

FOLLOWING IN THE WAY

A Study of the Gospel of Mark · Lesson 6

The Principles of Kingdom Growth

Mark 4:21–34

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Edited transcript of the class session. Class members' comments have been removed.

Introduction

Welcome

We're going to get started today. I know others will join us, hopefully. We are going to go ahead and begin our class on Mark. I want to show you a picture.

The Flower Bed, Revisited

On the left side of your screen is the picture I showed you last week. Now, when I got home, my wife said, "I heard you showed a picture of our flower bed." I said, "Yes, I did." She said, "Did you show the one we started with?" I said, "I didn't have that picture." She said, "Well, I do. Why didn't you ask me?" You know how that goes. So she sent me the picture, and she insisted I let you know we really did start off well. But the heat of the summer decided to destroy us.

This is a good segue, because we were talking about soil and growth, and today we're going to talk about soil, seed, and growth. So there is a good reason to do this besides assuaging my wife's feelings. That's probably good enough, but she's out of town, so you can't tattle on me anyway.

Two Signs from the Front of the Building

Now, I wanted to ask you this question. Have you seen these before? Where are they? They used to be in front of the building. We called it accountability. What do we do with those signs?

I know what we kids did with them. We sat there and wondered what you could make out of those numbers. If you add them up, what would they be? When you're bored stiff, you

have nothing else to do, and you're looking at this in front of the church building. That's where I learned preachers don't need any help with something distracting people. They'll do it on their own.

When I was just a kid, every church had one of these. Churches that had two people had one. Now, the numbers may have reflected fifteen years ago. I do know of some places where they never moved the numbers, and it said, "We had a hundred and forty last week." You look around, and there are four people here, and you go, "What happened?" Well, that was a long time ago.

We called it accountability, but you know what the real reason was? This is how I grew up, at least. Your mileage may vary. There was always an elder who would get up, point to the board, and say, "Folks, we're not doing enough. We've got to give more money. We've got to get more people in this building." That was a repeated approach on a regular basis throughout all my growing up. One of the refreshing things about coming to Water View was that they didn't have a board. Partly because we were growing so fast at that point that they couldn't have kept up, but I thought it was refreshing that you didn't have a board to keep track of.

The other side is a goal chart, which is a thermometer, and any time you're raising money, you add to that as you go. The interesting thing about thermometer charts is that they're great when they're going up. They're bad when they get stagnant. My grandkids go to an elementary school in Plano where the PTA was raising money over the last three weeks, and they kept putting the chart on Facebook, and it didn't even get halfway. I wouldn't have put it up there. It's embarrassing.

But that's the way we promote our work and what we're doing. Both of these are evidence of a mindset that has come across since a particular point in time. We're going to talk a little bit about growth today out of the Book of Mark.

Church Growth: Where We Got Our Ideas

Where the Idea Came From

He talked a little bit about this last week, in the parable of the sower, and we all know that one. But then he follows it up with other parables that we don't know quite so well, or that we have heard in other forms, and so the other form is what we latch onto, and not what he's saying here.

Church growth is an interesting idea. The term "church growth" is only about sixty-five or seventy years old. There was a time when nobody talked about church growth. It happened or it didn't. Most of the church was rural. You may have grown up in a rural

church, in a small place, or a very small church in town. We didn't talk about church growth, because church growth was something that just happened, and you didn't do anything about it.

Then something took place. At the end of the Second World War, when the GIs were coming home and moving into little houses in the newly planted suburbs, people began to look around and say, "Are we like them?" Suddenly we started asking ourselves the question in churches of Christ: where are we in comparison to the Methodists, the Baptists, the Presbyterians? At one time we boasted, and I don't know if it's real, because it's all preacher's numbers, and I know what preachers do with numbers, that we were the fastest-growing religious movement in this country, with 2.4 million members. They've never been able to find 2.4 million members, unless you go to the cemetery and count the people we've buried. But we were proud of that.

It was fueled by several things. Elmer Towns put out a book called *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools in America*, in which he looked at various denominational groups with huge churches. Then Donald McGavran wrote a missions tome about church growth, and it took off in this country as well. Some of his principles were good. Some of them were not very transferable. And then all kinds of things took place, and suddenly we started putting boards on the wall, counting numbers, promoting ourselves, and doing all kinds of things.

