

■ LIFE OF JESUS

May 16, 2021 | Parable of the Seeds

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

- Write down how you understand the phrase “kingdom of God.”
- Read Mark 4:26–34.
- Pray for God to help you apply this passage to your life.

THIS WEEK

■ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is the one who makes His kingdom grow.

■ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Our role in God’s kingdom is not found in understanding but in faithfulness.

■ MEDITATE

“[The kingdom of God] is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:31–32)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *How would you describe your role in growing God's kingdom?*

Q: *Why should we want God's kingdom to grow?*

“That is out of my hands.” This oft-repeated line means the success or failure of an endeavor depends not on us but on some factor beyond our control. One of the primary points of Mark 4:26–34 is that the growth of the kingdom of God is ultimately out of our hands. We do not decide how the kingdom will grow. Its growth does not depend on our effort. Many of us have trouble letting go of things. Not being in control of an outcome or a process worries us. But when it comes to the growth of the kingdom of God, we must remember that the kingdom does not belong to us. We participate in building it, but God's kingdom is not our project. We should feel relieved that such a task does not depend on us. The kingdom of God is far beyond our ability to direct. And in addition to being overcontrolling, many of us also have far too much confidence in our ability to hold things together. If you feel like the weight of the kingdom is on your shoulders, Jesus's words in Mark 4:26–34 are directed toward you.

Q: *Why do we struggle with giving up control of things that are beyond our control?*

Q: *Does freedom from control imply freedom from responsibility?*

APPLICATION POINT – Sometimes, the phrase “out of my hands” implies a release from all responsibility or concern. The growth of the kingdom is out of our hands, but we still are responsible for remaining faithful to God's calling to share our faith and make disciples. The fate of a patient in an operating room is out of the doctor's hands, but the doctor is still responsible for providing competent medical care. As you study Jesus's teachings in this passage, seek the appropriate balance between freeing yourself from a burden you cannot bear and being faithful to maintaining your witness to a lost world.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In Mark 4:26–34, Jesus continued the use of parables. In this passage, He discussed the nature of the kingdom of God.

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1. HOW THE KINGDOM GROWS
 2. BELIEVING IN THE KINGDOM
 3. GUARDING THE KINGDOM

GOING DEEPER

+This section will investigate Mark 4:26–34 to understand Jesus’s message concerning the kingdom of God.

1. HOW THE KINGDOM GROWS

■ MARK 4:26–29

Q: *What does the seed represent in this parable?*

Q: *What are the responsibilities of the person in this parable?*

This parable may seem very familiar after having studied the parable of the soils last week. The subject is again a sower, and he is again sowing seed. And like the previous parable, the seed represents the message of Jesus Christ and, especially once the seed sprouts, the believing citizen of the kingdom.

In this parable, however, the focus is not on the type of soil the seed is sown in but on the two roles of the sower. He scatters the seed throughout the field and collects the harvest once it is ripe. Jesus said this scattering of seed compares well to the kingdom of God. The sower corresponds to the followers of Jesus, and the duties of the sower correspond to our role in building God’s kingdom. We share the message about Jesus Christ with others, and we guide them to faith in Christ when they believe.

Q: *How are you sharing the message of Jesus with those who need it?*

Q: *How are you helping to disciple new believers in Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – The New Testament does not express our call to share our faith in Christ as often as we may think, but personal evangelism is one of the clear implications of this parable. Many modern Christians struggle to consistently share their faith. The conversations can often be uncomfortable or awkward, but one of the reasons for this unease stems from unfamiliarity—both on your part and on the part of the person you are sharing with. As you do it more, much of this discomfort will fade away. Consider starting the conversation this week with someone you feel God prompting you to share your faith with. Our role is to plant the seeds. Pray for God’s help in that role and for Him to work in our faithfulness to share.

❓: *How does kingdom growth occur?*

❓: *Why are seeds an appropriate illustration of the kingdom of God?*

This parable emphasizes the mystery behind the growth of God’s kingdom. Once the seed is sown, the sower does not know or understand how it grows. He can observe it growing. He sees the seed sprout, grow into grain, and ripen until it is ready to be harvested. But he does not know why it happens. In the same way, spiritual growth is ultimately up to God. We can observe other people growing in their faith, but we cannot make them grow. That is not our role in growing God’s kingdom.

