

Introduction

1. I set out three cucumber plants on Memorial Day.
 - a. I set them close to the house so that the deer or rabbits won't eat them.
 - b. They look so small right now, but I know that, Lord willing, they will grow long vines and cover the area where I planted them.
 - c. They may look small and insignificant now, but in a few weeks, hopefully, they will be large and produce some delicious cucumbers.
2. All of the parables in Mark 4 focus a common topic: the kingdom of God.
3. Mark leads us to reflect on the how the kingdom of God grows like a tiny seed/plant into something much larger and more significant.
4. **Read Mk 4:30-34.**

A. The Kingdom of God is like a Mustard Seed (30-32)

1. Jesus asked, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like?" (30)
2. He answered his own question in the next two verses with a parable. "It is like a mustard seed" (31).
3. There are two symbols in this parable:
 - a. "a mustard seed" = kingdom of God. (31)
 - b. "birds of the air" = several possibilities which we will examine in more detail below.
4. This is a small parable, only three verses, with a big meaning.
 - a. The "mustard seed" (Gk., *kokko sinapeos*) is small but grows into a large plant.
 - b. Black mustard (Lt., *sinapis nigra*) was thought in Jesus' day to be the smallest seed, and so it was used by the rabbis in many parables. Today we believe the orchid seed to be the smallest.
 - c. Black mustard grows rapidly in one season to be a plant of six to eight feet in height.
 - 1) It sometimes grows as high as twelve feet.
 - 2) Albert Schweitzer tells of a Jewish rabbi who was able to climb the branches of the mustard plant growing in his garden (R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, 153).
 - 3) The branches of the mustard plant can support the weight of birds (32).
5. Like the mustard seed the kingdom of God starts small and becomes something much larger.

B. Three Insights from this Parable (30-32)

1. **Patience**
 - a. "the smallest seed . . . becomes the largest of all garden plants" (31-32)
 - b. Note this second teaching about the kingdom of God starts just like the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mk 4:26-29) with an emphasis on patience.
 - c. This parable was meant to encourage disciples who expected great things NOW!
 - 1) In Mk 9:34 the disciples wanted to know which one of them would be the greatest.
 - 2) In Mk 10:37 James and John contended for the seats of honor in God's kingdom.
 - d. As with the gradual growth of the seed in the previous parable, we must be patient with the seemingly small beginnings that God gives us.
 - 1) Warren Wiersbe notes, "While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, it was probably the smallest seed that the Jews sowed in their gardens. It was a traditional symbol of that which is tiny. Our Lord began with twelve apostles. Later, there were as many as five hundred believers (I Cor. 15:6). Peter won three thousand at Pentecost, and throughout the book of Acts, that number steadily increased (Acts 4:4; 5:14, 6:1, 7). In spite of the sins and weakness of the church, the message has been carried to other nations, and one day, saints from every nation shall worship before His throne (Rev. 5:9)" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 55).
 - 2) What potential did the one who baptized Paul (Acts 9:18) or even Billy Graham see in these kingdom converts? It was a humble beginning that would bring tremendous growth to the kingdom.
 - e. We must be patient to see all that God will do with a mustard seed beginning in our lives/church.

2. Protection or Perversion?

- a. “such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade” (32)
- b. Who are the birds? What or whom do they symbolize in this parable?
 - 1) Daniel Akin presents four possibilities. “Some have suggested that ‘the birds of the air’ represent Satan, connecting these birds back to the ones in 4:4. Others believe this reference indicates shelter for kingdom citizens. Still others suggest the birds represent the nations coming into the kingdom. Finally, some believe the birds are simply part of the story and have no special significance. I like number three: the nations! Passages such as Psalm 104:12; Ezekiel 17:23 and 31:6; and Daniel 4:9-21 would all support this. That the birds ‘nest in its shade’ settles the issue for me. In effect, Jesus is asserting that all the people of the world are going to be there” (Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 95).
 - 2) Wiersbe disagrees with Akin and writes, “In the parable of the sower and soils, the birds stood for Satan, who snatches the seed (Mark 4:15). If we are to be consistent in our interpretation, we must take this into consideration, for both parables were taught on the same day. The growth of the kingdom will not result in the conversion of the world. In fact, some of the growth will give opportunity for Satan to get in and go to work! There was Judas in the disciple band, and Ananias and Sapphira were in fellowship with the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:1-11). Simon Magus was part of the church in Samaria (Acts 8:9-24), and Satan’s ministers boldly invaded the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 11:13-15). The bigger the net the greater the possibility of catching both good and bad fish (Matt. 13:47-50)” (Wiersbe, 55-56).
- c. I agree with Akin’s view that passages from the Old Testament (e.g., Dn 4:10-12; Ezek 17:22) that use similar images depict a bird sheltering tree which symbolizes the protection given to subject peoples by a great empire.
 - 1) So, for me, the shady branches of the mustard tree with birds resting there represent the protection believers/Christians have as a part of God’s eternal kingdom.
 - 2) There is room for all the peoples of the world in the branches of God’s kingdom tree, if they will only come home to roost.

