

for even more come in and choke the word, and it yields no fruit.' (4:18,19)? Such a description is so generally true of people it is hard to imagine that it is intended to be more specific, but it is. I would suggest that here, Jesus describes the religious authorities, as He frequently castigates them for tainting their duties to God through seeking worldly praise (e.g. the Pharisees praying in open places – Matt 6:5,) or pursuing their own material ends (see Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees – Mark 12:38-40, Mathew 23) rather than performing their proper godly duties.

It may be possible to identify categories of people who relate to the three unfruitful growths of seed in other ways, but this is the most obvious. It leaves us with Jesus looking around at His disciples and saying to them 'Hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' (4:20). In other words, the secret of the coming of the Kingdom and God's passion to restore people in repentance, was sown in the lives of the disciples. Although the fruit was not yet ready for harvest, God had vested in them the power to bear a harvest which would be beyond all expectation; and so it proved to be (as in the Acts of the Apostle).

Application

A parable which can be explained in terms of what happened in the life and times of Jesus Christ is not just stuck in the past, however. It will continue to yield helpful insights to us today, and we can also learn from the clarification of its place in the life of Jesus and the disciples, as above. On the one hand, we can say that all the means of preventing the growth of the seed are real factors which really do prevent people from growing in faith now; and we need to be aware of them. On the other hand, the analysis above suggests that we can apply the parable directly to our own times.

Firstly, we might say that Satan continues to rob people in general of their chance to grow in the Kingdom, so we must fight Him if we are to be successful in mission. Secondly, the most pernicious disease which prevents Christians from growing in the things of God are persecution and trouble: how many times have you heard people say that they have given up going to church because of troubles which they cannot reconcile with their faith? This is no small issue for God's people today, but if the church is to grow, then it must be addressed. Thirdly, the primary way that leaders of God's people are drawn away from their obligations as elders, priests, ministers, pastors and deacons (and others) of the church, is through the temptation to pursue worldly things such as success, academic prowess, financial advancement etc. This is not farfetched; it is a common observation today that the church is being managed as if it were a business, or that Christian theology or Biblical studies are academic disciplines far beyond the reach of everyday Christians. How tragic, when the church wilts for lack of godly leadership! Yet despite this, God had planted His seed, and we live in times when the harvest of the Kingdom is reaped, often far beyond our dreams. Let us keep our eyes on the whole parable in order to learn God's truth, but may we never lose sight of the harvest which is reaped when people are led to turn back to the Lord (see 4:12) and are forgiven by the grace of God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does the parable of the sower relate to real life today?
2. Discuss whether the three barriers to the work of the Kingdom in the parable of the sower are a complete explanation of what prevents the Kingdom from growing.
3. How would you describe the 'secret of the Kingdom' (4:11).

Discipleship

Make an assessment of how the three barriers to the work of the Kingdom of God affect you today. Try writing down a list of these and then thinking about whether any of them explain or reflect anything happening to you at this moment in time. Write these down as well. Now, what should you do about this? I suggest that you pray and ask God how to deal with what you have written down, and ask His help to put a stop to what is wrong and seek help if necessary.

Final Prayer

You have shown us glimpses of our future, Lord Jesus, and promised that we will have a place in Your Kingdom. Give us the grace to live by the light of this promise, with holiness and godliness all our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Prayer

Dear God and Father of all, there is so much misunderstanding within our world; make us agents of love, peace and charity, and help us to promote understanding, repentance and all the Good News of reconciliation which You gave this world through Jesus Christ our Lord. May we be Your servants in this way, today. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for people who are called by God to preach the Gospel in places where most Christians will not or do not go. This may mean going on the streets, preaching in pubs, spending time with people of other faiths to gain trust, and a range of work which most church goers do not do. Pray for those who are so called, and pray that the church will support them.

Meditation

Peace is knowing that you are special and loved;
Loved so much that you do not have to question it.

Security is being able to do what you believe to be right,
And not be ashamed about it in front of anyone else.

Health is feeling good about yourself all the time,
So good that no illness or disease can break your heart.

Hope is having complete confidence in the future,
For it is guaranteed by promises which are dependable.

Integrity is a desire to abandon all deceit and wickedness,
And be entirely honest and open in all dealings with others.

Confidence is being able to get on with things unhindered,
Because your conscience is clear about what is right and wrong.