The truth is, America was a different place at that point. Some of those large churches in the fifties had thousands of people. I'd bet half of that isn't there anymore. Many of them now run three services to take care of it. But yes, we had an army.

Our Way, Our Tools

What we developed was this: we like growth. We want growth, but we want it to happen our way. We started adopting a corporate model of church growth. If you do the right things in the right ways, and you put in a lot of effort and a lot of money and a lot of promotion, just as a grocery store does, or JCPenney's, or whoever, you will attract people, and you will have a growth chart that goes up and up and up. That has been the pattern for the last seventy years or so. We wanted to grow a certain way. We wanted to put a lot of effort into it, a lot of money into it, and be able to say, "Look at what we've done."

I'm not saying that's wrong. But you have to ask the question: is that what Jesus says?

The second part is that we want to make it grow with our tools, and our tools have become very corporate tools. We use the internet, and I'm glad we do, but we use the analytics of the internet. How many likes? How many interactions? How many shares?

We begin to judge ourselves by somebody else's external idea of what we ought to be doing. On top of that, we look at ourselves and say, "If we're not growing, but they are, what's wrong with us?" And we start to compare.

This is the idea we bring into this building today. And the problem is, would Jesus feel comfortable with any of those ideas? That's what we're going to look at, because the question is: how does the kingdom of God truly grow? We've suspected what we think will happen, but what's real? Jesus says that when you approach the kingdom of God, you have to approach it from a different viewpoint than a human viewpoint, as we're going to see.

Three Questions We All Ask

When you come to this passage, it answers some questions we all have about growth and about life and about ourselves.

The first question: if God is real and his kingdom is here, why is it so hard to see? Why aren't people responding? If it is so clear, maybe we just need to shout a little louder. They're just not getting it. Why can't they see what we see? Well, they can't see what we see because we have had lots of time with it. We have been immersed in it, so we think everybody sees what we ought to see.

The second question: I've done everything I know to do, so why am I not seeing results? I'll tell you, that's a preacher's question on Monday morning. Preach your heart out and nobody responds. What's wrong with me? What's wrong with my sermons? What's wrong with this church? We begin to ask that after we've done everything we can and we're not getting the results we think we ought to. It's a frustrating question.

The third question: the church seems to be getting smaller and less influential. Are we losing the battle? I hear that in various ways, and the only answer we have is to shout louder, not to go back and look at what the basics are. Today we're going to look at the basics of all this.

The Passage in View: Mark 4:21–34

Four Pictures

This is a passage that is carried by pictures. I don't know about you, but I like pictures. I like visual. You know why this exists? Because I like to see it. When I was in graduate school, I preached in a little town called Newell, Texas. They had six members, two dogs, and several flies and mosquitoes. That was their membership. I went out there, and they didn't have anything. They didn't have a board. This was before PowerPoint. I was poor

as Job's turkey, but I went out and bought a whiteboard and an easel and toted that thing out there so at least I could draw and write something on it.

Jesus was a visual person. He said, in effect, "I can't tell you these things without you seeing them." So he has four pictures that we're going to look at.

The first picture is an oil lamp that you would put into a house. You would burn the oil wick, and it would flicker just enough light to barely see in a darkened room. The second is the measure, how you figure out how much you use of something and how much it holds. The third is a seed that has just barely penetrated the soil, and you can barely see the shoot, something we're not as aware of today as we were maybe a hundred years ago. The fourth is a seed you can barely see, and what does it do? Those four pictures comprise everything in this lesson, and they all add to the point.

Picture One: The Lamp

It Arrives

Jesus begins by saying, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on a stand?" Have you heard that before? Where? In the Beatitudes, Matthew chapter 5. What does Matthew 5 say about the light? Who is the light? We are. We are the light of the world. We're the lamp.

