

Parables of Growth
Mark 4:26-34
11/13/22

In Mark's account of Jesus ministry, Jesus concludes His teaching in parables with 2 that deal with the nature & growth of God's kingdom. Mark then closes with a summary of Jesus' teaching in parables. Both parables are introduced with statements identifying them as describing the kingdom of God (26, 30). Like the parable of the soils, both concern seeds growing into plants. While the parable of the soils concerned the readiness of the ground to receive the gospel message & produce fruit, our 1st parable today is unique to Mark & speaks to the power of the seed to grow apart from human intervention or understanding & the 2nd parable points to the growth that will characterize the kingdom of God. While the teaching in vss 21–25 appears to have been directed to the disciples, the audience here, like the parable of the soils, is apparently the crowds in general (33–34). Both begin with the words, **He was saying**. Both vs 26 & 30 use the same Greek word even though the NAS translates them differently. It implies this was part of Jesus' teaching ministry to the crowds. Although followers of Jesus are called to sow the seed, to not hide the light of the gospel, they can't produce life itself. Only God gives spiritual life (Jn 3:3-8; 2 Cor 4:5-7). In the parable of the soils (3–9, 13–20) the emphasis was on human responsibility, in that of the secretly growing seed (26–29), on divine sovereignty. When these 2 co-operate abundant growth results, as shown in the parable of the mustard seed.¹

1. The Parable of the Growing Seed 26–29

We might think the kingdom of God should be likened to something grand & glorious like glistening mountain peaks, crimson sunsets, or beautiful beaches. But Jesus likens it to *seeds*. The paradox of the gospel, the scandal of the incarnation is described by such common things. Jesus says the routine of planting & harvesting is a clue to the nature & plan of God.² He tells us a man scatters seed **upon the soil** & then goes about his daily life. He sleeps & rises, night & day. He can't cause the seed to sprout or cause new life to form. He can't even fully understand how it all works. Yet

¹ William Hendriksen & Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 10, New Testament Commentary, pp 171–172

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, p 142

he plants the seed & waits. As time passes, while he sleeps at night & gets up by day & goes about his normal routine, small green shoots begin to break through the soil & grow. He isn't involved in this mysterious process by which dormant seeds transform into living plants. In the spiritual realm, the followers of Jesus are to sow the seed of the gospel widely. Some of the hearers, those with good soil, respond to the gospel in saving faith & exhibit spiritual life by producing fruit. This regeneration & spiritual transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5–8) & doesn't depend on the one sowing the seed. It depends on God, who imparts life through the power of the gospel (Jn 6:37–44; Rom 1:16; 1 Thes 1:5; 1 Pt 1:23). Human ingenuity, emotional manipulation, man-centered techniques, market-driven strategies, legislation, & coercion can't create new life in the heart of a sinner. Regeneration is only by the Spirit of God (Eph 2:1–4; Titus 3:5). Though we're called to faithfully proclaim the message, we can take no credit when someone responds in repentant faith (1 Cor 3:6–7).³ God's kingdom work is ultimately His work & He'll sovereignly bring it to pass. This doesn't mean the sower abandons his work or is uninterested in what takes place. It means the seed must be allowed its appointed course, as the process of growth advances toward a harvest that's coming.⁴ All the farmer can do is trust. Yes, he can root up weeds, loosen the soil, add fertilizer, & water the seeds. All these are important. But he cannot cause the seed to sprout & grow. He must leave that entirely to the One who created the seed, who knows it thoroughly, & activates it. The farmer must trust & pray. He must wait patiently.⁵ He must leave everything to God while continuing his daily routine, waiting patiently until the grain is ready to be harvested.⁶ Don't take this wrong. The point isn't that we play no part in the work of God or the advance of His kingdom. Not at all. Like most parables, this one teaches a key truth about the kingdom. It doesn't tell the whole story. We all realize a real farmer would work in a variety of ways to make sure the seed has the best chance to grow. But this is to miss the point. The parable's point is God's sovereign work. Not only does the farmer not cause the growth, he doesn't even know how it happens. The nature of the kingdom's growth is a mystery. Salvation is of God (Jonah 2:9). In 1786

³ John MacArthur, *Mark 1–8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 218

⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p 169

⁵ Hendriksen & Kistemaker, p 167

⁶ David E. Garland, *Mark*, The NIV Application Commentary, p 178

William Carey was burdened with world missions. He expressed his burden at a ministerial meeting in Northampton, England. One in attendance said to him: *Young man, sit down; when God is pleased to convert the heathen world, He will do it without your help or mine.*⁷ Not so. Yes, there's an inevitable & independent growth of the seed, but there are other factors that God has ordained: the sower must sow, someone should water, & the soil must be fertile. The point of the parable for the disciples & for us is that once you've planted the seed, you've done your job. Why is it that sometimes someone will respond & another won't? Why is it that some people's growth seem so rapid & others seem so slow? Why is it that some churches explode with growth while others remain small? These are the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Our job is to faithfully plant the seed. God is the One who brings growth & harvest. Just as the farmer isn't the power behind the life & growth of the seed, so also we aren't the power behind the spiritual life & growth of souls. What a comfort this must have been for Jesus' disciples to hear. They could've thought the task of saving sinners rested on their shoulders. Jesus countered that by reminding them that only God can change the human heart. Their responsibility was to faithfully preach the message. Having done so, they could trust God with the results. The faithful Christian living out & sharing the gospel message can sleep soundly at night, knowing it's God who causes the growth (1 Cor 3:6). All we can do is proclaim the message (Rom 10:13–17). The rest is God's work, & we can fully trust in His sovereign will.⁸ It's interesting that Jesus says the seed produces grain **by itself** (28). Kenneth Wuest says this word means *self-moved, spontaneously, without external aid, & also beyond external control, with a way & will, so to speak, of its own that must be respected & waited for.*⁹ We get the word *automatic* from this word. The seed sprouts automatically. The only other use of this word in the NT is in Acts 12:10 where Peter was in prison & the gates opened of their own accord, automatically. God is in charge of all things & He'll bring the kingdom of God to its fullness. No human action or opposition can change that.¹⁰ Like the growth of a seed, it's a mysterious process. Like the patient farmer, Jesus is confident in His kingdom. Though opposed by religious

⁷ George Winfred Hervey, *The Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands*, p 44

⁸ MacArthur, p 218

⁹ *Word Studies from the Greek NT*, p 92

¹⁰ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p 198

leaders He isn't disheartened, distraught, or desperate. Nor should there be anxiety among His disciples. The faith that Jesus requires of disciples is to sleep & rise in humble confidence that God has invaded this world with the gospel seed that will grow into a fruitful harvest.¹¹

Jesus concludes this illuminating analogy by pointing out that even though the sower didn't cause the growth of the grain, he still rejoices in the harvest (2 Tim 2:6). **29**

Although the human messenger plays no role in the actual work of regeneration, we're still given the blessing of enjoying the harvest God brings about in people one person at a time. To put **in the sickle** is a Hebraism that may mean to swing with a sickle or the sickle may represent the harvesters, in which case the owner is sending the harvesters into the field. Even though the kingdom in the days of Jesus was represented by a small band of believers, a harvest was coming. Compared to the entire population of the Roman empire, or to all those living in Palestine at that time, or even to the large crowds that followed Jesus, His kingdom was insignificant humanly speaking. It resembled a small flock of defenseless sheep (Lk 12:32). Its Shepherd was **despised & forsaken by men** (Is 53:3) but a harvest was assured. We must know our place. We plant the seed yet we don't know how it grows. Our work is important but the harvest belongs to the Lord.

2. The Parable of the Mustard Seed¹² **30–32**

The disciples, hearing the message of the Kingdom of God, were convinced that the kingdom was right around the corner. They would struggle with the smallness of this little kingdom group at this point because this wasn't a large number of followers of Christ. But what may seem small, inadequate, & insignificant will prove to be mighty & powerful as God works out His purposes & His kingdom continues to advance & grow. With this parable, Jesus assured His disciples that the work in which they would engage would produce something far beyond anything they could imagine (Eph 3:20).¹³ God's kingdom will grow despite its small & unpromising beginning. Because God is the one who blesses His Word & creates spiritual life, believers can fulfill their calling & purpose with the certainty of knowing that we're part of something that cannot fail. Jesus promised

¹¹ Edwards, p 144

¹² *Parables of Hope: Mustard Seed & Leaven*, preached at ABC on 4/26/20, www.ashlandbiblechurch.com/april-26-parables-of-mustard-seed-and-leaven.html

¹³ MacArthur, p 219

He'd build His church & not even the gates of hell could withstand it (Mt 16:18). The parable of the mustard seed is the 3rd & last of Mark's parables about seed sown (4:1–9, 26–29, 30–32). While the previous parable was unique to Mark, this one has parallels in both Matthew (13:31–32) & Luke (13:18–19). This parable begins exactly as the previous one, **He was saying...** Again, the crowds are probably in view (33–34). Both parables draw a comparison to the kingdom of God, this one with 2 rhetorical questions, **30**.

