

# The Sure Growing Seed

*Mark 4:26-29*

*With Study Questions*

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**And He said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,<sup>27</sup> and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how.<sup>28</sup> For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.<sup>29</sup> But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26-29)**

## **Introduction**

There is something about the nature of man that enjoys being part of something successful. Advertisers realize this. They promote products based upon how many other people are using them – it is the bestselling book or bestselling car. In some sense this may be legitimate. If everyone is reading the book or driving the car it is likely a good one.

But not everything can be marketed so pragmatically. It often takes only one generation to see how silly the previous generation was – be it hairdos, music or sagging pants. The longing for observed success, even in ministry, can be a dangerous desire. I was involved in a ministry one time that had something called a “proven talk.” A “proven talk” was not one that had theological integrity (at least that wasn’t the emphasis), it was one that yielded the greatest response – more people filling out the card indicating conversion.

On the tail of the industrial revolution, ministerial strategies have become the rage. If human innovation can ameliorate the lifestyles of the masses, why can’t we use similar innovations for the advancement of the Kingdom of God? Detailed studies of church growth and spiritual/psychological formation have become the basis for ministerial efforts. Not that we can’t benefit from understanding our culture – if we learn that elderly people won’t attend a church with too many stairs, or that people like to be welcomed (like at Subway) these are things we can take under consideration. But when the response of man begins to

establish the heart of the message, we end up with the proverbial lunatics are running the asylum. R.T. France explains:

**The kingdom of God, then, does not depend on human effort to achieve it, and human insight will not be able to explain it.** <sup>1</sup>

It would appear that one of the primary themes of this brief parable is what men don't know.

**And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground,<sup>27</sup> and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how (Mark 4:26, 27).**

### **What Men Don't Know**

The kingdom of God, strictly speaking, is not like the man or the seed or the growth but something parallel to the whole dynamic of described events.

The scattering of the seed appears to be the only effort the man in the parable makes. There is little doubt that this refers to the preaching of the word (Mark 4:12). After this the man appears idle. He goes to bed at night and wakes up in the morning. Perhaps this is one reason that farmers tend to be very religious – and not always in a good way. Pagan fertility cults often blossom in agrarian societies due to the farmer's knowledge of his own inability to control the elements.

Of course the farmers listening to this parable might object to the assumption that farmers merely scatter seed. They must also water, weed, shade and protect their crops from scavengers. So this parable is not to be an excuse for lethargy on the part of Christian either in his own effort to be holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16) or in his responsibility to aid in the growth of his neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> France, R. T. (2002). *The Gospel of Mark : A commentary on the Greek text* (214). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

**We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (Romans 15:1, 2).**

But each farmer will also recognize his own limitations. And that in an ultimate sense he has very little say or knowledge in terms of the growth of his crops.

### **God Gives the Increase**

Assuming that true seed has been planted (this being the message that Jesus is to be believed upon for the remission of sins and eternal life) and that the planting is followed by watering (1 Corinthians 3:6), the Apostle Paul mirrors the message of the parable:

**I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. <sup>7</sup> So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6, 7).**

What we learn from Jesus, Paul and the entirety of Scripture is that it is God and God alone who can give the increase. And the means by which God plants the seed in the heart of man is the preaching of the gospel. We should, therefore, not be tempted to alter the seed (change the message) in order to produce quick, false and temporary crop. The promise of Christ is that if the true seed is scattered, it will grow.

**For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head (Mark 4:28).**

### **The Promise of Growth**

This is a glorious promise. In the same way the earth will produce a growing crop if the seed is planted, the Christian can expect the God will continually be sanctifying those who are truly His. When Jesus uses the phrase “**by itself,**” the Greek word is *automatos* from where we get the

word 'automatic;' as if to say it is a sure promise of God to finish the work in us that He started (Philippians 3:6). It might be of interest to note that the word Jesus chose to use here (*automatos*) generally referred to the growth of wild plants rather than a farm.

We must keep in mind the historical context in which this parable was given. The gospel was more rejected than accepted and many were operating under the false assumption that the advancement of God's kingdom would be immediate and cataclysmic – there were zealots who were sporting for the instantaneous overthrow of the Roman Empire.

What Jesus is teaching in this parable is that though the advancement of Christ's kingdom might be (in some sense) imperceptible, it was also inevitable.<sup>2</sup> So powerful is the gospel in the hearts of men it grows in the most unaccommodating circumstances.