❓: *How can you remain faithful to your role in sowing the seed of the gospel?*

❓: *What challenges do you feel when sharing your faith with others?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many of the earliest missionaries, such as William Carey and Adoniram Judson, ministered for years in foreign countries before seeing a single convert to the gospel of Christ. They endured extreme hardships, the loss of family members, and even threats to their own lives, all in a foreign and often hostile culture, all for the sake of sharing the good news of Jesus. These men were well acquainted with the principle in these verses. Although they were faithful to serve, it was God who caused their seed to grow. One thing that sustained them through those difficult times was their commitment to God’s calling on their lives. They knew they had been called to foreign missions. This same strategy can work for us. We are called to be faithful to

sharing our faith. If you are going through long stretches of not seeing the fruit of your labor, focus on remaining faithful to your calling.

2. BELIEVING IN THE KINGDOM

■ MARK 4:30–32

Q: *What does the mustard seed represent in this passage?*

Q: *What does the parable of the mustard seed teach us about the kingdom of God?*

In the next parable Jesus discussed the kingdom of God by drawing attention to a mustard seed. According to Jesus, the mustard seed is the smallest seed, but it grows into the largest of the plants in the garden. He said that the kingdom of God is like this. Jesus was providing hope for His followers. There will be times when it seems as though the kingdom of God is unsubstantial compared to the structures and habits in place in our society. But Jesus taught that the kingdom of God has the potential to far surpass everything the world holds dear.

Q: *How can Christians keep their faith when the kingdom of God still seems small compared to the world?*

Q: *Are there times when you think Christianity will not survive in the modern, secularizing world?*

APPLICATION POINT – In a rapidly secularizing culture, it can sometimes seem that the kingdom of God has no hope of appearing. Even after largely abandoning a Christian ethos, the modern West was still built upon a Christian foundation, but that foundation now appears to be quickly fading away. People not only have a hard time thinking theologically, they also give every indication that theology does not matter. Religious liberty was once considered the first right, but now it is labeled as an excuse for bigotry. Such a trajectory can leave us with

little hope for the arrival of God's kingdom. But Jesus's parable about the mustard seed will not allow for despair. Even though the prospects of the kingdom may seem bleak at the moment, the kingdom of God, like the mustard seed, starts small but will eventually overcome every worldly rival. The parable of the mustard seed gives us the hope we need to maintain our faith in the kingdom of God even in a culture that is quite hostile to it.

❓: *Why is Mark 4:31 difficult scientifically?*

❓: *Can Jesus's claim be true even if it is not scientifically accurate?*

Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest seed. This statement has drawn some criticism from skeptics who want to challenge the truthfulness of the Bible and the divine nature of Jesus. This statement and the critical response have led many believing Christians to adopt some questionable responses. There is simply no need for any of this.

To be faithful biblical interpreters we need to give the biblical authors and the characters emerging within Scripture the same courtesy we would expect from others evaluating the things we say. This includes reading the text and statements within their intended context. With this statement, Jesus was illustrating a point He was teaching to His audience. He was not making a scientific point. In His historical context, the mustard seed was the smallest seed His audience was familiar with. Thus, it is completely appropriate to refer to this seed as the smallest to illustrate this point to His audience. No one in Jesus's context disputed this statement or performed interpretive gymnastics to make Jesus's words correct according to modern scientific knowledge.

❓: *Why is it important to affirm the truthfulness of Scripture?*

❓: *Why is it important to affirm the truthfulness of Jesus?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is important for us to recognize authorities outside of ourselves. Otherwise, we place ourselves in the position of absolute authority, a role we are not suited for. This is especially true for theological contexts where most modern people want to assert their right to say what they think is true. As Christians, it is

essential for us to embrace the authority of Scripture and of Jesus, and apart from their truthfulness, how could we do that? If we have adopted Scripture as our authority, we need to read it regularly. Do you skip over the Scripture passages when you read these lessons? Do you spend more time reading the lesson than the Bible? If so, commit to prioritizing the reading of Scripture.

