

## Mark 4:26–34

<sup>26</sup> He said, “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. <sup>28</sup> Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.” <sup>30</sup> He said, “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. <sup>32</sup> But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” <sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. <sup>34</sup> Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

## 11th Sunday: Parable of the Mustard Seed

*“To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed”*



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### Answering Questions

In the preceding chapter, Jesus’ public ministry is well underway. He is healing, teaching, casting out demons and has come under the scrutiny of officials from Jerusalem. The stories about Jesus are spreading and “A large number of people followed from Galilee and from Judea. Hearing what he was doing, a large number of people came to him also from Jerusalem, from Idumea, from beyond the Jordan, and from the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon.” (Mark 3:7-8) The stories have also raised concern among his family: “When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” (3:21). If that weren’t enough the scribes from Jerusalem said: “He is possessed by Beelzebul and by the prince of demons he drives out demons.” (3:22)

Jesus’ opening proclamation in the Gospel of Mark (1:15) is a pretty clear mission statement: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” With all the deeds/works of power/miracles or whatever one might call them, how is there such a diverse response to Jesus and his ministry? Why are people responding so differently to the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God? The demons “get it” and they very well understand the implication of the Kingdom

for them; the demons confess who Jesus is. And yet so many people resist, do not understand, or have reached decisions that deny Jesus and his ministry all together.

Mark's chapter 4 is the beginning of answers to those questions. But Jesus will not make it easy. This chapter is the largest collection of parables in Mark that are focused on Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom. Later on, Chapter 13 adds parables but those are focused on things eschatological - and there the apostles beg Jesus to "tell the plainly." But such is not the nature of parables.

Chapter 4 of Mark contains some very memorable parables:

- Parable of the Sower (vv.1-9)
- Purpose of the Parables (vv.10-20)
- Parable of the Lamp (vv.21-25)
- Parable of the Seed that Grows Itself (vv.26-29)
- Parable of the Mustard Seed (vv.30-34)

Three of the parables are agricultural in nature: the sower, the growth of the seed and the mustard seed. Each of the three reflects upon sowing, growth and harvest-elements which address the character of the Kingdom of God signaled by Jesus' presence among them. The parables also point to the inevitable and ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God.

One notable feature of this Markan chapter occurs early in the chapter when Jesus begins the parable with "*Hear this! A sower went out to sow...*" (v.3) and then closes the teaching with "*Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.*" (v.9) While ending a parable with a plea to discern is typical of the presentation of many parables, the doublet that bookends the first parable of Mark 4 is highly unusual when compared to the traditional Jewish presentation of the *masahal*/parable. There is interesting scholarly debate on the reason for this doublet, but one possible answer is that parables reveal those who are merely curious at this wonder-worker from the ones who are led by the Spirit to seek the Kingdom. In addition, when the authorities are "watching" it does provide a degree of uncertainty about the message being taught.

These reasons also offer some insight to the Parable of Lamp, suggesting that the listener will need to reflect on Jesus' words and action to fully discern their role in the emerging Kingdom. It should not be a "one-time" reflection but one in which the disciple returns to ponder anew and continually grow in their insight and understanding. The parables are meant to enable his audience to take Jesus' word to heart more personally and more profoundly so that they can share it fully with others (vv. 22–23). The parable-like saying about getting back "in the measure you give" (v. 24) is interesting, indicating that the listener must continuously grow in their understanding of Jesus for themselves, or they will lose what they think they possess. Yet at the same time the agricultural parables make clear that the growth of the kingdom is not tied to the effort of any one person. The Kingdom of God will grow, but will they understand it when they see it?

These parables are like seeds sown into our lives. They may sprout and grow or they may not. It depends upon the type of soil they land on.

