



HOW DOES THE KINGDOM GROW?

SERIES: PARABLES - OVERFLOWING EXTRAVAGANCE

Mark 4:26–39

5th Message

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Introduction: Why did Jesus teach in parables?

This morning we are continuing our summer studies in the parables of Jesus. Before we look at our specific parable, I want to add another layer of context to Shawn Reese's excellent introduction to explain why Jesus taught in parables. In Mark's gospel, Jesus begins teaching in parables immediately after five controversial stories, where he faced increasing hostility and ultimately outright rejection by Israel's leadership. In the final controversy, Jerusalem's scribes repudiate Jesus' exorcisms as being the work of Beelzebul (Mark 3:22), which is tantamount to blaspheming the Holy Spirit. At this critical juncture, Mark records that Jesus made a dramatic shift in both the arena and method of his teaching. He left the traditional arena of the synagogue for the open air and forsook the open announcement and proclamation of the Kingdom for the more cryptic method of teaching in parables. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus explains to his disciples,

**“To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God,
but for those outside everything is in parables, so that
‘they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.’” (Mark 4:11–12 ESV)**

The parables serve a dual function in that “they harden those who have already hardened their hearts, just as in Isaiah's day”¹ and, at the same time, they reveal the mystery of the kingdom to those on the inside. The parable was an ingenious method of disclosing a message that was extremely subversive and dangerous. The truth had to be veiled in secrecy lest Jesus should lose his freedom of movement and perhaps even his life. Thus the parables are cryptic metaphors, dense with meaning. Elie Wiesel, one of the greatest writers to emerge out of the Holocaust, explains how the dangers of life in the Jewish ghettos shaped his style of writing in a similar way. In his book *Night* he chronicles his account in Auschwitz and then Buchenwald. It is a mere 109 pages.

All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was not time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.²

By shrouding the truth of the kingdom in a veil of secrecy, the mystery of the parable would be given only to those who gave their “full measure” (Mark 4:24) to understand it. As the truth of the parable was revealed, it became all the more precious to those who worked for it. When truth is hard won, passions are ignited and the flame of love fills the soul. In this manner, the mysterious truth contained in the parable was passed on to the world only by those who loved the Savior. My short time in Communist Romania in 1988 and 1989 gave me a taste of this principle. The necessity of having to carefully veil the

gospel in the presence of enemy eyes was the very thing that fostered an unquenchable love by those who longed for it.

So how then does the parable draw in the hearer to listen? The answer is through stories and images that were familiar to Israel. (Shawn called this “the usual”). Each parable reaches back to some familiar story or image about Israel. Once his audience is drawn in and captivated by the familiar, Jesus adds a surprising new twist at the end that is designed to break open and shatter Israel's prevailing worldview and replace it with a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel's hope in Jesus. (Shawn labeled this “the unexpected.” I might even call it “the revolutionary.”)

The mysteries contained in these first parables were essential for the disciples to understand how the kingdom of God grows. Contrary to Israel's expectations the kingdom would be inaugurated not by the sword or political power, but with a farmer's bag of seed. If we ask, “What familiar imagery was Jesus alluding to in order to draw his hearers into this parable?” The answer came from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 55:10–13 the prophet speaks of the Messianic age where God's word will be like seed extravagantly sown in the earth bringing forth a New Creation.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

(Isa 55:10–11)

Borrowing that image, Jesus proclaims that the New Age has arrived in himself. He is the faithful sower with that bag of seed, teaching wherever he goes. He is the word from God, divinely powerful, and once that word is sown, it will not return void without accomplishing his purpose. But the image of an extravagant harvest is qualified, for the seeds that are sown bear different results—four different destinies to be exact. The reason, Jesus explains, is not because the seed lacks power, but because of the condition of the soil present in Israel, making Israel and the hearers unsettled. In the first three instances the seed was snatched up by an enemy, scorched with no root, or choked out by worldly pleasures. But in the fourth instance there was the good soil whose fertility would far outweigh the initial rejections of the other three, bearing fruit 30, 60 and 100 fold.

In our parable today, Jesus focuses on the process of growth that occurs in the good soil, bringing forth an extravagant harvest in fulfillment of what Isaiah envisioned in the Messianic Age:

**For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.**

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
 instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
 and it shall make a name for the LORD,
 an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (Isa 55:12-13)

I. The Parable of the Man and the Growing Seed

And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29)

A. The ways of the man mirror the ways of the seed

Jesus compares the kingdom of God to “a man who scatters seed” and how he experiences the results of his sowing. Robert Gundry observes that there is an intimate connection between the man and the seed, where the actions of the one mysteriously imitate those of the other. After the man “throws his seed on the ground,” the seed becomes a mirror of his life.

