

SEED THOUGHTS

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we want to join the disciples in listening to Jesus explain what he calls the "secrets of the kingdom of God." These "mysteries of the kingdom," as they are often referred to in our Scriptures, are really vital truths about humanity which are not discoverable in secular studies. You cannot find these in any university curriculum, unless it is one related to the Word of God. And yet they are very essential truths which we must know about ourselves, about life, and about the world in which we live, in order to grow and fulfill our humanity.

In our last study we saw, in Mark 4, how Jesus began to speak to the people in parables. This was the very first time he had used this method of communication. He did so, as he tells us, because a subtle change had occurred in the crowd. As a result of our Lord's earlier ministry they had heard of his wonderworking power, his healing ministry, and his mighty, marvelous words of deliverance. Word had spread throughout the whole land. People had come from north, south, east, and west, and gathered in Galilee to hear this amazing prophet. At first Jesus was able to speak to them very clearly and forthrightly, making tremendous declarations about humanity. During this period he gave the message we call the "Sermon on the Mount," undoubtedly the greatest message ever delivered in the presence of men, anywhere, at any time. Jesus longed to open their eyes and minds and hearts even more fully.

But a change had taken place. Crowds were pressing upon him -- not to hear the Word, but to be healed of their diseases. More and more, healing was becoming the preeminent attraction. These people had shut their minds, turned off their ears to the words Jesus spoke, and were intent only upon the deeds he performed. It was for this reason Jesus began to speak in parables. He said that he hid the truth so that people's curiosity would be awakened, and they would seek it out. He warned the people of a natural law which could be put this way: Use it, or lose it. If you do not obey truth, you will lose truth -- not only that truth you are hearing, but some you think you already have grasped. Jesus made that clear.

Furthermore, he said that as men began to search these parables and seek to understand them they would see truth as they were able to bear it. That is a remarkable revelation, revealing to us the radical character of Christianity. Christian truth -- which basically is reality, things as they really are -- is so different from what we think things are that we can hardly bear to hear it. Standards of value, modes of behavior, and styles of living are so different, so completely opposite to what we learn in the world, that we resist it. We do not want to hear it. It is only gradually that God can lift the veil and let us see ourselves as we really are. So the principle of revelation is: "as we are able to bear it." In First Corinthians 3, Paul stated that principle to the Corinthians: "I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready," {1 Cor 3:2 RSV}. This is the condition of our humanity.

Mark gives us but three of the parables our Lord spoke on that first day of parable utterance, but he refers to "many such." Matthew records seven parables given on this occasion. Mark's three are the parables of the sower and the soils, of the seed growing secretly, and of the mustard seed. Each is a revelation of the invisible reign of God in human affairs. Jesus takes us behind the scenes in each one and shows us something about the way God acts in human life, thereby revealing some of these mysteries of the kingdom.

We do not need to guess at what these are. The point of each parable emerges clearly as we understand what Jesus has explained to us. The first, the parable of the sower, is intended to show us how the kingdom comes into human life, how our eyes are opened, what God is doing, and how this touches us and enters our hearts. The second, the parable of the seed growing secretly, shows us how the kingdom grows, what forces we can count upon to see to it that this knowledge of ourselves and of God is increasing. The last, the parable of the mustard seed, shows us a very surprising effect the kingdom will have in the world. That is the outline of our study today. Let us take these parables one by one, beginning at Mark 4:3:

"Listen! 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 had not 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 onto good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundred-fold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."
{Mark 4:3-9 RSV}

This first of all parables is very typical of the power of Jesus to illustrate from nature. I am sure that something like this was going on right before the eyes of the people. Jesus was standing by the lake and the crowd was spread across the hillside. They could see the side of the next hill, along the curve of the lake shore, where a sower was out in the fields sowing grain. And, seeking a way to illustrate what he wanted to convey, Jesus saw the sower, took his activity as his text, and told the story as the crowd watched it happening before their very eyes. They could see the seed falling on various kinds of soil, birds coming to pick up some of it -- all of this dramatically vivid before them.

When Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," he made it evident that this is much more than just a story. It was not meant merely to entertain them. That phrase is like a sign which says **THINK**. But evidently they did not understand him. Even the twelve gathered afterward and said, "Explain the parable to us." So Jesus went on to explain the parable to the twelve, and to us, because, you remember, he said, "To you it is given to know the secret of the kingdom of heaven." And as he gave them the explanation, he said this amazing thing, Verse 13:

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?" {Mark 4:13 RSV}

That is a very, very important sentence, because he is telling us that this parable of the sower is the key to interpreting all the parables. Otherwise these words are without meaning. It is very important that we notice this. If we do not, we will make the mistake of many commentators, who simply make these parables mean whatever they want them to mean. This is what many of the commentators on the parables have done. They have ignored this clear statement of Jesus that the parable of the sower is the key to interpreting all the parables. In fact, many of the commentators make up their own rules of interpretation as they go along. I want to share with you a typical example of this, so you can see what I mean, and beware of what you read. Here is a man who is widely read among evangelicals. This is what he says about this parable of the sower:

The parables must never be treated as allegories. In an allegory, every part and action and detail of the story has an inner meaning and significance. Pilgrim 's Progress and The Faerie Queen are allegories. In them, every event and person and detail has a symbolic meaning. But, if that be so, clearly an allegory is something to be read and studied and examined and investigated. But a parable is something which was heard once, and once only.

He is suggesting that we do not need to spend a lot of time with the details of these parables, that we are merely to get the point and move on, because a parable is not to be taken in detail and treated as an allegory. This despite the fact that Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" -- an invitation to examine and investigate and study carefully. This commentator goes on:

Therefore, what we must look for in a parable is not a situation in which every detail stands for something; we must look for a situation in which one great idea leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning. It is always wrong to attempt to make every detail of a parable mean something. It is always right to say, "What one idea would flash into a man's mind when he heard this story for the first time?"

Now listen to the way Jesus interprets this parable, beginning with Verse 14:

"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 which is sown in them. [Satan is represented by the birds that came and ate the seed.] And these in like manner are the ones sown upon rocky ground, 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 delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty-fold and sixty-fold and a hundred-fold." {Mark 4:13-20 RSV}

Please notice that Jesus treats it exactly as the commentator says he must not do! He treats it as an allegory. He says every detail means something. And he says, furthermore, that this is the way to handle all the parables. This is the key to understanding parables. Parables are allegories in which every detail applies, has its own import to the whole. From that, I think we can deduce a very practical exhortation: as the song says, "Read your Bible. The words inside are true and reliable." And they throw a great deal of light on the commentaries!

Let us look at this story of the sower and see the first of these secrets of the kingdom -- how the kingdom of God comes to us. Jesus says, first, the sower goes out and sows, and the Word is what he sows. That is how the kingdom arrives in human hearts. The Word of God is sown by means of preaching or teaching or reading or studying or witnessing, or in some other way. The Word is dropped into hearts like seeds into soil. That Word is the life-giving element which can change the whole situation and bring enrichment and harvest into a life. Therefore the moment of the sowing of the Word is a magic hour. It is a time when the opportunity to be changed is present.

I used to read this story as though these various soils were four different kinds of people, who remained the same all through their lifetimes -- some were permanently hard-hearted, like the first example given; some were impulsive, like the second; some were full of concerns, like the third, etc. But I have come to see that what our Lord is describing here is not types of persons, so much, but conditions of heart at any given moment, i.e., conditions which are present when the Word is being sown. Whenever the Word is being sown, people are in one condition or another, just as they are described to us here. We have all been callous, at times, when we have heard the Word. We have all been impulsive in our reaction -- emotional shallow. We have all been overly concerned about other matters. And we have all had times of being open and responsive to the Word.

What is your heart like now? You are in one of these four condition is. Which one? That is the question.

Let us look at them:

First, there is what we can call the callous heart. The seed is sown upon the beaten, trodden-down pathway. This represents people whose hearts are busy, who are not open, who have been beaten down so many times they have grown cynical, hardhearted, callous to truth. When the seed hits them, the birds come and gather it up immediately. (Perhaps there are people like that here this morning. You are here not because you wanted to hear the Word but because coming to church is the "right" thing to do. Your hearts are callous and unresponsive, and the Word falls on them as on asphalt.) What does Jesus say about that kind of a life? He says it is strictly for the birds! The seed will be snatched away by Satan before you even have a chance to hear it.

