

Parables, Part 2 - Mark 4:21-25

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Before we begin I invite you to bow your heads with me for prayer. Today we are continuing our journey through the book of Mark. You may have noticed the sermon title: "Parables, Part 2". Part 1 was the Parable of the Sower. It was a detailed story covering 20 verses. If you missed part 1, you can see it afterwards for a cassette tape or go on our website, Lovinghope.com, for a manuscript. In part 2 we will look at three brief parables. They are like brief snapshots that at first glance might seem unrelated. The listener needs to fill in the gaps. In Mark 4:13 Jesus asked the disciples, "If you don't understand the parable of the sower, how will you understand all (the other) parables?" The three brief parables in today's Scripture text might be included in the "other parables". They are not quite as listener-friendly as the parable of the sower. We will look at these three brief parables one at a time by considering two questions. First, "What did it mean to the Jews?" Second, "What was Jesus calling attention to?"

Let's now consider what we might call "the parable of the lamp". Jesus articulates it in Mark 4:21, 22. (Read) Lamps in the first century were quite different from our lamps today. They consisted of clay or metal bowls in the shape of a saucer. The bowl contained olive oil, and floating in this oil was a wick. The lit end rested on side of the dish or protruded up through an opening. So this would have been the lamp Jesus was referring to in His parable. And now let's consider our first question. What did this parable mean to the Jews? What went through the minds of the group of people who first heard this parable close to two thousand years ago? Undoubtedly, when they heard a reference to a lamp in a rabbi's teaching, their minds went back to the gold lamp stand in the sanctuary (Exodus 25:31-40). This had been a part of the furniture in the sanctuary and was situated in the holy place. It contained a total of seven lamps, which were continually lit. The Jews listening to Jesus tell this parable might have also recalled the words of King David. Probably no one besides Moses was more respected by Jews than he. In 2 Samuel 22:29 he says, "You are my lamp, O Lord." Then in Psalm 119:105 he says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet." So, to the Jews a lamp had a lot of meaning in their laws and traditions. It had been used as an object lesson for generations.

So, what was Jesus calling attention to by telling this parable? He was calling attention to people's response to His teaching. Jesus' teaching was like a lamp. For thousands of years the truth that Jesus had come to reveal about God and His kingdom had been "hidden" and "kept secret" (Mark 4:22). In Colossians 1:26, 27 Paul says that the truth of God setting up His kingdom in people's hearts had been "hidden from ages and from generations". It would not make any more sense for Him to hide His lamp of truth than it would to light a lamp and put it under a bucket. And yet there were many in the crowd that Jesus spoke to who were trying to put out the light of Jesus' teaching. And with this parable Jesus addresses these people. He calls attention to their response to His teaching, namely, trying to silence it.

Our next parable might be called the parable of a measuring device. It is mentioned in Mark 4:24. (Read) This parable is really a one-liner. "With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you." In the Jewish society all the meals were cooked at home and made from scratch. So, measuring ingredients was very common. Also, many people traded goods such as grain that were sold by weight. And as a result measuring was a part of everyday life in their jobs. So, what did it mean to the Jews when Jesus referred to measuring in His teaching? What went through their minds when they heard Jesus mention this parable? I invite you to turn with me to Leviticus 19:35, 36. This is a part of the Torah or the five books of Moses. Many religious people in Jesus' day had memorized these books of Scripture. (Read) The act of measuring was seen as a type of

judgment. When someone made a measurement they were in a sense pronouncing judgment. They were making a decision. How much flour or oil should someone have in exchange for their money or some other property? Measuring was a weighty matter in the Jewish culture. Repeatedly throughout the prophets' writings in the Old Testament the Israelites are called to use "just balances". I remember working in my parents' bakery as a child. We used balances or scales to weigh the dough. A sixteen ounce weight could be put on one side and the dough on the other. When the scales balanced, you could be sure that the dough weighed sixteen ounces. My dad got to be quite good at estimating how much dough to put on the scales. Sometimes the piece of dough he had cut would exactly balance the scales. I watched others who were less experienced. They would put a piece of dough on the scales and realize it wasn't heavy enough. So, another small piece would be added. By the time the dough balanced the scales, it looked like a seven-layer burger, with all these little pieces of dough stacked on top of each other. If my dad or any of his employees had been greedy or dishonest, they could have put less dough on the scales and still labeled it as a regular-sized loaf. The Lord repeatedly warned the Israelites not to do this, but to be honest in their measuring. "Use just balances" was His repeated counsel. So, the Jews who heard Jesus mention this parable which referred to measuring, knew that He was calling attention to a serious matter.

