

# 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

Today's Scripture: Mark 4:26–32; Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18

## I. Parables of the Kingdom

### Mark 4:26–32

**26 And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground;**

**27 And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.**

**28 For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.**

**29 But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.**

**30 And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?**

**31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:**

**32 But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.**

26. Mark 4:1–34 features four parables, and this verse begins the third. As we read about *a man* who casts *seed into 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. Once *the seed* is planted, the farmer's job is done for a while. 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.

28. In the verse before us, Jesus describes a seed becoming a mature plant. From *the earth* (dirt), the germinated seed becomes *fruit of herself* 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 *blade* emerging from the ground, and sprouts indicate that the planting has succeeded. This becomes a stalk that produces an *ear*, 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. 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. 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.

30–31. 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 is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).

32. 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.

Like the previous parable, this one is about the kingdom of God. These parables refer prophetically to the church and its astounding growth. 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).

## **II. Work of the Kingdom Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–18**

**4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;**

**5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,**

**6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.**

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**11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;**

**12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:**

**13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:**

**14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;**

**15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:**

**16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.**

**17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,**

**18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:**

4. 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.

*One body* speaks of the church. 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. Believers have this hope through our belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and future eternal life with the Lord in heaven.

5. *One Lord* refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the church. *One faith* involves our common assent regarding the person and work of Jesus.

Paul emphasizes that the *one baptism* is for both Jews and Gentiles: a baptism into Christ.

6. Paul describes the *one God* by four uses of the word *all*. God is the *Father of all* in terms of creation. For God to be *above 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.

11. 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. Prophets speak for God to strengthen the church. 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.

12. The servant-leader roles complement one another in a common purpose: *perfecting the saints*. The leaders bring the believers in their congregations to spiritual maturity to share in *the work of the ministry*. *Edifying* means to build (construct an edifice). Church leaders should never be tearing down members, but building them up. Church leadership is about *the body of Christ*, the church.

13a. 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 of the faith*.

13b. In addition to being unified in the faith, the goal is to be unified in *the knowledge of the Son of God*.

14. People seem attracted to teachers who will support preconceived ideas—what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. But those who move on to maturity in Christ are less susceptible to deceptive forces. 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.

15. *Truth* is what we are to speak; *in love* is how we are to speak it. The outcome of teaching truth in love is spiritual maturity that results in unity.

16. 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.

17–18. Today's text ends with a stark warning: past practices (*walk*) and beliefs (*mind*) 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.

# Involvement Learning

## The Christian Church

### Into the Lesson

List an item for each category.

Season: \_\_\_\_\_

Emotion: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

Machine: \_\_\_\_\_

Choose one of the items and describe it by comparing it to something else.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Some things are difficult to understand if you haven't seen or experienced them before. Even for believers, the kingdom of God and the purpose of the church are complicated subjects to grasp.

### Into the Word

Read Mark 4:26–32. What are the word images in these verses?

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List possible interpretations of these images.

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How do these verses describe the kingdom of God?

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\_\_\_\_\_

Read Ephesians 4:4–6, 11–13. List things described as “one” and the roles referenced as “many.”

“One” \_\_\_\_\_

“Many” \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Read Ephesians 4:14–18. Rewrite these verses as a modern-day parable. Consider the following questions in your rewrite: 1–What is Paul's main point in these verses? 2–What aspect of the kingdom of God is Paul trying to convey?

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### Key Text

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

—Ephesians 4:15–16

### Into Life

Develop a twofold strategy for seeking reconciliation. Part one: Within the church. Part two: Between the church and its surrounding community.

Part 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Part 2: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Thought to Remember

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