**Listen carefully with the future in mind**

Text: Mark 4:21-25

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**Scriptures:** Matthew 25:14-30; Mark 4:21-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 84, 176,119:105-112,179,530

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#9)

**Theme:** In the future, the secrets of the kingdom of God will be revealed and the wealth of some will be increased and others will lose everything, depending on how carefully they listened to the Word of God.

**Proposition:** Listen carefully to the Word with a growth mindset

**Introduction**

What is going to happen in the future? Will we continue to see rising prices and shortages of some goods? Will Russia succeed in conquering at least part of Ukraine and what will this mean for the global balance of power? Knowing details about future events means you can make very good choices in the present. The Proverbs wisely say, “*The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it*” (27:12).

One of the unique perfections of the Bible is that the future is predicted with absolute accuracy. The Bible is a futuristic book, but it is also a book of history and of revelation about this present moment. Scripture has a **past focus** where God calls us to remember His work and our previous life choices as we look back and reflect. Jesus said ‘"*This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me*" (Luke 22:19). Scripture also has a **present focus** calling us to live thankful obedient trusting lives ‘in the moment’. Jesus said ‘*do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*’ (Matt 6:34). Scripture also has a **future focus**, preparing those who listen for what is yet to take place.

Last week we heard the Parable of the Sower together with the detailed explanation that Jesus gave to ‘*those around him with the twelve*’ (4:10). If you think about it, this parable has a **future focus** – on what happens to the seed after it has been sown. The main emphasis is on the extraordinary fruitfulness of those who hear the gospel, understand it and act upon it. Our text today from Mark 4:21-25 follows on directly from the last words of explanation that Jesus gives about the parable of the sower: “*But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.*" (4:20).

The five verses we will focus on today are sandwiched between the parable of the sower and two other parables which reveal the coming growth in the Kingdom of God: The parable of the seed growing without human involvement; and the parable of the small mustard seed growing. Some Bible scholars identify two more parables in our text: The parable of the lamp, and the parable of the measure. As we look closely at this kingdom teaching of Christ, we will see that the main message here is **to listen carefully with the future in mind**. We will do this under two headings:

1. The coming revelation of truth
2. The coming gains and losses
3. **The coming revelation of truth**

Before Jenny and I became ‘empty nesters’, when we had our children living at home with us, we would hide birthday and Christmas presents from them until the day arrived when we would give to them what we had prepared for them. Imagine how pointless and unkind it would be to prepare valuable presents for others but always to keep them hidden.

This is the idea that Jesus teaches in the ‘parable of the lamp’. In Bible times, lamps were a commonplace item found in almost all homes. They were usually small clay vessels containing oil with a wick that could be lit to produce a flame and thereby give out light. These lamps were often put on a table or on a shelve in a wall or on a special stand so that they could light up the house at night. The three other household items that Jesus mentions were also commonplace in most homes: the basket, the bed and the lampstand. It makes no sense to put a lamp under basket – the word here refers to a measuring container – where the light would not illuminate the room. Neither would anyone put a lamp under a bed or down on the floor. Imagine wiring your home so that the electric lights were only in drawers or under the beds and couches. You wouldn’t sensibly do it. Lamps provide light when they are visible, not covered over.

Jesus applies this simple physical truth to the spiritual realm of the Kingdom of God. He says: “*For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light*.” (4:22) It is not clear exactly who Jesus is speaking to here. It could be the ‘very large crowd’ (4:1) or the much smaller group of ‘those around him with the twelve’ (4:10). It was most likely the smaller group, but we can’t be sure.

Certainly it was to this group that Jesus had explained ‘*to you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables*’ (4:11). The Greek word translated ‘secret’ here is the one from which we get the English term ‘mystery’. The ‘mystery’ of the gospel, ‘*that was kept secret for long ages*’ (Rom 16:25) has come to light in Christ and is revealed to God’s holy ones (saints – Col 1:26) – all who have ears to hear.

For a time, Jesus concealed the fulness of His identity and His mission from the crowds who followed Him so that He could complete His work before willingly laying down His life at the cross. We’ve already seen how Jesus sought to hide His true identity: He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew Him (1:34). He had commanded a leper not to speak to anyone about his miraculous healing (1:44). He gave his explanation of the Parable of the Sower to a select few, not to the wider audience of the very large crowd (4:10).

