Mark Lesson 12 (2022)

**THE PARABLES OF THE GROWING SEED**

*(The Kingdom of God is Continually Growing)*

Mark 4:26-34

Key Verse: 4:31-32

“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.”

In the previous passage, 4:1-20, we learned the Parable of the Sower, also called the Parable of Four Soils, among which only one good soil bore fruits. The following parable, the Parable of a Lamp (21-25), highlights the importance of good listening to the words of Jesus, the good news of God’s kingdom. Jesus chose to speak through parables because most people, including Jewish religious leaders, refused to listen to Jesus’ words, even though many were attracted to his miraculous performances. No matter how excellent and valuable Jesus’ teaching may be if people are unwilling and cannot understand it, what good is it? We might wonder if God’s kingdom has a bright future. What do you think? How might Jesus have thought of the future of his kingdom work? Despite severe objections and challenges, Jesus had a positive outlook on God’s coming kingdom. The two parables in today’s passage teach the incredible power of the seed itself: the first parable teaches that the seed grows by itself, and the second parable, the Parable of a Mustard Seed, portrays its remarkable potentiality. According to the Parables of the growing seed, God's kingdom never stops growing.

Look at verses 26-28. “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.” The previous parable, the Parable of the Sower, focused on the sower (3-8) and four different soils (14-20). Now, the stress in this parable is the seed itself. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like the seed scattered on the ground. In the Parable of the Growing Seed, the sower, after spreading the seed, went home and lived his own life, sleeping and waking daily. Yet, the seed could enter the ground, germinate, sprout, and even mature without the sower's apparent work. How could it happen? Of course, God caused it to grow. But the parable's initial point is the seed's power.

Years ago, a group of archeologists opened up a three-thousand-year-old pyramid in Egypt. They found many ancient artifacts, one of which was a vase (#1). They found some seeds placed in that vase three thousand years ago. And when they planted them, guess what happened? These seeds sprouted in a matter of days. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECibetK2EYI). Wow! Remarkable life lies inside a seed.

 The growth process of the seed is part of the mystery of life. According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is like the mystery of growth beyond human control. One of the characteristics of God’s kingdom is that it’s constantly growing, like a growing seed. I heard that even the universe continually expands and that we cannot see the end (#3). Likewise, the kingdom of God constantly grows and develops.

So is the process of spiritual growth in people’s lives. The seed planted on the ground refers to Jesus’ words, the words of eternal life through the grace of forgiveness of sins. Jesus’ words are so full of energy and power that once it’s sown, the kingdom of God grows by itself and will continue to grow and bear much fruit. Fundamentally, spiritual growth is not solely the outcome of the human labor of the disciples. Instead, it is the result of God's gracious gift through the Spirit. It reminds us of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”

The phrase in verse 28, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head,” stresses the progressive spiritual development from stage to stage. The natural law of growth demonstrates the process of gradual progress and change in our lives. We shouldn’t skip the process of growing. We need to grow step by step. In Genesis, we see the spiritual growth process in the lives of the ancestors of our faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

 Look at verse 29. “As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest time has come.” Most Bible commentators view this verse as indicating God’s final judgment. Their view is based on the Prophet Joel 3:13, which states, “Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness.” I have no reason to disagree with most Bible commentators. Yet, I don’t feel encouraged by this approach. It seems that such a view appears restricted and hostile. Maybe there is more to it than just judgment. Well, it seems to make much more sense if we see the harvest not just as a final judgment but as a new beginning beyond our physical death. In fact, Apostle Paul describes Christ Jesus as the firstfruits of the harvest, saying, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Cor. 15:20). No matter what happens to the world, we will not perish in the end. The kingdom of God will continue to grow in us. We will be raised from death in a transformed body in the final harvest.

