

“The Kingdom of God is like . . .”

Series: Jesus and His Gospel: Studies in Mark – Part 12

Mark 4:26-34

Introduction: Take your Bible and turn to Mark 4, Mark chapter 4.

As a parent your kids often say things to you that give you a glimpse into how they view the world. From a child's perspective life is fairly simple and so when they see adults doing things they can't do, they often make comments about wanting to be an adult so that they can do those things. So for instance, your child might say to you:

- I can't wait to grow up so that I can stay up as late as I want to.
- I can't wait to grow up so that I can have my kids do the chores around my house.
- I can't wait to grow up so that I don't have to go to school anymore.
- I can't wait to grow up so that I can get a job and make my own money so that I can buy whatever I want to.

Their innocence and ignorance creates unrealistic desires. If only they knew that you stayed up late so that you could fold all of their laundry. If only they knew that in many ways school is less stressful than work. If only they knew that having a job and making money does not mean that you can spend it however you feel like in the moment.

I specifically remember one time when one of our children looked at Julie and me and said something like, “wow, it must be great to be an adult – you just get to stay up late all the time and have all the fun.” If only that was what it was all about! Progression into adulthood quickly teaches them that it doesn't always end up like they expected. Their ignorance truly is bliss!

The Jewish people of Jesus' day had a similar issue. They had expectations that simply did not correlate with reality – particularly as it related to the coming Kingdom of God. Their thoughts about the coming Kingdom and the coming Messiah who would rule and reign in this kingdom were largely shaped by their desires for this Kingdom. So, they longed to be freed from foreign oppressors. They longed to have their own land that was untouched by pagan nations. They longed to have a king of Jewish descent to rule and reign over God's people, and they longed for this King to exercise great power and authority over the nations of the world. These desires were shaped in part by the prophecies of the Old Testament, but they obviously were not fully informed. They completely missed the part about how before the King – the Messiah – could rule and reign over this kind of Kingdom he had to die as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world so as to allow mankind to enter the Eternal Kingdom by faith in his finished work of redemption.

So, when Jesus arrives on the scene proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom you can imagine that these misperceptions dominated the minds of his hearers – especially within the great crowd

who had been attracted to him by the displays of great power over demon and disease. They saw a man who claimed to be the Messiah and who proved he had the power of the Messiah by casting out demons and healing diseases with a word. And so, we have been given a series of parables in Mark 4 in which Jesus is seeking to re-shape the expectations about the Kingdom that were prevalent even among his own inner crowd – his disciples. In the parable of the Sower, the soil, and the seeds we learned that there will be different responses to the message of the Gospel of the Kingdom, but the seed that is sown will have an effect and some of the seed will fall on good ground and produce an abundant harvest. In the parable of the lamp we learned that the message of the Kingdom is not to be kept hidden, but that which has been brought will be made known. And now we come to two more parables in verses 26-34 in which we will see Jesus further re-shape the misinformed perceptions about the Kingdom of God.

It was not going to come to the Earth as primarily a political entity that would initially overthrow the pagan nations of the world and bring the Jewish nation to prominence over all others. There is coming a day during the Millennial Kingdom where this is going to be true, but Jesus did not come this first time to make that manifestation of the Kingdom a reality. Rather, He came to make known that entrance into the Kingdom is only through the redemption found in Him. This Gospel of the Kingdom, this Good News centered upon Jesus' life, death, burial, and glorious resurrection. Entrance into the Kingdom – either the Millennial reign of Christ on Earth or the Eternal Kingdom of God in the New Heavens and New Earth – entrance into the Kingdom is not possible without this Gospel of the Kingdom. Mankind in their sinfully rebellious state simply would not be allowed to enter the Kingdom filled with God's righteousness unless their sin problem was cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God.