On a linguistic note, the expression *he basileia tou theou* is usually translated "kingdom of God." Here in the 21st century it is the translation we are used to and expect. However, the word *basileia* has two meanings, both equally used: the area ruled by the king or the power/authority to rule as king. In this context we associate "kingdom of heaven" with heaven but I suspect the latter would be a better translation. We should think of *basileia* as the ruling power that emanates from God which means that to be part of the kingdom we place ourselves under the authority of the king - or in this case, the authority and power of God. It is the latter choice which I think most naturally speaks to our relationship to God which is a major theme of all the Gospels. At this point, we are used to the "kingdom" translation, but it is good to always keep the power/authority meaning close to the heart.

## Commentary

Mark alone records the parable of the “Seed that Grows Itself”: <sup>26</sup> *He said, “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. <sup>28</sup> Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.”*

Placed after the parable of the Sower (vv.1-9) and its explanation, it is easy for the significance of this parable to be lost in the fast-paced narrative of Mark’s gospel. In the parable of the Sower, the meaning of the interim time before the fruits appear has a positive sense: the time of waiting is a time for sowing, an opportunity for seed to be scattered in the field. There is also a teaching that in that interim period there will be barriers, resistance, and problems encountered in the sowing of the seed as it comes to fruition. As in the earlier parable, the sower is not involved with the subsequent growth of the seed. It grows and produces “of itself” (v. 28).

As to the parable at hand, Eduard Schweizer [*The Good News According to Mark*, 103] notes: “The parable with its assurance that the harvest will come stands in opposition to any form of doubt or care which, instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise, endeavors to force the coming of the Kingdom or to build it -- by a revolution like the Zealots, by exact calculations and preparation like the Apocalyptists, or by complete obedience to the law like the Pharisees. Thus the parable is asking if we are willing, for Jesus' sake, to wait with him for God to do what he is sure to do, and if we are willing to wait with the carefree attitude which is becoming to the children of God, without any spiritual maneuvering or misguided efforts. To build one's life in this way -- entirely upon God's promise and no longer upon one's own ability or inability -- demands all the feeling, thinking, doing, and speaking of which we are capable.”

Consider that in the parable, as soon as ripe grain appears, the sower comes to harvest the crop. One need only mention “harvest” and one can easily assume it is a metaphor for the final judgment: Consider the words of v.29: “*when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.*” Now compare those to the words from Joel 4:13: “*Wield the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.*” There is no doubt in Joel that the words refer to the coming judgment.

If a final judgment is intended here in our parable, then we are left to understand the oddly passive man who sowed the seeds as symbolizing God. PHEME PERKINS [*The Gospel of Mark*, 577] offers that the stress in the parable falls less upon the identification of the “passive sower” as God, but more on the sowing of the seed as a messianic work which unleashes mysterious forces operating of themselves in the achievement of the purposes of God. For the attentive listener, this parable highlights Jesus’ mission and what is to be expected. Jesus’ work was sowing; only after a certain lapse of time will there be the gathering of the harvest. The period between sowing and harvest, however, is not insignificant; for in that period *something happens*.

Clearly in v. 27, the seed germinates and sprouts; it springs up and matures in a mysterious manner that goes almost unnoticed: “*sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how.*” This is the emphasis behind Mark’s phrase “*he knows not how.*” It is clearly not by human intervention that the seed grows (v.28); the earth produces fruit “spontaneously.” This does not mean that the sower abandons his work, nor that he is uninterested in what takes place, for this is not the point in the reference to his sleeping and rising. It means that the seed must be allowed its appointed course, as the process of growth and ripening advances toward a harvest that is approaching.

The sower takes account of the growth of the seed, but he cannot fully understand it. His ultimate interest is in the purpose for which the seed was sown—the harvest; when the grain is ripened, he immediately sends forth the sickle into the grain. These expressions exhibit aspects of the mysterious manifestation of the Kingdom of God in history. It comes mysteriously, by God’s initiative and appointment, without human intervention.