Just as the man sleeps and rises, so the seed dies and sprouts new life. And as the man is involved in three progressive actions, that of throwing, sleeping and rising, so the seed has three progressive stages of growth—first is the blade, then the ear, and finally the full grain in the ear.³

As the man methodically works his way through these fertile fields and observes the wonders of the seed, he sees his life mirrored until, with the passing of time progressive growth leads to a wonderful harvest.

B. The seed’s growth is totally independent of the man

In the initial reading nothing seems unusual or extraordinary about the experience of growth and harvest. However, on closer examination we find that after the man scatters the seed, **he contributes nothing** towards the growth of the seed. **He simply goes to sleep.** As the man sleeps, so does the seed; it sleeps the sleep of death. Then as the man rises in the morning, he observes that the miracle of growth occurred, yet how, he himself does not know. It remains a mystery that captures him in awe and wonder, for all he does is “wait” while the ground produces the crop *automateæ* (from which we get our word “automatic,” a striking and unusual word that means “something that happens without visible cause, by itself”).

Now anyone that has the slightest experience cultivating a garden knows that this laid-back approach would spell disaster for a beneficial harvest. Ever since the Fall of mankind, the earth has been cursed and without the sweat of painful toil, it will only yield thorns and thistles (Gen 3:17-19). But the kingdom of God is radically different. Once the seed is sown in good soil, the earth produces a crop *automateæ* (“by itself”) with no human intervention. To the attentive listener Jesus’ choice of this unusual word (*automateæ*) is a clue that the ministry Jesus is inaugurating is a New Creation that was foreshadowed by the Sabbatical Year when Israel was instructed,

You shall not reap what grows of itself (LXX *automata*) in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you...all its yield shall be for food. (Lev 25:3-7)

Judah Halevi, (1075-1141) one of Israel’s great poets and thinkers, reflects on the mystery of the seed:

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed that falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth,

water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casing off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Image. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. In the same manner the Law of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it, though it may externally repel him. The nations merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, if they acknowledge Him, they will become one tree.⁴

C. Gathering in the harvest

Just as the earth produces the grain “by itself” without the man, so also the readiness of the harvest is determined by the readiness of the grain, not the decision of the man. All the man can do is wait. As James writes,

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. (Jas 5:7-8 NIV)

At the point of harvest the man is needed again. When he observes that the grain is fully mature he *immediately* “puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” The language comes directly from the book of Joel (3:13) where the harvest is a metaphor for the coming apocalyptic war and the destruction of God’s enemies.

Proclaim this among the nations:

Consecrate for war,

stir up the mighty men...

Put in the sickle,

for the harvest is ripe

Go in, tread,

for the winepress is full.

The vats overflow

for their evil is great. (Joel 3:9, 13ESV)

Jesus is not abandoning the idea of great eschatological harvest in judgment, but he adds to another dimension that the faithful do not live in fear of judgment, but in the hope of a great harvest of eternal life.

II. How Do We Cultivate Spiritual Life?

What implications can we draw from the parable of the man and the growing seed? I would suggest that the three activities of the man in relation to the seed give us clues as to how we are to cultivate spiritual life.

A. Sowing the word

First, we learn that the kingdom grows by our extravagant sowing the word. It is the word Isaiah prophesied that goes forth from God’s mouth and will not return to him empty; but will accomplish the purpose for which he sent it. The seed of God’s word is divinely powerful for eternal life. It “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). It must not be tarnished by the opinions of men, nor diluted by modern day currents to be politically correct. It has no need to be neatly packaged and marketed for mass appeal, nor does it need

to be defended. It merely needs to be secretly sown in good soil and it will bear fruit, as Peter writes,

Since you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God...therefore, like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation. (1 Peter 1:23, 2:2)

That's why we are Peninsula Bible Church—the word of God is what gives life. This is why we exposit the word, why we have Bible studies and offer classes in Biblical languages.

B. Observing God at work until the harvest

Secondly, once the word is sown, the farmer adds nothing to it to aid its growth. He simply sows the seed and goes to sleep, then rises to observe what God has been doing, night and day, day and night until the harvest. During this lengthy period of waiting (Jas 5:7-8) — and waiting is so difficult! — he is being transformed as an *awestruck observer* of God at work in the life of the seed. The longer the wait for the harvest, the more adept he becomes at seeing the kingdom of God growing all around him until his life overflows with wonder and praise. This was new thinking for me: God is transforming us through our waiting to be awestruck observers of him working all around us in the ordinary stuff of life.

