



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Using the Measure God Gives

Mark 4.21-32

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Can You Imagine?

T. R. Glover once devoted several pages to showing how amazing it was that the church conquered mighty Rome. In light of Rome's "enormous strength, universal acceptance, great traditions, splendors of art and ceremony, and manifest proof of its gods," it was "absolutely inconceivable . . . that it could ever pass away."¹

Then comes the Christian Church—a ludicrous collection of trivial people, very ignorant and very common; fishermen and publicans, as the Gospels show us, "the baker and the fuller," as Celsus said with a sneer. . . . The whole thing was incredibly silly (Glover, 199).

Of course, we know

that Church has triumphed. Where is the old religion? Christ has conquered and all the old gods have gone, utterly gone—they are memories now, and nothing more. . . . How was it done? . . . The Christian 'out-lived' the pagan, 'out-died' him, and 'out-thought' him" (Glover, 200).

Relative to out-thinking the pagan, Glover wrote,

The Christian out-thought the pagan world. . . . They would go to the shrines and ask uncomfortable questions. . . . The Christian . . . lived the freest intellectual life that the world had. Jesus had set him free to be true to fact. . . . Who did the thinking in that ancient world? Again and again it was the Christian (Glover, 203-205).

The book of Acts confirms Glover's analysis relative to the church's living and dying, but also with regard to its thinking. Look only at Luke's use of the term λόγος (*logos*, "word").

Throughout Acts—I counted 37 verses where direct statements are made—the church stayed focused on the word. Jerusalem (Acts 1-6), Samaria (Acts 8), Syrian Antioch (Acts 11), Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), in Jewish synagogues or beside pagan temples, it was always the same. They had a message. Luke's section summaries reinforce the point. Each summary of developments put primary emphasis on the word (see 4.4; 6.7; 12.24; 19.20), not numbers. Once a commitment to the word was secured, the numbers followed.

They learned this from Jesus, but differently from the way we sometimes stress it. The first disciples had more than a conviction that they needed to say certain things. They had a deep-seated belief that it was in living and declaring the word that God would powerfully act.

For the Word to Matter, There Must Be Trust

Mark 4.21-32 is part of the section from vv. 1-34. It reports the last three of four parables that Mark includes. The three immediately follow Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower (4.13-20) which itself follows his explanation of the reason he used parables (4.10-12). Those verses reveal that many will not learn and follow because they are not open to really hearing the truths the parables reveal.

For committed disciples the story is different, as Larry Hurtado explains in comments on v. 11.

To be given **the secret** is not just to be given some information but is to be made a part of the secret operation of God's kingdom. The kingdom of God is a secret, not just because nothing is said about it, but because the real significance of what is said and done in the name of the kingdom is not perceived by many. . . . To be given the secret is roughly the same as being called to follow Jesus and to participate with him in his ministry.²

In other words, what the disciples would learn from the parables was not just a message, but the life that message conveys—one built on absolute trust in God to do things they simply could not do themselves. The three parables that comprise verses 21-32 confirm the point.

A Call to Really See God (4.21-25)

Verses 21-25 revolve around the exhortation in v. 23 to really listen to Jesus' words.

Verses 21-22 use a well-known experience to make the point that what was then obscure (the coming and nature of God's reign) would give way to future openness and clarity. God's truth and power would be made obvious and Jesus' ministry would be vindicated.

Verses 24-25 appeal to disciples to do what we are called to do and trust God to work things out in his time. Verse 24 tells us that paying attention—and acting accordingly—is of utmost importance while verse 25 means that an acceptance of the reign of God as revealed in Jesus' ministry will see one receive more light and blessings of salvation. Conversely, to fail to perceive and act on what God was doing will result in rejection on judgment day.

A Call to Be Patient with God (4.26-29)

Verses 26-29 are unique to Mark and begin with a reminder of the importance of the word ("seed"—see vv. 1-9, 13-20). The illustration teaches the principle of patient perseverance. How does germination occur? We really don't know. What can we do to hasten it along? Nothing. We know *who* makes it happen. We must trust him for the how and when. So, even when it *appears* nothing is happening, we keep sowing seed, trusting *God* to cause the harvest.

A Call to Trust God for Great Things (4.30-32)

Verses 30-32 have as their background the typical ancient Jewish use of the mustard seed "as the proverbial picture of smallness" (Hurtado, 80). There are smaller seeds in the world, but that is irrelevant to Jesus' point, which is not about a botanical detail, but the use of a common figure to stress the great contrast between what appears and what will one day be.

"The point of the parable is the *contrast* between the insignificant mustard seed and the fully grown plant that it produces, not the *process* involved" (Hurtado, 77). Jesus' ministry looked insignificant, but in fact, something amazing was beginning that would eventually be obvious to all with eyes to see it. That mighty Rome would eventually yield to this movement that began in one of its most troublesome backwaters confirms the truth of Jesus' teaching.

A Strategic Time

In 1967, Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Weiner wrote a book entitled, *The Year 2000* in which they “note[d] that ‘there are some parallels between Roman times and ours’ and suggest[ed] that some of the prospects for the year 2000 are, in effect, a return to a sort of new Augustinian age.”³ Broadly at least, their predictions proved accurate, that our world would be one with

increasingly sensate, secular, pragmatic cultures; the accumulation and application of scientific and technological knowledge; the increasing tempo and institutionalization of change; and increasing education, urbanization, and affluence (Kahn & Wiener, 7; in Snyder, 26).

That is essentially our world. As Snyder observed, it is not so much a world that has “come of age,” but one where “history has come full circle. It has returned in several key respects to the spirit of the first-century Roman world. And therefore this age to which we have come may be *the most strategic one for the effective proclamation of the biblical gospel*” (Snyder, 26).

But not if we don’t meet it as the first Christians met Rome. Acting in a prophetic role, multiple observers have noted a deficiency in this regard. They point out how we have often allowed evangelism to be “subsumed under the vague and more inclusive euphemism ‘outreach.’” They note the emphasis on activities purportedly used to attract outsiders with advice and insight on things such as marriage enrichment, family relationships, drug abuse, stress reduction, and the family budget. They call us to account for our attention to aerobics classes, golf tournaments, and ski trips as “body life” activities with a nod toward outreach.⁴

I am not arguing that such things have no place at church or have no value for getting attention, building relationships, or letting people see that we are people wanting to help wherever help is needed. I am not against doing things that can be useful pre-evangelism (and service) activities. But I often wonder if we are trying first one thing and then another out of a sense of desperation, in effect throwing various ideas against the wall to see if anything will stick. Our world *has* changed. We must try to meet people where they are, as the earliest disciples did. The various activities can help with that. But as we do them, we must ask, are we neglecting the one thing that changed the world the last time it was like this?

The first disciples were convinced that it was in living and declaring the word that God would powerfully act. Do we share their conviction?

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Notes

¹ T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (New York: Association Press, 1917; New York Public Library reprint), 198.

² Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 73.

³ Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Weiner, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 189; in Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 26.

⁴ See Michael R. Weed, “Evangelism, Ethics, and Eschatological Existence,” *Christian Studies* 10 (1989): 51.