“Depending on the perspective from which the parable is viewed, the seed growing secretly may

be a warning about the suddenness of the coming judgment. No one knows when the hour will come (Mark 13:20-23, 32). When it does arrive, the kingdom that has been hidden will be manifested to all. Or it may be understood as a word of consolation for those who feel that God delays decisive action. Human actions can brother hasten or delay the coming of the kingdom, which has begun in Jesus' ministry." (Perkins, 577)

The comments by Schweizer and Perkins are biblically solid, but there is something left uneasy. Commenting specifically on Schweizer's view (above), Brian Stoffregen writes: "While I agree that this is a valid understanding of the parable; it is not too helpful if we already have a congregation full of people sitting around waiting for God to take care of everything. Often our problem is not with people thinking that their work will bring in the kingdom; but with people who are doing no work."

We are reminded by St. Paul: "*What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth...For we are God's co-workers.*" (1 Cor 3:5-9). Without a doubt the power of God unlines, drives and empowers growth, but nonetheless we are called to know our role in leading others to an acknowledgement and understanding of the Kingdom of God.

### The Parable of the Mustard Seed

<sup>30</sup> He said, "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. <sup>32</sup> But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade." (Mark 4:40-32)

In many commentaries on these three verses, the focus falls on the mustard seed being the "*smallest of all the seeds on the earth.*" Which is true, but even in Israel the orchid seed is smaller. If the result of these two seeds is to be compared, certainly the beauty of the orchid plant would claim the prize. The seed of the mediterranean cedar is not all that large and when it reaches maturity, compared to the 10-foot tall mustard plant, the cedar majestically towers above the largest of mustard plants, has awesome branches, and casts a lot more shade. And there is the question of identity. In parallel verses, Matthew and Luke, identify the mustard as a "tree." Mark describes it as *lachanon*, which means "edible garden herb, vegetable" [EDNT, 345] which is closer to reality even if, untended, it can grow to 10 feet tall. Still, it makes me wonder about the old adage: "one person's weed is another's flower."

The Kingdom focus is not on the seed but rather its development: a respite for the birds that they can find shelter in its shade. One easily can hear an echo from the Old Testament: "*On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it [tender shoot of the cedar, cf. v22]. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Every small bird will nest under it, all kinds of winged birds will dwell in the shade of its branches.*" (Ezekiel 17:23).

But notice that the Kingdom is not likened to the mustard seed, but to what happens to the mustard seed. The whole life of the plant provides the basis of the comparison. The reference to the birds of the air which find shelter in the branches of the mustard shrub may have a deeper significance. Echoes of the OT may be responsible for this formulation; the LXX of Ezek 17:23 has birds "under its shade" rather than "in the shade" of the tree. There are older variants of Matthew 13:31-32 and Luke 13:18-19 the seed grows into a tree. This variant highlights the OT use of great trees to depict the kingdoms of the world (Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:12, 20-22). The great tree in Dan 4:20-22 corresponds to a kingdom that rules all the

peoples of the world. The image of a mighty cedar of Lebanon symbolizes Assyria (Ezek 31:2) and Judah (Ezek 17:3–4). Perhaps the copyist thought it must have seemed contradictory to use the image of a bush to represent the kingdom of God. Changing the image for the kingdom from a bush to a tree emphasizes that the kingdom of God is greater than all human kingdoms.

Even when fully grown, the kingdom of God does not appear unusually large if it is compared to great trees. Birds that nest on the ground are sheltered by its branches. Jesus may have told this parable to counter the impression that God's rule had to appear among the great and powerful. It may have been an expression of God's providence in creation that even the lowliest in man's hierarchy have "shade" in the Kingdom.

Brian Stoffregen has a great insight on this parable. "The mustard is a common weed in Israel. One interpretation is that this parable lampoons the old pictures of the cedars of Lebanon. Today we might make a contrast between the mighty Redwoods of that exotic land, California, and the crab grass or dandelions growing in our own yards. Which is more illustrative of the kingdom of God? the power of God? The giant Redwood tree, which grows in northern California, like the cedar, would be a fitting symbol for the might and power and grandeur of God's rule coming to earth. They are trees that seem to live forever. Their tops seem to reach right up to heaven. The trunks can grow so large that a tunnel can be cut out large enough to drive a car through. They are a magnificent, mysterious, part of God's creation.