To the disciples, who were still being trained & hadn't yet been sent out, the task may have seemed overwhelming, given such seemingly humble beginnings. But Jesus wanted them to be confident in the final outcome. He compared the advance of the gospel to a **mustard seed** that is **sown upon the soil**, which starts small but grows into a tree-like bush. The mustard seed, about the size of a grain of sand, was proverbial in Judaism for its smallness. Jesus says elsewhere that with faith the size of a mustard seed His disciples could move mountains (Mt 17:20; Lk 17:6). Some have challenged the accuracy of Jesus' words, since the mustard seed isn't **smaller than all the seeds**. The seeds of some orchids that grow in rainforests are much smaller. Some so small they can't be seen without magnification. It would take 35 million of them to weigh one ounce.¹⁴ Jesus, however, isn't giving a lesson in botany or speaking to a gathering of geeky botanists. He's speaking in language His audience would be familiar with & understand. From the perspective of a 1st-century Jewish audience, the mustard seed was the smallest seed they knew. & yet this small mustard seed would grow into a large, tree-like shrub, sometimes 10-12+ feet tall, **larger than all the garden plants**. The parallels in Matthew & Luke refer to it as a *tree* (Mt 13:32; Lk 13:19). It's certainly large enough for birds to find shelter in its branches. The point of Jesus' parable would have been self-evident to the disciples: though the kingdom of heaven at that moment was tiny, like a mustard seed, it would grow into a large body of believers. The Messiah Himself had a humble beginning, born in a stable, laid in a manger, & raised in an out-of-the-way town in Galilee (Jn 1:46). None of the 12 disciples were highly educated or members of Israel's social or religious elite. Far from being spiritual leaders, they were often fearful, slow to believe, & spiritually weak (Mt 8:26; 14:31;

¹⁴ <http://diogenesii.wordpress.com/2007/06/22/what-is-the-smallest-seed-in-the-world/>

16:8). Just as God transforms a tiny speck of mustard seed into a tall shrub, what God will accomplish through the death & resurrection of Jesus will be even more extraordinary. During Jesus' earthly ministry, the kingdom was almost imperceptible, both because of its small numbers & because it was spiritual & invisible. It didn't come **with signs to be observed**, Jesus explained on another occasion, **nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst** (Lk 17:20-21). Even after His resurrection & ascension, the group that gathered in Jerusalem numbered only about 120 followers (Acts 1:15), with another 500 or so in Galilee (1 Cor 15:6). Those small beginnings would soon grow. 3,000 souls were added in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). At the close of the book of Acts it could be said that the whole world had heard the gospel (Col 1:6). Hundreds of millions more have been added since. The kingdom of God had small & seemingly insignificant beginnings, but will grow into something great. The significance of the birds in the parable is debated. Some see them as simply illustrating the size of the plant. Though once a tiny seed, it's now large enough for birds to nest in it. Others see significance with the birds representing the Gentiles who will find a place in the kingdom of God.¹⁵ Still others say the **birds of the air** represent demons or other evil forces, as they do in the parable of the sower (Mt 13:19). But there's no reason to expect a figure to always represent the same thing & the idea of evil doesn't fit the context of this parable. **Birds** making nests may carry the idea of protection, safety, refuge, & sanctuary. Of course, some say the **birds** here are just birds & leave it at that, & they may be right. But in Nebuchadnezzar's dream he saw...

a tree in the midst of the earth & grew large & became strong, & ...reached to the sky... Its foliage was beautiful & its fruit abundant, & in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, & the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, & all living creatures fed themselves from it (Dan 4:10-12).

In his interpretation of this dream, Daniel explains **the tree that you saw ... is you, O king; for you have become great & grown strong, & your majesty has become great & reached to the sky & your dominion to the end of the earth** (20, 22). Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon had brought great advancement & prosperity to a large part of the world. In his vision, the birds & animals who

¹⁵ Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 331; Hooker, *Mark*, 136; France, *Mark*, 216-17

benefitted from the tree's shade & food were the other nations of the world. In a revelation to Ezekiel, God described Assyria as...

a cedar in Lebanon with beautiful branches & forest shade, & very high... Therefore its height was loftier than all the trees of the field & its boughs became many & its branches long because of many waters as it spread them out. All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs, & under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth, & all great nations lived under its shade (31:3, 5-6).

