

March 11, 2012 by Steve Brandon



The Nature of the Kingdom of God

Mark 4:1-34

- 1. Some See It and Some Don't (verses 1-20).**
- 2. With Knowledge Comes Responsibility (verses 21-25)**
- 3. We Don't Understand Its Growth (verses 26-29).**
- 4. It Will Grow (verses 30-32).**

As most of you know, here at the church we host an after-school program for children. We call it "Kids KLUb." Kids Learning and Understanding the Bible. We meet every Tuesday and Thursday here at the church right after school. We normally have about 6-9 children each time. It has been a great blessing for me to take these precious children, many of whom knew literally nothing about the Bible. We are teaching them so much. They have been taught the Ten Commandments and the books of the Bible; we've watched the Jesus film, read through The Big Picture Bible, and memorized Psalm 121 (now we're working on Psalm 103). This week, we just finished reading, "The Dangerous Journey" -- a children's picture version of "Pilgrim's Progress."

Since we reviewed the story each week, the kids all know about how Christian left the city of Destruction to head to the Celestial City. Evangelist told him to go via the wicket-gate (i.e. the small gate). He left with a burden on his back (representing his sin). Initially setting out on his journey, he was met by Obstinate and Pliable. Obstinate refused to hear anything that Christian said, but Pliable went with him, being delighted with what he heard. Soon, they fell into depression in the Slough of Despond. At this point, Pliable left him, as this wasn't what he was expecting on his journey. Later, Mr. Worldly-Wiseman persuaded Christian to head to the city of Morality, symbolic of seeking his justification by works. Evangelist came and pointed him in the right way again. He tried to warn others, like Simple, Sloth, and Presumption of the danger that lay ahead, but they neglected his warning. Finally, he came to Calvary. Upon lifting up his eyes to the cross, his burden fell off his back and rolled into the tomb. At this point, he was given new clothes (representing the righteousness of Christ). His journey was far from over. Along the way, he sought the straight path, though deviating from time to time because of his own sin. He fought Apollyon and walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Along the way, he met two friends who encouraged him in his journey, Faithful and Hopeful. He and Faithful refused the world's goods in Vanity Fair. He and Hopeful struggled together in Doubting Castle. In the end, they both crossed the River of Death and arrived safely in the Celestial City.

Today, we come to a text in the Gospel of Mark which is a bit like "The Dangerous Journey," in that it describes the Kingdom of God using pictures. We are in Mark, chapter 4.

For the first time in the gospel of Mark, we will get a dose of the teaching of Jesus. Up until this point, Mark has emphasized the works of Jesus, the things that He was doing. Things like healing demon-possessed people (1:21-28; 3:2-23); like healing diseases, fevers (1:30-31), and lepers (1:40-45), and paralytics (2:1-12), and withered hands (3:1-5). Furthermore, Mark has laid an emphasis upon the calling of His disciples.

But now, we get a healthy dose of the teaching of Jesus. It's not that we haven't seen any of the teaching of Jesus before. He has taught that He can forgive sins (2:8-12). He has taught about why He ate with sinners (2:15-17) and why His disciples didn't fast (2:18-22). He has taught about the Sabbath (2:23-28). He has taught about the nature of Satan's kingdom (3:23-30). But, these were all in response to questions or life's circumstances. And, they were short responses.

In chapter 4, Jesus will carry on a longer discourse. If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, you will see that most of chapter 4 is in red letters. That is, it contains the words of Jesus. And Jesus is teaching about the most important thing: the kingdom of God.

When Jesus began His ministry, the kingdom of God was His topic, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). When Mark highlights the first major teaching in his gospel, it's about the same thing: the kingdom of God. How it starts. How it works. How it grows.

My message this morning is entitled, "The Nature of the Kingdom of God." That's the topic that Jesus puts forth here in these verses. My first point comes from the first 20 verses. Here it is, ...

1. Some See It and Some Don't (verses 1-20).

Mark 4:1-9

He began to teach again by the sea [of Galilee]. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty,

and a hundredfold." And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

This is a very simple illustration. The farmer goes out into the field with his bag of seed, slung around his shoulder. He reaches his hand inside the bag and spreads the seed upon the ground. Later, he will come back and rake the ground, allowing the seed to set under the soil.

