



A Seed

Mark 4.1-34

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Today, we're continuing our series through the book of Mark. And over the weeks, some of you have been asking me: Why does Jesus keep telling people to keep quiet about who he is?... When he heals the man with leprosy in chapter 1 he tells him **not** to tell anyone. Multiple times as he is casting out impure spirits, they actually say Jesus is the Son of God and he even tells them not to speak.

Why does Jesus do that? This is a valid question. I think Mark, the writer, wants us to be asking that question.

Well, very briefly—*very* briefly—there's a practical reason, and that reason is, it's not time yet for Jesus to be arrested and killed. Jesus knows that's how his life will end, but he's not ready. So, he tells people to keep it quiet for now.

The second reason is theological. Very often the ones who are saying out loud that he is the Son of God are the impure spirits—the demons...And they have the intellectual knowledge of who Jesus is, but as we saw last week, intellectual knowledge alone isn't enough to enter into the kingdom.

I think Mark wants the reader to be asking this question. And the fact that we're asking the question betrays something about us and particularly about our culture.

It betrays our desire for instant gratification...

Now that I have the internet in my pocket, and not only that, but I have an Amazon account and the Amazon App, I can have almost anything I want instantly—well, in less than 24 hours. In fact, if I have to wait much longer than that, I get really frustrated.

We live in an Amazon Prime era, where we can have almost anything the instant we want it. And that is shaping us profoundly not only to want things instantly, but to feel a sense that we're **owed** everything we want now.

And that's not just true about products, it's true about life in general. I think I should have the career I want **now**. I think I should have the family I want **now**. I think I should have the lifestyle I want **now**. And that is certainly how we've begun to view our spiritual lives as well. So we get frustrated if we don't feel spiritually alive now, if we don't feel spiritually wise now, or spiritually encouraged or strong now.

I think this is something Mark is trying to draw out of us as readers. Alright Jesus, get on with it! Everyone in Israel and even in the surrounding nations knows about you now.

You've got your apostles—your band of brothers who will go anywhere with you and do anything for you. Oh, and by the way, God the Father himself has verbally endorsed you in front of a crowd of people.

What are you waiting for? Let's get this kingdom started...**now**.

Alright, let's pick up the text. Chapter 4 verse 1... Here we go...Jesus' new kingdom is on it's way!

Chapter 4 verse 1...

text: Mark 4.1a - Again Jesus began to teach by the lake.

What a let down. Here he is teaching again. Delayed gratification strikes again. Why? Why is he teaching again when it seems that he's got all the pieces he needs to unleash his new kingdom on earth?

Well, embedded in this passage *is* the reason. Jesus is going to show us his kingdom is not an instant gratification kingdom. His kingdom is not like Amazon Prime...it's like a seed.

He'll show us three ways it's like a seed:

1. A Seed that's Scattered
2. A Seed that's Buried
3. A Seed that's Small

So, let's take a look...

GOD

1. A Seed that's Scattered

As Jesus is by the lake he begins speaking to the crowds in parables. And from here on out, the

primary way he addresses the crowds is in parables.

The word parable literally means something thrown beside something else. In other words, a parable is a comparison—it's a truth you already know or understand put alongside something you don't to help you understand the new truth.

When Jesus uses parables, he's comparing something we know well here on earth to help understand a concept or a truth that comes from heaven.

In verses 3-7 he tells a parable about a farmer who scatters seed and the seed falls on 4 types of soil. And he tells *this* parable so that we can understand just how his Kingdom is going to be spread and grow here on earth. Just like the farmer scatters the seed, Jesus and his followers are going to scatter the Word—the gospel.

That's what Jesus goes on to explain in verses 13-20.

Now, he uses this comparison of a seed to the word, so let's think about that. What do we know about a seed? You might say, like me, because we're urbanites—not very much. We don't know very much about seeds.

But we do know this, a seed is tiny compared to the plant, or the tree that comes from it. But even though it's tiny, it has contained within it both life and immense power.

If a seed that's planted actually grows into a plant or into a tree that means there's life. Burying the seed has brought about new life. And not only that, but most plants are able to reproduce. From a single seed comes the ability to reproduce over and over and over again because the new plant creates more seeds. More seeds that can be planted and produce more plants which can produce more seeds which can produce more plants.

So, contained within the humble seed, this little thing—meant to be buried in the ground—is both life and immense power. Now, do you see it yet? Do you see why Jesus has cast this earthly image alongside his heavenly one?

The Word—the gospel is like a seed. Contained within it is both life and immense power. Contained within the gospel itself is the Kingdom of God. Remember what the kingdom is like?

Well, so far in Mark, Jesus has been traveling around doing three things. He's been preaching. He's been healing people from sickness, from

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impure spirits, from deformities—essentially, he's been freeing people from whatever is holding them captive. And thirdly, he's been forgiving people of their sins.

