

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 8/22/04 Brad Brandt

Mark 4:21-34 "When It Seems Like Nothing's Happening"*

Main Idea: It's not easy to be a follower of Jesus doing kingdom work in this world. There are times when it seems like nothing is happening. Jesus told three parables in Mark 4:21-34 to encourage us. The first parable shows us that we need to **do** something. The second and third parables show us we need to **remember** something.

I. When it seems like nothing is happening, *do this* (21-25).

A. If you have the truth, share it (21-23).

1. The purpose of light is to reveal.
2. The purpose of the light of God's Word is to help people see.

B. If you hear the truth, heed it (24-25).

1. It's not enough to agree with the Word.
2. What you get depends on what you give.

II. When it seems like nothing is happening, *remember this* (26-34).

A. God's kingdom is like growing seed (26-29).

1. Seed is small but powerful.
2. Seed works even when the farmer doesn't.
3. Seed works slowly.
4. Seed produces growth in stages.
5. Seed results in a harvest.

B. God's kingdom is like a mustard seed (30-34).

1. At the beginning it seemed insignificant.
2. In time it will be seen by all.

Take it to heart: Here's the bottom line...

1. Our perspective is limited.
2. The Lord's promise is liberating.
3. We are called to live by faith, not sight.

Did you see the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games last week? For me, several scenes caught my attention: Thousands of athletes marching into the stadium in Athens. The colorful outfits. The soloist with a dress made from thousands of yards of blue fabric that covered the athletes in the infield while she was singing. People made to appear as if they were flying through the air to approach a suspended globe. A huge torch on a lever that lit the Olympic flame.

Some of the words that come to my mind as I reflect on that ceremony are impressive, spectacular, exciting, and attention-grabbing.

If you think about it, that's what the world loves. That's how the world measures success. The bigger something is, the more impressive it is to the seeing eye, the better. If something is successful it will grab your attention and excite you. The world loves powerful things. It values the influential. It applauds the impressive.

Now, consider this. Who are we? We are followers of a person who died as a criminal on a cross. What is our calling? He told us, "Take up your cross and follow Me." What is our position? We are, in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:13, "the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world."

The contrast is striking. The world values things that highlight human power. We glory in our weakness and His power. The world treasures the impressive. We treasure the cross. The world applauds what it can see. We are living for the applause of someone we cannot see.

This is a fact. *It's not easy to live for Jesus in this world.* You say, "But God is on our side." Yes, He sure is if we are in Christ. But there are times when we don't feel His presence. To the contrary, sometimes we feel as if we're all alone. Kind of like the following story...

A woman was at home doing some cleaning when the telephone rang. In going to answer it, she tripped on a scatter rug and, grabbing for something to hold onto, seized the telephone table. It fell over with a crash, jarring receiver off the hook. As it fell, it hit the family dog, who leaped up, howling and barking. The woman's three-year-old son, startled by this noise, broke into loud screams. The woman mumbled some words of frustration. She finally managed to pick up the receiver and lift it to her ear, just in time to hear her husband's voice on the other end say, "Nobody's said hello yet, but I'm positive I have the right number."

Can you relate? My point again. It's not easy to be a follower of Jesus doing kingdom work in this world. There are times when it *seems like nothing good is happening.* You may be a student and you've witnessed to some peers for several years concerning the saving grace of God, but the only results you've seen is their mocking. Perhaps you've been trying to make a difference for the Lord at work, but again, no results. For others it may be with unsaved family members—you've let your light shine but they've just shut their eyes.

If you feel that way know two things. One, it's *normal*—in kingdom work it often seems as if nothing is happening. And two, it's *not true*—for the fact is, something *is* happening as we'll see from the Word of God today.

Jesus told three parables in Mark 4:21-34 that can encourage us greatly when we feel like nothing good is happening. The first parable shows us that there is something we need to *do*. The second and third parables show us there's something we need to *remember*. We'll see both in a moment, but first a look at the context.

