

The Powerful Word of God (Just Keep Sowing)

Parables in Mark: Part 5
Mark 4:26-34 7/22/2018

Summary: The kingdom began shockingly small, but, like a seed, had great power to produce imperceptible growth, automatic growth, and mysterious growth that will result in the glorious, eternal kingdom. As the farmer can't cause growth to happen, neither can man cause spiritual growth to happen. Our role is indispensable, however. Seed doesn't grow unless it's sown. We must not become discouraged in the work of sowing.

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Mark 4:26 He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man throws 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.”¹

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 seed you plant in the ground. **32** 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.”

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.

¹ This is one of the few passages, and the only parable in Mark without a parallel in Matthew or Luke.

Introduction

They say power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And we've certainly seen plenty of examples of that in the world—someone gets into a position of great political power and very quickly becomes corrupt. But today I want to tell you about a power that is greater than any monarch or dictator or king has ever had in this world, and yet it's a power that never corrupts. In fact, just the opposite; it makes people better. This power that I'm talking about is the power source behind the kingdom of God. Throughout the OT, God promised that someday his Messiah would reign over the whole world in power and great glory and there would be no more rebellion, no more sin or suffering or sickness or death, no more evil—the whole creation would be transformed and all nations would worship the true God. Think of the massive power that will be required to bring all that about. It's a power unlike anything in this world. It makes a nuclear bomb look like a firecracker. And we're going to see today how you can get your hands on that awesome power and unleash it in your life and in the lives of people around you.

It's About the Kingdom

Today we're going to take a look at the next two parables, which are both about the kingdom of God. Mark 4:26 He also said, **“This is what the kingdom of God is like.** And look down at the next one in v.30. **30 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?** Jesus is searching and fetching in his mind to find what he could use from the natural world to illustrate what the kingdom of God would be like. After the words, “The kingdom of God is like...” they would have expected the most spectacular description possible. Someone in the crowd might have offered some suggestions. Maybe compare it to the coronation of a mighty king with marching bands and fanfare and all the glorious regalia? Or something really powerful—a hurricane, an earthquake, a tidal wave, a volcano. And Jesus says, “No, the best illustration I can think of for the great, glorious, eternal kingdom of God is ... a seed.”

A seed? A seed isn't very powerful, is it? Actually, it is.

26 ... A man throws 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.”

The seed doesn't look very powerful, but it has within it the power to produce life and growth and ultimately a harvest. There is tremendous power in the seed. Look at the next parable.

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 seed you plant in the ground. 32 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.”

That imagery of a tree where the birds nest in the branches is used multiple times in the OT to describe a vast empire², and the birds represent other nations that find their place and shelter in that empire.³ Jesus is talking about a seed that has within it the power to grow up and dominate the entire world.

The Power of the Gospel

And what is the seed? He told us back in v.14.

² See Ezekiel 17:22-23, Ezekiel 31, and Daniel 4.

³ Ezekiel 31:6.

Mark 4:14 The farmer sows the word.⁴

The power that creates this amazing kingdom is in the word of Christ—the gospel. Imagine how that would have hit Jesus’ followers at the time. “Oh, you’re the Messiah! You’re the one who’s going to establish the glorious, eternal kingdom of God. Wow. How are you going to do that, Jesus? You don’t have anything. You don’t have any money, you don’t have any political power or connections. We pull out our swords and you tell us to put them away. We don’t have any army, we don’t have any numbers. What do we have? A teacher. Who dies. What does that leave us with? The only tool we have to conquer evil and transform the whole world is our story about how our teacher died and rose again. That, and his teachings. This is how we’re going to transform the world? Twelve men and a story? We’re just going to go out there and talk to people? And tell them a story and tell them to believe it, and then they will get mad and kill us. And most of them will reject it, but a few will accept it, and many of those few will get choked out or withered away. That’s the big plan? That’s how this kingdom comes?” Nobody saw that coming.

The Way the Kingdom Grows

Small Beginnings

They expected the kingdom to come like a bolt of lightning—the final, glorious form all at once. But Jesus said, “No, it begins like a seed, in fact, the smallest⁵ of seeds. A mustard seed. Those are really small. It takes about 20,000 mustard seeds to make an ounce. Looking at one, you would not expect it to produce the largest plant in the garden. The kingdom of God was to begin very, very small—12 guys and a story.

