

## Discipleship According to Mark

*The Growing Kingdom* (Mark 4:21-34)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 22, 2026

### Introduction

- ❖ Last week, we jumped into chapter 4 of Mark's Gospel. Where Jesus begins to teach in parables. We studied one of the best known of his parables—the one where a sower broadly sows and scatters seeds. And they fall either onto bad, inhospitable soil (of varying degrees) or onto good, hospitable soil that actually produces fruit.
  - Jesus later explains to his disciples that the parable describes two kinds of people—those on the inside of God's kingdom and those outside. **They're distinguished by their distinct responses to Jesus's words.** Outsiders merely hear audibly with their ears. Insiders go further and hear spiritually with their hearts. They listen with faith.
  
- ❖ And we talked about how that particular parable is emblematic of all of Jesus's parables. **Because the reason he taught in parables was to enlighten some listeners while confounding others.** Those who heard his parables and drew near to him, seeking to understand and learn more—their reaction revealed the goodness of their soil and their status as insiders. But those who heard his parables but walked away confused or agitated and enraged—their reaction just confirmed the hardness of their hearts and their outsider status.
  - And what must have shocked his original audience is the indisputable fact that those who were reacting like kingdom insiders were the least expected of all in those days—the sinners and the tax collectors. And the ones everyone had assumed were the consummate insiders—the scribes and Pharisees—were proving, by their reaction, to be outside the kingdom of God.
  
- ❖ This role reversal in the kingdom—**where the first shall be last and the last first; where the weak shame the strong; where the insignificant and unassuming are the ones that God uses to expand his reign on earth**—*that* dynamic of the kingdom is underlined in today's text. In these parables about an oil lamp, a farmer's plant, and a mustard seed.
  - They're intended to upend our expectations. To surprise us. To provoke us. To stop and think about the true nature of God's kingdom and what life looks like under his kingdom rule. **In our day, contemporary Christians are far too enamored with size.** Assuming bigger is better. We get caught up with numbers. Tell someone about your church and one of their first questions is usually, "How big are you? What's your average attendance?" **The assumption is that if God is working in and through this church, this organization, this movement—then we should be witnessing something big, something impressive, something spectacular.**
  
- ❖ But in the economy of God, things just work differently. **In his kingdom, you should keep your eyes—not on what's large scale and grand—but on what's humble and small yet faithfully growing.** I think Tolkien captures this dynamic well in *The Lord of the Rings*.
  - Most stories in this kind of fantasy genre have heroes who are great warriors. And *LotR* has plenty of characters who fit that profile. You've got mighty men, majestic elves, sturdy dwarves, and powerful wizards to choose from. You'd expect one of them to end up saving the day.

- ❖ **But these little hobbits turn out to be the big heroes.** Tolkien describes them as between two and four feet tall. They look like children among men. They tend to be stout in figure, have voracious appetites, and generally want nothing to do with adventure. They're just ordinary farmers and gardeners. Yet these hobbits end up defeating the great evil of their day and saving the world. They're not the heroes you would've expected.
  - Now remember, Tolkien didn't dream up that plot twist himself. As a devout Catholic, he drew inspiration from the four Gospels. From Jesus's parables about the kingdom starting off as something small and insignificant. **And from Jesus himself, who like a mustard seed, started off his earthly ministry as a tiny baby in a manger.**
  
- ❖ **The kingdom of God will inevitably grow. But how it begins and how it grows may surprise us or provoke us.** So as we walk through these parables in vv21-34, I want to make three observations about how the kingdom grows: (1) The kingdom of God grows until it lights the whole world. (2) The kingdom grows apart from human effort. (3) The kingdom grows beyond all human expectation.

### **The Kingdom Grows Until It Lights The Whole World**

- ❖ Let's consider our first observation about the kingdom of God—**how it grows until it lights the whole world.** If you recall from last week's text, Jesus explained to his disciples why he began to teach the crowds in the form of parables. Look in v11, *"<sup>11</sup>And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, <sup>12</sup>so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."'"*
  - We noted that he was quoting **Isaiah 6:9-10**, where Isaiah the prophet is commissioned and sent to preach to a people who will refuse to listen. **They will fail to perceive and understand God's word to them.** Which confirms that they are an idolatrous people under divine chastisement. Their failure to understand is a form of divine judgment. That's the context of Isaiah 6.
  