In Mark 4 Jesus' popularity is peaking and the crowds keep coming (2:13; 3:7, 20). Opposition is coming, too, from the jealous religious leaders (3:6). At that point Jesus began to use parables to teach the people (3:23), offering this explanation to His disciples in 4:11-12, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"

In the previous account Jesus told the parable of the four soils (4:1-20). The story is about a farmer who sowed seed that landed in four places in a field. The first three produced no fruit—the hard soil, the rocky soil, and the thorny soil. Only the prepared soil brought a harvest. In His interpretation Jesus taught that the four soils represent four kinds of people listening to His Word: those with hard hearts, shallow hearts, crowded hearts, and prepared hearts. Only the fourth hearer responds in an acceptable way.

Let that sink in. In His story Jesus said that only one out of four hearers produces fruit. That's a 25% success rate. That also would indicate that 75% of the time kingdom work produces frustrating results, people who either reject the Word or who show early promise but throw in the towel for one reason or another.

If Jesus stopped at that point we might feel like throwing in the towel, too. Who wants to work on a team that shows a 75% failure rate? But there's more to the story. To balance out the hard facts of kingdom work seen in the parable of the four soils, Jesus proceeded to tell three more parables which show the positive side. Are there disappointments? Yes. But will there be success? Absolutely.

How should we respond when it seems like we've hit the wall? First of all...

I. When it seems like nothing is happening, *do this* (21-25).

According to Jesus' first parable, we need to keep doing what He told us to do in the first place. And what's that? We have two responsibilities.

A. If you have the truth, share it (21-23). Verse 21—"He said to them, 'Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand?'"

Jesus was a master at using common images from ordinary life to illustrate kingdom truth. Here He used a rhetorical question about the use of a lamp.

In that day the common lamp was simply a clay dish filled with oil, with a wick put into the oil. In order to give light the lamp had to use itself up, consequently, the owner had to replenish the oil supply.

There's one thing you never did with a lamp, then or now. You don't bring a lamp into a dark room and then cover it up. That would be foolish. To the contrary, you bring a lamp into a room if it's dark and you want to dispel the darkness. You use a lamp so you can see. That's the reason we have lamps, to help us see.

Then Jesus interpreted the parable in verses 22-23—"For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." Simply put, the point is twofold.

1. *The purpose of light is to reveal.* That's true of lamp, but it's also true in the spiritual realm.
2. *The purpose of the light of God's Word is to help people see.* You say, "But didn't Jesus just say He told parables so that some people wouldn't understand the secrets of the kingdom?" Yes, He did, in verse 11. He said He used parables to reveal kingdom truth to His followers but also to conceal truth from those on the outside. He hid that truth in His parables—and here's a key word—He hid it *temporarily*. The ultimate purpose of parables is to reveal truth, to make truth clear to hearers. The Lord Jesus hid kingdom truth from some, *temporarily*, because they weren't ready for it. They wanted a different kind of kingdom. They wanted a different kind of king. So from them, at *that* time, Jesus hid the reality of His kingdom.

But that would soon change. Following His death Jesus would give this charge to His band of followers, "You shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)." They were to go tell the truth, the whole truth, the whole *kingdom* truth, to the world, nothing hidden.

And so they did. What is the message we hear from the gospel preachers in the book of Acts? Listen to them...

--Acts 8:12 "...they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the *kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*..."

--Acts 14:22 "We must go through many hardships to enter the *kingdom of God*," Paul and Barnabas said.

--Acts 19:8 "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the *kingdom of God*."

--Acts 20:25 Here's Paul again: "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about *preaching the kingdom* will ever see me again."

--Acts 28:23 Here's Paul under house arrest in Rome: "From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the *kingdom of God* and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets."

--Acts 28:31 Paul once again, in Rome: "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the *kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ*."

