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Mark 4:1 - 4:34



Gospel of Mark - Steve Gregg

In this lesson on Mark 4:1-34, Steve Gregg analyzes several parables of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. He discusses how some parables were intentionally ambiguous and meant for only those who truly hunger for the truth. Furthermore, he explores the importance of being receptive to the message and not hardening one's heart against it. Finally, he emphasizes the gradual growth and maturity of the kingdom of God, leading to a fruitful harvest at the end of the age or one's life.

Transcript

Well, we've come to the chapter break at Mark chapter 4, and this chapter begins as similar chapters begin in Matthew and Luke. It is a chapter that contains several parables about the Kingdom of God. A similar chapter exists in Matthew 13, and there's one rather like it in Luke 8. Now, Luke 8, I think, doesn't have as many parables as Mark does, and Mark doesn't have as many as Matthew does.

Matthew's chapter 13, it seems to be a compilation of parables of Jesus on the subject, which neither Mark nor Luke records all of them in the same place. Now, they do actually record some of them in different places. That is to say, some of the parables that you find in Matthew 13 are not found in Mark 4, but they're found elsewhere in Mark.

They're not found in Luke 8, but they're found elsewhere in Luke. So that we see evidence that what Matthew has done here is taken parables that Jesus gave on more than one occasion, and decided to include them in a chapter where he was recording these parables that Jesus gave on this occasion, just making the compilation larger. And this is typical of what Matthew does in his gospel.

All five of his rather large discourses in Matthew are compilations of more than one thing said in more than one setting by Jesus, as the other gospels would give evidence. So we won't worry about how many of the parables Jesus gave on one occasion or another, because they're pretty much standalone stories. But Mark and Luke and Matthew all agree that there was a day when Jesus went out and told a number of parables, the first of which is what we call the parable of the sower.

Some call it the parable of the soils. And that is the only thing these chapters all have in common, is that they all start with this parable. Well, the other thing they have in common is they include other parables, but not the same gathering, not the same collection of parables.

In Mark four, verse one, it says, And again, he began to teach by the sea and a great multitude was gathered to him so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea. And the whole multitude was on the land facing the sea. Then he taught them many things by parables and said to them in his teaching, Listen, behold, a sower went out to sow.

And it happened as he sowed that some seed fell by the wayside. And the birds of the air came and devoured it. Some fell on stony ground.

Where it did not have much earth and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up, it was scorched and because it had no root, it withered away and some seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no crop. But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced some 30 fold, some 60, some 100.

And he said to them, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Now, we have the advantage of having read further on and knowing the explanation of the parable. But we have to think how this would have sounded to the hearers on the mountainside, what it would have meant or more properly what it would not have meant to them.

To the crowds on the hillside, this is just a story about a farmer. And you begin to wonder, well, what's the punchline here? What's the moral of the story? A guy goes out and sowing seed. OK, there's probably a lot of stories, folk tales and so forth that might involve characters who are farmers.

So we've got the beginning of a story about a farmer. He goes out trying to seed. They see that seeds fall on different kinds of ground.

Obviously, everybody knows that some kinds of ground will yield and some kinds will not yield from the same seed. And this ground, only some of the ground was good ground for that and produced a lot of produce. Other ground had various problems that prevented that from happening.

Yes. And what next? The story's over. End of story.

Well, that wasn't a very interesting plot. There was no there was a protagonist, but no antagonist. There was no story.

It's just that a guy sowed seeds. The main characters were the seeds themselves and how they grew or didn't grow. And so that's all he told the crowds.

He didn't explain it to them. Now, he did explain it privately to the disciples. But he didn't explain it to the crowds, which means he left the crowds wondering what? We've heard that this guy is a great rabbi.

He's a miracle worker, maybe even the Messiah. We want to hear what he has to say. He tells us about a farmer who throws seeds and some seeds grow and some don't.

What? Tell us something we don't know. We know that happens when farmers sow seeds. So what does what's it about? Now, some people probably would just go away saying.

Nothing in him, nothing in what he had to say that made any sense to me. He didn't tell me anything I didn't know. But there'll be others in the crowd who say, I'm not getting this, but there's something here to get.

You know, I mean, a guy like Jesus isn't just going to waste his words telling stories that have no purpose. But I can't figure out what it is. So they'd come to Jesus and say, would you please explain that story to us? And that's what happened.

That's what Jesus intended to happen. He knew that the crowds contained two kinds of people, kind that were there because he was a celebrity, because they didn't want to miss out on what all their neighbors were talking about. He typically did a lot of miracles when he was out places and they wanted to see some of those, you know, they were used to hearing rabbis.

They certainly he sounded like more exceptional than the rabbis they'd heard. They want to hear if he has anything profound to say. They come out out of curiosity.