As he throws the seed, it falls in various places. Some of the seed falls on the path. This may happen because of poor aim on behalf of the sower. This may happen because some of the seed spills out of his bag as the sower walks along the path. One way or another, it falls upon the path. The future of this seed isn't good. It won't become a plant. It will become bird seed.

Some of the seed falls on the rocky ground, where there is neither much soil nor depth of soil. As a result, this seed will grow quickly, because it will have no place for roots. The only place that it can grow is up. The future of this seed isn't good either. Whatever growth it experienced will only be short-lived. Soon after it rises up out of the shade the rocky soil provided, the sun will scorch that plant. It will wither away.

Some of the seed falls upon the thorns. This is fertile soil, perhaps too fertile. as weeds are able to grow there as well. Again, this seed will grow, but it won't grow for long. It will need to compete with the hearty weeds, which take away all of the nutrients and moisture from the soil that there is. It will soon die away.

Some of the seed falls upon the good soil. This is soft soil (unlike the hard ground). This is deep soil (unlike the rocky ground). This is clear soil (unlike the thorny ground). And the future for this seed is bright! In all likelihood, it will germinate, cast its roots deep, and have plenty of nutrients to grow and flourish. It will reproduce itself thirty-fold, sixty-fold, perhaps even a hundred-fold!

There's the illustration. Those who heard it for the first time would have understood the picture completely. In an agrarian culture, many of those who heard Jesus speak were farmers themselves, and they sowed seed just as Jesus had described. Furthermore, everyone had seen a sower ply his trade. And so, they all knew what Jesus was talking about. The illustration was no problem. The meaning, on the other hand, was a problem. Like Pharaoh's dream, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream, we need help to understand the meaning of the parable.

Imagine with me that you have never heard this parable before. I know that this is difficult for many of you, as you have heard this parable scores of times. But, if this was your first time hearing it, it's meaning would be difficult. We know it's meaning only because Jesus explained the meaning in verses 10-20.

Mark 4:10

As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.

With verse 10, comes a change of scenery. Jesus is no longer with the multitudes. Rather, He is alone with His disciples, who had a few questions for Him, particularly about these parables. Here's what Jesus said, ...

Mark 4:11-12

And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven."

We must think deeply about these verses, because they are of utmost importance. They tell us of the reason why Jesus tells parables. They tell us how parables are understood. They tell us why people don't understand the word of God. These verses open up for us the nature of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, I say this, "If you don't understand verses 11 and 12, you don't understand any of the parables of Jesus, because verses 11 and 12 give the reasons why Jesus taught in parables."

Now, many think that parables are like sermon illustrations. When I preach the word of God, I find that it's useful to you if I give an illustration from time to time -- an object lesson, an allegory, a story from history, some common life experience. I use such things to help explain God's word. This is not quite what a parable is.

Parables aren't quite like sermon illustrations. They are uniquely designed by God to do two things:

1. Illumine the minds of the believing.
2. Darken the minds of the unbelieving.

We catch the first part -- to illumine the minds of the believing. In this way, parables are like sermon illustrations. However, people can often miss the second part -- to darken the minds of the unbelieving. In this way, parables are not like sermon illustrations. Parables actually are a way of bringing judgment upon non-believers.

Notice in Jesus' explanation of why He taught in parables how there are two groups of people. There are the insiders and there are the outsiders. Verse 11 says, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God." These are "the insiders." In verse 10 we see who the "you" is. It is the "followers" of Jesus along with the twelve. In other words, the "you" refers to those who were believing in Jesus and following after Jesus. They were granted true knowledge of the nature of the kingdom of God.

And notice that it is a gift. "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God." God gives understanding to some. God gives understanding to those who believe. But not so to those on the outside.

Later in verse 11 we read, "but those who are outside get everything in parables." These are "the outsiders." These are the ones who didn't believe in Jesus. These are the crowds who were following Jesus only for what He could do for them, looking out for their own interests and not really embracing Jesus and believing in Him. The outsiders get only the parables. They don't get the explanation. They are left in the dark.

Jesus is intentional about this. "[They only] get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven" (verses 11-12). Listen again. Listen closely, "[They only] get everything in parables, so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand, otherwise they might return and be forgiven" (verses 11-12).