Now, all these things are worthy, but how can they be found?
The truth is, they are freely available through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Study - Mark 4:10-20

¹⁰ When He was alone, the twelve together with those who were around Him, asked Him about the parables. ¹¹ He said to them, 'You have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables, ¹² so that "they may look and see, but not perceive, and may hear and listen, but not understand; so that they might not turn back and be forgiven."'

¹³ Jesus said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the people on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan comes straight away and takes away the word sown in them. ¹⁶ Other people are the seed sown on rocky ground, who when they hear the word, receive at once it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root and do not last. For when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly give up. ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: they are the people who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, the lure of wealth and the desire for even more come in and choke the word, and it yields no fruit. ²⁰ And there are others sown on good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

Review

The reading today contains two very important passages of Scripture. The first is Jesus' explanation of why He was teaching by means parables, and the second is His explanation of the parable of the sower. It is clearly very important that we understand both of these, for the parables were Jesus' main method of teaching about the Kingdom of God, and the parable of

the sower is one of the first and most important parables recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. A quick read through this passage will probably give us the impression that we understand what Jesus says, but neither of these explanations is what we think, and each of them leads us into deeper waters.

It appears that the first three verses simply tell us that Jesus expected the disciples to understand the parables, but those who were outside of His circle of disciples and other close followers, would not. Unfortunately, Mark tells us that as time went on, the disciples constantly failed to understand what Jesus was saying to them either when Jesus spoke directly to them or in parables (7:17f., 8:14-21, 9:9-13, 10:23-31, etc.). For that reason, it may be that is best to regard this passage as a reflection of Mark's general theme of 'secrecy'. In verse 11, it says that the disciples were given access to the 'secrets of the Kingdom', but the people in the crowds who followed Jesus were not. That does not mean to say that the disciples understood them, it only means that they had access to these secrets through Jesus.

However, it is more fascinating to read what Jesus said about 'those outside', and by this Jesus meant the crowds of Jewish people who came to hear Him speak and clamour for healing. In describing them, Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9,10, declaring that they would not fully understand that what He said was about the Kingdom of God. Those who know the Old Testament will know that this famous prophecy was given to Isaiah to explain that God's people would never understand what He was doing with them until all Israel was destroyed and only a 'seed' remained (see Isaiah 6:13). In the light of this, Jesus' choice of subject for explaining the Kingdom of God is remarkable! The parable of the sower is of course about seed! So by giving this parable, Jesus declared that Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled, and issued an invitation for everyone to see that He was the Messiah and that God's new Israel was coming to birth! This is the secret Jesus wanted the disciples to come to understand, and which the crowds could never fully see.

Again, Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower appears to be straightforward. He explained that the seed was the Word of God (4:14), and then likened the growth of the seed in the four situations mentioned in the parable to the experience of people. The seed trying to grow on the path was unable to grow just as Satan prevents people growing in faith (4:15), and the seed sown on rocky ground failed after initial germination just as people fail to grow because of 'trouble or persecution' (4:17). Then, the seed sown amongst thorny weeds became choked just like those whose spiritual insight is darkened by the affairs of the world. In none of these circumstances do people bear fruit. Only the good seed sown on good soil bears a harvest for the Kingdom.

Jesus therefore identified three enemies of the Kingdom of God; firstly the work of Satan and evil, secondly lack of faith due to troubles, and thirdly the lure of this world. This is a good analysis of the enemies of faith today, let alone in the state of Judaism in the first century! However, we are left wondering how this relates to us. Nevertheless, the important result of the work of the sower is that a harvest was obtained, and this is an encouragement for us to persist in our own call despite all problems. The parable does not define the Kingdom of God, it tells us something about how it grows, so that we may know some of the reasons why growth is not predictable or even.

Going Deeper

Even as we have read so far, it is clear that the passage has much more to tell us. As is often the case with Jesus' teaching, our initial reaction makes us feel that we have understood what Jesus is saying, but as soon we look at it closely, there is more. The parable of the sower is well known, but it is not necessarily well understood, and the whole reading says far more about the Kingdom of God than anything we have read in Jesus' teaching so far in Mark's Gospel.