C S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, describes a man who goes into a library to read and meditate. His mind is suddenly opened to deep thoughts of God. Confronted with his own standing before God, he starts thinking in terms of his eternal welfare. Then, Lewis says, the demons that are assigned to keep him from discovering truth call his attention to the sounds on the street, to the newsboy calling out the latest news, and to the fact that he is hungry, ready for lunch. And that is all it takes. All thoughts of God disappear, and he is involved in the mundane affairs of life. And, from the point of view of the satanic emissaries, he is delivered from this danger of thinking about God. That is what happens to the callous mind and heart.

Then there are the impulsive hearts. The seed falls upon them and they immediately respond with joy. The seed takes root and grows up quickly. The trouble is, they respond like this to everything -- food fads, new books, political leaders, whatever popular movement happens to be abroad at the time. As a result, their lives are so shallow that the seed of the life-giving Word cannot take deep root and change them. Consequently, the life

which apparently is there withers away and dies. Jesus says that this kind of life is shallow; it cannot stand the heat. When persecution and tribulation come, immediately it is withered. They turn away and lose interest, and cannot abide.

The third condition of heart is represented by the thorns. These are those who hear the Word, but thorns spring up and choke it. This is what we could call the over-involved heart. There are three things Jesus details here which are thorns that choke the life-giving Word:

First, there are cares, i.e., worries concerns. These are people who are concerned all the time over what is going to happen next, worried about the situation they are facing -- fretful, anxious, troubled people who do not know how to rest, how to leave things in God's hands but are constantly trying to work it all out themselves. These people Jesus says, are losing truth. The seed has fallen upon their hearts, but it does not take root because it is choked by the thorns, and they soon lose it.

Second, there are those who delight in riches, who are caught up in the pursuit of wealth, in the Playboy philosophy -- constantly planning for their own amusement and pleasure. That is all that their life consists of. The life-giving Word, which could make a real man or woman out of them, is hitting them, but it cannot find root and grow up. There is no place left in their hearts.

Then there is what Jesus calls "desire for other things," or what we might call "restlessness." These are people who are always shifting from one thing to another. James Michener wrote a book, *The Drifters*, in which he describes this kind of people, especially young people, who cannot stay in one place long enough to put down roots, but drift from one experience to another. Jesus says they are losing the truth of the delivering Word. They are choked by life.

But then there is the receptive heart, the one ready to receive -- open and responsive immediately.

I talked this week with a prominent businessman who was passing through this area. He told me about how he became a Christian. He had been raised with no church background at all, and had four different sets of foster parents before he was eighteen. He had tried various philosophies, seeking some answers to the riddle of life. Among them were transcendental meditation and the Eastern religions. None of this satisfied him.

One day a friend invited him to go to church, and he went -- for the first time in his life. The pastor spoke about Christ. Afterward he met the pastor and said to him, "Sir, if I understand you correctly, Christianity is saying that up here is God; down here is man; and in between is Jesus Christ, and that he is the key for man to reach God. Is that right?" The pastor said, "Yes, that's right. In fact, you've accurately described a verse in Scripture which says: 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,'" (1 Tim. 2:5). This man said, "Well, that makes sense to me."

The pastor said, "I've got a book here I'd like you to take home and read. And next week, if you come back and have read it, we'll sit down and talk about it together." The man said to the pastor, "Well, I appreciate that. But tell me: If it is true that Jesus really is the way to God, then why do I have to wait till next week? Why can't I come to him now? If it really works, it will work now; if it doesn't work, it never will." The pastor said, "You're exactly right." So they bowed their heads, and the man received Christ, became a Christian immediately. He received the Word, has grown in grace ever since, and has become a strong testimony for Christ.

That is the responsive heart which is ready to act. It is true not only at the initial stages of Christianity, but whenever the Word falls on us, that the seed is being sown. And areas of our life are either ready to respond, or, like any of the other kinds of soil, reject the truth. This is the way the kingdom of God, the rule of God, comes into our hearts. The great question, then, is: Examine your heart when the Word is being sown. What is it like? What is it like right now?

The second parable is found in Verses 26-29, where our Lord speaks of the seed growing secretly:

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,

and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." {Mark 4:26-29 RSV}

This is a secret of the kingdom of God, and to me it is one of the most encouraging of all the parables Jesus ever uttered. He is speaking of how this rule of God increases, how it grows in a life. He explains it as a coming to harvest by a patient expectation that God will work. The key of this whole passage is, "... the seed grows, he knows not how. The earth bears fruit of itself, ..." That is, there are forces at work which will be faithful to perform their work -- whether a man stewes and frets about it or not. He does what he can do, what is expected of him. But then God must work. And God will work. And in the confidence of that, this man rests secure.