Two weeks after my wife and I visited my mother-in-law in Korea, we found she had passed away last week. She was 90 years old. We were saddened. Yet, we also remembered that even though our physical life does not last more than 100 years, the seed of God’s kingdom continues to grow in us. After the final stage of our lives, we enter the new realm of God’s kingdom, which remains a mystery to us. For us, physical death is a new beginning. Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15: 46, “The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that spiritual.” The kingdom of God is a mystery, and it continually grows.

 Look at verses 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 become the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.’” (P#4) The mustard seed is the smallest seed known to the Jews in Jesus’ time. But when it’s planted, it grows big and becomes the largest of all seeds on earth. This parable seems prophetic, stressing the contrast between the messianic kingdom’s insignificant beginnings and the impressively large scale in its full maturity.

Indeed, the beginning of the messianic kingdom was small and insignificant. Only a few people from Galilee followed Jesus and his teachings, while most people rejected them. The future of Jesus’ messianic kingdom seemed unpromising and vulnerable. It could have been a matter of time before this new movement from Galilee disappeared. But it grew and grew until it made a tremendously positive impact on the lives of millions and billions of people in the history of humankind, including you and me. Jesus predicted a bright future for his kingdom through this parable, assuring it would one day be impressively large, providing enough livelihood for all people in the world.

Probably, when Jesus spoke this parable, what the Prophet Ezekiel or Daniel said was on his mind. Ezekiel 17:23 states, “On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.” Also, Daniel 4:12 states, “Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it, the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it, every creature was fed.”

Our view of the world is greatly affected and limited by the power of death and the world’s worsening conditions. But despite the world's negative reality, Jesus had a bright vision of his coming kingdom. Even though Jesus was aware of his upcoming death on the cross, he transcended the limits of death and shared the fruitful future of his kingdom ministry. He said in John 12:24, “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

With this prophetic vision, Jesus diligently planted the seeds of God’s kingdom in people’s hearts. He believed the seed would grow by itself and step by step until it’s fully matured and bear fruit in God’s proper time. We also need to have this prophetic vision for the future kingdom of God and plant the seed of God’s kingdom in our hearts and others.

In verses 33 and 34, the author Mark concludes the session. Look at verses 33 and 34. “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using the parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.” We are not told what other parables Jesus might have spoken about. Yet, the author Mark concludes his account by reminding his audience of Jesus’ initial purpose in teaching them in parables only. Jesus told them in parables not to exclude them from God’s kingdom but to correct their attitude to listen and understand his words.

The consequence is severe when people fail to listen and understand Jesus’ words of truth. They cannot embrace the reality of God’s kingdom in their lives. No matter how powerful Jesus’ words may be if we cannot listen and understand, what good is it? That’s why Jesus kept telling them to listen and consider carefully what they heard. (4:9, 20, 24) 1 Peter 1:23-25 states, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’” Mark commented in verse 34 that when Jesus was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. It does not mean that his disciples didn’t have to struggle to listen to Jesus’ words. Unless they listen carefully, they too can remain spiritually stagnant.

As I was studying these parables, I wondered what practical lesson I could take with me. Due to ongoing problems in today’s world, including the pandemic, wars in Ukraine, economic downturn, high inflation, frequent natural disasters all over the world, etc., I felt pessimistic about the future. It’s easy for us to be negative and hold a pessimistic view of life and the world. Some might have wondered, “What good does our faith in God do for us?”

We cannot expect positive results when we have negative thoughts about our lives and future.

The Parable of the Growing seed reminds us that God's kingdom continually grows in us and the world regardless. The seed of God’s kingdom is full of life and power so that it can transform us into a new creation. God’s kingdom also grows even now by His absolute sovereignty and providence. No matter what happens in the world or our lives, it’s not the time for us to be discouraged and give up. It’s time to trust and trust again in the power of the seed of God’s kingdom. Nothing can stop God's growing kingdom in us and the world. We must believe that there is a bright future for us despite the challenges we face. All that is needed is the seed sown in us. It will take care of itself. May we continue to engage in listening to God’s words afresh and apply them to our lives so that God’s kingdom may continue to grow in us.