

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED

Mark 4:21-34

Key Verse 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.

Today's passage is about the kingdom of God, which is the central theme of Jesus' teaching. The first message of Jesus in the beginning of his ministry was: ***"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news"*** (Mk 1:15). Jesus taught the kingdom of God in parables during his ministry on the earth. Moreover, Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God when he resurrected from the dead and stayed with his disciples for the period of forty days (Acts 1:3). Therefore, the kingdom of God is the most important theme of the gospel ministry of Jesus. Then, what is the kingdom of God? How do you define it? A Bible dictionary defines the kingdom of God as "the kingly rule of God in the lives of people and nations," referring to the recognition of the authority of God rather than a geographical area.¹ The kingdom of God comes into being wherever the kingly authority of God is acknowledged by believing in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God came near when Jesus Christ who is the Son of God came to the world in order to suffer and die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. The kingdom of God becomes true in us when we repent of our sins, believe in Jesus, and are born again of water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5). When the kingdom of God comes to us, we are ruled by God with his peace, justice, forgiveness, love, joy, humility, and fruitfulness. Our lives will be transformed into the image of God and filled with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. We will be fruitful, just as the good soil produces a hundred-fold crop.

There was a man who cheated on his wife and was on the verge of getting divorced. His life would be ruined completely, and his wife and children were suffering due to his sins. When they were under the rule of the Satan, God had mercy on them and invited them to the kingdom of God. At a Summer Bible

¹ This definition is quoted from *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (Logos Bible Software).

Conference in Venezuela around 20 years ago, the man repented sincerely of his sins in front of his wife and children. The forgiveness of Jesus moved all their hearts, and they began to cry hugging one another. The kingdom of God came to this family filling them with the love and peace of Jesus Christ. Their lives were changed by the power of God. They began to serve God and have been faithful and fruitful during the last 20 years, ministering at a UBF chapter in Venezuela. This is what happens when the kingdom of God comes to us.

Today we can learn more about the kingdom of God through a lamp on a stand, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed.

First, a lamp on a stand (21-25)

In this teaching of Jesus, we can find four wisdom sayings that Jesus employed: ***“Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”*** (21); ***“For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open”*** (22); ***“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more”*** (24b); and ***“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them”*** (25). The Jews were familiar with these sayings as Americans are familiar with wisdom sayings such as: “Each day provides its own gifts,” “Diligence is the mother of good luck,” “Arrogance is a kingdom without a crown,” and so on. Also, we can find two exhortations here: ***“If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear”*** (23) and ***“Consider carefully what you hear”*** (24a). Here are two metaphors: the first metaphor (vv. 21-23) concludes with ***“if anyone has ears to hear, let them hear,”*** whereas the second metaphor (vv. 24-25) begins with ***“consider carefully what you hear”*** (24a). Therefore, we can discover that these two exhortations are located in the center as the central message of this teaching of Jesus.

Verse 21 consists of two rhetorical questions: ***“Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand?”*** To put a lamp under a bowl or a bed would be illogical because the purpose of the lamp is to give light to the whole room. Hence, the lamp must be put on its stand. “Lamp” serves as a metaphor in different ways in the Bible. In 2 Sam 22:29 ***“You, Lord, are my lamp; the Lord turns my darkness into light,”*** the lamp is God. In Psalm 119:105 ***“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path,”*** the lamp is the word of God. Therefore, to put the lamp on its stand means that Jesus reveals the secret of the kingdom of God to the world. However, the kingdom of God is hidden and concealed to some people, contrary to the expectation of the lamp. It is not because Jesus hid the kingdom of God from them, but because people could

not find the kingdom of God for the lack of their spiritual desire. I believe that God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). Accordingly, the kingdom of God is hidden to those who do not seek God, whereas it is disclosed to those who seek God with all their hearts.

Therefore, it is imperative for us to consider carefully what we hear if we want to enter deeply into the kingdom of God (24a). **“Consider carefully what you hear!”** (24a) “Consider carefully” is *Βλέπετε* in Greek, which means see, look at, think about, consider, etc. The English Standard Version translates it “pay attention to what you hear.” To consider carefully what you hear means to hear the word of God, meditate on it day and night, understand it, retain it, recite it, and put it into practice as a good soil. What benefit can we receive when we consider carefully what we hear or what we read about the kingdom of God? Jesus says, **“With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them”** (24b, 25). This saying teaches us that we can understand and enter into the kingdom of God to the degree that we pay careful attention to the word of God. The kingdom of God will grow more and more in us if we consider carefully the word of God. On the other hand, the kingdom of God will be taken from us if we do not pay careful attention to the word of God. Therefore, to consider carefully what we hear or read is a basic attitude that we must have before the word of God.