Imperceptible Growth

But then... **27 ... the seed sprouts and grows.** The germination happens underground. The farmer goes out the next day and all he sees is a bunch of dirt. That’s how the word of God works in people’s hearts.⁶ It’s invisible. Subtle, small, undetectable changes take place under the surface, unseen by anyone.

⁴ The illustrations in parables do not always keep the same meaning from parable to parable. For example, the birds in the parable of the Sower represent Satan, and the birds in the parable of the mustard seed represent the nations. However, since Mark had just given a parable where the seed is the word, followed immediately by another very similar parable, and there is nothing in the context that would indicate any change in the meaning of the seed, it’s likely that the meaning of the seed remains constant across the two parables.

⁵ The critics have tried to use that as proof that there are mistakes in the Bible, because technically, there are smaller seeds than that in existence. People who make arguments like that don’t understand language. It was a saying—like today if someone says, “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.” When we use that saying people don’t jump up and say, “Ah ha! You made an error. Studies have shown that women are more attached to family than they are to diamonds, so you made a mistake.” Common sayings and figures of speech are intended to convey a particular idea, not to be pressed into extreme literalism. The saying about diamonds just means women tend to really like diamonds a lot, which is true. And the saying about mustard seeds simply meant that mustard seeds were really, really tiny, which is true.

⁶ Is this parable describing the work of God’s word in the hearts of individual people, like in the previous parable? Or is it a description of the progress of the kingdom as a whole through history, as in the following parable? I think there is an element of both. In the parable of the sower, the reader is thinking of the seed as the word and the soil as the heart. Mark then immediately gives this parable with a sower and seed and gives no reason to assume any change in the imagery. (The only part of the parable that might hint of more of a historical view is the apparent allusion to Joel 3, where the judgment is described in terms of a harvest.) With the parable of the mustard seed, however, there is a reason to take it differently. The seed is specified as a certain kind of seed, the soil is irrelevant, and the emphasis on size seems more suited to the kingdom than to the work of the word in someone’s heart. It seems to me that this parable is a bridge between the two, showing how the unfolding of the kingdom in history is a function of the growth of God’s word in people’s hearts. As the word produces its harvest in individual hearts, the kingdom as a whole progresses. The kingdom is not mainly an organization. Rather, it is the fruit of countless changed hearts. See James 1:21.

I've heard people ridicule preaching by saying, "Sermons don't really change anybody. Acts of kindness and love are what really have an impact, not lectures. People don't even remember sermons." But when people make that argument, they are forgetting this parable. The proclamation of God's word has mighty power to establish the kingdom of God in people's hearts, but it's slow, and it's imperceptible at first. Of course people can't recall all the points of all the sermons they have heard from memory. What happens is they hear a sermon, and it hits them in a certain way and adjusts the course of their attitude toward that principle by one degree. They have a slightly different perspective on the holiness of God, or repentance, or the Second Coming—just a slight adjustment in their attitude or way of thinking about that subject. And in another sermon, another slight adjustment. But the changes are so subtle, you can't even see them from day to day—just like a growing plant

Just because you can't see the progress doesn't mean it's not happening. A friend of mine told me how this happened in her life. She thought she was a believer but wasn't. And one day someone at church challenged her with one sentence, questioning whether she was saved. The woman just said one sentence. My friend was offended and left the church and never spoke to that woman again for 6 years. But she told me later that during that entire 6 years that one sentence kept coming back to her, again and again, until finally, 6 years later, she realized she wasn't truly saved, she repented, and became a true Christian. To everyone on the outside she looked like dead soil. But underneath, that tiny little seed was doing its work changing her heart. That's how the word of God works. The more people's hearts are moved and changed by the word, the more they submit to God, and the more the kingdom of God—the reign of God over mankind, grows.

Automatic Growth

And again, where does the power come from? Not the farmer.

28 All by itself the soil produces grain

The Greek word translated **all by itself** is *automata*.⁷ It's automatic. Where is the farmer? He's in bed.