Q: *What did Jesus say rested in the branches of the tree from the mustard seed?*

Q: *Why did Jesus include this detail?*

Jesus mentioned birds nesting in the branches of the mustard tree. This observation can be challenging to understand. Was Jesus being poetic or describing some idyllic scene from nature? Jesus's remarks are most likely a reference to a vision contained in Daniel 4.

Daniel 4 describes a vision given to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In this vision, Nebuchadnezzar saw a great tree that spanned the whole earth and gave shade to the animals and rest on its branches to the birds. Then the tree was cut down. The animals fled and the birds flew away.

This allusion to Daniel 4 strengthened Jesus's point substantially. Although the kingdom of God may be small in stature now, the kingdoms of the world come and go, just like ancient Babylon. It is the kingdom of God, however, that will last.

Q: *Do you see more evidence that the kingdom of God or the kingdom man controls our culture right now?*

Q: *How can we build our trust in the kingdom of God and its ultimate victory?*

APPLICATION POINT – There is a growing sense of turmoil in our society. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we live. There is growing strife among the nations and within our own nation. The moral and sexual

revolution rages unchecked. As Christians look upon the world before us, it is understandable to wonder if the kingdom of God will ever overcome all we see. But Jesus has given us a subtle reminder that the kingdom of God will always prove more trustworthy than the kingdom of man. We are currently living in the kingdom of man, but we need to live for the kingdom of God. When you find yourself worried about the kingdom of man, train yourself to look to Scripture for encouragement to wait for the kingdom of God.

3. GUARDING THE WORD

■ MARK 4:33-34

Q: *What was Jesus's exclusive teaching method during this time?*

Q: *How did Jesus protect His message?*

Jesus was concerned to protect His message. He protected its vitality by shielding Himself and His disciples from persecution. Without the use of parables Jesus's message would have quickly caught the attention of the Roman authorities. They would not have tolerated the idea of a rival kingdom and would have immediately sought to put down any such opposition. Jesus and His followers could not have expected any better reception from even His own countrymen. Some of them benefitted from the Roman rule. Others were unlikely to have approved of Jesus and would have eagerly betrayed Him to the Romans. Thus, Jesus taught His message discreetly. His parables illustrated His message perfectly while also disguising it sufficiently from those who would not receive it.

Jesus protected the viability of His message by explaining everything to His disciples in private. We need not worry if the disciples misunderstood it. They were able to faithfully pass Jesus's message down to us through Scripture.

Q: *How can you guard the message of Jesus?*

Q: *How can you present the gospel of Jesus in a way that makes it attractive to others?*

APPLICATION – In order to protect the message of Jesus Christ, Christians must ensure that they are beyond reproach morally and ethically. When Christians who are vocal about their faith are discovered living in a manner that is inconsistent with it, they mar the message of Jesus in the eyes of those who wish to detract from it.

Christians also need to ensure that they do not present the teachings of Jesus in a needlessly offensive way. Of course, the gospel of Jesus will inevitably offend those who are hostile to it. But there is a difference between offending with the truth of the gospel and speaking the truth of the gospel in an offensive way. A few years ago, a TV personality made a public stand on an issue pertaining to the Christian faith, but he did so in an obviously offensive way. His comments were taken as offensive in the wider culture. The problem was that it was not clear what they found offensive. Christians should never find themselves in this position.

NEXT STEPS

We can sow seed and reap the harvest, but it is God who makes His kingdom grow. We must pursue all He has called us to do and leave the rest to Him. In what ways are you seeking to sow and reap the harvest? Look for a way to engage your community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of you may consider becoming involved in a need-based ministry, such as crisis pregnancy support. Others may want to engage in a ministry to the homeless. Or you may simply need to become more serious about sharing their faith with those God has placed in your path. However God leads you to engage the culture for Him, remember that your role is to be faithful. Only God can make His kingdom grow.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, help me to always represent you well. If others are offended by me, let it be only because they are offended by your message.

Lord, help me to place myself under the authority of your Word.

Lord Jesus, your burden is light. Free me from believing that the progress of your kingdom lies in my hands. Keep me faithful to the role you have called me to.

