

Kingdom Dynamics: Seeding Dirt

Mark 4:1-20

April 11, 2021

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When was the last time you were surprised by one of your sanctifying agents? Have you got sanctifying agents in your life? Marriage is a sanctifying agent. Having kids is a sanctifying agent. Owning a puppy might even qualify.

A sanctifying agent is something God uses to expose your brokenness and give you the opportunity to grow. So you get born basically a paragon of virtue – at least I did – and then I got married and found out that actually I’m a sniveling sinner. My poor wife! Anyone else find out you weren’t nearly as prince charming or perfect as you thought?

Then I grew into an environmentally conscious, cloth diapering champion of nature and I knew I was better than you. And this worked great with our first baby who was constipated most of the time. But then twin sanctifying agents with the spiritual gift of poo showed up and now about a quarter of the PG landfill is full of our diapers, Pampers sends us Christmas cards, and I’m way less judgmental.

Is Jesus working on you – digging deep into the hidden corners of your heart, and making you more beautiful?

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If you’ve been with us over the last couple months you know that we have been looking at Jesus through the Gospel of Mark. And Mark defines what he is writing as a gospel. He says:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1 NKJV)

So we call this book a Gospel. And “gospel” is a word that has taken on meaning in culture. People will tell you the gospel truth. Or sometimes we accept things as gospel.

But in the first century a gospel was an exclamation of good news, like a headline on a news feed about something really positive. So after months of COVID we read “There’s a vaccine that’s 97% effective.” That’s gospel – a proclamation of good news.

And so “gospel” wasn’t a religious word in the first century but there was something about it Jesus liked. And so, right at the beginning, Mark tells us Jesus used it to define His message. We read:

Jesus went into Galilee, where He preached God’s Good News. “The time promised by God has come at last!... “The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!” (Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus’ good news was that God’s kingdom was coming near or literally breaking into the broken world we are familiar with. And if we repent of our sins and believe we can participate in it.

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Well we are starting a new section in Mark today where Jesus begins unpacking what God's inbreaking kingdom looks like. And it's beyond what anyone was expecting. The Jews wanted a messiah who would kick the Romans out. But instead Jesus shows up performing miracles, forgiving sin and transforming hearts. Nobody even had a box to put that kind of thing in. And that's what this next section is all about.

And it begins with one of Jesus' most well-known illustrations or parables. So if you've got a Bible please go ahead and open it to Mark 4 starting in verse 1. And as you are finding that would you stand with me for the reading of God's word. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 4:1-20]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now most of the time that I have heard this passage preached the work has been done unpacking the different soils that Jesus describes here. But today I want to look at the power of the seed which is the point of this story.

The point isn't, be a good soil so you can get the most out of Jesus. The point is Jesus' word, His message, His gospel, isn't like the other stuff you've experienced. It's powerful and can transform you.

You see, in this section Jesus is defining what the good news about the inbreaking kingdom of God is like. And the first picture He uses is a seed. Jesus' word, His message, is like a seed.

Now this is all very unimpressive. Like come on Jesus, why not say "My message is like a sword or a hammer." That would inspire some confidence. But Jesus turns around to His disciples and says "I'm not the kind of Messiah you think. I'm coming to heal something you never dreamed could be healed. And so it's good news that My word isn't any of the things you want, it's like a seed."

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But seeds are so small and fragile.

We've got some planters going in our kitchen in case spring shows up. And one of the things I've witnessed in the last couple weeks is these little planters getting knocked over by my sanctifying agents. And then there is this mad scramble to put the dirt back in the pots. But there's no way to be sure you've actually got the seed back in there. It's so small you can't even find it! And then the dog comes and eats some of the other ones. So half these pots are doing nothing.

And Jesus says "Listen, My kingdom is like a farmer going out to sow seed." And my response is "Oh Jesus, I don't think this is going to work." But there's power here.

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So I want to unpack three aspects of Jesus' picture that take us to the heart of what He is saying about His gospel – His good news. First, Jesus says His word is like a seed because it has power. Second, His word is like a seed because of the way that it releases that power. And finally, His word is like a seed because weakness is the secret of its power.¹

Let's look first at how Jesus' word or His good news has power like a seed.

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So God's word is the agent He uses to accomplish His work. It's got power. God speaks "let there be light" and light happens. God's word has creative power. And elsewhere we find out that it also has recreative power. So Peter says:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Peter 1:23)

God's word can root itself inside dead people and recreate or revives us. This means God's word about His kingdom isn't information, its got a power in and of itself. And as such it's kind of like a seed.

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So I've got a princess who keeps her hands pretty clean, but then I've got 3 boys and a dog who love dirt. And this means all manner of things are continually getting planted around my yard. Large rocks, Lego, bones, some of my tools. And I usually find them with the lawn mower and get sanctified.

