

Series: Basic Gospel of Mark

Title: The Parables of Jesus

Text: Mark 2:3-4

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Our study of Mark brings us to the subject of Jesus' teaching. We've already seen that our Lord's teaching was held in high regard by first-century hearers. Mark described the reception He received in local synagogues: "They were all amazed, and so they began to ask each other, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority'" (Mark 1:27). The people's amazement was based on the difference between Jesus' teaching and the type of teaching so commonly heard on the Sabbath. While most synagogue teachers were known to string together quotes from rabbis, Jesus spoke authoritatively from Scripture. He didn't speak from the authority of another; He spoke from His own. He spoke directly from God!

Jesus' authority was one unique feature of His teaching. Another was His use of a teaching device known as a "parable." Mark made mention of Jesus' use of the method on roughly four occasions. The first is found in Mark 3:23. In a passing reference, Mark said, "So he summoned them and spoke to them in parables" (Mark 3:23). The second instance is found in the fourth chapter of Mark. In that chapter, Jesus shared three different parables to impart important truth about the Word of God, the grace of God, and the Kingdom of God. The third reference to parables in Mark is found in Mark 7. Mark there made another passing reference to Jesus' use of the teaching device, saying, "When he went into the house away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about the parable" (Mark 7:17). The fourth and final reference to parables in Mark is found in Mark 12, a chapter that denounced first-century Jews' for their rejection of Jesus.

To appropriately understand the gospel of Mark, and to appropriately understand the teaching ministry of Jesus, one must understand the nature of parables. The Greek word from which the name of the teaching device is derived literally meant "to place beside." A parable was a story thrown alongside teaching in order to accomplish an important purpose.

Twenty-first century Christians should be careful not to mistake the purpose of parables. Our entertainment-oriented society can make us automatically think that Jesus used parable to be more engaging or captivating as a communicator. Some popular evangelical preachers have commended Jesus for His excellent communication skills and held him up as an example for modern preachers to follow.

Modern conceptions of parables are quickly dismantled when we read what Jesus said about His purpose in using them. In Mark 4:11-12, our Lord said, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those outside, everything comes in parables so that they may indeed look, and yet not perceive; they may indeed listen, and yet not understand; otherwise, they might turn back and be forgiven." Far from being a clever teaching device to engage people and illustrate teaching, parables were actually designed to conceal heavenly truth from certain people!

In a sense, Jesus used parables to mask His full identity. He did not want to be too plain in His teaching, so He didn't always teach in a didactic, straightforward fashion. He knew if He made direct assertions concerning His Messianic nature to

some people, two unfavorable results were possible. First, some would try to rush to make Him and earthly king. Second, others would attempt to kill Him before the Father's appointed time. Jesus used parables to obscure His teaching in order to prevent such outcomes.

Though parables served a purpose of concealing truth to outsiders, they also served the purpose of conveying truth to insiders. Mark explained, "He was speaking the word to them with many parables like these, as they were able to understand. He did not speak to them without a parable. Privately, however, he explained everything to his own disciples" (Mark 4:33-34). From Mark's words, we see that there is truth for Christians to understand from the parables. By examining the four parables we find in Mark, we can discover important truth about Christ's kingdom.

PARABLE #1: THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD IN CONVERSION (READ MARK 4:1-9; 13-20)

Mark 4 contains what is likely one of Jesus' most famous parables. It is known as "The Parable of the Sower." In the parable, Jesus told of a "sower who went out to sow" (Mark 4:3). The sower sowed seed on four different types of ground — "the path" (Mark 4:4), "rocky ground" (Mark 4:5), "among thorns" (Mark 4:7), and "good ground" (Mark 4:8). After sharing about the sower's activity, Jesus said, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen" (Mark 4:9). Through those words, our Lord indicated that special perception was needed in order to fully grasp the meaning of His teaching. His words were in concert with what He would later say about the purpose of parables (Mark 4:10-12). Grace is required to understand the mysteries of Christ's kingdom.