Last month I read the biography of one of my favorite poets, Denise Levertov. “She became what Kenneth Rexroth said was ‘the most subtly skillful poet of her generation...the most profound... and the most moving.’”⁵ In my conversations with Stanford professor John Felstiner, he acclaimed her as the master of the “line-break.” Her mother was Welsh, her father a Russian Jewish Christian scholar. Despite her Christian upbringing, she did not embrace Christianity, but she remained constantly attentive to wonder and mystery. At the age of 60 through a myriad of encounters with Christian writers and artists she felt herself gently pulled in a new direction.

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me—a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic.

.....

Not fear
but a stirring
of wonder makes me
catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it when I thought
it had loosened itself and gone.⁶

It was during her years teaching at Stanford in the 80's, that her commitment to faith took root and deepened—the result of many faithful sowers.

Whenever you read the gospels you can't help but grieve over those with hard hearts who were blind to the glory and awe and wonder that surrounded the life of Jesus. What strength and beauty Jesus Christ displayed in his career, as Matthew writes, “the blind receive sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them” (Matt 11:5). Yet many couldn't see it because they doubted God would fulfill his promise and they attempted “to force the coming of the Kingdom or to build it—by a revolution like the Zealots, by exact calculations of preparation like the Apocalyptists, or by complete obedience to the law like the Pharisees.”⁷ This parable is a stinging rebuke to their lack of faith in all those corners of Jewish leadership.

The parable should also make us feel unsettled. It is difficult to believe that the word will grow unaided by our efforts. Our lack of faith is evidenced in our tendency to exert control over those we nurture. Rather than acting like the man who goes to sleep, we look like anxious farmers who, unable to rest, sneak out into the fields by moonlight to dig up the seed and inspect the results. Though laden with good concern, we often do more harm than good and ruin any possibility of the divine work of integration. Control is supremely destructive to spiritual growth for it destroys the ability to see God at work for both the giver and the receiver.

The truth in our parable also calls into question the premier value of most of our occupations—the quest for speed. The pained pursuit and global competition to do things faster and faster has disrupted our rhythms of daily rest and robbed us of our ability to see God at work in our daily lives. Thinking we can overcome the toil, we get up earlier and go to bed later but sadly, as the psalmist writes, our attempts are vain.

**It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:2)**

All that we accomplish by burning the candle at both ends is to create oppressive work environments. For all that the world rewards us, we are only demonstrating our lack of faith, for “he gives to his beloved sleep.” Scanning the Scriptures, we discover that God gives us his best gifts when we are asleep. Adam received his wife after he went to sleep. Abraham was promised the land while he slept. David received God's promise of an eternal dynasty while he slept. Jesus finished his work by sleeping in a grave. And I find it interesting that when after a lengthy day of teaching, Jesus and his disciples set sail for the other side of the lake. When a storm rose and the sea began to fill up the boat, the disciples found Jesus fast asleep.

C. Being ready to harvest the fruit

In the parable the man who “puts in the sickle” when the harvest has come is the Lord who gathers the elect at the end of the age. But I would suggest there could be a secondary application. The term for “putting in” the sickle is the same root as the noun “apostle,” those “sent ones” whom Jesus sends out two by two in Mark 6:7. After the apostles sowed the word, they expected to reap spiritual fruit in peoples' lives. They did not determine what that fruit was, or when it would appear, but they knew it was coming. As Paul writes to the Colossians, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.” Once it appeared they felt a keen responsibility to harvest the fruit. This means when spiritual transformation occurred, it was publicly acknowledged, whether in baptism, public thanksgiving and praise in a worship service, or through the financial gifts. “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Cor 9:11 NIV). Thus the word was sown in expectation of fruit, and when it matured through the process of time it was sealed in appreciation. We ought never lose sight of this wonderful rhythm of seeing God at work and then praising his name, filled with the glory of Christ.

To illustrate the parable of the man and the growing seed I have asked my friend Daniel Kirchhofer to share his testimony:

Good morning. My name is Daniel Kirchhofer and I am the husband of Elsie who did the announcements today. Earlier this week, it was explained to me that certain events in my life are good illustrations for the parable you just heard. So, here I am to talk about these events that indeed changed my life. The main actors are persons

who truly cared for me and each one of them was throwing their seed on the soil of my heart. Many of them did not come to know what happened to the seed, but all of them trusted in the Lord that the harvest would come in his time.

