

Mark – The First Gospel

009 – More Seed Parables – Mark 4:21-34

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/>.

First Thoughts

Jesus' teaching section continues in the verses to be examined today. As a reminder of how this section is structured, here is the chart from last time. We will be examining the last three parts this time.

Table 1: Chiastic Arrangement, Reading Mark, 4:1-34

A	Narrative introduction (4:1- 2)	
B	Seed parable (4:3- 9)	(public teaching)
C	Statement about hiddenness (4:10- 12)	(private teaching)
D	Allegorical explanation of parable (4:13- 20)	(private teaching)
C'	Statements about revelation (4:21- 25)	(private teaching)
B'	Seed parables (4:26- 29, 30- 32)	(public teaching)
A'	Narrative conclusion (4:33- 34)	

As a brief review, the seed/sower parable was a description of how the gospel proclamation (both words and deeds) are received by those who experience it. Some reject, others seem to accept it until difficulties and trials emerge, and then there are those who accept and bear fruit. It was a way of Jesus explaining his own reception by the people, and it was also an explanation of what was happening to Mark's audience.

We discussed how it is important to *not* use this parable primarily as *parenesis* – i.e., as exhortation or command – to be better soils, to work hard to cultivate soil, or as warning against those things that cause unfruitfulness.

What the parable is about is the *secret* and the *mystery* of the kingdom of God. As Jesus was telling this parable, his entire proclamation was puzzling to everyone (including the disciples) because the kingdom did not look like what they were expecting. To non-Christians of Mark's time, the gospel was puzzling because it looked like it was in retreat.

The mystery of the kingdom of God is only understood through the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. For those before the event and for those who choose to reject the message of the event, the gospel remains a mystery, a secret, and a puzzle.

The remaining parables and instruction build and expand on these themes.

Collection of Sayings

4:21 *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? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 24 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. 25 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."* (ESV)

1. The individual sayings that make up this section are scattered through the Synoptics¹
 - a. It provides insight into how the gospels were written
 - b. It tells us that what is recorded may not necessarily be what Jesus originally intended
 - c. It is what each gospel writer interpreted and understood as the gospel for his audience
 - d. What Mark provides is what a teaching session from Jesus might have looked like
 - e. It is not a specific instance of Jesus teaching

The aphorisms from which this section has been constructed are traditional in character and occur elsewhere unrelated to each other... By inserting this block of material into the discourse on parables he sheds light on his distinctive understanding of these words of Jesus.²

2. In the parallel C section (4:10-12) the message was that of secrecy and hiding
 - a. Jesus was intentionally “hiding” the gospel and revealing the secret to just a few
3. In this C' section the message is that of revelation
 - a. What was hidden and secret will be revealed
 - b. The lamp is “brought in”
 - i. It is literally “come”³
 - ii. Lamps do not normally “come” of their own accord
 - iii. Jesus has come, not to be forever hidden, but to be revealed
 - c. What is the point of hiding something if it isn’t to be revealed at some time?
4. Another exhortation to listen – this is the primary exhortation of this parabolic section (4:1-34)
 - a. The exhortation is to listen and hear, watch and see, and then to comprehend the kingdom of God breaking through into the world through Jesus
5. The context of the proverbs of vv.24-25 is the act of hearing and comprehending
 - a. These could be interpreted as saying that as disciples share (give away) what they currently comprehend (be lamps), they will be given more light⁴
 - b. These could be interpreted as saying that those who take hold of Jesus’ teachings and put them into practice will receive more wisdom and understanding⁵
 - c. These could be interpreted as saying that those who recognize the in-breaking of the kingdom into the world and participate with God in those places, will be given additional

¹ C.f., for vv.21-25, Luke 8:16-18; for v.21, Matthew 5:15 and Luke 11:33; for v.22, Matthew 10:26 and Luke 12:2; for v.24, Matthew 7:2 and Luke 6:38; for v.25, Matthew 13:12.

² NICNT: Mark, 4:21-25 introductory text.

