

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED

Mark 4:26-29

Spiritual growth cannot be measured by a stopwatch. The kingdom of God may begin in a person's life in an instant, but its growth becomes visible only with the passing of time and the practice of faithfulness. This is one aspect of the kingdom of God that Jesus describes in the parable of the growing seed, a story that is recorded only by Mark. Let's read this passage. Mark 4:26-29.

Mark 4:26. And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows-- how, he himself does not know.

28 "The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.

29 "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

A growing seed

The Lord Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God may be compared to a man who scatters seed on the ground. He then goes to bed. He gets up the next morning and he goes to bed again. Then he gets up, and he goes to bed again. This is happening throughout the summer until ... Until what? Until the seed comes up. First, we see the blade. Then, the ear. And finally, the fruit, i.e., the full grain in the ear. And when the fruit comes, the man cuts down the plant. He takes in the harvest. He doesn't know how the seed grows. His task is to sow it at the beginning, and to reap it at the end.

We can divide this parable into three scenes. Scene #1 is the farmer planting seed into the ground. Scene #2 has the farmer going to bed and getting up each day. In scene #3, the farmer puts in his sickle and gathers the ripened crop.

Some commentators have viewed this parable as a further explanation of the parable of the sower – which comes just before the parable of the growing seed. For others, the lesson is about Christ who has sown and in time will come to reap; the rest of the story refers to the invisible work of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the disciple. Various interpretations have stressed either the seed, the period of growth, the harvest or the contrast between sowing and harvesting.

A human sower

It is true that this parable is very similar to the parable of the sower. But there are also many points which are quite different. In what way is it different? Let's consider the sower for example. Who is the sower? In the parable of the sower, the sower is first and foremost the Lord Jesus. Now, can we also say that the man who sows in the parable of the growing seed is Jesus? That, to me, would

be a mistake. Why would that be wrong? Well, consider this. This man sows the seed and he doesn't know how it grows. How can those words apply to the Lord Jesus? V. 27: ... *the seed sprouts up and grows-- how, he himself does not know*. How can we say that Jesus does not know how the word of God rose? He is the Creator. He Himself is the very word of God. He knows how the seed springs and grows.

Also, we notice that there is a difference between this parable and the parable of the sower about the seed. In the parable of the sower, we read that *The sower went out to sow his seed* (Luke 8:5). The farmer was sowing his seed. But here, the seed that is being sown by the man is not said to be his own seed. He is simply sowing seed, not necessarily his own. When a person teaches the word of God, he doesn't teach his own words. He teaches God's word. It is God's seed that he is sowing. If it is the Lord Jesus who is sowing the seed, then He is sowing His own seed. So we see that the sower in the parable of the growing seed cannot be the Lord Jesus.

If the man does not represent Jesus, then who is he? Well, any person who is sowing God's word is a sower. Any one who proclaims the good news of salvation in Christ is a sower. In the Bible, the sower is not always the Lord Jesus. Yes, He is the first one who sows. You might say that He is the Sower, with a capital 'S'. But we are all sowers, you might say, with a small 's'. Man is the means, the instrument that God has chosen to share the gospel with the world. In that sense, we are His servants. We are His workers. Paul says that we are 'God's fellow workers' in 1Corinthians.

Christians as spiritual farmers

The picture of the sower representing Christians, especially those who preach the word of God, is quite common in the Bible. The apostle Paul, for example, speaks of himself as planting (or sowing) in 1Corinthians 3:6. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*. Who sowed the seed? The apostle Paul sowed the seed. Who watered the seed? Apollos watered the seed. But who gives the increase? It is God who causes the seed to take root and to grow. We find in this statement a parallel to the words in Mark. How the seed grows, the apostle Paul doesn't know. Apollos doesn't know. We don't know either. But God knows. He is the one who gives life to the seed. He is the one who makes it grow.

A similar picture is found in 2Timothy 2:6 where the minister of the word is compared to a farmer. *The hard-working farmer ought to be the first to receive his share of the crops*. Paul exhorts Timothy to be a hard working farmer. A farmer knows that seeds do not plant themselves. He must go out into the fields to sow them and cultivate the growing plants. God's servants must go into the world and spread the gospel.

