

## Bible Study Guide: Week of 6-7-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

### Mark 4:26-34

<sup>26</sup>[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,<sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup>But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

<sup>30</sup>He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup>yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

<sup>33</sup>With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup>he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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This parable follows the equally familiar (if not more familiar) parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20). This parable is sometimes called the parable of the seed growing of itself. The “sower” here (if he or she can be called that—the Greek term is *anthropos*; literally “person”) is oddly passive. This is no master gardener. Even the word used here—“scatter”—is a harsh contrast with the more deliberate act of “sowing.” The Greek word for sowing seed is *speiro*. The term used for “scatter” here is *ballo*—literally to throw or toss. The image here is of someone who haphazardly threw seed onto the ground and then forgot about it, only to discover that nature provided an abundant harvest. The “sower” is more accurately referred to as the “reaper” or “harvester” because the only work done besides tossing seed out onto the soil is the work of going out into the field with the sickle. The harvester is opportunistic (or at least prudent) in choosing to harvest the surprising and sudden yield.

This parable, like most of the parables, does not have one single easily discerned meaning. An analogy (or parable) we might use to describe a parable is that a parable is not like a pearl, but rather is like a cut gemstone. A pearl is smooth-sided and easy to see clearly from any angle. It looks the same on all sides. By contrast, a cut gemstone has multiple facets and appears different depending on which angle one sees it from. In the same way, parables allow us to glimpse different viewpoints on the Kingdom of God, pondering it from different angles.

That being said, there are some strong themes in this parable that help us know how to begin to understand it. First, there is the theme of the automatic nature of the growth from seed to grain. “The earth produces of itself,” Jesus says. This takes place in spite of the person’s seeming inattentiveness. Further, there is the theme of mystery—the person doesn’t know how this growth happens. There is, finally, the theme of the urgency of the harvest once the grain has been revealed—the person “goes at once” to reap the bounty.

We must consider: In what way does this parable represent the kingdom of God? Is the “person” in the parable representative of God or of Jesus; of disciples or of people in the world? Or is this parable not functioning as an allegory at all? Likewise, does the seed represent the Word of God (as it did in the earlier parable of the sower), or does the seed represent something else? Does the harvest symbolize the end of days (as it does in the parable of the wheat and the weeds), or does the harvest represent a present-day fulfillment of the kingdom (as when Jesus tells the disciples that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few)? As you can see, there are many facets to consider and many possible ways this parable could describe the kingdom of God.

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This second parable is the parable of the mustard seed. Here, Jesus' focus seems to be on the transformation from small to large. Though to be sure Jesus is speaking hyperbolically to make a point. We know that mustard seeds are by no means the smallest seeds on earth. Nor are mustard shrubs the largest shrubs on earth. The contrast between the tiny and seemingly insignificant seed becoming a large and useful plant seems to be the primary theme here. Like the parable of the seed producing of itself, the parable of the mustard seed focuses on something unimpressive (seed "tossed out" or a tiny seed of mustard) resulting in something great and important (a mighty harvest or a sheltering plant). That is the secondary theme of this parable—the usefulness of the mustard shrub in sheltering the birds. The kingdom of God—that which others may reject out of hand because it seems unimpressive by worldly standards might be the very refuge that is needed in such a world.

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How interesting it is that Jesus spoke to the crowds exclusively in parables and only "as they were able to hear it." Jesus, evidently, put a great deal of faith in the crowds' ability to understand what he was teaching them. Further, he trusted them to do the hard work of pondering the parables and interpreting each facet of wisdom and truth conveyed by the parables. Even though he explained everything in private to his disciples, we see over and over that even these disciples didn't always understand what Jesus was teaching them. Again, I find it fascinating that Jesus puts that sort of faith and trust in disciples and crowds alike, sharing parables and teachings with them and trusting that their faith would be formed and strengthened.

#### **Discussion/Reflection Questions:**

- 1. In what way or ways do you interpret the parable of the seed producing of itself? In other words, what do you think Jesus is trying to tell us about the Kingdom of God through this parable?**
- 2. In what way or ways do you interpret the parable of the mustard seed? In other words, what do you think Jesus is trying to tell us about the Kingdom of God through this parable?**
- 3. Why do you think Jesus only taught the crowds using parables? Why do you think the disciples still didn't "get it" when Jesus explained everything to them in private?**