

“TAKE HEED!”

As you probably realized, this is a passage whose meaning is not necessarily self-evident. Part of this is due to its literary form. These verses contain a series of wisdom sayings, and one of the characteristics of a wisdom saying is that it often functions somewhat like a riddle. It expects us to stop and puzzle out its meaning. Another factor that contributes to our difficulty in understanding this passage is that the sayings contained in it appear in the other Gospels in different contexts. For example, Matthew’s Gospel has a very similar saying in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus commands his followers to let our light shine before others in the same manner that a lamp on a stand gives light to an entire room. In that passage, Jesus is talking about the need for his followers to bear witness to him in both word and deed. Due to our familiarity with that passage, we might be inclined to think that Jesus is talking about the same thing when he uses the image of a lamp placed on a stand in this passage. However, this is almost definitely not the case. This passage is not about Christian witness.

What is it about? What does Jesus mean here when he says that a lamp is brought into a house, not to be placed under a basket or bed, but to be placed on a stand? We find a great deal of help in answering that question when we pay close attention to the first word in verse 22: the word “for.” This little word tells us something very important. It indicates that the saying in verse 22 is intended to help explain the saying in verse 21. In other words, putting a lamp on a stand is like unveiling something that had been kept hidden or secret. You can see the similarity: a light on a stand exposes things that were

previously in the dark, things that were hidden and kept secret. And the use of the word “secret” should remind us of Jesus’ words in verse 11, where he told his disciples that the secret of the kingdom of God had been given to them, but that it was still a mystery to those who were outside of his group of followers. It stands to reason that the word “secret” in verse 22 has the same meaning that it had in verse 11. And this sheds a great deal of light on the meaning of verses 21-22. Jesus is saying that the secret of the kingdom, the message that has been revealed to his followers but is still hidden to the eyes of the world, will one day be brought out into the open for all to see.

Of course, this leads to another question: when will this take place? When will the secret of the kingdom be brought out into the open? Once again, we find help in answering that question when we look carefully at the way this passage is structured. Notice that the two sayings in verses 21-22 are immediately followed by two more sayings, sayings in which Jesus tells his hearers to listen carefully to what he is saying. He says, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” And then right after that he says, “Pay attention to what you hear.” You get the point. Jesus wants us to listen up. He tells us, not just once, but twice, that we need to take heed to what he is saying. Why does he do this? Why is he so concerned that we will lose sight of the message that he came to preach? The reason for his concern is because the kingdom that he came to preach is in one sense still hidden. And this answers our question about when the secret of the kingdom will be brought out into the open. On the one hand, Jesus is the light of the world; he is the supreme revelation of God’s kingdom. But on the other hand, his light is

still hidden to those who have not been given eyes to see. You will remember from our study of the parable of the sower that that was what that parable was all about. Jesus' glory, and the glory of his kingdom, is not plain for all to see. It will be on the day when he returns in all of his glory. But up until that day it remains veiled, except to those who have been given the eyes of faith. This is the meaning of the first half of our passage. Though the kingdom is presently hidden, it will not always remain so. It will be brought out into the open on the day of judgment.

Some interpreters disagree with this interpretation. Instead, they argue that Jesus was saying that the kingdom was hidden during the time of his earthly ministry, but that it would be brought out into the open after his resurrection, and especially after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit would empower the church to proclaim the gospel throughout all the earth. From that time on, the secret of the kingdom was brought out into the open. Now it is true that Pentecost marked an important turning point when it comes to the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. However, is it right to say that the message of the kingdom is no longer hidden? I do not think that it is. For one thing, such an interpretation is not supported by the broader context of this passage. The parables that immediately follow these verses tell us that God's kingdom grows in a hidden and mysterious manner up until the time of the harvest, and the harvest serves as a symbol for the final judgment. In addition, our own experience tells us that the glory of Christ and his kingdom is still hidden to a great many people. While the secret of the kingdom has been given to some, there are many more who consider the Christian faith to be nothing

more than a human invention. To multitudes of people, the secret of the kingdom remains very much hidden.

Jesus used the sayings in this passage to remind us that it will not always be this way. The day is coming, and it is drawing nearer each and every day, when every eye will see him in all of his glory. And this is why he places so much emphasis upon the importance of listening carefully to what we hear in the gospel. And remember, Jesus is not talking about listening in a general sense, but a certain kind of listening, the kind that is characterized by trust and commitment. Jesus repeats the command to pay close attention to his words because we all need constant reminders to live by faith in the gospel. We are so quick to forget what we hear from God's Word, not necessarily in the sense that we forget it altogether, but in the sense that we fail to entrust our lives to what we hear in the gospel.