27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows

What he's saying is, "It doesn't matter where the farmer is. He can be in bed, he can be awake, he can go to the movies—that seed is going to do its thing on its own. No farmer has the power to make anything grow. He waters it and fertilizes it and all the rest, but none of that causes growth. And if you doubt that, try doing those things to anything but a seed. Take your cell phone and put it in the dirt and dump water on it and fertilizer, and see if it grows. Do that with a rock or a spare tire or a dollar bill or anything else in the world, and all you're doing is littering.

Mysterious Growth

The farmer definitely has a crucial role—we'll talk about that at the end. But he has no power whatsoever to cause growth to happen. And it's a good thing, because if farmers had to make seeds grow we would all starve, because farmers don't have a clue as to how to do that.

⁷ *αὐτομάτη*. This word *by itself* or *automatically* is used one other time in the Bible. Acts 12:10, where Peter was being miraculously delivered from prison and he came to the gate and it says the gate opened "by itself." The germination and growth of a seed is no less astonishing and inexplicable than the miraculous opening of that gate. The only reason we call the one a miracle and not the other is because God does it with plants every day but he almost never does it with gates, and the definition of a miracle is when God does something different from what he usually does. So we don't call it a miracle, but it's every bit as amazing, every bit as mysterious, and it requires just as much power from God. In fact, I would argue that the germination and growth of a seed is even more amazing and requires even more power from God than the gate miracle.

27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

All due respect to farmers—they don't know how this happens. It's not like the farmer gets that little seed and takes it apart, and gets all the little component parts in there and stacks them all on end to create a stalk...no. The farmer doesn't know the first thing about how to do that. And neither do biologists or botanists or any other scientist. I read a recent journal article from the journal *Plant Science* titled, "Germination—Still a Mystery." And he describes in that article how we are still unable to do any genetic modification to help germination because scientists haven't been able to discover any genetic event that triggers germination.⁸ They don't have any idea how a seed germinates. We can apply all our staggering scientific knowledge and capabilities, and we can study and research and analyze and theorize and run tests and experiments and use every tool at our disposal and the most we can come up with is **Psalm 104:14 [God] makes grass grow.** We are no closer to unraveling that mystery than they were when Psalm 104 was written.

And with all our technology, we still have no ability whatsoever to create any kind of seed. If all the apple trees stopped producing seeds for one generation, then apples would be gone from the earth forever.

Now, we know that farmers work hard year round. There is far more to farming than just planting and reaping. But Jesus is teaching us here specifically about the growth aspect, and if you just look narrowly at that one aspect, it's really an amazing thing. The farmer just throws some seed down, then gets on with life, and one day he wakes up and says, "Oh, looky there—a harvest!" Where else does that happen in life? Do you bring home some groceries, throw them down on the kitchen floor, go to bed, wake up the next morning, and, "Oh look, a fully cooked meal!" Do you buy a bunch of car parts, throw them in your garage and go in a week later, "Oh look, my truck engine rebuilt itself"? That kind of thing just doesn't happen in any other profession—just farming.⁹ That's the only profession where the work does itself.

And that's how God's word is. Fallen human beings are not capable of understanding how the word of God works in the human heart. And if we try to figure it out—if we try to start engineering spiritual growth ourselves, all we will do is destroy the seed and nothing good will come of it. People come up with so many great ideas on how to help people grow and change. "We'll use psychology, and therapy and acts of kindness and concerts and media..." If you use some of those tools to help get the word of God into people's hearts, great, but it is the word and the word only that can do the work. If a farmer tries to get creative and says, "This whole idea of planting seeds is so outdated. I've got a new idea. Let's try planting loaves of Wonder Bread. Or microchips." That farmer will go broke, because if you want a harvest, there is one way and one way only to make it happen, and that is, you have to plant seeds. And there's only one way to make spiritual growth happen—let the word do its work. Parents, always remember, you have no ability to produce faith in your children: none. Only the word can do that. And you can't make the word do its work either. And if you think you can, you are likely to drown the seed with all your input.

Churches can build fabulous, spectacular organizations through clever, human techniques, but if you want it to be the kingdom of God, the only thing that will work is to plant the word of God into the hearts of men and women. God makes this new creation the same way as his old one: through his powerful word.

⁸ After a long, technical description of all the molecular and biological processes that we do understand, the author says this: "While there is much information with respect to changes in gene expression during germination, no key event(s) has been identified that results in its completion. The downstream effects of the observed hormone changes are not known..." Then he goes on to say, essentially, we don't know how it works, and so we can't really do anything in the area of genetic manipulation to improve germination.