But this was a foreign concept to the perception of the Jews of Jesus' day. Just like the kid who thinks adulthood is all fun and games, the Jews anticipated an immediately overcoming King who would rule and reign right now through a powerful overthrow of the Roman Empire. But Jesus knew that if the divinely ordered progression was not followed then there would be no one who could enter His kingdom. If he, as the Messiah, as the Son of God, if he didn't lay down his sinless life to take upon himself the righteous condemnation due the sins of mankind, then no one would be allowed to enter His Kingdom. Redemption must precede entrance. And so Jesus came to redeem mankind from sin so that those who would believe in His name would be saved from sin and would gain entrance into His Kingdom.

And so, you can see that this created quite the tension between what the Kingdom was in the mind of Jesus' hearers, and how he knew what it was and how it would come. And so he teaches them through these parables what the Kingdom of God is like, and through these parables we too can understand more of the nature and glory of the Kingdom of God. Let's read 4:26-34.

Jesus lays out for us two parables in which he uses common, everyday, ordinary things to illustrate deep and eternal truths about the Kingdom. The first thing we learn is that the Kingdom of God grows mysteriously.

I. The Kingdom of God grows mysteriously – vs. 26-29

- a. We see this truth in the first parable about the farmer planting the seed and it grows all on its own without the farmer's help or knowledge. Now, before we jump into this parable I must tell you that interpreters down through the centuries have pressed into the text all kinds of fanciful interpretations and applications. But it really isn't all that complicated. The point of the parable is that the Kingdom of God grows mysteriously. The farmer plants the seed in the ground and waits for it to do its thing – to grow into a plant that produces the crop. When it does he comes and harvests it. We do not need to find deep and fanciful meaning in all of the details of the parable. We simply need to look at the obvious point Jesus was trying to make. The Kingdom of God is going to grow absent from human logic and absent from human effort. This is deeply mysterious to us, and especially to Jesus' first hearers. They expected Jesus' Kingdom to come with power, might, and force – all fully understandable to us and all through human effort. They expected to be enlisted as part of Jesus' overthrowing band of militants, and here he is telling them that his Kingdom is not like a flash of lightning falling from the sky with great power and authority, but it is like a seed planted in the ground by a farmer. This seed grows without help from the farmer and first produces the blade and then the ear and then the full grain in the ear. And then it is ready to harvest.
- b. *Through the sowing of the Word*
 - i. This mysterious growth of the Kingdom was going to come through the sowing of the Word. We know this from the first parable at the beginning of the chapter where the sower was Jesus spreading the seed. The seed there, and here, is the Word of Jesus Christ. This is how the Kingdom will grow – through the spreading of the indomitable Word of God. It will not come through the political machinations of the Messiah, or the militaristic might of Heaven. These things will be seen someday during the Millennial Kingdom on Earth, but this is not the nature of the genesis of the Kingdom in this first coming of Jesus Christ to Earth. Rather, it is like a seed planted by a farmer that grows on its own. So, the Kingdom of God will grow mysteriously through the sowing of the Word.
- c. *According to no human explanation*
 - i. This growth then, is accomplished according to Divine logic, not human logic or explanation. So, in the parable the farmer simply plants the seed and then the seed in the ground does the rest. He sleeps and rises day after day and the seed sprouts and grows and he does not know how. So, just speaking in an agricultural sense here – we can analyze what happens with a seed as it is planted in the ground. We can scientifically understand the process it goes through from sprouting the roots downward and the stalk upward. We can give scientific names to each part of the process and we can even use things that will help the process – like watering the seed, adjusting the mineral content in the soil, spraying herbicides and pesticides to keep the plant from being destroyed, using

fertilizer to increase the yield of the seed, etc. – we can help the process along – but at the end of the day we have no idea how this all works. We simply say – well – that is the way God designed it to work and so we operate within the system God has given us. But we really don't have any idea how it actually works, or maybe I should say we don't really know why it works the way it does. We know what happens, but we don't know why.

