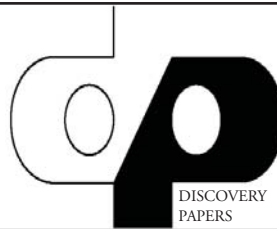


# INTO THE MYSTERY

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING  
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



Catalog No. 5281  
Mark 4:21-25  
12th Message  
Scott Grant  
August 3, 2008

When my older daughter was three years old, she learned how to use the word “why.” Often, when I asked her to do something, she would answer, “Why?” She answered in this manner with enough regularity so that one of the first words my younger daughter learned was—you guessed it—“why.” When my younger daughter was eighteen months old, she began asking “why” after I told her to do something. At first, she responded this way reflexively, without intent (I think) to illicit an answer from me.

Exhortation: Study the scriptures. Question: Why? Jesus, in the two parables in Mark 4:21-25, exhorts us to dive into his teaching. He also answers the “why” question. His answer, simply put, is that diving into his words will benefit us. The answer to the “why” question gives rise to the “how” question: how will it benefit us? For the answer, turn to Mark 4 and dive in.

After facing opposition from Jewish leaders, Jesus began teaching in parables to a crowd by the Sea of Galilee. Mark first recorded the parable of the sower and then inserted a later scene in which Jesus instructed a smaller group comprising his twelve disciples and other followers. Jesus told the smaller group that he teaches in parables not only to reveal the nature of the kingdom of God to his followers but also to confound his opponents, lest they understand him too well and manage to rally the forces necessary to bring his mission to a premature end. He also explained to these followers the meaning of the parable of the sower. Beginning in Mark 4:21, Mark returns to the seaside scene and records four more parables.<sup>1</sup> By inserting the later scene into the narrative flow, Mark has prepared us to grapple with the meaning of the rest of the parables in Mark 4.

Mark 4:21-25:

**And He was saying to them, “A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.**

**And He was saying to them, “Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.”<sup>2</sup>**

## The parable of the lamp

The first parable begins with the ridiculous scenario of placing a lamp under either a basket or a bed. The proper

place for a lamp, quite obviously, is a lamp stand. But why would Jesus even suggest such scenario in the first place? He explains himself: “For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light.”

Jesus’ explanation is understandable in the context of Mark’s narrative. Jesus, up to this point in Mark, has shied away from publicity. Furthermore, he has recently begun teaching in enigmatic parables in part to conceal the nature of his mission. Jesus himself has seemingly hidden the lamp: the nature of the kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus is saying, this is a strange way to bring in the kingdom of God—strange, but necessary because of the powerful forces that are arrayed against him, not least Satan himself. At this point, he needs to keep publicity to a minimum and teach cryptically in public settings. However, a time is coming for the lamp to be put on the lamp stand, so to speak. Under questioning from the high priest, Jesus will later go public with his identity as the Messiah who inaugurates the kingdom. The high priest, who holds to a different view of the kingdom of God, will respond by convincing other leaders to hand Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion (Mark 14:61-64). No wonder Jesus is less than forthcoming about his identity and his mission here: he isn’t ready to die yet!

In Jesus’ telling, a lamp is not “brought,” as one would expect, but literally “comes.” The strange wording (a lamp certainly can’t move by itself) is evocative of Jesus himself. John the Baptist spoke of one who is “coming,” Jesus “came” into Galilee, and he spoke of that for which he “came” (Mark 1:7, 14, 38; 2:17; 10:45). Jesus, the Servant of the Lord anticipated by the prophet Isaiah, embodies God’s purpose for Israel to be the light of the word (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). Isaiah, in fact, expected the Servant to come in a hidden way. In Isaiah 49:2-3, the Servant of the Lord speaks about how God has hidden him and spoken to him:

He has made My mouth like a sharp sword,  
In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me;  
And He has also made Me a select arrow,  
He has hidden Me in His quiver.  
He said to Me, “You are my Servant, Israel,  
In Whom I will show My glory.”

The parable of the lamp explains to those who might wish for a more straightforward approach that Jesus’ current methodology is a necessary but temporary concession to the times. He didn’t come into the world to hide from the world. No, he came into the world as the light of the

world. He would go public soon enough. He would also tell his followers to go public while warning them that they, too, would pay a price (Mark 9:9, 13:9-13). Therefore, they should listen attentively to Jesus now: “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” If they listen now, they’ll be better prepared to face persecution later.