Jesus would later underscore man's inability to naturally understand God's Word. He asked the Twelve, "How then will you understand all of the parables?" (Mark 4:13). By themselves, the disciples couldn't understand the meaning of Jesus' words. They needed His divine assistance.

The Twelve's inability to understand Jesus' teaching is a reminder of the need every believer has when it comes to understanding God's Word. Human flesh can never discern the true meaning of God's truth. Heavenly assistance is needed. Fortunately, believers have help in the person of the Holy Spirit. The apostle John said, "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. Instead, his anointing teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie; just as it has taught you, remain in him" (1 John 2:27). John's words weren't meant as a wholesale discussion of the need for teachers in the local church. Obviously such teaching is necessary (Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11). John didn't mean to minimize the role of teachers in the church; he only meant to maximize the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the meaning of Scripture to believers.

While Jesus was on Earth, He fulfilled the role of the Spirit for His disciples (John 16:7-8). Thus, He made the meaning of Scripture plain to them. In relation to the Parable of the Sower, He gave the meaning in Mark 4:13-20. He illuminated His disciples thinking, making them see that each of the four types of ground represented four different heart receptions to the gospel. The first ("the path") represented those who are prevented from hearing gospel truth because of spiritual warfare (Mark 4:15). The second type of ground ("rocky ground") represented people who are initially impressed by the gospel, but quickly fall away when they understand the true nature of

Christ's calling (Mark 4:16-17). Such people have a belief in Jesus without repentance (Mark 1:15); thus, they never experience regeneration. The third type of ground ("among thorns") represented people who reject Jesus because of an overabundance of concern for worldly things (Mark 4:18-19). The final type of ground ("good ground") represented fertile hearts that welcome the truth of God, receive it, obey it, and produce glorious gospel great (Mark 4:20).

It is important to note that the Parable of the Sower only presented one favorable reception of the gospel. Only one type of ground represented a converted, regenerate believer. The point of the parable was simple. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that God's Word, though often rejected by most people, will ultimately accomplish what God intends. Scripture is clear that God's Word is powerful to accomplish God's work. It is for this reason that Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). Scripture is also clear that God's Word always accomplish God's intended purpose. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, "For just as rain and snow fall from heaven and do not return there without saturating the earth and making it germinate and sprout, and providing seed to sow and food to eat, so my word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do." (Isaiah 55:10-11). Modern Christians shouldn't be shy, fearful, or bashful in proclaiming God's Word. If they will only sow the seed of Scripture, there will be some sort of harvest. The word of God is chock-full of Holy Spirit power to covert souls. Such was the meaning of the Parable of the Sower.

PARABLE #2: THE GROWTH OF GRACE IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER (READ MARK 4:26-29)

Jesus' second parable in Mark is found in Mark 4:26-29. The parable is known as "The Parable of the Growing Seed." Interestingly, Mark is the only one who included the parable in his gospel account. We do not find it in Matthew, Luke, or John.¹

The Parable of the Growing Seed began with Jesus saying, "The kingdom of God is like this...a man scatters seed on the ground" (Mark 4:26). In the opening of the parable, we find a parallel to Jesus' first parable — a "seed." In our Lord's first story, a sower sowed seed. In His second, no such character was present (Mark 4:4). However, a seed was once again at the center of Jesus' story.

In Jesus' first parable, seed represented the Word of God (Mark 4:14). In His second, the meaning was a little different. It seems our Lord's intent was to use a seed as an illustration of the way grace works in a believer's life. Once planted in the human soul, God's grace has supernatural ability to take root, germinate, grow, and bring forth great fruit for the glory of God. For disciples to be "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:1), they must be aware of how such growth in grace works.

