

Kingdom Parables

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Date: 05 March 2025

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[0 : 00] When we covered the parable of the soils last time, we talked about how Jesus told that parable to encourage a small group of true followers. In tonight's passage, we'll see Jesus tell other parables designed to encourage his followers even more. Tonight's passage includes three parables known as Kingdom Parables.

The Kingdom Parables will tell us what the Kingdom of God is like. The theme of all of them is how God's Kingdom emerges and grows with the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, who came to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark brings these parables together to reinforce the main parable of the soils, which we looked at last time. Let's go ahead and read Mark chapter 4, verses 21 through 34. Mark is again speaking about Jesus in Mark 4, verse 21. And it says, And he said to them, And he said to them, And he said, And he said to them, And he said,

And he said, And he said,

He explained everything. Here's the main idea for tonight's passage. So, So, once again, using more parables, Jesus foretells the spread of his kingdom.

So, once again, using more parables, Jesus foretells the spread of his kingdom. Jesus placed a great deal of importance on the hearing of the word of God in one form or another.

[3 : 09] And the word here is used 13 times from Mark chapter 4, verse 1 through verse 34. Obviously, our Lord was speaking about hearing with spiritual discernment.

To hear the word of God means to understand and obey it. In this passage, the Lord's specific emphasis was on the fruit that comes from being a faithful witness to him.

The parable of the soils focused on the recipients of the gospel, distinguishing between those who would ultimately reject the message and those who would genuinely embrace it.

These subsequent parables that we'll look at tonight highlight the responsibility of the faithful hearer as an evangelist. As those who had received the gospel and accepted it, Jesus' disciples now would be called to bear fruit by obediently proclaiming the message of salvation to others.

Sometimes the work of the Lord can become frustrating and even disappointing. We can work hard but see little fruit. We shine the light of the gospel and sow the seed of the word, but not much happens.

[4 : 17] It seems almost futile and we wonder why we even continue. Well, if you felt that way, you're in good company. Others have thought the same thing.

But William Carey was different. William Carey was the father of the modern missionary movement and he labored in India seven years before seeing his first convert.

He shared the gospel for more than 40 years, but the fruit of his labor was minimal. Still, he could say the future is as bright as the promise of God and expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.

So how could William Carey say that despite having, from a human perspective, so little success? Well, William Carey understood the message of the parables that we will study tonight.

Whether the initial disciples of Jesus realized it or not, God's kingdom will grow in accordance with God's plan. We can see more evidence of that than those early disciples could, but the message is still the same to us.

[5 : 25] Whenever we are tempted to think that our efforts for God make little difference, God may use those efforts to continue the spread of his kingdom. We're going to break tonight's passage into five sections, starting with verses 21 through 23.

In these verses, we see the importance of proclamation. So proclamation is your first blink. Here are verses 21 through 23 again.

And he said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.

If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Several commentators noted that Mark's original Greek here should have been translated better.

R.C. Sproul said, The Greek New Testament clearly uses the definite article and makes the lamp the subject of the sentence. There is only one proper way to translate what is in the original Greek, and that is, Does the lamp come to be put under a basket or under a bed?

[6 : 41] Jason Meyer noted, The lamp in the parable in 421 through 23 is a reference to Jesus. The original language makes that point even more clearly.

Translated literally, the text tells us that the lamp is not brought in, but comes in. Jesus' opponents and even his family want to limit his influence.

In effect, they want to hide him under a basket or under a bed. But the light of the world has come into the darkness to occupy an elevated place and spread the light.

Consider why this parable would have been so enlightening to Jesus' true followers. Remember what Jesus said in Mark 4, verses 10 through 12. In Mark 4, verses 10 through 12, we see, Those true followers probably were wondering whether this changed, would be permanent, and whether they also would need to obscure the truth.

The verse 22 that we're looking at now clearly shows that Jesus had no intention for the gospel to be permanently hidden. There was an occasion when the truth was hidden and obscured from some obstinate rejecters.

[8 : 24] However, there was coming an era when the hidden things were to be revealed and the secret things disclosed to the world. That era of unveiling mysteries would commence with the preaching ministry of the apostles, starting while Jesus was still with them.