This is what the Kingdom of God is like, it's a life of forgiveness and freedom from whatever holds you captive.

And how does a person get access to that kind of life? It's through the seed—the Word of God.

It's the seed of the Word of God has the power of spiritual life. The very life of God comes into you through the planting of this seed in your life. But here's the problem, here's the other thing Jesus wants us to see in this parable—and we know he wants us to see it because he explains it in verses 13-20.

The seed only releases its power if it goes in deep. The seed only takes root and grows if it's worked into the soil.

Now, in 3 of the four soils where the seed is scattered, there's a problem.

In the first two soils, it's a depth problem—the seed on the first soil doesn't go in at all. The second one doesn't go in deep enough.

And in the third soil it's a problem with clutter, there's too many weeds and thorns and when the plant finally comes up out of the ground the weeds choke the plant and kill it.

Now the fourth soil is in stark contrast to the other three. The seed that was scattered on the fourth soil went down deep and therefore, it grew and produced a crop—do you see this both in verse 8 and in verse 20—a crop multiplying 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

Here's what Jesus wants his followers to see. This incredible power of the kingdom of God is released into your life by taking in and receiving the humble seed—the humble Word of God.

By the way, did you notice in verse 9 Jesus says:

text: Mark 4.9 - "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

He says it again in verse 23, and in verse 24 he says:

text: Mark 4.24 - "Consider carefully what you hear,"

The way the seed of the Word of God comes into your life—with all the potential to give you a new

life, with all its immense power to forgive you and free you from anything that holds you captive, and all its power to reproduce 30, 60, 100 times—the way it comes into your life is by hearing. But not just any hearing—careful, considerate hearing.

You see, God's word—the Gospel—is incredibly powerful, but it never does something **to** you without you. The way God's word takes root in our lives and grows up to bear fruit is by us listening + pondering + thinking + reflecting + discussing + applying the word over + over + over + over again.

Listen, this seed will do its work, it will put down deep roots, it will grow up into an incredibly fruitful plant, but it takes ears to hear.

Listen, do you feel like there's not much fruit in your life? Do you feel like it's been a while since you felt spiritually alive, or spiritually wise, or spiritually encouraged or strong. It might be because you haven't cultivated the soil—you don't have ears to hear. Let me explain with an illustration...

illustration: A little while ago, I asked our student team here to have a look at what sorts of activities were helping our students grow the most. What sorts of things were we doing with students to help them become more alive, more wise, more encouraged in their faith in Christ.

And here's what we found. The students who regularly spent time—one to one—with an older Christian reading the Bible were the ones who became more spiritually alive, more wise, more encouraged in their faith. And quite often it was those students who then began to pour into others. They were the ones who began to lead Bible studies, they were the ones who signed up to help teach kids in our kids work on a Sunday morning.

What we found is it's the ones who took time to listen + ponder + think + reflect + discuss + apply the word over + over + over + over again as they met week by week in their one to one—they were the ones who felt more spiritually alive, more wise, more encouraged in their faith. Why?

They had ears to hear. They took the time to cultivate the soil of their lives so that the seed would go down deep, and the result was that the bore fruit. Not only fruit in their own lives—they felt more spiritually alive, more encouraged, wiser—but also fruit in the lives of others. That's just one example of what it looks like to have ears to hear.

There's another reason you might not feel like you're experiencing much fruit in your life and that's the second parable Jesus tells. This one is about a seed that's buried.

2. A Seed that's Buried

Now, this parable is all about waiting. The farmer scatters the seed, then no matter if he's asleep or he's awake—doesn't matter what the farmer does, once the seed is buried in the ground, verse 28 says...

text: Mark 4.27b-28 - the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

The picture here is not of an instant plant. It's of a plant that takes time. First, below the surface, out of sight it sprouts and grows. Then up from the ground comes a stalk, then the head, then the kernel.

Here's what Jesus is showing us as he throws this image of a slow growing plant alongside to help us understand the Kingdom of God. I think it helps us understand two things.

First, the seed needs to be buried.

You see, there's a sense here that when Jesus Christ talks about a seed that needs to be buried, he's actually talking about himself...

You see, when Jesus Christ came, he came to die. He came to be buried—and he was buried. A seed only releases its power if it's buried in the ground. And to receive the word about Jesus Christ into your life **IS** to receive the seed of faith that puts down roots in your life and one day produces a crop maybe 30, maybe 60 maybe 100 times over in your life and the lives of others.

That's the first thing this parable opens up for those who have ears to hear, But the second is this: the growth of the Kingdom of God both in this world and in our lives will often be slow.

Like a plant that first does its thing out of sight, then slowly comes up out of the ground and over a whole summer grows from a tiny stalk into a full grown seed bearing plant, the work of the gospel in our lives comes slow. It comes over a lifetime.

