

Jesus' parable about the seed and the soils aired a sharp criticism of the way most were responding to Him. The religious leaders said Jesus was possessed by the devil and plotted His destruction. The disciples were certain that somehow Jesus would become a new world leader with themselves as members of His cabinet. His family concluded that He had lost His mind and went up to Galilee to take custody of Him. And the crowds just wanted Him to do a miracle for whatever immediate crisis they faced. To illustrate these responses, Jesus told them the parable of the seed and the soils. Some were so hard of heart they could not receive His message. Others were too shallow to receive the seed of the gospel. After an initial enthusiasm, when troubles came, they left Him and went on to things more promising (see John 6). Still others had divided hearts. They also found Jesus initially attractive, but the seed of the gospel was choked out by the cares and deceitfulness of worldly riches. Encouragingly, some will listen to Jesus and accept His message. And for those who do, the seed of the gospel grows and produces a harvest of extravagant proportions: thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold.

Why the rejection? Well, when you are looking for a political revolution, seeds will not do. A hammer maybe, a sword, or fire, but not seeds. When you are looking for an immediate solution to the crisis of the day, sowing seeds requires way too much waiting and patience. Seeds are irrelevant to a political revolution or an immediate crisis. And most importantly, if you are looking for a way to influence and power without experiencing a radical death to everything that you are and all that you have and want, the secret of the kingdom will remain obscure and irrelevant to you.

Here is the controlling operational principle of the kingdom of God. In order for the seed to produce fruit, it must first fall to the ground and die. The weakness of a seed is too counterintuitive and too unattractive to keep most interested for very long. To die to self is the very thing that we fear and resist the most. Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ." Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." The paradoxical principle of the kingdom of God is: the way to fullness is by emptying yourself. The way to become first is not to try to be the top dog; it is to be last. The way to influence and power is not to seek influence and power but to serve. The smallest seed becomes the largest tree. The way to get rich in the kingdom of God is to give what you have away. The way to be happy is not to try to be happy but to try to make others happy. The way to rule is to submit. The way to a magnificent character is humility. The way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of God and others. The way to be free is to go to God and say, "Command me! I want to be your slave." Few are willing to die to their own way. The kingdom of God is the world turned upside down. It is the reverse of the way the world regards money, power, recognition, status, comfort and happiness. I grieve when I see the church looking to worldly ways to make her significant. The world says, "If you want happiness, try to make yourself happy, look out for number one. If you want wealth, accumulate and hold on to it." Jesus says these things work the other way around.

On the last page of C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* he writes,

This principle runs through all of life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of our ambitions and favorite wishes everyday and the death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run

only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look to Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.¹[1]

Are you still interested in following Jesus? The operating principle of the kingdom of God is that a seed must die before it can bear fruit. Nothing terrifies us more.

The Question

Jesus' parable raised some questions. If so many people reject Jesus and if their rejection was going to make it even more obscure for them, why preach? To this question, Jesus gives three more brief parables. Why preach, why sow the seed if so many will not receive it? Each parable gives an answer to that question.

1. God's Light: To Shine in the World

The parable of the lamp reveals that God's intention is to fill the earth with His light. And, His light is not at all hindered by those who reject it.

A lamp is not come to be put under a peck measure, is it, or under a bed? Is it not come to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it should come to light. (Mr. 4:22)

Just in case Jesus' disciples got the idea, from v.12, that Jesus' intent was to hide the gospel, He tells them that His intent is to get His message out into the darkness the way a lamp casts light into a dark room. The gospel of the kingdom is to be compared to the way we use a lamp. Monday, I installed some motion detector lights on my front porch. What would my neighbors think if I went out there each night and covered them with a heavy blanket? They would say, "What has gotten into that crazy pastor?" Jesus is saying, "Listen, do not let the fact that many reject the gospel dampen your enthusiasm about spreading this light. The purpose of the light is to shine, illuminate, and penetrate the darkness. And, in its time, it will shine. In 1968, I saw the light of the gospel for the first time. That was almost 2,000 years after Jesus said this. Do not let negative responses cause you to redefine God's intentions. He wants the light of His gospel to go out no matter how many receive it. And, in its time, it will be revealed to all either willingly or unwillingly. And when the gospel shines, it illuminates wondrous things for all who believe. Things we were dead to before explode and come alive in the presence of God's light. Things like, the Father's love, repentance, faith, mercy, resurrection, heaven and hell, King, kingdom, by the seed of the gospel, all come alive to us as never before. Yes, many will reject but for those who receive the harvest is 30, 60, 100 fold! Look at 23, "If *anyone* has ears to hear with let him hear...

Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him shall more be given and whoever does not have even what he has shall be taken away from him.

Notice this has nothing here to do with money. Jesus is still talking about how to lay hold of the kingdom of God. You must die to your own voice long enough to hear Jesus' voice. Laying hold of the kingdom is about hearing Jesus, listening to His words and His gospel. And if you do, it opens you up for even more good news. The *measure by which you measure* here means the amount of attention you give to the word of the gospel. If you pay attention and receive it and keep on receiving it, then your capacity for it grows and you can become alive to even more. But, if you do not listen, accept or remain closed, you remain dead and you

[1]Lewis, Clive Staples. *Mere Christianity*. London: G. Bles, 1977. 190

lose the little bit of light you were exposed to. Jesus is not being mean here. He is employing a well-known proverb. If you give attention to any interest or skill (like the piano lessons you took as a kid), the more you pay attention, the greater your capacity will grow in that skill. If you neglect it, even the little bit that you may have acquired may be lost. The same is true of the gospel. What are you paying attention to? What do the roots of your soul wrap around and from where do they draw life? What are you listening to each day? Do not let the fact that many reject the gospel keep you from letting that light shine bright in your heart and out to others. Verse 23 says, “If anyone has ears, let him hear.” So, do not let those who reject it keep you from sharing the light of salvation to everyone. Some will listen and accept it, and for them the harvest will be unimaginably wondrous.

Second, God is the Power of the Gospel

The second parable is in vv. 26-29. We are back to the seed again.

The kingdom is like a man who casts seed upon the soil and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows. How he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

The second reason the disciples should be encouraged to sow the seeds of the gospel, even though many reject it, is because of the certainty that *God will bring about His harvest by His power and not the sowers’*. God is the source of the harvest. Certainly, the sower has his responsibilities. But even when the sower is asleep, the earth is fast at work. Like the earth, God never sleeps nor slumbers. There is a mysterious and hidden power at work here that we cannot see and that we do not accomplish. Evangelism is not about the power of human persuasion and accomplishment. It is about the power of God at work. His power is subterranean and hidden like a seed in the ground. Without diminishing the sower’s responsibilities, the power is not with the sower. The power is always with God who is unseen. The farmer cannot make the seed grow no matter how hard he tries. He does not really even understand how it all works. The kingdom of God does not come in the manner Jesus’ contemporaries wanted. He works in a way that is hidden and slow. His kingdom does not come suddenly. Someone said, “As seedtime is followed in due time by harvest, so will the present hiddenness and ambiguities of the kingdom of God be succeeded by its glorious manifestation.”

So, there was no need for the disciples to become discouraged either by the negative responses in the parable or by what a small group of Christians were in the church in the day that Mark wrote his gospel. Jesus said, “Fear not little flock, it is my Father’s pleasure to give you the kingdom.” The infinitely great is already active in the infinitely small. Can you see in your sowing the certain harvest of God’s doing? Can you believe that God is at work in your sowing although today it may be hidden to your senses? Does everything have to be revealed to you now for you to be content? Do you insist on the harvest on your timetable? Do you know that God is at work when the seed is sown and that it will bear eternal fruit for His glory no matter how people respond? Sow the seed and do not become discouraged; God is at work when the seed is sown. Let’s be about sowing.

Third, God Promises Wondrous Outcomes from Small Things

Lastly, the parable of the mustard seed.

Again, what shall we say the kingdom of God is like? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

Just a note for the biologists among us. The mustard seed is not the smallest of all plant life. I believe it is the Black Orchid. However, Jesus is not giving a technical lesson in biology. The mustard seed was the smallest seed, which most of Jesus' audience would have been familiar. Although very small, when fully grown a mustard tree can reach to about ten feet high. The way of the kingdom of God is the way of the mustard seed, which begins in insignificance but ends in productivity and great usefulness. Why should Jesus' disciples share the light of the gospel even when many reject it? They should because the light of the gospel, though seemingly insignificant in size, will someday grow into a large tree—one that is so strong and with such stout branches, that the birds of the air can nest under its shade. And it will be the Tree that connects sinners to heaven.