It would continue on the other side of the Great Commission, and it will last until Jesus returns. The lamp comparison gives us a great picture of how the gospel would spread.

In those days, one lamp strategically placed could light up an entire room, and often an entire house because the houses were small. People inside the house, previously in darkness, would receive the light.

The same is true of the gospel. People previously in spiritual darkness get their souls illuminated when God shines the truth of his gospel into their hearts and their minds.

J.C. Ryle said, A lamp is not lit to be hidden and concealed, but to be put on a lampstand and used. Religious light is not given to us for ourselves alone, but for the benefit of others.

[9 : 35] We are to spread and diffuse our knowledge. We are to display to others the precious treasure that we have found and persuade them to seek it for themselves.

We are to tell them the good news that we have heard and endeavor to make them believe it and value it themselves. The light may be for the most part hidden now, but eventually the whole world will see the glory of that light.

That which is hidden will be made manifest. The resurrection of the crucified king assures us of this revelation, and the second coming of the glorified king will establish it.

The world may try to hide Jesus, but it will fail miserably in those attempts. The apostles eventually understood what Jesus taught in these verses.

Tonight's passage is one of several in the Bible where Jesus is compared either to a light or to a lamp. John included several of those light or lamp references in his writings.

[10 : 41] John 1, 4, and 5 say about Jesus, In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

A little bit later, John 1, 9 says, The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. Then in John 8, verse 12, Jesus again identified himself as the light, just as he did in this parable.

Here's John 8, 12. Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

John 12, 46 records these words from Jesus. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

And even Peter finally understood what Jesus was telling his followers in this parable from our Mark text. Listen to what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2, verse 9.

[11 : 52] 1 Peter 2, verse 9 says, Peter's words are a great way to summarize the meaning of Mark 4, 21 through 23.

Now that we've seen the emphasis on proclamation, let's move to verses 24 and 25. In these verses, Jesus takes a brief break from the parables to tell us about the promise.

So promise is the next word to focus on. This promise states what will happen to someone who obeys the command in verse 24. The promise also states what will happen to someone who ignores the command in verse 24.

Listen again to verses 24 and 25 of Mark chapter 4. And he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. The command comes first.

[13 : 22] Pay attention to what you hear is that command. Then comes the reason why. And that reason comes with the promise that is more fully fleshed out in verse 25.

Here's the promise part of those verses again. He said, With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

John Butler made this pointed statement. He said, Your response to the word of God determines if God will give you more of the word. If you do not give honor to the word, do not listen will, etc., then you will get nothing.

Those who pay attention to the word will get more illumination. If you do not get much from the Bible, here is a likely reason. And here's a Jason Meyer quote.

He said, The measure the disciples use for listening will be like a boomerang and will come back upon them. If someone listens well and receives the truth, he will receive even more.

[14 : 33] If someone listens poorly and rejects or shows no interest in the truth, even the little he has will be taken from them. The parable of the sower has given an example of this principle.

We saw that Satan snatches away the seed that is given to those with hard hearts. That goes back to Mark 4, verse 15. Daniel Akin said this about the positive part of the promise.

He said, If your hearing is good, rich, and receptive to the word, you will receive it back and even more indeed. Indeed, to the one who has, it will be given.

And then he quoted Proverbs 9.9. Here is Proverbs 9.9. Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser.

Teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning. Now here is more from Daniel Akin. He went on to say, Respond to God's truth and more truth will follow.

[15 : 39] Embrace the kingdom now when it is small and you will share in it when it is worldwide. In radical contrast, for the one who rejects the word, even what he has will be taken away.

Refuse Jesus and the word and you lose the little you once may have had. This is a critical spiritual principle. Our spiritual health, our spiritual eternity are at stake.

How we respond to Jesus day by day is of the utmost seriousness. Do not take for granted the relationship you have today. It could all be lost tomorrow.

Having respected theologians come to the same conclusion about a verse's meaning is good, but here is a question for you. Does scripture illustrate the point of these verses?

And the answer to that is yes. The woman at the well in John 4 is an example of someone who was receptive to the truth and consequently, she received more truth in return.

