

This month, we have been covering some examples of Jesus's miracles and teachings. Today we turn our attention to some of Jesus's parables in Mark, Chapter 4, in which Jesus teaches us about God's word:

MARK 4:26–34. (EHV)

[Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is like this: A man scatters seed on the ground, and while he sleeps and rises, night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. The ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head. When the crop is ready, he swings the sickle without delay, because the harvest has come." Then he said, "To what should we compare the kingdom of God? Or with what parable may we picture it? It is like a mustard seed, which when sown on the ground is one of the smallest of all the seeds planted in the ground. Yet when it is planted, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade." With many similar parables he continued to speak the word to them, as much as they were able to hear. He did not speak to them without a parable. But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

Many Christian teachers have defined Jesus's parables as earthly stories that each have a heavenly meaning. That's a great, simple definition. Although there are multiple characters, actions, and other elements in each parable, the main takeaway of each parable is the point or lesson Jesus intended to teach with it. For example, the parable of the sower and the seed, which Jesus tells earlier in Mark 4, is meant to teach us that we can expect different reactions as we share God's word with people, and what is going on spiritually behind those different reactions. If we push the details of the parable beyond the main point or lesson of the parable, we'll probably end up believing or teaching something false and misleading.

Nevertheless, there is more to the parable than just the main point alone. For instance, there is a reason that Jesus repeatedly compares his word to seed. He compares it to seed in the parable of the sower and the seed, and he compares it to seed in the two parables I just read. And these two parables also help us to understand why Jesus compares his word to seed. A seed looks unimpressive on the outside, and yet it conceals extraordinary power and potential beneath its unimpressive shell. A seed does no good if it is kept in storage off to the side; it needs to be sown. And when it is sown, it does its work out of human sight. The results of its work can be seen, but if you don't know about the seed, you'll just pay attention to the results by themselves, without tracing them back to the seed.

Jesus talks about the incredible way God's word works in the first parable. The man with the seed simply sows the seed. After he does that, it is the seed that sprouts and grows. There is an aura of the miraculous about it. The man who planted the seed sleeps and gets up, sleeps and gets up, and while he does, "the ground produces fruit on its own: first the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head." Eventually there is grain or fruit ready to be harvested.

That's how God's word works. The apostle Paul once wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is

anything, but it is God who causes the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6–7).

Receiving compliments for their sermons is one of the strangest things that pastors do. On the one hand, preaching a sermon is not nothing. God has called us to preach his word, and as I alluded to before, God’s word sitting in storage off to the side doesn’t do anyone any good. On the other hand, it is God who has planted his word in pastors’ hearts through the ministry, testimony, and teaching of others. It is God who gave us our mind, understanding, and abilities, and who helped us to cultivate and develop them. And when we write our sermons, we are not trying to come up with anything ourselves, or at least we shouldn’t be. In that way, we’re kind of like news reporters. The job of news reporters isn’t to create anything, but to report that which is already there. That’s what pastors do. We simply take the seed that God has planted in our hearts and has entrusted to us, and share it with others. The only reason we have anything worthwhile and joyful to say is because God does, in his word. When we share God’s word, we are sharing God’s power.

It reminds me of a time one of my former congregations had a family in need. So we had a food drive for them, and the members gave generously. I was then entrusted with delivering the food to the members in need. When the lady of the house met me at the door and saw me and the food I had brought, she immediately broke down in tears and clasped my hand tightly and said, “Oh, Pastor, God bless you always, always.” What I had done wasn’t nothing, but ultimately I was simply delivering goods entrusted to me by others. If they hadn’t supplied the goods, I couldn’t have delivered them.

The same is true every Sunday with every faithful pastor. We are sharing goods purchased by God and entrusted to us by him—namely eternal righteousness, peace, joy, and life in the name of Jesus his Son. And because they’re God’s goods, they have God’s power. And long after we say Amen, the goods of God we deliver to people’s hearts through their ears continue to work on their hearts. While we sleep and get up, sleep and get up, God’s word continues to grow and produce fruit, though we do not know how. Even with those who do not believe it, but who still pay attention to it, it is like a pebble in their shoe that they can’t dislodge. It continues working on their hearts, so that they either grow in their hostility against it or eventually come around and believe it.

Jesus’s second parable shows the extent of the growth that God’s word produces, in spite of its humble beginnings. Jesus compares God’s word to mustard seed, which is one of the smallest seeds. Someone actually once gave me a keychain with a mustard seed lodged in it, to remind me of this parable. The seed was so small, it eventually became dislodged and I couldn’t find it. But if you were to plant mustard in your garden, it would eventually grow to be the largest plant in your garden.

But it’s like Jesus realizes that his illustration is going to fall woefully short. It’s like he realizes that there really is no comparison to the power, growth, and effect of God’s word in the natural world. That’s probably why he asked, “To what should we compare the kingdom of God?” So in his parable, his mustard plant turns into a tree and puts out large branches so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade. “The birds of the sky” is a phrase often used in the Scriptures for the large, soaring birds, like eagles, vultures, and hawks, which were ceremonially unclean in the Old Testament. Jesus is therefore likely alluding not just to the effect God’s word

has in our lives, but also to the fact that the gospel shared in the kingdom of God is so great that it could not just be limited to his chosen people, the Israelites, but would also spread to Gentiles, non-Jews, throughout the world. Birds of every feather may flock together here around God's word.

A now-deceased pastor once told the story that, in the 1850s, he had a member of his small church who always went to sleep during church, as soon as the pastor started preaching the sermon. The member's name was Daniel. The pastor talked to Daniel about it, and Daniel said he couldn't help it. The pastor told him, "Let me give you a good piece of advice, sir. Come to church with the thought, 'Today I am going to hear for once what the pastor has to say.' Then, when you are there, pray really earnestly that our dear God would please drive the sleep away. If it comes anyway, then bite yourself on the tongue, and make it a good one." Sure enough, it worked. From then on Daniel listened to the pastor's sermons very attentively.

So, as you might expect from these parables, there was now going to be fruit in Daniel's life.

And there was. That small congregation actually ended up closing for a while, after a bunch of families moved away. But a few years later, when some more people moved into the area, Daniel went to visit a pastor about twenty miles away, in the days before automobiles, and asked the pastor if he would come to preach there on a regular basis. Daniel told the pastor that he would make all the arrangements for traveling there and back himself, and would additionally give the pastor five dollars every time, which was a lot of money in those days. (According to the US Inflation Calculator, \$5 in 1913 was the equivalent of about \$160 dollars today, and this was around 1857.) The new pastor agreed, and eventually asked Daniel what prompted him to do all of this, and Daniel responded, "[My former pastor] sowed seed in my heart, and now it's coming up." A mustard seed had become a plant, even after the pastor who planted the seed was gone, and that plant was still growing.

As a result of Daniel's efforts, together with the new pastor whose services he secured, the church was restarted in 1858—and is still around today.

This is just one example of the amazing power of God's word. Let us trust that power, and not seek to add our own human cleverness, ideas, and so-called wisdom to it. Let our goal be nothing more and nothing less than to believe and share the pure, saving word of God, centered in Jesus Christ, God's Son, and our Savior from sin, death, the devil, and hell. God is the only one who can give spiritual growth and extend his kingdom, and through his word, he does. Amen.