- ii. In the same way, the Kingdom of God grows without human explanation. What Jesus is saying here is that the Kingdom of God is not going to come in and take over like the Roman Empire did. We know how and why that happened. We can understand the process of the death of Alexander the Great and how that weakened the Greek Empire and made it ripe for the Romans to overthrow it. It all makes sense to us – weakening of one power and the strengthening of another as seen through a series of military encounters that proves the new empire is stronger and can now seize control. We get that process because that is how all of the kingdoms of the Earth have come into power – through political schemes and military power.
- iii. But this is not how the Kingdom of God grows. It grows like a seed does – without human explanation.

d. *According to no human effort*

- i. This growth of the Kingdom of God is also not through human effort. The farmer does nothing here to make the seed grow. Farmers of our day do all kinds of things to increase the likelihood of success in the growth and production of the seed – but the fact is the farmer can do nothing to make the seed grow. The Kingdom of God is just like this. The only reason we know to put seed in the ground and have it produce fruit is because it has done it before. It is not logical to put a tiny seed into a bunch of dirt and expect it produce something useful. We don't plant a wood chair in the ground and expect it to produce a dining room set. That would not be logical – and neither is putting a small seed in the dirt and expecting a plant to grow that will produce a harvest of more seeds. Just like I can't plant a wood chair and make it grow me a dining room set, so, I cannot plant a seed and make it produce a plant with more seeds. And yet, God has designed the seed to be planted and to respond to the dirt by sprouting and producing a plant and eventually a harvest. This is God's design and God's doing.
- ii. And so is the Kingdom of God! It is His design and His doing. It grows apart from human explanation and apart from human effort. You see, the Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus came preaching was not that He would finally use that particular generation of Jews to overthrow their oppressors through man dependent means like military might and political prowess. This was not the good news of the Kingdom. The Good News of the Kingdom was wrapped around a person – the person – the

Son of God. This Word of the Gospel would prove to be the seed that would regenerate and redeem the souls of men and women who would place their faith in Jesus Christ. The process of regeneration in the hearts of men where those who are dead in their trespasses and sins are brought to life is a process that is owing to no human explanation and no human effort. We can understand the what's of the process because the Scriptures make this process clear. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. The Spirit brings life to whom He wills. The believer is justified as he is identified with Jesus and he who knew no sin becomes sin for them so that they might be clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We can understand the what's of the process, but all of this is God's doing and it is all done by God's effort. The growth of the Kingdom of God through the sowing of the seed of the Word of God grows apart from human explanation and apart from human effort. The Kingdom of God grows mysteriously.

II. The Kingdom of God grows exponentially – vs. 30-32

- a. The Kingdom of God also grows exponentially. We see this in the next parable of our Lord in verses 30-32. Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds and yet when it is planted it grows up and becomes the largest plant in the garden with branches so big that birds of the air make their nest in it. The point of the parable is found in the contradiction of small beginnings that yield exponential results. The mustard seed is the smallest of the seeds in use at the time of Jesus, and yet the seed produced a tree that was billions of times its own size. This is what the Kingdom of God is like. Small beginnings followed by exponential results.
- b. *Small beginnings*
 - i. Think for a minute of the small beginnings of the Kingdom of God. The Incarnation of the Son of God happened in obscurity and insignificance through an unknown girl named Mary. The boyhood home of the Messiah was in a town of poor reputation. The personal ministry of Jesus was primarily among the common folks of Galilee and was especially to the poor and sick – the lowest of the low. The religious elite and the political powers of the day rejected Jesus and His message which ultimately led to the death of the Messiah through the cruelest of forms – the Cross. Jesus' ministry had drummed up a viral response among the common people of the day, but it was all heading toward Calvary where they would all abandon him. This is mustard seed type stuff. Small beginnings for sure.
 - ii. This is not in the manual for how to setup a Kingdom. Step one is not – as the King die on a cross. Step two is not – have all of your followers abandon you.
- c. *Followed by exponential results*
 - i. And yet these small beginnings are here promised by Christ to be like the path of the mustard seed. The smallest of seeds yields exponential growth.

