



# The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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## Part 10

### Mark 4:21-34

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# Review

## Mark 4:1-20

We have just finished studying the Parable of the Seeds.

This was identified, within the text itself, as being an important parable for understanding other Kingdom parables.

The entirety of 4:1-34 is a clearly designed collection of parables all relating to the Kingdom of God.

Three of these concern agricultural analogies – seeds in particular.

But the first concerns a lamp!

Remember that in 4:10-12, Mark had introduced the theme of “the secret of the Kingdom” – the secret that Jesus continues to reveal in the coming parables.

## Mark 4:21 (NIV)

He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”

“He said to them”

Who is the audience here?

“Them” could be the crowd from 4:1, or the disciples from 4:10.

More likely, it is the Twelve from 4:10, from the context of the “secret” ... so the audience here is likely DISCIPLES, not just everybody.

“bring in a lamp”

This is literally, “a lamp does not come in” – drawing a closer analogy to the “coming in” of the Kingdom of God than the English translation suggests.

“under a bowl or bed ... on its stand”

This draws the contrast between a lamp that is hidden or covered, and a lamp that is visible, as an image pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

# Mark 4:22-23

(NIV)

For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”

“whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed”

This verse is often used to describe a future judgment – the revealing of our personal hidden secrets or pasts.

But the context of the parable is about revealing the secret of the Kingdom, not Judgment Day!

The verse suggests that something HAS been hidden – something, like a lamp, that should NOT be hidden.

What has been hidden, until now, is the truth of what God’s Kingdom is like and how it will arrive!

So, this verse is actually good news, not a warning!

The secret of the Kingdom, that has been previously hidden (under a bowl or bed), is being revealed to humanity!

Remember that the expectation was that the “day of the LORD” would come abruptly.

By using seeds in these three primary parables, Jesus demonstrates that in fact, the Kingdom’s inbreaking will be something that grows over time.

Though up until now it has been hidden, NOW it is being brought out, made public, placed on a stand for everyone to see!

“let him hear”

Not as in “allow him to hear”, but rather, “he MUST hear”. The meaning is, essentially, “Listen up! Pay attention!”

## Mark 4:24 (NIV)

“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more.”

“Consider carefully what you hear”

This underscores the command to “Listen up!”

“With the measure you use ...”

The degree to which we invest in listening carefully is the degree to which we will be able to understand.

“and even more”

Actually, if we listen very carefully, we understand **MORE** than we would expect!

## Mark 4:25 (NIV)

“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”

“Whoever has ... whoever does not have”

The words contain both a warning and a promise.

The promise is an abundant understanding of the Kingdom, beyond both the knowledge already possessed and the expectation of understanding.

God WANTS to give us this understanding!

“taken away”

But the warning is – failure to respond to, or disregarding the message of the Kingdom will result in losing what you already have.

This recalls the parable of the seeds and losing the content of the seed by having it either snatched away or choked out.

## Mark 4:26 (NIV)

He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.”

4:26-29 contains The Parable of the Growing Seed, also known as The Parable of the Ignorant Sower.

This parable is unique to Mark’s Gospel, not found in any other.

Note that again, this parable and the next use a “seed” as the core image of the parable.

“kingdom of God”

This is now the third of four Kingdom parables.

“a man scatters seed”

This puts the focus, first, on the seed that is spread.

# Mark 4:27-29

(NIV)

“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. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

“the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how”

The lack of understanding on the part of the sower is key to the parable.

Remember that “lack of understanding” has been a theme of the Gospel ever since the verses in 4:13 and 4:21-23.

“All by itself”

The sower himself is not actually ACTIVE in the parable in making the seed grow – and yet it grows and matures!

Part of the point here is that the man has NOTHING to do with it.

“as soon as the grain is ripe”

Nevertheless, the seed grows into a fully mature grain.

“he puts the sickle to it”

The sower is now active again!

He harvests the crop, preparing it for its ultimate purpose – which is assured of reaching its consummation.

# Mark 4:27-29

(NIV)

“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. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The POINT of the Parable of the Growing Seed:

The Kingdom of God grows by God’s work, not ours.

We sow seeds of the Kingdom, but OUR efforts are not required or involved in its growth – in a person, or in the world. That is God’s work. Even though we often act as if we do affect spiritual outcomes. Sometimes we try to take control of another’s spirituality and MAKE it happen.

The mystery of the Kingdom in this parable, what we can’t understand, is HOW it grows ... but it WILL grow, and reach its consummation. We can sow and reap, but we cannot create spiritual growth or Kingdom growth.

This does not deny that there are wise and foolish ways of sowing and reaping, or that the environments and opportunities we provide have a role – but all of that is SOWING. We cannot actually CREATE a spiritual life.

Paul also speaks to this in his first letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 – “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (NIV)

# Mark 4:30-32

(NIV)

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 seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

Note the movement in this parable from SMALL to LARGE.

This is how God works!

The vision for the great nation of Israel begins with an old man and a barren woman (Genesis 15:1-6).

Israel’s royal lineage begins with David, the youngest and smallest of Jesse’s sons (1 Samuel 16:1-13).

God typically uses the weak, sick, inferior, young, and poor to do his great work (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

The Parable of the Mustard Seed, too, shows the small and insignificant doing great things!

# Mark 4:30-32

(NIV)

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 seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

“Kingdom of God”

This is the final Kingdom parable in this series.

“mustard seed”

Proverbially, in Jewish folklore, it represented the smallest seed.

It was a symbol of smallness, and it had a negative ring to it, as seen in Jesus’ usage in Matthew:

Matthew 17:20 – “He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.’” (NIV)

“smallest seed you plant”

Technically, not true ... but the parable uses the common symbol of smallness.

“largest of all garden plants”

In Greek, it is closer to “of all herbs”.

It grew to 8-10 feet in height, large for a garden plant.

“with such big branches”

The words contrast the smallness of the seed.

Luke’s parallel version says “becomes a tree”.

# Mark 4:30-32

(NIV)

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 seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

“birds of the air can perch in its shade”

This is an Old Testament reference!

Ezekiel 17:22-24 – “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and place it on a high and lofty mountain. 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. All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” (NIV)

Therefore, “birds” here may represent all the nations of the world, as in Ezekiel.

POINT of the Parable of the Mustard Seed

Again remember the expectation of an abrupt, sudden, arrival of the Kingdom in its fullness – but the inbreaking they see in Jesus’ day is small, infinitesimal ... but will be great, encompassing all nations, when its fullness arrives.

Also, the mustard plant did not have a great reputation – something of an invasive pest that was hard to uproot or control. The Kingdom of God will be similar.

ALL of the Kingdom parables contrast the present and future dimensions of the Kingdom.

# Mark 4:33-34

(NIV)

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 a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

These verses are a concluding summary, bringing this section of parables to a close.

“many similar parables”

This closes out the section beginning in 4:2.  
These parables have been a mere subset!

“as much as they could understand”

Again continuing the theme of difficulty understanding from 4:12.

“without using a parable”

See 4:11 – to those on the outside everything is said in parables.

“he explained everything”

This implies that the disciples continued to not quite get it from the parables alone, without Jesus’ help in articulating their meanings.



## Bibliography

The following materials have been used as sources for this Bible study:

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