In 2Timothy 4:2, Paul says to Timothy, 'Preach the word, in season and out of season.' Notice the expression 'in season and out of season.' This is in agricultural language. We normally sow the seed at a certain time in the year, usually in the spring. We don't sow in the winter. When it comes to the word of God, we sow at any time, in season and out of season. So you can see that Paul has combined two things in this verse. For Paul, preaching the word of God is pictured as sowing the seed.

The same picture is found again in James 5:7 where Christians are pictured as farmers, waiting for the harvest to come. *Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth*.

Growth is of God

The next thing we notice about the man in the parable is that he sleeps and rises. He *goes to bed at night and gets up by day*. We must not get the idea that this farmer, after he has sown the seed, does nothing until harvest. This parable bypasses a number of details – significant as they may be –

and places the emphasis on the sowing, the growing, and the harvesting. Of course the farmer doesn't spend his days idle. There is much work to do. Plowing, fertilizing, and weeding took a lot of his time. And besides the daily chores, he had to do the buying and selling, planning and preparation for the harvest. All this is taken for granted in the parable.

The point is that the farmer cannot do anything for the seed to grow. He can make the circumstances as good as possible for the seed to grow, but he cannot cause it to grow. The power to germinate, to break forth and grow is of the seed itself, by its own virtue. Man does not create life. He can only discover, rearrange and develop what is already there. Unless God causes the seed to grow, then all the effort of the farmer would be wasted.

It is the same with the kingdom of God, with the growth of believers, both individually and collectively. Growth is not of man. Growth is of God. It is the Spirit of God that takes the gospel and changes a man's heart, causing him to grow in grace.

A hardworking farmer

But again, I repeat, this doesn't mean that all the farmer does after he has sown the seed is to sit back and twiddle his thumbs until the harvest comes. He cannot force the seed to grow, but he can certainly do something to protect it and to make the circumstances as ideal as possible for growth to happen. There is no such thing as inactive faith. Growth is sure but it would be a great abuse of this truth to think that believers and the church will grow without me, that I don't have to serve. We cannot say that spiritual growth is all of grace and that I have no responsibility. We do have a responsibility in the process of growth.

Remember 2Timothy 2:6: 'the hardworking farmer.' The hardworking farmer doesn't work hard only at the time of sowing. He works hard all year round. The person who wrote that verse knew about working hard. When Paul was defending his apostleship in 2Corinthians, he said, 'I toil day and night. I have worked harder than anyone, but I do this by the grace of God.'

In this respect, I would like to read to you Colossians 1:28-29.

Colossians 1:28. Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ.

Paul, like the farmer, plants the seed. What is the seed? Christ Himself. The word of God. That is why he says here in v.28, *Him we proclaim*. We preach Christ. But Paul doesn't preach simply to get people to accept Christ. It is not just a matter of getting a decision. The aim of the preaching, of the warning and of the teaching is to 'present every believer perfect in Christ.' Those who come to Christ must learn how to follow Christ day by day as they face the trials and temptations of life. In that sense, he wants to bring perfect men to Christ. In other versions, you will find the word 'complete', 'full grown' or 'mature'. Paul wants every Christian to reach maturity in faith and character. And for this, he is willing to work intensely.

Colossians 1:29. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

'To this end I labor. I toil.' This word 'toil' is a very strong one. It means to struggle in work to the point of exhaustion, fatigue and pain. It is the picture of an athlete struggling, pushing himself well beyond his capacity in order to achieve his objective. Where does Paul get all this energy? He says, 'I strive with all His energy (God's energy, God's power), which powerfully works in me.' It is God's energy that was working in Paul.

God inspired the apostle Paul. But this inspiration, what is it? It is grace. It is God's grace. And this grace, what does it do? It causes Paul to strive with all his might to present every man perfect in Christ. You see, Paul's concept of grace is a dynamic one. The fact that God assures us that His kingdom will grow does not mean that there is no need for us to work hard to bring people who measure up to the stature of Christ. God wants us to give ourselves entirely up for His service.

The Lord Jesus brings out this point very well in the parable of the growing seed. Let's return to Mark 4.