Therefore, we need patience.

Now, it seems that almost everything being created today is being created to get rid of the

need to wait. We have very little tolerance for waiting. Our patience always seems thin...

illustration: I was doing a little bit of reading on this recently, and I came across a book called: *Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting from the Ancient to the Instant World*. The book is about how to wait, and it actually explains the virtues of waiting for things, how waiting shapes us and forms us in some really good ways.

So I went onto Amazon to order the book, to order this book about how to become a person who waits. And Amazon gave me some ordering options that I found slightly ironic. Take a look...

Prime FREE One-Day delivery! Free delivery by—and then in bold—Tomorrow—but only if I order in the next 17 hours.

Oh, and by the way, to create a little bit of fear in my heart that if I don't order it now, I'll have to wait even longer—there's only 4 left in stock.

Now, do you see what that's designed to do to me. It validates and endorses my need for instant gratification. Even if I'm going to buy something that will help me learn how to wait, I'm affirmed in my need to have it instantly.

Now anything we have to wait for is bad, it's weak, it's less, it's inferior.

Except, what Jesus is showing us is that spiritual growth, the growth of his kingdom in our own lives and in the world is slow. It takes time. Especially at the start, it's all under the surface growth.

illustration: Imagine if we lived in the 18th century. I've been reading a biography of the famous British preacher George Whitefield. And in it, the author shares about Whitefield's proposal for marriage.

In 1740, Whitefield was in America traveling around preaching, but he felt a deep love for Elizabeth Delamotte, a woman he met back at home in England. And so he wrote a letter to her to propose. But there was no instant response. At the time, it took 4 months for a letter to make its way from Georgia to London. So he had to wait 4 months for Elizabeth to receive the proposal, then wait *another* 4 months for her response to reach him in Georgia! Talk about delayed gratification!

By the way, do you want to know he wrote to her? Here's what he wrote, it's dripping with romance: "Can you, when you have a husband, be as though you had none, and willingly part with him, even for a long season, when his Lord and Master

shall call him forth to preach the Gospel?" How romantic right? Well, it get's worse: "I write not from any other principles but the love of God.... The passionate expressions which carnal courtiers use ... ought to be avoided by those that would marry in the Lord."

What a proposal?

So, he writes the letter, seals it—maybe with a kiss, probably not, seems a little too carnal for him—sends it off and waits the 8 months it would take for a round trip. And what does Elizabeth say?

No.

Either way, eight months of waiting for a response. Can you imagine how that must have shaped Whitefield? How much prayer, how much contemplation, how many hours of introspection and how that must have shaped his faith?

We don't live that way anymore. Now everything is instant. Today, if you want to propose to someone on the other side of the world, you get on an airplane and you can be there in less than 24 hours.

And if you can't do that, there's always FaceTime or Snapchat.

Do you realise our need for instant gratification is not only shaping how we buy things or how we connect with other people, it's shaping how we approach our faith? Because everything else in the world is created to give us instant gratification, we expect the Word—the seed that has immense power—to work instantly. And when it doesn't we're disappointed, maybe even crushed.

But, did you notice verse 29? There's a reward for our patience...it's the harvest.

text: Mark 4.29 - As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.

Even though the crop comes slowly, there's still a harvest.

So, what's God's word like? It's like a seed that is scattered. But it's also like a seed that is buried. A buried seed requires patience while the seed does its work underneath the soil, then even as it sprouts up, it still needs time to grow and develop, but eventually God's word brings a harvest.

Here's what this means for us, keep burying seeds. In your own life, keep burying the seed of the Word—read it, listen to it, discuss it, memorize

it—do that over and over and over again and as you bury it deep down, it will sprout, it will grow up like a tender shoot and eventually it will bear fruit.

But not only in your own life, but bury seeds in the lives of others, share the Word—share it with non-Christians in little ways, in big ways give them the gospel and then be patient. Share it with other Christians who need encouragement, who need wisdom, who need strength, bury it down deep and eventually, it will sprout and bear fruit.

Now, not only is God's Word like a seed that's scattered, and like a seed that's buried, but it's also like a seed that's small.

3. A Seed that's Small

In the third parable, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Now, let's be honest, a mustard seed means nothing to us. I've never planted a mustard seed, I've never even seen a mustard seed. But we can still understand the image. It's small. It's weak.

Now, we need to stop and think for just a minute about the image Jesus uses for the Word of God. Jesus could have used all sorts of images, all kinds of parables to describe how people would receive his kingdom. You know in the Old Testament, there's all sorts of powerful images to describe the Word of God...hammer...fire...sword...

You see, a hammer crushes its opposition, a fire blasts the opposition, the sword slashes through the opposition.