Others come out because they're hungry for truth and they're hungry for the kingdom of God and his message is about the kingdom of God. They want to know what it is. They want the kingdom of God.

He says the kingdom of God is like this. And when they finish hearing the story, they say, well, in some way or another, the kingdom of God must be like that. But I don't see the connection.

But I'm not content not to know. I'm not going home until I know something more about this. I'm not just going to forget about this.

I want to know about the kingdom of God. There's something hidden in this story and I'm going to find out what it is or die trying. And so people came to him.

It says, actually, the twelve initially came to him and said when they were alone from verse 10. It says, but when they were alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parable. Now, who were those about him? The twelve were there, of course.

And then there were others who were with the twelve. There were other disciples, probably some who had been following Jesus all along, some of that larger group out of which Jesus had selected the twelve. But that crowd could also include anybody from the crowd who had wished to inquire.

And so there were people who wanted to know more, maybe not very many, not maybe not a very large percentage of the crowd. But there were some who came and asked him about the parable. And he said to them, to you, it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, those who didn't come and ask.

In other words, all things come in parables. That is this. The kingdom of God is not for everybody to know about.

Anyone can come into it and anyone can know about it if they are interested in it for the right reasons. But not everyone's interested and not everyone's going to know the secrets, the mysteries of the kingdom. After all, this is an invasion.

This is a war. There's a kingdom of darkness. There's a kingdom of God.

And, you know, the commander doesn't just broadcast his strategy everywhere. The enemies can get the hold of it. He wants to make sure he's meeting with his tribunal of faithful, trusted officers.

He wants to know that when he's telling the secrets of his campaign, that he's telling people who are at least more than just curious. The people who are who are interested and hungry for what he's doing to just throw out the mysteries to the crowd so that they could understand them, but reject them in many cases means that he's giving away his whole campaign. He's making himself vulnerable.

He's casting his pearls before swine and giving what's holy to dogs. So that's that's what he's not going to do. He says, you people who come and ask me of this, you disciples.

You are the ones to whom it is given. God wants you to have the mysteries. He wants you to know the mysteries.

And therefore, I'm going to explain them to you. But those who are outside, I'm not going to explain to them because it is not their privilege. They don't qualify.

They're not the kind of people that I will trust with all my information. So I speak to them in parables. Obviously, what he's saying is the parables are there to conceal things.

A lot of people think parables are there to elucidate things now to the right crowd. They do elucidate, you know, a parable to somebody who's got an understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom. It does kind of teach us things.

It does illuminate things. But people who don't have the knowledge of the kingdom, it's

just obscure to them and it's made to be obscure. They don't know how to put the corresponding parts together to make it sensible.

He says, so that seeing they may see and not perceive and hearing they may hear and not understand, lest they should turn and their sins be forgiven them. Now, this is a quote from Isaiah, chapter six, verse nine and ten. And it's a strange statement.

Because it sounds like God doesn't want them to turn and be forgiven. He says, I'm speaking to them this way so that although they will see and hear things, they won't perceive what it's about. It's in code.

They'll hear the message, but it'll mean nothing to them. They will see and not perceive. They'll hear, but they won't understand.

Well, why do that to them? Well, so that they won't turn and be saved. Now, that's certainly an unexpected sentiment. Now, it is a direct quote from Isaiah, and Jesus is saying there's a similar situation here in this generation as there was in Isaiah's generation.

People's eyes seeing, but not perceiving, hearing with their ears, but not understanding, not turning. But this makes it sound like it's God who's deliberately making them blind so they won't turn. If you look at the parallel where Jesus quotes this verse in Matthew 13, it kind of brings out a nuance that that's not so clear in Mark's version.

Here's the same passage in Matthew 13, verse 13. Therefore, I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear nor understand. In them, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says, hearing you will hear and shall not understand.

Seeing you will see and not perceive. For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing and their eyes, they have closed.

Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn that I should heal them. In other words, they have shut their ears. They have made their heart dull.

They are they have closed their eyes, lest they would repent and be saved. It's an irony in Isaiah. It's an ironic statement.

He's saying these people, God forbid that they would understand and turn and get healed. That is God forbid from their point of view. They they they dare not.

They close their eyes so they won't see so that they won't believe so that they won't get healed. It's not God who doesn't want to heal. It's they that don't want to see.

Now, of course, you might say, but Jesus is the one who's saying he's chosen the

parables. That seems like God's the one who's choosing not to let them see. True, but Jesus says it's because they are like the people in Isaiah's day.

These are people who've made a habit of not seeing made a habit of not listening. I mean, they have heard the word of God taught in the synagogues. Why haven't they become faithful to God? Now, we don't know very much about the level of religiosity of the people in Israel in that time, except for Jesus' own assessment of it, which we have to trust.

