



February 15: The Kingdom of God - A Growing Seed

WEEKLY READING - MATT. 28 - MARK 4

TODAY'S PASSAGE - MARK 4:26-32

MAIN POINT

God is at work growing and expanding His kingdom in the world today.

BACKGROUND

To those on the “outside,” Jesus teaches in parables as a warning sign of impending judgment (Mark 4:10–12). To his disciples, parables serve as a means of further instruction. Jesus often teaches by means of parables, that is, through different kinds of figurative language and storytelling. The coming kingdom (or rule) of God means that Jesus is initiating new and redeemed life. Coming under the rule of God means that the powerful and established principles of a God-opposing individual and social life must come to an end. Human life occurs either by welcoming the kingdom of God or by persistence in the kingdom of self. The growth of this new messianic rule is, at first, inconspicuous (4:1–34).

In the kingdom parables, Jesus describes how God establishes his rule (4:1–32) and who the God of this kingdom is: he acts as a father (Matt. 6:26) who invites (Luke 15:3–32) and also judges (Matt. 25:34, 41). The three parables in Mark 4:2–32 emphasize that God impacts the hearts of people directly, personally, and fruitfully. Mark 4:1–34 constitutes one of the relatively few teaching sections in Mark (note, however, also 7:1–23 and 13:3–37).

CHRIST CONNECTION

In this passage, Mark adds to his account a third major topic of his narrative: while he has already presented the ever-expanding authority and power of Jesus as well as his authoritative call to discipleship, he now gives insight into the kingdom-of-God teaching, which serves as the thematic umbrella for both the coming of Jesus and his call to discipleship. The coming kingdom and rule of God connects with the message of the OT in terms of the expectation of the coming of Yahweh.

The representative parables given in 4:1–34 stress that it is God who is at work. Inconspicuous in its beginnings, the growth that God nevertheless works issues in the individual and corporate fruit of reconciled, God-surrendered lives as a testimony to a watching world. Jesus teaches in parables in order to describe the state of the human heart and to convey various characteristics of the rule of God. To those “outside,” Jesus tells parables as a sign of judgment of hard-heartedness (cf. Isa. 6:9–10). To those who remain with Jesus, his parables serve as a means of instruction.

Skeptics may question whether there is a God in this very troubled world and, if so, whether one can actually know him. Jesus says that God and his ways, while often inconspicuous, are real. Skeptics must also hear that human existence is marred by the reality of a hardened heart that resists receiving anything from God—intellectually, morally, or volitionally. Both skeptics and followers of Jesus need to hear the parable of the sower, which exposes the inner heart of a person: Is there merely a fleeting interest in Jesus to see what he may offer? Is there openness to Jesus only on the condition that he promptly improves lives and delivers from all problems of life? Is there engagement with Jesus while simultaneously remaining blind to rising worries and lusts in the human heart? Or is there, mediated by the Holy Spirit, an openness to Jesus' radical call and a sustained willingness to serve as a host to him and his purposes? Such openness will lead to radical transformation.

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
 - 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
 - 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
 - 30 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
 - 10 minutes - 3 Circles Group Activity
 - 5 minutes - Prayer requests
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INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use at least one of these questions to introduce the topic of discussion.

- **Have you ever bought something, such as a specialty tool or a smart phone, only to find it too complicated to use?**
- **Did you return the item, or did you persevere and learn how to use it somewhat properly?**

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - Though most items we purchase are designed to make life easier, that doesn't always turn out to be the case. Some things are just hard to figure out how they work. Likewise, when we look around at all that is taking place in the world and in the church today, it's hard to understand how our sovereign, loving God is at work. Nevertheless, He is, and He has given His followers the special privilege of joining Him in it.

YEAR OF PRAYER - GROUP PRAYER

GUIDE YOUR GROUP TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Pause and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

Father God, as we gather we acknowledge the significance of coming together in unity with our brothers and sisters' in Christ to focus on praising you and sharing our requests. We want to begin

by acknowledging that you are the Great I Am, that you are Holy, Holy, Holy. You are El Shaddai—Almighty God, Jehovah Tsaba—the Lord of Host. We bless Your name O Lord.

Please share your words of adoration now. (pause)

We humbly ask for a growing burden for the lost around the world. May we be faithful to pray for the missionaries who boldly share the gospel. We ask for boldness in sharing with family and friends—even the strangers we meet. May we begin to pray for the lost without ceasing—especially those who are part of our world.

Would you share aloud the names of those who weigh heavy on your hearts. Share their names now.

