

STORIES

Mark 4:11, 33-34

School is now in session, so, here is today's English / Grammar lesson: A *metaphor* is an implied comparison between two different things. A *simile* is an expressed comparison of two different things or ideas. An *analogy* is a likeness of one thing to another. For example, the "sea of life" is a *metaphor*; "life is like a sea" is a *simile*. But saying, "In the same way the seas have ups and downs and storms and currents, so does life" is an *analogy*. However, saying, "Going to church is like sitting in an English class talking about metaphors, similes, and analogies; doing both is about as exciting as watching paint dry," is an analogy, simile, and metaphor.

Analogies, similes, and metaphors, are tools people use to help describe something that is hard to describe. In the hands of a professional writer, these tools are like paint brushes, creating literary works of art. But in the hands of the inexperienced, they can make you scratch your head in bewilderment. Consider, for example, the following analogies turned in to a High School essay contest:

- She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like that sound a dog makes just before it throws up.
- He fell for her, like his heart was a mob informant and she was the East River.
- The red brick wall was the color of a brick-red Crayola crayon.
- He spoke with the wisdom that can only come from experience, like a guy who went blind because he looked at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole

in it and now goes around the country speaking at high schools about the dangers of looking at a solar eclipse without one of those boxes with a pinhole in it.

- Her hair glistened in the rain like nose hair after a sneeze.
- Long separated by cruel fate, the star-crossed lovers raced across the grassy field toward each other like two freight trains, one having left Cleveland at 6:36 p.m. traveling at 55 mph, the other from Topeka at 4:19 p.m. at a speed of 35 mph.
- Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.

The Parables of Jesus and the Kingdom of God

A major theme in Mark's gospel is the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "The time has come...The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15). He explained the kingdom of God by using metaphors, similes, and analogies. In other words, Jesus illustrated His teachings by telling stories. The Bible calls these stories "parables." Mark records, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables...With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when He was alone with His own disciples, He explained everything" (Mark 4:11, 33-34). Chapter four of Mark's gospel is a collection of four such stories and one illustration; all describing the kingdom of God.

How would you finish the sentence, "The kingdom of God is like...?" In chapter four, Jesus explains that the kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed (4:3-20); a lamp on a stand and a measuring bowl (4:21-25); a seed growing till harvested (4:26-

29); and a mustard seed (4:30-34). What insights can we gain from these analogies about the kingdom of God?

1. The kingdom of God is a done deal (4:3-20).

In the first parable, Jesus describes a farmer who is sowing seed. As He sows, some of the seed falls on the path, other seed falls on the rocks, others fall among thorns, and others fall on good ground, producing a good crop. The “farmer” (or “sower”) is Jesus. The “seed” is the word¹ (or message) that Jesus proclaimed; specifically, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”² The “soil” represents a person’s receptivity to Jesus’ message.

Here’s the point: *The kingdom of God came when Jesus came.* Each person has to decide what to do with Jesus. Accepting Jesus means entrance into the kingdom. Rejecting Him is choosing to remain on the outside. But whether or not a person accepts or rejects Him, doesn’t change the fact that He has come and His message, like seed, has been sown. Regardless of what you do with Jesus, His coming—the kingdom of God—will “produce a crop—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4:20). You cannot turn back the hands of time. Jesus has come, the kingdom of God is here, it’s a done deal. All that remains is your response! Will you accept it or reject it? Will you embrace it or resist it?

2. The kingdom of God is now and not yet (4:21-25).

¹ This is directly stated in 4:14

² Mark 1:15

With Jesus Christ came the kingdom of God. When He comes again His kingdom will conquer. Jesus came the first time as a suffering servant. When He comes again it will be as a conquering king. Right now, God's kingdom is here, but it is not yet complete. We are living in a time of transition where the kingdom of God is now and not yet. Jesus' parable of the lamp on a stand and a measuring bowl illustrates this truth.

Jesus said, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? 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" (Mark 4:21-23). "Lamps" in biblical days were made from clay, and had a wick that was fueled by fire. The "bowl" is a "measuring bowl." The word "bed" refers to a bench, or a couch, similar to what we would call a "day-bed."

Literally, v. 21 reads, "Does the lamp *come* for the purpose of being placed under the measure or under the couch?" The structure of this sentence is intriguing because lamps do not *come*, rather, they are *brought*.³ However, if Jesus was referring to Himself as the "lamp," then He did indeed come, and that's the point! Jesus did not come announcing the kingdom of God, only to be hidden under a bowl or bed. Jesus did not come to be concealed. In Jesus Christ, and through Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has been revealed—God's kingdom is now; but one day, God will manifest the glory of Jesus for all to see—God's kingdom is not yet; and on that day, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every

³ It is unfortunate that most translations (including the NIV and KJV) do not capture this thought, preferring instead, to translate the verse as "bringing" instead of "coming."

tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).