Did you catch it? Jesus spoke in parables to the unbelieving not that they might understand the illustration and believe, but that they might understand the illustration and not believe the reality.

This is exactly what Isaiah was called to do. Perhaps you remember that great scene in Isaiah, chapter 6. When Isaiah saw the Lord in a vision, "lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah saw Seraphim crying out to one another, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). When Isaiah saw the holiness of God, he saw his own sinfulness (Isaiah 6:5). But, by an act of grace, God cleansed him from his sin when one of the seraphim ... touched [his] mouth with a burning coal, declaring, "your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven" (Isaiah 6:6-7).

Shortly afterwards, the Lord said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" (Isaiah 6:8). With sins forgiven, Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). The Lord took Isaiah up on this offer and said, ...

Isaiah 6:9-10

"Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive;

Keep on looking, but do not understand.'

Render the hearts of this people insensitive,

Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts,

And return and be healed."

He says, "Yes, Isaiah, go and preach to Israel. Call them to repentance. Tell them of their sin. Tell them where they can find forgiveness. 'Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool' (Isaiah 1:18). And in your preaching, you will harden the hearers. They will see you. They will hear you. But, they will not understand. They will not turn and repent."

In other words, "Isaiah, go and preach and have a fruitless ministry. The people will hear you, but they won't understand. The people will see you, but they won't believe you."

And these are the very words that Jesus speaks when He tells us why He taught in parables. Lest you think that this is a minor theme in the gospels, think again. These words from Isaiah are quoted in every single gospel as well as the book of Acts. Matthew 13:14; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26. It is the reality of the kingdom of God. You either hear the message of Christ crucified for our sins, and you understand it and you embrace it and you love it. Or you hear the message of Christ crucified, but you do not understand it, and it has no effect upon you.

This is how the kingdom of God works. Some See It and Some Don't (verses 1-20). This is exactly what we see as Jesus explains the parable.

Mark 4:13

And He *said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?"

Right here we are confronted by the importance of this particular parable. In one way, this parable of the sower is the gate that unlocks the others. "How will you understand all of the other parables if you don't understand this parable?" This parable is like rudimentary math facts like addition and subtraction. How will you understand Algebra if you can't add and subtract? How will you understand words if you don't understand the letters and the sounds that they make? It's that basic.

And so, also, if you don't understand this parable, you can't understand all of the parables. It's that important. And so, we'll spend a bunch of time here, reflecting upon these words. Jesus says, ...

Mark 4:14-20

The sower sows the word. These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they

hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

The seed is like the word of God. It is sown in a multitude of ways. It goes out in tracts and books. It goes out in sermons. It goes out in daily conversations. The soils are like the souls of men. In this way the entire parable is allegorical, just as much of Pilgrim's Progress is.

Some souls are like the hard path. They hear the word of God, and it makes no penetration into their soul. It's like they haven't even heard it at all. The parallel in Pilgrim's Progress is Obstinate. He flatly refused to hear or believe anything that Christian had to tell him.

I know people like that. I've spoken with people like that. I've told them of God and Jesus. I've told them of their sin and their need for forgiveness. But, it's as if they didn't hear a word that I said. Even recently, I had the opportunity to speak with someone about Christ. And this person didn't want to listen at all. All I got in response was profanity. It was a hard heart.

If you run across people like this, know that Satan is at work. The word of God (which is sharper than any two-edged sword), has no effect, because the devil comes and takes the word away (verse 15).

Some souls are like the rocky soil. They hear the word of God, and they like it! They like the message. They like the results that they think will come of it. They feel the need to change their lives. They want that. But, soon afterwards, they face some sort of difficulty because of the word, and they fall away. It may be because of family. It may be because of work or school or friends. It may be because of some failed expectation. Whatever the reason, they don't endure. The pressures of others pull them away.

The parallel in Pilgrim's Progress is Pliable, who was initially persuaded by the things that Christian had to say. Pliable had great joy in going out, especially as it related to the place where they were heading. Consider the conversation they had on the way.

Pliable: Come, neighbour Christian, since there is none but us two here, tell me now further what the things are, and how to be enjoyed, whither we are going.