## Preparing for the future

The risks posed by following Jesus in certain parts of our world today dictate that followers of Jesus, at least occasionally, take a less-than-straightforward approach to ministry. Although the Silicon Valley is not one of those places, it is resistant enough to the gospel that we would still be wise to consider a parabolic approach to ministry that incorporates storytelling, always remembering that one of most powerful witnesses for the gospel is the story of one’s own life. Always be on the lookout for opportunities to share how the story of Jesus merges with the story of your life.

When I worked as a journalist, I never declared my allegiance to Jesus the first day on the job. Inevitably, my co-workers discovered that I was a follower of Jesus, however, and many of them were shocked because I didn’t fit their preconceptions. I asked one co-worker, after working side by side with her for a few months, what was most important to her. I don’t remember her answer, but I’ll never forget the drop of her jaw when I answered the same question when she put it to me. I told her that faith was the most important thing in my life. Another co-worker, upon discovering my allegiance to Jesus, took offense. She leaned across a table and protested, “But you have fun!” The parables of Jesus challenged prevailing worldviews. Our lives, like a parable, challenge prevailing worldviews and give us an opportunity to surprise people with Jesus.

If we listen to Jesus now, we’ll be better prepared to face whatever lies ahead of us. Many of us become more interested in the scriptures in times of need. We feel that we need something from God, so we dive into the scriptures with increased vigor. Or we want to share truth with the people we’re meeting and feel that we need to be better equipped. I always ask applicants to our intern program why they want to spend two years studying the scriptures. Some of them have answered that they need to go deeper into the scriptures in order to minister to believers and engage the seekers and skeptics in their world. Recognized need motivates us to listen to Jesus in the gospels and to the rest of the scriptures.

Jesus, however, gives us another reason to dive into the scriptures. He’s not so much motivating us by connecting us to our present need as he is by connecting us to our future need. It doesn’t take a prophet to anticipate tough times. Tough times are a given. We prepare ourselves for the future by diving into the scriptures in the present, knowing that the truth we learn in the bright light of the day will guide us in the dark shadows of the night. We go to school, we hit the books, we learn a trade—not necessarily because we benefit from such efforts in the present

but because we believe we will benefit from them in the future. What will you want to know, what will you want in your soul, when the going gets tough: the opinion of man or the word of God? What do you anticipate wanting to know in your final days? If you envision wanting to know what God says to you, then immerse yourself in his word today.

Billy Graham says that if he had his life to live over again, he would spend more time immersed in scripture: “The biggest regret is that I didn’t study more and read more. I regret it, because now I feel at times I am empty of what I would like to have been. I have friends that have memorized great portions of the Bible. They can quote [so much], and that would mean a lot to me now.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ admonition to listen in the parable of the lamp leads naturally into the next parable.

## The parable of the measure

Throughout Mark 4, Jesus has taught about perception, most often in the form of listening. He began his teaching by the sea with an invitation to listen. Twice he has challenged anyone with ears to “hear.” He said his reason for teaching in parables concerned what people perceive and don’t perceive. The parable of the sower concerned hearing the word about the arrival of the kingdom of God. The parable of the lamp involved what is seen and what isn’t seen. Now, Jesus literally says, “See what you listen to.” What are they listening to? They’re listening to the parables of Jesus. He then tells the parable of the measure, which concerns giving attention to that which they are listening to: Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God.

A “measure” would be used to measure grain. But what does the parable mean? Again, Jesus explains himself. He speaks of whoever “has” and whoever “does not have.” Jesus is challenging anyone who “has” ears to hear. The “measure” therefore concerns the level of attention one gives to the words of Jesus. The “measure” you give to the words of Jesus is the measure of the benefit you will derive from them. In fact, the benefit you derive will exceed the attention you give. You will reap more than what you sow.

What is the benefit? If someone exercises the ears he “has” by listening to the words of Jesus so that what he “has” increases, then that which increases is hearing capacity. Jesus told his followers that the mystery of the kingdom of God had been “given” to them. For someone who gives attention to the words of Jesus, “more will be given”—more insight into the kingdom of God. That insight, then, opens you up to even more insight.

The parable, therefore, conveys a promise. But it also conveys a warning. Attention to the words of Jesus results in addition, but inattention results in subtraction. Like those who “hear the word” in the

parable of the sower and initially profit from it, you will lose whatever benefit you derived from exposure to the teaching of Jesus. The insight you gained into the kingdom will be taken from you, for if you don't give attention to the words of Jesus, you're demonstrating that you don't value such insight.