I want you to think about that. Matthew says we're the lamp, but when you get to Mark, it says something different. It doesn't say, "Do people light a lamp?" It says, "Do you bring a lamp into a room and then put it under a bowl?" You say, "Well, that sounds like the same thing." It's really not. The word "bring" means to arrive. The lamp arrives to give light. You don't light the lamp; the lamp arrives. You bring it into the place, and now you can see. That's a different image, for a lot of reasons.

A Mystery Is Revealed

You may remember last week we had this passage in chapter 4, verse 11, where he said, "the secret of the kingdom of God." That word "secret" is the same word as our word "mystery." You know what a mystery is? A mystery is something you can't figure out until it's finally revealed at the end.

Right now I'm listening to John Grisham's new novel on audiobook. I haven't gotten very far, but it starts with a very disturbing idea, and as you go through one of his books, you still don't know what's going to happen until the appropriate moment where he says, "This is it." Can you imagine if, in the preface of the book, they said, "Here's how it's going to end. Now read it"? I don't want to read a book like that. I knew people who used

to tape the Super Bowl to watch later. That is the most worthless thing I ever heard in my life. You're riding home from church, and the score is all over the news. Nobody ever watched it, from what I can tell. I think there are probably people who have a full library of Super Bowls they've never watched, because they already knew how it ended.

Jesus says this is a mystery, and so in verse 22 he says, "For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed." There's the concept of the lamp. It is meant to suddenly be seen when it arrives, and whatever is concealed will be brought into the open. Jesus says the secret of the kingdom of God is given through parables because there are people who can't see it. It has to dawn on them. It has to arrive at them. It is meant to be revealed to them, not told to them.

So the big reveal is that the truth about Jesus is supposed to be revealed, not told. Don't mistake hidden for absent.

I don't know if you have noticed, but I like to tell stories. You know why I like to tell stories? For lots of reasons. When you start telling a story, people start trying to figure it out in their heads. "I wonder where this is going. I bet it works out like this." At the end of the story, when it all works out, they either go, "I knew that," and they feel real proud of themselves, though they probably didn't know it, or they go, "Wow, I never saw that coming." That's exactly what happens with Jesus. You pay attention, and you develop a dawning realization of who he is and what he's doing.

We're in a bad habit of telling people what they ought to hear. "I'm going to tell you what the story is, and you're going to have to accept it." That may not be the best plan. Jesus went through this with Peter. He said, "Who do men say that I am?" and then, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Jesus is uncovered through people who are studying, who are learning, who are thinking. You cannot tell someone; they have to figure it out themselves. That's what Jesus is talking about in this lesson.

Whoever Has Ears

Then he adds this epigram again: "Whoever has ears, let him hear." We're back to hearing. "Are you listening?" is what he says. At this point they're going, "To what? I don't get it." And he says, "Good, you're listening." Isn't that a strange thing? I'm glad you don't get it, because now maybe you'll listen harder.

Picture Two: The Measure

Consider Carefully What You Hear

He goes on to say, “Consider carefully what you hear.” Start turning this around in your mind. Try to figure it out. He starts talking about the second image, the measure. For us it’s like a cup, a tablespoon, a teaspoon, but everybody has measures. The ancient world had measures. Sometimes the measure was nothing more than a weight. Sometimes it was an amount of grain that was measured out. In fact, the word “measure” is where we get our English word “meter.” It is what is metered out.

In Matthew 7:2, we use the measure in connection with judgment: whatever you give is what you’re going to get. That’s the short answer. Here, something else is involved. This is also not about money. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard people stand up and say, “You know something? If you’ll give more, God will give greater.” It’s a sales pitch. That’s what a salesman does. “Man, if you’ll just invest a little bit in this, you’ll be a billionaire.”

So he’s not talking about money when he says, “Whoever has will be given more, and whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” That’s about listening. It’s about carefulness of consideration in what you hear. He says, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and even more.”

That’s an idea we need to struggle with, because it seems to indicate that whatever you can take in may give you a little more capacity to get more. But if you can’t take that in, you won’t get any more. Jesus told these stories, and some would go, “Nice story.” Some would go, “Wow, there’s truth in there somewhere.” And they would start listening to it and develop an ear for the truth. They would develop the capacity to hear more.