Christian: I can better conceive of them with my mind than speak of them with my tongue: but yet, since you are desirous to know, I will read of them in my book.

Pliable: And do you think that the words of your book are certainly true?

Christian: Yes, verily; for it was made by him that cannot lie.

"In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;" Titus 1:2

Pliable: Well said. What things are they?

Christian: There is an endless kingdom to be inhabited; and everlasting life to be given us, that we may inhabit that kingdom for ever.

Pliable: Well said. And what else?

Christian: There are crowns of glory to be given us; and garments that will make us shine like the sun in the firmament of heaven.

Pliable: That is very pleasant. And what else?

Christian: There shall be no more crying nor sorrow; for he that is owner of the place will wipe all tears from our eyes.

Pliable: And what company shall we have there?

Christian: There we shall be with seraphim and cherubim, creatures that will dazzle your eyes to look on them. There we shall see the holy virgins with their golden harps; There we shall see men that by the word were cut in pieces, burnt in flames, eaten of beasts, drowned in the seas, for the love that they bore to the Lord of the place--all well, and clothed with immortality as with a garment.

Pliable: The hearing of this is enough to ravish one's heart. But are these things to be enjoyed? how shall we get to be sharers thereof?

Christian: The Lord, the governor of the country, hath recorded it in this book; the substance of which is, if we be truly willing to have it, he will bestow it upon us freely.

Pliable: Well, my good companion, glad am I to hear of these things: come on, let us mend our pace.

Soon after this, Christian and Pliable fell into difficulty in the Slough of Despond. This was too much for Pliable. He was looking for a place of comfort and ease and treasure. He was not willing to put up with the hardships of the Christian life that would lay ahead. This is a classic description of those sown on the rocky soil.

I know people like this. They hear the word and are excited. The joy they had at first is unable to sustain them through the difficulties. Soon, they are back to living the way that they were before. Sometimes, I have had men who are new at church come up to me all excited about

what's taking place here. They are excited at the preaching, saying that they are wanting to learn the Bible. But soon, just a few months later, they aren't interested. I try calling, but hear nothing from them. It's like they vanish. Such people are rocky souls.

Some souls are like the thorny soil. They hear the word and come to embrace what it says. But, then, other things come into their life that simply overwhelms them. It may be material things. It may be circumstantial things. It may be a job change. And the many things of this life distract them from the main thing. And Christ takes second fiddle in their lives.

An example in Pilgrim's Progress of this is Demas, who attempted to lure Christian and Hopeful over to see the silver mine, where a little digging for treasure may yield some precious treasures. Although Hopeful was tempted to join Demas, Christian wasn't as he fully understood him to be a traitor, who turned away from Christ and to the pursuit of riches. Christian sang the tune about him, ...

BY-ENDS and SILVER-DEMÁS doth agree;
One calls, the other runs, that he may be
A sharer in his lucre: so these two
Take up in this world, and no farther go.

I know people like the thorny soil. They spent many years in the church. They know the word. They know a lot about the Bible. And yet, when it comes down to it, they aren't sold out to Christ. It's not so much that they deny Christ. It's just that have so many other things in this life that are important. It's important to give their children opportunities, and so they overwork themselves to pay the tuition, and have no time for Christ. Or they scamper around on Sundays pursuing after their children's soccer games and have no time for the body of Christ. Or it's their boat or their investments or their vacation home or their fishing. It's something. And they are unfruitful.

Some souls are like the good soil. You have heard the word. You have embraced the word. You have loved the word. And it's bringing forth fruit. It brings forth fruit in your lives. It brings forth fruit in your children. It brings forth fruit among brothers and sisters in Christ. I know people like this. This is like so many of you! The example of good soil in Bunyan's classic are the lives of those who remain faithful until the end, such as Christian and Faithful and Hopeful.

This is the kingdom of God. Some see it and some don't (verses 1-20). Lest I need to point out the obvious, I will. Only one of these soils "sees it". Only one is "good soil". It's the soil that bears much fruit. The other three soils don't "see it".

At this point, the obvious question is this. What sort of soil are you? What sort of soul do you have?

