

All by Itself

Mark 4:26-29

In his book, *Why We Don't Pray*, Ben Patterson shares the following:

The baseball game was tied with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning. The batter stepped into the batting box and made the sign of the cross on home plate with his bat. Yogi Berra, Hall-of-Fame catcher for the New York Yankees, was behind the plate. Also a Catholic, Berra wiped off the plate with his glove and said to the pious batter, "Why don't we let God just watch this game?"

"Why don't we just let God watch?" That's usually a good theology for athletic competitions. I must admit that it confuses me when Christian athletes on competing sports teams both call on God to help them win. It seems self-evident that God is not an Eagles fan. If He is still a Cowboys fan, there is clearly a season of testing going on. Did God really care who won that Pistons/Spurs series this past week, at least since David Robinson retired? Or is God intent to just watch?

But letting God just watch is a terrible way to work in the kingdom of God. And yet, in an age when even the church is dominated by the pragmatism of an aggressive and competitive culture, God is often relegated to just watching. Skevington Wood observes: "It is the temptation of this pragmatic age to presume that technique is the secret of evangelism." After all, if growing a church is really just a matter of the right programs, style and methods, what role does God even need to fill?

The *Parable of the Growing Seed* that Jim read earlier reminds us that the Kingdom of God is still God's enterprise and that any real, enduring growth that takes place is His doing. We cannot see the mystery of growth at work as it happens. In fact, we cannot even understand what is happening.

Only the Gospel of Mark records this brief parable. In the more familiar *Parable of the Soils*, whether or not the kingdom grows is dependent on the receptiveness of the soil into which the Word of God is sown. If the soil is shallow, the seed will never take root. Such a man may respond in the short-run, but he will never survive the scorching heat of testing. If the soil is weed-infested, faith will be choked out by the other interests of life. If the seed lands on the hardened path, it will never be received at all. But, if the soil is good, the Word of God will be received. It will flourish and bear fruit.

In the parable before us this morning, there is still a sower and there is still a field. But in this story, the emphasis on kingdom growth is established in the mysterious quality of the seed itself. The sower can sow, but he cannot guarantee any results, for the responsibility for growth belongs to God alone and the power to transform darkness into light and death into life is the exclusive domain of His Word.

That's a tough pill to swallow for Christians living in this current culture. We are accustomed to thinking that if we just do things a certain way, push the right buttons or work the required programs; God will step in and perform. This parable kicks the wind out of such presumption. It is arrogant and foolish to presume that we as mere men can assess our own "cause and effect explanations" to why things do or do not happen in God's kingdom. While there certainly is a place for good methods and clever button-pushing, these things are never the power to make things grow in ways that will endure for eternity. In and of themselves, our methods may produce results, but eventually, those results will be shown for what they are. It is the Word of God alone (the seed itself) that embodies the miracle of life.

¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. – Isaiah 55:10, 11

I. Kingdom Growth Is Invisible to Human Eyes

A. This Parable Is a Call to Patience

Jesus likened the kingdom to a man who scattered seed. The sower sowed, and the matter was now in God's hands. The farmer could grab a stool, sit up all night and watch the spot where he planted the seed, but he would only get frustrated at the excruciatingly slow pace of developments. He was better off just going to bed. At some point, he would simply have to trust his Creator to do His part.

Parents get excited when their little toothless, bald-headed offspring start getting hair, or better yet, a tooth. The excitement is understandable, but we would worry about any mother who just obsessively stared at the top of her little one's head, waiting for growth. God's rhythm for us in His kingdom is the same as it is in the natural world – do what you can and then rest. Do what you know to do and what you've been told to do, but do not drive yourself nuts over that which only God can do. Spend yourself in the labor of the kingdom. Then, find your rest in Him. Anxiety over whether "growth" will occur or frustration with the speed of the results robs God of your trust and usurps His responsibilities.

B. Impatience and Presumption Only Serve to Agitate God's People

Jesus was speaking to His Twelve Apostles and a few others when He told this parable. These loyal Jews saw themselves as living between Golden Ages in Israel. Their land was occupied by the Romans for now, but they looked forward to a day when *Messiah* would come to set all things right. This new king from God would drive the Romans from the holy land and reestablish Israel as the most powerful kingdom on earth. These men needed to learn patience. Things were not going to happen as rapidly as they imagined, and the things that would happen would not be the things they anticipated.