⁹ Actually, farming and one other one: medicine. Doctors are a lot like farmers. They don't really do any actual healing. They just create the circumstances where the body can heal itself. Whether you have a cold, flu, broken arm, lacerations—the body heals itself. Setting the bone and putting on bandages and all that puts the body in the best position to heal itself, but all the healing is done by the body, not by the doctor.

Seed Power

Most people, if they were thinking of a parable to describe great power, would not pick a seed. But seeds have amazing power. Seeds have the power to feed 7 billion people on the planet and countless animals every day. Only seeds have the power to keep life going on the earth. All the forests, all the fields, vineyards—all life on earth comes out of the power of the seed.

Is it explosive power? No, it's quiet power. But don't mistake that for weakness. The power of the seed is staggering and beyond human comprehension. And so it's the perfect illustration for the word of God.

Never underestimate the power of the word of God to do awesome things. Someone's heart is incased in cement, and the only tool you have to break through it is a little pebble. You're throwing this little pebble at them, and you think *What a waste of time this is*. But it turns out it's not a pebble; it's a seed. How many times have you seen a plant push up through a sidewalk or a boulder or even a pipe? Seeds can grow trees that come up and split concrete into pieces.

Our Part

Ok, so all of that shows us the amazing power of the seed—the word of God. What about our part? What role do we play?¹⁰ Farmers don't cause growth to happen, but does that mean they don't do any work? Do they just sit around and watch TV most of the time? No, farmers are some of the hardest workers there are. Why? Because seeds don't put themselves in the ground. What happens to seed when it stays in the bag? Nothing.

26 ... A man throws seed on the ground.

That's a very bland way of describing it. It doesn't even say he plants it or sows it; he just tosses it on the ground.¹¹ So his role isn't complicated, but it's essential, because nothing happens until that happens.

Just Keep Sowing

Our role in the progress of the kingdom of God is *indispensable*.¹² We must sow the seed of God's word in people's hearts. There's an animated children's movie where a fish is trying to encourage some other fish who is depressed, and she says, "When I get discouraged and I'm tempted to quit, I just sing this song: "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming..." (That's the whole song—she just keeps repeating that.) We could adjust that a bit and say, "Just keep sowing, just keep sowing..." That's our role in the kingdom. God designed farming so that nothing happens until the farmers sows the seed.

¹⁰ Many have argued, under Ladd's influence, that it is improper to speak of believers building the kingdom or doing kingdom work, as Scripture speaks of people receiving or entering the kingdom, but never building it. And this parable is used to make that point emphatic. The kingdom grows without any help from the farmer. I believe this is to overstate the point. The sower in this parable is clearly involved in kingdom work. He isn't the source of the growth, to be sure, but how can we say he is not involved in kingdom work in his sowing when the parable says, "The kingdom of God is like a man who...?"

¹¹ In the previous parable the sower was "sowing" (*speiro*) the seed. Here he just throws (*ballo*) it down. They describe the same action, but the word used here downplays the act of sowing somewhat.

¹² Does that mean we deserve part of the credit for building the kingdom of God? No. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul said that it was ridiculous for people to divide into factions behind Paul and Apollos or whatever their favorite preacher was. And his reasoning was this: I planted and Apollos watered, but God brought all the growth, therefore Paul and Apollos are nothing. If your role is to plant and water, that's an indispensable role because God, in his grace, has granted us a meaningful place in his kingdom work, but it does not allow us to steal any glory from God. He brings all the growth, therefore he deserves all the credit.

No Harvest Without Sowing

How often do we sit around praying for a harvest when we haven't even thrown out any seed? "Lord, make my spouse more godly!" That's great to pray for a harvest of righteousness in your spouse, but have you planted any seeds? Have you done what you can to apply the word of God to their heart? "Lord, please let so-and-so become a Christian." Have you even told them the gospel? Do you expect God to give you a harvest when you haven't even sown any seed?

When William Carey proposed a mission to India, the mission board said, "Sit down, young man, if God wants to save the heathen, he'll do it without your help or ours." They didn't understand this parable. Thankfully, Carey didn't listen to them.

