

Growing Gains

Mark 4:26-34

Do you remember those “grow in water” toys? They still sell them, but you don’t see them as much as we did in the 90’s. The packages promised *unbelievable* growth - that what you started with would expand to 50, 100, 1,000 in size. So you’d get out the little capsule or the tiny, shrunken dinosaur that looked like it came out of a Lucky Charms box, toss it in a glass of water, then wait a few hours, only to realize you were *right* to not believe the claims. Now, instead of a tiny, shrunken marshmallow you didn’t want to play with, you had a wet sponge that you didn’t want to play with.

Mark 4 shows us the way Jesus taught in Galilee. He predominantly used parables when speaking to the crowds. This chapter is a stack of parables, not necessarily given at the same time, but showing Jesus’ method and the content of some of these teachings.

The collection starts with the Parable of the Sower, which Jesus sets out as the key parable for understanding the others. Tonight we have two other parables that are similar in style and imagery, but with somewhat different points.

In the Parable of the Sower, the focus was the four types of soil. Tonight the main point is that even though Christ’s work began humbly and in obscurity, in the end the growth will be unbelievably huge - dominating the whole world with life.

Mark 4:26a - ²⁶ “The kingdom of God is like this,” he said...

What does Jesus mean by “the Kingdom of God?” The truth is, Jesus doesn’t *define* the Kingdom of God. But He did *describe* it.¹ Does He mean the final phase when Jesus is on His throne, ruling in Jerusalem in glory? Or does He mean the spiritual reality - that though we’re still waiting for His forever Kingdom to arrive in full, the people of God live and operate with the knowledge that Christ *already* is King and we are citizens sent on His business during our pilgrimage home? Or is He referencing the redemptive work that the imperishable seed of the word of God does in *individual* lives as it is sown into our hearts and starts to transform us and bear fruit?

Looking at the parables we find all these elements. We see the final harvest of souls into eternity, we see the calling we all receive as Christians to join together in the global work of the Gospel, *and* we see how the Gospel penetrates and permeates our individual hearts and minds to change us, here and now. As one scholar noted, in this section of Scripture, “we have parables which imply that the Kingdom is present and yet not present, and which continue the...contrast between what is now hidden and what will assuredly be revealed.”²

¹ *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*

² Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

Mark 4:26b-27 - ...“A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day; the seed sprouts and grows, although he doesn’t know how.

In the Parable of the Sower, *Jesus* is the first and foremost Sower and we imitate Him. But notice *this* sower: He sleeps and he isn’t all-knowing. He represents believers who have taken up the call to be a part of the work of God and the spreading of the Gospel.

This image assures of several things: First, that the Lord *will* accomplish His work in this world. It cannot fail. Even though the people involved do so without total understanding and with *no power* of their own to bring a crop out of the ground. Even still, the seed *will* germinate. It *will* grow. The field *will* come alive for the harvest.

Second, there is - as always - a depiction of God’s generous grace toward us. This farmer has such limited knowledge. He has limited strength. He can’t work round the clock. If you’re talking about saving the world, he’s not the ideal candidate. But God includes us in His work despite our shortcomings. God is gracious toward us to include us in His redemptive mission.

As partners in that work, we should behave with humility. We should recognize that we *don’t* always know the mind of God - that we *don’t* always have the best ideas for how to do God’s work. And we should always remember that the power is not in our minds or in our scattering technique or in the supplements we put in the soil. The power is in the seed.

Sometimes churches feel like the Gospel needs some help. That the seed needs Miracle-Gro alongside it. That people we want to help need enticement before they’d be willing to accept the Gospel. But the Gospel is the power of God for salvation in and of itself.³

This farmer may not fully understand how this seed does its thing, but he believes it *will*. And so, not only is he faithful to do the work, but we see he does it in restful confidence - without worry.

But the fact that he isn’t worried *does not* mean he doesn’t care. He has *dedicated* himself to this seed, this effort, to growing this crop. Day by day focusing on that growth.

What would happen if this farmer grew no crop? What would happen to his family? To his community? They *need* the harvest for now *and* for the future. It’s essential.

In times of peace and prosperity, believers often stop caring about spiritual growth. We settle into a mentality that’s, “I’ve got a spot in heaven and that’s all I need.” But that’s *not* all we need. God wants growth in your life - harvests from your life. Not just once, but season after season.

