

That don't impress me much.

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[0 : 00] So we're carrying on in Mark's Gospel. We're in chapter 4. And really what we're getting here is the second half of kind of... We've had all these parables that are sort of agricultural-based. In the first half of chapter 4 that we looked at last week, and then we've got these two that come this week as well. But the real question that I want to pose to us before we begin is, is really how do we measure success?

How do we measure success? The issue at stake here is an important one. Because if you look into our world and look at what is impressive or what is seen as impressive, it is often the opposite of what we see here in this passage.

And often I think it is probably what looks impressive on the outside, and often that corresponds to pound signs. But you think of the most impressive thing that you can think in your own life.

If you've been to a console or an impressive gig or stage production, the bigger the better. That's how we think, isn't it? The lighting, the production, the sound quality, the bigger the better.

[1 : 09] That's how we think. Or maybe if you're not into that kind of thing, you think of companies in the world that we find impressive. Now, this is not a plug for Amazon, and I don't know if you shop there, but I think most of us at some point have shopped on Amazon.

But whatever you think of Jeff Bezos, you've got to hand it to him. I mean, the sheer scale of that online operation, which is global, to get whatever you need delivered the next day, it is with pretty much anything you want, across the whole Western world.

You've got to hand it to him. It is impressive. It is big, and it is an impressive... The scale of it blows our minds. That is the kind of thing that the world, and let's be fair to it, we as well are impressed with.

We're impressed with people's abilities and skills, by their understanding, what they know. We're impressed with people who seem to be in charge of their own destiny.

They know it, no one. And they know how to get it. And they can think and seem that people are responsible for their own achievements. We know what that means, even if with Jeff Bezos, for example, there is a whole market built on the back of his success with people who write books about him because people want to copy what he does because they'd live their company or their life to be as impressive as he is.

[2 : 38] We are conditioned to admire and judge what success is by how impressive it is. It might even be with material things.

I still do this one. I don't know if you've done this. You're driving somewhere, and for some reason you go down the street and it surprises you. You drive down sort of mansion's row. And I catch myself saying, even to whoever I'm driving with, look at the size of that house!

Look at the size of it! It's massive! I wonder how many bedrooms and bathrooms it has. It is impressive, and we are conditioned to think like that.

Everything that Jesus says in these two parables flies in the face of that kind of thinking, of that kind of human wisdom when it comes to success and what is impressive.

Now, don't get me wrong, Jesus is not concerned with building a multinational corporation that produces e-books and has an online streaming platform. But it is concerned with growing a multinational body of people, a multi-nation of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

[3 : 51] The kingdom of God, that is his prerogative. The way he goes about it, it flies in the face of human wisdom. And there are three things that we're going to look at as we look at what counts as success in the eyes, not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of the living God, how the kingdom of God grows.

The first thing that I want us to explore is that the kingdom of God is grown by God in his timing. The kingdom of God is grown by God in his timing. And that's what we're going to see in the first parable that comes from verse 26 to 29.

Just look with me. Verse 26. This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground, night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

We understand the illustration from Jesus that once you've planted a seed in the ground, watered it, there is nothing more than you do to make it grow.

What you do with that has no more bearing on the growth of the seed. That's what Jesus is saying, whether the man, the farmer, the one who's sowing the seed is awake or whether he's asleep, it won't affect the growth.

[5 : 11] In fact, the man doesn't really know when or how the seed will grow. We're noticing that in verse 28 that it grows on its own accord. Verse 28.

All by itself, the soil produces corn. First the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. The growth of a seed is somewhat mysterious.

It is somewhat mysterious. This was immensely challenging, immensely challenging to the people of Jesus' day. Because what Jesus was saying is that people, people are not in control of the kingdom of God.

That's what he's saying. People are not in charge. It's that the men in charge, what they do, whether they're active or not, will not determine how God's kingdom grows. And when it came to the religious elite, the Jewish hierarchy, this is definitely not what they wanted to hear.

Because if anything, if anything, that their whole system of religious order relied upon the control they exerted over the people. The control they exerted over the people, and it slows.

[6 : 26] This parable would have threatened their way of religious life. It is deeply shocking, and what it's really saying is that the control they thought they had was just an illusion.