I think of my own feeble efforts at gardening when it seemed like nothing I planted ever sprouted. Then I built a wooden deck on the second floor of my house, far away from soil and no seed (that I knew of) planted in it, yet stuff started growing. We see this in cement, through walls and at times pipes! The truth may move forward slowly but it is sure.

**But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day (Proverbs 4:18).**

The Scriptures are unambiguous when it comes to the power of God's word:

**A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass.<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:6-8).**

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<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 10: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*. New Testament Commentary (169). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

We tend to want very structured programs for Christian growth and they may be fine at some level. But I find myself very comforted in the knowledge that even though I ought to avail myself of the means of grace which are at my disposal (preaching, sacraments, prayer, study, worship, fellowship, etc.), my greatest assurance, not only of my salvation but of my sanctification is a God who, like a concerned parent, scrutinizes my path (Psalm 139:3) and holds me hand.

**The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; <sup>24</sup> though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand (Psalm 37:23, 24).**

Hendriksen and Kistemaker sayss it nicely:

**as God alone, not the farmer, thoroughly understands and is in fact the Author of *physical* growth, so also God alone, not man, thoroughly understands and is the Author of *spiritual* growth, the establishment and progress of the reign of God in hearts, lives, and spheres. It is because of his will that the spiritual seed, the word or message of the gospel, asserts its increasingly powerful influence upon the hearts of men and thus also upon society generally.<sup>3</sup>**

Jesus finishes the parable with a reference from Joel 3:13.

**But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come (Mark 4:29)**

## **The Harvest**

Jesus seems to be indicating that a certain level of growth must take place prior to the harvest. So what does this mean? I hesitate to launch into a long eschatological explanation here. Suffice it to say, in a certain

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<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 10: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark*. New Testament Commentary (166). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

sense, the sickle was about to swing. Jesus would quote Joel again later in the Gospel of Mark:

**But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light (Mark 13:24)**

Jesus would go on to explain a great judgment which included the apocalyptic language of stars falling from the heavens and the Son of Man coming in the clouds (Mark 12:25, 26). He would finish this lesson with these words:

**So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (Mark 12:29, 30).**

Some might say the “generation” of which Jesus is speaking is the generation in existence at the end of the world. But a very contextual cross-reference simply does not allow it.

**For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. <sup>28</sup> Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Mark 16:27, 28).**

It would appear that the harvest in context was the judgment of God at the end of the Old Covenant and the destruction of the temple – what we might call a cultural or national judgment.

Clearly there is also going to be a universal and eternal judgment at the end of history when God has completed His work upon the earth.

**All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. <sup>28</sup> For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. <sup>29</sup> All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;**

**before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive. <sup>30</sup> Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; <sup>31</sup> they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it (Psalm 22:27-31).**

One theologian made an interesting point, which I believe has some merit. It might be called an individual eschatology. One to which we might appeal when we begin to think God has no more useful purpose for us. Perhaps we're old or sick or feel disqualified from useful for His kingdom.

**As soon as a Christian is ready for heaven, God calls him away; and therefore we may infer that it is unwise, if not sinful, for a Christian, oppressed (as he) may be with sickness or trouble, to be eager in wishing to leave this world. "It is one thing to be willing to go when God pleases; it is another thing to speak as though we wished to hasten our departure." "When the fruit is ripe, *immediately* he putteth forth the sickle." If, therefore, the sickle is not yet sent forth, it is because the fruit is not yet fully ripe. The afflictions of the faithful are God's means to ripen them for heaven.<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary: St. Mark Vol. I.* 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (159). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.



## Questions for Study

1. What are some of the dangers of human innovation when it comes to the Christian faith (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is the scattering of seed in this parable (page 3)?
3. What are the limitations of farmers and how do they help us understand this parable (pages 3, 4)?
4. Is Jesus teaching that we shouldn't bother trying to be holy (pages 3, 4)?
5. Who actually causes the increase to God's kingdom and why is it important for us to realize that (page 4)?
6. What is the glorious promise in verse 28 (pages 4, 5)?
7. What was the historical context of this parable and how would that encourage the listener (page 5)?
8. What is our great comfort in this glorious promise of God (page 6)?
9. Discuss the different ways we might understand the sickle and the harvest (pages 6-8).