"In contrast to the cedar trees or the giant redwoods, Jesus says that the *basileia* of God is like a mustard plant. There is nothing grand and glorious about a mustard plant. It is a common, ordinary bush that grows everywhere around Palestine. Perhaps like crabgrass or dandelions in most of our neighborhoods -- or sagebrush in the deserts of Wyoming. Jesus proclaimed that the *basileia* of God was at hand. As far as I know, there are still no cedars growing in Israel; but there are a lot of mustard plants.

"Is God ruling now or not? Perhaps we are looking in the wrong places -- staring up in the sky for tall trees, instead of looking on the ground for common weeds -- and maybe we do the same thing with people. I've heard it suggested that a weed is just a flower that's a victim of prejudice. This interpretation of the parable -- God's rule is like a weed -- is one that certainly would challenge and threaten the hearer's world of assumptions of the coming, powerful kingdom of God. Yet, when the seed of a weed is covered by cement, they seem to find a way to grow through the tiniest of cracks."

### **The Word and Private Interpretation.**

<sup>33</sup> *With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it.* <sup>34</sup> *Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.* (Mark 4:32-34)

Why parables? There are any number of general observations about parables and their use in both the OT and NT. Parables are not a literary form unique to Jesus. Parables are an analogical way of teaching; one that does not simply give the listener the correct answer, but invites them into a reflection about the analogy offered: "the kingdom of God is like..." It invites them into a range of possibilities whose ideas germinate into a larger answer. That answer might be "next step" on the journey of faith, a radical u-turn, or something that completely turns one's world upside down. Had Jesus spoken to the crowds in a direct manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. Perhaps a decision that too quickly concludes unbelief and rejection. Jesus' use of the indirect address of the parable is then a grace and invitation to allow time for deeper reflection on his appeal to penetrate beneath his words to "the word."

William Lane [173] offers this insight about the public/private teachings: "With Jesus' parables before the people the evangelist contrasts his private exposition of '*everything*' to his own disciples. '*Everything*' within this context means more than parabolic utterance; it refers to the mission of Jesus in which the mystery of the Kingdom was veiled. The summary, accordingly, ... exhibits the two aspects of the revelation of God in the mission of Jesus. There was *veiling* (or very partial disclosure) before the

multitude and *disclosure* (but only partial understanding) to the disciples. This is the pattern illustrated in Ch. 4 and assumed throughout the Gospel of Mark. In the private instruction which Jesus gives to his disciples, the mystery of the Kingdom as present in his person is graciously unveiled. Only through revelation does the enigma become partially resolved; not until the consummation (to take the perspective of the parables) will it become resolved for all men.”

**Final Reflections.** The scholar PHEME PERKINS [579] offers these reflections on this Markan passage.

“The seed parables point to the certain harvest that stems from next-to-invisible beginnings. The lack of human agency during the growth process does not mean that disciples should sit back and wait for God to bring the harvest. The proverbial sayings on how faith increases warn against such a conclusion. Instead, the image of a certain harvest from invisible beginnings promises that even though our testimony to the gospel appears insignificant or even fruitless, Christians should not be discouraged or give up. Christians should beware of giving in to the mania for statistics as evidence of success, which dominates modern life. When the harvest is ripe, it will be time for the reaper.”

“The image of a mustard bush as the kingdom of God set over against the alternative vision of the nations as great trees points to another feature of God’s rule. The kingdom does not replicate the kind of greatness that human nations attempt to build for themselves.”

“The passivity of human figures during the growth process challenges a common reading of these parables. They do not describe an evolutionary process by which Christians build the kingdom. The proverbial sayings warn Christians that faith cannot remain private. We must give away what we have received. This evangelical emphasis counters a common modern tendency to think of religion as a matter of private preference that is best worn lightly in the presence of others. These proverbs and parables suggest that God does not give the gift of faith (or secret of the kingdom) to individuals as their private possession. Rather, the gift provides light for others and shelter for the birds of the field.”

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