Mark 4:28 - ²⁸ The soil produces a crop by itself—first the blade, then the head, and then the full grain on the head.

³ Romans 1:16

There are times when the Lord works dramatically and suddenly, but in general, as God works in a life, in a church, in the world, it's not instantaneous. There is gradual development and progression. The farmer isn't *done* with the job the moment he scatters the seed. Then there is the watering. There's watching for weeds, protection from pests, careful measurement of when the crop is ripe. The Christian life is about patience and dedication and faithfulness. It's not just about us feeling a certain way all the time. There's a book on Biblical discipleship with a great title: *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*. That direction is where *the Lord* leads.

Now, as we wait on the Lord and walk faithfully with Him, God is - of course - even more faithful to do what He has promised. This seed grows by itself. The word there is "automatically."⁴ But the farmer dedicates himself to being a part of it.

The encouragement for us is to trust that the growth God wants to do in our lives *is* going to happen. It may be gradual, but it is unstoppable. And so don't give up your place or activity in the Lord's garden because you think there's more action out in the world. Real, eternal power and change is not found in the political, it's not found in the financial, it's not found in the experiential. It's found by following God's designs which come charged with God's power.

Mark 4:29 - ²⁹ As soon as the crop is ready, he sends for the sickle, because the harvest has come."

They say, "It's not about the destination, it's about the journey." In *this* case, it's not about the blade or the head, it's about the *crop*. In the Parable of the Sower we see shoots that came up quickly but bore no fruit. That wasn't a good thing. God wants fruit in your life, in our church, in this world.

And there are all sorts of different crops God wants to bring out of your life. All sorts of fruits of the Spirit. Just as olives served a different set of purposes than grain did, so each of our lives can glorify God and bring change into this world in a wide variety of ways.

But don't just be a bag of rich soil. Actually bear fruit. If we were to drive down to any one of the nurseries in town, we would find pallets and pallets of perfectly good soil, bagged up and ready for use. But that soil won't grow *anything* unless it's worked.

Mark 4:30 - ³⁰ And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to describe it?"

Jesus wants us to be thinking about the Kingdom and to apply what we hear. We don't learn *everything* about the Kingdom of God from these parables,⁵ but they give us ideas to consider and meditate upon and accept with real action and obedience.

⁴ Clifton Allen *Matthew-Mark*

⁵ *ibid.*

Mark 4:31-32 - ³¹ **It's like a mustard seed that, when sown upon the soil, is the smallest of all the seeds on the ground.** ³² **And when sown, it comes up and grows taller than all the garden plants, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade."**

What is this parable about? That's a question that has a wide set of answers from faithful, thoughtful students of God's word. Each of the three interpretations offered tonight give us a lot to ponder.

The first and most common interpretation for this parable is that it's simply about the fantastic growth of the Kingdom. That even though Christ came in the humblest form, the most modest of beginnings, look at what the final result is. The Carpenter from Nazareth, born in a stable, Whose message was absolutely rejected by the elite of Israel and Rome and Who died a criminal's death - yet look at how the Gospel continued to spread, continued to change lives, continued to accomplish the impossible day by day through the centuries up to and including our lives today!

Other interpreters say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa - *birds* weren't a good thing in the Parable of the Sower. In fact, they were devilish figures who *ate* the seed." And they point out that *this* mustard plant has *overgrown*. For them the parable speaks of how as God does His work, there will be *false* growth mingled with it.⁶ A worldly overgrowth that looks impressive and powerful, but where is the fruit? Instead of helping, there is a hindrance. We think of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8 who attached himself to the revival in Samaria, but he wasn't a follower of Jesus. He saw it as a way to enrich himself and wield power over others.

There's validity to this interpretation. It reminds us we're not to judge hearts, but we *are* supposed to judge fruit. What crops are coming out of a life? In my own life, what is growing? Tangles and thorns and unruly overgrowth, or am I growing in my knowledge and obedience to Christ?

There is a third interpretation to consider. Why a *mustard* plant? Well because the seed is so small. Jesus liked to use the mustard seed as an analogy: "Faith like a mustard seed..."

