

## More Lessons from the Farm

Mark 4:21-34 (01/25/15)

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Jesus takes us back to the farm again this morning with more lessons on sowing and growing stuff. He's using parables to help His followers and us get a handle on how God will be growing His spiritual kingdom from the time of Jesus all the way to the end of the age when Christ returns. And what we're going to find out is, while God puts responsibilities on us to be sure to be sowing the Word of God, He is the one who does the growing. We do the sowing; He does the growing. And that is a wonderful truth.

I am thankful that as elders we have never sat down to strategize how to grow our church numbers, to get more people in the doors and in the seats. We have talked about evangelism and opportunities for outreach, which means sowing the Word out there as well as in here, but we've never even thought about hiring a church growth consultant to come in here for a hefty sum of money to give us a twenty-step program to build a bigger church.

The reality is, we have the Master Teacher and Builder right here in the Scriptures explaining what we need to do as a church and what God is going to do to build His spiritual kingdom, both here and to the ends of the earth. Mohammed began in the sixth century to spread his message of Islam and death to the infidels. How does the true and living God assure us His worldwide plan and redeeming work will succeed? Not by armies; not by human manipulation; not by baptism; and not by slick marketing methods and skills. We'll see this morning how He does it.

These are fascinating little stories that teach huge lessons for us. They are not easy to interpret. You may disagree with mine, but I want to keep them as simple and helpful as possible. Last week Christ assured us there would be some good soil, some people who would hear, receive, and bear fruit as we sow the Word. Here are five more stories about how God will grow His kingdom.

### **God will grow His spiritual kingdom by shining the light of Christ into this dark world – vv. 21-23**

*And He was saying to them, "A lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lamp stand? "For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has anything been secret, but that it would come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."*

Here's what I love about Jesus' teaching. He talks so even nine and ten year-old kids can understand, and when he said this, I'm guessing there were some snickers in the crowd. Light a light and put it under a bushel or under a couch? That's just plain silly. But there's a great truth here. You turn on a light in the house so you can what? See! Exactly. In those days they had these little clay lamps pinched on the end; you put oil and a wick in them and light the wick. You may only have one lamp for everyone to see. And where do you put it? On a lamp stand! We don't turn on a lamp and then quickly put baskets over them or shove them under beds. That's ridiculous.

So what is Jesus saying? You'll have to trust me here, but neither the NASB nor the ESV translated this correctly. It literally says, The (with an article) lamp (the subject) does not come (active, not passive) to be hidden, but it comes to shine out so people can see. This lamp is Jesus. He came to shine the truth of the gospel out from this little land of Galilee to eventually the entire world. He is THE light of the world who shines into hearts and turns them on, so that we now are His lights in this dark world. And the principle is this, the dark world needs the light of the gospel.

What does light do? It exposes. It reveals. Jesus exposes our hearts and reveals our sin. For those who are really getting it, who have spiritual ears, you understand this. And if Christ hasn't shown His light into your heart yet, rest assured that He will. When He returns in judgment, He will expose every secret thought. Paul assured us of this in 1 Corinthians 4:5; when the Lord comes He will "both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts." That is one scary piece of Scripture. You cannot hide your life from God! Christ is the light and will expose all of us. All those bitter, malicious, hateful thoughts; all those little lies that you hid behind; all the adulterous, pornographic imaginations you toyed with in your heart; all those self-righteous, proud, religious thoughts, those secret thoughts of despising the Bible's talk about your sin and depravity and desperate need of Christ, your rejecting the truth of Christ as the one and only way to God – all of these secret, hidden thoughts and motives Christ will expose.

This is the work of God. Jesus came to shine the light on the way to God and you need to hear it. He is the only way to be forgiven, the only way to be reconciled back to God, to be saved from your sin! Are you listening? "Do you have ears?" Jesus asks. God pours His grace into our hearts through our ears as we hear and receive! That's why Protestantism moved the altar out and put the pulpit front and center. Be sure you are hearing, which takes us to the second way God grows His kingdom.

#### **Through warning people about what they hear – vv. 24-25**

*And He was saying to them, "Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it will be measured to you; and more will be given you besides. For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him."*

This will drive the disciples to ask Jesus what He meant. Let's give it a shot. This world, your world, has a steady stream of philosophy and human ideas to live by. You will either be carefully listening to God's truth and applying it to your life, or you'll be the subject of all kinds of godless notions: "Live and let live." "I make up my own mind about truth." "When you die, that's it, you're dead." To whom are you listening? And, guaranteed, you're listening to someone. We are all subject to the constant drumbeat of a godless worldview, and unless we are being careful, it will take root in our hearts. To whom are you listening?

Here's where Jesus' words get tricky. What are you measuring your life by? What is your standard of truth? Your measure should be the Scriptures; measure everything by the Scripture. If you are feeding on God's truth, applying it to your life, like James 1:22 says, "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only," then God will bless you and feed you more truth to love and rejoice in. If you neglect, ignore, and reject God's truth, the Gospel and the Word of God, you will lose what little you may have known. Many a young person grows up under the gospel message, but then decides it isn't for him and they lose any heart grip on the gospel.

Here's the point – God's Word is living and active and dynamic, and no one can play games with Christ and the truth and escape the repercussions. The gospel requires response in your heart. God builds His truth into those who zealously pursue it, and takes His truth away from those who are careless. To neglect to give your ears to God's Word is highly offensive to God. Proverbs 28:9 says if you aren't willing to listen to God, He won't listen to you. Don't be asking God for stuff if you aren't willing to listen to what God says!

