

Trust the Seed

Mark 4:26-29

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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."

Only Mark provides us with this unique little parable about a seed that grows because that is what seeds do. The thrust of the story is rather straightforward. There is something mysterious about how a seed grows. A man can plant the seed, water it and contribute a number of other things to develop conditions favorable for farming. Still, the only explanation that is satisfactory for why any seed grows is God. In the same way, authentic kingdom growth is the work of God.

Perhaps, Mark included this parable in his record of the life of Jesus as a word of encouragement to the Christians in Rome. As persecution began to affect their lives and test their faith, it would be comforting to know that God is building something that even the Gates of Hell cannot stop.

Another possible reason for Mark to include this parable could be his source, generally assumed to be Peter. I would be speculating to suggest that this little story was a favorite of Peter, but I can think of no other story that could have convicted him more powerfully to straighten out some of his thinking. We know of Peter's impetuosity. He denied his Lord in an impulse of fear. He wielded a sword in an impulse of bravado. He retreated into an old racist mindset under an impulse of peer pressure. It may have relieved Peter to recall, on occasion, that God's kingdom grows by the power of the seed and is neither sped along nor hindered by the impulses of men.

Even today, I suspect that some of our impulsive approaches to "making things happen" in the kingdom may, in fact, cause visible things to happen. But, not every visible effect of human ingenuity is authentic kingdom growth. Some of the fruits of human labor presented as God's work may one day prove to have nothing at all to do with the fruit of the kingdom. There will be many grand and glorious accomplishments of men that will be burned up in judgment.

Deregulation in the eighties led to the blurring of sizing formulas adopted in the 1940s by the National Bureau of Standards. Fifty years ago, a size 10 dress had a 34.5-inch hip line. Today, even a small size 10 may have a 37-inch hip line. "I shudder to say this, but that size you squeezed into after your latest diet. It could be a con. What you think you see may not be reality.

Nowhere is this truer than in the realm of the kingdom of God. Only that which God makes to happen can endure into eternity. This is why we need to trust the seed of the kingdom of God, which is the truth of Jesus, which is that Jesus is the Truth of God. Not everything that has been built under the moniker of the modern church is a true reflection of God's eternal kingdom. To truly seek the kingdom, we need to trust the living Christ more than we trust books, programs, methodologies or the experts because Christ alone is the seed from which the kingdom springs.

I. The Invisibility of the Seed (26)

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

A. In My Hand, I Can Study a Seed

Having no interest at all in gardening or in eating things that are good for me, I cannot tell the difference between one seed and another, but I could learn. The farmer can peek into a bag and know if he is looking at something that will produce corn, barley, oats, wheat, cotton or wildflowers. But, even if I were to study every kind of seed thoroughly and could pass a quiz on the subject, I still could not explain why any seed produces a living plant.

It is possible, no, common for people to have an academic relationship with the Word of God. I can know what the Bible says about Jesus. I can grasp this neat formula that His death was a substitutionary payment for my sins. I can grasp what Jesus is saying when He calls me to live under His lordship. I can understand the call to be a servant. I can understand the call to cross-bearing discipleship. I can master the notion of stewardship over God's resources. I can even write a paragraph defining repentance. None of these things are beyond the scope of my intellectual capacity. Still, if my heart fails to embrace these truths, all that knowledge yields nothing.

B. In the Ground, the Seed Works beyond My Gaze

The kingdom of God is "the reign of Heaven's principles within the heart of man." Once I truly receive the seed of the kingdom, I am not instantaneously Christ-like, but I am instantaneously different than I was, for something is now operative in me that will work in me for the rest of my life. As I yield control over my life to the King, His kingdom within me begins to take over.

When we sow the seed of the kingdom, we must realize that its germination in the hearts of others is out of our hands. That doesn't mean I can be indifferent to how that person responds to the gospel. There is more to sowing than just speaking. But, I do suggest that it is always useful to clearly grasp that which is in our control *versus* that which is beyond our control.