Maybe you've even experienced it with, maybe you remember when you were, back when you were at school, I know with our own kids, we've had this. At school, you bring home a little egg cup with crescent, and we leave it downstairs.

We've had it with Heidi, she's brought a plant home. A little bit of water, first day nothing happens.

And every day we've had it, Heidi comes down and checks, and there's still no growth.

There's still nothing. And then one day, come downstairs, and there's that tiny little bit of crest seed growing out of the eggshell. How did it happen? There are times in our life when we'd love to be in control of our lives and of church.

In our heads, maybe we thought, I know I've thought like this, in our heads we think, if things just panned out how I would like them, how I would plan them, then everything would be so much simpler.

[7 : 42] And all of us, at some point, we try our absolute best to do as much as we can to control situations and outcomes. We do our absolute best to maintain control and order and have things as we like them.

And when things go out of our order, just like the religious elite in Jesus' day, we do everything we can to restore it to maintain that sense of control over our lives and maybe even over church.

the church, God's kingdom on earth, grows like the seed. It is mysterious.

It is unseen. It comes from God alone. You can be, we can be running around like a mad hen doing everything we try or we could be asleep and we don't see the mysterious growth of the kingdom of God done in his timing.

God is at work growing his kingdom. He'll show people who he is in his timing. Now, just pause for a minute, just pause for a minute.

[8 : 57] That doesn't mean that we don't do anything. We don't believe, do we, in let go and let God because he uses our efforts. But the emphasis lies on he uses our efforts.

Our efforts on their own are nothing but it is God who uses our efforts for the mysterious growth of the seed, of his kingdom, of the church.

But it's not just the growth in numbers. Each of us is growing too.

Each of us is growing and the growth in our own hearts, it is mysterious. It is mysterious as we want to grow with spiritual maturity. Maturity in the individual if you think about it is actually less obvious than if people, if more people are coming in the building.

It's more insane. But let me tell you, if you've believed in the good news of Jesus, if you've taken it to heart, maybe there's times when you're unsure of where the thought is in your own life.

[10:10] The trick, the real trick is don't look at what God does over a month. Don't look at what God has done in you in maybe even six months.

But look at what God has done in your life over five years. The last ten years. It is amazing. There's so much fruit in your life.

There's sins that you've overcome. There are destructive thought patterns that don't have the same hold on you. You have a greater knowledge of the living God. You have a greater desire to serve God's people and people in general.

You see, God is doing a mysterious often unseen work in his church by bringing people to faith, but he's doing a mysterious unseen work in each of those that follow him. I'd encourage you to, if you see that someone has grown, if you can terribly see and notice where a fellow of Jesus, a buddy or sister in Christ is grown, tell them.

Encourage them in their walk with the Lord. You know, I just find it amazing that you're so good at listening to children. I've noticed recently how you serve people in the church and you never complain.

[11:31] God is at work in each of us, but it is unseen. It is unseen. He wants to change you and he will give you a unique purpose in your life to glorify him by growing you.

So that's the first one. That's the first parable that we've looked at. The second one comes from verse 30 to 32. The growth of the kingdom of God, it is spectacular, but it comes from something small and we probably say a little bit pathetic looking.

The second thing about the kingdom of God, it looks small and weak. Of all the things that Jesus could compare the kingdom of God to, this is the last you would expect, a mustard seed.

Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a mustard seed, they're kind of spherical, they're about a millimetre in diameter across the middle. It's very small, but that is not why Jesus picks it.

Saying something or anything was as small as a mustard seed, it was a Jewish proverb of the day, it's a Jewish saying, always used to illustrate how tiny something was.

[12:43] And we know, don't we, that if I had one in my hand right now and blew it, we'd never find it. We'd never find it in the street, you'd never get hold of it again. And look, this is, yet again, this is, the shock value of this to the Jewish society would have been unparalleled.

Hearing God's kingdom being compared to something small, infinitesimal, weak, if we dare say it almost a little bit pathetic, no one spoke about God's kingdom that way.

It is deeply shocking. How dare, how dare, this man compare God's kingdom to a mustard seed? How dare he? So unimpressive and pathetic, it verged, it verged hearing that on blasphemy.