Ponder Jesus' words again. "Whatever is hidden [the truth of the kingdom of God] is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed [the truth about King Jesus which was veiled during His incarnation] is meant to be brought out into the open." And it was. Why? Because people who had the truth, *shared it*.

That's our first responsibility, fellow disciples. If you have the truth, *share it*. You say, "But people aren't responding." Share it. "People don't want to hear it." Share it. With your life and with your lips, make the truth known that Jesus is the King of kings. Tell them that the King has come and died for sinners. Tell them that the King is alive and is coming again to establish His kingdom.

Don't put your lamp under a bowl. Put it on a stand. Let its light shine! If you have the truth, share it. In addition, we have a second responsibility.

B. If you hear the truth, heed it (24-25). Verse 24—"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more." Note this charge has to do with *hearing*. In the parable of the soils all four individuals *heard* the Word, but in three out of four cases, the hearing fell short. They heard, but they didn't heed.

They used the wrong measuring stick, so to speak. When some people listen to a sermon, they analyze it, examine it, and critique it. They can even repeat it word for word. But that's all that happened when they heard the Word. They heard it alright, but they used the wrong measuring stick. They failed to hear it with God's intent in mind.

What is God's intent for His Word? 2 Timothy 3:16—"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful [here's the fourfold purpose] for teaching [doctrine], rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." That's why God gave us His Word, to show us what's right, what's not right, how to get right, and how to stay right with Him. When you come to hear a sermon or even when you spend time alone in God's Word, do you have this fourfold intent in mind: to be taught, to be rebuked, to be corrected, and to be trained in the kind of righteous life God desires for you?

Verse 25—"Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." That's interesting. Those who listen well make it possible to gain further profit from the Word. Those who don't take a step backwards. They begin to lose what truth they previously heard.

I see two lessons here.

1. *It's not enough to agree with the Word.* Churches are full of people who have Bible head knowledge, but that's as far as it goes. They come to church to hear, but not to heed. That's dangerous.

2. *What you get depends on what you give.* "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you." What you expect when you come to hear God's Word is no small matter. If you expect to be entertained, that's what you'll get—and if you don't get it you'll decide to go somewhere else so you can get it. If you expect Bible knowledge, that too is what you'll get—a head full of Bible trivia, and no more. But if you come expecting to have your life changed, if you come open to rebuke, correction, and instruction, you will leave a different person, a renewed person, a Christ-like person, all to the glory of God.

When it seems like nothing's happening, *do this*. If you have the truth, share it. If you hear the truth, heed it. You say, "But if nothing's happening, what's the point?" The point is, *something is happening*. How do I know? Because Jesus told us...

II. When it seems like nothing is happening, *remember this* (26-34).

It's so important to remember...

Who's the most successful college basketball coach in history? Some would debate due to school loyalty, but who can argue with the stats of John Wooden. While coaching at UCLA, John Wooden built a dynasty in the 1960s and 1970s. His Bruins won ten NCAA Championships in twelve years, at one point assembling a sixty-one game streak.

But ponder this. Do you know how many years Wooden coached the Bruins *before* his first NCAA Championship? Fifteen. From 1948 to 1963, Wooden worked in relative obscurity before winning his first championship in 1964. What did he do all those years? He built a foundation, created a program where everybody was on the same page, and did it year after year. Few noticed him in those first fifteen years perhaps, but few can ignore his success now.

When it seems like nothing's happening, the Lord wants us to remember something about the nature of His kingdom, two comparisons...

A. God's kingdom is like growing seed (26-29). Verse 26—"He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like.' God's kingdom has to do with God's rule. God is reclaiming the world He created, the world that came under His judgment when Adam and Eve sinned. He has given all authority to His Son, the One He sent the first time to rescue a people for His kingdom, via the Cross, and the One He will send a second time to establish His rule over all creation. His Son is the King. What is His kingdom like? How does it work? Like this...