My wife Elsie and I have been with PBC Cupertino for over 20 years and I was not a Christian when we started coming here. Therefore, the events I'll talk about go back 30 years. At that time, I was a research scientist and an atheist; today I'm still a research scientist but a believer, and this makes all the difference.

It all happened when Elsie and I lived in Basel, Switzerland. After getting settled, Elsie started to make new friends and found an English-speaking church. I reluctantly went along to the church services with her and our little girls, even though I was a convinced atheist and rejected Christianity flat out.

It all started with her parents giving me a Bible with my name engraved in golden letters. I thought this was over the top, but what could I say? Her father was a pastor of a Chinese church and I could not refuse the gift. So on Sundays, I brought my gold-engraved Bible to church and I started reading, just out of curiosity. Elsie's dad never checked up on me to see whether I was a good son-in-law who was reading the Bible, or whether my spiritual status was progressing.

The next seed thrower was a man named Dan Kidder. He was from North Carolina and worked for a pharmaceutical company and lived in Basel with his family. They went to the same church and he once asked me what kept me from becoming a believer. I told him that science is not compatible with Christianity and that Christianity would not live up to scientific scrutiny. He did not argue with me, but just said that I might be interested in a book written by a scientist, named Hugh Ross — *The Fingerprint of God*. It is about the relationship between Genesis and science written by an astrophysicist. He gave me the book and said he would be happy to answer questions or talk about it and then he stepped away. Of course, I read it and was fascinated. This started an entire literary quest during which I gobbled up many books about science and faith.

Then came the pastor of the church, Ellis Potter. I didn't like him very much, but he was very kind to me. He had me and Elsie over for dinner and he told me that I could ask him any questions I had, no matter how crazy or difficult. I peppered him with plenty of them and he answered honestly and competently. He told me about C.S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*, and stepped away. After planting the seed, he did not bother me or check up on my spiritual state, but he kept on caring for me and remained available.

Needless to say, I read the C. S. Lewis book with great interest. This led me to other apologetic authors such as Kreeft/Tacelli's *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, then to F. F. Bruce's *The Canon of Scripture*, and also to books written by scientists, such as John Polkinghorne's *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*. These writers were also seed throwers, even though they didn't know me. I am truly grateful to each one of them, as they all had a great impact on my growth from a small seedling to a strong plant.

The last sower I like to mention was not a person, but an organization called the American Scientific Affiliation. It is a society of scientists who share both a passion for science and a passion for Christ. They are mainly professors at US universities and colleges. Still being on the fence in the early 1990's I went to one of their annual meetings, which happened to be at the breathtaking campus of Pepperdine University

on the coast. This meeting turned into a most profound experience for me. There was the keynote lecture by Francis Collins, the scientist who at that time led the famous Human Genome Project and who later became the director of the National Institutes of Health. He certainly was a person I looked up to and deeply respected. I was truly moved when he told his "conversion story" and presented beautiful images of the human DNA to illustrate the awesomeness of God's creation. Then, I witnessed a bunch of grey-haired professors singing old hymns and sharing in their Christian faith.

This more or less did it for me. God's work was almost done, but none of the sowers knew about it as they kept on sleeping. Because the seed was thrown on tough soil, it took not just one season or two, but it took an agonizing 12 years for it to finally sprout, to establish firm roots and grow to be ready for the harvest.

I am truly grateful to these sowers and for being great examples to me on how to be a seed thrower myself. I am also grateful to those who came after them. There is no parable about them and I don't have a catchy name to encapsulate what they've done for me: they are the people of God who are helping me to buttress my faith. First and foremost, it is this church with its focus on strong orthodox teaching, the pastors and many of you in front of me, who have helped me to strengthen and deepen my faith. This keeps my roots strong and firm. The regular watering comes from deep friendships, including some really special nerds who share my passion for church history, New Testament Greek and studying the bible.

Now comes the final chapter of my seed story, when God brought forth the crown of golden grain. I finally came to accept Christ as my Lord and Savior during a communion service here at our church. To me it started as a normal Sunday morning, but God had probably waited long enough and gave me the final nudge when the communion elements passed by. I took the bread—the body of Christ—and then the cup—his blood of the New Covenant, which is poured out for me for the remission of my sins.

To God be all the Glory, amen.

1. Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), 209.
2. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs, All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 321.
3. Robert Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 220.
4. Judah Halevi, *An Argument for the Faith of Israel, The Kuzari* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 226-27.
5. Dana Greene, *Denise Levertov, A Poet's Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1.
6. Greene, *Denise Levertov, A Poet's Life*, 144.
7. R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (SHBC; Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007), 149.