

The Parables of the Grain and Mustard Seed

The Gospel of Mark #17

Mark 4:26-34

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they pour forth knowledge. They have no speech; they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth. For the heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

There are well over 100 billion stars in the Milky Way. When God said, “let there be light,” he assigned each star to a specific location and called them by name. When God spoke our world into existence, he saw fit to tilt the earth on an axis of 23 degrees. That’s why we have winter, spring, summer, and fall. If the earth had not been tilted exactly as it is, the vapors from the oceans would move both north and south, piling up vast continents of ice. If the moon was only 50 thousand miles away from the earth, instead of 250 thousand, the ocean tides would be so enormous that all the continents on our planet would be submerged in water and the mountains would be eroded. If the crust of the earth was only 10 feet thicker than it is, the land would be deprived of oxygen and all animal life would die. The earth weighs 6 sextillion tons. That’s a 6 with 21 zeroes. Yet the earth is perfectly balanced and turns easily on its axis. It rotates daily at the rate of more than 1000 miles per hour for 25,000 miles each day and 9 million miles each year. Considering the tremendous weight of this planet rolling at this fantastic speed, that also just happens to be held into place by unseen gravitational forces on an invisible axis, I would venture to say that God has the universe under control. He’s had the whole world in his hands since He spoke it into existence, quite literally. And he sustains it by grace with each second that passes.

People of God, you are going to see from two parables this morning that the Kingdom of Heaven works the same way. He’s got your whole life, both physically and spiritually, in His hands. And it spins perfectly on the invisible axis that is the Providence of God. God really is in control. When Jesus said: “let there be the Gospel,” and you heard it and responded to it in the right way, the Word of the Lord, which is sharper than any two-edged sword, fell on the fertile ground of your heart. We saw that in the Parable of the Sower and the Soils. After you responded to the Gospel in the right way, the Light of the World sent his light into your heart. You are now the lampstand. And we, the people of God, are now the city on a hill that cannot be hidden, entrusted by Jesus to shine His Gospel light into the world. We saw that last week in the Parable of the Lamp and Lampstands. Today we are going to see two of the most applicable parables about the Kingdom of Heaven in the entire New Testament. Here’s why they are applicable: they teach us not only how God is in control of every aspect of our spiritual lives, just like the universe. They also teach us what it is that is up to in our lives. What He is bringing about. And precisely how He goes about bringing it about what He has ordained for us before we even took our first breath.

So here is why you need to listen this morning: we often give intellectual and verbal ascent to the fact that God is in control. What we struggle with, however, is resting in the fact that God is in control. And the reason we struggle with it is quite simple: we really believe we must do something to bring about “so on earth as it is in heaven” into existence. You are going to see today in the Parable of the Grain and Mustard Seed that we don’t. God does. He controls the whole process. Our only responsibility is to spread the seed and rest in the assurance that the Word of God doesn’t return void. As a result, God has four lessons for us today about His control that we can apply to our lives from the Parables of the Grain and Mustard Seed. To see them, please turn with me to Mark 4:26-34.

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” ³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² 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.” ³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

Four Lessons about God’s Control from the Parables of the Grain and the Mustard Seed

1. God writes the script; and you have a part (4:26, 29, 32).

- **Famous One-Liners** — (1) Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship (Casablanca); (2) They call me Mister Tibbs! (In the Heat of the Night); (3) Elementary, my dear Watson (Sherlock Holmes); (4) What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate (Cool Hand Luke); (5) You’ve got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do you, punk? (Dirty Harry). (6) You know what those are: famous one-liners, of course. They are just one line from famous motion pictures that helped make the movie famous.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** The Kingdom of Heaven is the work of God, brought about by God. It’s God going about the business of ushering in “on earth as it is in heaven” and seeing it to its full completion. But in that provident script of God’s control, we do play a part.

- **Textual Emphasis: A Lot Going on in the Parables and the Role We Play:** (1) There's a lot going on in both parables. (2) In the first one, the grain sprouts and grows. Eventually, it produces a stalk, then a head, then a full kernel. All which God made possible. (3) In the second, the mustard seed grows, then becomes the largest of plants, then expands with big branches. (4) But did you notice how both parables begin? In the first, "a man scatters seed on the ground" (4:26) then returns plays a part in the harvest (4:29). In the second, the mustard seed gets planted. Someone puts it in the ground (4:32) and then the process begins.
- **App:** When it comes to the control of God, it's not "my hands are completely off." Instead, it is: "I do what God requires and He will do the rest."