The reason people are not deeper is not because they are unintelligent. It is because they don’t have the capacity for more. The measure is too small. The more you understand, the more you can understand.

First Grade Math and the Fire Hose

We do this all the time, don’t we? In first grade you start to learn addition and subtraction. The reason you learn addition and subtraction is so that in later grades you can learn multiplication and division. Once you figure that out, you go on to algebra. Once you have algebra, you have the tools to deal with geometry and trigonometry. Once you get that, you can go on to abstract numbers and calculus. But you don’t hand a first-grader a calculus problem and say, “Go ahead and take care of that.” It would be silly, wouldn’t it? That’s not how it happens.

We know better in the physical world. In the spiritual world, what we want to do is tell everything we know. We're going to shoot them with a fire hose. Everything in the Bible, start to finish, and now you've got it. What are you going to do with it? "I don't understand it." You don't understand? It's clear as mud, isn't it? That's what it is, because they have no capacity for taking it all in. The more you understand, the more you can understand. And Jesus says that because he's about to move on to the next image.

Picture Three: The Seed That Grows by Itself

What the Man Does

In verses 26 through 29, I want you to think about one idea. What does the human being in this story do? Look at what he does. A man scatters seed on the ground, and night and day, whether he gets up or sleeps, that's what he's doing. Nothing else. That's the extent of humanity in this parable. Sow the seed, and go to bed.

You go, "That doesn't sound right, does it?" Jesus says it doesn't have to. This is the reality. Then he contrasts that with what happens with the seed. The seed goes into the ground, and the seed sprouts. The man is asleep while that's happening, by the way. He's not nurturing the sprout. It's just happening. He doesn't have any basis for doing it. He's just going about his business, and something is going on which he can't see.

The Lima Bean Jar

I don't know whether you remember this from school. It may be too juvenile for modern education today. You get a jar, and you put a big wad of cotton in it, and you make the cotton wet, and you shove a couple of lima beans in. I don't know why lima beans. It's always lima beans. I guess it's because they're big and you can see them. You put it on the windowsill, and you go to recess. You come back in, endure the rest of the day, and go home. You don't even notice. You come back the next day, go through your routine, and you don't even notice. Two or three days later you turn around and go, "Huh, something's happened." What's that green thing? Where did that come from?

You didn't do anything to get it, did you? Outside of shoving it in the jar with a little wet cotton. It's doing itself. It works on its own. That's what Jesus is trying to say here. This thing will sprout, and then it will put on a stalk, and then it will put on the head with grain on it that will feed multitudes. But look at what he says. It does it all by itself. The farmer has no role in this.

I always liked the saying that there is no good farmer who can walk over to his field, lean over, and say, "Grow." It doesn't work that way. The seed works. The seed has the power. The seed in the right soil has the magic. So he says, "You need to pay attention to that

seed.” It grows without human help. You can’t make it grow. The power behind the growth of the kingdom is in the soil and the seed, not the sower. All by itself.

Plant the Seed and Go to Bed

I thought about this this week. I won’t tell you names, because they’re members of this church. About ten or twelve years ago, I don’t remember exactly, it’s been long enough that I can’t place it, this individual had lunchtime and wanted to study, so I studied with them at lunch for about six weeks. We went through everything I always do with people. When we got to the end and started talking about response, the person said, “I’m not ready to do that.” I said, “Well, can you tell me why?” Now, I think that’s a bad question for me. It’s too manipulative, but that’s how I was taught. It’s been passed on from generation to generation. Bad habits usually do that.

The person said, “No, no, no. I’m just not ready. I’ve got some issues.” I said, “We can talk about it.” She said, “Well, we may be able to, but I don’t think you can fix them.” And I couldn’t. So we went on our way, and the person kept coming to church here, and I’d be friendly to them. Then, a couple of years ago, I guess it was, I got a text on a Sunday morning. It said, “I wanted to let you know I was baptized into Christ. You were part of the reason, and a lot of other people were.”

So I know what it is now. You plant the seed, and you go to bed, and you let the seed work. That’s all you do. How hard is that? That has nothing to do with boards inside church buildings. Jesus never had a board. This growth, you can’t see it happening at the time it happens.