Because, it was everything that the religious elite didn't want to think that people think that God's kingdom was like. They prided themselves on being impressive, they prided themselves on the religious regalia, the ceremonial clothes, the rituals, their positions and societal life.

If anything, it was the grandeur, making God's kingdom look on our appearance as impressive as possible, full of gold, expensive ornament, the best seats in the house.

[14:03] That's what mattered. Who is this upstart saying that God's kingdom should be compared to something so weak and pathetic?

big. So that at the beginning the wisdom of the world says that big is best. And it is challenging because as followers of Jesus we can be drawn into thinking just like the religious elite of Jesus did.

That our church will only grow if we make it look impressive, if we make it appealing of a certain kind, good. If maybe we're just here to entertain people, maybe then more people would come.

If we make it what everybody else likes in the culture and then just kind of tag on the gospel on the end. If we start with asking that question, we can run into problems.

What we need is the best music, then God's kingdom will grow. What we need is a better venue, then God's kingdom will grow. What we need is filling the gap. God's kingdom has never grown like that.

[15:17] It's always mustard-seedy. From small beginnings, throughout the history of God's people, there has been so many moments when things have looked so mustard-seedy. A friend of mine, his wife was telling me how she became a Christian not so long back.

And she told me that she became a Christian as a 12-year-old girl. The whole story, she explained in great detail. It was her friend who was a Christian, told her the gospel of how Jesus had died for

her sins, had paid for her ransom, in a school changing room, getting, as they'd just finished a PE lesson.

Just consider that for a moment. Two 12-year-old girls chatting. No one else there. had just finished a PE lesson.

It is so ordinary. It's so not glamorous. It's so almost unimpressive that two 12-year-old girls are chatting after PE in a changing room, and the kingdom of God grows in no one else sees.

It is so ordinary, so not impressive. That is how the church grows, that is how the kingdom of God grows, one person at a time, in non-impressive, very ordinary ways.

[16 : 41] It is also mustard seedy. But you see what happens when that mustard tree grows. houses all the birds in the garden.

The impact that one seed has, the street you live, the place you work, the communities that you join in, it's more than you know.

It looks so ordinary, so mustard seedy, but the place you live, God has placed you, he's placed you to be his hands and his feet in ordinary yet amazing ways. We're all aware of all the building work that's been going on in our village over many years, and it's not too long since they've finished the motorway junction that joins just down the road at the end of the road.

But you know what I love to see, I love to see this, is when you see them building a new road, you know how the building is so many different layers to the building process, they start off the capping layer, the sub base layer, the base, the binding and the surface layer, one after another, palette, one on top of the other, layer after layer after layer, and then finally they finish it with the tarmac, the new road is there, everybody's happy, look at it, look at what we've built, it is indestructible, layer upon layer, and you know what I love, you go to the new road, and there, there, right in the middle of the new road, what's right in the middle, a little dandelion, a weed, you have this huge dominating impressive feat of engineering, and the pesky, pathetic little weed, that somehow found a way to grow, that's gospel, that is the gospel right there, weak and pathetic from a small beginning, yet somehow finds a way to grow in the most unlikely circumstance, and you know the real reason why the kingdom of

God is like this, you know the real reason, because right at the heart of the Christian faith is weakness, you think of this, the heart of the Christian faith is a weak saviour who is executed, that's the heart of the Christian faith, the cross itself, it looks foolish, it looks weak, weak, does it not make God look weak to the world, of course it does, that God himself would come down, that God himself would come down and then hang on a minute, hang on a minute, the God who comes down, who names his son Jesus, which means God saves, the God who comes down, Jesus Christ dies, is so mustard seedy, it is so mustard seedy, what happens, totally unexpected, the tree grows, it is able to house all the birds in the garden, we have the resurrection,

[19 : 51] Jesus beats death, the cross itself, says Paul to the Corinthians, is foolishness to man, it is weakness, but to followers of Jesus it is the wisdom and the power of God, which means that if the centerpiece, if the centerpiece of our faith is a weak, foolish execution, it means that the church itself at times will, if it's cross-shaped, will look to the world weak and foolish, but the result is all, it's totally unexpected, the power of God is in the cross, human wisdom looks at the church, says it's weak and foolish, but the living God says that is where my power and wisdom are.