3. Potential

- a. “the smallest . . . becomes the largest” (31-32).
- b. James Brooks believes that “. . . growth is not the main emphasis: contrast between the beginning and the end is the main point of comparison” (James A. Brooks, *Mark*, 85-6).
- c. Again, the emphasis seems to be upon the endpoints. Even though something may have a humble, small beginning it may eventually grow into something glorious and great.
- d. The kingdom of God starts small and grows large by the miraculous working of the Spirit of God.
 - 1) The kingdom of God started with Jesus (Mk 1:14-15).
 - 2) It grew to include twelve disciples (Mk 1:16-18).
 - 3) True followers of Jesus at the ascension were 120 (Acts 1:3).
 - 4) It grew at Pentecost by over 3,000 (Acts 2:41).
 - 5) The Apostles spread the kingdom throughout the known world.
 - a) Philip went with the gospel to the Samaritans and Ethiopians (Acts 8).
 - b) Peter went to the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 10).
 - c) Paul was sent to the Gentiles in Asia Minor, Europe, Rome, and beyond (Acts 13-28).
 - d) Traditionally, Mark travelled as with the gospel to India, and the Apostle Thomas to Egypt.
- e. What started with one seemingly small man, Jesus Christ Son of God, grew into a worldwide movement that has withstood the test of centuries.
- f. The kingdom of God is still grows today in the world, US, Washington County, Abingdon, and in you.
 - 1) It starts small but grows large.
 - a) It starts small with your commitment to study God’s Word but grows large as God teaches you and guides you day-by-day.
 - b) It starts small with your commitment of time to serve others but grows large as others are encouraged to join in by your example.
 - c) It starts small with your contribution of money but grows large as we pool resources with others in missions.

- 2) We must continue to work with God in growing the kingdom at home and abroad until “the harvest has come” (29).
- 3) We must not be frustrated by seemingly small starts in commitment, service, or contribution. We know that God is a work miraculously to grow His kingdom.

C. Jesus’ Other Teaching (33-34)

1. The parable was Jesus’ main teaching tool.
 - a. Note there are many parables in the gospels. Mark only contains a few, primarily here in Mark 4. Matthew and Luke repeat some of the parables recorded by Mark but add many others. Overall, all there are at least 39 parables of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.
 - b. Jesus used other forms of teaching (e.g., Wisdom/Didactic style in the Sermon on the Mount Mt 5-7).
 - c. The Apostle John reminds us, “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe[a] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30-31).
2. Jesus’ parables only had meaning for those who “heard” (Gk., *akouein*) them, that is who could “understand” (NIV) them. Only those who had “ears to hear” (cf., Mk 4:11-12) fully understood what Jesus was saying about the Word of God, that is ultimately about Himself, and God’s kingdom.
3. As with the Parable of the Sower, Jesus had to “explain” (Gk., *epeluen* – “loosen, “release,” “interpret”) the kingdom meaning to his disciples who did not yet fully understand who he was and what his mission was. This was why Jesus needed three years to teach his disciples before God’s plan was fulfilled in his crucifixion/resurrection.
4. The parables of Jesus in Mark 4 focus on the nature and life within the kingdom of God. Remember that Jesus’ primary purpose was to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God (cf., Mk 1:14-15), and He continued announcing the coming of God’s kingdom with his teaching in parables.

D. Closing

1. Read Mark 4:30-32.
2. What have you learned from this parable?
3. Are you patient as God works in and through you to accomplish his kingdom purpose in His time and his way?
4. Are you resting secure in the kingdom of God like a bird in the branches of a mustard plant?
5. What is your kingdom potential? Are you growing a little larger in the Lord each day?