You know, we usually think of Israel as a more or less religious country. Maybe, you know, they don't know Jesus, but they're at least following Moses. But Jesus made it very clear that the people of his day were not even following Moses.

Jesus said to the religious leaders, he said, did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you follows the law. He said in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man went into Hades. And said, let me go back and warn my brothers about this place.

And Abraham said to him, they have the law and the prophets. Let them hear them. And he said, oh, but they don't listen to the law and the prophets.

We will hear a man who comes back from the dead. Abraham said, well, if they're not the type to listen to the law and the prophets, they're not the type to listen, even if man rises from the dead. In other words, if they're already making a habit of ignoring what God is saying.

God has been speaking to them all the time through his law and the prophets. And they're ignoring that habitually. Well, what are you doing? They're closing their eyes to the truth that they've been given.

They're they're hardening their hearts. Now, when Jesus comes, it is a time of separating the wheat from the chaff. As John the Baptist said, remember, John said that Jesus is coming with his threshing fan in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff.

And he's like got an axe. He's going to cut down the trees that don't produce fruit and throw them in the fire. What John the Baptist was saying in that was that Israel now was comprised, as always, of two different kinds of people.

There were Jews who were fruitful trees. There were Jews that were true wheat. There were, in other words, faithful remnants who cared about God.

And there were those who didn't. They were fruitless trees. They were like chaff.

They were worthless as far as God was concerned. Because they were they were people who rejected his word, just like any other country. Israel was a country where many people, probably most people, rejected the truth when they heard it.

There was a remnant within them who did respond. And John said that Jesus is coming to separate those two and to cast the fruitless trees and the chaff into the eternal fire, into everlasting fire. This fire was, I believe, the judgment that came upon the chaff in Israel when the Holocaust came in A.D. 70.

But the righteous had been gathered into the barn. Those who had followed Christ had been brought to a safe place before that happened. And so Jesus is simply acting out that thing.

He's got his threshing fan in his hand. He's separating the wheat from the chaff. In Israel, in these crowds that come to hear me, there's some people that are wheat.

They're God's fruit. They're the faithful remnant. In the crowd, there's also people who are chaff, and they're not going to.

They have made themselves chaff. They've made a habit of ignoring God's words. They are not faithful to God.

According to the revelation, he's already given them. They've blinded their own eyes. They've stopped their ears.

Therefore, God is simply confirming them in that he is now depriving them of the ability. Remember, I mentioned earlier in 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul talks about those who did not receive the love of the truth. Therefore, God sent them a strong delusion.

You see, God gives the truth first and gives every opportunity to believe it. But if people insult the truth and insult God by saying, I don't want the truth. I want something else, and they suppress it.

And he says, okay, if you love lies that much and you despise the truth that much, you have just lost your last opportunity to know the truth. I'm going to send you a strong delusion, since that's what you want. And that's a judgment.

People come to the point where God judges them. Pharaoh, when God hardened his heart. That's an unusual thing for God to harden somebody's heart like that.

I mean, there are other cases in the Bible, but most people, God doesn't harden their hearts. Just a couple or three cases known in the Bible, in the Old Testament. But you see, Pharaoh, that was a judgment on Pharaoh.

Pharaoh had been a wicked tyrant, oppressing his slaves and rejecting God, arrogance against God. Who is the Lord that I should listen to him? God says, okay, you're the kind of guy I like to make an example of. And I mean, you deserve what you're going to get.

And what you're going to get is a hard heart. And then you're going to live with the consequences of being unrepentant for ten plagues. And that's the judgment you're

worthy of.

See, from time to time, when people have made their decision to reject God, to reject the truth, and they've hardened themselves against it, and their heart then becomes dull, and their ears hard of hearing, it's their own fault. It's not God who wanted them to go deaf. They made themselves deaf.

You shine a light in some people's face, and some people don't like that. They're going to close their eyes in response to it. And the light of God is not welcome to all people.

When they see it, it exposes them in ways they don't want to be exposed. They close their eyes. They don't want to hear it.

And they shut off that truth. And when you begin to shut off any truth, you begin to form a disposition of accepting what you want to accept and rejecting what you want to reject, even among things that are true. You accept the truths you like, and you reject the truths you don't like.

That's a bad disposition to get. Then your heart becomes hardened and dull, and you don't love the truth. And God may even send you a strong delusion if you anger him enough about that.

Because it's such an insult to him that you hate him so much that you don't even want to hear from him when he graciously communicates and sends his light. Well, these people, this generation in Jesus' day, were an unusual generation of Jews in that they had reached the end of God's patience with them. And those who had blinded themselves, He was going to keep them blind.