[16 : 45] Flip over to John 4, verse 5 to start. This passage is a long cross-reference, but it's worth our time because it illustrates what we see here in Mark. This cross-reference gives a real-life example of Mark 4.25's positive promise.

So let's read John 4, verses 5 through 26. It says, So he, talking about Jesus, came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, Give me a drink. For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, asked for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?

For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, Give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have

given you living water.

[18:05] The woman said to him, Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?

He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock. Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

Jesus said to her, Go call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, You are right in saying, I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.

What you have said is true. The woman said to him, Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.

[19:26] Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ.

When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he. That's a long passage, but did you notice the progression here?

The woman first calls Jesus a Jew, then she calls Jesus Sir several times. After Jesus talks to her more, the woman calls Jesus a prophet.

[20:35] Then when she mentions that the Messiah is coming, Jesus rewards her careful listening by revealing to her that he is the Messiah. So we see the progression that Mark tells us about with this parable from Jesus.

She embraced the truth that she got, and she received even more in return. Going back to our Mark text, we need to spend a little bit more time on the negative side of the promise.

Look again at what Jesus said at the end of Mark 4, verse 25. He said, From the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

Luke's parallel passage words the quote from Jesus better. Listen to Luke 8.18. In Luke 8.18, Jesus said, Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away.

Notice how Luke says that what he has taken away is what he thinks he has. He never really had it. So far, we've seen the proclamation and the promise.

[21:53] verses 26 through 29 have the second parable in this passage and the point of this parable is patience. So patience is your third blank.

Patience always is needed when doing God's work and patience also may be needed if you're wondering if we're really going to get through tonight's text in a reasonable amount of time. But listen to Mark 4, verses 26 through 29 again.

Jesus still is being quoted here. And he said, the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade then the ear then the full grain in the ear but when the grain is ripe at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

Only God can give spiritual life and that's what we see illustrated here. After the farmer finishes sowing the seed he goes to bed at night and sleeps.

[23:07] The farmer cannot cause the seed to sprout or new life to form. He can't even fully understand how the seed comes to life. Yet he plants the seed and waits.

and while he waits entirely apart from his involvement the seed in the ground comes to life. As the days and weeks pass while the farmer sleeps at night and goes about his normal routine during the day the seed starts to grow until it produces a crop.

The farmer is never involved in the mysterious process by which the dormant seed is transformed into a living plant. That quote was from John MacArthur and MacArthur continued by saying, the point of this parable is simple.

In the same way that the farmer is not the power behind the regeneration of the seed, so also the evangelist is not the power behind the regeneration of souls. What a comfort this must have been for Jesus' disciples to hear.

Perhaps they were concerned that the task of saving sinners rested on their shoulders. Jesus countered that notion by reminding them that only God can change the human heart.

[24 : 21] Their responsibility was to faithfully preach the message. Having done so, they could trust God with the results. The diligent evangelist whose message corresponds to the true gospel can sleep soundly at night knowing that it is God who causes the growth.

All the evangelist can do is proclaim the word. The rest is God's work and believers can fully trust in God's sovereign prerogative. So, do those last couple of sentences take the pressure off when you're telling others about the gospel?

We could substitute believer for evangelist and if we do that, those sentences would read, all the believer can do is proclaim the word. The rest is God's work and believers can fully trust in God's sovereign prerogative.

believe. This teaching here by Jesus would shatter misconceptions about the kingdom. No one had imagined that the coming of the kingdom would be hidden and happen below the surface.

People expected it to be big and obvious and overpowering. They also expected it to come because of their hard work and obedience to God. But in fact, it is God himself who brings the growth.

[25 : 42] In the original text, the Greek word usually translated as automatically or automatic is the emphasis of verse 28. That word comes in the part of the verse translated in the ESV as the earth produces by itself.

But the Greek text literally reads automatically the earth bears fruit. Once the process has begun, it is destined to be completed first the blade, then the ear, then the grain, and then the harvest.

That process that brings about the fullness of the kingdom of God is not spectacular, but it is certain. Even now, that process is present and growing, whether we see it or not.