When believers are dissatisfied with the limitations of their roles as sowers of seed, one man we might expend unwarranted energy trying to persuade another when others in this dying world might need those energies directed their way. Another Christian might deem someone who never responds to the gospel as a personal failure. They might believe the lie that they don't know what they're doing and that they do more harm than good. It was never in the power of any of us to make another person trust Christ. That is the work of God in the life of that other person

II. The Independence of the Seed (27)

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

A. The Farmer Does All That He Can Do

There was much that the ancient farmer could do to work with nature and to make conditions as conducive to growth for the seed as possible. He could plow the ground and plant the seed into the furrows. He could water the seed. He could cultivate the ground to drain properly. A modern farmer can do much more than that. He knows how to use fertilizers, chemicals and nutrients. He knows how to kill pests. He knows how to rotate his crops and maximize the life of the soil.

Of course, there are laws of nature to which the modern farmer is every bit as bound as was his ancient counterpart. He cannot use pebbles for seed and expect life to come forth. He cannot plant apples in hopes of getting oranges. That may seem obvious, and yet, it is commonplace for certain practitioners of the gospel to use worldly enticements to draw believers into a church, hoping to slip the Gospel in gradually. Still, the old adage remains true no matter how successful such techniques appear to be; “What you win them with is what you win them to.” If we couch the gospel in the likes and dislikes of people, we are in danger of winning them to a kind of Christianity that is as narcissistic and demanding as it is meek, repentant and selfless.

B. The Farmer Is Not Burdened to Do What Only the Seed Can Do

Somehow, we have embraced the idea that it is within our human power to build the kingdom of God. Just hook us up with the right program, book or worship style. Jesus never asked or equipped anyone to bear the responsibility for growing the kingdom of God. He suggested that whether the farmer slept or sat out in the field staring at the ground, the seed would do its thing.

In fact, the farmer cannot even explain the process; “the seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how. This cannot be a favorite parable of the technocrat who believes that he knows exactly how to build a church; with proven methods, celebrity experts and essential programs. Isn’t it amazing how we turn something that Jesus says cannot be understood into a science? Jesus drew huge crowds, but precious few disciples. So, in a church of 100 or of 10,000, God knows His Own. They are the ones with hearts in which the kingdom of God is taking over.

The Lord was teaching His disciples then that they would need patience just as He is telling us today to be patient. The seed of the kingdom of God is growing according to its own laws, and it doesn’t cease to grow just because we cannot trace it. God is at work mastering the hearts of His people, and there is not the slightest doubt that He will finish the work He began in us.

III. The Intervals of the Seed (28)

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

A. Kingdom Growth Is a Process

A stalk, a head, a full, ripe kernel of grain - we all grow up in stages. Every believer began as a babe in Christ. His survival depended on learning the rudimentary trustworthiness of God’s Word. He craved spiritual milk, and hopefully, some community of faith nurtured him. But, a point must come when it is no longer appropriate for that believer to be spoon-fed by others and it is no longer appropriate for him to measure all things by his own needs and emotions. His life must begin to be governed more by principles and an awareness of others than by personal wants and emotions. Finally, there must come a point when the character of Jesus is reproduced in that believer as thoroughly as it is going to be in this life. That’s when He gets plucked.

Sadly, some believers betray this process. They are as emotional, demanding, divisive and want-oriented at sixty as they were at sixteen. Such believers perplexed even a man like Paul:

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. - 1 Corinthians 3:1, 2

B. This Process of Growth Can Never Be Bypassed

Young believers can get frustrated and frustrate everyone else around them when they interpret their emotionalism, enthusiasm or giftedness with maturity. This is one reason Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Many there touted their favorite teacher as God's favorite teacher. Some liked to censure others on what they could eat. Others boasted of their spiritual gifts. They confused such issues with maturity. But, they were rather careless about matters like sexual purity, unity, decorum in worship, caring for their own poor and community witness. Against this backdrop of self-delusions of piety, Paul wrote the most recognizable words in the letter:

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. – 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

In other words, Paul was telling them, "I really need to start seeing evidence that Christ is being formed in you guys." It is still by that fruit that we will show ourselves to be children of God. Primarily, this little parable is not about building churches or about dreaming and reaching big dreams. It is about the most basic fruit of the kingdom. How much are we becoming like Jesus?