³ NICNT: Mark, 4:21-23.

⁴ Feasting: Mark, locations 4570, 4628.

⁵ Feasting: Mark, location 4580.

sight and understanding to see God at work in more places and the opportunities to participate in those as well

- i. The unveiling of the kingdom of God is something in which Christians have the opportunity to participate; the extent which depends on their response⁶
- d. Conversely those who refuse to see the kingdom and participate in even its small revelations will lose the opportunity to participate in any

Precisely because there is going to be an unveiling which unravels the enigma and reveals the mystery [of the kingdom of God], hearing with true perception is important now... If the word of proclamation is appropriated with eagerness and joy, in like measure a rich share will be received in the eschatological revelation of the Kingdom, and "even more shall be given..." What will ultimately be received in the Kingdom of God will depend upon that which a man possesses of it now. Present possession depends upon hearing, upon appropriation or rejection of the word of the Kingdom that has been scattered like seed... Only those who penetrate the mystery in the present will share in the glory which is yet to be revealed.⁷

Parable of the Growing Seed

26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (ESV)

This second parable seems to emphasize that there is nothing for the farmer to do between planting and harvesting; the earth bears fruit *automate* (literally, "automatically"). Here is a sharp contrast with most Hellenistic notions of *paideia*, where the emphasis is on the human effort necessary to produce the "fruit" of genuine education...

This theme of God's reign as gift, not achievement, is present in the parable of the seed that grows automatically. The farmer merely sows the seed. After that, all he does is "sleep and rise," not knowing how the seed is growing, not calculating what the result will be. This certainty of success parallels the first parable in which abundance results despite the failure of many seeds to mature.⁸

1. The point of this parable
 - a. What the church/Christians do
 - i. The church sows seed
 - ii. The church knows when it is time to harvest
 - b. What they cannot do
 - i. The church cannot cause the seed to germinate, grow, or fruit⁹

⁶ My interpretation of *NICNT: Mark, 4:24-25*.

⁷ *NICNT: Mark, 4:24-25*.

⁸ *Reading Mark, 4:1-5:43*, discussion of B-B'.

⁹ "We have not been commissioned to manipulate, dominate, or coerce people to join our fellowship of believers; neither is it necessary for new converts to accept a particular political perspective. Further, we must not reduce

- ii. The church cannot explain how growth occurs¹⁰
- iii. The church cannot hasten or delay the harvest¹¹
- iv. The church cannot control how fruitful the harvest will be¹²

It may be worth considering this historical context for a moment longer. Ever since the Maccabees succeeded in ousting the Antiochenes from Israel, there was the sense among some other groups that they should do something to rid the land of the oppressors and that YHWH would support them in their endeavor. Some, like the bandits and later Zealots, sought to do this via violence, others, like the Essenes, through withdrawal and purity. Many of Jesus' listeners may have had some sense of what needed to be done in order to bring about the rule of God on earth...¹³

2. What this parable does not address

- a. Whether or not there is any work for Christians between sowing and harvest

The farmer also has the task of tending the field, watching and waiting while the life sown at creation comes to its place of fruition. Yet, in the story, the one tending the field has no idea how the crop grows. The story line has shifted the reference point from God to us, the parable's hearers, who do not know the secrets of the kingdom.¹⁴

3. What this means

- a. We can let go of the pressure to see growth in seeds we sow
- b. Faithfulness cannot be measured by visible growth
- c. Success, whatever that means to God, is assured
- d. There will be time between the sowing the harvest – the first coming of Jesus began the period of sowing; the harvest is still sometime in the future

At the heart of our ministry is the intent to be faithful to Christ and to the kingdom of God, not to the achievement of certain measurable results. The apostle Paul said some people will sow

evangelistic efforts to culturally limited recruitment of members who 'look like us...' *Feasting: Mark*, location 4723.

¹⁰ "The kingdom of God produces its fruit by its own internal power, a power that the sower does not understand and does not control. The process is mysterious, hidden, ambiguous, and sometimes stressful and frustrating. Clergy (pastors, teachers, evangelists, missionaries) do not control how the kingdom grows..." *Feasting: Mark*, location 4744.