So what should we understand from verse 29's reference to the sickle and the harvest? even though the farmer did not cause the growth of the grain, he still rejoices in the harvest.

When the crop permits, the farmer immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

Similarly, although the human messenger plays no role in the actual work of regeneration, the human messenger is given the privileged blessing of enjoying the spiritual harvest, one primary aspect of that blessing is the added fellowship that comes every time a new believer is added to the body of Christ.

[27 : 08] The riches of that fellowship will last for all of eternity. The glorified saints, as one great spiritual harvest, will gather around the throne to worship their Savior and King.

And God has let us be a part of that when we carry his message to others. J.C. Ryle had some great observations about this parable and good applications for what it teaches.

One observation mirrors what we've discussed, but most are new, and here are a few of them. First, he said, this parable is humbling, no doubt, to ministers and teachers of others.

The highest abilities, the most powerful preaching, the hardest work, cannot command success.

God alone can give life, but it is a truth that at the same time supplies an admirable antidote to worry and despondency.

Our principal work is to sow the seed. That done, we may wait with faith and patience for the result.

We may go to sleep and get up night and day and leave our work with the Lord.

[28 : 18] He alone can, and if he thinks fit, he will give success. Then here's his next observation.

He said, as in the growth of grain, so in the work of grace, life appears gradually.

There is a true proverb which says, nature does nothing at a bound. The ripe ear of wheat does not appear at once as soon as the seed bursts forth into life.

The plant goes through many stages before it arrives at perfection. First the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But in all these stages, one great thing is true about it.

Even at its weakest, it is a living plant. Then he said, the work of grace similarly goes on in the heart by degrees.

The children of God are not born perfect in faith, hope, knowledge, or experience. Their beginning is generally a day of small things. They see in part their own sinfulness and Christ's fullness and the beauty of his holiness.

[29 : 26] But for all that, the weakest child in God's family is a true child of God. With all his weakness and infirmity, he is alive. The seed of grace has really come up in his heart, though at present it be only in the stalk.

He is alive from the dead, and the wise man says even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. And that actually is a scripture reference, that live dog and dead lion reference comes from Ecclesiastes 9, verse 4.

Here's the last observation from Ryle. He said, Let us not despise grace because it is weak, or think people are not converted because they are not yet as strong in the faith as St.

Paul. Let us remember that grace, like everything else, must have a beginning. The mightiest oak was once an acorn. The strongest man was once a baby.

It is better a thousand times to have grace in the stalk than to have no grace at all. The last of the three short parables tonight is in verses 30 through 32, and the point of this next parable is the process.

[30 : 43] So process is your next blank. Listen to Mark chapter 4, verses 30 through 32 again. Jesus said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God?

Or what parable shall we use for it? It 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.

Of the parables we've looked at tonight, this parable's interpretation has the most variation among conservative scholars that we respect. We'll take this parable in context to mention Jesus' most likely intent, then we briefly will talk about some of the varying interpretations, just in case you run across them.

With this final parable, Jesus assured his disciples that the work in which they would engage would produce an abundant harvest far beyond anything they could ever imagine.

[31 : 57] To the disciples who were still being trained as preachers, the task may have seemed overwhelming, but such seemingly humble beginnings led to something big and Jesus wanted them to be confident in the final outcome.

them. Some people wrongly say that Jesus made a mistake here because some seeds exist that are smaller than a mustard seed, but Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

Jesus was limiting his statement to that which his audience would have been familiar. Of the plants grown in first century Israel for agricultural purposes, the mustard plant had the smallest seed.

also using the mustard seed as a way to refer to things that were small was a common proverbial expression, one that those listening to Jesus would have immediately recognized.

Mustard plants in Israel grew to a height of 15 feet larger than other garden plants, and full-grown mustard plants had branches in which birds could nest.

[33 : 03] the seed scattered on the ground in the preceding parable showed us the work of grace in a heart. The mustard seed shows us the progress of Christianity in the world.

The growth and increase of Christ's visible church in the world began to grow from the day of Pentecost and grew with a rapidity which nothing can account for but the finger of God.

It grew wonderfully when 3,000 souls were converted at once and 5,000 more a few days afterward.