2. God writes the script; and parts of it are mysterious (27).

- **Funny Answer on an Exam:** (1) Several years ago, I taught an Old Testament survey class in a local seminary. I knew from the first day it would be an interesting year as there several "cut up" personalities in the class. (2) My suspicion was confirmed on the final exam. One of my questions on the exam was this one: How does the Book of Deuteronomy shape the narrative of Joshua-Kings? (3) It solicited this response from one of those personalities: "only God knows the answer to this question. Merry Christmas." (4) To which I responded, then God gets an "A." You get an "F." Happy New Year."
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Some ways God brings the Kingdom of Heaven about in our lives are clear, like "faith that comes first by hearing." But many of the ways God works in our lives are mysterious, just like what we observe in nature.
- **Textual Emphasis: The Mysterious Domains in the Ancient World:** (1) We know now through scientific inquiry what the ancients didn't. (2) In their world, the skies above, the ground below, and the depths of the oceans were so mysterious that pagans developed "gods for them that defined their way of life. (3) The pagans thought (a) Zeus to be the "god of the sky and lightning was his way of demonstrating that; (b) They thought Poseidon was the "god of the sea and storms were his way of demonstrating that; (c) They thought Hades was the "god underneath the earth and earthquakes were his way of demonstrating that. (4) But here, Jesus takes the concept of mystery the ancients believed, removes the negative connotations of mystery and judgment, and inserts mystery and growth. And implies that the King of Heaven is the one who brings these things about. (5) Night and day the farmer gets up and does nothing here. He's only planted the seed. Yet, the seed sprouts and grows. It's a mystery. And it is a good one.
- **App:** The hardest moments to trust God are those moments we don't understand. But it is in those moments when we must take to heart: "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts and ways higher than yours, says the Lord."

3. God writes the script; and doesn't rush the progression (31-32).

- **The First Rule of Cooking and My Rule of Cooking:** (1) Any good cook will tell you that to make something good and tasty in the oven, you must use low heat for a longer period. That means 250 means 250. (2) But Derrick's rule is different: when you want to make something good and tasty in the oven, and it calls for 250 for a long period of time, then 450 will cut that time in half. (3) You know how the story ends.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** God doesn't rush the process of how he grows you in his life. It's not instantaneous. It's gradual and leads to the intended outcome because He controls the whole process.
- **Textual Emphasis: The Growth of the Mustard Seed:** (1) To drive this point home, he uses the image of the mustard seed. (2) It's quite small, one of the smallest seeds of any plant. (3) Then a combination of light, water, and good soil that's devoid of weeds allows that seed to germinate. (4) And then over time, it grows into a large shrub that over ten feet tall. (5) But it doesn't get that way overnight. Nor does it get that way by skipping any point of the growth process. (6) The point he makes is that the Kingdom of God, something that is big and blest, had the humblest of beginnings. Our lives work the exact same way.
- **App:** You can be sure in your life that He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. But you can also be sure He won't rush the process.

4. God writes the script; and concludes it with an exclamation (29; 32).

- **Punctuation Marks in Books about God:** (1) Whenever I buy a book that deals with a theological concept of some kind, I always turn to the conclusion first, not the forward. I then look at the last sentence. (2) If it ends with a period, I might read it. But I better be sure to scan it before I buy it because that tells me the writer might lack passion. (3) If it ends with a question mark, I probably won't read it because the writer isn't sure himself or herself. (4) But if it ends in an exclamation point, it's a must buy for me. Why? What's contained in the pages has led to a climatic, important conclusion.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Because God is in control, we can be sure He will work all things to their intended conclusion, with an exclamation mark.
- **Textual Emphasis: The Parables Endings:** (1) In the Parable of the Grain, the intended conclusion is the ripeness of the grain. That's why the grain was planted. (2) Jesus then adds the image of judgment to say that not every seed sown turns to grain. Not everyone who hears the Word responds appropriately. And on that day, God will deal with that rejection of the Gospel appropriately. Both the ripeness and the judgment are exclamations. (3) In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus concludes with birds perching on the tree's branches. That's the intended conclusion. (4) Put them both together and you have this: (1) God plants for ripeness. He plants for the benefit of birds to sit in the shade. That's what he is up to in our lives: growth in us to be that city on a hill to extend grace and announce the news of the soon approaching sickle.
- **App:** The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. So do we. He writes the script. We play a part. But He leads it to His intended conclusion. Amen. Praise the Lord.