Pick it up again at verse 26—"A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Mark alone records this parable of Jesus. It emphasizes the certainty of growth in the kingdom of God. The focus is on the seed which represents the Word of God, and particularly the gospel message. Five things are true of seed.

1. *Seed is small but powerful.* Put one seed in your hand, make a fist, and the seed is gone. But it's not gone. It's just hidden. Put that seed under some soil and again it's gone. But again, it's not gone, just hidden. And tucked beneath that soil is something powerful enough to crack a sidewalk.

"So is my Word," God said through Isaiah the prophet. "It will not return void."

2. *Seed works even when the farmer doesn't.* It doesn't matter whether the farmer is working or sleeping. "Night and day," Jesus said, "The seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."

Think about that. We can sow the seed, but beyond that there's a limit as to what we can do in gospel ministry. Yes, we can preach the Word, but from that point we are basically helpless. There's nothing we can do to make the seed germinate or produce roots or bear fruit. In gospel ministry we have no power to give a person a new heart, to convert someone, or produce lasting change. We can plant the seed. We can make sure the seed we plant is good seed. But when it comes to matters of growth and harvest we are totally dependent on God—which, by the way, is why prayer is so essential.

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow," Paul reminded the church in 1 Corinthians 3:6. How does growth occur? "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty (Zech 4:6)."

Sometimes we take ourselves too seriously. Remember, seed works even when the farmer doesn't.

3. *Seed works slowly.* I watched farmers a lot growing up. I also noticed that the pattern never changed.

They put the seed in the ground in the spring, watched the plants grow in the summer, and harvested in the fall. Spring, summer, fall. Spring, summer, fall, always the same. You couldn't rush the cycle, either. The farmer couldn't say, "Well, this year I want my crops in the summer. I don't want to wait till fall." No. There's no rushing the growth process. Seed works slowly.

If you've grown discouraged by the lack of results in your service for the Lord, remember this. Kingdom work is God's work, and by His design, seed works slowly.

4. *Seed produces growth in stages.* Jesus said, "All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head (28)." This is vital to see. Seed produces growth *in stages*. Seed, then the stalk, then the head, then the full-kernelled head. If you want a harvest you must go through the necessary process to get there. And there are times in the process when it seems like nothing is happening.

Take, for instance, a corn field. The farmer plants the seed in April. May is an exciting month—you see the plants pop through the ground. June's exciting, too, for the shoots go vertical big time, with lots of growth. July is good, too, for July brings more maturity to the plant and the stalk grows higher than your head. Then August comes. What do you see happening in August? *Not much*. The plant isn't getting much taller. In fact, it doesn't even seem to be growing. But it is. It's actually entered a very critical phase, the maturation phase. The kernels are maturing. Oh, you can't see it happening, for it's a hidden process, but it's happening.

It's not just corn. Parents go through the August syndrome, too. So do Sunday School teachers, and youth leaders, and churches. You faithfully try to do what God has called you to do, but you don't see anything happening. Take heart, my friend. Jesus said that seed produces growth in stages. And in the end...

5. *Seed results in a harvest.* "As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come (29)." Note the timing, when the grain is *ripe*. We may want to rush things, but the wise farmer doesn't bring in the harvest until it's ready.

God doesn't either. The harvest will come, of that we can be sure. Again, not until He says it's ready, but in His time the harvest *will come*. Of this we can be sure.

And why is that? Because His Word, like seed, possesses inherent potential and power for growth. The harvest *will come*.

J. D. Jones writes, "There is infinite encouragement and hope in all this. We soon come to the end of our little resources, and we grieve that we see no visible results. But when this is so, remember that God never leaves the field. He never ceases His work, and under His fostering care the seed we scattered, unknown to us and unseen by us, is growing up. When we never see it, faith is in existence. When we never suspect it, it has often made considerable progress."

I referred to Isaiah 55 earlier. Ponder again God's guarantee in Isaiah 55:8-12:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

When it seems like nothing's happening, *remember this*. God's kingdom is like growing seed. Bring it to mind over and over again. Furthermore, remember this...