It grew wonderfully at Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome.

Congregations were gathered together in all those places and after those events Christianity was firmly established. The kingdom of God grew wonderfully when at last the despised religion of Christ spread over the greater part of Europe, Asia Minor, and North Africa.

In spite of fierce persecution and oppression, Christianity supplanted heathen idolatry and became the professed creed of the whole Roman empire.

[34 : 16] Such growth must have been marvelous in the eyes of many, but it is only what the Lord foretold in this parable. So now let's talk about some different interpretations of this parable.

people, some have suggested that the birds of the air represent Satan, and that's because they try to connect these birds back to the birds we saw in the parable of the sower in Mark 4.4.

But there's really no reason to do that. Jesus doesn't tell us that the birds represent the same thing. Others believe this reference indicates shelter for kingdom citizens, and still others suggest that the birds represent the nations coming into the kingdom, and finally some believe that the birds are simply part of the story and have no special significance.

I like number three in that interpretation, as did Daniel Akin, who woke this throat. He said, the birds represent the nations coming into the kingdom. Passages such as Psalm 104.12, Ezekiel 17.23, and 31.6, and Daniel 4.9-21, all support this.

That the birds can make nests in its shade settles the issue. Jesus is asserting that all the peoples of the world are going to be part of the kingdom, and are going to take refuge in its shade.

[35 : 42] So does that get you excited to do God's work? God can use the smallest words that we speak, the smallest service that we give, and bring a kingdom out of it.

This points not to the greatness of the mustard seed, or to the greatness of us as believers, but to the greatness of God who works every day to bring everything about in his plan for the ages.

So yes, there is surprising growth to God's kingdom, and all nations will enter and enjoy it. So this parable is a parable of growth and grace, of joy, and of celebration.

So we've covered some ground tonight, and we've covered some seed in that ground. We've learned about proclamation, a promise, patience, and the process.

We have two more verses to cover, and verses 33 and 34 contain the postscript. So the postscript is your last heading. Look at what Mark tells us in verses 33 and 34 of Mark 4.

[36 : 48] These verses close Mark's section of parables by recapping what we studied last time when our lesson included Mark 4, verses 10 through 12, and those were the verses that we read earlier tonight.

Jesus' followers consisted of true hearers who embraced the gospel. What was hidden from the unbelievers Jesus was explaining privately to his own disciples.

Believers today share that same privilege of knowing the truth. The Lord Jesus has ascended to heaven, but his spirit indwells and illuminates the hearts of all who belong to him.

Every Christian has the privilege of knowing and understanding the truth, a reality that enables them to be fruitful hearers. So do you really grasp that truth that every Christian has the privilege of knowing and understanding the truth?

Jesus performed countless miracles, but only about three dozen of them are recorded in the gospels. Similarly, he told countless parables, but not all of them have been preserved.

[38 : 11] Nevertheless, enough of them have been recorded for us to marvel at his wisdom and his words. Mark says that he never spoke without using illustrations. Not content with that, he often would explain his teaching at greater length to his disciples privately.

Who would have imagined that starting with a group of only 12 men, Christianity would grow to where it is today? But it won't stop where it is today. It will continue to grow until every people group on the planet is found in the kingdom.

God will ensure this growth. And here's the key question to ask yourself. Are you certain that you are a part of this kingdom? If you have yet to embrace Christ for salvation, but Jesus' parables make sense to you, ask Jesus to reveal more truth to you.

Jesus grows his kingdom every day by saving sinners like you, me, and every believer.

Acknowledge your sins and ask Jesus to save you, and we know he will.

For those of us who are saved, be encouraged by tonight's passage. The kingdom starts small, but it will grow large, and the biggest and best part of this growth is yet to come.

[39 : 30] If you doubt that, listen to Revelation 7, verses 9 and 10. John wrote there, Let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this teaching on how your kingdom will grow exactly how you planned it to grow. Let these parables encourage us to share the gospel more and more with people that we come in contact with.

Let us enjoy the blessings of sharing the gospel when we see you bring more people into your kingdom, and we all rejoice before the throne. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Thank you.