He was going to not let them know the truth. He's going to hide it from them. And that's why He used parables, Jesus said, because they have shut their eyes, lest they should see and be converted and be saved or be healed.

Okay, let's go back to Mark chapter 4. So Jesus has explained why He uses the parables, but that doesn't apply to them, the disciples. They weren't those who had blinded themselves. They were those who were hungry.

They were the ones that wanted the kingdom. And therefore, He gladly explained to them what this parable was about, but only in private. Verse 13, He said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? Now, this is an interesting question.

It always kind of bugged me that He asked this question, like He's blaming them for not knowing what the parable means. Well, how in the world are they supposed to know what it means? And He's almost like saying, if you don't get this one, you're not going to get any of them. But that's not exactly what He says.

I kind of took it that way for a long time, but I think maybe what He's saying is this. So you acknowledge that the parable is obscure. You acknowledge you don't understand it.

Well, then, if you don't understand this one, how are you going to understand any of them? The answer is the same way you're going to understand this one, is by me telling you. You're not going to understand anything I say about this unless I explain it to you, and that's what you need to know. You see, you don't understand this parable? Well, get a clue.

It's going to be the same with other parables. You'll need me to explain these things to you. It's not going to be obvious to you.

And I think He's asking it rhetorically. How, then, will you understand all the parables? He's saying, by implication, the same way you're going to come to understand this one, namely by me explaining it, no other way short of that. The sower sows the word, so the seed is immediately recognized as the word.

In Luke's version, in Luke chapter 8, he says, the word of God. In Matthew's version, Matthew 13, he calls it the word of the kingdom. The word is the message, the message of God, the message of the kingdom, God's communication to people.

It's what Jesus was sowing whenever He taught. He was spreading seed out, and there were different kinds of soils receiving it. This also applies to any of us who preach or who teach or who share, even one-on-one with somebody.

We're casting good seed out. If it's the word of God we're giving, it's a good seed. But we can't be sure it's going to be received well.

These are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. And when they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. Now, what he means is that there was, in the parable, some ground that was hard, so the seed didn't penetrate.

It was on the wayside. The wayside is where people walk. You don't walk on the soft, tilled soil where you're growing crops.

You walk on the pathways and the edges of the field. And those wayside paths get pretty much packed down, almost like pavement. When the guy throws his seed indiscriminately, some of them are going to land on the pavement or on the hardened ground.

Obviously, those seeds don't have a chance. The birds are going to eat them. And Jesus said here, these are the ones who Satan steals the seeds from them.

In Matthew 13, he says, these are the ones who when they hear the word, they don't

understand it. And then Satan comes and steals it from them. So there's this other aspect that it doesn't penetrate at all.

They don't understand it. Now, these are the majority of the crowd who didn't come to Jesus and ask about the parable. He gave them the word in a parable.

They didn't understand it. Now, they could have come and asked him, but instead, they didn't care enough. And so the devil just takes it from them and they end up having nothing.

They're not any better off than if they'd never heard him in the first place. He says in verse 16, these likewise are the ones sown on the stony ground, who when they hear the word immediately receive it with gladness, and they have no root in themselves and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble as they fall away.

Now, stony ground, perhaps we have an image of stony ground like some of the ground out here, where there's soil, but there's a lot of rocks scattered around in it. I was out walking in the lawn the other day and there were some rocks in there I thought were dangerous to the lawnmower, so I took them through that pit that's out there. There are big rocks in the lawn.

I was hoping that they weren't there for ornamental purposes. I just thought, if someone's mowing this lawn, the blade's going to hit that thing. But that's, you know, the ground is rocky.

I'm sure when they planted that lawn, they moved a lot more stones like that out to be able to plant the lawn because rocks, you know, you can't grow stuff on the rocks and therefore anything you grow on rocky ground of that type is going to be patchy. But he's not talking about that. When he says rocky ground, he's talking about ground that is shallow soil under which there is rock.

They had a lot of that kind of ground in Israel. There was bedrock because there's rocky mountainous areas there and there was much rock that had, over years, had some little few inches of soil come to accumulate on top of it. And so if seed would fall into that kind of area, it would penetrate those few inches of soil but it couldn't go any deeper because there's bedrock underneath it.

There's no place for the roots to go down. Therefore, although it would germinate quickly and would pop up, it would die quickly too because it needs the moisture that's deeper than that soil. And it doesn't have any roots to get that moisture, so it dies.

And he says that's what some people are like when they hear the word. They receive it at a shallow level. It's not life-changing for them.

It doesn't change where their heart's at. Their surface thinking has changed for a while. They learn how to talk like a Christian, how to sing like a Christian, how to look like a Christian but their heart isn't really changed fundamentally.