We live in-between the now and not yet of the kingdom of God. How are we supposed to live during this transition? First, our lives are to be an example for others to follow. We are to be lights in this world; and by the way we live our lives, the reality of the kingdom of God is to be brought into the open. Jesus said, “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 (Mark 4:22-23).

Secondly, we are to live by faith, and as we live by the little faith we have, God will increase our faith. “Consider carefully what you hear...With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more” (Mark 4:24). Third, we are to live as stewards, recognizing all we have comes from God. As we are faithful with little, He will increase our responsibility. “Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Mark 4:25).

3. The kingdom of God will produce a harvest (4:26-29).

“He also said, ‘This is what the kingdom of God is like. 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 4:26-29).⁴

⁴ Mark is the only gospel writer to record the parable of the growth of a seed.

A farmer can describe **how** crops grow, but he can't explain it. The farmer plants and waters; and then while he sleeps a miracle takes place—a seed produces grain. Likewise, the kingdom of God. Jesus' message has been scattered and watered. Now it is time for the harvest. People may try to stop God's kingdom, and interfere with its growth, but they will fail. God's Word will not return void. The kingdom of God cannot be stopped! It's a done deal; it's already here. Jesus said, "I will build My church (My kingdom) and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

The harvest God's kingdom has produced, and will produce, is great. One day, when the time is right and the grain is ripe, the Farmer will take His sickle, and bring in the harvest. The idea behind this imagery is judgment. What a person does with Jesus, whether or not a person receives His message, is of the utmost importance. To reject Jesus is to put yourself in danger of God's judgment on crop gathering day.

4. The kingdom of God is mysteriously amazing (4:30-32).

Jesus' final parable shows the mystery and beauty of God's kingdom. His kingdom started small, and it seemed insignificant, but it is amazing and all encompassing. Jesus said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. 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" (Mark 4:30-32).

In Jewish folklore, the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds, but a full grown mustard seed plant, much like a shrub, could grow to heights exceeding 10 feet. God's kingdom is mysteriously amazing. From one person, to twelve people, to billions and billions, it has grown all around the world. How it happens, no one really knows, but it happened, and it will continue to do so.

5. The kingdom of God brings peace during the storms of this life (4:35-41).

After telling 4 stories, Jesus decides to go by boat to the other side of the lake. Apparently, Jesus was teaching from the boat, and when the disciples left, "they took Him along, just as He was, in the boat" (Mark 4:36). Other boats followed, and at some point, Jesus went below deck to sleep.

The Sea of Galilee is located in a basin surrounded by high mountains. Sudden, violent storms are not uncommon. Winds blow in, getting trapped between the mountains and swirl, becoming more and more monstrous. One of these storms comes on the boats. The storm was so severe that even experienced sailors thought they were going to die. The disciples were incredulous that Jesus was sleeping through the storm, and so they woke Him, yelling, "Don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38) It is easy to mistake Jesus' inactivity as unconcern, but nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus quiets the storm, scolds the disciples, and then, even though the Bible doesn't say so, I think He went back to sleep, leaving those who witnessed the scene speechless (Mark 4:39-41).

Why does Mark record this story here? It seems out of place, but it's not. Jesus has been explaining the kingdom of God, but what relevance to daily living does God's kingdom have? Because God's kingdom is a done deal, because His kingdom is both now and not yet, because His kingdom produces an incredible harvest, and because His kingdom is mysteriously amazing, His kingdom brings peace in the middle of the storms of life!

Through faith in Jesus Christ I have become a citizen of the kingdom of God. But I still live in enemy territory. The seas are still dangerous. Storms can come out of nowhere. Things happen that I didn't plan. Life can be a bumpy ride, but there is no need to be afraid. Jesus is watching over me. He loves me. He cares for me. He speaks the word, and the strongest of storms becomes a whimper. That is something I can hold on to. That is something that gives me hope, even in hopeless situations.

CONCLUSION

Would you like to have that peace? Would you like to remain calm in the middle of your present storm? Would you like to be part of God's kingdom? You can be. It's really quite simple.

On one occasion Jesus was surrounding Himself with little children. The disciples got upset about this because, after all, children are to be seen and not heard. Jesus said to His disciples, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:13-15).

I had the privilege of teaching both of my children how to swim. I can remember both of them, at different times, standing on the edge of a pool while I was in the water encouraging them to jump. They knew I would catch them, so without hesitation, they leaped off the side, into the water, into my arms. They had the faith of a child, and it pleased their father. How much more is our Heavenly Father pleased when we throw caution to the wind, and like a child, leap into His arms.

I can't explain it. I don't have all the answers. But I do know this: God is waiting for us. His kingdom is ours for the taking, and it is a kingdom that is a done deal. It is a kingdom that is both now and not yet. It is a kingdom that produces an incredible harvest. It is a kingdom that is mysteriously amazing. And best of all, it is a kingdom that brings peace in the middle of storms.

Are you a citizen of the kingdom of God? Have you, in child-like faith, made Jesus your King?