No, instead he uses the image of a seed. And a seed is tiny, it's weak. You don't drop a seed to the ground and say "bombs away!" If you drop a seed to the ground, you can't even find a seed.

A seed doesn't have the destructive power of a hammer or of fire or of a sword. A seed is easily destroyed, you can even crush it between your two fingers.

And yet, here we have Jesus, the authoritative author of creation—the one who spoke everything into being. The one who through him and for him all things were made in heaven and on earth. It's his kingdom coming on earth.

Yet, what does he say it's like?.....It's like a tiny, weak, little seed. It's so weak, we've already learned, most soil—most people—will reject it.

But, look what happens when you do receive it? It becomes far bigger, far more life giving, far more restorative, far more fruitful than you would ever expect. Take a look, verse 32...

text: Mark 4.23 - 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.

A seed looks so weak, so insignificant, but a seed has a paradoxical weakness and strength. Let me give you a picture of this.

illustration: here's an acorn...Contained in this little tiny acorn is everything necessary to grow a huge tree. And if you plant this acorn it becomes a tree, off that tree will fall hundreds and hundreds of other acorns, and if you plant all of those, off of them will fall hundreds and hundreds more! Contained in this little tiny acorn is the power to cover the entire face of the earth in wood. No hammer, no fire, no sword has the power to do that. And yet, if I drop it on the ground I can crush it with my foot.

Power and yet weakness. Or put it another way, power from weakness. Because when the weak little seed is planted it grows and becomes something big, something strong.

illustration: A few years ago, I went up into the mountains near San Diego, California with some friends to go sledding in the snow. It was, I think a sad attempt to relive our childhood—to be 10 years old again—to pretend the last 20 years hadn't happened...We spent hours and hours sledding down this hill. And on the very last run of the day, we decided to make a train. That the 10 of us would all link together and see if we can make it to the bottom without breaking apart.

Well, we broke apart, and as we did that, I went spinning off the clear path into a bunch of trees. And as I was spinning around like a top, my left leg crashed into a tree, a small tree, a sapling, but I knew immediately something was wrong. So I pulled up the leg of my trousers and I saw the deepest hole I've ever seen in a person's skin. Thankfully nothing had broken, but I had lost in two places two patches of skin about the size of a 50p coin. It took two months for those wounds to heal.

...from a tiny little acorn grew a tree...it wasn't even a fully grown tree yet. And yet it still had immense power. The power to stop me dead in my tracks and spin me around. Can you imagine what would have happened if it was a full grown tree? I probably wouldn't be standing here today, I'd be dead. That's how powerful, and yet it

started out so weak—a tiny seed you could crush under your foot.

That's the power of the seed, this little, tiny, weak thing—that when you receive it, when you bury it and patiently wait for it to do its work, one day, it becomes a big beautiful, strong, powerful tree that bears fruit in your life and the life of others.

So, as we close, can we go back to the four soils?

Every soil represents someone's response to Jesus. We've been learning that all through the book of Mark, Jesus interacts with three audiences, three types of people. The crowds, the opposition and the followers.

The first soil is the opposition—the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the Herodians—they've rejected him.

The second soil is the crowds—they've sprung up so quickly and from everywhere. But as soon as he stops doing miracles, they're gone.

The third soil are actually, believe it or not, his followers. The seed has gone down deep, but as soon as the worries of this life, the worries of their comfort, their safety, their reputation come up, they're gone, they desert him.

But do you know what the good news is? What we see as we read through the book of Mark and the other Gospels? The seed of the word—if it goes down deep enough—it can and does transform the lives of people from all three groups.

And it can do that for you too...But it means receiving Jesus Christ, not as a hammer, not as a fire, not as a sword, but as a seed.

He came not to judge, but to be judged. Not to judge *you*, but to take *your* judgement upon himself. Jesus Christ came not to be lifted up and exalted, but to die and to be buried...

Because seeds only release their power if they're buried in the ground. If Jesus had come as a hammer, if he had come as a fire, if he had come as a sword, we'd all be crushed, burned, slashed.

But Jesus Christ came as the ultimate seed that was buried. And from his death and his burial—that look so unbelievably weak—has come a new kingdom. A Kingdom that means forgiveness and freedom for every single person who will receive the Word of the Kingdom—the Word of God into their lives.

But it's not like Amazon Prime—it's like a seed. It's more like the title to this book I downloaded

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recently: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. I haven't read it yet, but I'm not sure I have to in order to get the point.

Listen, the Word of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ—is like a seed that's scattered. It's being scattered here this morning. And when you bury it, it sprouts and it begins to take root.

And if you're patient, it will do its work. And this weak, tiny seed will one day become a strong powerful tree that will bear the fruit of freedom and forgiveness in your life and in the lives of others around you.

All you have to do to get that, is have ears to hear, to receive it and let it go down deep.