



THE NONCONFORMIST

THE **PUZZLING** STORIES
OF JESUS

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THE BIBLE LAB®

YES, NO + MAYBE

1. I'm more humble than the people sitting on either side of me.
2. I like to do more work than what is expected of me.
3. God needs us to understand how His Gospel works, so we can help His kingdom come even sooner.
4. God is waiting on us to finish the work, so He can return and take us home.
5. Thanks to Jesus' parables, Christianity today is unmarred by misconceptions of God's true character..

DIG DEEPER

● READ Mark 4:26-34 (NLT)

Parable of the Growing Seed

26 Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. 28 The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. 29 And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come."

Parable of the Mustard Seed

30 Jesus said, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? 31 It is like a mustard seed planted in the ground. It is the smallest of all seeds, 32 but it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches, and birds can make nests in its shade." 33 Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand. 34 In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.

+ 26 seed on the ground - This is a very down-to-earth illustration. The kingdom of God was thought to be likened to something grand and glorious: to shimmering mountain peaks, crimson sunsets, the opulence of kings, the glory of a gladiator. But Jesus likens it to seeds. The paradox of the gospel—indeed, the scandal of the Incarnation—is disguised in such commonplaces. The God whom Jesus introduces will not be kept at celestial arm's length. Jesus does not tell us how high and lofty God is but how very near and present he is, and how the routines of planting and harvesting are mundane clues to the nature and plan of God.

- What does it say about God that Jesus would speak of His kingdom in lowly terms?

+ 27 while he's asleep or awake - Night and day a farmer waits for seeds; "he sleeps and gets up," and life goes on as it always has. But simultaneously and independent of the farmer another process is at work. Slowly, imperceptibly, "the seed sprouts and grows." The seed is wholly unlike the worldly quest for power where, as in Jotham's parable of the thornbush (Judg 9:7-15), raw

DIG DEEPER...CONTINUED

ambition secures a place for itself by violence and revolution. Jesus will later warn against that pursuit and temptation (Mark 10:42-45).

+ 28 the earth produces crops on its own - The coming of the kingdom of God is likened to a process of growth but a process strangely independent of human activity. The words “on its own” are the translation of *automatē* (αὐτοματη) which is made up of *autos* (αὐτός) “self,” and *memaa* (μεμαα) “to desire eagerly.” The word means in its totality, “self-moved, spontaneously, without external aid, and also beyond external control, with a way and will, so to speak, of its own that must be respected and waited for.” We get our word “automatic” from this Greek word.

● How do we tend to do the opposite of what Jesus is saying here? How do we make the Gospel more difficult and cumbersome than Jesus describes it in this story?

+ 29 as soon as the grain is ready - The **Zealots** tried to force the kingdom on stage by revolution; apocalypticism hoped by careful observations and reckonings to portend the future; the **Pharisees** believed that the emergence of the kingdom could be midwived by scrupulous legal observance. The parable of the growing seed warns against wedding the coming of the kingdom to forecasts, projections, timetables, and strategies. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus disrupts all attempts to capture him in categories, formulas, and agendas. So it is with the kingdom of God.

● How are we guilty of trying to bring the kingdom about by our calculated actions today?

+ 31 a mustard seed - The comparison becomes the more striking when we see that this mustard kernel is Jesus himself, for the kingdom grows from him, the King. Some think that the mustard seed was chosen, not because of its tiny size, but also because of its pungent taste. Its heat, its fiery vigor, the fact that only through being bruised it gives out its virtue, and all this under so insignificant an appearance and in so small a size.

● What does it say about Jesus that he would compare himself to a mustard seed?

+ 32 but it becomes the largest - The greater point is that the kingdom of God arises from obscurity and insignificance. Although an herb, the mustard plant could grow to heights of ten to twelve feet and attain a thickness of three or four inches. The difference between the tiny seed and the huge herb that grows from it is an excellent illustration of the difference between the beginning and end of the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Mark and his readers/hearers were much nearer to the beginning than the end.

+ 32 birds can make nests in its shade - The OT prophets occasionally use the image of birds nesting in branches to allude to the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s chosen people (Ps 104:12; Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:9-21). This offers a clue to v. 32, “the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” In addition to the surprising growth of the kingdom, the parable of the mustard seed contains a hint of God’s grace to all peoples.

● How did Jesus become the largest by being the humblest, and how does including people outside of Abraham’s promise make Israel more special?

+ 33 as much as they could understand - The popular expectation in the first century envisioned the kingdom arriving as a cataclysmic event. Jesus’ contemporaries would have been more likely to compare it to a thunderstorm than a mustard seed, but there is nothing overwhelming or abrupt about a mustard seed. It is so small as to be insignificant, but it eventually produces a plant so large that the birds of the air take refuge in its shade. This parable contrasts a small and unexpected beginning with a much larger consummation. This comparison leads in turn to the possibility that the kingdom of God might be present, although unnoticed by people looking for something else.

● What are some people looking for today that might not fit with this picture of God’s character?



MY PRAYER...

1. How am I allowing God to change my expectations and picture of Him?
2. What am I looking for today that might not fit the true picture of God?
3. What new aspect of God’s character does He want me to know?