¹¹ "The kingdom of God grows because of its inherent God-given nature, not because of the efforts of its custodians... This relieves the church of an immense burden. It can do nothing to hasten the coming of the kingdom... It is impossible to rush the kingdom. It will take its own time, and its advance is ordinarily imperceptible..." *Feasting: Mark*, locations 4660, 4686.

¹² "In contrast, Jesus portrays the kingdom as coming without any effort or even knowledge on the part of the farmer. He goes through his daily life awaiting the seasons of the seed, sprout, stalk, and finally the head, waiting for the seed and soil to do their work. Perhaps Jesus was warning some of his hearers against presuming they knew how to bring about the kingdom on their time schedule and through their effort..." *Feasting: Mark*, location 4787.

¹³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4783.

¹⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4686.

and others will reap. The image of a seed that grows mysteriously points to transformations that take time and are often not visible to the sower.¹⁵

Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 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." (ESV)

In light of that expectation [a great, conquering kingdom], Luke and Matthew appear ill at ease with Mark's diminutive expectation. Luke forces the parable into Ezekiel's mold and says that the mustard seed grows into a tree (13:9). Matthew, on the other hand, combines Ezekiel and Mark, and explains that "when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree" (Matt. 13:32). Mark, the most spare, and the most botanically accurate, says the seed becomes a shrub... Agnes Norfleet, in an unpublished paper on this text, notes that "by keeping it a shrub Mark is differentiating the kingdom Jesus proclaims from past prophetic dreams of glory and hope to be like the other nations."¹⁶

1. The seed has to be sown for it to become of any use or benefit
2. This is not a biology lesson – there *are* smaller seeds than the mustard seed
 - a. Perhaps should be read, "one of the smallest of all the seeds"
 - b. What is the *mustard plant* in this parable? It is probably a variety of black mustard¹⁷
 - c. Could birds make nests (κατασκηνόω, kataskēnoō) in the plant?¹⁸
3. The focus of interpretation is often on the "smallness" of the seed
 - a. We are insignificant, our efforts are miniscule – but is the parable about "us"?
 - b. The overall context of Mark's rhetoric is on the kingdom and on the gospel
 - c. This third parable itself begins with an extended introduction about Jesus pondering how to explain the kingdom

¹⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4660.

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 4879.

¹⁷ See Old Dominion University, *Plants of the Bible*, "Mustard":

<http://ww2.odu.edu/~lmusselm/plant/bible/mustard.php>, retrieved 9-Sep-2014. "So the logical conclusion seems to be, as many experts agree, that the parable points to *Brassica nigra*. The seed of both black and white mustard is similar in size, about 1.0 to 3.0 mm (1/8 inch) so it is not the smallest seed but it is the smallest seed of those which 'you plant in the ground' clearly indicating that the Lord was not comparing the mustard seed to all plants but only to those which were commonly grown... A grown black mustard would still be a herb, botanically speaking, but sometimes a very big herb, popularly considered a shrub. There are wild mustard plants over ten feet tall near the Jordan River, and even in moderate climate a mustard plant may grow that tall, provided it gets enough sunshine."

¹⁸ *Ibid*. "Many have pointed to another problem: that this plant, or any mustard, could not support roosting birds. It seems questionable whether the Gr. Kataskēnōō has to mean this, as many have thought, partly also on the argument that kataskēnoōsis in Matt. 8:20 & par. does unquestionably mean 'nest.' But a very important point is overlooked: by the end of the summer, when the plant has reached its peak in growth, the time for building nests is long past. The word may simply mean 'rest' or 'lodge', which is the more probable as Mark 4:32 says 'under its shadow.'"

However, when we limit our focus to the size of the mustard seed, the interpretation of the parable becomes something like this: if a tiny mustard seed can become a great, hospitable, and protective plant for birds and other creatures of the earth, then know that in due time, your hard work for the kingdom will pay off!