Picture Four: The Mustard Seed

Hard to Describe, Easy to Compare

Then he comes along and says, “What shall I say the kingdom of God is like? Or what parable shall we use to describe it?” Think about the point of that. It’s a pondering question. What is the kingdom of God like? It’s hard to describe. You can’t define it. You can’t describe it. You can only compare it. So Jesus says, “It’s like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted,” here are the same words again, it grows, “and becomes the largest of all garden plants.”

I want to emphasize “garden plant.” We’ve always called it a tree. It’s not a tree. It’s a garden plant. That makes it a little different, as we’re going to see. It becomes the largest of all garden plants, with big branches, so that the birds can perch in its shade. What he’s describing is the black mustard seed. The plant in this picture is about eight feet tall. It grows all over Palestine, because the seed just falls and suddenly you get this. Notice how

much you can put in it. The birds here are probably the Gentiles, that the nations of the earth can come into it. It's large enough to handle all that. All of that from a little seed, and that little seed creates all of this without our help.

The Temptation of the Big Event

Now, there's a temptation called the big event. You know what it is. If you want the kingdom of God to grow, you rent the largest coliseum you can find, bring in the finest preacher, load the place up, let him hit them with everything he's got, and they're going to swarm into the churches next week. That's a philosophy, by the way.

I remember back in the nineties, I was preaching on the Gulf Coast, and a man in Tennessee, who owned a lumberyard somewhere from what I remember, had what you'd call a brilliant idea. Never confuse a nightmare with a brilliant idea. His brilliant idea was that we were going to take the gospel to every mailbox in America. It was going to cost four million dollars. We were going to print up this really fine material, on slick paper, several pages. We'd pay for the printing and the publication, and then we'd send you the names of all the people who wrote in and said, "I want more." He said, "I'll supply the first million. The rest of you have to supply the rest."

So he sent his sales force out, and I say that because that's what they were, and they tried to get churches to buy in and raise money for the campaign. They came to our church, and I said, "Well, we'll give it the best shot we can." We had never raised more than eight thousand dollars on a Sunday. We raised twice that much. We were excited. We sent it in. The day arrived when all the mail was supposed to hit all these mailboxes. I didn't get one in my mailbox. None of the church members got theirs. None of their friends got it. So I called the guy. I said, "Did we miss something?" He said, "Yeah, you did. We needed you to raise fifty thousand dollars, and you didn't do it, so you don't get it."

There's a word for that, and it's called a scam. It was a colossal flop. That's the big event.

I grew up in a time when we would do door-knocking, two hundred doors a day. We got nothing. The one that would work is a backyard conversation across the fence with your neighbor, and that's the one we never do. The mustard seed: smallest, yet it creates big impact when planted in the ground.

As Much as They Could Understand

So Jesus, with many similar parables, spoke the word to them as much as they could understand. I like that. Jesus knew everybody did not have the capacity to understand the gospel the same way. He knew that if he told everybody what he told the disciples, they wouldn't have a clue what he was saying. So he spoke to the outsiders in parables, and if they wanted to know more, they could ask him, and he would give them more.

Contrast that with how we do things. We've got to tell them the whole Bible. Well, they can't handle all that. If they can't handle a hose, we need to do it with an eyedropper. People have to be able to hear it in order to continue to hear it.

One of my favorite Christmas movies is *The Polar Express*. If you've been living under a rock somewhere, *The Polar Express* is an animated movie. It's about a boy who receives a Christmas bell, and he can hear it because he continues to believe in Christmas. When he gets home and rings it, his parents can't hear it. His sister grows out of it. She can't hear it. But he can still hear it. He has the capacity to hear it.

That's what Jesus is saying. "I'm only going to invest in the people who can really understand what I'm saying. I'll give them a little bit now, and then I'll give them a little bit more." And at the end of this passage, he talked to everybody in parables, but later, when he was alone with his disciples, who could understand more, who were asking questions, he explained it all. You say, "Wasn't he deciding who could and who couldn't?" Yes, he was. We should too. Some people can't handle all of it. Don't give them everything. Give them a little bit.