I was an atheist who did not have ears to hear the word of God. I argued a lot with my Christian friends, those who tried to evangelize me, and my one-to-one Bible teacher, saying that there is no God. Hence, I could not experience God’s reign in my life and lived in darkness with sadness and anxiety. However, Jesus had mercy on me and shed light on my darkness with the lamp of the kingdom of God. At a Summer Bible Conference in 1989, the Holy Spirit worked powerfully in me through the word of God, convincing me of my sins and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ who died on the cross. I repented of my sins and accepted Jesus as my Savior, then the kingdom of God came to me with great joy and peace. My spiritual eyes and ears were opened to the kingdom of God with great desire to know Jesus more and more. The word of God became sweeter than honey to my mouth (Psalm 119:103). I began to consider carefully the word of God through Daily Bread and Sunday message testimony writings. I tried to discipline myself meditating on the word of God with my eyes closed during 5 minutes in the beginning, later 10 minutes, later 30 minutes until I could concentrate myself on the word of God. Sometimes my Bible testimonies were much longer than Sunday sermons. When I considered carefully the word of God and tried to put it into practice, I could enter into the kingdom of God deeper and deeper. I believe that God has blessed my life to be fruitful like a tree planted by streams of water so far

because I have enjoyed meditating on the word of God. I pray that God blesses all of us to consider more carefully the word of God, enter into the kingdom of God more deeply, and be more fruitful for the glory of God.

Second, the parable of the growing seed (26-29)

Interestingly, the parable of the growing seed is not recorded in the other gospel books but is exclusive to Mark's gospel. Another interesting point is that the verbs in this parable are used in the present tense such as 'a man *scatters*,' 'he *sleeps* or *gets up*,' 'the seed *sprouts* and *grows*,' 'he *does* not know,' 'the soil *produces* grain,' 'the grain *is* ripe,' 'he *puts* the sickle to it,' and 'the harvest *has* come.' The use of the present tense is intentional for the purpose of describing that the kingdom of God is in the present and in progress. The growth of the kingdom of God is depicted with three processes: first, scattering or sowing (26b); second, growing (27, 28); third, harvest (29). This parable is similar to the parable of the sower in terms of scattering seeds, growing, and harvest; however, there is no mention of good or bad soil, nor the sun or rain in this parable. Also, the farmer's normal task of plowing, fertilizing, and tilling is not considered. What the farmer does is to sleep or get up; however, the seed sprouts and grows, though the farmer does not know how. The farmer appears again when the grain is ripe for the harvest. It is fantastic! Imagine that you plant a seed of mango in the backyard of your house, and you do not need to take care of it, you just sleep and get up, but the seed sprouts, grows, bears delicious mangoes by itself, and you pick it, eat it, and enjoy it! Isn't it fantastic? But the point of this parable is not to say that the farmer does not need to do anything for the growth of the seed. Also, it does not say that other conditions such as soil, sun, rain are not necessary. The point is that the seed, which stands for the word of God, has vitality to grow and produce crops all by itself. The kingdom of God grows all by itself, which means that the Triune God is working for the growth of the kingdom regardless of human efforts. God is the main actor for the growth of the kingdom, while we are the supporting actors who have to join God's kingdom work faithfully, just as the farmer scatters seeds and puts the sickle to the grain for harvest. Because God is working hard for the growth of His kingdom, we can scatter the word of God with faith expecting the harvest in God's time. Galatians 6:9 says, ***"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."***

I was told that college ministry in the US is very difficult to bear fruit. A research reports that two-thirds of American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager dropped out for at least

a year between the ages of 18 and 22.² The top five reasons for dropping out church are: first, I moved to college and stopped attending church (34%); second, church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical (32%); third, I didn't feel connected to people in my church (29%); fourth, I disagreed with the church's stance on political/social issues (25%); and fifth, my work responsibilities prevented me from attending (24%). The research analyzes that many young people leave the church when they move to college because they had not embraced Christian faith deeply. This reality confirms the difficulty of college ministry in the United States. However, we do not have to worry about it because we believe that God is working hard for the growth of His kingdom in America and the world. Some have not experienced the work of God yet because they have not believed in God. Unbelief is the enemy of the kingdom of God. What we have to do is to scatter the word of God diligently, co-work with God preparing an environment of faith among us, and harvest faithfully in God's time. Do you know that Chicago is the third largest college city in the US with more than 500,000 students at more than 60 universities and colleges?³ This means that numerous young college students in the Chicago area are leaving their faith in God now. I pray that we may be faithful farmers who scatter the word of God diligently by faith even in this challenging time of the pandemic. Then, the kingdom of God will grow by itself among those who receive the word of God from us. And we will harvest in God's time.

