

The Christian Church

Devotional Reading: Acts 2:42–47

Background Scripture: Matthew 16:13–20;
Ephesians 1:15–23; 2:13–22; 5:22–27

Mark 4:26–32

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.

²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² 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.”

Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the

prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Key Text

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. —Ephesians 4:15–16

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 3: The Church and Its Teachings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the parables of Mark 4:26–32.
2. Explain the purpose of unity in the Spirit.
3. Make a plan for seeking reconciliation within the church and between the church and its surrounding community.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Rapid Growth
- B. Lesson Context

I. Parables of the Kingdom (Mark 4:26–32)

- A. Scattered Seeds (vv. 26–29)
- B. Smallest Seed (vv. 30–32)

II. Work of the Kingdom

(Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18)

- A. Unified under Jesus (vv. 4–6)
- B. Properly Led (vv. 11–13)
United We Stand
- C. Secure in Truth (vv. 14–16)
Tossed Around
- D. Showing Transformation (vv. 17–18)

Conclusion

- A. Recognizing Two Kinds of Growth
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Rapid Growth

My home state, Nebraska, enjoys a worldwide reputation for growing corn. It is estimated that cornfields in the state total nearly ten million acres. For me, moving to Nebraska from California, this was astounding. In central Nebraska, one can drive miles in the summer and see nothing but corn fields.

What was especially impressive to me was how fast this crop can grow. Farmers plant, and seedlings emerge in May. The corn stalks quickly become knee-high, then waist-high, then over-the-head-high. With plenty of moisture and fertilizer, corn stalks can grow an inch a day or more. I was told that sometimes you can hear the corn growing, which is true. If you stand in a corn field during peak growth season in the evening, you will hear popping as leaves emerge from the stalk.

Jesus and the people of his time and place did not have corn as we have it today. But they had other plants that grew rapidly in the fertile and well-watered fields of the Galilee region. Jesus told many parables involving farming and sowing seeds. This lesson reveals one reason why.

B. Lesson Context

Jesus is known for his use of parables when teaching. While Jesus' parables are unique, this teaching method was well-known in the ancient world. For Jesus, a parable is usually an illustration that compares something well-known in the experience of the hearers to less understood spiritual truths. His illustrations were drawn from the everyday lives of his audience.

Many parables teach about the “kingdom of God” (in Matthew, “kingdom of heaven”). We see their comparative nature in their introduction, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .” (example: Matthew 13:24). Some parables are narratives, telling a little story (example: Luke 15:4–7). Others are observational, giving spiritual application to an easily pictured scenario (example: 6:39).

The kingdom parables often have applications regarding Jesus' intentions for the church. This lesson looks at two such parables in Mark.

I. Parables of the Kingdom

(Mark 4:26–32)

A. Scattered Seeds (vv. 26–29)

26. He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.

Mark 4:1–34 features four parables, and this verse begins the third. As we read about *a man* who casts *seed on the ground*, we remind ourselves that people of Jesus' day had no mechanical devices to spread seed like we have now. Rather, seed was broadcast by hand. This required skill to minimize wasted seed. After harvest, seed was saved to be ready for the spring planting. What was saved could have been eaten, but farmers knew that without that seed, there would be no future harvest.

27. “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

Once *the seed* is planted, the farmer's job is done for a while. He sleeps and gets up according to his routine. The seed needs no help to spring and grow up. However, while the farmer can observe this, he doesn't know how it works. He just expects it to happen.

In a world before modern scientific advances, there was great wonder about seeds and how they were able to replicate the plants they came from (compare Genesis 1:11–12). For seeds to be sown and then produce a good crop was seen as a blessing of the Lord (26:12). So, too, for Jesus: the growth of the kingdom is accomplished by God.

28. “All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

In the verse before us, Jesus describes a seed becoming a mature plant. From *the soil*, the germinated seed becomes *the full kernel* without help from the farmer. Grain crops produce kernels that can be dried and ground into flour, providing a necessary ingredient for bread until the next harvest.

Plant growth begins with a *stalk* emerging from the ground, and sprouts indicate that the planting has succeeded. This becomes a stalk that pro-

duces the seed *head* of the plant. This grain head matures and, if the conditions are right, will be *full* of grain like the seed from which it came.