... While this message of personal encouragement to keep an eternal perspective should not be discounted, we must be careful not to imply that the mustard seed grows into a great plant because of our hard work.¹⁹

- d. It's not about us!
- 4. What is it about?
 - a. The contrast between the appearance of the seed and the reality of the plant

So, the lesson is not that the kingdom of God comes by quiet, prolonged growth, but rather that, though many might think the manifestation of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry insignificant, they would be proven wrong in the day of its full appearance.²⁰

This parable is concerned with the enigmatic present manifestation of the Kingdom as embodied in Jesus' person. Its appearance may be characterized by weakness and apparent insignificance—but remember the mustard seed. The day will come when the Kingdom of God will surpass in glory the mightiest kingdoms of the earth...²¹

- b. It's about Jesus and the gospel of the kingdom of God
- c. It's about the certainty of the eventual manifestation of the fullness of the kingdom
- 5. Remember that in Mark's account, the mustard plant never becomes a might tree – it remains a shrub, albeit the largest shrub
 - a. The kingdom of God will never look like what people expect from a worldly kingdom
 - b. It will be humble and lowly, its principles an antithesis of those of worldly kingdoms
 - c. Yet it will offer genuine rest and shelter for all who seek it
 - d. It is large enough accommodate all who come to it

Mark's emphatic introduction to this parable is necessary because, more than any other parable so far, this one makes absolutely clear that the kingdom is not what the hearers might well want or anticipate...

Moreover, the mustard seed merely grows into a large shrub, not an imposing image by any stretch, although proportionally startling from the small size of its seed. For people trained in the imagery of the proud cedar, this would be a shocking concluding parable.²²

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 4931, 4939.

²⁰ *UBC: Mark*, 4:30-34.

²¹ *NICNT: Mark*, 4:30-32.

²² *Feasting: Mark*, locations 4971, 4976.

Summary of Jesus' Use of Parables

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. 34 He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. (ESV)

1. Jesus used parables because he wanted to raise questions in his listeners' minds
2. The disciples were able to comprehend a bit more, and because they were to sow the next generation of "seed", they were given additional explanations and instruction

The motive for Jesus' use of the parables is expressed in terms of his accommodation to that stage of preparation which was present in the crowd; he spoke the word "as they were able to hear it." This means that he adapted it to the level of understanding that he found in his listeners. Had Jesus spoken to the crowds in a direct manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. That decision could have expressed only unbelief and rejection. Jesus' adoption of the indirect address of the parable was accordingly an expression both of grace and of judgment. It was an expression of grace which allowed time for reflection on his appeal to penetrate beneath his words to "the word."²³

In all these passages we see that Jesus' parables are not simply teaching aids, like charts, diagrams, or other such devices. Though they present the kingdom of God in story form and analogy, the kingdom of God they describe does not conform to general expectation but makes its appearance in "secret" form in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Thus, the parables are difficult, challenging, because they embody and testify to a reality not easily recognized and received for what it really is.²⁴

Conclusions

Here are some messages that Mark 4:1-34 offers to us. How might we look at the work of the church and gospel proclamation in light of these points?

1. The church's primary responsibility is to sow
2. The church cannot cause sprouting, or hasten growth or fruiting
3. Don't worry so much about sprouting, growth, or fruiting
4. The gospel provokes a decision – some will reject, others will accept – just the way it is
5. The gospel cannot be hidden – it is veiled at times, but it cannot remain hidden forever
 - a. Between the sowing and harvest, the church's responsibility is to discover where God is working and participate in his unveiling of the kingdom
6. The success and growth of the kingdom is assured
7. Kingdom growth is quiet
8. We will know when the harvest is ready
9. The kingdom will never look impressive
10. There needs to be room for mystery and questions in gospel proclamation
11. The gospel is about letting go of our need to control things, circumstances, and people

²³ NICNT: Mark, 4:33-34.

²⁴ UBC: Mark, 4:12 note.