

**Theme:** The Kingdom of Life

What do you imagine when you think of a kingdom? Maybe the European medieval version of a castle with mighty stone walls, tall parapets and towers, a big metal portcullis, and lots of knights in armor and weapons and colorful banners to impress and project an image of wealth, success, and power to be able to protect interests and obliterate aggressors. Rule. Might. The ability to impose by force or violence one's will going so far as taking someone else's life to impose your will. This is what we often think of as kingdom stuff. In fact, the one who can force others better has the bigger and better kingdom. Jesus talks about God's kingdom in a way that shatters our notions of what a kingdom's like: how it's established, how it grows, what it becomes and turns out to be, quite different from usual thinking. Not a sword, not a buncha guns, not tanks or battleships or jets, not power or control or influence, but welcome, grace, life, and growth.

Sitting in the prow of probably Simon Peter's boat on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus talked about God's kingdom. He talked about how there's different soils and explained that parable to his disciples. Then, he said what God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus said, *"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head."* **(Mark 4:26-28)** All by itself, that's a big thing. Seed which was sown, just tossed rather about by someone, all by itself grows and becomes a plant. You can watch that happen! After a while, it even makes grain or fruit you can eat. Really!! All by itself. That's a big idea. All by itself, cars go fast when I step on accelerator. It goes up through the speeds all by itself, the transmission's automatic, it just does it when I step here. Well, the crop, the plant just happened after the planting, all by itself, then, when the crop is, very literally, when the fruit permits it, it's harvested. *"As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."* **(Mark 4:29)**

That is a big idea. When the crop permits, when the fruit is ready to be harvested, he sends the sickle, the harvesters, to harvest. Harvesting is God's job, he knows when to do it.

Since that's the case, let's not expect people to be ripe for harvest before God knows they're ready. Plant, water, and be patient as you wait for the Lord to harvest on his time. No amount of our intervention will make that happen when we think it should happen. No amount of rules or legislating this or that aspect of a faith which says it stands on the Bible will make people really ready for God's harvest, make them believe Jesus takes their sins away, or bring about a deep, genuine, change of heart, which is what we want, right? But just saying, "Follow these Christian rules!" over and over again doesn't bring people into the kingdom. "Jesus was like this! Be like this!" doesn't make people like Jesus or believe in him, but we fall into the trap of thinking it does. People can't be forced into the kingdom of God through social, political, or military force. The, "Maybe if we pass the right rules/laws and elect the right person/people to enforce them, maybe then God's kingdom will come and grow!" is breathtakingly wrong. All by itself the seed grows, and bears a crop.

This is gospel work and it displays that it's hard at work often without our notice. Thankfully. This is God in the heart through the Word work and it doesn't require help from civic/secular mechanisms because it's of heaven. The Word does this all by itself. The gospel calls us to be shrewd in how we share it, yes, but never does the gospel require certain conditions to be met for it to be shared. The Word works powerfully and subtly, graciously, not like a cudgel. The gospel is excellent bread which gives life, so we invite and say, "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" The kingdom is about openness, grace, welcome, sharing, forgiveness, and life. The kingdom of God is all about the reign of Christ, the King of Grace, in the heart, and that can be anywhere in anyone. The Word of Christ who is the Savior of the world, who was born in Bethlehem, who died outside Jerusalem on a cross for the sins of all people, who broke out of the grave opening up life for everyone, is the life the kingdom is all about stands on, celebrates, and shares, gives away. Do you believe this? Me too! Let's share this. Let's learn this more to give it to other better. When the seed of the Word is sown by Jesus or by anyone else, when it's watered, God makes it grow and produce a crop and we witness and are blessed. Without us noticing, right under our noses, the Word has been hard at work growing life!

Jesus continues to talk about the kingdom of life like this, asking an interesting question, "*What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?*"

**(Mark 4:30)** This is great. Why ask? Jesus doesn't need an illustration, not at a loss. Jesus is bringing in those listening so that more than just their attention is engaged. Jesus wants his listener's active energetic thought because it's important for us to know what the kingdom of heaven is like and work through it in our minds in a deep way. So in that mental space, the thing Jesus says the all-glorious, all-majestic, all-powerful, eternal kingdom of God is like?? A seed. Jesus chose a seed, which doesn't look like much, looks fragile and weak, but is alive and which produces lots of other life by growing and changing. Listen to him! *"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."* **(Mark 4:31-32)** Mustard trees have a big, wide canopy. Lot of branches. Lot of shade. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a small seed, a mustard seed, which grows into a huge tree with massive sprawling branches.

Do we picture the church like that often enough? Too often we take to picturing the church like a fortress, a castle, and there's a time and place for this thinking, sure, but Jesus also presents the church to us like this in the Bible. The church is just there, big and sprawling, existing for the birds of the air to just fly in and be, to find rest and shade. The church being a place of life and rest is common in the prophets. Isaiah viewed it like greenery coming back to the desert when it rains. Ezekiel: a cedar shoot transplanted tenderly by God for birds to live in after it grows mighty. All kinds of birds, Ezekiel stresses. Jesus: a mustard seed growing into a tree where rest and relief would be found. This is happening among us like it did among the Colossian Christians. God's Word brings growth and life.

Jesus kept on teaching the people in parables. Jesus wanted them to understand that there was much to teach about the kingdom of God and he wanted it to be accessible for them so the big things of what he was teaching would be remembered. Like the seed grows all by itself, it's our job to plant, to water, share the Word, share Christ, and God makes things grow. And that the kingdom of God may look frail or weak at times, but it grows into something big and lasting, a mighty place of rest for all people, a place where people can have the stuff of life be given that Jesus has taking away their sins too. Amen.