

*Where we start . . .*

Although we may have a few items around the house that claim to be “automatic,” very little really is. (After all, the “automatic” coffee maker still needs you to put the water in, measure the coffee, etc.) Can you think of anything around your house that really does develop or grow and act “automatically”?

*What we read . . .*

Jesus uses a word akin to our word “automatic” in telling us more about how the kingdom comes. See if you can pick out the word as you read Mark 4:26-34.

These two short parables follow on the heels of Mark’s account of the parable of the sower (4:1-20). What was the point of that parable?

Each of these short parables have their own point to make. Taking them individually . . .

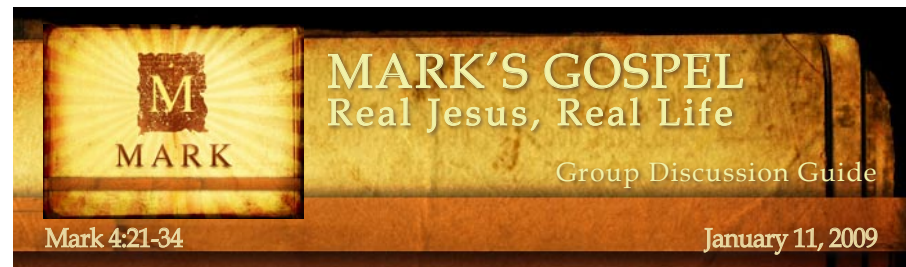
What is the central idea pictured by the parable of the growing seed (4:26-29)?

What is the central idea conveyed by the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32)?

Drawing on the parables of the sower, the growing seed and the mustard seed, try and capture a “bigger picture” of what Jesus is telling us about how we will experience kingdom life:

*Why this matters . . .*

As you reflect on these three parables, what is Jesus calling you to do? What does He want for us?



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*Diving in . . .*

Last week we listened as Jesus explained (through a parable) that *the secret to the kingdom is to pay attention to what Jesus says*. But even getting that, we sometimes draw misguided implications from that insight. We sometimes conclude that Jesus' teaching is, fundamentally, rules to follow or instructions to execute. But as we listen to Him continue to explain kingdom life, it becomes clear that life is experience, *not because we do something as much as because His Word does something in us*.

*Discussing . . .*

In the parables that we will look at this time, Jesus uses a word very much like our word "automatic" (when He says that "the earth produces *by itself*" in Mark 4:28). So we begin our discussion of what it means for something to work "automatically." Basically, the idea is "without our help." And that insight will come into play as we explore the parables before us.

You might want to briefly glance back at Mark 4:21-25 and remind the group that Jesus' teaching in parables is: 1) intended to reveal truth (to those who really want to listen) and not hide truth; and 2) designed to produce further understanding for those who really listen to Jesus (the "measure" or amount you pay attention to is related to the amount of understanding you will gain). Those key ideas are drawn from previous discussions.

This week we turn to two, short, parables. Each, in a sense, stands alone. And only after we grasp what each is saying in itself are we free to draw the whole group of parables together.

The first of the two is the parable of the seed that grows. Like our reading of the parable of the sower, it is important to pay attention to where the action is in the parable; that will help us read it well. And in this parable, although the man scatters the seed on the ground, the real emphasis appears to fall on the seed itself. The seed "sprouts and grows;" the man does not know how this happens and, as Jesus tells the parable, the man doesn't really do much of anything to cause this growth. Something just happens (automatically!) when seed is sown. And this is the point of this particular parable.

How does this build on what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower? Well, there, Jesus explained (or, perhaps better, called us to think through) the idea that the kingdom of God comes in and through the simple process of the proclamation of the Word. Jesus' ministry is one of sowing the Word,

proclaiming the kingdom. And all that He calls His hearers to is to "pay attention" to what they hear. But that may leave them (and us) with the question: "Is that it?! If I listen will growth and change happen?"

The parable of the growing seed answers that question. The seed *does and will grow*. Here we get a glimpse of grace. Jesus is not calling us to "do something" or "get busy" in order to earn or obtain life. He is speaking life-giving words, life-altering words; He sows the truly good seed into our lives. And it is by embracing and welcoming this seed that we will experience life . . . because the seed (God's Word) will produce fruit.

This doesn't mean that there might not be something for us to do, some way to appropriately respond to what Jesus is saying; but the focus is not on our doing stuff to make life happen but on our really giving heed to what Jesus says. Even in these parables, there is very little for us to "do;" Jesus' hearers need to simply embrace what He is telling them about how the kingdom really does come. It is experienced through listening to Jesus.

But that might stir another question: "But that sure doesn't look like much. Will this simple beginning really produce kingdom life?" The parable of the growing seed informs us that God's Word will produce life in us. And the parable of the mustard seed helps us maintain a proper perspective on that kingdom life.

We might think that giving heed to Jesus' words and listening well to what He says is such a small thing. We might be tempted to think, "How can that really matter all that much? What difference can that make?" But in telling the parable of the mustard seed Jesus underscores the idea that from seemingly incredible small beginnings, God brings great things. If we think that listening and giving heed to Jesus' words seem such a small thing, we need not worry. In God's economy and by His design, such small beginnings will ultimately usher in significant life.

The parable of the mustard seed not only gives us a way to understand the growth of the kingdom in our own lives, but also in the world. Here Jesus is, in the midst of an increasingly hostile environment, and He amasses no armies, mounts no crusades, wages no battles. He merely begins to speak words of truth into the lives of a few who are listening. That sure doesn't seem like an auspicious beginning for a program intended to change the whole world!

But Jesus understands how God's kingdom really does come. This small beginning-proclamation to a few out of a crowd who are willing to listen-will ultimately result in the establishment of the kingdom of God that encompasses the whole world. And it all happens, not because we (the hearers) make it happen; it all happens because of what God does through His Word as announced and evidenced in and through the life of Jesus.

So where does that leave us? What does Jesus want for us? Perhaps it is simpler than we often make it. He wants us to attend to Him; He longs for us to listen to Him; He desires for us to live as if what He says is what really produces life-changing, kingdom life. If we do that . . . something will *automatically* (through God's own plan and power) begin to happen.