There's no depth there. They haven't really changed their whole core. They're still living for themselves.

They've just added Jesus to their life like something that will enhance their lives because enhancing their lives is what all their decisions in life are about. They choose who they'll marry, they choose what job they'll do, they choose what they're going to have for dinner, they choose who their friends are going to be, and they choose whether to believe in Jesus or not by whether they think any of those things will enhance their life. It's all about them.

Now, of course, to break through that rock requires that someone has a fundamental breakthrough, a fundamental change at the core of their being. Or they say, it's no longer I, but Christ. It doesn't matter whether something enhances my life.

Who am I? My life should be enhanced. What rights do I have to that? God is my maker. What matters to Him, that's what matters to me.

If I live well, praise the Lord. If I die, praise the Lord. Whatever pleases the Lord, it's fine.

Paul says we don't live to ourselves or die to ourselves. We live for the Lord and we die to the Lord. It's not about us and what's good for us.

It's about what does God deserve to get out of us. When a person has that fundamental change in their orientation, then there's roots there. When trials and tribulation come because of the Word in that life, they're going to survive it.

You know why? Because they're not in it for the comfort. They're not in it for the convenience. They're in it for God.

And God's interests do not change when things get happy or sad in our lives, when things get easy or hard. God is the one constant that never changes. And if your roots are in Him and His pleasure and His will is all you care about, then no matter how hard it gets, you're not going to change.

The sun will come up. It'll blaze down. It'll burn up everything that doesn't have roots.

But the plant that has roots in God, because that person has exchanged their own life for God. They've taken up their cross. They've denied themselves.

They're no longer living for self but for God. Well then, you know, of course no one enjoys tribulation. No one enjoys trial.

But for someone who's not living for their own comfort, the presence of tribulation doesn't present any argument for changing what they're doing. But it does if they're still living for themselves. If they've received the Word at a shallow level.

Because, you know, their friends are doing it. And they like to be with their friends. They like the songs that are sung.

They like, you know, it's kind of a neat group of people maybe. Whatever. They like the idea that they're going to heaven instead of going to hell.

That's good for me. You know? These are the reasons they come in. They're looking after themselves.

Well then, when tribulation comes, they say, wait a minute, this isn't good for me. I'm out of here. And he says, those are the ones who are like, they're shallow.

Shallow converts. And they stumble when tribulation and persecution comes. Verse 18, Now these are the ones among the thorns.

They are the ones who hear the Word and the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things entering in, choke the Word. And it becomes unfruitful. Now the soil here doesn't seem to have any inherent flaws.

It's just contaminated. That is, the rocks are not there. It's not hard soil.

The seed can penetrate. Presumably it can even put its roots down. The soil has potential.

But it's contaminated. There's other stuff in there too that competes with the Word of God, with the seed. And those things, because they are allowed to be there, competing, they tend to make their claims.

They press their claims and they grow and they compete with the Word for the ground. And what are those things? Well, they're the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches. When you come to Christ, those are things you're going to have to just put aside.

If you don't, they'll still be in there with the seed. You want to have all this in Jesus too? You know? I want to have my worldly plans and ambitions. I want to reach my career goals.

I want to have the family that I always dreamed of. I want to have the car that I always wanted to drive. I want to have all this and Heaven too.

And I have in me, along with my true desire to be a Christian, the desire for some worldly things too. And some riches and all that. Those things are like they're in the soil there.

The seed does penetrate. The seed really grows. There's some hope for it.

But there's these other things come up and strangle it out. And eventually that person becomes unfruitful. Now it's interesting, he doesn't specify whether these people fall away or not.

The first seeds don't ever germinate at all. The people never get saved. The second groups seem to really get saved but they don't stay.

These ones may actually get saved and stay saved but they become unfruitful. Because the worldly things that they care about compete with their total availability to God, I suppose. And their total resignation to God.

So, realize that this is not, the Kingdom of God is not just about getting saved. It's true. The first group didn't get saved.

The second group got saved and didn't stay saved. This group might even stay saved but it's not good enough. The message of the Kingdom isn't about getting and staying saved.

The message of the Kingdom is about being fruitful for God. That God would get from His field, from His vineyard, the fruit He's always sought. That's His Kingdom.

That He will take the Kingdom from Israel to give it to a nation that will bring forth the fruits of it. He didn't say, I'm going to give it to people who will appreciate their right to go to heaven. He said, I'm going to give the Kingdom to people who will bring forth the fruits of it.

That's what God's after. He's hungry. He wants fruit.

And so, it's not good enough that I get saved and stay saved if I'm unfruitful. In this, my Father is glorified that you bring forth much fruit. So shall you be my disciples, Jesus said.