Mysterious Grace

The details of The Parable of the Growing Seed reveal that the work of grace is mysterious to a degree. Jesus said, "A man scatters seed on the ground. He sleeps

¹ Edwards, 142.

and rises night and day; the seed sprouts and grows, *although he doesn't know how*" (Mark 4:26b-27). For people in the ancient world, the process whereby a seed produced a harvest surely seemed miraculous. We now have understanding into principles of biology. Modernity provides some insight into how the germination and growth process works with plants and vegetables.

However, even with the knowledge imparted by modern science, we are still unable to fully fathom the way the Earth produces a harvest. There is a limit to our understanding. We cannot duplicate the Creator's masterpiece of creation. In His infinite wisdom, He has masterfully engineered a system that, from our finite perspective, mysteriously nourishes humans and the animal kingdom with food. In the book of Acts, the apostles gave witness to this reality, saying, "...he did not leave himself without a witness, since he did what is good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons and filling you with food and your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

Jesus used the marvel of agriculture to paint a powerful picture of the way grace works in the human heart. He said, "The soil produces a crop by itself..." (Mark 4:28a). The Greek word translated "itself" in Mark 4:28 is one from which we get our English "automatic."² As used in the context of Jesus' parable, the word picturesquely depicted the grace of God accomplishing the work of God in the heart of men and women.

Though Jesus' second parable in Mark was only contained within the gospel of Mark, Paul was surely well aware of it. He often conveyed the grace of God as being the sole reason for the work of God in an individual's life. He knew that neither human merit, intellect, or will-power could produce Christian salvation or sanctification. In defending his ministry to his harshest critics, he relied upon these realities. When writing to the Corinthians, he said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). Paul was dependent on the grace of Jesus in his ministry. He knew the principle conveyed in The Parable of the Growing Seed. God's grace works in mysterious ways, ways that are beyond human comprehension or ability.

A Progression of Grace

Notice from Jesus' second parable a clear progression in the work of grace. Speaking of the growing seed, Jesus said, "...—first the blade, then the head, and then the full grain on the head. As soon as the crop is ready, he sends for the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:28b-29). From Jesus' words, one sees four obvious phases in the life of the seed — "the blade," "the head," "the full grain," and "the harvest." While we shouldn't be too precise in our interpretation of what each object represents, we can gather that grace has a progressive work in the life of the believer.

This was a secondary point to Jesus' parable. His first point was that grace works mysteriously in the human soul, but He was also clear that grace works in an incremental and progressive fashion. Yes, the grace of God dramatically saves one at regeneration and justification. That event is a one time, irreversible work. However, grace has a continuing work throughout the Christian's life. From the first moment of

² Edwards, 142.

salvation by grace (“the blade”), all the way until the final work of glorification (“the harvest”), grace continues to work in the life of the believer in an incremental fashion, accomplishing the will of God. This was one of the great meanings of The Parable of the Growing Seed.

Interestingly, Jesus would later perform a miracle that demonstrated this same truth. Knowing that his disciples were slow to fully understand His Messianic nature, He healed a blind man, but He initially only gave the man partial recovery of sight (Mark 8:24). Later He fully healed the man (Mark 8:25). The incident provided a sign for His disciples. Though they partially understood His nature and mission (Mark 1:16-20), they needed additional growth and development (Mark 8:21).

Growing in Grace

For believers to be strong in the Lord, they must grasp the reality behind The Parable of the Growing Seed. Throughout the Christian life, there is a gradual, incremental work of grace to be experienced. It is for this reason that James said, “But he gives greater grace...” (James 4:8). Though Christian salvation is accomplished by grace (Ephesians 2:8), there is subsequent grace to be enjoyed and received. This is why Peter told his readers, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