Though the Kingdom of God is beginning in inconsequential and obscure ways this does not mean that the Kingdom of God is destined to failure. Just because Jesus will go up to Jerusalem to be crucified does not mean that the Kingdom will die too. Rather, the promise of Jesus is that though the Kingdom of God will begin with such small beginnings, it will grow to be the biggest plant in the garden and the birds of the air will find shade under its branches.

- ii. How many billions of times is the size of the mustard seed repeated through the growth of the tree? How impossible this seems to us as we look at the tiny mustard seed. How could something so small and insignificant produce something so large and mighty?
- iii. And this is what the Kingdom of God is like. Small beginnings that will produce exponential results. We are somewhere in the middle today. The seed of the Kingdom of God has been planted. The Messiah has proclaimed the Kingdom and has given His life as the way to gain entrance into the Kingdom of God, but the full manifestation of the Kingdom has not yet come. In this 2000 year interval the Kingdom has grown exponentially. From all of Jesus' followers abandoning Him at His crucifixion to untold millions that have claimed the name of Christ as their only hope for salvation. Small beginnings have truly yielded exponential results – and will only continue too. You see, the Jews of Jesus' day had too small of a picture in their minds of what the Kingdom of God entailed. They were content to think of Christ's Kingdom as being for the Jewish nation alone. They were content to have his kingdom come in their lifetime, and their enjoyment of it only last as long as they could stay alive. But Jesus knew differently. His Kingdom would grow far beyond what they could imagine. His Kingdom will be a shelter for all of the nations of the world as people from all tribes, tongues, and peoples come to him for salvation. His Kingdom will cover the whole of creation. Truly this is like the mustard seed. Small beginning with exponential growth!

III. Because the Kingdom of God grows mysteriously and exponentially:

- a. And so, because this is true, we should respond this morning in some very specific ways. Because the Kingdom of God is like this – it should shape how we relate to God's Kingdom work. So, because God's Kingdom grows mysteriously and exponentially how should we now live? Well, because the Kingdom of God grows mysteriously we must entrust results to God.
- b. *We must entrust results to God*
 - i. We cannot explain how it is that God is at work in our world to bring people into His Kingdom through the sowing of the seed of the Gospel. Yet we can know from these words of Christ that we don't have to understand it in order for it to be happening. God's work in this world to save souls from eternal death and add them as citizens of his Eternal Kingdom is a work that is not dependent upon our comprehension or our

might. This does not mean that we now sit back and do nothing in relationship to God's work. This does not mean that we say – well, it is God's work and I can't understand it and he will do it without my might and ability so I'm just going to sit back and relax. No, Jesus will explicitly give his disciples clear instructions about their role in spreading the Word of the Gospel of the Kingdom before he ascends into Heaven. It is clear from Jesus that they are to be ambassadors of this Gospel taking the message to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the Earth. God will use their sowing of the seed to bring about the growth of the Kingdom. Paul, among many others, models this human effort and work through sleepless nights and toils and intense labor for the sake of presenting every man mature in Christ Jesus. We are not to now be lazy because the Kingdom of God grows apart from our understanding and in independence from our ability.