And that's the goal, is to be fruitful for God. Fruitful in good works, fruitful in righteousness and justice, in the fruit of the Spirit, Christ-like. He's looking for a people who will reflect the things that He treasures and that He values.

And it's possible to be a Christian and not produce that, apparently. But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word accept it and bear fruit. Some thirtyfold, some sixty, some a hundred.

Now thirtyfold is good. Sixtyfold is a lot better. A hundred is exceptional.

In fact, almost miraculous. You may remember we recently studied Genesis where Isaac during a famine sowed seed in the land. During a famine and he produced a hundredfold.

That's way high. I mean, what we're talking about here is that every farmer, when he sows grain, you know, his harvest, he hopes will be more than the grain he planted. He wants to take his seed out for the next years, but he wants whatever is left over after he takes out the same amount of seed he sowed before.

He wants that to be enough to sell and to live on. He needs to make more than just what he sowed. He's got to make two, ten, fifty, who knows? The more he gets, the better.

Thirty times as much is great. Sixty is fantastic and a hundred is incredible. But the thing is the fruitfulness is what this is about.

And the Word of God is given as seed because God intends to bring forth fruit. The Word of God can bring forth fruit in our lives. The Word of God is not just there to give us promises to rejoice in, to give us a hope of heaven, to give us our best life now.

The Word of God is there to produce fruit such as God wants in people. And so that's what the kingdom is like. And he said in verse 21, and he said to them, is a lamp bought to be put under a basket or a bed? Is it not to be set on a lamp stand? For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret, but that it should come to light.

If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Now he said that the kingdom of God, the mysteries are being kept secret, but everything that's been kept secret will actually be brought to light. Now whether this means to everybody eventually, even those to whom it is now a secret, or whether it means to those who are let in on the secret.

There are secret things, but some people are let in on the secret. There is a room that has a lamp in it, and those who go into that room see light. Those who don't, do not.

In the parallel in Matthew, I believe Jesus said no one takes a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a lamp stand to give light to all who are in the house. And I don't know if he's here thinking of the whole world, or the house is the house of God. Those to whom it is given to know the secrets, to know the mysteries of the kingdom.

I'm not sure exactly what he's referring to here. We usually think of it in terms of a reference to the need for us to not hide our witness. And we even have that childhood song that everyone knows this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, hide it under a bushel.

No. No, I'm not going to do that. Because I need to let my light shine.

That is a valid use of it, because actually, I believe in Matthew's Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, we have this particular teaching in connection with the church being a city on a hill and being a light of the world. And it's there in Matthew 5 that he says that, you know, you don't put a lamp under a bushel. But here, in this connection, it sounds like

maybe he's saying the secrets of the kingdom.

Because he's still talking privately to his disciples here. The secrets of the kingdom are for you. They are secrets indeed, but there is a lamp.

There is a light that has come. And I have come to bring these things to light. And if you're in my house, it'll give light to all who are in the house.

If you're one of those who has ears to hear, as opposed to those who have stopped their ears and shut their eyes, less they should hear and see. Let him who has ears to hear, let him hear. Now, Jesus says this a number of times, and he assumes that his disciples are the ones who will have the ears to hear.

Those who stop their ears are of a different group. Verse 24, and he said to them, Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you.

And to you who hear, more will be given. For whoever has, to him more will be given. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

This is enigmatic, but I think what it means is that when Jesus came to Israel, like I said, there were two kinds of people. Those who do have a hunger for the kingdom of God. Those who have responded to the previous revelations, although they've been minimal revelations, perhaps, compared to what Jesus has revealed.

Those who have already, they're the haves. There are haves and there are have-nots. You know, those who have are the ones who have a heart to know the truth.

They've already, you know, they've already been given some truth, and they've received it, and they have held on to it. Others have heard the truth, and they haven't kept it. They have nothing.

Well, the ones who have nothing, they're not going to be given any more. In fact, they're going to have what little residue of what they had, is going to be taken from them. But, through the parables of Jesus, and his concealing the kingdom from them.

But to those who have, those who've already are of that remnant who've meditated on God's word up to this point, but still need more light, there's more going to be given to them. And he said, the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. Now this sounds the same as the previous one, but it's different.

And he should sleep by night and rise by day and the seed should sprout and grow. He himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself.

First the blade, then the head, after that, the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle because the harvest is come. Now here we have a parable that starts out like the other one.

A sower sows seeds. It goes into the ground, but this is a different focus. It doesn't talk about the soils that produce nothing.

It only talks about the soil that really does produce. And it produces almost magically. Because the man who sows the seed, he can't make it grow.

He can just put it in the ground and that's all he can do. He can go to bed and it'll grow. He can be awake or asleep, it's going to keep growing.