Both Jesus & the disciples, as Jews, were familiar with these accounts & the parallel to this parable must have been obvious. The kingdom of heaven would grow from tiny beginnings to a great tree & would provide shelter, protection, & benefit to the whole world. How does this happen? When we as Christians live in obedience to the Lord, we're a blessing to those around us. Individual believers become the source of blessing to nations as they live out their faith. It's from the teachings of Scripture through Christians that education, justice, the dignity of women, the rights of children, prison reform, abolition of slavery, hospitals, orphanages, & countless other such benefits have come. Whenever the gospel of the kingdom of God is faithfully preached & practiced, all the world benefits. Jesus' point is that, in spite of great opposition, His kingdom will start small & spread greatly, & one day, when He returns, be absolutely victorious. What may at 1st seem inadequate & small & insignificant as God's means for reaching the world will in the end prove to be mighty & powerful as He works out His purposes & His kingdom advances against all the odds. Easily overlooked & often dismissed is the nature of God's kingdom today. He chose what is low & despised in the world (1 Cor 1:28). God takes His Son & hangs Him on the cross & everyone despises Him & this is the seed that plants the kingdom in the world. God takes your stammering lips & your faltering prayers & your fragile service & by it the kingdom grows. Appearances can be deceiving. Don't judge the value of your labors for Jesus by your perspective or by appearances. Learn to judge by His promises instead. His Word will not come back void (Is 55:11). He is faithful, always. In Jn 12:24, Jesus uses a similar image to the mustard seed to speak about His own death. He said, **unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth & dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.** Jesus was despised, rejected, crucified, murdered, & buried. But His death, He says, will be like the sowing of a seed & it will bear worldwide fruit. How improbable that cross

must have seemed to everyone who saw Jesus hanging there as God's instrument for planting the mighty tree of His kingdom into the world. The Roman authorities saw in Jesus nothing but a threat to the rule of Caesar & to the peace & prosperity of the region, & so they put Him down. The crowds delighted in His death. They rejected & despised Him. Even the disciples were overcome with despair at the sight of Jesus on the cross & deserted Him. No one saw the cross for what it really is, the mustard seed of the kingdom; the dying grain of wheat that would make such progress that people from around the world would find eternal rest in it. As Paul said, **God has chosen the foolish things of the world that He might shame the wise; & God has chosen the weak things of the world that He might shame the strong** (1 Cor 1:27). The implications of this parable go beyond the church age to Christ's future millennial kingdom as well (Ezek 17:23). During His glorious reign, King Jesus will rule from Jerusalem over the whole world, extending unparalleled blessings to all nations. & so, in spite of numbering so few & facing opposition, the disciples could proclaim the gospel in the confidence that they were instruments in building God's invincible kingdom. What to them seemed hopelessly small would spread in influence until it circled the earth. That which was weak & frail, under divine power, was the beginning of the unstoppable & eternal completion of God's redemptive plan through the church to gather God's people to glory. Mark concludes this section of Jesus' parables with a summary statement.

3. Summary of Parabolic Teaching 33–34

The phrase **with many such parables** suggests this is only a sampling of the many parables Jesus told (Jn 20:30–31). The **word** is the message of the kingdom of God (1:15; 4:14). The audience here (**to them**) is assumed to be the people in general, since Jesus explained **everything privately to His own disciples**. Mark doesn't record a great deal of Jesus' actual teaching compared with Matthew & Luke, & most, if not all, of it is in short sayings & parables. Mark's primary point, however, is to emphasize Jesus' private instruction to the disciples (7:17–23; 9:28–29, 35; 10:10–12, 32–34; 12:43–44; 13:3–37). The phrase, **so far as they were able to hear it**, could mean that Jesus gave them teaching appropriate to their level of knowledge, simplifying the message so they could easily understand it. But more likely, people's comprehension depended on whether they had **ears**

to hear, that is, whether they were able to hear Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, or rejected it with hard hearts & closed minds. This is supported by the following sentence, where Mark notes that Jesus spoke to the crowds exclusively in parables, but then explained **everything privately to His own disciples**. As in vss 11–12, the purpose of the parables is both to reveal & to conceal. To those open & responsive to the gospel, the parables illuminate that truth. But for those who refuse to respond, the parables conceal it. We must remember that although the parables are a word of judgment against those rejecting the message (11–12), the boundary between those who truly hear & those without ears to hear isn't yet permanently set & the kingdom is open to all who'll respond in faith & repentance.