The church throughout history has often opted for ways to reflect the culture at large rather than to live distinctly from it. The governmental structure of the Roman church still reflects the hierarchy of the ancient Roman Empire. American churches have at times reflected the federal government, and at other times, the business world. Today, we are preoccupied with bottom-lines, statistics and humanly-measurable standards of whether or not we are "succeeding" as the world defines success. We are intolerant of the demands of patience. We are constantly on the lookout for the next new thing.

At some level these other things must be important. I am just curious where that agitating, peace-stealing, sleep-robbing anxiety that we put ourselves through intersects with our profession that only God can bring certain things to pass. What part of kingdom building, after all, is God responsible for? And what, after all, are the true measures that the kingdom is growing? Are they simply attendance or "recorded decisions"? Or, are the true measures changed lives; disciples serving in ministry according to their gifts as their faith is reproduced in the lives of others? These are the things only God can do.

II. Kingdom Growth Is Independent of Human Enterprise

A. A Sower Can Only Do What a Sower Can Do

Man is creative because he bears the image of his Creator. He can build things and bring certain things to pass. But, does he have the capacity to build that which will endure for eternity? No, every man-made thing is temporal. Ultimately, we must witness the winding down and eventual decay of all that our hands produce. But, that which is truly of the invisible kingdom of God is His workmanship, into which He invites us to take part. Whether or not we build for eternity is not a matter of human ingenuity, but of whether or not we are participating in God's own work. This parable was Jesus' way of reminding His followers that the kingdom of God, ultimately, is God's own enterprise, not men's.

The Bible tells us that one day, all that we build for the name of Christ will be shown for what it is. If we built within the framework of the Word of God and its power to affect lives, the results will endure. But, much of what goes on today in the work of the kingdom is the pragmatic application of human techniques that have nothing at all to do with the dynamic might of God's Word. Such techniques may produce visible results, but only in the light of eternity will the worth of any of our labors be revealed:

... ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. – 1 Corinthians 3:11-13

It is of little value to protest that we are not tempted by the pragmatic. Such temptations are so effective that Satan thought they might even distract Jesus Himself. The Lord fasted forty days as He contemplated His kingdom. The devil tempted Him to prove His status as God's Son by changing stones to bread. Satan tempted Jesus to do a spectacular free-fall from the highest point of the temple into the deep ravine below and let the world witness as the angels caught Him. Satan promised Jesus dominion over the world now if Jesus would bow to him. All these things would have produced results, but Jesus rebuked Satan. He had no interest in shallow results. Pragmatism was of no value to Him.

The kingdom of God is not a place where people follow Jesus for shallow reasons. The kingdom must reign first in the hearts, minds and souls of His people. Pragmatism may yield fast results, which feed the human sense of accomplishment. God's workers today need patience more than pragmatism. The cross of Jesus ultimately must be the centerpiece of the kingdom message and cross-bearing discipleship the basis on which churches are built and by which individuals grow. There are no sufficient short-cuts.

B. Still, a Failure to Grow Over Time Can Be Symptomatic of Pathology

God is faithful to finish the work he began in us. Still, we like to see progress. Our lives and our churches ought to be temples where the Holy Spirit is producing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness gentleness and the like. If that toothless, bald-headed offspring we mentioned earlier never sprung a hair and never cut a tooth by age one, Mom would be alarmed and rightfully so. She might suspect a chemical or vitamin deficiency. She might suspect a malfunctioning system. She might even suspect disease. Those believers who bear no evidence of development over any span of time and those communities of believers that bear little resemblance to the character of Christ are not well. Paul confronted the Corinthian believers when he perceived that their growth had screeched to a halt:

¹Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? – 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

What causes this pathology of chronic infancy that is evidenced by jealousy, bickering, insecurity, mistrust; all of which quench the Spirit's fire in God's people? Is it pride? Poor teaching? Bad theology? Weak faith? Loss of first love? Sin? Whether it is one of the above, none of the above or all of the above, the corrective first step must always be to acknowledge that the kingdom is God's enterprise and that while we are blessed to have roles here and there, we can do nothing apart from the Spirit of God.