It's sort of like what many doctors have often said. They say, we don't heal anybody. We can set the bone, but we can't make it heal.

We can do the treatment. We can patch the wound up. We can bind it, but we can't make the skin heal.

God has to do that. And it's that way with the seed growing. The farmer can put it in the ground.

He can make conditions conducive to growth, but after that he can't do anymore. Paul said that when he talked about himself and Apollos and their work in Corinth in 1 Corinthians chapter 3. He said, I planted and Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. God's the one who makes it grow.

And he's using a metaphor similar to this here. Planting the church. He came to Corinth when no one else had been there who was a Christian.

He sowed the seed of the gospel. He preached to the first people who heard it. They got saved.

Paul left. Apollos came later and he preached and taught and he watered that seed. And lo and behold, there's something growing there.

There's a church in Corinth now. There's a harvest to be had there. And yet he says, it's God who gives the increase.

So also here Jesus says, it's God who gives the increase. The man sleeps. He wakes.

It doesn't change anything. The seed is growing independently of him because the man doesn't make it grow. The kingdom of God does not advance as a result of human genius or human effort or human workaholicism or anything like that.

There's a place for resting. There's a place for working and there's the fortunes of the kingdom continue no matter what men are doing in a sense. He says, for the earth yields crops by itself.

And then the emphasis on first the blade, then the head, then the full or ripe grain in the

head of grain. Now obviously he's pointing out that there is a progressive growth that doesn't start out ripe. It doesn't start out mature.

It begins small. Eventually it ripens and grows to maturity. Now I have a friend who's preached on this parable many, many times.

He's an evangelist and he applies it differently than I do. And I can see why he would. Because he applies it to the individual spiritual growth of a believer.

After all, in the previous parable the seed was sown into an individual's heart. If it was good soil it grew and produced fruit. Here we have seed being sown into what's apparently good soil so we could possibly see that as a person personally receiving the gospel.

And that good soil of the heart produces the fruit. But the emphasis here is it's a work of God and that it happens gradually. You're not a spiritual giant right away.

You're not a mature Christian right away. The seed begins and in the early stages you're just a little blade of grass. And then eventually things mature and you become to be a mature Christian by stages.

That's how my friend understands it. I tend to understand it differently. It's true that would be a consistent way to take it if we see the sowing of the seed in the ground as the previous parable had it.

Because that was speaking about seeds and individuals receiving or rejecting producing fruit or not. This however I take to be of the kingdom of God as a whole. Now the reason I do is because of the mention of the harvest.

If he is talking about individual Christians I'm not really sure what to make of the reference to the harvest. But if he's talking about the kingdom of God as a whole the global kingdom of God then the harvest has a very natural place in the story. Because the harvest comes at the end of the age.

And that's when there's no more crops to be grown. That's when all the growth is done. I suppose the harvest in an individual's life could be his death.

But I think that the harvest is a bigger issue than what takes place in one Christian's life. And I think he's saying the same thing. Only not about an individual's growth but about the growth of the kingdom as a whole globally.

And especially that reference to the blade in the head and the full grain in the head I think it's particularly apt. Because I consider the kingdom of God to be growing through the growth of the church. And the kingdom is one organism the church is one body.

There's only one stalk in this picture. It's a blade of grass then it's a stalk and then

there's heads of grain on the stalk. But they're green.

They're green and unformed. They're immature. But they are clusters.

They are bound together in relationship to each other in the head. And in the head they mature. In the context of the head of grain the grain in the head ripens individually.

The individual heads ripen. I mean individual grains ripen. But in the context of the heads and I see whether Jesus intended this or not I can't say but it seems like a very apt illustration of the church because that one stalk with many heads is the one church and the many heads are different fellowships different churches, local churches I don't mean local churches like the organizations we call by that name but the church in a region all the Christians in a region they're in relationship with each other even before they're all mature.

In fact it's in that relationship that they mature. They ripen. But when all the grain is ripe or at least as much of it is going to ripen when God says OK I've got all the ripe grain I need now then He puts in a sickle because it's time for the harvest.

So in my opinion and it's not extremely important whether I'm right or wrong because there's not an awful lot at stake but in my opinion there's a difference in the way that the soil and the seed are used here. In the first parable the seed is the word that enters individual hearts and the soils are the hearts. I would take the earth here to be more like the world and the seed represents the kingdom itself planted in the world because Jesus does use a similar image of the kingdom in the next verses verses 30-32 He said to what shall we liken the kingdom of God or with what parable shall we picture it It that is the kingdom of God as a whole is like a mustard seed which when it is sown on the ground is smaller than all the seeds on the earth and when it is sown it grows up and becomes greater than all the herbs and shoots out large branches so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade So here we see the kingdom of God the global kingdom of God depicted as a seed that grows like a mustard seed into a great bush not very different than that of the stalk of grain which has a slightly different emphasis the stalk of grain has a separate head and that might be the special emphasis of that parable or one of the special emphasis of that parable but here we have the kingdom of God again is like a seed this is the global kingdom of God and it starts small but it grows large eventually it takes in birds and as we saw recently in Daniel chapter 4 and also in Ezekiel chapter 31 and also in Ezekiel 17 there are Old Testament passages that speak about kingdoms that are likened to trees and in their best days they are likened to trees that have great foliage and great branches and the birds are nesting in their branches and the creatures of the wild are burying their young under the shade of the tree and so forth this is a positive picture of a tree doing what it's supposed to do.

