won't put us off, temptation won't put us off, persecution won't put us off, & the desire for other things won't put us off. Instead, we'll receive the Word of God regularly & bear fruit to His glory. The question is, are we doing it? Are you sowing the seed of the gospel? Are you sharing the light of the gospel to this dark generation. One man says,

*Some may expect to plow the field, plant the seed, reap the harvest, thresh the grain, and bake the cake all in one worship service. The parables do not promise instantaneous growth. God gives the growth, and it follows an appointed order that cannot be hurried or bypassed. One must learn to allow the seed to do its work, to allow the word to persuade and to convert. All anxiety is therefore superfluous since events are out of human control.*¹⁵

Just keep shining & planting & leave the rest to God.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Elliot, *The Journals of Jim Elliot*

¹⁵ Garland, p 187