

Jason Upchurch - Mark 4:26-34 - The Good News Grows Slowly But Surely

This morning we come to 2 parables that I think will be very encouraging to us.

The parable of the Scattered Seed and the parable of the Mustard Seed. The parable of the Scattered Seed is the only parable that is unique to Mark's gospel. The parable of the Mustard Seed is in all 3 of the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke.

And while Jesus preached many parables on the side of the sea that day, I think Mark included these parables specifically to emphasize the importance of the right response to the preaching of the Word of God.

Now, I think if we're honest, the other parables have been very weighty. In the parable of the 4 soils it feels as though there's not much hope: we proclaim the Word but most are not actually changed by its message.

In the parable of the lamp and the parable of the measures it feels like a large responsibility to proclaim the Word of God even though many will reject. And if we don't shine the light of the Word we will be held accountable.

We are very much like Isaiah in Isaiah 6 - which Jesus quotes here - when told to go proclaim so that...**Read 12**

The task of spreading the Word seems daunting and discouraging and hopeless. Is that really the attitude that we are too have? Do we just go on preaching in futility? Are we just preaching while standing on the Titanic while the world around us is hopelessly sinking to the bottom of the ocean? Is the outlook for Christians bleak until the return of the Lord Jesus?

And I think the answer from Jesus here is decidedly: no. We have every reason as Christians to be optimistic about the future forecast of the success of the Kingdom of God.

Isaiah's task was depressing because he preached knowing he would fail. We preach knowing we will succeed.

And I think these 2 parables unpack for us how that works. They serve to encourage our hearts and also manage expectations.

So let's dive in.

1) The Kingdom of God Will Grow Slowly. Read 26-29

So a couple of things to note about the parable before we unpack it's meaning. First, the parable can be a little frustrating because we know the parable is about the Kingdom of God. But the hard part is knowing exactly what in the parable represents the Kingdom of God.

Is it the farmer? Is it the seed? Is it the soil? Is it the growth of the plant? To understand a parable well, you have to know what represents what. So what is the Kingdom of God in this parable?

If you read different commentaries they all argue about which of these it is, but many eventually settle on the conclusion that the Kingdom isn't one element here, but it's this whole scenario. The Kingdom of God is like this whole thing of a farmer planting seed and it grows slowly and he's not sure how it grows but it grows.

I think that's right. The point is that the Kingdom grows slowly and we should expect it to just like the farmer expects his field to grow slowly. No farmer thinks his field will go from seed to harvest overnight.

Second, just a reminder: what is the Kingdom of God? It's where God rules and reigns. And although our Kingdom is a heavenly Kingdom, the Kingdom exists here on earth because the Kingdom is made up of all the people who follow Jesus and follow his Word.

Just like Israel was a nation even when they lived in Egypt, so too the Church is a Kingdom - a holy nation according to **1 Pet. 2:9** - that exists here on earth even though we long to be in our true home with Jesus. One day the Kingdom will come to earth in its fullness when Jesus returns.

So what this parable is doing is telling us **how** the Kingdom of God grows. And it's telling us how it grows very slowly until the return of Jesus. **Look at Vs. 29. Read**

Why does Jesus mention the harvest? Because harvest imagery in the Bible is often connected with the end of the age and judgement. So what Jesus is doing is describing the whole expanse of Christianity from Jesus's first coming until the second coming.

Other parables help us understand that as well: The wheat and the tares are sorted out at the end of the age - at the harvest.

Here, it's at the harvest when the sickle is put to the wheat. A sickle a small hand held tool with a curved blade attached to handle that farmers would use to cut down grain during harvest time. You know the Russian flag with the hammer and sickle? Those symbols were basically propaganda used to show the uniting of farmers and factory workers in a common cause.

So it's a farming tool used at harvest time. And in the Bible it relates harvest time to judgment from God.

Many people believe that Jesus is touching on **Joel 3:13** where this is almost an exact parallel. Joel is talking about God judging Israel except that Jesus is pushing this to the end of the age.

And so what Jesus is giving us is a big picture view of the slow growth of the Kingdom of God throughout the entire Church age until Jesus's return. And the point is that the Kingdom is going to grow slowly. Very slowly.