Through the grace of God, believers have all they need for service and sanctification in the Christian life. The Parable of the Growing Seed makes such truth plain. In ways beyond our comprehension, God’s grace gradually changes us and makes us into all He wants us to be. Victories are won over sin, old ways of thinking are rooted out, and worldly attitudes are demolished. The virtue of Christ grows like beautiful foliage and fruit because of the inner-work of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). All the way up until the final “harvest,” grace works to transform us into the image of God’s Son. Even the last event of glorification (Romans 8:30; 1 John 3:1-3) is a work of the Lord’s sovereign grace. The apostle Paul understood these realities. That’s why he said, “... by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Are you experiencing the truth represented by The Parable of the Growing Seed? Have you been saved by grace? If so, is grace accomplishing a progressive work in your life? Understand the meaning of Jesus’ parable. The Lord’s wants to continually work in your life by His grace all the way up until the final “harvest” of glorification. By faith and with His means of grace, allow Him to gradually and incrementally shape you into all He wants you to be.

PARABLE #3 THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH (READ MARK 4:30-32)

Jesus’ third parable in Mark involved yet another agricultural-based story. In addition, it involved a seed! In Mark 4:30-32, our Lord said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to describe it? It’s like a mustard seed that, when sown upon the soil, is the smallest of all the seeds on the ground. And when sown, it comes up and grows taller than all the garden plants, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade.” Jesus’ words constituted what is now known as “The Parable of the Mustard Seed.”

In Jesus' first parable, a seed represented the Word of God in the life of a believer. In His second, it represented God's progressive work of grace in one's life. His use of the metaphor in The Parable of the Mustard Seed was intended to speak of the church. Such was made plain in verse 30 with His mention of "the kingdom of God." There is a sense in which the church and the Kingdom of God are synonymous (Matthew 16:19).

Jesus wanted His disciples to know that His church would grow by the power of God. None needed to worry about its success. The Lord Himself promised that the church would succeed and grow. The point of the parable was in concert with Jesus' plain assertion in Matthew's gospel — "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18).

To depict the church's miraculous growth, Jesus used a "mustard seed" as an object lesson. The seed was a well known, small seed in first-century Israel. Some skeptics have attempted to discredit Jesus and the Bible by pointing out that the mustard seed technically wasn't the "smallest of all seeds on the ground," as Jesus said in Mark 4:31. It is important to realize that Jesus' intent wasn't to give a precise taxonomy of first-century seeds. Common folk were well aware that the mustard seed was very small. It may have been the smallest seed most had ever handled.

Jesus' intent was to speak in a non-literal and figurative way. In his day, the mustard seed was used as a euphemism for things that were really small.³ When a new baby was born, one might say, "She is as small as a mustard seed!" Because of its usage in conversational jargon, the mustard seed served as a good metaphor for the church. Though the initial band of Jesus' followers were a relatively small and insignificant group, they would grow into a massive horde that would radically alter the course of human history.

Jesus' words would find initial fulfillment shortly after His resurrection. On the day of Pentecost, the Twelve gave great witness to their resurrected Lord. Jews of the Diaspora who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Holy Week witnessed the unlearned men preaching and speaking in foreign languages. In accordance with the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, the spectacle was a sign that judgment had come upon the Jews (Genesis 11:1-9; Isaiah 18:2, 7; 28:11; 33:19; 66:18, 23; Jeremiah 5:15; Ezekiel 3:4-6; Daniel 5:19; Zephaniah 3:9. The Lord provided a sign and wonder to reveal that He would begin to work amongst the Gentile nations (Romans 11:26).

Startled by what they heard, some accused the disciples of drunkenness (Acts 2:13). In response to the accusation, Peter stood up and gave a defense. He then preached the first sermon in the history of the church. At the conclusion of his preaching, people were convicted. The Lord wrought regeneration and repentance in hearts. In fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 16:18, many were saved. The Lord birthed His church and He began the work of building it. Acts 2:41 says, "So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them." The building of Christ's church would continue throughout the book of Acts. Just two chapters later in Acts, we read, "But many of those who heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4).

³ Brooks, 85.