Crops produced by the soil

Mark 4:27. ...the seed sprouts up and grows...

*28 The **soil** produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.*

Do you notice something here? The seed sprouts up and the soil produces grain. The seed grows because life is in the seed – that is easy to understand. But then, to our surprise, the next sentence does not go on to say, 'The seed produces the blade, the ear and finally the full grain.' That's what we would have expected, isn't it? But we don't see that there. V. 28 says that it is the soil that yields crops, not the seed.

What does that say to us? The soil in the Lord's teaching, in the parable of the sower, represents the heart of man. It refers to human beings into whom the seed is sown. Now, think about this. The life is in the seed. And the seed must grow. But can it grow without the soil? If you put a seed on a chair, will it grow? No, it won't grow. You have to put it in the soil. That's where it is going to grow. And in that ground, a wonderful work of transformation happens. The barren earth is transformed into a fruitful field. So we need both the seed and the earth to have a harvest at the end. In other words, we need God's grace and man's response in order to have a harvest. It is not all of grace without human responsibility. God's grace always takes into account the will of man. It never violates human freedom.

The harvest has come

The seed has transforming power. It takes the barren land and produces a fruitful field out of it. That's what a farmer wants of course. When a farmer sows his land, he is looking for the fruit. He wants the harvest. The word 'harvest' is a key word that we find in the last verse of the parable.

*Mark 4.29. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the **harvest** has come.*

What does this harvest refer to? Is the harvest the final judgment, the judgment day when the Lord sends out his angels to gather the harvest of the earth? This is the harvest that is described in Jesus' explanation of the parable of the tares. He says in Matthew 13:39, *The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and **the reapers are the angels***. This harvest will take place at the end of the world when the Lord Jesus comes again.

Can we say the same thing about the parable of the growing seed? No. The problem with this interpretation is that the harvest at the close of the age is brought in by angels, which is not the case in the parable of the growing seed. Let's read again this verse in Mark 4:29. *But when the grain is ripe, at once **he** puts in the sickle*. Who puts the sickle? The person who sowed. Who is the sower in this parable? The Lord Jesus? No, we saw that it cannot be Jesus. This person doesn't know how the seed grows. He is a human being, a disciple, who cannot explain how a seed grows. And the person who sows is the same person who reaps here. He is the one who puts in the sickle. So we find that this harvest can hardly be the eschatological harvest, the harvest at the end of the age where it is the angels who reap. This is a harvest that involves believers and that goes on at this present time.

Where do we see this kind of harvest in the Bible? In John 4:35-36, the Lord Jesus is speaking to His disciples and He says this.

John 4:35. Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes, and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. (There is, right now, something to harvest. We don't have to wait until the end of the age).

36 Already he who reaps is receiving wages, and is gathering fruit for life eternal; that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.

What is the harvest here? The harvest is 'the gathering of fruit for eternal life.' And what is the fruit? The fruit are the souls that are converted to Christ, those who will inherit eternal life. In this sense, we are all reaping right now. Some sow the seed. Others reap the harvest. Some sow and reap. It is all part of the same work of bringing people into the kingdom of God, into eternal life. God gives the increase, while Paul may plant and Apollos water. The point is that we both sow and reap at this present time.

Growing believers

Let us sum up. God's grace is a free gift of life to us. It is a source of power that changes the heart of a man and causes him to grow spiritually. The growth is sure but it doesn't happen by force. Therefore one condition is essential. It requires the cooperation of the person. He must have 'an honest and good heart' (Luke 8:15). When the seed falls on such ground, then growth is inevitable and unstoppable.

And the goal is not to produce just the blade or the stalk. The goal is to produce the full kernel in the head, the mature grain in the ear. It was precisely for this purpose that Paul labored so much, 'to present every man mature in Christ' (Colossians 1:28).

Being a Christian means to be changed from one degree of glory to another degree of glory by the Holy Spirit into the image of the Son of God. It is also Paul who writes in 2Corinthians 3:18, *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*** When a believer allows the Spirit of the Lord to take full possession of his heart, he progresses and grows inevitably from one stage of glory to a higher stage. That's what Christian growth is about.