29. “As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The stalks of *grain* don't just keep growing on and on, year after year. Their seed has been planted for a purpose: *the harvest*. And so it is with the kingdom of God (compare Isaiah 17:4–6; Matthew 13:1–23; Revelation 14:14–18). And as the ancient farmer didn't understand how a seed could result in a mature stalk of wheat, so too it is with the kingdom of God.

B. Smallest Seed (vv. 30–32)

30–31. Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

In these verses, Jesus introduces a new parable. Unlike the previous parable, the one we now consider has parallels in the other two synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19). Again, the parable is about *the kingdom of God*. The vital need for such illustrations is seen in the fact that “The time has come, . . . the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15).

Like wheat, the *mustard* plant grows from seed after being planted (Matthew 13:31). Mustard seeds are tiny, as small as one millimeter in diameter. These were the smallest seeds with which Jesus' hearers would have been familiar, thus symbolic of the smallest item in their everyday world. This imagery is so powerful that Jesus will use it again later (17:20; Luke 17:6).

What Do You Think?

What word image would you use to tell a modern-day parable about the kingdom of God?

Digging Deeper

What truth regarding the kingdom of God would your parable convey?

32. “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.”

Mustard plants can grow from tiny seeds to large shrubs in a single growing cycle of approximately 90 days. Some people have seen mature mustard plants around the Sea of Galilee that reached 10 feet tall. Though not technically “trees” by modern definition, they have considerable *branches*, giving a tree-like appearance. These leafy branches provide shade and can support the weight of small birds (compare Luke 13:19).

Like the previous parable, this one is about the kingdom of God. These parables refer prophetically to the church and its astounding growth. Beginning with a core of disciples, Jesus’ followers became the church on Pentecost. The book of Acts describes the rapid numerical growth of the first-century church following Jesus’ ascension (Acts 2:41–47; 4:4; 6:7). Today, estimates number those who identify as Christian at more than two billion.

What Do You Think?

In what ways have you seen God work through something small or humble to achieve his will?

Digging Deeper

How has the kingdom of God surprised you? How should it?

II. Work of the Kingdom

(Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18)

In the first three chapters of this letter, Paul discusses the church’s foundation in the plan of God (Ephesians 1:11–12); Paul explains Christ’s role in breaking down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (2:14); and he calls his readers to recognize that Christ is the head of his church, and the church is his body (1:22–23). These points are all at odds with a divided church. Therefore, chapter 4 begins Paul’s expression of the vital, unitary nature of the church.

A. Unified under Jesus (vv. 4–6)

4. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

The church grows as more people are added to

the kingdom of God. This growth creates challenges to unity as various cultures interact. Ephesians 4, however, teaches about the doctrines of the church that are to remain unchanging. Neither growth nor unity is to be emphasized at the expense of the other. The apostle Paul stresses unity by teaching on the “seven ones” in Ephesians 4:4–6. These are points of doctrine that cannot be dismissed if the growing church is to be what God intends.

One body speaks of the church (compare Romans 12:4–5; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). Paul has much to say about diversity within the unified body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31. That passage also tells us how the *one Spirit*—the Holy Spirit—relates to that unified body. Christians are unified in having received the Holy Spirit through faith and repentance (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:14).

The church has *one hope* to which it is called (see Ephesians 1:18; 4:1). Believers have this hope through our belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 15:19; 1 Peter 1:3) and future eternal life with the Lord in heaven (Romans 6:22). After Paul left Ephesus, he testified to his “hope of the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6).

5. one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

We come now to the fourth, fifth, and sixth of the “seven ones.” *One Lord* refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church (Ephesians 3:11; 5:23). *One faith* involves our common assent regarding the person and work of Jesus (John 20:30–31; Acts 16:31).

Paul emphasizes that the *one baptism* is for both Jews and Gentiles: a baptism into Christ. This emphasis aligns with Paul’s corrective to the Corinthians regarding different baptisms (1 Corinthians 1:12–15; compare 12:13).