If the parable of the measure constitutes a challenge to give attention to the words of Jesus, then it particularly constitutes a challenge to give attention to the parables of Jesus. In that the parables are not straightforward, they require special attention in order to understand and apply them. When Jesus challenges those with "ears to hear" in the context of his parabolic teaching, he's telling hearers that the meaning of the parables lies beneath the surface. In that they concern the long-awaited arrival of the kingdom of God, they feature the stories of Israel—but with new twists that show Jesus to be the fulfillment of those stories. Stories about a sower and a lamp, for example, would ring chimes for Jews who knew their scriptures (Isaiah 55:6-13, Exodus 25:31-40, Isaiah 49:6, Zechariah 4). Jesus' teaching in Mark 4 is deliberately enigmatic. He wants to confound opponents and instruct followers. But for followers to be instructed, they must give special attention to the parables with an ear to how the story of Israel is reaching its climax in Jesus the Messiah.

## Increasing capacity for insight

Like the parable of the lamp, the parable of the measure challenges us to give attention to the words of Jesus. The reason for doing so in this parable, complementing the appeal of the earlier parable to future need, is the degree to which we benefit from giving attention to the words of Jesus. He promises us that the benefit we derive from his words increases with the level of attention we give to them. Our capacity for insight into mysteries of the kingdom of God expands as we fix our hearts and minds on the words of Jesus. His vision of the kingdom is no less revolutionary in our day than it was in his. He tells us to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, to lose our lives that we might save them. Insight into the mystery of these words will take more than a lifetime to assimilate.

Jesus gives us what we desperately need: heaven's perspective. He doesn't give it to those who don't want it, however. Nor does he give it to those who don't want it badly enough to seek him out for it. Nor does he give it all at once to anyone. The kingdom of God is too vast and brilliant for total penetration into its mystery, at least until it is consummated. Jesus grants heaven's perspective incrementally to those who know they need it and therefore seek it out in his words.

So much of what passes for biblical teaching today only dances around the edges of the mystery of the kingdom of God. Such teaching either paints the world in black-and-white terms or offers simple formulas for getting your life in order. These approaches focus on rules or principles while screening out the majesty of God. They wrap you in a straightjacket or disconnect you from reality. Where's

the pathos? Where's the wonder? Where's the awe? Rules and principles don't ignite passion for the gospel. Rules and principles by themselves don't motivate us to get on our feet to preach the gospel and set the captives free. Those who crave more of the mystery soon lose interest in such teaching.

Looking beyond rules and principles does not mean disavowing biblical morality. No, it means seeing the beauty in biblical morality. It means seeing the beauty of God. It's not so much a matter of seeing the grays between the blacks and whites as it is seeing all the colors the kingdom. Jesus wants more for us than rules and principles. He wants to take our breath away. If we give attention to the words of Jesus and he takes our breath away, "more will be given": Jesus will take us even deeper into the mystery of the kingdom.

Every fall, new interns begin taking their first course at Peninsula Bible Church. 'Long about October, whether they enter in the Old Testament year and study Genesis or the New Testament year and study the gospels, little bombs start going off in their minds and rattle some of their preconceptions about the scriptures. Then I enjoy watching them tear into the scriptures as the Lord takes them deeper into the mystery of the kingdom.

Be forewarned: exposure to the teaching of Jesus doesn't necessarily mean you will profit from it. If you don't value it, if you don't absorb it, if you don't put it to use, in the end it will profit you nothing. Listening to sermons—especially sermons that don't take you deeper into the mystery of God—doesn't necessarily mean you're giving attention to the words of Jesus. You can listen to a doctrinally sound sermon and do nothing with it. You can also listen to a heretical sermon and blissfully accept it. Furthermore, studying the scriptures—even the gospels—doesn't necessarily mean you're giving attention to the words of Jesus. You can know the scriptures cover to cover without knowing Jesus. You can also hide from Jesus in the scriptures, giving him your head but not your heart.

If you don't go deeper into the words of Jesus, you will also lose whatever benefit you derived from exposure to them. For all of us, the glow of a fresh encounter with the scriptures fades. Unless we continually dive deeper into the mystery of the kingdom, we will lose whatever passion for Christ we once had. Ability to comprehend the mystery of the kingdom of God is like a muscle: if you use it, your comprehension will increase; if you don't, you will atrophy. I can honestly say that today I find the words of Jesus infinitely more compelling than when I first embraced them thirty-five years ago—in part, I think, because the failure of easy answers drove me deeper into the scriptures.

Giving attention to the words of Jesus involves both considering them in their context and applying them to life. The words of Jesus are historically conditioned by a time, place, and culture: the Palestinian Judaism of the first century. His words are also related to both what precedes and follows them in a particular narrative. To understand the words of Jesus, then, we must consider them in light of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the context in which



they appear. Exegesis is only the first step, however. It's not enough to understand the meaning of Jesus' words. We must also open our hearts to them and find ourselves in the stories, both in the narratives and the parables in the gospels.