So, is this God's work or is it man's work? It is clearly God's work, but He invites us into it. That may seem like a picky point until we start thinking in terms of Who must always receive the glory and on Whose timetable movements of the Spirit must occur. The parable does teach that the miracle of growth is God's domain, but the parable is equally clear that nothing happens until "a man scatters seed."

III. Kingdom Growth Is Integrated with Human Energy

A. The Farmer Does Have Important Work to Do

Paul rebuked the childish Corinthian church because they were quarrelling over whether it was better to be a disciple of Paul, Apollos or Peter (1 Corinthians 1:11, 12). Did one teacher who led people to Christ carry more prestige than others? Did one "party" of believers stand nearer to God's throne? Paul reminded them that God alone deserves glory when he wrote something very akin to our parable:

⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. – 1 Corinthians 3:6-8

B. The Realm of Human Responsibility Should Be Identified

Jesus spoke of scattering seed. Paul spoke of planting and watering. While the miracle of spiritual growth is exclusively God's domain, we would be remiss if we ignored the human contribution. The Pastoral Team is engaged together in the study of a church growth resource called *Natural Growth Development*. In a virtual ocean of church growth resources, what caught my eye about this one is that it is not the "how-we-done-it" story of some mega-church. In fact, the story of how a church happened is usually only the perspective of its pastor, and it may not be the invisible kingdom story at all.

Rather, the emphasis is on church health, which is defined independently of numbers. Thousands of churches from around the globe of various ethnicities, sizes, ages and styles were studied to identify the common denominators of healthy churches regardless of their individual stories. The researchers found that all healthy churches are strong in what they label Eight Essential Qualities. You will hear much more about these Eight Essential Qualities in the weeks to follow, but for now, I offer a brief overview.

- 1) **Empowering Leadership** – The members are not motivated tools for achieving the goal or vision of a leader. Rather, the leader assists members in fulfilling God-given potential.
- 2) **Gift-Oriented Ministry** – When Christians serve in the area of their giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 3) **Passionate Spirituality** – In churches which tend toward legalism, spiritual passion is usually below average. “Pure doctrine” alone does not induce growth. Members must learn to live their faith with contagious enthusiasm.
- 4) **Functional Structures** – The traditionalism that fears and resists updating to better, more functional ways of “doing church” stifles freedom and growth.
- 5) **Inspiring Worship Service** – This factor is unrelated to style. It neither means shifting into rock-and-roll mode nor embracing the ancient. Is the Holy Spirit invited to work?
- 6) **Holistic Small Groups** – Much of the essence of true church life is worked out in small groups – relationships, burden-bearing, exhortation, evangelism, service according to gifts. These groups need to emphasize the practical expression of sound doctrine in real life.
- 7) **Need-oriented Evangelism** – Evangelistic efforts need to focus on the needs and questions of non-believers rather than on programs to “draw” them. Expanding our contacts is not as essential as building on the ones we have.
- 8) **Loving Relationships** – Unfeigned practical love has a divinely generated magnetism far more effective than evangelistic programs which depend almost entirely on words. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

It is in the direction of church health that the Pastoral Team is unanimously committed to lead in the days ahead. We have had some difficult times in the past year. Attendance has been lethargic. Our financial performance against our budget has been abysmal. But, we also suspect that if we were to expend all of our energies in simply addressing those two matters, we would only exacerbate them both. No, we believe that our human contribution must be in the pursuit of long-term spiritual health. And, we hope that as we continue to set what that means before your eyes, that you will see the wisdom of this direction, capture our enthusiasm for it and make yourself available to work the harvest of God.

The growth of the kingdom of heaven is God’s domain, but He has invited us to work in His fields:

²⁶He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.
²⁷Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.
²⁸All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

The man who knows that he has given God his best has nothing over which to fret. Work hard. Pray hard. Go to bed. Sleep well. The lyrics of the late Christian songwriter, Keith Green, come to mind:

*Just keep doing your best,
 And pray that it's blessed,
 He'll take care of the rest.*