6. one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We come to the seventh and final “one.” Paul describes the *one God* by four uses of the word *all*. God is the *Father of all* in terms of creation (see Malachi 2:10; Ephesians 3:14–15). For God to be *over all* speaks to his transcendent nature. He exists outside of his creation. This means

there is nothing above the Lord God in power or authority (see Psalms 97:9; 113:4–6; 1 Timothy 6:16).

As we come to the phrases *through all* and *in all*, we may be confused about the difference between the two (compare Romans 11:36). The preposition *through* indicates “means,” “agency,” or “intermediacy,” as in “by means of,” in this context (as it does in Colossians 1:20; 1 John 4:9). The preposition *in*, for its part, indicates “location.” This speaks to God’s immanence, or presence everywhere (compare Jeremiah 23:23–24; Acts 17:27–28).

What Do You Think?

Which of Paul’s “seven ones” do you struggle with the most? Why?

Digging Deeper

Which encourages you the most? Why?

B. Properly Led (vv. 11–13)

11. So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,

Christ provides servant-leaders for his church. In this verse, Paul is not teaching about spiritual gifting but about Christ’s gifts to the church: *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers*. The gifts are people.

An apostle was appointed by Christ to be authoritative in the first-century church. Transforming Jesus’ followers into a functioning church required strong leadership, and the apostles had that authority. Only apostles or those closely associated with an apostle were recognized as legitimate authors of the books that make up the New Testament.

Prophets speak for God to strengthen the church (Acts 11:27–28; 15:32; 21:10–11). The household of God is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20; compare 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Evangelists are mentioned in the New Testament only here and in Acts 21:8 and 2 Timothy 4:5. They proclaim the good news about Jesus, a

task essential yet today (see Matthew 28:19–20; Romans 10:14).

Regarding the categories of pastors and teachers, there is some debate regarding whether these are two distinct roles or just one role (as in the hyphenated “pastor-teacher”). The Greek word translated “pastors” occurs 18 times in the New Testament (here and in Matthew 9:36; 25:32; 26:31; Mark 6:34; 14:27; Luke 2 [four times]; John 10 [six times]; Hebrews 13:20; and 1 Peter 2:25). In those other 17 instances, the translation is always “shepherd(s).” Pastors are shepherds who attend to God’s people as a “flock” over which they had been made “overseers” (Acts 20:28).

Teachers instruct on how to understand God and how to live a godly life based on the Scriptures (Colossians 1:28; 2 Timothy 3:16). Noteworthy is the fact that the role of teacher is in Paul’s “top three list” in 1 Corinthians 12:28. Paul explains the reason these leadership roles are necessary in the next verse.

12. to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

The servant-leader roles complement one another in a common purpose: *to equip* the people of God. The leaders bring the believers in their congregations to spiritual maturity to share in the *works of service* (compare Hebrews 5:11–6:3). The word behind the phrase *built up* is translated elsewhere as “edify” or some variant of that word (Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 14:5). Church leaders should never be tearing down members, but building them up. Church leadership is about *the body of Christ*, the church.

What Do You Think?

Who has been the most influential in helping equip you to serve Christ?

Digging Deeper

How will you help equip others to serve?

13a. until we all reach unity in the faith

This ministry of edification is not easy. Anyone who teaches in a church knows there will be differences of opinion that can become nasty divisions. Paul’s vision is that the church will be guided by the great “seven ones” of Ephesians 4:4–6, thereby

coming to the *unity in the faith* (compare Ephesians 4:3). We usually understand the word *faith* in terms of words such as *trust*, *assent*, or *belief that* as focused on the person and work of Christ himself (see John 8:24; 20:31; Romans 4:5; etc.). But that is not the sense here. The inclusion of the definite article “the” in the phrase “the faith” has the sense of a body of doctrine to be believed and accepted as true (Acts 6:7; Titus 1:13; Jude 3).

13b. and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

In addition to being unified in the faith, the goal is to be unified *in the knowledge of the Son of God*. This goal is repeated from Ephesians 1:17. Paul stresses such knowledge also in 2 Corinthians 2:14; 4:6.

United We Stand

“But Mom said I could!” the child yelled at her dad, who had just denied her request. Sound familiar? Children become quite skilled at playing their parents off against each other, lining up a positive response from one parent as ammunition for gaining permission from the other parent as well.