I always like to say that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But you can feed him potato chips. We'd be feeding people potato chips, frankly. No, I didn't bring any Lay's this morning, so don't get your saliva going. What I'm saying is that maybe you just need to give them a taste. Then they'll go, "Do you have any more?" And you give another taste. A little bit at a time, you get them where they need to go. That's all Jesus did with the kingdom of God. He gave them a little bit and let the power of God work with them at that point.

Which Picture Do You Need Most?

What Each Picture Answers

Now, which picture do you need most? These four pictures answer four complaints.

The lamp answers, "I don't understand. It seems to be all hidden." The answer is that it's brought into the open, but by revealing, not by telling. So don't tell. Let it be revealed.

The measure answers, "I'm not getting a lot out of this." Then he says, "If you'll give a little bit, you'll get more." So start to bring a larger measure to life.

The growing seed answers, "Nothing's happening. I don't understand why." He says, "Don't worry about it. It's growing whether you like it or not." You put the seed in the ground. Don't worry about the harvest. God will take care of that.

The mustard seed answers, “This is too small. I don’t know what to do. It’s insignificant.” Well, big finishes start with small beginnings. Always. So don’t despise the day of small things.

Our Part and God’s Part

The problem we’ve got is that our part is sowing and hearing. Those are the two things we’re supposed to do: sow the seed and hear the message. That’s the only thing we can affect. God’s part is growth and harvest. Here’s the difficulty. Most of our discouragement comes because we’re trying to do God’s part, and most of our stagnation comes because we’re not doing ours. If we get them right, things go better.

All Jesus is saying is that the church grows when good seed is put in good soil and left alone, because it will work. I’ve known some people who don’t trust the whole principle. They plant something in a garden and go out every day and look. “Hmm, nothing.” They look, and there’s nothing. Finally they get frustrated, so they say, “Let’s see if it’s growing in there,” and they dig it up. Well, now it’s not going to grow at all, because they dug it up. Leave it alone. If you plant good seed in good soil, leave it be, because that’s how it grows. That’s how the kingdom of God grows.

Four Questions for This Week

Where Does God Seem Hidden?

In your life, where does God seem to be hidden right now? We think we can’t find him at times. He’s always there. I like the story in the Book of Esther. It’s very simple. It’s about a woman who becomes the queen of Persia and saves her people, and it’s a great story. The problem with the Book of Esther is that the name of God doesn’t appear in it anywhere. It’s a strange thing for a Bible book not to mention God. That’s kind of our lives at times. We want to know, “Where is God when I need him the most? Why isn’t he showing up?” The answer is always the same with Esther as it is in our lives. He’s there, and he’ll show himself at the right time. So where does that happen to you today?

How Big a Measure Do You Bring?

How big a measure do you bring to God’s Word? How much are you willing to listen to what God is telling you? Because the more you listen to what God is telling you, the more God will tell you.

It’s an amazing idea. I’ve told you about my daily Bible reading experience, and I’m not going to go through all that again. But it’s interesting that probably tomorrow we finally end the Old Testament. It has taken us until the middle of October to read the Old

Testament. Why don't we just get to the end of the story? Because that's how God works. He reveals a little at a time, and the more you can take in, the more you understand. The more you understand, the more you take in, until finally you go, "And who is this baby from Bethlehem?" Whatever measure you bring is what you get.

What Have I Sown That I Need to Quit Digging Up?

Sometimes the best thing we can do is sow the seed, tell people what we know, and then keep our mouth shut. I've been in Bible studies where a person was supposed to be a silent partner. The reason you have a silent partner is so they can be silent. That tends not to work, because they won't keep their mouth shut. They get in the middle of the discussion and undo something. That's what we do. Let God do the work. So, are you trying to do God's part?

What Small Thing Have I Written Off?

What small thing have I written off in my life as insignificant? Remember, we're always looking for something big to do, something impressive. Stop. Look for the smallest thing you can do, the smallest act, the smallest word, the smallest moment, and do that one, and let God do the rest of it.

Next week, we get on a boat in the middle of a thunderstorm. So, thank you very much.