Why is this the case? Why do we so quickly forget the gospel, at least when it comes to how we go about our day to day lives? It is precisely because of what Jesus says in these verses. The kingdom of God is hidden to human sight. Even though Christians belong to that kingdom, we still have the old nature within us, and we still live in an evil age. We have to walk by faith, not by sight, and that is not an easy thing to do. Many of the things in our own lives, and many of the things that we see around us, seem to argue against the idea that the kingdom of God is present. Think about it. Why are so many people utterly disinterested in the gospel? Why does evil seem to be making so much headway in this world? Why do we Christians keep on struggling with the same old sins?

Why do godly people sometimes have to endure great suffering? It is very difficult to live as a member of the kingdom of God when almost everyone and everything around you presumes that that kingdom doesn't even exist.

This is why it is so important for us to pay attention to what we hear in God's Word. God has given us the secret of his kingdom. He has given us eyes to see and ears to hear. He has given us faith. But he also knows that our faith is quick to grow dim. While it is certainly true that God-given faith perseveres to the very end, there is also a sense in which our faith tends to decay. God knows this. He knows that we are in regular need of renewal, that we need fresh supplies of his grace over and over and over again. And he has provided the means by which our faith can be regularly fed. This is what Jesus is saying here. This is why he commands us two times to listen to what he says. He knows that we need the Word to feed our faith. We need to pay close attention to it. We need to keep it before us all the time.

How can we do this? One way is by hearing the Word preached on a regular basis. This is why Hebrews 10 instructs us to meet together regularly for corporate worship. God knows that our lives are easily consumed by the things of this world. He knows that our faith needs regular encouragement if we are going to hold fast to the confession of our hope and be stirred up to love and good deeds. This is why we place such an emphasis upon corporate worship at our church. It is why we recently started a Sunday evening service. Our faith is in constant need of renewal, and corporate worship,

centered upon the preaching of the Word, is the primary place where we receive that renewal.

Another way that we can pay close attention to the message of the gospel is by making good use of the sacraments, and especially through regular observance of the Lord's Supper. For this sacrament serves as a corrective to our tendency to downplay the extent of our dependence upon Christ. It reminds us that the only way to have life is by being one with Jesus Christ. And we need that reminder because, as Calvin says,

“[W]e will never have enough confidence in [Christ] unless we become deeply distrustful of ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves.” [*Institutes*, 3.12.8]

Have you ever wondered why God gave us the sacraments? There is nothing that we receive through them that we can't receive through the Word of God. Why then did Jesus command us to remember him with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Why isn't it enough to remember him by listening to the Word? And why did he say that the Lord's Supper is a means by which we proclaim his death until he comes? Why isn't it enough to proclaim the message of the cross in our preaching? Why? Because the secret of the

kingdom is still hidden, and God knows that it is difficult for us to go on trusting in things that we cannot see. Robert Bruce explains,

“Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word...The sacraments ...serve to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word...Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seal, you believe it better...for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe...The Word is appointed to work belief, and the sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief.” [*The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*, 64-5]

One of the ways for us to take heed to what we hear in the gospel is to make good use of the sacrament in which Christ is presented to us by the sensible signs of bread and wine. The kingdom is still hidden to human sight, but in the sacraments God has provided us with a visible assurance that his Word is true. This is why we have started celebrating the Lord’s Supper every week in our evening worship service.

The reason why it is so important for us to pay such careful attention to what we hear in the gospel is because our ultimate inheritance in the kingdom of God depends upon

what we possess of that kingdom in this life. [Lane, 167] This is what Jesus is talking about in verses 24 and 25. The measure that we use in receiving the message of the kingdom now will be the measure that is used to measure out the kingdom to us in the life to come. In Jesus' day, a merchant would use a measure to weigh out his products to his customers. Sometimes the measure was skimpy, and other times it was generous. Jesus is saying that our response to the gospel should be like a merchant who uses an especially generous measure. In other words, get as much as you can out of the gospel. Bring the biggest container that you can find, and keep coming back for more. This is one of the great wonders of the gospel: the more you seek from it, the more you will receive. The person who responds to the gospel half-heartedly will not get very much from it in the end. But the person who keeps trying to get more and more out of the gospel will one day discover that Christ is even better than he ever imagined. As Samuel Rutherford once wrote,

“I am sure that the saints, at their best, are but strangers to the weight and worth of the incomparable sweetness of Christ. He is so new, so fresh in excellency every day of new, to those that search more and more in Him, as if heaven could furnish us as many new Christs (if I may so speak) as there are days betwixt Him and us; and yet He one and the same. Oh, we love an unknown lover when we love Christ!” [*Letters*, 201]

The riches of God's grace are far beyond even our wildest imaginings. But in the life to come, we will only receive those riches in proportion to the extent that we laid hold of them by faith in this life. This is Christ's message to us in these verses: take heed of the gospel, even though it is hidden to the eyes of the world; keep seeking more and more from Christ, and you will end up with a bigger cup to be filled in the world to come.