With a little bit of study, you can learn what the soil in your garden is like. You can take some of your soil and squeeze it in your hand to see if your soil is a clay soil, a sandy soil, or a loamy soil. You can test the drainage by digging a small hole and filling it with water to see how well it drains. You can search for earthworms, which are a sign of organic nutrients in the soil. You can purchase a Ph test kit at the local nursery to check the acid levels of your soil. [11](#)

With those tests, you can get a pretty good idea of whether or not plants will flourish in your garden. You can do the same with your souls. We should test our souls. Are you a hard soul? Do you have the sort of soul that is disinterested in the things of God? Do you think that religion is a waste of time? Then, you have a hard soul.

Are you a rocky soul? Is your faith in God shallow? Do you only worship the Lord in the good times? Then, you have a rocky soul.

Are you a thorny soul? Do you have many other interests, distractions, or responsibilities that cloud your affection for Christ? Are you living for the world and it's pleasures? Then, you have a thorny soul.

Are you a good soul? Do you receive the word of God as life to your soul? Do you see its fruit in your life? Then, you have a good soul.

This is one of the most important things that you will ever know about yourself. What sort of soul do you have? When it comes to the kingdom of God, Some See It and Some Don't (verses 1-20).

Well, let's press on to my second point. We will move through these last three points more quickly.
2. With Knowledge Comes Responsibility (verses 21-25)

Verse 21, ...

Mark 4:21-25

And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."

This is the most difficult portion of this chapter. Not so much in understanding the verses themselves. But, more in catching how they fit with the flow of Jesus' thought in this chapter. As one commentator said, "The connection between verse 21 and the preceding is not clear. This holds also for the relation between the verses of the new paragraph (21-25). This does not mean that the sayings are grouped artificially. But though an attempt will be made to show inner coherence, ... it must be admitted at the very outset that certainty in such matters is unobtainable." [12](#)

I have suddenly been relieved of much responsibility! Here's my shot: With Knowledge Comes Responsibility (verses 21-25).

The illustration here in verse 21 is a simple one. You don't light a lamp and then cover it up. You don't turn on a flashlight, only to keep your hand over the light. That does no good. It denies the purpose of the flashlight.

The illustration of the measure (in verses 24-25) is simple as well. To him who is given much, much will be required. To him who is given little, little will be required. In a similar way, if the mysteries of the kingdom of God have been granted to you, you have a responsibility to shine it forth.

The kingdom of God is not to be hidden, but is to be proclaimed. The kingdom of God is about light coming into the world. It is good news about a Savior who has come to help us in our dark despair. We have a responsibility to shine that light. If we don't, God is sovereign, and will still shine it anyway (verse 22). But, we ought to do our part in opening our mouths and letting the world know about Jesus.

So, are you talking with others about the kingdom of God? Are you talking with others about the glories of Christ? Are you letting the light of the gospel shine in your life?

Now, it may be that you are here this morning and think that you don't know much about God and the Bible. That's OK. God doesn't expect all of us to have the same level of knowledge. That's the point of verses 24 and 25. But, what you do know, you need to proclaim. God takes no delight in the man who takes what he has been given, only to hide it in the ground. God delights when we take what little we know and share it with others.

God is very pleased with the child who learns the Ten Commandments at Kids KLUB and recites them to her parents. Much more so than the one who reads his Bible every morning, and yet never makes Jesus Christ known in the workplace.

Note the great promise. Note the threat. The promise is that if you are faithful with what God has given you, you will be given more. The threat is that if you are not, God will take away what you have. So, I would encourage you to use what you have. Trust that God will increase your account. Don't hide the good news that you have been given.

Let's look at my third point. Of the Nature of the Kingdom of God, ...
3. We Don't Understand Its Growth (verses 26-29).

I love this story.

Mark 4:26-29

And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts 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. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

What a great picture of the farmer of Bible times. He went out and cast his seed upon the soil. At that point, his work was done, so he went to bed. He didn't live in the days of pesticides. Perhaps he didn't do much weeding. He just waited. He doesn't make the plants grow. He doesn't really know how they grow. But, they do. The crops grow up -- slowly, but surely. First comes the blade, then the head, then the mature grain. Finally, the harvest comes and he takes his sickle and reaps the harvest.

That's how the kingdom of God works. All we can do is scatter the seed upon the soil. All we can do is let the Word of God be known to the souls of men. We cannot make the seed of the Word of God grow. We don't know how the seed of the Word of God grows. But it grows while we are sleeping.