- ❖ So in quoting that, Jesus is saying he teaches in parables *so that* the failure to perceive and understand by some in the crowd just goes to confirm their status as kingdom outsiders. That they too are under judgment. **But I know it's those two words "so that," which makes it sound like Jesus doesn't want them to understand his teaching.** I'm going to teach using parables *so that* you remain confused like those in Isaiah 6. It sounds as if Jesus is intentionally obscuring his message. Like he's hiding it from most people and just keeping it a secret that's only available to an elite few. Some might draw that faulty conclusion.
  - Which is why he tells this parable in v21, *"<sup>21</sup>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? <sup>22</sup>For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light.""*
    - So, right now, the kingdom is a secret contained within parables. **But it's an open secret that's slowly but surely being revealed as God opens the ears of more and more to listen with faith and follow Jesus.**

- ❖ **So just as you wouldn't light a lamp in a darkened room simply to keep it concealed, the good news of the kingdom won't be hidden for long.** It's intended to be shared with all. Why would you put it under a basket or shove it under a bed? You would want to place it on a stand, in a prominent position, to give light to all. **Jesus is stressing the fact that the ultimate goal is for his message—for the good news of the kingdom—to be shared to the whole world, to the ends of the earth.**
- ❖ Commentators note that the specific construction of his sentence in v21 is significant. **In the original Greek, the lamp is the subject of the sentence.** Literally, the lamp comes into the room as if it moves itself. But that sounds awkward since lamps are impersonal objects. That's why many English translations make the lamp the object that someone brings in. The NIV says, "Do you (subject) bring in a lamp (object) to put it under a bowl?"
  - But Jesus describes the lamp itself coming in and introduces it with the definite article. It's not just a lamp—it's *the* lamp that comes into the room. **In other words, *the* Lamp is a metaphor for Jesus himself** (cf. 2 Sam 22:29). He has come into the room, or the world to be more exact.
- ❖ Jesus is the Light of the World. **Now admittedly, when he first came, his light was obscured. Concealed by his humanity.** He came in the form of a helpless babe. And just like his parables, some could still see the light of his glory (as faint as it was), but others looked at Jesus and saw a mere teacher, a mere worker of signs and wonders, a mere agitator that we need to get rid of.
  - **Even today, the same reactions occur.** As the Church puts Jesus and his gospel on the lampstand, shining it far and wide, some will hear his voice and see his glory—glory as of the only Son from the Father—and they'll believe. But others will hear the same Jesus preached, and they'll hear nothing spectacular. They'll see nothing impressive. They'll conclude that Jesus is nothing worth giving their lives to.
- ❖ **Church, it's our job to keep Jesus on the lampstand.** To shine his gospel wherever he sends us. **But we have to be careful *not* to obscure his message.** By concealing it behind man-made religious traditions—like how the Pharisees tried to confine Jesus within old wineskins. Or by cloaking his gospel with poor witnesses, by living lives contrary to his kingdom. Don't put him under a basket. Let Jesus shine—in and through our lives.
  - And be prepared for rejection. These parables are warning that people *will* reject our gospel. Let's be sure it's *not* because we've concealed its truth and grace. **If friends and family reject the gospel, let it not be due to a lack of access or opportunity to hear—but to a lack of openness on their part.** If their hearts are presently hardened to the gospel—like a cement path—then so be it. Now don't stop praying for them or sharing with them. But don't blame yourself if they refuse to listen and believe.
- ❖ **And for anyone here who is not a Christian**—maybe a friend or family member invited you this morning—if you have even the smallest inkling of interest in Jesus, then I encourage you to keep listening. **Ask God—even if you're not sure he's even there—ask him to open your ears and to help you hear. Exercise whatever little faith you have.**

- ❖ Listen to Jesus's encouragement starting in v23, "*23If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*" *24And 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. 25For to the one who has, more will be given."* **In other words, to those who have open hearts to the truths of the gospel, more shall be entrusted to you.** So like I said, exercise whatever little faith you've got. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you (Jas 4:8).
- ❖ **But to those who are closed off right now**, Jesus warns in the second half of v25, "*And from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*" Like in the Parable of the Sower, Satan will try to snatch away the seed. Even the good news you've been exposed to will be taken away. **So please take that as a warning—to respond to whatever little you know of Jesus right now.** How you respond today has dire consequences for your future.
  - You might tell yourself that right now is not a good time in your life to become a Christian, to take the faith seriously. Maybe you'll wait until college. Or maybe until you establish a career for yourself. Or maybe you'll wait until you start a family. But putting off a decision for Christ until a later date is a risk not worth taking.
    - **Because if your heart grows colder, harder, and more distant from Jesus, then you very well may not be in a position of openness down the road when you think you'll be ready to get more serious about Christianity.** From the one who has not—has not an open heart to accept Jesus right now—even what you have may be taken away. So if you have ears to hear Jesus's warning, please hear him and respond with whatever little faith you have.

### The Kingdom Grows Apart From Human Effort

- ❖ So our first observation about the kingdom's growth is that it'll grow until it lights the whole world, and our job as disciples of Christ is to faithfully shine his light. To hold forth the gospel on a lampstand by what we say and what we do. Through our words and through our lives. That's our mission. **But let's be careful *not* to overstate our role or influence in someone accepting the gospel and becoming a disciple of Jesus.** That leads to our second parable and second observation: **The kingdom of God grows apart from human effort.**
  - Listen to vv26-29, "*26And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.*"
- ❖ The Parable of the Seed Growing is unique to Mark's Gospel. Similar to the Parable of the Sower, there's a farmer scattering seed on the ground. **But while the first parable stressed the inevitability of a harvest despite the varying degrees of resistance, this parable's stress is on the hiddenness of the growth.** How the plant grows apart from human insight or effort. The farmer just goes to sleep, and the seed sprouts and grows, "*he knows not how.*"
  - Now that's not to suggest that the farmer has absolutely nothing to do or to contribute. He sows and scatters in the beginning, and he puts in the sickle and reaps in the end. **But "in the middle" is a bit of a mystery, and there he has to accept his limits.**

- ❖ **After the seed goes into the ground and remains hidden from sight, the farmer has little else to do but wait.** He goes about his day, and gets a good night's sleep. And all the while, the seed is growing. He doesn't exactly know how it happens. It just does.
  - In v28, Jesus says, "*The earth produces by itself.*" **In the original, "by itself" is the word *automate*, where we get the word *automatic*.** The seed grows automatically. In a technological age, we hear the word *automatic* and picture something mechanical as in automated production or autonomous cars. But in a first-century agrarian context, automatic growth simply meant something that takes place apart from our effort.
    - **Jesus's point is that the farmer didn't produce the grain.** The farmer is important to sow the seed in the beginning and to reap the grain when it's ripe, but apart from that he takes a back seat. **He plays a passive role in the middle. The power of growth is found in the seed itself.**
  
- ❖ Now, again, we have to place ourselves in the mindset of Jesus's first-century Jewish audience. **They wouldn't have considered plant growth from a naturalistic perspective.** Attributing growth to the power of photosynthesis or some other law of nature. No, a Jewish farmer would've attributed the growth of the plant to the creative act of God. God did it.
  - And the point of the parable is that the farmer didn't. **He can't take any credit for the growth. From seed to ripe grain, he knows it's all God.** God gives the growth.
    - **And not only does this parable teach the growth is automatic—apart from human effort—the growth is gradual.** It doesn't just spring up from the ground the next morning as a fully-ripe grain. There's a drawn out, gradual process. "*First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.*"
  
- ❖ Now when you apply that principle of automatic and gradual growth to the kingdom of God, you can see how it challenged the prevailing view in Jesus's day. **So many expected the kingdom to come immediately and spectacularly.** They expected it to arrive through political uprising. By overthrowing Roman rule. Which they expected to come about through human effort. As a result of their hard work or their piety. Led by the Messiah, they assumed they were going to usher in the kingdom in spectacular fashion.
  - That's why many in his day rejected Jesus as the Messiah and despised the kingdom he preached. **It was too humble, too ordinary, too shameful.** He said his kingdom would grow through rejection, defeat, and crucifixion. Through dying for our enemies instead of overthrowing them. And it would take time. His kingdom would grow relationship by relationship. Through the long haul of lifelong discipleship.
    - Do you see why Jesus generated so much opposition? If you expect God's kingdom to come immediately and spectacularly, then Jesus and his kingdom will be a huge disappointment.
  
- ❖ **But to those with ears to hear—who take Jesus for who he is instead of who we expect him to be—they will hear his voice and see his glory in the message of Christ crucified.** And they'll believe and be saved. And the thing is, you won't know how it works. Or when it's going to happen. But that's okay. Because that's the power of the gospel seed planted in someone's heart. It grows automatically and gradually—apart from human effort.

- ❖ Think about what this means for our evangelism. It means you, as a Christian, have an important role to play. **You have a responsibility to share the gospel of the kingdom and its king who humbled himself to death, even death on a cross.** Scatter that gospel seed. And pray that it takes root in the heart of the person you're evangelizing.
  - But after that, don't fret. **Don't be anxious about what they're going to do with that seed.** And don't blame yourself if they appear to initially reject it. **You can put your head down on your pillow and get a good night's sleep.** Trusting that if the gospel is going to sprout and grow in the soil of their heart, it's going to happen by itself—by the grace of God—and you won't know how. Nor will you be able to predict when you'll see any signs of conversion. Just plant those seeds, pray, and put your trust in the power of the gospel seeds you planted.
  