The disciples thought Jesus would begin the Kingdom immediately. That was the expectation of the first century Jews. Messiah would come, overthrow the government and rule. Jesus says that Messiah does rule, but the Kingdom is supernatural and slow growing.

When you have kids you can't really notice much of a change from day to day in terms of their size. It's very small. Same with a garden. But over the course of time you notice change. That's how the Kingdom works.

Now let's break this down a little more and make some observations.

A. The Kingdom does in fact grow. Read 26

I don't think it's an accident that we're back at a seed parable and there's someone sowing seeds, scattering them around. I think Jesus is connecting some dots for us with the parable of the 4 soils.

The Kingdom will grow. You look around the world and our country and you read all these Barna polls and church statistics and you think: the Kingdom ain't growing. Yes it is. We know that for 2 reasons. First, Jesus promised it would and second we're on the other side of the planet from where our Lord was crucified and there are about 100 faithful churches within an hour's drive of here. The Kingdom is growing, you guys,

Now, there is expected effort on the part of those in the Kingdom to scatter the message of the Kingdom. We are called to go and scatter - we saw that in the parable of the 4 soils as well. The reality is the Kingdom spreads when people in the Kingdom tell the message.

I mean think about this: God could speak directly from heaven in a booming voice in everyone's language the whole gospel message. Or he could send out legions of angels to proclaim the good news like he did the night Jesus was born to the shepherds. Or he could drop Bible from heaven like he dropped manna from heaven.

But he doesn't. The subjects of the Kingdom - you and I - go and make more subjects of the Kingdom and it will grow.

B. The Kingdom grows mysteriously. Read 27

When I say mysteriously what I mean is we don't understand how God is making everything happen. There's no formula for how the Kingdom grows and this is true on a personal level and true on a global level.

My conversion story is different than my wife's and yours. Some of you came to faith out of radical circumstances, others have grown up in church. No one can plan how this all happens.

Practically what this means is that there is no formula for making people Christians. There's no formula for advancing the Kingdom. There are a lot of books and people out there who want to tell us how we can for sure win people to Jesus. How we can make more effective disciples for Jesus.

Can I tell you something? Just throw those books right in the trash. Use those books to start your wood stove. Because there is no formula.

Now, can we read books on how to overcome fear of talking with people? Sure. Can we read books on how to be more clear with the gospel message? Sure. Can we read books on the depth of the gospel and what we need to be sure to tell people? Of course.

But once we tell people the gospel, it's really all up to God. It's like we've dropped the seed on the ground and it's all up to God to do the rest. We don't understand how that works.

What's going through the mind of someone who just heard about their sin and the judgement of God? Are they scoffing? Are they worried? Are they angry? I have no idea. And frankly that doesn't matter. I've scattered seed and that's all I can do.

We just have no idea how the Word works in peoples' hearts.

This is also true on a bigger scale. There's all kinds of books about how to grow churches or reach your whole town for Jesus. Books on how to have a revival in your city.

The great pastor of early America Jonathan Edwards was alive during what is called the Great Awakening. When the preaching of the Word of God seemed to go out in usual power and save many people. There was just nothing like it before then.

Well, what happened in the years after that kind of died down was people began to ask "what can we do to make that happen again?" And so what they tried to do was recreate the circumstances surrounding the first Great Awakening. If we just do these things, and say these things, and pressure people this way, and make them feel really bad, the Kingdom will grow again.

That's not how the Kingdom works. During the revival days of the early to mid 1900s people thought the way to get people saved was to bring in revival preachers. Set up a tent, do a week long preaching series, invite all your friends, make a big splash.

The biggest of course was Billy Graham. And don't get me wrong, there were many people who came to faith under those preachers and under Graham's ministry. But there were 2 main problems with those approaches.

First, usually those organizations compromised their doctrine to get a bigger crowd. They would cooperate with Catholics and unbelievers in an attempt to get the biggest crowd possible. They were locking arms with people who weren't even Christians supposedly in the name of Jesus. That doesn't work. You can't use unfaithful methods and expect God to bless them. Maybe he will in spite of that, but certainly not because of it.