What's this mean for us today? Are you discouraged that there doesn't seem to be more growth in God's kingdom? As you look at our world, does it depress you? Don't let it! Just try to imagine what it would be like without the past 2,000 years of Christian influence! God's kingdom is still growing, individual-by-individual. Christians aren't just a small group of people waiting to be defeated by the world; we're part of a growing kingdom that in the end succeeds beyond our imaginations. Christ is building His kingdom & the day is coming when it will come about that **the seventh angel sounded; & there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord & of His Christ; & He will reign forever & ever"** (Rev 11:15). Therefore, we can, & must, pray & work toward, Father, **Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven** (Mt 6:10). We are called to sow seed & shine light. God does the work of salvation & building His church. We don't know about the results of our lives & words. We have no idea how powerful a simple word can be. God can & does use the faithful living & witness of His Word, though we may never see the effect our words have. That's the way the kingdom is. We often don't know what God does with our service. We plant the seed, go to bed, and, while we sleep, God germinates the seed so that life grows & eventually produces a harvest. We need to forget about trying to see the fruit of our service immediately. It doesn't matter if we ever see it in this life. We're called to take the light & let it shine, then let God do with it whatever He pleases.¹⁶

¹⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, p 86

He is at work building His kingdom, not with entertainment & not with flash, but by obedience to His Word, which is attended by His Spirit, so that the kingdom grows & grows until the day when the Lord of the harvest comes for His fruit.¹⁷

How do these parables apply to us today? They teach us that there's a need for perspective in the work of God. To put it bluntly, this work isn't about you, it's not about me. It's about Him & His word. It's about the seed. Paul said, **I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth** (1 Cor 3:6-7). We need perspective. It's not about us. Yes, we have something to do, but it's not about what we do, it's about what God does. It's from His hand that comes the increase, & Paul's argument to the Corinthians was that since the planter & waterer don't have any power in themselves to bring forth life, why are you envying each other? Just go & do the work God has given to you & rejoice when God shows His hand of blessing on it. Sometimes we lose perspective. In 2 Cor 3, Paul again addresses this problem: **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?... Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God** (1, 5). It's not about us. These parable give us perspective as we consider the power of the Word of God. It happens in spite of us. Yes, we have an involvement but the life springing forth has got nothing to do with us. There's a need not only for perspective but also patience in the work of God. The farmer slept, he rose night & day, & the seed sprung up. Eccl 3:1-2 says: **There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven... A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.** That's saying there are seasons in life & in nature, & often that season is a season of waiting. Sowing, waiting, reaping. What goes on during that waiting is often undetectable. The farmer doesn't know what's going on under the ground & you don't know what's going on with the work of the Spirit in the lives of those around you. But know that something is happening, that God is at work. Hudson Taylor, that great pioneer missionary to China, once said that there are 3 qualifications for missionaries: *patience, patience, & patience*. That's a qualification for anyone in the work of the Lord. It takes faith to be a farmer

¹⁷ Sproul, p 87

& it takes faith & patience to be a sower of God's seed. Someone has said that the secret of patience is doing something else in the meantime. This man was sleeping, getting up, at night going to bed, doing his daily work. The thing we can be doing while we're waiting & patiently looking for the harvest is to keep sowing & to keep watering. That's our job. Some go a lifetime without seeing much fruit, but God's Word promises that a harvest will come. We also need perseverance in the work of God. Gal 6:9 says, **Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.** These parables teach that we don't have to raise the dead, that's not our job. We can't create spiritual life. We are to faithfully sow the seed & water it in prayer believing God will bring a harvest, though we may never see it. We can believe because He's said it. William Carey spent over 40 years in Burma & India, & when he was asked to explain his astonishing accomplishments, he simply answered one word: *perseverance*. He said to his wife, *If, after my removal, speaking of his death, anyone should think it worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge of its correctness. If he gives me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much. I can plod.*¹⁸ That's perseverance. The unusual productivity of the Word of God teaches us that we need perspective in God's work, we need patience in God's work, & we need perseverance in God's work, knowing He will bring the increase.

¹⁸ John Emory Godbey, Allen Howard Godbey, *Light in Darkness: Or, Missions & Missionary Heroes*, p 121