Galatians 6:7 ...A man reaps what he sows.

That's so obvious, and yet how often we seem to forget it. On the one hand we sow to the flesh and then pray for crop failure. We don't want any negative consequences. And then on the other side, we fail to sow the word of God, then we pray for a big harvest. That's not how farming works. If you want a harvest, just keep sowing.

Don't Get Discouraged

And don't get discouraged when the kingdom work goes exactly like Jesus described it in these parables. Every pastor, every missionary, everyone involved in the ministry of the word—you ask them, and they will tell you about times of deep discouragement in ministry. And it's usually because people respond to the gospel exactly the way Jesus said they would respond. We get discouraged when the shallow soil burns out and walks away when trouble hits. We get discouraged when the weedy soil chokes out and people walk away from the faith to pursue the world. We get discouraged when God's work in people's hearts is hidden beneath the surface, and we can't see anything happening. If I can't see it then it's not happening? What kind of atheism is that? I think one of the chief purposes of these parables is to keep us from discouragement. Just keep sowing, and in God's timing, the harvest will come.

Harvest

29 When the grain is ripe,¹³ he immediately puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."¹⁴

The harvest is the intended result of the word of God in the lives of people. You plant seeds, and there will be a big harvest in the good soils, but not until after the growth process has taken place. Literally it says **When the grain permits, he immediately puts the sickle to it**. The farmer doesn't decide when the harvest happens; the seed does. In Colorado, corn is planted in April and harvested in September. No one can say, "Well, I'm a really hard working farmer, so I'm going to get my corn ready for harvest by the 4th of July." It doesn't matter how hard the farmer works; it's programmed into the seed how long it's going to take from planting to harvesting, and nothing is going to move that timetable. The seed not only supplies all the power for growth, it's also the seed that decides when it's ready for harvest.

¹³ Lit. When the grain permits. Much like our saying, "Weather permitting..."

¹⁴ "Puts in the sickle" (ἀποστέλλει τὸ δρέπανον) clearly echoes Joel 3:13, which is a passage where harvest represents the final judgment. So many commentators assume Jesus is alluding to judgment here. However, the context of the parable does not appear to support that conclusion. Rather, the harvest is seen here in a positive light of reaping the rewards of the growth of the kingdom. And the harvester does not appear to be God in the parable, as he does not understand how the growth occurs. This seems to be an instance where a biblical phrase is used, but without any intention of calling to mind the context from which it comes.

Process, not Event

When I was a kid, my mom had a big garden out back, and each of us kids had our own little section where we could plant whatever we wanted. Mom took me to the store, we bought seeds, I planted them, covered them up, put water on there, and was very, very patient the whole rest of that day. Got up the next day, went out there, and was thoroughly discouraged when I saw that it didn't work. Patience has never been my strong point. I've always wondered why microwaves take so long. And so waiting for weeks and weeks for any little sign of growth was just out of my range.

That's understandable for a little kid, but very often people in the church are that same way watching for spiritual growth. For us, it's not so much an issue of expecting the final form of the kingdom to come into place suddenly. But we do lose patience with the various steps of progress in the kingdom—with the spiritual growth of individuals.

That's a process too. People grow spiritually, not from big, dramatic events, but from slow changes over time. Our constant temptation is to take what Jesus said is a process and turn it into an event. We want to sow and reap on the same day. We figure out methods where we can present the gospel to people and moments later have them make a profession of faith. We tell our kids some biblical principle and we expect a harvest that same moment. We don't allow any time for the seed to grow. You've explained a biblical principle to a friend 5 times, and now you're fed up. You're not seeing any harvest, and so you give up.

Churches have actually developed systems that create shallow soil. There is so much pressure to produce quick results, that they focus all their energy on those plants that spring up quickly. So they preach a shallow message, leave out the offensive parts of the gospel, keep everything ultra-simple, and then have an altar call with lots of music and all the various forms of emotional manipulation. They think they can plow the field, plant the seed, reap the harvest, thresh the grain, and bake the bread all in one worship service. And all they are doing is creating more and more shallow soils that won't last.