As Jesus draws the picture, this farmer goes out to sow. It is hard work as he sows the field, but this is what he can do. But then he goes home and goes to bed. He does not sit up all night biting his fingernails, wondering if the seed fell in the right places, or whether it will take root. Nor does he rise the next morning and go out and dig it up to see whether or not it has sprouted yet. He rests secure in the fact that God is at work, that he has a part in this process, and he must do it; no one can do it for him. But he will faithfully perform it. So the farmer rests secure, knowing that as the seed grows there are stages which are observable: "... first the blade, then the ear then the full grain in the ear." It is only as the grain is ripe that he is called into action again. When the harvest is ready, then he is to act once more.

This is exactly what Paul describes for us in that passage in First Corinthians 3: "For we are laborers together with God:" {1 Cor 3:6a KJV}. This is the way we ought to expect him to work. It involves a witness first, perhaps a word of teaching or exhortation to someone -- or to ourselves. And then an inevitable process begins, one which takes time and patience, and allows God to work. One of the most destructive forces at work in the church today is our insistent demand for instant results. We want to have immediate conversions, immediate responses, immediate dedications every time we speak. We tend not to allow time for the Word to take root and grow and come to harvest. But our Lord is teaching us the great truth that we ought to.

I have been watching a boy in the PBC congregation growing up since grade school. I watched him come into adolescence and enter into a period of deep and bitter rebellion against God. I watched his parents, hurt and crushed by his attitudes, yet nevertheless praying for him -- saying what they could to him -- but above all holding him up in prayer. I watched the whole process as the seed which had been sown in his heart took root and began to grow. There were tiny observable signs of change occurring. Gradually he came back to the Lord, and opened up to the Christian family. Just this past week he asked me to fill out a reference for him to go to seminary. That is the Word growing secretly. The sower knows not how it happens, but he can rest secure in this. Our Lord is teaching us the fantastic truth that God is at work. It does not all depend on us! Once we have done what has been given us to do, then we are to rest in the fact that God will work.

The parable of the mustard seed is the last of this trio. It is given to us in Verses 30-32:

And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." {Mark 4:30-32 RSV}

This is perhaps one of the most puzzling of the parables. Many have pondered long hours over it, because it seems to be contrary to nature. Mustard seeds simply do not grow into great shrubs with large branches in which birds build nests. They do not grow like that here in California; they do not grow like that in Palestine. Nor have they ever done so. Any reports of "mustard trees" you may have read in reference books refer to plants which are very unlikely to be mustard.

Then what is all this about? I think we get a clue to the strange character of this parable in the way our Lord introduces it. He sounds almost puzzled: "Now, how can I illustrate this? With what can I compare the

kingdom of God, or what parable shall I use?" There is an element about this which is different, unusual, and even Jesus is hard-pressed to find a natural illustration for it. Then he tells the parable of the mustard seed.

Anyone who has read the New Testament knows that Jesus frequently used the mustard seed as a symbol of faith. It is a beautiful symbol. Matthew 17:20: "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move hence to yonder place,' and it will move; ..." {Matt 17:20b RSV}. We in Christian circles have picked that usage up. Our dear friend, Lillian Dickson, has an agency in Taiwan she calls "The Mustard Seed." It is an umbrella organization which sponsors many various and great works she has begun, all of which rest upon faith.

Mustard seed is an excellent symbol of faith because it has two qualities about it:

First, there is the quality of the seed itself -- its inherent capacity for growth. A seed is able to grow, and so can faith. In fact, faith that is not used will not grow; but if it is used, it increases. This is why Jesus uses a seed as a symbol of faith. And this is why you never have to worry about whether your faith is small or great. If it is small, it can grow and eventually become large. That is where all great faith has come from -- from people trusting God in little things, then in larger things, more and more, until their faith grows to take on great things. That is an invariable principle of the Word of God. When you trust him in little things, you learn to trust him in larger things, and you find your faith has grown, and you are able to step out a little farther.

