

THE KINGDOM IS LIKE PLANTING SEED

Mark 4:1–34

The Kingdom of God is like planting seeds. The Rule of God is like planting seeds.
God taking over the world is like planting seeds.
God ruling you and me is like planting seeds. Do seeds have *power*? Do seeds *rule*?
The Dominion of God is like planting seeds.
Too slowly to see, seeds become small plants. Too slowly to see, plants grow.
The kingdom of God is like planting seeds. Seeds become plants; plants become harvest.
Every year, from Creation until now, harvests from seeds feed the world.
The Kingdom of God is like planting seeds.

Mark 4:1–9 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

1 Why are These Parables *here*?

In Mark 1, Jesus said that the waiting time was over, and the Kingdom of God had arrived. Then he called some people to follow him. In Mark 2, every story showed people who did *not* like what Jesus was doing and teaching. At the beginning of Mark 3, they already start to plan how to kill him!

That is, Mark 2 and 3 show much rejection and misunderstanding toward Jesus. The kingdom parables in Mark 4 explain this misunderstanding and rejection. They help us make sense of all the people who did *not* like what Jesus was doing.

The Jews who followed Jesus, who believed that Jesus was the promised Christ, were shocked that Israel didn't want their own Messiah, the One God had sent!

It never occurred to any Jew that the Messiah would finally come *and then be rejected!* But to Jews like Peter and Andrew, and James and John, that is exactly what was happening! Was God's plan failing?

Mark 4 explains this. The first part of the explanation is in the verses we read. First, we see that there are four kinds of soil, and only one actually produces anything.

As Jesus explains the kingdom of God, there is more failure than success, there are more poor plants than good plants. But there is still a great harvest coming. The plants that are good are very good, some incredibly good.

2 To You the Mystery has been Given (4:10–11)

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables."

The secret has been given to you. What does Jesus mean? He means: they believed that the waiting was over, the Kingdom had arrived, *and* that this Kingdom was all about following Jesus.

"The Kingdom has arrived; follow me." The mystery is that the Kingdom has arrived, and that following Jesus is how one enters. It is a secret, a mystery, because God was showing himself in this quiet veiled way. If people could figure out that in this Jesus, walking around Galilee, God's Kingdom really had arrived, then they could figure out the parables.

Without knowing this secret, this mystery, *everything* was a riddle, not only the parables but Jesus' whole life, and all his teaching. We still have trouble with this. Even though we sort of know better, we want a Jesus that will come into our lives with power and rule over the evil and fix things that are wrong.

"The Kingdom of God has arrived, so follow me" — this is not quite what we want.

Here's a line of Jesus that's in Matthew and Luke: "*Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me.*" Jesus himself was a big block to people believing, even good people. He knew it.

People would want the kingdom of God, and after they watched Jesus for a while, they doubted. Jesus asked so much, and gave so little. "Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me" (Mt 11:6; Lk 7:23). He knew he was not what they wanted and expected.

3 Is God's Plan Failing? No (4:12)

Why did he speak in parables? So *they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!*

Since there is more failure than success, since only one quarter of the seeds end up producing any harvest, is the kingdom failing? No, this is God's will. Jesus quoted Isaiah 6 to his followers. When Isaiah was called by God to be a prophet, on that very day, God told Isaiah that his preaching and prophesying were not going to help.

The people would not understand or repent. And as hard as that is to understand, that was God's deliberate plan. Jesus quoted that to his followers, to show them that the Kingdom of God was not failing. These words to Isaiah were also words to Jesus. Most will *not* understand or come to God. God's plan is not failing. This is all part of God's plan.

4 The Sower and the Seed Explained: What Happens After we Hear? (4:13–20)

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

"The sower sows the word," says Jesus in v14. Now we know what planting seed is: it is preaching. It is telling the message. Jesus never says who the planter is. At this stage it is Jesus himself, but eventually it will be many others. But planting is telling people that the Kingdom of God has arrived, and that following Jesus is how we become a part of it.

But what happens when people hear it? That is the important thing.

In v15, Jesus says, "as soon as they hear it . . ."

In v16 he says, "Others . . . hear the word and . . ."

In v18 he says, "Still others . . . hear the word, (19) but . . ."

And in v20 he says, "Others . . . hear the word, accept it, . . ."

The "word" is "the Kingdom of God has arrived. Repent and follow Jesus." That is the message. This whole chapter tells us what happens when people hear that message.

The word "hear" is the most important word in Mark 4. It occurs 12 times.

V3: the very first word Jesus said was "*Hear!*" The NIV translates it "listen," which is fine, so long as you understand that in Greek it is the same word, "hear."