Our job is very simple: sow the seed, sow the seed, sow the seed. Just keep sowing. And don't think of sowing only in terms of evangelism. That's part of it—giving the gospel to lost people. But all spiritual growth comes from the word, so we need to always be sowing in the hearts of one another as well. Your friend has a problem; sow the word in their heart. Your kids, neighbors, family, friends, enemies—if you want them to have life, always be sowing the seeds of God's word in their hearts.

The Mustard Bush¹⁵

Well, what happened when those 12 men went out and told their story? What happened with that little mustard seed? They turned the world upside down.

Zechariah 4:10 "Who despises the day of small things?"

No one could have ever imagined that 12 guys armed only with a story and some doctrine could have any significant impact on their country, much less the world. But within 40 years of Jesus saying this, the gospel had reached every major cultural center in the Roman Empire and beyond.

Colossians 1:6 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

You look at the impact it has had on society in the western world now, and it's staggering. In art, biblical themes dominate the great majority of the greatest works of art in the western world. Music: Take away Christian influence and you lose Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Handel, Mendelson, Vivaldi. Science—so much groundbreaking science in modern history has come from Christians whose belief in a

¹⁵ If Jesus were making a point mainly about how big the kingdom would be, he might have used an oak tree or cedar of Lebanon as his illustration. But they already understood that the kingdom would be large. The point Jesus is trying to convey is mostly about the small beginnings.

marvelous, wise, ordered God compelled them to scientific research. One example is Sir Frances Bacon, whose Christian beliefs inspired his work. He's known for establishing and popularizing the scientific method. Take away Christian influence and you lose the contributions of: Kepler, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Michael Faraday, Louis Pasteur, the microbiologist who figured out that diseases were caused by germs Blase Paschal, a brilliant theologian and writer who, in his spare time, went ahead and invented calculus. Literature—take away the influence of the Gideon Bible and you don't have Shakespeare. Take away the Geneva Bible and no pilgrims, no Plymouth colony, no Mayflower Compact, no United States as we know it. The influence of the kingdom of God has gone out from the tiny nation of Israel into every country on the face of the earth, reaching billions of people, and shaping culture. Countries that based their legal system on biblical principles; it's amazing to see how much they have prospered compared to countries that haven't had Christian influence.

That's the influence it's had so far. Now, in the western world, Christianity is on the decline, but the western world isn't the whole world. In China, in Korea, Japan, South America, Eastern Europe, Australia, many places in Africa there is explosive, exponential growth of the kingdom of God unlike any influence ever before in human history.

When Jesus gave this parable, they were living under the greatest empire the world had ever seen—the Roman empire. But where is that empire now? It's gone. It's just ruins that you can visit on vacation in Europe. It's dead. They used to say that the sun never sets on the British Empire, because it was everywhere in the world. Now the sun sets on England every night. But the church is far bigger and more expansive and more influential and powerful than any human empire has ever been or ever will be. And people from all the nations of the world are finding rest in that kingdom.

So does that mean the mustard plant has reached its full size? No. Not even close. In many ways, the kingdom of God is still in its seed form. It has expanded massively, but it still hasn't reached the glorious extremes promised in Scripture, where all evil is eliminated and everyone in the world bows the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. That won't happen until Jesus' second coming.

So when you look around this world and get discouraged at how bad things are, put your hope in the promises of the coming kingdom! When you look around at the church and see how far short it falls from what it should be? Put your hope in the promised kingdom. The work of the word of God to bring about this kingdom is happening.

It's invisible, it's slow, it's mysterious, it's not what we expect it to be, but it is happening, and it is powerful, and it will bring the harvest.

Parables

33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could hear. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

The more receptive people were, the more Jesus taught them. To the indifferent, he gave very little, to those somewhat interested he gave a little more. Nobody went away hungry. Unlike many preachers today, Jesus never gave out the word in such meager doses that people who really wanted to learn ended up starving. But to the crowds, it came in riddles and hard sayings, and only those who followed him got the explanations. To those people, he explained everything. And we can understand Jesus' teachings, because those disciples passed those explanations on to us in the epistles of the NT.

Conclusion

So what do we take away from all this? Trust in the mighty power of the word of God.

Jeremiah 23:29 "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes

1 Thessalonians 1:5 our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power

1 Corinthians 1:18 the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Hebrews 4:12 the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Don't get discouraged. Don't use any alternative method. Trust in the power of God's word and just keep sowing.