We don't even know how the Word grows in people. We merely know that it does. When it is grown, we merely go out and reap the harvest.

The implications of this are huge. Our job is to sow seed and to sleep. Our job isn't to grow the plants -- that's God's job.

It's no accident that this is the same picture that Jesus gives in the first parable. The sower simply scatters the seed. Some will fall on fertile places. Others (perhaps even the majority) will fall on bad places -- along the path, in the rocks, and among the thorns. And depending upon the soil, the word will grow. If the soil is bad, the word won't grow. But, if the soil is good, the word will grow. And how exactly that happens, we don't know. Oh, to be sure, we teach and we encourage and we do all that we can to foster the growth. But, in the end, it is God who causes the growth.

This was Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 3, ...

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. 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 God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Some prepare the soil; others plant the seed. Some water the crops; others weed the field. But, in the end, God causes the growth. Praise be to God.

We simply need to be faithful in sowing and watering and tilling. And then go to bed at night and sleep like a baby.

Psalm 127:2

"He gives to His beloved even in his sleep."

God will grow His kingdom in His timing and in His way. Throughout the history of the church, there have been times of great revival, when it is the feverish heat of summer and people are growing in Christ. There have also been times of famine, as told in Amos 8, ...

Amos 8:11-12

"Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord God,
"When I will send a famine on the land,
Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water,
But rather for hearing the words of the LORD.
People will stagger from sea to sea
And from the north even to the east;
They will go to and fro to seek the word of the LORD,
But they will not find it.

We simply need to be faithful, shining our light as God gives it to us.

Let's move to my final point. The Nature of the Kingdom of God is that Some See It and Some Don't (verses 1-20); With Knowledge Comes Responsibility (verses 21-25); We Don't Understand Its Growth (verses 26-29); and, ...

4. It Will Grow (verses 30-32).

Mark 4:30-32

And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade."

The picture here is clear. The mustard seed is a very small seed, indeed. And when it grows, it's the largest of all spices. In fact, it's so large, that the birds of the air can nest in its shade. I do have some mustard seed here. The seeds are very small. Yet, you can place these in the ground, and you will get a small tree, about 8-10 feet in height.

By the way, Jesus isn't trying to teach botany at this point. He is merely pointing out how small the seed is and how large the plant is.

This is the lesson of the parable: the kingdom of God will grow. And God will often take very small and humble beginnings, and transform them into great and mighty movements for His glory.

I'll give you a few illustrations that come to mind. The first is of Charles Spurgeon.

On a snowing night, Spurgeon was headed to a place of worship, but was unable to get there. So, he turned into a small Primitive Methodist chapel in Cochester and attended a worship service in that place. The crowd was small that night. The preacher who was scheduled to preach had been detained in the snow, so a man stood up unprepared and preached a message from Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is none else." The man who preached this sermon was "a tall, thin man" with a "feeble voice." Spurgeon said that he was "really stupid, ... and did not even pronounce his words rightly." And yet, that night, the Lord saved Charles Spurgeon. And he went on to be the instrument of God's great blessing to the world, being more prolific than any other preacher in the history of the world.

I think of the country of Nepal. In 1950, there were but a handful of believers in Christ. Today, there are upwards of 400,000 Christians in Nepal.

But, the greatest example of great growth coming out of a small thing is the disciples themselves. There were only 12 of them. Shortly after the death of Jesus, there were 120. But, within a few short weeks, thousands would believe at Pentecost. Within a few centuries, the number of Christians was so vast that the "Roman Empire," was changed into the "Holy Roman Empire," signifying the raw numbers of people who professed a faith in Christ.

Jesus Himself is an illustration of this. An obscure Jew dies an obscure death with several other criminals on an obscure hill outside of Jerusalem. And what has happened from that? The church. Untold millions have been saved. Much more was going on at the cross than we can see. God's wrath for our sin, all falling on Him. It was all unseen. So also in the Kingdom of God -- there is much that happens behind the scenes. God will make His Kingdom grow.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 11, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] <http://organicgardening.about.com/od/soil/a/easysoiltests.htm>

[2] Hendriksen, p. 161