Jesus proved faithful to build His church. The Parable of the Mustard Seed was brought to fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost. The seed was planted. Since that fateful day in which Peter preached, there has been an ever-increasing growth of the Church. Jesus' words have been realized. The church has produced "large branches" (Mark 4:32). All types of people have found spiritual solace and been permitted to "nest in its shade" (Mark 4:32).

What do these things teach us? The Parable of the Mustard Seed reveals that Jesus will be faithful to build and sustain His church. We need not worry concerning her fate or destiny. One day there will be countless thousands giving praise before the throne of God (Revelation 4:9-11).

Nowadays there is a lot of unhealthy focus on "growing" the church. Many ministers and church members mistakenly believe it is their job to keep the church alive. Ministry "experts" strive to make sure the church continues into the next generation. Some make too much of earthly methods. Undue attention is sometimes given to the physical over the spiritual. Jesus' parable teaches us that we have no need to engage in such hurried frenzy. He will build His church; we need not worry. Our only job is to be faithful to His Word and allow Him to do His work.

PARABLE #4: THE FOLLY OF REJECTING JESUS (READ MARK 12:1-12)

Jesus' fourth parable was aimed at the religious elite of His day. He was well aware of their vehement disfavor of His ministry and teaching (Mark 2:6-7; 3:3, 6, 22). He was also omniscient God, so He foresaw their betrayal and His pending crucifixion (Mark 2:8; 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Consequently, He told a parable to illustrate the judgment that would come upon the Jews for their rejection of Jesus. We find the parable in Mark 12:1-12. It is now known as "the Parable of the Vineyard Owner."

Jesus told the story of a vineyard owner who, after having built and supplied a vineyard, leased it out to sharecroppers for harvesting (Mark 12:1-2). When the time of the harvest came, the owner sent different workers to collect his rightful revenue from the land. The sharecroppers, however, spitefully plotted against the landowner. They abused the first representative he sent and turned the man away empty-handed (Mark 12:3). They treated the second spitefully (Mark 12:4) and they killed the third (Mark 12:5). The landowner sent many others, but they all received similar treatment (Mark 12:5).

Exasperated, the owner finally received his own son. However, the son wasn't just any son. He was the master's "beloved son" (Mark 12:6). Unfortunately, the sharecroppers had no regard for the man's cherished offspring. They seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard" (Mark 12:8). Jesus brought the parable to a conclusion with a forceful observation: "What then will the owner, of the vineyard do? He will come and kill the farmers and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9).

It is important to note that the vineyard metaphor was popular in Israel's history. It was used by the prophet Isaiah as a picture of the Lord's relationship to Israel (Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus employed the metaphor to depict the way in which the nation had a long history of rejecting God's truth. The various workers sent by the landowner represented the prophets the Lord had sent throughout Israel's history. Despite His goodness in sending various mouthpieces to declare His truth, the nation had been stiff-necked and rebellious. It is for such good reason, that the Lord had once declared

through His prophet, “But the Lord, the God of their ancestors sent word against them by the hand of his messengers, sending them time and time again, for he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept ridiculing God’s messengers, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the Lord’s wrath was so stirred up against his people that there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

Jesus’ story about the vineyard would not have been lost on His original audience. The first-century religious leaders were guilty of the spiritual crimes outline in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16. They had rejected the message of God’s prophets and they would soon reject the ultimate prophet — God’s Anointed One! They were guilty of high spiritual crimes against the Holy One of Israel; thus, they were worthy of terrible judgment.

We can learn a lot from Jesus’ opponents. They stand as a testament concerning the importance of listening to God’s Word. All should be careful that they don’t become like Esau’s — too hard-hearted for repentance (Hebrews 12:17). Because of rebellion, some live like the Pharisees of old, driven by a greater fear of man than God. A fearful judgment await such people who fail to listen to God and His Word. All need to learn to honestly and humbly listen to the Lord. Each should be careful to seek after real truth and real repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9-10).