Second, many - not all, but many - really thought that this was the way of evangelism. You wait til a big name comes to town and invite your friends. "I'm not smart enough or bold enough to tell the gospel, so I need this professional to do it."

And what slowly happened was rather than personal faithfulness in the home and in our community to tell people the gospel and disciple them in the faith, people got trained that they weren't qualified to say anything

about Jesus because they weren't the guy up front. And historically we have church attendance and membership records that show there is usually a bump in attendance for a couple months after a revival, and then it goes back to normal. Because you can't push the growth of the Kingdom.

By the way, this revivalist idea still goes on today. I have friends who are pastors who still think we need to promote big tent revivals and hear from someone anointed by the Spirit to really bring the Word for change to happen. That's all nonsense.

We know that we - all of us - are to go and make disciples in our home and in our community and in our situation God will work. So we preach the Word. But, just like the farmer doesn't understand the growth of the crop, we don't know how that works. We don't know how God is using that.

The Kingdom grows mysteriously.

C. Grows automatically. **Read 28**

Literally here, the earth produces automate - automatically. This whole thing happens by itself. Put another way: aside from scattering the seed, the farmer doesn't actually do anything to produce the crop. It's all up to God.

Luther on the Reformation: "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no price or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it."

Again, this is true in the Christian life personally and in the Kingdom of God universally. We just do what we can and the Kingdom grows exactly as God decides it to grow. There's no way to manipulate a bigger yield. You can't throw fertilizer on the Kingdom. You can't GMO the Kingdom.

But the reality is aside from preaching the Word, there's not a lot we can do.

Look over at **Phil 2:5-13**. As you're flipping, I just want to be as plain as possible: we cannot force people to grow in maturity. We can't force sanctification on other people or on the church globally. You want your wife or kid or your dad to be more Christlike? That's fine. That's good. But aside from encouraging them and sharing the Word with them and praying you can't make anyone do anything. It's between them and God.

So we are to have this mind of humility like Jesus where we are willing to lay down our lives for others. **Read 5-11**

So this part we know well, but then Paul ties it together with application. **Read 12-13**

So as a result of the example of Christ the Philippians - and we - are to work out our salvation. Not work for it, salvation is not by works. But live it out. Why do we do that? Because God is working in us.

Wait a minute, is it us working or God working? When we're talking about salvation all of it is a work of God. When we're talking about sanctification - becoming more like Jesus - it's a cooperative effort between God and the believer. We work toward maturity and God works in us.

So here's the interesting thing, Paul can encourage them to work out their salvation. He can command them and call them to it. But at the end of the day it's between them and God.

He says basically the same thing in **Chap. 3**. Remember in chapter 3 Paul talks about his former life in Judaism how he was a Pharisee and a Hebrew and blameless according to the law, he had all these things going for him that he viewed as merit badges for salvation. But ultimately he counts them all as excrement so that he might know Christ.

And so he presses on in following Jesus so he can know Jesus more. Then he says this. **Read 12-16**

So he says he presses on to know Jesus and to walk a perfect life. He's not there yet but he keeps striving. Then he says "Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise God will reveal it to you."

What he's saying is that he can keep dropping these truths on them but at the end of the day God has to be the one to apply it.

Have you ever fought against some biblical teaching, you rejected it or struggled with it. And then one day you were like, you know what, I believe that with my whole heart? And your view of the Bible or an area of obedience changes. You know who did that? God. God in you.

When we're disobedient, it's on us. We can't blame God. But when we move into maturity as believers it's on God and his grace.

What does this mean? It means that personally we are to strive for maturity in our life. We are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus and to walk in holiness. As we progress we give thanks to God because it's him working in us.

But with other people, there's only so much we can do. We can encourage growth but, as Paul says, God has to reveal that to us. There have been times when people come to me and they want to change they want to get rid of some sin or grow in some way. And I love that and I'll help them, but the reality is they have to do the work. There are no secrets to maturity in the Kingdom.

It's like having a strength coach at the gym. They can tell you what to do, but you have to actually get under the bar and push the weight off the ground. Over and over and over.

