

## Living in the Kingdom Mark 4; Matthew 13

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Imagine a traveler riding by on his horse as a farmer carefully waters the soil. The traveler asks, "What are you doing there?"

The farmer says, "I planted seed. I'm watering it.

The traveler says, "You're crazy. I don't see anything but dirt."

The farmer says, "Nevertheless, the seed is in the soil. I planted it there myself."

The traveler says, "Prove it."

The farmer says, "Okay, stay and watch. Better yet, join me in watering. In time, it will prove itself."

That is what Jesus is saying in the parables of the Kingdom. When He teaches the Kingdom of God Jesus generally doesn't draw doctrinal boundaries; He gives pictures of what is happening where the Kingdom is present—what the Kingdom's effect on people tends to look like. Mark 4 gives three of Jesus' first recorded parables.

### Parables in Mark 4 (all quotes from the NIV)

#### The Lamp: God's Kingdom is shining. Do you see it?

<sup>21</sup>He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? <sup>22</sup>For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. <sup>23</sup>If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."

<sup>24</sup>"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you--and even more. <sup>25</sup>Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

**Notice verse 25:** "Whoever has will be given more." Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear Jesus' kind of Kingdom will see it more and more. But the opportunity to receive the Kingdom is temporary. "Even what he has will be taken from him." Those who are focused only on the kingdoms of this world will not see God's Kingdom at all.

**Verses 23-24:** Do you have ears for the Kingdom of God? Can you hear what Jesus is describing? It is radically different.

Do we want the world's un-satisfiable standards of biggest, most, and winningest? Or can we glimpse Heaven's love, generosity and wholeness? "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you." If we pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," we are participating in something very different from king-of-the-hill thinking.

**Verse 22:** "For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open."

It is not His intention that you fail to see the Kingdom, but that you do see it. Jesus' life and all His teachings, including His death, were a shocking confrontation of the kingdoms of this world. When we

don't see God's Kingdom, it's not because He's hiding it. It's because we're gazing at the wrong things. SO . . .

**The Seed: God's Kingdom is already growing. Are you aware of it?**

<sup>26</sup>He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup>Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup>As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

Jesus is still describing the Kingdom (26), and He compares it to seed. The Kingdom is not only what comes of the seed; it is the seed itself. Whatever a plant is to become, it is already there in the seed. If I have an apple seed, it is already apple in its very nature.

Jesus said all along that the Kingdom is already present in the world. It is near you (Matthew 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15). It is within you (Luke 17:21). You can't see it unless you are born again (John 3:3). Seek it first, if you would know God's provision (Matthew 6:33). Jesus wasn't giving us only a distant future hope. He was calling us to recognize Him and experience His presence and ways right now.

You don't see seed when it goes to work. But those who live on agriculture think no less of the seed for being out of sight. They don't belittle the sprout for being small. They don't reject first sign of fruit for being unripe. They know those are all stages of something that will come to harvest.

It is a pagan idea that the gods are up there somewhere, aloof from mortals. The God of the Bible has always been among His people, doing His creative work. He promises not only a New Heaven, but also a New Earth (Revelation 21:1). We will see the Kingdom triumphant and complete at the harvest. But that Kingdom has already been sown. The seed is already scattered.

WE keep saying we have to try harder, assuming the Kingdom will come in Right-handed, in-your-face ways. Jesus says the Kingdom is like seed. Only God can make it grow, but He involves us in cultivating the best conditions to bring it to harvest.

We don't tend our gardens every day in hopes we'll be accepted. We do it because it's gratifying to see life growing and fruit borne. The life itself is God's work. **Verse 27** says it happens whether you're asleep or awake, whether you're paying attention or not. **Verse 28** says "all by itself," to emphasize that you and I are not the dynamic agents in this happening. The next parable emphasizes the seed.