Father, we have so much for which to give thanks Isaiah 12:4-5 tell us to “give thanks to the LORD , call on His name. Make known His deeds among the peoples; make them remember that His name is exalted.” 1 Chronicles 16:34 “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good for His steadfast love endures forever!

Lift up your words of thanksgiving now. (pause)

As we lift up our petitions and intercessions Father God, we pray for those who’ve been baptized recently. May they continue to grow in their faith. Make us aware of those around us who need to be encouraged and or challenged in their faith. Guide us in meeting those needs. We pray for our pastors and ministers—give them rest and a renewed commitment to the call on their lives.

Please share your requests and prayers for others now. (pause)

Fill our minds with ways to encourage others to love and good works. Keep us focused on the gift of the Spirit causing our lives to be marked with love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control throughout each of our days.

We pray in agreement and in faith in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic. Commentary is listed below each passage for you to reference.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MARK 4:26-27.

- **4:26.** What is the kingdom of God like? A kingdom is the realm in which a monarch reigns. God’s kingdom is where He reigns. God reigns in the hearts of people who open their lives to Him. When Jesus explained the complicated concept of the kingdom of God, He used parables—stories with common experiences and spiritual realities brought alongside one another. For example, the kingdom of God is like seed scattered on the ground. Some seed will fall on good soil, take root, and grow. Other seed, however, will fall on hard, rocky ground and will not grow. Likewise, the kingdom will take root in the hearts of some but will be rejected and unfruitful in others (Mark 4:1-9,13-20). In the kingdom of God, as in nature, we are laborers together with God. The results of our work depend on Him, but it is our duty to sow the seed (the truth of the gospel) and then to wait for God to cause it to grow.
- **4:27.** After scattering the seed, the farmer sleeps and rises day after day. He goes about the normal rhythm of life and leaves the field alone. The verbs sleeps and rises denote activity that is repeated continuously, signifying a long process. Once planted, the natural process of plant

growth occurs as the seed sprouts and grows. This process remains outside the farmer's control. In fact, the farmer doesn't know how the process really works. Night and day the process goes on, but to the farmer it is a mystery. As the farmer went about his usual daily activities, the seed he had planted sprouted and grew. However, he could not force the seed to produce a quick harvest. In like manner, believers were to announce the good news and patiently await the results of their labor.

What do you think the kingdom of God is?

The kingdom of God in its broadest sense refers to God's sovereign rule over creation. In the spiritual sense, it connotes His rule in the hearts of people who acknowledge Him as King. Jesus' parables teach about different aspects of the kingdom of God. Understanding the parables gives us insight into how God is at work growing His kingdom and ways that we can be involved in His work.

What do you notice about the farmer in verse 26? Does he seem to be a good farmer?

In this parable, who is the farmer intended to represent?

Do you ever feel unfit to serve God? Despite any "inexperience" in ministry, in what ways has God encouraged you to serve?

The beauty of God's kingdom is that we don't have to be great farmers, we just have to be willing to scatter seeds. After sowing the seed, the farmer sleeps and rises day after day. He goes about the normal rhythm of life and leaves the field alone. The natural process of plant growth occurs as the seed sprouts and grows. This process remains outside the farmer's control. In fact, the farmer doesn't even know how the process really works. In the same way, all human effort in God's kingdom is completely futile without God's involvement.

What role does trust play in our willingness to be involved in kingdom work?

Do you ever get discouraged when you see little or no evidence of God at work? What are some ways to be encouraged? What specific Scripture encourages you? (Example: John 5:17).

HAVE ANOTHER VOLUNTEER READ MARK 4:28-29.

- **4:28.** Without human intervention the soil produces a crop by itself. Growing season after growing season the sequence of growth remains the same. The blade—the green, tender shoot—appears, then the head of grain materializes on the stalk, and then it ripens. The soil contained the nutrients necessary for germination and growth. Without the seed, however, no harvest could occur. Elements such as sunshine, rain, nutrients, and careful cultivation would produce nothing without seed. Once planted, the seed proceeded at its own pace in the normal manner. Jesus did not minimize the importance of spreading the gospel; the seed of the good news had to be sown. Yet human effort did not bring the harvest; God was and is active in His sovereign power to ensure His kingdom's growth. Believers are to declare the good news; the results of their efforts are God's responsibility. God's kingdom grows in human hearts the same way—without human effort. Spiritual growth takes place on God's timing through the receptivity of people to Him.
- **4:29.** The farmer only enters the scene again when the crop is ready for harvest. Eventually, the grain reached full maturity; in due time, harvesting began. The harvest seems to be Jesus' major emphasis in the parable. The harvest is a certain fact; God sees to that. Jesus' followers were to proclaim the gospel in the confidence that God would bring a harvest of people who would believe and place themselves under His rule (see 4:8,20). What an encouragement to Jesus' laborers who sow the gospel seed! The farmer also cannot force the ground to cooperate. He might notice the pattern that growth takes—first the blade, then the head, then the ripe grain—but he knows he neither designed nor controls the growth. Instead, the design