It's a healthy tree, it's providing shelter for creatures that God knows need shelter the kingdom of God becomes the shelter into which sinners and slaves of sin come in order

to be a part of what God is doing and come under His protection to be part of Him part of His movement now it's been controversial that Jesus said that the mustard seed is smaller than all the seeds on earth in my opinion this is a mere hyperbole there are many hyperboles in the teaching of Jesus and it would be very silly to try to fault Jesus for using a hyperbole here. A mustard seed is extremely tiny if you've ever seen one in some Christian bookstores you can buy since Christian bookstores will sell any kind of Jesus junk but they will sell you a little a little like amber or a drop of plastic or amber or something that has a real mustard seed in it. Boy is that inspiring but I guess that's the only place I've ever seen a mustard seed but they are indeed almost microscopic, they're very tiny almost like a spore and yet they do grow into a great large bush now in Matthew it says it grows into a tree now I just think those are hyperboles and I don't have any problem with Jesus using hyperbole some people wanting to make sure that Jesus is technically correct they say well among all the seeds that the Jews ever used in their gardens there was none smaller than the mustard seed which is possibly true but I don't know that we have to make the limit.

He says it's the smallest of all the trees on earth of all the seeds on earth. It's small if there's smaller ones you wouldn't be able to see them I think and there probably are smaller ones but you can't see them um and as far as the bush being a tree I mean it's really nitpicking for people to say Jesus said that all of the bush or the mustard seed and its bush is a tree it's not a tree it's just a big shrub well you know it's not like Jesus was trying to fool somebody. It's not like the people had never seen a mustard plant if he said it was a tree then he either must have been talking about some mustard plants that were large enough to almost be referred to like trees where birds would actually nest in them and there must have been some.

Who was he hoping to fool you know he could have said an apple seed it's small too and it grows into a big tree but he obviously was talking about a plant that everyone was familiar with it is possible even that there was a strain of mustard plant in those days that we don't have anymore that actually did grow into much more of a tree but it's kind of silly to suggest that Jesus made a mistake because he had never seen really a mustard plant and if he had he would have known it's not a tree you know now he's obviously using the tree either as a hyperbole because it does grow up and apparently the big ones can make a lot of shade and shelter for birds like a tree does. In any case to make an image of a tree with birds is an Old Testament image and therefore Jesus had a reason to speak of a tree because it connects with Ezekiel 17 in particular where the kingdom of God is described as a great tree in which birds lodge in its branches anyway verse 33 and 34 says and with many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it and that's something more preachers should be sensitive to whether their audiences are able to hear it. Here we are sitting in weltering heat past our time and you people are sitting here being made to listen to teaching perhaps more than you're able to hear Jesus didn't do that to people he taught them as they were able to

hear it some preachers have coined a proverb that the mind is only able to absorb so much as the seat can endure and so Jesus apparently was sensitive to that.

He didn't want to give them too much at one time overburden them but we'll stop with verse 34 where it says but without a parable he did not speak to them and when they were alone he explained all things to his disciples so Jesus never gave a public talk without using parables apparently there are discourses of Jesus to his disciples and even in arguments with Pharisees where he didn't use parables but when he spoke to the multitudes in Galilee on the hillsides he always used parables that is he always hid his message from them but he always when they were alone explained the meaning to his disciples so they were never left in the dark and they were never left to wonder now interestingly we don't have a record of all the explanations of his parables and therefore some Christians have understood some of the parables differently than other Christians have but apparently he explained them all to his disciples and the ones that they left unexplained when they recorded them for us they must have left because they thought we could figure it out I mean some of this is not rocket science I mean a mustard seed growing into a great tree I mean there's plenty of plenty of ways that we could be expected to understand what that means without being mistaken so Jesus gave his disciples private explanations all the time and that's why he selected them so that he could give them what he couldn't give to other people what he couldn't entrust to others and we'll stop there even though we're not at the end of chapter 4 yet but the story that remains ahead of us would be too involve too much comment for us to try to take in the little time that I would want to give to it so we'll stop