It is also mustard seed. Mustard has a peculiar characteristic. When I grew up as a boy in Montana, we had no doctors available, and no medicine. So whenever we got a cold, there was a single remedy. A mustard plaster was placed upon our chest -- a sticky, smelly, gooey mess. It was not there very long before it began to irritate and burn and stimulate. The flesh turned red. In fact, if you did not watch it, it would actually blister. I do not know how it worked, but it seemed to cure colds. At least I was very reluctant ever to admit I had one! But that is a quality of mustard -- to irritate, to stimulate. And that is a quality of faith. If your faith is growing, someone else's is growing too. Your faith will stimulate others to have faith. Soon it spreads through the Christian body, and people begin to walk in faith who had never walked before. That, Jesus said, is what the kingdom of God is like. It has the quality of mustard seeds about it. It is to be planted, so that it will grow and work in this remarkable way.

But the amazing thing about this parable is that the mustard seed does not grow true to life. It acts as no other mustard seed has ever acted before. It is intended by nature to be a low shrub, no more than eight to ten feet high at best, very spindly, certainly not able to support a nest of birds. It is a rather fragile shrub, and yet pungent and powerful in its effect. That is what the church ought to be -- lowly and unimpressive, and yet powerful in society. But according to Jesus, this mustard seed would grow into a great, impressive shrub, probably twenty feet high, with large branches able to support nests, and birds would come and build nests in its shade. But true mustard has never grown like that, anywhere. That would be contrary to its nature.

Well, what does this mean? Our Lord is telling us a secret of the kingdom of God. He says that this mustard seed, which is supposed to be lowly and unimpressive, will provoke a false growth. It will stimulate a wholly false system which will be characterized by its seeking to be dominant, very impressive and powerful, and to exercise wide influence -- so much so that satanic forces (you remember that in the parable of the sower, the key to all the parables, this is what Jesus says the birds represent) will take up residence within its great structure. It will seem to be tremendously powerful, and will have the name of the kingdom of God, but it will be anything but!

Now we know, after twenty centuries of history, that this is exactly what has happened. Great churches have grown up, seeking worldly power and influence, seeking to dominate political life and influence people in this way. This has been true not only of the Catholic church, but of Protestant churches equally as well. I am always amazed at the things evangelicals regard as marks of a successful church. Usually it is numbers. If you can just get a crowd of people coming, that is a successful church! And yet the cults usually can get more people than we can. Or a lot of money. A large budget, especially a large missionary budget, is a mark of success. Or if you have impressive, beautiful buildings, with costly art and expensive architecture, that is a sign of success. Or, amazingly enough, some regard the number of buses a church operates as a sign of success today! Yet we forget that, in the book of Revelation, Jesus warned the Church: "For you say, I am

rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked," {Rev 3:17 RSV}. None of these things are marks of success in the true church.

What is the mark of success? In Ephesians 4 Paul exhorts the church in Ephesus to "walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called," {cf, Eph 4:1}. What is a worthy church, a successful church? Well, he tells us. It is one characterized by "lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," {cf, Eph 4:2-3}. That is a successful church -- where people are growing in lowliness, not seeking to lift themselves up but to be powerful where they are, with a low profile, but nevertheless extremely stimulating, even irritating to the community around -- "with patience, forbearing one another in love" -- getting along together, forgiving one another, loving one another, reaching out and sharing, being open with one another. This is a successful church, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

There are the three secrets of the kingdom of God which Mark selects for us. What do they say to us? God is at work today just as he was then:

- He is sowing the Word, by various means, in our lives and hearts. We are to be careful that our heart is ready and responsive to receive that Word.
- Then we are to rest upon him. He is bearing the load of the battle. The battle is the Lord's, not ours. He is working out his purposes in our individual lives and in the life of the church as a whole. He will do it. We can rest on it till the harvest time comes; then he will call us to action again.
- Finally, we are to be lowly, not seeking for status or advancement, but stimulating one another in the same way as mustard seeds. And when we do so, we can expect to provoke this whole false system which will rise on our every side. But we are to walk worthy of God, in the way he has called us to be.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for another look at the truth as it comes to us taught by the Spirit, and from the lips of Jesus our Lord. We pray that each one of us will be a responsive instrument, Lord, and will receive the delivering Word, this wonderful Word which sets us free. Help us to be responsive to it, to understand it and give heed to it, and to obey it. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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