

“The Secret of The King”

Introduction: Lest we be tempted to think otherwise, being a follower of Jesus in the first century was no easier than it is today; in fact, it was probably even more difficult. The political scene was frightening, led by the occupying power of Rome which exercised its rule in a dictatorial, arrogant, and oppressive fashion. The moral scene was confusing, as Christians sought to live out a renewed lifestyle in the midst of highly pagan practices. Even the church scene was more difficult as local bodies of worship were few and far between and members were forced to work things out as a family of faith instead of being able to flee to the church down the street.

So how did Jesus seek to help his followers prepare for and live in such an environment? Well, he didn't surf from one hot, cultural topic of the day to the next. Rather, he spoke quite a lot about the kingdom of God and how one is to live within that realm while living at the same time within the realm of this world. And his favorite way to teach about the kingdom of God was through parables, short metaphorical stories that seemed even silly on the surface but actually packed quite a punch when you got down to it, depending upon how you were listening.

The parables reveal, we hear Jesus say this morning, the secret of the kingdom. It's a secret we will see that speaks of the presence of the kingdom, the prodigal nature of our sower God, and our need to take regular soil tests.

I. The Secret of the Kingdom of God

A. We've seen Jesus surrounded by the crowds, while out walking, and even in his home. This time, while Jesus was teaching by the Sea of Galilee (the “lake”), Mark tells us that the crowd had become so large that it forced Jesus to get into a boat, drop anchor, and teach from there. He spun a simple tale about a farmer who sows some seed which falls on different kinds of soils. Interesting to note that the word for “shore,” where the people were standing and listening, is the same for that of “soil” in the parable. In effect, Jesus was acting out his parable as he taught it, sowing the word of God as he spoke to people with various soils, or receptivity.

B. Now, think of what it must've been like standing there. You heard this simple story. Some seed did not grow and some did. Well, you might have asked, so what? It would be like my telling you that yesterday I got on my bike and rode in four different directions. One way I hit several stop lights, another way only a few, a third way had just a stop sign, and the fourth way I rode for an hour without stopping. Again, you might ask, so what?! But then Jesus concludes with this exhortation: “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” This command to listen carefully, to hear well, begins, and ends, and appears throughout – 13 times – the string of parables Mark records for us in chapter 4. What does it mean to listen well? Evidently, part of listening well means to be willing to ponder and probe deeper and ask questions because to those around him who were interested in hearing more, both about this parable as well as others, Jesus was more than willing to explain.

C His explanation had something to do with what Jesus called the secret of the kingdom of God. A secret, as the biblical writers use the word, is not something God doesn't want us to know; however, it is something God must reveal. So what is God revealing in this parable about a farmer sowing seed? To begin with, sowing in the OT is a metaphor for the renewing, recreating, work of God. In particular, God promises to sow, or plant, Israel back in the promised land following her exile to Babylon due to her persistent disobedience. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God declares of his people Israel: “Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant” (Jer. 31:28). And through the prophet Ezekiel God says of the land: “You will

be plowed and sown, and I will cause many people to live on you—yes, all of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt” (Ez. 36:9f). The metaphor of sowing thus speaks to the promise of God to renew his people, to bring his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Which means that Jesus, who is now sowing the word of God, is revealing that he is the one through whom God’s kingdom is being sown.

D. The secret is out of the bag, Jesus was saying. Through him God has begun to plant and sow, to bring the exile to an end, to make all things new, both personally and cosmically. The parables Jesus tells will reveal what life in the kingdom of God is like and how it is to be lived as God renews and restores his creation. Jesus will also reveal the contours of kingdom through the contours of his own life, which he invites us to follow. But they are far different from how we’re used to thinking about a kingdom or from what was anticipated. There are no borders to this kingdom or distinctions based on race or gender or nationality. The kingdom is fueled by the power of love not the love of power. The nature of the kingdom is grace and mercy, not revenge and retaliation. Self-denial not self-service describes the character of its citizens. A splintery cross, not a stylish condominium complex is its chief symbol. This kingdom is present, it has come near in Jesus. But it takes ears to hear.

II. The Prodigal Sower

A. As we ponder the presence of the kingdom, this parable also reveals the wonderfully prodigal nature of our sower God. Prodigal is a word that means reckless extravagance. It’s often assigned in another parable of Jesus to a father’s younger son, who takes his father’s inheritance and blows it recklessly through extravagant living. But we learn in that parable that the love of the father is even more extravagant, that it is indeed God who is truly prodigal, truly reckless in his love for us. Well, we see his prodigal nature at work here as the sower simply throws seed everywhere! It lands on a hard path, on soil loaded with rocks, on soil filled with thorns, as well as on soil that looks pretty good.