This “divide and conquer” method can turn parent against parent and weaken family relationships. It is not the child’s responsibility to maintain unity, though. Parents are responsible for that. When parents are divided, the children can sense it. The result is a sense of anxious unease and lack of security.

The same thing applies to the church. The spiritually mature leaders have the responsibility to maintain unity. When that doesn’t happen, those who are spiritually immature can sense it; they end up insecure and anxious. What can you do to maintain and strengthen the unity among your congregation?

—L. M. W.

How to Say It

Colossians	Kuh-losh-unz.
Ephesians	Ee-fee-zhunz.
Pentecost	Pent-ih-kost.
Synoptic	Sih-nawp-tihk.

C. Secure in Truth (vv. 14–16)

14. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

People seem attracted to teachers who will support preconceived ideas—what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear (see 2 Timothy 4:3). But those who move on to maturity in Christ are less susceptible to deceptive forces (compare 1 Corinthians 14:20; James 1:6). The danger here is not that of sincere but mistaken people. Instead, the threat is from professional tricksters. The descriptions here have a sense of false teachers who are peddling lies in ways that make money for themselves (compare 2 Corinthians 11:12–13).

Tossed Around

When my son was a baby, we tightly buckled him in his car seat. His neck struggled to assert control over his head movements as his head rolled side to side or tipped forward, tossed around by centrifugal and gravitational forces as we drove. We believed that he would soon gain control of his neck and head as he grew.

We were right. He grew up to be a fine young adult despite the wobbly beginning. The boy who could barely hold his head up for more than 15 seconds is now part of a world-class drum corps at college. He carries a heavy set of five drums onto the field and plays while marching. His steady development has resulted in him becoming a man who understands his role on the team and carries it out with excellence.

We were all spiritual infants at some point, subject to being tossed around by the forces of the world. Some of us have grown out of that stage and on to spiritual maturity. Others haven’t. Which category are you in? To find out, read Hebrews 5:11–6:3.

—L. M. W.

15. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Truth is what we are to speak; *in love* is how we are to speak it. Both must characterize our speech for spiritual growth to occur. The outcome of teaching truth in love is spiritual maturity that results in unity (see 1 Corinthians 3:2; 1 Peter 2:2; etc.).

What Do You Think?

What practical ways can you keep truth and love balanced in your interactions?

Digging Deeper

How will you ensure that such interactions result in the maturity and unity of the body of Christ that is the church?

16. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Paul returns to his metaphor of the church as the *body* of Christ (see expanded metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31; compare Colossians 2:19). Our physical bodies are made up of compatible parts. They are designed to work together as each serves its function. Just as every part is important, so it is to be in the church. This is why divisions—whether based on false doctrines, personal animosity, or whatever—cause the church to self-destruct. Instead, the goal should be edifying, building the church into a community that loves God and others. This will never happen without an overwhelming spirit of love for one another in the church. You cannot work for the destruction of others if you love them.

D. Showing Transformation (vv. 17–18)

17–18. So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Today's text ends with a stark warning: past practices (*live*) and beliefs (*thinking*) must remain in the past. In so doing, they will not allow paganism, the ways of the *Gentiles*, to influence the church.

Paul has more to say about all this in Romans 1:18–32; 6:6; Ephesians 4:19–24; and Colossians 3.

Conclusion

A. Recognizing Two Kinds of Growth

The parables Jesus told give the impression of rapid growth of the kingdom of God. As with seeds to mature plants, this may seem mysterious to us at times. Astounding church growth may be happening in places we don't expect. May we rejoice whenever we hear stories of unbelievers coming to faith in Christ!

But the numerical growth of people brings growth in the number of opinions and interpretations. This can lead to divisions (compare 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; 3:1–9; 11:17–22). The solution is found in the “seven ones” of Ephesians 4:4–6. These still define the basis for church unity.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we confess your Son to be the head of the church. Use us to raise his name high so that everyone will be drawn to you. Help us not forget that growth of the church means the salvation of more people and their experience of new life in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ intended and designed his church to grow in number and unity.



Visual for Lessons 9 & 13. Display this visual as learners pair up to discuss how they can show love through action.