When writing a play, Arthur Miller envisioned in advance an individual in the audience. He wanted to be able to picture that person saying, "My God, that's me!" If he could envision such a reaction, then he felt that he was succeeding. If we place ourselves in the biblical narrative, if we hear Jesus speaking to us, if we find ourselves in his stories, then we'll find ourselves saying, "My God, that's me!"

We at Peninsula Bible Church teach from both testaments that we might understand how individual texts fit in to overall biblical context. We mostly teach expositionally, passage by passage, that we might understand the immediate biblical context. Finally, we teach not simply to raise the biblical IQ of our members but to relate the scriptures to the hopes and fears of everyday life. We hope and pray that this approach, when we come to the gospels, will help all of us give attention to the words of Jesus. If you don't say, at least with some degree of regularity, "My God, that's me!" then our sermons are missing the mark. We dare not trust in the approach, however. Instead, we put our trust in God and the power of his Holy Spirit to place the words of Jesus in our hearts.

If you want to go deeper into the mystery of the kingdom of God, try digging into the parables of Jesus, which unsettle conventional notions of spirituality. Remember that they concern how the kingdom of God is arriving in the person of Jesus Christ. Consider the parables in the context of the gospel in which they appear. For example, if you don't know that Jesus in the gospel of Mark begins teaching in parables after enemies have lined up against him, your understanding of the parables in Mark 4 will be incomplete. Also consider the parables in light of the Hebrew Scriptures in order to see how Jesus retells the stories of Israel. For help, consult the work of some trusted scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Giving our minds and hearts to the words of Jesus and to the rest of the scriptures takes work, and the reward is seldom immediate. But aren't the most worthwhile endeavors the ones that take the most work? Digging into the scriptures is not as easy as flipping the pages of a novel, turning on the television, logging onto the internet, or playing a video game. Many people today who call Jesus Lord know their Xboxes far better than the word of God. How much better to dive into the words of Jesus and be inspired to a real-life adventure? It takes work, but the reward—the long-term reward of diving into the mystery of the kingdom and seeing into the heart of God—is worth it.

The writer of Hebrews rebuked his readers for preferring "milk" to "solid food" for their spiritual sustenance. He wanted them to move on from "elementary teaching" and "press on to maturity" (Hebrews 5:11-6:12). He might rebuke us today for preferring novels, television,

the internet, and video games to the word of God. Let us listen to him and dive into the words of Jesus.

## Just learning

Exhortation: Dive into the words of Jesus. Question: Why? Answer: Because it will benefit you. Question: How? Answer: Diving into the words of Jesus will both prepare you for the future and increase your capacity for insight into the kingdom of God. Dive into the words of Jesus because you know you'll need them later and because you want to see the heart of God. The parables of the lamp and the measure presuppose that we're on the front lines in bringing the gospel to the world and that we therefore need the words of Jesus to sustain us.

Leonardo da Vinci, the painter of such masterpieces as the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper, is reported to have said at the end of his life, "It's too bad I'm about to die. I'm just learning how to paint." Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." No matter how spiritually mature we are, no matter how steeped in the scriptures we are, no matter how many masterpieces we've painted, no matter how many dragons we've slain, we're just learning to penetrate the mystery of the kingdom of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *1 That Jesus is teaching the crowd instead of a smaller group in Mark 4:21-32 is suggested by the summary in Mark 4:34: "and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to his own disciples."*

<sup>2</sup> *Literary structure:*

*A Narrator's introduction: "And He was saying to them ... " (21a)*

*B Two-part parable of lamp (21b)*

*C Two-part explanation: "For ... " (22)*

*X Invitation: "If anyone has ears to hear ... " (23)*

*A' Narrator's introduction: "And He was saying to them ... " (24a)*

*B' Two-part parable of measure (24b)*

*C' Two-part explanation: "For ... " (25)*

<sup>3</sup> *Jon Meacham, "Pilgrim's Progress" (Newsweek, Aug. 14, 2006), 42-43.*

<sup>4</sup> *Two books in particular have helped me in my study of the parables: Jesus and the Victory of God by N. T. Wright (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) and Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes by Kenneth Bailey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, 1980). Wright, on pages 198-368, explains the theological context of the parables, and Bailey analyzes both their cultural context and their literary structure.*

---

Discovery Publishing © 2008. Discovery Publishing is the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This message from the Scriptures was presented at PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH, Palo Alto. To receive additional copies of this message contact Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306 Phone (650) 494-0623. [www.pbc.org/dp](http://www.pbc.org/dp). We suggest a 50 cent donation per printed message to help with this ministry.

Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE ("NASB"), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.