A Roper Poll some years back reported that 33% of Americans professed to having a "born-again experience" of Jesus Christ. But, when those same people were tested on what difference this conversion made in their lives on the issues of driving while intoxicated, marital fidelity, and drug usage, the statistics actually deteriorated after conversion. I will leave it to others with their doctrinal axes to grind to debate the salvation status of such folks. It won't be their call one way or the other. I can say this with certainty. We are all called to move toward the likeness of Christ.

IV. The Intention of the Seed (29)

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

A. There Is Not the Slightest Doubt of What the Fruit Is to Be

When the Bible actually defines "fruit" it speaks in terms of character. Paul describes spiritual fruit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23). The Bible never places a great deal of emphasis on tangible results as the measure of spiritual fruit. On the contrary, in the parables that touch on judgment, Jesus seems most interested in asking, "Did you feed the hungry? Did you cloth the naked? Did you comfort the sick? Did you step over that beggar, Lazarus, when you went out shopping for your big party? Did you think about anything bigger than yourself going on in your world when you decided to lay up your fortune in bigger barns and put your feet up for the rest of your life?"

The Seed of the kingdom is Jesus. The Life of the kingdom is Jesus. Can it come as any great surprise to learn that the Fruit of the kingdom is Jesus formed in you? Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). To be connected to the Vine and to bear the fruit of the Vine demands that the life of the Vine flows through us. The "stuff of the vine" must be the stuff that flows through us. One day, the Judge will look at us and divvy out rewards. How hard He will look at the visible things a man accomplished on some grand scale I cannot say. What I know is that He will be very interested in how our lives have reflected a connection to the Vine.

B. Fruitfulness Is Only the Beginning of Our Destiny

The time of harvest is death if we are speaking of the kingdom within the believer. If we are speaking of the kingdom on some broader scale, the harvest may be some great event at the end of time. Since God's eternity is not bound by our notions of linear time, it may all seem to happen in a single moment. In any event, the fruit of Christ-likeness will not be the end of the matter, but only the beginning. We were sealed for heaven when God sent His Holy Spirit to abide in us. But, in God's time, according to God's laws and God's ways, His kingdom has been growing. God Himself has been working in us to make us fit for heaven.

God never asked us to carry the burden for that over which we have no control. He only asks us to sow kingdom seed, so let us be diligent about sowing well. It is easy to suppose that sowing kingdom seed is simply a matter of verbally articulating the truth about Jesus. In fact, the Bible describes many other venues for sowing seed that also communicate the truth of Jesus in manners to which people specifically respond. If you think sowing is important, listen ...

- To allow Christ's light to shine before men through good deeds and acts of mercy invites them "to praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).
- To live justly and mercifully in an unjust and merciless world invites the "pagans" to "glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12).
- To love one another within the community of faith tells all men that we are disciples of Jesus (John 13:35).
- To fiercely maintain unity with other disciples in a world that flies apart at the drop of a hat testifies that Jesus really came from the Father to show the world His Father's love (John 17:23).
- To cling to God in times of trouble makes our divine hope conspicuous and may even invite inquiries from others for us to explain the basis for our hope (1 Peter 3:15)
- To live in the presence of an unbeliever with a Christ-like spirit presents a compelling case for the Gospel that no amount of talking can duplicate (1 Peter 3:1-6).

We cannot make a seed grow, but we can sow, and there is more to sowing than just talking. Someone will always write the next great "*How I Done It*" guide to building a mega-church, but of this we can all be sure. If we are not investing ourselves first in the things that God says make a difference, then, we are not sowing in obedience. Let us sow as we have been called to sow.