What is Jesus up to when He spoke of this large tree and quoted Ezk.17:23? In the Hebrew Scriptures, God used a number of symbols that represent a connection between heaven and earth. In Jacob's dream, God used a stairway, which was literally a huge ramp with heavenly angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. It was where heaven and earth meet and joined together. In John 1 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus claimed to be Jacob's ladder that connects heaven and earth and represents heaven coming to earth. Elsewhere God uses the symbol of a mountain that touches the sky. In Ezk.17 and Dan.4, the image of this connection is a huge tree.

Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take {a sprig} from the lofty top of the cedar and set {it} out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant {it} on a high and lofty mountain. On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches."

We must not read this to be as a literal tree at the center of the world. The prophets were alluding to the history of God in the world. Originally, the world was a garden paradise where God dwelt among us on the earth in the fullness of His presence and glory. There was no death, disease, decay, injustice, brokenness of any kind. That was so because God's presence is the only environment where all created things can flourish. His presence is like the soil in which every created thing must be planted in order to thrive. Our potentialities cannot explode unless we are in the presence of God. But humans wanted control. We wanted to be our own masters and saviors; we got what we wanted. As a result, the presence of God was withdrawn. Heaven became remote from earth. The eternal is now remote from the temporal. The ideal is remote from the real. As a result, we live in a broken world. And when our relationship with God unraveled, so did all our other relationships. Psychologically we became filled with fear, dread, anxiety, and worry. Social, cultural, and physical alienation have now become the norm. We are like fish flopping around and gasping in small puddles. We were created to live for God, but we chose to be our own masters and this environment is insufficient. The evidence for this is everywhere. We now live for family, country, ourselves, and various causes. But all are too small for our souls.

The prophets spoke of a day when God would plant a tree or build a stairway to reconnect heaven and earth when the presence of God would re-enter the earth and reunite heaven and earth. Earth would be a garden again. This great tree they spoke of would reach to the sky, and would bring heaven down to earth. Birds would rest under its huge branches safe and secure. The tree would give food, shade, shelter and a home for the creatures of the earth. The kingdom of God—in Christ—grows like this tree. It is the reintroduction of the presence of God into the world. It turns this world into God's home, which our hearts most desperately yearn for. This world will one day become a garden again where your deepest longings become satisfied. That is the kingdom of God. I remind you that at the end of the book of Revelation, we do not all go up to heaven and leave the earth and play on celestial clouds. Heaven comes down to earth and renews it and all who are in it. When that day comes, God will return to put everything to rights.

Jesus' quotation from Ezekiel evoked the prophecy of the day when God would plant a tree, through the shoot of David. And that tree would reconnect heaven and earth and make a home, a shelter, fruit, and food. The kingdom of God would become a garden where God's presence would once again cause His people to thrive and be renewed. Jesus is the tree of the prophecy that reconciles sinful humanity to God. It begins as a small seed, which is at first hidden to the ways of man. Its power is not like political, commercial, or consumer power. It is organic. In fact, I think that it shines best and brightest when it has the least political, commercial, and consumer advantage. This certainly happened in the third century.

In 251 a plague hit Rome and in fifteen years wiped out between 33%-50% of the population. Those with financial means fled the cities including Rome's leaders. The Christians who had no status and no political or financial power stayed and served those who were sick and dying. Like little weak seeds, they cared for highly contagious people and risked death believing heaven awaited them when they died. So, they stayed and provided shade and shelter for those who suffered. They spoke of a risen Savior who takes away our sins and takes us home to God when we die. When the plague ended and people returned to the cities, those who suffered remembered who helped them most. Respect for the Christians grew exponentially. Their strategic plan was simply to die to self, love God, and others. And they did. When Constantine pronounced his edict at Milan, ending religious persecution of the Christians, he did not make Rome Christian. He was merely acknowledging what had already taken place. The few thousand Christians at the end of the second century had now grown to more than half of Rome's population. The Christians had nothing, nothing but love for God and seeds of faith and the kingdom. And that small seed became the faith that turned the world upside down.

The kingdom of God is like seed sown in the ground. It is like a lamp shining bright in the darkness. It grows by God's power in mystery and certainty and though small like a mustard seed, it becomes like a great tree that gives food, shelter, peace, and life to all who hear and believe. It matters not that many reject. That rejection will not hinder God's good purposes in the world. May God once again move His people to listen to His Son, accept Him and His message, and sow seeds of the kingdom. May He do this for His glory and for the salvation and joy of all peoples. Amen.