In this ‘parable of the lamp’ Jesus is saying that this divine concealment is **temporary**. Some scholars think that Jesus is referring to Himself when He says, ‘Is a lamp brought in’ which in the original Greek is literally ‘Does **the** lamp **come**’. However, lamps do not come in themselves, they are brought. **The** lamp could also refer to a particular light, although the words basket, bed and stand are also preceded by the word ‘the’. Jesus certainly did refer to Himself as the Light of the World (John 8:12). For these reasons, it is possible that Jesus is speaking about Himself in this parable as ‘the lamp’, but many think not, as evidenced in our ESV translation ‘Is a lamp brought in’.

We know that for most of His life on this earth, the true identity of Jesus was partly concealed. Then later Jesus revealed Himself to be the promised Messiah, the suffering Servant of the Lord at the cross. He revealed His eternal Sonship and conquest of sin and death in His resurrection. He will reveal His supreme authority so that everyone will recognise Him for who He is when He returns to this earth in glory (Phil 2:10-11).

Have you noticed that the teaching of the Apostles that we find in the New Testament (Acts and the epistles) does not contain parables? Why? Because there was no longer any need to partially conceal the light of Christ. The secret that had been hidden like a lamp under a basket or bed, was now made manifest. Like the apostles, we are called to reveal, not conceal, the gospel. Jesus said: "*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt 5:14-16).

We can help to reveal the gospel through godly living (HCLD32) just as we can conceal the truth about Christ if we live unholy hypocritical lives (e.g. Matt 23:16). However, **only** doing good works as a witness for Christ without saying anything about the reason for the hope we have (1 Pet 3:15) can also hide the gospel. We can, for example, give the impression that the gospel is **just** about good works. Many people who do believe in the possibility of God’s heaven think that entry is gained by ‘being a good person’ rather than faith in Christ, the only truly good Person. If our neighbours see us leaving to gather as a church each Sunday, and we do not reveal the light of the gospel to them, then they may think that Christianity is just about ‘doing the church thing’. If we never talk about our faith in Christ, but only ever discuss the church, our worship services or our Reformed theology without ever clearly explaining the gospel, then we may effectively conceal the light of the gospel of God.

Before we move onto the ‘parable of the measures’, there is another truth revealed in Christ’s words: “*For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light*” (v22). Ultimately, God is a revealer, not a concealer of truth. The day is coming when everything will be plainly visible (Eccl 12:14; Matt 12:36; 13:43; 16:27; Luke 8:17; 12:2; Rom 2:6; Col 3:3, 4; Rev 2:23; 20:12,13). “*For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Eccl 12:14). In the final harvest of souls at the end of this age, whether we had true faith proven by genuine works (James 2:18) or temporary faith that died like a withered plant in the sun or one chocked out by worldly weeds will become known to all. “*If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear*” (1:23). We’ve heard about the light to be revealed, now let’s hear about the measures.

1. **The coming gains and losses**

At the present time global financial markets are in turmoil. For many people their Kiwisaver balances are down whilst the prices of many commodities like oil, wheat and energy are up. Inflation in the USA, the gas crisis in Europe and China’s current Omicron outbreak threaten the global economy. In the future there will certainly be financial gains and losses. Most likely, the rich will continue to get richer and the poor poorer.

In the parable of the measure, Jesus reveals that in the future there will certainly be **spiritual** gains and losses. The rich will get richer and the poor poorer. This is what Jesus says: *"Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (4:24-25).* The Greek word translated ‘measure’ is the one from which we get our English term ‘metric’.

In the ancient world, this frequently used word described a unit of measurement, either of volume, weight or length. It is employed in the New Testament to quantify spiritual ‘commodities’ for example: “*Fill up, then the* ***measure*** *of your fathers {guilt}*” (Matt 23:32); “*Think with sober judgment, each according to the* ***measure*** *of faith that God has assigned*” (Rom 12:3); “*grace was given to each one of us according to the* ***measure*** *of Christ's gift*” (Eph 4:7). In our text, Christ stacks this word up three times in a row: Literally ‘*with the measure you measure, it will be measured to you*’.