Third, the parable of the mustard seed (30-32)

This parable of the mustard seed starts with double questions: *“What shall we say the kingdom of God is like?”* *“What parable shall we use to describe it?”* Now, Jesus uses the mustard seed in order to describe the kingdom of God. The main role of the mustard seed in this parable is a contrast between the smallest seed of all seeds on earth and the largest of all garden plants (31, 32). Some may dispute saying that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed of all seeds on earth using their botanical knowledge. A website tells that the smallest seed in the world is epiphytic orchid seed in the tropical rainforest.⁴ Then, was Jesus wrong and does the Bible lose veracity because of this parable? No! What we have to remember is that Jesus was not giving botanical knowledge to the people, but a knowledge of the kingdom of God using the parable of the mustard seed. The Jews in the time of

² Aaron Earls, “Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church as Young Adults,” Lifeway Research, Jan 15, 2019, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>

³ Bloomberg CityLab, “The Reality of America’s College Towns,” September 8, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-08/america-s-biggest-college-towns>

⁴ <https://diogenesii.wordpress.com/2007/06/22/what-is-the-smallest-seed-in-the-world/>

Jesus thought that the mustard seed was the smallest seed, hence Jesus used it to explain an important characteristic of the kingdom of God. The main point of Jesus is that the kingdom of God starts small, even smallest in the world; however, it grows to be the largest in the world to the point that the birds can perch in the shade of its branches. The birds can represent different things, but I believe that this idea of birds came from Ezekiel 17:23 ***“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.”*** In the book of Ezekiel, “the birds” stand for the gentiles of all nations. The vision of Ezekiel was the restoration of the kingdom of God and its expansion from Jerusalem to all nations of the world. Likewise, the parable of the mustard seed gives us the vision of the expansion of the kingdom of God to all nations so that all people in the world can take rest in the shade of God’s kingdom. Furthermore, this vision will be fulfilled completely when Jesus comes again to the earth, which is the consummation of the kingdom of God.

The gospel ministry of Jesus started small with his twelve disciples at a small town in Galilee, Israel. But this small ministry expanded to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Asia, Rome, Europe, and all over the world. Currently, Christianity is the largest religion in the world with 2.4 billion people identifying as Christian. Our UBF ministry started small in a small-town Kwang-ju, South Korea by Dr. Samuel Lee and Mother Sarah Barry. But this small ministry expanded to Seoul, South Korea, Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America, CIS, Africa, Oceania, and the Middle East. Currently, UBF is one of the largest missionary sending agencies in South Korea with around 1,500 Korean and non-Korean missionaries working in around 90 countries. How could this happen? I believe that it could happen because we were faithful with small one-to-one Bible studies, small prayer meetings, and raising one man and woman of faith as disciples of Jesus with a shepherd heart. I believe that the Holy Spirit can work in different ways, such as converting three thousand people in a day as apostle Peter did. However, I also believe that it is essential for a disciple-making ministry to be faithful with small one-to-one Bible study and raising one man and one woman of faith.

My favorite book of the Bible is Acts of the apostles, especially chapter 19 where apostle Paul starts disciple-making ministry in Ephesus. Paul found some disciples of John the Baptist who had not received the Holy Spirit in Ephesus. He helped them to be baptized in the name of Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit through prayer. Paul started his disciple-making ministry with these twelve men by teaching them the word of God every day for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Then, the word of God was preached to all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia. The kingdom of God expanded so strongly that evil

spirits were driven out and the idolatrous culture was transformed into a Christ-centered culture. Furthermore, Paul saw the vision of God to evangelize the world saying, *“After I have been there, I must visit Rome also”* (Acts 19:21).

This disciple-making ministry of apostle Paul became a good model for my work for God in Venezuela. When my wife and I started a disciple-making ministry in Venezuela, we worked faithfully with one-to-one Bible studies and prayers. In 1998, the Holy Spirit worked powerfully among us at a Summer Bible Conference. One college student confessed her sins sincerely and repented. Then, most of the participants began to repent of their sins and accepted Jesus as their Savior. We started discipleship with those who received the Holy Spirit. Then, our small ministry began to grow. When we prayed for 30 participants of Sunday Worship Service, God filled our hall with more than 30 people. We moved to a bigger place and prayed for 60 participants. God filled our hall with more than 60 people. Then, we moved to a bigger place and prayed for 100 participants. When we prayed for 100 people, my wife worried because we would have more problems. But she believed and God sent us more than 100 people to our ministry. In this way, God’s kingdom expanded to five cities in Venezuela and other countries as well by Venezuelan local leaders.

Sometimes, we think that God’s kingdom is losing its territory, especially in the Western world such as Europe and North America. However, God never sleeps, but works hard for the completion of His kingdom. The kingdom of God is expanding rapidly in the non-Western world and the redemptive history of God is in progress to be completed. Therefore, we need to discern what God is doing among us and participate actively in God’s mission. I believe that God is working among us and inviting us to join his redemptive work. I pray that we continue to be faithful with our small one-to-one and group Bible studies. May we pray faithfully for the expansion and completion of the kingdom of God. Then, the kingdom of God will continue to grow in us to be great so that many people of all nations can come and find shelter in its shade through us. Amen.