and power for growth rests solely with the Creator. At the proper time, however, the farmer has another kind of work to do: wielding the sickle when the harvest has come. He couldn't make the seed sprout or the plants grow, but he participated by planting and harvesting. With this harvest tool, he prepares to reap what God has grown. Although the farmer did not make the harvest, God allows the farmer's participation in it.

- From this parable we learn how God's kingdom—that is, His reign over His creation—operates. As believers, we're called to participate with God in His kingdom work; but we aren't responsible for its growth. God's work in the world ultimately does not rely on human effort. That reality really should encourage us. It means we can persevere in the kingdom work God calls us to do and leave the results (growth) to God. Because God's kingdom is both present and future, one day the Lord will declare the crop is ready. Then will come the time for His harvesting.

What truth do you think Jesus intended to emphasize when He said the soil produced a crop “by itself” (v. 28)?

What does it look like when God includes us in the harvest?

The harvest seems to be Jesus' major emphasis in this parable. Although the farmer didn't make the harvest, God allowed his participation in it. God's work in the world ultimately does not rely on human effort. God can do whatever He plans to accomplish. Like the harvest, His ability to work is certain. Those who submit to God can participate in what He does and can be sure He fulfills His promises. This is God's delight as He receives the maximum glory from us as we join in the plans He is accomplishing.

If God's Word can be spread without our help, why do you think He asks us to join Him?

HAVE ANOTHER VOLUNTEER READ MARK 4:30-32.

- **4:30.** Defining God's kingdom in human terms can be difficult. Jesus, of course, understood it perfectly. But human understanding has its limits. So Jesus sought another way to illustrate the truth of the kingdom in a parable.
- **4:31.** All His hearers knew the nature of a mustard seed. It was known to be smaller than any other seed. A person might consider it to be useless. Like the mustard seed, the kingdom arose from small beginnings. But it did not stay small.
- **4:32.** Once germinated, the mustard plant can grow up to 10 to 12 feet tall. Its stalk can develop to a thickness of three to four inches. The large branches of the plant serve a practical purpose too. The birds make nests in its shade. Jesus compared the growth of the mustard seed to that of God's kingdom. Both outstrip their small beginnings to function in a practical manner. Similarly, Jesus' ministry started small but grew to be quite large in time. No limitations can ever be placed on God's activity in this world. In fact, every believer's life with God begins with the seed of the gospel implanted in the heart.

How else did Jesus compare the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed? (See Matthew 17:20.)

What does Jesus' parable here tell us about the nature of God's kingdom?

What are some ways you have seen God's kingdom grow from small beginnings, such as a relationship with someone or a seemingly insignificant event?

Why do think we are tempted to place limitations on God's kingdom, His kingship, or His activity in the world?

Jesus compared the growth of the mustard seed to that of God's kingdom. Both outstrip their small beginnings to function in a practical manner. No limitations can ever be placed on God's activity in

this world. In fact, every believer's life with God begins with the seed of the gospel implanted in the heart.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In what ways are you involved in scattering the seed of the gospel? In what ways are you demonstrating trust in God for the harvest?

Is there an area in your life where you struggle to believe God really is in charge?

Where might you need to demonstrate an attitude of patience toward God's kingdom? What about an attitude of confidence?

How does the mustard seed parable challenge your view of God's kingdom? How does it challenge your own identity and priorities?

GROUP ACTIVITY*

NOTE - WE WOULD LOVE ALL LIFE GROUPS TO TAKE TIME FROM THE LESSON TO DO THIS GROUP ACITIVTY!

3 Circles Training

Go to 3circlesgospel.com and watch the training video on the website.

Then either plan to show the video or demonstrate the 3 circles presentation to your class.

After showing it to your group have them practice sharing the gospel through the 3 circles presentation with one another (be sure to have them swap places as the listener and the presenter).

After everyone has shared discuss some of observations from sharing the gospel in this way

End with a prayer for the Lord to reveal to each member of your group someone who is lost that you can share the 3 circles gospel presentation with

PRAYER

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -

Close in prayer, asking God to cultivate in your group a willingness to serve Him every day, trust in Him, and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Thank God for His kingship in the world, and pray that group members would not doubt, but trust that He truly is our strong and watching King.