B. God's kingdom is like a mustard seed (30-34). Verse 30—"Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?'" The KJV says, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what comparison shall we compare it?" Jesus isn't telling us what the kingdom *is*, but what it's *like*. This isn't a definition of the kingdom, but a description of how it works.

Verse 31—"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground." Some have criticized the parable, citing that the black orchid seed is smaller. But Jesus wasn't interested in giving a botany lesson. He's referring to the smallest seed known to His audience, and that was the mustard seed not the black orchid. What's true of the tiny mustard seed?

Verse 32—"Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." I read that once the mustard seed germinates and grows it can reach heights in excess of ten feet.

Note the shocking contrast. It starts as the smallest seed, but ends up being the largest plant. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is *like that*.

How so? Like the mustard seed two things are true of God's kingdom.

1. *At the beginning it seemed insignificant.* In A.D. 30 there wasn't much to see, just Jesus and a few followers. To the natural eye, the kingdom seemed so insignificant. However...

2. *In time it will be seen by all.* You shouldn't judge the significance of results by the size of beginnings. The Lord began with twelve men. Then there were 120. On the day of Pentecost the number passed the 3,000 mark (in Acts 2). Today more than one billion profess His name.

Have there been setbacks? Yes. Did the church make mistakes? Yes. Will there be more? Without a doubt. Can we anticipate dry seasons? Sure. But the spread of the gospel has gone all around this globe, just as Jesus said it would. And by the time the Lord is done with His work in this world His church will include saints from every nation, language, and tribe (Rev 5:9).

What about the birds and large branches Jesus mentioned in verse 32? Are they significant? Some say no, others yes. It's possible Jesus is eluding to Daniel 4:21, suggesting that God's kingdom will expand to worldwide proportions so that people from all nations will find rest in it.

I find Wiersbe's comments helpful, "The growth of the seed is only one part of the story; we must also account for the birds in the branches. In the Parable of the Sower and Soils, the birds stood for Satan, who snatches the seed (4:15). If we are to be consistent in our interpretation, we must take this into consideration, for both parables were taught on the same day. The growth of the kingdom will not result in the conversion of the world. In fact, some of the growth will give opportunity for Satan to get in and go to work! There was Judas in the disciple band, and Ananias and Sapphira were in fellowship with the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:1-11). Simon Magus was part of the church in Samaria (Acts 8:1-24), and Satan's ministers boldly invaded the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:13-15). The bigger the net, the greater the possibility of catching both good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47-50)."

Our text concludes in verses 33-34—"With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them [the four Mark includes in Mark 4 aren't exhaustive], as much as they could understand [the goal of teaching isn't to dispense information, but to help people understand truth]. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything."

Perhaps you entered this room wearied, even disillusioned with what's been happening (or *not* happening) in your life. Things can be different, my friend. According to Jesus we must *do this*—if we have the truth, we must share it; if we hear the truth, we must heed it. And here's why, *remember this*—His kingdom works like

seed.

Take it to heart: Here's the bottom line...three implications.

1. *Our perspective is limited.* We can't see what the seed is doing. The fact is, there are things for which we are responsible, but there are also things over which we have little or no control. Will you accept that fact this morning that your perspective is *limited*? Will you let God be God? Our part is to plant the seed. He does the rest.

2. *The Lord's promise is liberating.* He says the seed will grow. He says the harvest will come. He says His Word will not return void. He says He will build His church. He says He will save sinners. He says He will keep His own. Rest in His promises, brothers and sisters. They are indeed *liberating*.

3. *We are called to live by faith, not sight.* That's how we are saved, by placing our faith in what God says about His Son. That's how we are to live, not by sight, not by measuring success by what we can see—we are called to *live by faith*. Let's choose today to live, not by our feelings, but by faith in God and what He has said.