At the cross, we look, we look like the cross, because the church follows Jesus Christ in the way he lived. It's really encouraging to think, when we look at this morning and we see we might think that we're small and weak, but God is at work, because this is how he loves to grow his kingdom.

He loves to grow his kingdom like this. We're coming to our last point. We started off last week thinking about how we listen to parables, how we listen to parables, and at the end of this section of parables, Jesus finishes it off by reminding his disciples of what parables do.

And at the end of this, Jesus experienced something quite profound about his teaching, and particularly regarding the parables. Just look with me in verse 33. With many similar parables, Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. You see, it reminds us of the purpose of parables.

[21 : 54] As we heard this this morning, as we've heard about how those two parables would have been highly offensive to the religious elite.

They were there to warn them, but also to encourage us. That the parables are there for those who would hear, not just who would hear, but who would properly listen.

They're there to reveal, but also to conceal. To those who listen, parables open up and illuminate the truth. But to those who don't listen, who just hear, parables conceal the truth and keep it hidden. And notice the emphasis when he explains he is with his own disciples. He explains everything to them. And two things to notice.

They are his disciples. They're his. What that means is that in one sense they belong to him. And because they belong to him, that is why he explains things to them.

[22 : 54] Notice with me that the explanation is done in private. Now, the peculiar thing about all these parables is that the disciples don't fully understand them either.

They need a teacher to explain them. The difference is they are ready to be taught. And they ask him. We have the word of God.

We have the scriptures. And we are privy to the private teaching sessions that Jesus gives his own disciples. Anyone can get hold of a Bible, can read what he says to them.

And there may be some things that we read where we don't fully understand, but there is an important lesson that we can learn. It's the same as, but maybe we are often too proud to do it. It's the same as children at school, when we don't know something, what if the teacher says, put up your hand and ask. And if we ask, we're praying to the Lord Jesus to give us understanding in the things he wants to teach us.

[24 : 04] If we're thinking like that this morning, maybe if some of us are thinking that way, it is a humble posture to sit at the feet of Jesus and ask him afresh to teach us the things that we want to know in a fresh way.

There is a time in all of our lives where we didn't know Christ, when we didn't follow him. And there's nothing special about any one of us that made us worthy of belonging to Jesus.

But he has made us one with himself. He has taught us, he has given us his Holy Spirit. The living Son of God came down in order to rescue us, to teach us about who he is, and who he is, and who we are, what life is really all about, and to give us peace, and joy, and hope, and forgiveness. He came to offer us life and truth to teach us that we might put our trust in him and find our fulfilment and satisfaction in him.

With what shall we compare the kingdom of God? God, it is like a mustard seed. It looks weak and foolish. It is grown exclusively by God of law as he is drawing one person at a time to him and giving them life in his son, offering them forgiveness.

[25 : 31] It looks weak and foolish because the Saviour, God himself, the centrepiece of our faith, is a crucified Saviour. God will come to the resurrection.

The cross will look, the church will look like the cross. It will look weak and foolish. But the picture will be reversed at the end of time.

When all the birds will be housed in this amazing tree, there is a multitude of every tribe and nation which will be before the throne. It grows to be the biggest tree and the people of God will not be able to number them.

Every tribe, tongue and nation worshipping before the Lamb. God is at work. He's mysteriously grown his kingdom. He's mysteriously grown it in number and he's mysteriously grown it in each of us.

It looks weak and foolish to men but it is the power and wisdom of the living God. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we do thank you for your word and we thank you that you have brought us into the kingdom of your son.

[26 : 46] We thank you that you have given us of your Holy Spirit. And we do pray that you would bless us, encourage us, equip us. We do thank you that you are the one who grows your kingdom, that grows your church, that grows each of us.

Lord, there is moments in our life when we would love to be in control of things. There is times when we doubt and we're filled with frustration.

Lord, give us a fresh vision and a desire to keep on plugging away when things are tough and show us how great your kingdom was.

Would you grow us as individuals and would you grow us as a people? We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen.