

Mark 4:26 – 34

April 22, 2018

Have you ever been duped to go to someone's home for dinner or coffee or dessert only to find a crowd of people yelling – surprise!

You expect one thing and get something entirely different. Has that ever happened to you? Your expectations changed when you heard the word, "Surprise!"

You were looking for dinner and got a party. If you've experienced this you know it takes a moment to gather your wits. You process – and say – you lied, wait that wasn't true. And the first bit of the party and the part that everyone is laughing about is how you were duped.

The nation of Israel was duped and it was no laughing matter. The nation of Israel had the wrong expectations of what the Kingdom of God should look like and therefore they were in danger of missing it all together.

So many missed the Kingdom of God because they were expecting something all-together different. Tom Wright is correct when he says,

“The Kingdom of God is here, (Jesus) seemed to be saying but it is not like you thought it was going to be.” Tom Wright

What is the Kingdom of God like?

That exact question is what Jesus takes up this morning. This is a question that we need to understand too.

What is the Kingdom of God like? In other words –

Q. how does God advance his purposes in the world today?

A. Not like you think he would.

God works by his good purpose and not according to our expectations.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

The Kingdom of God is,

Not what you imagine.

Not what you think.

Not what you expect.

Accept the working of his kingdom even though it doesn't come, act or advance like you might think.

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.”

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.”

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.” Mark 4:26-34

Mark 4 is full of agricultural imagery. If Jesus used parables today – he would use grocery store imagery because few of us understand agriculture. We work to earn money and buy food.

We do not work the land to harvest food.

Sure you might have a fun little garden, but if all the food you were going to get was going to come from that garden we would be in a world of hurt.

But all of his original hearers understood farming, because if they didn't they didn't eat. Let's remember where we have been –

Mark 4 is a chapter on the kingdom of God. Jesus explains the Kingdom of God in parables.

Remember where we have been?

- Soils: there are many ways people respond to the kingdom of God – from nothing to bearing fruit.
- Lamp: Only right way to respond to the kingdom of God is to – Listen!

Today we see a bit of shift. Instead of focusing on how we ought to respond to the kingdom of God – Jesus shows us what the Kingdom of God is like. You can see this right there in the text –

- Vs. 26, “**And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if...**
- Vs. 30, “**“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like...**

There are two parables that describe the kingdom of God. Two parables that show us that the kingdom of God is not what we might think.

The Farmer & The Mustard Seed –

Parable #1: The Farmer (Mark 4:26 – 29)

The way Jesus describes the farmer is curious. He seems a little clueless. Look at verse 27,

“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.”

Jesus seems to present the farmer as somewhat of a bumbler who just cools his heels and harvests grain despite relative inaction.

But his focus is on the seed’s activity NOT the farmer. Everyone knows that being a farmer requires a prodigious amount of hard labor. There is watering the crops, weeding the land, keeping animals at bay and so much more.

But Jesus is focusing on the work that no farmer can do. Even if the farmer works tirelessly from sun up to sun down – no farmer can make a seed grow.

The farmer works but the seeds grows by itself. The seeds grows by gaining nutrients from the soil, water and the sun and slowly matures. The seed and not the farmer holds the secret of growth.

The farmer does not make the seed grow, the seed just grows.

- The seed does not need growing lessons from the farmer – it just grows.
- The seed does not need a growing coach it just grows.
- The seed does not need inspirational quotes from the farmer to feel like growing – it just grows.
- The seed does not need the farmer to sing songs to coax the seed to grow – it just grows.

The seed just grows.

And further, the farmer does not know how the whole process works. He knows what the process looks like: What seeds to pick, to get wheat or corn or cilantro, but he can't explain how it grows.

The farmer puts the seed in the ground and lets the seed do its thing.

The Kingdom of God grows like this seed. It grows on its own without human effort. Yes, there are things we must do to be faithful, but the Lord brings the growth and does the work.

The original audience expected the Kingdom of God to arrive with a thud – and Messiah come to conquer the Roman hoards with a word.

The Kingdom came in a way they didn't expect and it grows in a way that they didn't expect.

They expected Messiah to come mounted on a mighty steed, wielding a flaming sword, with lightning in his eyes – and he comes talking about farmers and seeds.

The Kingdom grows in a way no one expects.

- They expected flash and Jesus gave them farming.
- They expected power and Jesus gave them weakness.
- They expected Thunderbolts and Jesus gave them seed talk.
- They expected armies and Jesus gave them more seed talk.
- They expected national dominance and Jesus gave them farming talk.

What can we say?

We are no different than they are:

God does not work according to our expectations.

The Kingdom God grows and advances by the power of God not by you and me.

The Kingdom of God is established by the power of God – and it grows God's way. The kingdom of God

will be established by the power of God NOT by the work of mankind.

God is the one that brings the growth.

Just as the seed grows on its own – so does the Kingdom of God. How does the kingdom advance?

Military campaigns?

Social awareness?

Public works?

Political activity?

Nope.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

The kingdom of God advances through the multi-faceted ministry of the word of God. The Word of God is the means of the growing of the kingdom of God.

What does this mean?

God and his purposes are not subject to my expectations.

The imagery Jesus uses is,

“...not that of marching armies, heroic duties, and valorous exploits, but the humble, homely imagery of

sowing, tilling, and harvest. The seed is scattered, falls, and lies on the ground, and meets a variety of fates. Instead of striking out defiant and aggressive, the Kingdom of God appears lowly and vulnerable. The seed is subject to adversity, rejection, delays, and loss. The parables contain no promise of instant and universal triumph.” Gilbert Bilezikian

But with a sure harvest. Jesus is confident that the kingdom of God will grow by his power even if it defies our expectations.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

The kingdom grows contrary to our expectations – ALSO, the kingdom will become more than we expect.

2. Parable #2: A mustard seed (Mark 4:31-34)

What seems insignificant is more than it seems. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to –

Verse 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.”

A mustard seed – what is it. It is one of the smallest seeds – how small?

Tiny.

Not much bigger than a grain of sand. Lucky for us Sprouts sells mustard seeds in bulk for – I’m not really sure why.

But here is a picture –



And here is what it looks like, wild and fully grown –



That insignificant seed becomes the largest garden plant. Mustard plants are known to grow upwards of 10 feet high. From that.

What is so small changes into something much, much greater. The mustard seed arises from insignificance and obscurity but can't be ignored when it grows. But if you were to guess — you would think another kind of seed would make a larger plant.

You can see how birds can perch in the branches.

In other places Jesus talks about our faith and says even the faith of a mustard seed is enough to move mountains. He is says this in Matthew 17. His point is small faith in God can do great things.

True. But that is not Jesus' point here in Mark.

Here he is comparing the seemingly insignificant mustard seed and what it becomes to the working of the Kingdom of God.

A mustard seed becomes more than you think it could ever be. So much of the inner workings of God's kingdom is so very ordinary that we are apt to miss it.

His Kingdom purposes rarely advance in leaps and bounds but through quiet, steady, often hidden growth.

Think about how God's purposes have advanced in the pages of scripture – not like you would think:

- The Father of the nation of Israel – was for years fatherless.
- The nation of Israel – was for years enslaved.
- The savior of Israel and the world – came through a virgin.
- The King was born in a small backwater in a stable.
- The King walked the earth so long anonymous.
- The King was lifted up and died but rose again.

The workings of this kingdom, of the kingdom of God shout – “It isn't like you expect.”

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

We know this truth in our lives as well –

- We find ourselves by giving ourselves away.
- We experience greatness through humility.
- We love in the face of hate.
- We grow in the shadow of great loss.
- We are strong in our weakness.
- The meek will inherit the earth.

Who would think that a murdered king could rise and come to eternal prominence?

The work of God in the world does not grab the headlines, get the likes or garner the re-tweets. God works slowly, quietly and ways so easily over looked.

How easily overlooked?

Like you might overlook a seed quietly growing in the ground.

The Kingdom of God advances differently than we might expect. And if we aren't looking for it – we will miss it.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

God's ways are not our ways –

What have we learned about the Kingdom of God?

1. You are a part of something big – but it is often hidden.

The Kingdom of God does not have territory, armies, thronerooms, that we can see. The kingdom of God does not carry with it the trappings of power. All of that is hidden.

This is why gathering together is so important. One of the reasons we gather together is to remind us that we are emphatically NOT alone. We sing together to a risen King who is alive who is right now hidden.

We see him clearly enough through the reading and preaching of his word – but to so many he is hidden from them. We gather and remind ourselves that other people believe in this hidden king and his kingdom.

Not just us, but all over the globe Christians in countless towns, villages and cities gather to remind themselves they are a part of something big, that is hidden.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

2. God's Kingdom usually advances in quiet and unremarkable ways.

How quiet?

Stunningly quiet. I went out last night to listen to our garden grow. I gave my full attention to the little spit of dirt in our backyard and I heard....nothing.

But I see plants growing.

If you look for God to advance his purposes through loud and flashy ways – you are going to miss it. I think too often we Americans think that if a political figure or a celebrity or a billionaire gets saved then the Kingdom would advance powerfully.

When actually, God uses the quiet and unremarkable people to leave an eternal mark.

God's ways are not our ways.

Those quiet advances of the Kingdom are the ones that last. The things that don't grab the headlines –

- The tiny church plant with little support.
- The faithful intercessory prayer group who gathers week by week.
- The small group who faithfully meets.
- The people that come on Sunday even when they don't feel like it.
- Daily feasting on the word of God.
- Daily talking to God not so you can say you had your devotions – but so you can make it through the day.

God advances in quiet, seemingly unremarkable ways.

John Piper helpfully says –

“God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.” John Piper

And when it comes to the Kingdom of God – we might say: God is always doing 10,000 times 10,000 things and we may be aware of three of them.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that because you can't see all of the ways God is working that he is not working. May we never shrink God down to the size of our perceptions.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

3. The kingdom's success is NOT dependent on our effort.

The seed of the word takes root and grows on its own—God needs no one and yet he freely uses many people.

I am so glad that the Lord does not need me, but feels free to use me. I am glad that the advancement of the kingdom is based on the king and not on my feeble efforts. I am glad that kingdom success is not based on my ingenuity, strength or resolve.

You know what—I/We might suffer loss, might look the fool but that does not mean that Jesus loses or is a fool. We might bear the indignity of the rejection of the world and look like losers—but Jesus will win.

He is sure.

Did you notice how confident he is of a harvest? He is sure that the Kingdom of God will steadily grow and the harvest is coming.

Because he is confident, we must be too.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

4. Serving the Kingdom of God requires great patience.

This is so very difficult. We Americans expect to plant the seed, see the stem, harvest the crop, and bake the bread all before noon.

But life in the Kingdom of God takes so much time and patience.

The Kingdom of God does not fit our specifications or expectations. We want things to happen faster but the King moves at his own pace.

How tempting is it to think that because something is slow in coming that it will never come at all? The Kingdom of God does not move at the speed of light.

But slowly.
Incrementally.
By stages.

And not according to our timetable.

Part of the reason he works at the pace he does is because we are so very weak. We think we can handle fast and flashy advances but we can't. God knows our frame.

He knows we grow –

Slowly
Incrementally
By stages.

And if you are a new Christian, this can be a very difficult reality to grasp. You want to grow quickly. You want to see action and all you see is slow, quiet normal life.

Don't be discouraged.

You are on the front lines of the kingdom of God.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

5. We serve in his Kingdom, He does not serve in our Kingdom.

This is fundamental but so very true. He does not check with me to see if what he is planning makes sense.

It doesn't.

Our expectations of how things should go can blind us to the way things really are. God does not work according to what makes sense to you and me.

His ways are not our ways.

Paul isn't joking when he says,

[20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21

He can do more than we can even ask or imagine. Aren't you glad that he has his purposes and doesn't need our consultation?

Aren't you glad that his ability is not limited to what we ask for?

We serve in his kingdom for his purposes; he does not serve in our kingdom for our purposes.

God is NOT subject to our expectations.