- ii. Rather, we must entrust the results of the sowing of the Word to the King of the Kingdom. There is great mystery as to how God grows His Kingdom. Therefore, while we fulfill our ordained role as sowers of the Word of the Gospel we must do so with a deep trust in God to bring the results. It is pretty easy to look at our current world and be overwhelmed with the many ways it seems that God's Kingdom work is failing. Church's closing, Atheism growing, nation's abandoning any form of Christian heritage, Christian's being persecuted around the world, and on and on the list could go. And yet, here we have the promise of God that the Kingdom of God is growing. It is not growing in ways that can be fully explained by human logic and it is not growing directly because of human effort. It is growing because it is God's seed that will produce a harvest. It is through the adversity and the pain and the struggle of God's people in this world that God is at work to bring more and more souls to believe in Him.
- iii. Therefore, we can entrust the results of our sowing to Him. When we hear discouraging news of another seeming defeat for the cause of Christ in our world, we can settle our hearts by affirming our faith in God's unstoppable work. When things don't make sense as to why God would allow this or that, we must settle our hearts in faith in God. When we share the Seed of the Gospel and there is a lack of response, or a negative response we must run to the throne of our King and declare our faith in His ways and in His ability to produce a harvest.
- iv. We must guard ourselves against actions motivated by a desire to generate a response to the Gospel. You cannot make someone come to faith in Christ. You cannot give increase to the seed. You cannot make it sprout and grow and produce fruit. That is God's job. And yet, so many of these antics abound in evangelism. We seek to present it just the right way or with the right inflection so as to manipulate a positive response. But the Gospel seed will bring its own growth. We must share it. We

must share it carefully and with precision and love and care. But we must not manipulate results through emotional antics to get responses.

- v. One way I have found to help me express my trust in God to produce results through the sowing of the Word is prayer. If I am witnessing to people about the Good News of Jesus without praying for God to save that soul, then I am most likely entrusting the results of my efforts to me. I am in some way depending upon my ability to explain the Gospel well if I am not fervent in prayer. Prayer is the baseline expression of trust in the life of the Christian, and if we are entrusting the results of our evangelism to God then we will be praying often for God to do His promised work through the sowing of the seed.
 - vi. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God will produce fruit. May we ever entrust the results of the sowing to the Lord of the Harvest.
- c. We must exercise faith in the promised outcomes
- i. Also, in light of the fact that the Kingdom of God grows exponentially we must exercise faith in the promised outcomes of God. God has promised through these words of Jesus that the Kingdom of God, though it had an inconsequential and obscure beginning, it will grow exponentially. Though the Kingdom of God is not now present on Earth in a physical sense, there is coming a day when Jesus Christ will return and He will bring all evil to account, and He will be the Judge of the living and the dead, and He will rule and reign over all, and all will bow the knee to Jesus declaring Him to be Lord to the glory of God the Father.
 - ii. We are not there yet, but we must live as though this is coming. We are not bringing in the Kingdom through our sowing of the seed. We are not paving the way for Christ to return through our righteous influence on society. No, we are walking moment by moment in faith that what God has said is true. This is the course of all of those who long for the Kingdom of God. We must walk by faith and not by sight. We must be like the saints of Hebrews 11. In verses 13-16 the text says this about them:
 - 1. ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb 11:13-16 ESV)
 - iii. These saints of old kept their eye on the prize. They did not lose faith, but realized that they were pilgrims destined for another Kingdom. They left behind the safety and security of Egypt and they forged ahead waiting and longing for God to fulfill His promises. This is our course too. In the face of what seems to be one defeat after another for the work of God in this

world, we must press on in faith as pilgrims looking for another land. God will bring about His promises. The small seed of the Gospel of the Kingdom will produce the exponential results of the unimaginable glory of God on Earth. John saw a glimpse of this in Revelation 21:

1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.
(Rev 21:1-7 ESV)
- iv. God will do this. If you conquer this will be your heritage. What does it mean to conquer? It means to listen carefully to what God has said about His work and His ways in this world and believe in faith that He will do as he said. It means that you will be on guard against all fake kingdoms that would like to lure you into believing that they are the real deal. It means persevering in faith even when it looks like God is losing. It means faithfully sowing the Word as a pilgrim in a foreign land, looking to the author and finisher of our faith to guide each step.

Conclusion: Because the Kingdom of God is not according to human logic or human effort, and because it is not going to be present on Earth when and how we would like to think it would be, then we must be careful to listen to the words of Christ about the Kingdom. We must take Jesus at His Word here and be good listeners by receiving these words as truth and staking our lives and eternity upon them. Let's pray.

Benediction:

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

(Rev 22:20-21 ESV)