But amazingly, of all the things that get planted, only the seeds Nikki has put in those pots grow. Why is that?

Well the reason is because nothing else has the power of life in it like a seed does. And Jesus grabs onto this and uses it as a picture of what the good news about God's kingdom is like. It's got life in it such that if it gets planted in you it can grow into something miraculous.

And in the text it's a miraculous harvest of 30, 60 or a 100 fold. And any farmer will tell you that's impossible. Even modern agriculture doesn't expect returns like that. But Jesus does. When His word gets into us it produces exponential growth like life growing from one order to another.

So there are different orders of life. Plants are alive. They can grow. They can consume nutrients. They can turn towards the sun. They can do all sorts of amazing things that rocks and minerals can't do.

But while plants are alive their life is nothing like animal life. Talking to your plants only helps if you water them at the same time. But your animals can sense your tone of voice and respond. And that's because animals can see and interact with things in a way plants can't.

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-seed-of-the-kingdom-5449/> (Accessed April 7, 2021)

And then humans are an exponential step up from even the most intelligent animals. My dog knows when we aren't happy with it – it hangs its head and looks guilty. But no animal is actually capable of feeling guilt. And that's because guilt is a moral thing. Animals simply don't have the ability to judge between what is right and wrong. They can't tell you about injustice.

So it doesn't bother a pride of lions to target the antelope babies or the zebra with the hurt leg. There is no pick on someone your own size in the animal kingdom. It's just lunch and the survival of the fittest.

The other day YouTube decided I needed to watch some Natural Geographic. And you know those recommended videos are going to sit there until you watch them. So eventually I was watching something called "Two hungry wolves chase a super fast rabbit." And the whole time I'm watching I'm saying "run rabbit!" It feels wrong to me that two big hungry wolves should be able to pick on something white and fluffy. But nature doesn't see things like we do. We see more.

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And the gap between these orders of life is exponential. And so if you had an animal that through some injury was rendered only as alive as a plant, you would not consider it to be really living.

And similarly if a loved one, through some terrible injury was rendered only as alive as an animal that would be so sad. And you wouldn't consider them to be really living.

To go down an order of life is a tragedy, but what if you could go up? Jesus says there is another order of life that He wants to open up to us. He calls it 'abundant life.' And this is what happens when His word gets into you.

Now this is just an illustration – Jesus followers don't become a different species than other people. But Jesus' point is that there is an awareness of life beyond what the natural person sees. And it is actually more real than the one we see with our natural eyes – it's supernatural.

So Jesus followers can experience the Holy Spirit's power in our lives. We can become aware of Jesus' fingerprints all over creation. And we can hear Him speaking into our souls. And before coming to faith this isn't available to people – they either don't believe it exists at all, or they have sort of an academic believe about it but have never experienced it themselves.

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Surveys tell us most people in Canada believe in God. The majority, however, have no interaction with Him. But when God speaks His word into you then this belief about God changes into an experience with Him. And this makes an order of difference.

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So how do you know if you're there? You see the fruit of the Spirit growing in you.

So for example, when tragedy strikes how do you respond? Most people pray when there is trouble even when they've got no faith. In football if you are desperately behind the quarterback might try a "Hail Mary" play – just throw the ball and pray.

But Jesus' good news is that there's something available to us a full order of understanding above this. So when you get in trouble are you plugged into God's goodness such that you can trust it to strengthen you? Or do you fall apart?

When you're facing sickness or failure or devastating criticism, is God's love so real to you that it sustains you? Is His delight in you, in Christ, more real than the criticism of the people around you? Is His life so rich in you that it's more real than the sickness in your body or the body of someone you love? If it is, you can handle anything because you've entered a higher order of life. That's a sign that Jesus' seed is growing in you.

In Romans Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes (Romans 1:16)

So, do you know about God, or is His power at work in you? Jesus' good news is like a seed because it contains power to deliver life. And second, Jesus' good news is like a seed because of the way it releases its power.

In 1995 some biologists found a lotus seed that they radiocarbon dated to 700AD. And they planted it and it sprouted. For hundreds of years it lay dormant, but then by simply putting it deep in some good soil, life emerged.

And going deep is the way the seed releases its power and we see with the soils. So in the first soil – the path – the seed doesn't get in at all. It just stays on the surface and gets eaten. Then in the rocky soil the seed gets in a little, but not deep enough. Something sprouts, but the sun scorches it. In the third soil the seed gets deeper still, but only as deep as the other concerns of the world – they are just as important. And the result is no crop.

In all three soils Jesus' good news about the kingdom doesn't get into the person deep enough. And the result is that the power of God doesn't come to life in them.

And this is what Jesus is saying: if you are going to gain access to the next order of life – abundant life – then what I am saying has to get deep into your soul. It can't be something you just believe once. It can't be something you like the sound of and so look into a bit. It can't be one of the things you love and look to for meaning.

Jesus' gospel has to go in deep to your soul. If we want the reality of His kingdom to grow in us Jesus says "I have to root deep into your being and be your main thing – your God."

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Now how does Jesus' word get deep into us? It's actually a gentle process. Gardening isn't mining. You don't use a pickaxe or dynamite when you are gardening. You work a seed into the soil with small tools and your fingers. It's gentle.

And so Jesus constantly says "Listen, look, understand." And as we give ourselves to these things; as we spend time listening, reflecting, praying, reading, discussing, Jesus' word gently works into our lives. And that's where its power gets released.

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So what are you doing to cultivate Jesus' seed? His word has power to transform; to open us up to a whole new understanding of life, but to access its power it has to root deep. So what kind of root have you allowed it to develop in you?

Have you simply heard Jesus' word such that it's sitting on the surface? Or has it gone in a little and you're interested, but that's it? Or has it grabbed hold of you, but only as strongly as some other things have grabbed hold of you? Or have you cultivated your heart such that Jesus' word is working down deeper than anything else. Does His word sit at the very center of who you are?... How do you know?

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You've probably heard people ask "What comes out of you when you get bumped? The picture is you are a cup full of something, and when you get bumped whatever is in the cup comes out. It's a similar picture. When life happens, if you are in Christ, He is what comes out of you.

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Remember Kim Warren? We had a youth pastor here whose athletic husband dropped dead one day out of nowhere at 26 years old. That's tragedy. What would come out of you if tragedy struck like that; if life bumped you like that? Would you get angry or resentful? Would you use it as an excuse to sin?

You probably know people who have grown crusty and bitter with disappointment. Bad things happen to us all, but Jesus says bitterness doesn't have to result. If He gets into us we actually become more beautiful as life crashes down around us. So how you respond to life's disappointments is one way to see what kind of soil you are.

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I was so blessed and encouraged by Kim. She loved and lost. She mourned but she didn't get mad. She was so full of joy and peace. Life bumped her as hard as it could, and Jesus bubbled out. Jesus' word had gone down deep inside her. And as such it was like a seed.

A seed and Jesus' word have power and they both release their power when they have the opportunity to go down deep. is like a seed that only releases its power when it gets down deep inside us. And finally, Jesus' good news about His kingdom is like a seed because weakness is its power.

It's so amazing to me that Jesus doesn't say "My kingdom is like a hammer or a fire or a sword." Any warrior would use those pictures but Jesus isn't interested in rallying the troops. He didn't come to conquer our hearts by force but to win us with love.

And so like a seed the power of God's kingdom is only released as it goes into the ground and dies. But this is such a surprise and so different from anything else in life that most don't know what to do with it. And so three of four soils reject Jesus' word.

The first soil hears that the cross is Jesus' MO and says that's not the Jesus I'm looking for. The second soil initially thinks Jesus is awesome, but like Judas, only hears the parts of Jesus that line up with their own agenda, and so when Jesus speaks of sacrifice and death, leaves Him behind.

Third soil people are happy to add Jesus to their life as long as He benefits. Jesus offers abundant life - great! We'll add that to the list of abundant life we want and pursue them all together.

But only when the seed goes deep into the soil and dies does its power release. And you can only die once or for one thing. So the cross was Jesus' glory. It was the moment of His victory. And Jesus tells us the path is the same for us:

"If any of you wants to be My follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow Me." (Luke 9:23)

Jesus' way looks like loss. It looks like sacrifice. But the mystery of the power of His word gets released when we embrace His kingdom and His will instead of our own. When this happens the power of the gospel gets released into 30, 60 or 100-fold growth. It's a new order of life. And that's what Jesus wants for us.

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Friends, this new order is so strong that it doesn't matter what kind of fear or addiction or poor self-image you have suffered from. It doesn't matter how messed up you are. It doesn't matter how unfair life has been. When God's seed gets so deep into your heart that you die to everything else it releases its power to transform, and the result is abundant beauty.

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So Jesus stands here today, arms outstretched wanting His abundant life for each of us. And saying "Let everyone who has ears hear and understand. Will you let Me work deep into the depths of who you are – deeper than anything else? Will you let Me expose what is broken so I can plant something new. I have 30, 60 and even 100-fold plans for you. Will you follow Me to the cross and cultivate the soil of your soul?"

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) What stands out to you about Jesus' seed from the sermon?
- 2.) If animals don't understand morality what is a puppy doing when it hangs its head?
- 3.) Tell a story about a time Jesus made Himself real to you in your life.
- 4.) What kinds of things help you cultivate your heart so Jesus' seed can go down deep? How have you grown in this over time?
- 5.) What kinds of things in our society keep people from allowing Jesus' word to get deep into their hearts? How can we fight this?