B. Why not be more choosy? Why not be a better steward of his seed? Simply because this farmer, this sower, does not prejudice the soil. He is not concerned about test marketing his message, or hitting only target groups. He is not afraid to sow outside boundaries or risk losing or wasting some of his seed if it increases the chances of a harvest. We should be grateful for that heart of God because in that extravagant, reckless way, we might have been hit! And we should be challenged by that, challenged to be prodigal sowers of the seed of his word that God has entrusted to us.

C. As we sow, these seed parables (two more of which follow ours), enable us to be aware that although Jesus has brought the kingdom of God, and is sowing broadly, its arrival does not come dramatically and all at once, but emerges slowly and over time. The somewhat ambiguous way Jesus describes it – the kingdom “has come near” or “is at hand,” (Mk. 1:15) – leaves room for understanding that the kingdom has come and is still coming. Evil has not yet vanished; opposition and failure do happen. The parables, infact, Jesus tells his followers, will even cause some not to turn and seek forgiveness and a restoration with their relationship with God, but to turn away from him. The fact of the matter is that parables are not simply cute little stories; they pack a punch! Ultimately they challenge their listeners with a question: What will you do with Jesus? Will you throw in your lot with him, or not? The promise is that those who are trying to puzzle out what Jesus says will receive more revelation from him. On the other hand, those who show no interest, or think he is just plain silly, or even possessed by an evil spirit (3:22) will bring judgment upon themselves.

Illustration:: I think of the apostle Paul, describing to the church in Corinth how the ministry of the apostles, as they sowed or spread the word of God, is like a fragrant aroma with two markedly different effects (2 Cor. 2:14-16):

Thanks be to God . . . who through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

That which enables one to see confirms the blindness of another. Those who receive who Jesus is and what he has brought receive life; those who reject it will experience death.

The encouragement to us is that God's word, as we shared from Isaiah 55 earlier in our worship, will accomplish that which he desires. Even though there is opposition, even though some will walk away, God will not fail in accomplishing his renewing and recreating purposes. Our call is to keep on sowing and allow the Spirit to work, and it is to keep listening, so that the Spirit can work within us.

III. Testing Our Soil

A. This is where the need for regular "soil testing" comes in because listening, while critical, is still hard! There is so much noise around us, so much that competes for our attention that it takes intentionality. [cf. PAX offerings] You see, this word of God, the seed that Jesus is sowing, is living, and it is therefore life giving. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that this Jesus is not only the one through whom God made the universe, speaking all things into existence, but is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:1-3). Peter, reflecting on his experience with Jesus, writes that we have been born again—given spiritual rebirth—through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pe. 1:23). He goes on to say that we grow up in the gift of our salvation, and are formed as a community that is the church, by this same word (2:1-2). But our soil can get funky if we're not watchful and alert to that which may compromise it, keep us from listening, and prevent the word of God from bearing fruit in our lives.

1. Sometimes we can be like hardened soil, like that of a path. Nothing sinks in. We do not understand and, due to laziness or disinterest, we do not care to invest in what it takes to understand. When this is the case, we remain untouched by the word.

2. Other times we might be like shallow soil because we're loaded with rocks. The Christian walk, we soon discover, is not simply singing praise songs on a Sunday morning. Not everyone likes it when we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus. Trouble in our life or persecution of some variety comes along and we're not rooted deeply enough in the word to stand firm or grow through our suffering. Instead of overcoming it, it overcomes us.

3. Still other times we can be materialistic soil. When this happens, the thorns of other things seek to crowd out the word that is sown and trying to grow. We worry about not having enough, and are led to falsely believe that if we just had more, of whatever is it, we'd be happy and content and secure. We dip our buckets into the wells of money and comfort, or relationships and sex, or respect and success, and hope we'll pull up something that truly satisfies. But it never does, for long. The living water that Jesus offers, which we can begin to taste by drinking in his word, gets ignored.

So may we humbly cultivate receptive hearts, guarding against what might prevent us from listening well, praying that the Spirit, with his pick ax and spade and saw might break up our hard soil, remove the rocks, and cut out the thorns, so that God's word might take root within us and keep on transforming and growing us, so that we might live well as kingdom citizens within our challenging times, for our sakes, as well as the sake of others.