**The Tiny Seed: The great comes out of the small. Do you value it?**

<sup>30</sup>Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. <sup>32</sup>Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

The point is, seeds start very small in proportion to what grows out of them. Seeds can become trees. These parable correct **three misunderstandings** of the Kingdom:

1. It's not a Right-handed-power kind of kingdom. (See blog on "What kind of Kingdom?")
2. It's not a distant, irrelevant kingdom.
3. It's not of our own making.

Here's the challenge, Jesus seems to be saying: Whenever I start talking about the Kingdom, you start picturing earthly kingdoms of industry, weaponry and political power (Right-handed power).

When I call it the Kingdom of Heaven, you start picturing a far-off place unrelated to the world you live in (distant and irrelevant).

And when I describe it being already here, you start asking what you have to do to make it happen—as if all depended on you.

But it's not like industrial, military or political power (Right-handed). This is a living Kingdom, like something that grows all around you.

It's not a far-off place unrelated to your home. It has already begun right here among you.

And I don't want the focus to be on you making it happen. The Father already produces the growth. I want you to focus on the Good News: that God is already here at work and wants you to be with Him. As surely as seed becomes tree, the Kingdom will reach fruition. You don't manufacture it. You watch it grow.

Now in both Matthew and Luke, that parable goes immediately into another one:

### **Matthew 13**

#### **The Yeast: God works in unseen ways. Do you trust Him?**

<sup>33</sup>He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Jesus gives a picture the people there had often seen—but many of us may have never seen. Picture a woman taking a large amount of flour—the literal amount here is about 16 five-pound bags, which, when you add enough water to begin mixing the dough makes about a hundred pounds of dough (Robert Capon, "Kingdom, Grace, Judgment," Eerdmans, 2002, p. 100).

A hard-working woman is preparing a feast for a large household, or perhaps a large party of guests—both of which are pictures that Jesus later uses for the Kingdom. This woman is working the yeast through this huge tub of bread dough to make many loaves. But it doesn't take all that much yeast. And the small amount of yeast there immediately becomes invisible in the dough. Despite its smallness and invisibility, the yeast eventually permeates and raises the whole batch.

The woman in the story is the Lord. God is the one doing the work. The dough in the story is the world. The yeast represents the Kingdom.

The Kingdom, like yeast, is not highly visible, but that doesn't mean it's not there. The Kingdom, like yeast, may seem small and insignificant, but it works through everything to effect everything. The Kingdom, like yeast, will accomplish the good purpose of the Master Baker, to provide the great feast.

What does the quote from Psalm 78:2 refer to? In Matthew 13:35 Jesus says "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."

This quote introduces a very long Psalm about God's miraculous provision, and the repeated doubt and disloyalty of his people. God led His people in the wilderness, providing food and water they did not earn. They repeatedly doubted that He could do it. His power was as plain as light, but they forgot it almost constantly.

God rescued them, without their efforts, from the mighty Egyptians. They responded with disloyalty and faithlessness, loving other things. His care for them was constant, even when they paid Him no attention.

God made a mighty king out of a lowly shepherd boy (like a tree from a seed). God always provides—without our help, when we need Him most, and we repeatedly act oblivious to His presence.

SO, what is the quote in verse 35 saying? "I'm going to tell you things that have always been true, but that you, being spiritually blind have not seen."

These things are hidden and mysterious NOT because God keeps them obscure, but because in our unspiritual condition we are so myopic we don't notice what He is doing all around us.

If we do not believe in the yeast, that doesn't diminish its effectiveness, nor does it hinder what the Baker is preparing for us.

That is what He is doing among our humble company. We can catch glimpses of what the Lord is doing in the lives of others and be thrilled. But in the day to day grind we can feel, at any time, as if we are fruitless.

Can we learn good ideas from others that might prove beneficial? Sure we can. But does our work all hinge on our technique? No, Jesus says, I planted my seed among you. I will make it grow. And you get to participate and be there when it comes to harvest. The world questions the invisible realities. But you know better.