V9 "He who has ears to *hear*, let him *hear*."

V12 "Always *hearing*, but never understanding."

Then are the four in vv15–20, which we just went over.

V23 "If anyone has ears to *hear*, let him *hear*."

V24 "Consider carefully what you *hear*."

V33: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could *hear*."

The crowds gathered mostly because of the miracles. They liked the miracles, and that Jesus threw out the demons. But if Jesus had said "the center of the kingdom is to follow me," they would have walked away.

They were not ready to *hear* that. So Jesus told parables about the Kingdom of God being like planting seeds. He said the Kingdom of God is like many seeds not doing well but some producing very fruitful plants. That was as much as they could *hear*. In this way Jesus was trying to get them ready for how the Kingdom of God was really working.

Hearing is not just understanding. Understanding that the Kingdom has arrived and that following Jesus is how the Kingdom works is not yet proper *hearing*. *Hearing* means following Jesus, joining up.

The reason Jesus could tell his followers in verse 11 that the secret had been given to them was that they were followers. The choice to put the message into action, to actually follow Jesus, is the secret, the mystery, that had been given to his followers. Those people have ears to hear.

The crowds were not ready for that. They already had in their minds what the Kingdom of God would be like, they knew what God should do for them, and it was not Jesus.

5 Kingdom Growth Cannot Be Explained (4:26–29)

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

How will planting seeds bring the Kingdom of God? How will preaching bring the Kingdom? Answer: It cannot be explained! It just happens! Someone speaks the message, plants the seed. Then, night and day, whether the farmer sleeps or gets up, it grows. He does not know how. All by itself it does this. And turns into a good harvest.

Just because we cannot explain how planting seeds will bring about the Kingdom of God, does not mean it won't happen. It will happen.

6 The Kingdom of God Starts Small, and Gets Very Big (4:30–32)

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 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."

The Kingdom of God starts smaller than anything else, but by the end it will be bigger than anything else. We may not be able to figure out how planting seeds will work, but it will work very well. By the end, it will be largest of all.

What is God saying to us today? God has some warnings for us, and some encouragement.

7 Warning

Let's look at verses 16–19. I assume that we here are seeds that have sprouted and are growing, so we should look at what stops plants from producing grain.

Seed on rocky soil represent people who receive the message joy, but when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they fall away. What happens when following Jesus actually makes our lives worse, when being unfaithful makes our live easier, when being faithful to Jesus gets us in trouble somewhere?

That is a classic plant-killer. Following Jesus was supposed to make life better! The Kingdom is not working! Kingdom growth has started, but the plant can't take the heat. God is telling us today that this has killed many plants that started well. There *will* be trouble in following Jesus. He was always clear about that. Don't quit.

Then we hear about seed sprouting and growing in the middle of thistles, which choke the plant. Jesus describes three things that choke good plants.

One, the worries of this life. There are worries in this life. God is telling us to trust him, and not be distracted by these worries, because they choke the plant! The worries of this life are fingers around our throats, choking the Kingdom plant. Surviving the worry in front of us can become more important than following Jesus.

Two, the deceitfulness of wealth. Money and nice things promise to fill us and make us happy, but they are lying. If we think about how to get more, and plan and work toward wealth, fingers are tight around our throat, choking the Kingdom plant.

Wealth promises to fill us, but really we are being choked. That's why it is deceitful. The kingdom plant is ready to collapse. Our Father in heaven is warning us. Are we hearing?

Three, the desires for other things. We all want something. Wanting it distracts us from the Lord. What will we do to get it? Will we stop following Jesus to get it? These things ruin good plants. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

8 Encouragement

There is encouragement here for all of us who do want to follow Jesus, and we try not to get distracted or turned away, but nothing seems to be happening!

That has always been the offense of the Kingdom of God. This whole chapter, with its emphasis on seed and plants, which don't seem to have any power, which don't seem a good way of overturning evil, is God's way of telling us to *be patient, don't quit!*

Most important Kingdom growth happens too slowly to be noticed. Don't quit. What you are experiencing is the very thing these parables are about, it is the very thing that convinces most people that this cannot possibly be the Kingdom of God at all!

Be patient. Growth is slow, and harvest doesn't come until the End. It does not look like how we think the power of God in our lives should look. It never has. But it is the Kingdom of God. Don't let anything turn you aside from following Jesus.

If you want to follow Jesus (and you do), and if you believe that that's how God works on earth (and you do), then the seed has sprouted in you and is doing just fine. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, give us ears to hear. Open our ears and our hearts and our minds. Open the eyes of our hearts to see your light. Give us ears to hear. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.