And listen, as believers, that should comfort us. First of all, we know that if we're striving for maturity then God will do what he wants to do in his time.

Second, we don't need to be worried about other peoples' sanctification. We can't do the work for them. And we also have to be okay if they're not progressing in the way we want.

That's true for us personally and for the entire Kingdom of God. It grows at God's pace. We are commanded to make disciples and encourage people in their growth but ultimately it's up to God. So we don't need to worry about how influential the church is or how much political ground we're gaining or not or how holy some other church is.

No, we just focus on us. Are we growing and are we encouraging growth? That's all we can do.

The Kingdom grows slowly. Back to **Mark 4**.

2) The Kingdom grows surely. That's the parable of the mustard seed. **Read 30-32**

And these go together. It's a good thing that the Kingdom grows slowly. No way force it. But we can also be optimistic that the Kingdom grows surely. It will grow!

I'm just going to give you guys the application up front. I get worn out from believers talking about how the world is degenerating downward and downward and the church is just a generation away from extinction and we're losing some culture battle. And the whole world is just terrible and get me off this rock.

We have to stop all that nonsense. Heaven is our home and to depart and be with Christ is far better. Sin is in the world and affects us. There are bad guys and bad things. But that does not change the promise of Jesus to build his Kingdom.

Jesus said in **Matt 16** I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it.

That's a promise. The church will be built. The church will grow. The elect will come to faith and heaven will be filled with masses of believers so great that no one can number.

And that's the simple message of the parable of the Mustard Seed. The Kingdom will grow into the biggest plant in the field.

Just like in Daniel the little pebble of a Kingdom that hits the statue and then grows up into the biggest boulder on the planet, that's what this is. Just as a tree. The Kingdom will grow into the biggest plant in the garden of the earth.

In Palestine the mustard plant - probably the black mustard - was not technically a tree, but a bush that would grow up wildly each year. Basically a massive weed. The seed is about twice the size of a poppy seed or maybe the size of a sesame seed on your hamburger bun.

While not technically the smallest seed in the world, it was basically the smallest seed in the ancient near east world at the time. And this particular plant would normally grow to 9-10 feet, but at times could reach as high as 15' in a single season. That's pretty impressive.

And so the point of the parable is that although the Kingdom of God starts off very small, it grows exponentially.

When Jesus died - after only a 3 year ministry - there were 11 close followers. After his resurrection, 50 days later there were 120 people in the room hiding on the day of Pentecost. That day 3,000 people were added to the Kingdom. A little while later another 2,000 were added.

The church was growing so fast in Acts 6 that the apostles had to designate 7 godly men just to take care of the widows among the believers. And continued to grow there in Jerusalem until God scattered the church through persecution.

By the end of the book of Acts, the whole of Israel has been filled with the gospel. Three islands in the Mediterranean Sea (Malta, Cyprus and Crete) have multiple churches on them, Italy is evangelized, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Cyrene, Ethiopia, Asia Minor all have churches everywhere.

That's in 1 generation.

That's what this parable shows us. **Read 30-32**

A lot of people want to speculate on what it means that birds are in the branches of the tree. Are birds bad or good? Does that mean false teachers hide in the Kingdom? Do the birds represent the Gentiles in the Church?

That's probably overthinking the parable. I think it means that this Kingdom becomes substantial and strong.

Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was compared to a tree that provided shade to the whole earth. It was a blessing and good for the world until it became corrupted and God chopped the tree down.

The Kingdom doesn't do that. The Kingdom grows and provides blessing to the world. It provides shelter and shade and grace.

Just like the Kingdom is salt and light - a preservative and a beacon - the Kingdom provides blessing to a world that is dead set against God.

Even though this age until Jesus comes back is described as evil and persecutes us, Christians flourish. When the iron curtain was lifted decades ago they thought there would be no Christians in the USSR at all. Instead it was a vibrant church that was refined by persecution and providing grace for the oppressed.

Same thing in China. Same thing in Africa.

The Church Father Tertullian once said: “The blood of the saints is seed; the more you mow us down the more numerous we grow.”

So go sow seed. Don't look for a harvest overnight because it happens slowly. But look for the harvest, because it will come to the glory of God.

Pray,