You may remember from last week’s sermon that ‘hearing’ includes not only receiving sounds into your physical ears, but also understanding what you have heard and then responding wisely to the message. If you hear the Word of Christ carefully then the benefits you will receive will be in proportion to how well you have listened.

Imagine that you are playing a treasure hunt game which begins with someone describing all the many places where he has hidden valuable items for you and others to find. If you pay close attention to what he says and then act on that knowledge as you go to find the treasures, you will end up with more than the person who paid less attention. If you wanted to find all this treasure, then you’d listen carefully! There’s a compounding effect in the spiritual realm just as there is in the world of finances. The rich do get richer, and the poor do get poorer. If someone has some money and wisely invests it, then it will grow, whereas if they don’t it will likely be devalued or lost.

Jesus describes this practical principle and applies it to spiritual matters in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30). There, a servant who was given five talents and by trading well made another five talents was then given the one talent from the ‘wicked and slothful servant’ who did not use his gift wisely. Jesus then said: “*For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away*” (Matt 25:29 cf. Luke 19:26).

As you may be aware, in contemporary personal development books a distinction is made between a ‘growth mindset’ and a ‘fixed mindset’. A growth mindset means that you believe your talents and skills can be developed over time. A fixed mindset means that you believe that these are unchangeable—so if you’re not good at something, you believe you’ll never be good at it. We could say that Jesus is calling His listeners to have a ‘growth mindset’ so that as they hear His words they expect to gain and develop spiritually in Him. In this faith is exercised. The sower who sows seed in the good soil has a ‘growth mindset’ – he expects to see a good harvest. Many people think that Christians have a ‘fixed mindset’ – being set in their ways and resistant to change. There is some truth in this.

The revealed mind of Christ is ‘fixed’ in that we have the completed Word of God in the Bible, and this remains unchanged and unchangeable (Matt 24:35). Sometimes people will say to me after a sermon I’ve preached something like ‘*it was good to be reminded of that truth*’. For the children of God there is a blessed familiarity with the gospel which they never tire of hearing and then telling: This is expressed in a line from the hymn by Katherine Hankey “*I love to tell the story, ‘twill be my theme in glory. To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love*”.

The revealed mind of Christ is certainly fixed in Scripture, yet as we listen to this truth, we are surely changed **if** we pay attention to what we hear. This is the Biblical ‘growth mindset’ which results in gains in godliness, that is in Christlikeness (1 Tim 6:6). It is this mindset/heart-attitude that Christ calls all who ‘has ears to hear’ to have. It could be said that it is not possible to remain the same when the Word of Christ enters your ears. There will be changes – gains or losses. Either you will listen carefully and grow spiritually, or you will not listen carefully, and you will wither like a plant in the sun without sufficient roots, or one that is choked by weeds.

There is no third option according to Jesus. Just as the ‘wicked slothful servant’ in the parable of the talents ended up losing what he had for a while, if we do not pay attention to Christ’s Word with a ‘growth mindset’, then over time we will lose the spiritual benefits that we have received in the past (I am not referring here to losing one’s salvation if you are truly saved). As with the parable of the sower, there is a warning here.

There is also amazing encouragement because behind the future gains that Jesus promises to those who pay attention to His Word is the **great generosity** of God. He makes the spiritually bankrupt enormously wealthy in Christ. “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*” (2 Cor 8:9). He is pleased to add gift to gift, favour upon favour, blessing to blessing. He is lavish, incredibly bountiful in His abundant giving.

In him, brothers and sisters in Christ, ‘*we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*’ (Eph 1:7). He pardons abundantly (Isaiah 55:7) in Christ. “*And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*” (John 1:16). He gives generously: “*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*” (Rom 8:32).

It is so good to be able to listen to the Word of God together and to grow together. Coming together to worship is more than honouring our God, it is more than enjoying precious fellowship together, it is an occasion when we either grow in wealth or in poverty; depending on how we listen to the Word of Christ. Coming together to worship is also one of the ways in which we are equipped to reveal the gospel to others, not hiding the light, but plainly telling the ‘old, old story, of Jesus and His love’.

AMEN.