The secret of the Kingdom of God

The connection between this passage of scripture and Isaiah 6 is remarkable. When Isaiah began His ministry, God told Him that the people of Israel would not understand what God was doing; they would 'look and see, but not perceive, and ... hear and listen, but not understand' (Isaiah 6:10 and Mark 4:12). Isaiah struggled throughout his days with the message God had given him that the Lord had rejected His people because of their sin, and had it in mind to recreate a new people beginning with a 'new seed' (Isaiah 6:13). In the mature writings of Isaiah, the Lord spoke to him about the 'suffering servant' who would bring salvation (Isaiah 61:1f.). Now, here was Jesus, anointed in baptism as the 'Son of God' and come to earth to do God's will, and one of the first things that Jesus taught concerning the Kingdom of God was that

it was like a seed growing in the soil! This connection between Jesus' ministry and Isaiah's prophecies continues throughout Mark, and we will find that Jesus refers to Isaiah on a number of significant occasions. In addition, we will find a close connection between the prophecies of Isaiah about the 'suffering servant' from Isaiah 53 and the death of Jesus as recorded in Mark (Mark 14,15).

In the light of all this, we can come to the conclusion that by the term 'the secret of the Kingdom of God', Jesus meant the fact that He was the Messiah and He was establishing God's Kingdom at that very moment. Clearly, the disciples were privy to this, but equally clearly, they did not yet fully understand the full implications of it and struggled with it throughout Jesus' ministry. They only came to a full understanding of it when Jesus died and rose again, and this was the story of the early church which Mark made no attempt to record, finishing his Gospel very briefly after the resurrection of Jesus.

Why therefore, did Jesus continue to say about the crowds what Isaiah had said about the people of Israel centuries previously at the time of the Assyrian invasion of Israel around 720 BC? As far as Jesus was concerned, the general truth about God's people had not changed. They had within their history and traditions all that was necessary for them to recognise God's work in their midst, and receive from Him the restoration and reconciliation which God longed for. Since the beginning of time when Adam and Eve fell from race, it was the Lord's express purpose to re-establish a relationship with people; He wanted them to 'turn back and be forgiven' (to use Isaiah's phrase – Isaiah 6:10, Mark 4:12). However, the Jewish people had become dominated by the religious authorities who had built a tradition based upon the revelation of God to Moses, and had not been prepared to accept the words of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah that the heart of God's love was not to be found in ritualistic religion but in restored relationships.

Mark's quote from Isaiah (4:12) is highly significant. Jesus came as the Messiah according to the prophecies of the Old Testament precisely because God's people were not able to be restored to Him through the Pharisaic religion they clung to. God's 'secret' was a new way for people to turn back and be forgiven, through Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

The parable of the sower

The message we have already found in the parable of the sower identifies the enemies of the Kingdom of God as Satan, persecution, and the lure of worldly contentment. This appears relatively straightforward, but if you read the text closely, what Jesus says is not all that easy to understand. My translation attempts to make what Jesus said as clear as possible, but we cannot escape the fact that after Jesus says 'the sower sows the word' (4:14), we must start with the analogy that God (and perhaps Jesus) is the sower, and what is sown is the 'word', which is the truth about the Kingdom of God. To begin with, this makes sense in the light of the first half of our reading. God was declaring a 'secret' about the Kingdom of God through Jesus, the 'Son of God', and because of Isaiah's prophecies (see above) we can say that this secret compares directly with the seed in the parable.

Reading on, however, Jesus says, 'These are the people on the path where the word is sown' (4:15) and explains that they are those from whom Satan takes away 'the word sown in them'. Think carefully about this, for the parable itself only speaks about the seed, what happens to it, and why. So, who are the people Jesus is talking about and how are they represented in the parable? They cannot be the seed, because that is the word which is planted! The only way we can make an analogical connection between the people Jesus talks about and the parable is to say that the story of what happens to the seed is like the story of what happens to certain real people. So, be very careful not to try and make too much of what each of the objects in the parable mean, for it is easy to be casual and think that Jesus equates the growing seed directly with people. This is not the case; the seed is always the Kingdom, and the point of the parable is to illuminate real life in real people by describing what happens to the growing seed.

With this in mind, and with what we know has already happened in the story of Jesus in Mark's Gospel (see my notes on Mark 4:1-9), those people within whom the seed is unable to grow because it has been snatched from them by Satan, represent all humanity who have turned away from God as described by the Fall (Gen 3). Next, knowing the history of God's people, we can easily make a connection between God's chosen people of Israel and those who 'when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly give up' (4:17). This is as concise an analysis of what the prophets say about Israel as you are likely to find! Lastly, who are the people 'who hear the word, but the cares of the world, the lure of wealth and the desire