- ❖ I've been prayer walking during this AWAKEN HOUSTON movement, and the other day, I saw a familiar sight walking along the streets of Houston. **I came to a section of sidewalk that was extremely unlevelled because a huge root from a massive oak tree had cracked and elevated the cement path.** I'm sure fifty some years ago that was a smooth and even sidewalk. But one day, a tiny little acorn landed on the soil, just a bit too close to the sidewalk. It didn't look like much. Just a little ordinary seed. **But within that acorn contained a power greater than us.** Strong enough to crack and elevate a cement path.
  - My point is this—don't despair because the gospel message you shared with your friend or family member seems so small and ordinary. You feel like you could've done better. But don't worry. **The power to save—to break through a stony heart—is not in you but in the gospel seed you planted.** What you shared may seem like nothing special but contained in the gospel itself is a mighty power to save.
  
- ❖ **And who knows, maybe you'll be the one God asks to finish the task by reaping a harvest of salvation in someone's life.** You'll share the gospel with someone and, lo and behold, they'll express a sorrow for their sins, and a desire for repentance, and a trust in the gospel. Praise God. **But don't think too highly of yourself or of your ability to evangelize.**
  - For who knows how many others, in the recent or distant past, have planted gospel seeds in that person's heart. **You were just given the privilege of swinging that sickle and reaping the harvest that others have faithfully sowed in the past.** So don't get too down on yourself or too high on yourself when it comes to evangelism. You have a part in the beginning. You might play a part in the end. But in the middle—and this could take a while—trust in God to give the growth.

### **The Kingdom Grows Beyond Human Expectation**

- ❖ So the kingdom grows until it lights the whole world, and the kingdom grows apart from human effort. Here's our third observation: **The kingdom of God grows beyond human expectation.** This point is stressed in Jesus's last parable. Listen to vv30-32, *“<sup>30</sup>And he said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, <sup>32</sup>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.’”*

- ❖ **The emphasis here is on the contrast between small, humble beginnings and big, glorious endings.** It's about how the kingdom of God—his rule and reign on earth—looks very different at the start—and even now—compared to the kingdom when it comes in all its fullness. The kingdom arises from obscurity and insignificance. If you were there in Jesus's day, you couldn't have imagined what it's become today, much less what it'll be in glory.
  - **The kingdom is compared to a tiny, insignificant mustard seed.** Now a mustard seed is not literally the smallest seed on earth, but to Jesus's audience it was a common illustration for describing something small. Imagine a poppy seed that you might find on a bagel but picture a bit larger. That's how small a mustard seed is. But when it's fully grown—it doesn't technically become a tree—but it does grow into a large shrub. About nine to ten feet high. **The point is that a mustard seed is so small and unremarkable compared to a fully-grown mustard plant, that, in some ways, you can't imagine how one could come from the other.**
  
- ❖ The same applies to the kingdom of God. It had such humble beginnings. **Jesus didn't come riding on the clouds in glory. No, he came in obscurity.** Born in a manger, not a palace. For thirty years, he lived an ordinary life. The carpenter's son from the backwater town of Nazareth. And when he died, it was a shameful criminal's death.
  - **But as the gospel story goes, this Mustard Seed was planted in death but rose in new life.** He ascended in glory and is coming back again on the clouds with all the angels to reap a harvest. His second coming will be that big and spectacular event that so many were expecting at the beginning.
  
- ❖ And when the parable speaks of the birds of the air nesting in the fully-grown mustard plant, that's an OT allusion to **Ezekiel 17:22-24**. To a prophecy that likens Israel to a sapling the LORD plants, which grows up into a mighty cedar tree with branches large enough for birds of every kind to dwell.
  - **In context, that's referring to the nations, the Gentiles—to those of us who are believers and not of Jewish descent—it's about each of us making a home in the kingdom of God.** And not just about us but all the unreached peoples of the earth. There's room enough for them on the branch. **In fact, it's our very mission, as the Church, to preach to all nations.** Compelling them to come by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom—that it's open to all who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.
  
- ❖ That's where the kingdom is headed. It will be a great multitude that no one can number, *“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”* (Rev 7:9)
  - **But the Parable of the Mustard Seed stresses the kingdom's modest beginning.** It was smaller than anyone expected. And yet it was God's design. It was his intent to humble the proud and strengthen the feeble.

- ❖ What a needed corrective for the church today! **In our day and age of mega-megachurches and multi-million dollar Christian ministries, it's tempting to think that bigness is a sure sign of blessing and success.** But if the first church led by Jesus—and the early church led by the apostles—if they were mere mustard seeds, then that ought to reorient and redefine our understanding of church success.
  - **If we have a small church, a meager ministry, a barren mission field—that shouldn't discourage us.** We shouldn't lose heart. Little is not a problem. Small is not our concern. Faithfulness is. As long as we're faithful in sowing the seeds of the gospel, we can rest assured. We can get a good night's sleep tonight. Knowing that God is the One who gives the growth.