This is how God grows His kingdom – by warning us over and over to be careful what we give our ears to! Paul told Timothy many would fall away from the faith by paying attention, giving their ears to deceiving spirits (false teachers) and doctrines of demons! And in 2 Timothy 4 Paul urged Timothy to zealously preach the word, even though people would turn away from the truth and give themselves to myths! They don't want the Word; they want their ears tickled. There are plenty of ear ticklers out there. So Jesus' word to the wise: be careful what you listen to and to whom you listen!

**God is growing His spiritual kingdom by the sovereign power of the gospel – vv. 26-29**

*And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."*

This is the best story here! John MacArthur preached on this at Together for the Gospel 2010. Some of you may remember. Only Mark's gospel tells this story. It lets us know several things. First, we need to be sowing the Word, right? We're back to that. Cast that seed on the soil. Then what? Go to bed and sleep. Why? Because you have no control over that seed germinating and sprouting. You really don't even know how it works in that seed.

The sprouting seed happens without your manipulation. All you do is plant the seed. The germination takes place "by itself," our word "automatically." You can't manipulate it or somehow make it germinate. It's automatic in that it's in God's hands. That word "automatically" is used in Acts 12:10 describing the first automatic doors in history, when the angel broke Peter out of jail and the iron gates to the city opened "automatically" to let them in.

God makes believers; we don't. All we do is make sure we've given the truth of the gospel. God is the one who works in the heart and gives the new life that responds to the gospel. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3, "I sowed, Apollos watered, but God causes the growth!" While we pray and even weep over lost people, we depend on God to give new life. Why are you a believer? One reason – God. How do people get saved? God has faithfully raised up sowers for 2000 years, people like you and me. We sow the seed all over the place, on the ground, in the streets, on sidewalks, in the gutters – you never know whom God is planning to save. But we can't manipulate people into getting saved. We don't need to feel that we've failed if we've planted a seed and nothing happens. That's in God's hands.

And notice something else here – God grows His people in stages. You'll see the movement of grace in a heart as a person is concerned about their sin. They are pushed by their guilt to the cross, they call upon the name of the Lord, they are saved, and they begin to grow. They don't come out full grown, like flies out of their pupa that never grow any bigger. No, first there is a blade, then a head, then the full grain in the head. God sovereignly grows His kingdom of saved people through the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is faithful to them; they finally are brought right into His presence. Salvation is of the Lord! We do the sowing; God does the growing. Sow and sleep and trust God to make that seed germinate if that is His will!

Luther understood this. He wrote, "Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer (that's those Lutherans for you!) with my Philip of Amsdorf the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all." God grows His spiritual kingdom sovereignly through the power of the gospel.

**God grows His spiritual kingdom from a very small beginning ending in world-wide results – vv. 30-32**

*And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE."*

Think about Jesus time. Here's the mustard seed – a baby is born in an obscure village in Palestine, a young lad grows up in an insignificant town in Galilee. For three years He goes around healing and teaching, only to be crucified on a Roman cross for the charge of

blaspheming God! At the same time, He has gathered a tiny group of untrained guys who end up running away from Him. Caesar didn't know about Him, the scholars of Alexandria never heard of Him. Just this extremely small group of Jewish peasants following this crucified Man.

But then this unknown Man breaks out of death! Up from the grave He arose! With a mighty triumph o'er His foes! He sends out these guys to preach the gospel about a Jew who was God in the flesh and was crucified bearing God's wrath in the place of a vast multitude of sinners. The Spirit comes down, 3000 are saved on Pentecost, and this little seed contains in itself all the blessings of the gospel, repentance, faith, regeneration, justification, sanctification. It's all in this powerful tiny seed which explodes throughout the Mediterranean world, up to Rome, throughout Europe, northern Africa, India, over to America, to the Far East and the south Pacific Islands, Irian Jaya, the Auca Indians in South America, Russia and Lithuania.

That tiny mustard seed has grow up and is big enough for even Gentiles to find shade under its branches. (Ezekiel 17:23) And while it doesn't seem all that powerful and big today with Islam and secularism on the march swallowing up the Middle East and western civilization, that tiny seed continues to effectively grow. Islam and secularism will come to an end, but this mustard seed will continue growing right up to the tribulation period, in the tribulation period, and then it will cover the earth in the millennial kingdom like the waters cover the sea! All the nations will bow down in submissive worship and obedience to Jesus Christ.

**And then, God grows His spiritual kingdom by explaining and applying God's Word to the lives of His people – vv. 33-34**

*With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.*

Jesus put the cookies of truth on the lower shelf, so people who were interested could easily understand it. And He told these stories to the public, most of whom really didn't see the spiritual implications. But then look at Him there as a group of people gather around Him and He is explaining to them what He meant. I would love to sneak into that little huddle and get the plays from the greatest Quarterback of them all! But actually we can be in that huddle. We can get the plays every day as we open the Word week after week, day after day in various ways. God has been growing His spiritual kingdom through the explanation and application of the Word of God throughout the church age. And those of us who teach and preach and sow the seed of the Word are so totally privileged to be a part of this whole process!

**SO WHAT?**

What do we take with us this morning?

We have the assurance and confidence that God is working in hearts through His Word. And we can be sure of this: He will not fail. Every sheep Jesus came to save, to pay that penalty for, will be saved. Not one will be missing. God will see to that.

We need to keep sowing His Word wherever and whenever we can.

Has the seed of the Gospel taken root in your heart? Has God given you ears to hear? How could you walk away from Christ and reap the awful consequences of dying in your sin? Will you call upon Him now as your Lord and Savior?