By the way - at some point a skeptic might tell you that the mustard seed is *not*, in fact, the smallest seed, so there you go Jesus never existed. Rabbis during this time period used the mustard seed as the proverbial example of the smallest measure of size.⁷ Think of how we use ants today.

But a *mustard* plant is not really what you would cultivate in your field. Listen to this ancient historian's account: "Mustard...with its pungent taste and fiery effect...grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it."⁸ In some sense, Jesus was saying that the Kingdom of God was, to some people, an invasive and noxious weed. And yet, in reality, it was a plant that produced flowers and oil and spice and aroma and flavor and medicine for life.⁹

⁶ See H.A. Ironside, Ray Stedman

⁷ R.T. France *The Gospel Of Mark*

⁸ Pliny the Elder quoted in Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*

The Pharisees thought of Jesus as an invasive weed. They did all they could to pluck Him and His followers out of their land. But once the Lord arrived, once the truth of the Gospel was sown, Light into the darkness, the darkness could not overcome it. And it kept growing and bearing fruit.

Mark 4:33-34 - ³³ He was speaking the word to them with many parables like these, as they were able to understand. ³⁴ He did not speak to them without a parable. Privately, however, he explained everything to his own disciples.

Do parables ever confuse you? They confuse me sometimes. Even this last mustard parable... scholars who know original languages and dedicate their lives to studying one area of Scripture aren't all totally sure about the interpretation.

And that's ok. The disciples also didn't fully understand. But the *point* of the parables was to divide people into two groups: Those who *wanted* to understand and those who didn't.

You know, Hebrews 4 says the word of God is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.¹⁰ That's *exactly* what the parables did. If you *wanted* to follow, you *followed up*.

Now listen, we have more resources than the disciples then did. We've got the whole canon of Scripture. We have many centuries of careful study that we can lean on. We've got more information than ever before. But we're *still* supposed to be disciples who follow up. Because our faith in Christ and our understanding of His word is not math. It's not, "I believed the right ten things and now that's all I need." It's not, "I heard the parable once and that's what was required."

We're called into an ongoing relationship of closeness and growth with the Lord. Called to keep going to His word and opening our lives before it and allowing it to be sown into *our* hearts so that it can do its work. And the truth is, the Word always has power to put down new roots in us.

I was talking to someone the other day who said, "You know, I've read that verse 1,000 times and it's just been a sort of pass-it-by verse, but I read it today and it suddenly jumped out at me. It stuck in my mind." And they were talking about how they weren't sure what the Lord wanted to teach them about it, but they were thinking about it and it was bearing fruit in their minds.

There in verse 33 it says, "As they were able to understand." The word understand is defined as, "Listening and conforming to what was heard. To receive news, believe it, and respond."¹¹

We don't always immediately *get* what the Lord is trying to tell us, which is why we want to make hearing God's word a *lifestyle*. The goal isn't to just read the Bible once, but to continually have it sown into our lives, day-by-day, situation after situation, so that *new* roots can grow down to bear new crops for the Lord.

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:12

¹¹ *Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*

Verse 34 says that Jesus explained everything to His *own* disciples. What an amazing thing that Christ calls us His own. That He takes the time, the effort, the patience, the grace, the power, to cultivate our lives for His glory and His purposes. To grow fruit in us that changes the world.

Today there's a lot of talk of low-skilled workers being replaced with robots, right? The Lord *could* do that. But He doesn't. Because He loves us and calls us to His side and empowers us to be *His* hands and feet, because He has made us His own.

The Kingdom of God is an unstoppable work of grace, meaning, and fruitfulness. So, seeing that this Kingdom is operating now and will culminate in a dominion of life all over the world, shouldn't we *rush* to be part of the harvest? Why wouldn't we clear the fields of our hearts so that the King can sow as much seed into us as He possibly could?

If there are things we don't understand about His truth or His leading, that's ok. But don't stay on the outside. Become an *insider* by pursuing the Lord and saying, "Jesus, I want to *understand*. I want to be conformed by what I hear from You. I want to be brought into the work You're doing."

Now *is* the time for sowing and for growth and for the reaping of spiritual fruit. Don't be a bag of soil unused on the shelf. Grow according to God's leadings and designs, starting right now.