Well, what was Jesus drawing attention to? Just as in the parable of the lamp, He was calling attention to people's response to His teaching. In effect He was saying, "How you measure My teaching will be how God will measure you." In Matthew 7:1, 2 in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had said, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you." In this parable we find Jesus' first call to accountability in the final judgment. Those who were using an unfavorable measurement concerning His teaching, would be faced with their own unfavorable judgment at the end of time.

And now we turn to our third parable, which might be referred to as the parable of possessions. Notice Jesus' parable in Mark 4:24-25. Americans know all about possessions, don't we? We have so much stuff we have to rent storage space to hold it all. What about the Jews? How did they relate to possessions? I invite you to turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter 8. This is another book that many religious Jews had memorized and were at least well-acquainted with. Moses is speaking to the Israelites. He is reminding them where God has brought them from. They used to be slaves in Egypt, with little possessions. But now God has given them the land of Canaan. They are now a free nation in a fruitful land. We will begin by reading verse 11 of Deuteronomy chapter 8. (Read) "Beware that you do not forget" is Moses' warning to the Israelites. "Be on guard lest you think that your possessions are the result of your own hard work. Let's skip down and read Deuteronomy 8:18. (Read) The Israelites are given a call to remember that their possessions come from God. They had been slaves with no ability to accumulate their own resources. But God had given them a fertile land in which through His blessing they could become wealthy. Jesus gives His parable within this context. Notice His choice of words in Mark 4:25: "more will be given" and "what he has will be taken away". This is not a picture of an employee being given his wages or of a thief coming and taking away someone's possessions. It is a picture of an owner giving more or taking away from his managers what belongs to him. It was an important part of Jewish culture and history that they were only stewards or managers of another's goods. What they possessed had historically been given to them by God.

So, what was Jesus calling attention to? What idea was He drawing attention to by telling this parable? Once again, He was putting the spotlight on the people's response to His teaching. The goods that He was referring to is the ability to discern truth. According to His parable everyone present had some "goods". Everyone had at least a slight ability to discern truth. In the crowd that surrounded Jesus some were gaining more "goods". Others were on the verge of losing what little they had. Jesus wanted the people to understand that the ability

to discern truth is a gift. In Jesus Christ God brought His people a message that, if accepted would bring eternal life, but if rejected would be eternal death. The ability to accept this message would not always be theirs. This ability was a gift. And those who did not utilize it were in danger of losing it.

So, in each of these parables Jesus called attention to people's response to His teaching. The primary message Jesus was seeking to get across by telling these parables was a message of warning. Those who didn't respond to or fought against Jesus' teaching were in danger of being lost. Their eternal destiny depended on how they responded to Jesus' teaching. Before Jesus came, many Jews were ambivalent. But with His teaching, the Jews were polarized. No one was able to remain neutral. Some became murderers of the Messiah and His followers. Others became martyrs for Jesus Christ.

Being raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church I have seen a similar experience to that of the Jews before Jesus came. Many Seventh-day Adventists are such in name only. (This is the experience in other denominations as well.) For years in my own experience the experiences of those in the Bible seemed foreign, except where they made mistakes. I remember giving Bible studies as a pastor to two brothers. They were quite different and often at odds with each other. The older one was filled with disgust for his younger brother. And the younger one was a slave to alcohol and poverty. In all my time studying with them, they remained unchanged. This frustrated me. At one point I was ready to throw the Bible studies out the window, because I couldn't find anything in them to help these brothers be free from their lives of sin. My own experience seemed little more than going through the motions. But I have since learned that when God's Word is put to the test, it always does what it says. What I build my life on truth, no storm can destroy my experience with God.

It's all in how I respond. When God speaks to me through His Word or His church, does it go in one ear and out the other? Or does it settle down deep into my heart? There is a song entitled, "The Motions" by Matthew West:

This might hurt; It's not safe
But I know that I've got to make a change
I don't care if I break
At least I'll be feeling something
Just ok is not enough
Help me fight through the nothingness of life

Chorus:
I don't want to go through the motions
I don't want to go one more day
Without your all consuming passion inside of me
I don't want to spend my whole life asking
What if I had given everything
Instead of going through the motions

Don't be content to just listen to Jesus' teachings. Respond. Let His words get all the way down into your heart. Build your life around what He says. Let the truth change how you live.