

“The Seeds of the Kingdom”

- *Mark 4:26-34*

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Mark 4:26-34 *And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, 27 "and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. 28 "For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. 29 "But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? 31 "It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; 32 "but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade." 33 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. 34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.*

However we might feel about what we personally do to build up the kingdom, it is almost universally true that it is less than we would like. Oh, I know there are those that attempt to 'carefully balance' their service unto the Lord with their earthly pursuits, and have a worldly peace about their participation level. But for those of us who believe in the scriptural picture of body life...those that believe that all we are and all we have is His, for us we will forever feel that we fall short. There will of course always be "consumer Christians." Those that live their faith and pick their church by what they can get and how comfortable they are there. The Mormons and the JW's will make you feel accepted and comfortable too, so why not go to church there? For those today, I have nothing much to say other than such a practice is selfish sin and spiritual immaturity. I want to speak rather to the biblical Christian. The one who adheres to scriptural body life with the loving and serving of others and the unity and participation in spiritual community. For us, we at least feel that can never do enough or get enough!

Christ herein seems to move to comfort those of us in the latter camp, and call our attention back to *what* we are planting rather than just how *much* we are planting. Paul reminds us 1Corinthians 3:7 "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." Yet those of us who long to participate in and further the kingdom of God can easily be discouraged by perceived failure to 'make a dent.' But Jesus is telling the listener here that the gospel seed itself has the power. While it may be the work of the sower to plant, it is the work of the seed to grow, and we learned previously it was the job of the soil to receive it.

The parable Jesus gives draws a picture of a man who went out faithful and consistently to plant his fields. For him, it was his calling, his job, his survival, his *life*. Few of us will accept that roll. Most of us see our "seed-planting" ...*if we engage in such at all*, as a 'hobby,' a 'position,' or maybe a 'duty.' Something we must occasionally do...like changing the oil in our car or mowing the lawn. The picture is given of the farmer who plants but he has no control over the growing. The growing was something that he very much does not understand and thankfully it is not required that he does. He merely does his part and the rest is, well...*supernatural*. The farmer still lived his life...he would go home...go to sleep and rise to do it all again.

The seed sprouting, the plant growing and maturing, it is all beyond his doing. He may participate in the care, but he cannot make the plant grow and he cannot make it grow any faster! We can't make it rain and we can't make the sun shine. It is useless to try and will only serve to both frustrate and eventually anger the farmer when he cannot affect the process. Sometimes a seed fails to grow to maturity, and such has nothing to do with the farmer if he did his part in care. Does he try to triage the failed seed or does he turn his attention to the field full of wheat before him? You may reply herein that the shepherd is to leave the flock to search out and find the one that is lost. But I will reply that *that* lamb was *lost*, not *run away*!

The process of spiritual rebirth and the sanctification which follows is a thing of mystery! John 3:8 tells us that "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" For the farmer this is simply a work of faith. He does not return to the field every day to dig up the seed to see if it has germinated. He may water the field. He may remove the weeds. He may keep the soil worked up, but he cannot force growth. Please note that such does not mean the farmer does not *participate* in the process, but the miracle is God's alone.

While there are those who unduly attempt to affect this process, there are those who also wish to wash their hands of the whole matter! "I'm no farmer!" is the cry! Or in this case, "I'm no preacher..." Yet as resident in the kingdom of God, there is no place for us to forgo community and evangelistic participation. If Christ is indeed both king and sovereign example, then we all must hear his words "*for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.*" (Luke 19:10) I guess the question for most of us is 'are we a hobby gardener or are we a farmer?'

You see, Jesus did not just save you for eternal life, He saved us for a reason. We have a job to do. But the fact remains that there are as many of us that struggle with indifference to the seed or the condition of the field all together as there are those who struggle with the temptation to meddle with the sanctification growth process. I mean, we will *participate* in the work as long as it fits our schedule of earthly and worldly pursuits, family obligations, and career plans. Few of us are truly willing to be obedient to the issue of giving God the *first* fruits, and instead give him what's left after we involve ourselves in family, vocation, and material wants.

No one can clearly explain how a dead, dormant seed can produce life when it is buried in the soil. Often in less than 24 hours time that seed will have sent a tiny root downward and the beginning of a stalk upward! It is a puzzling mystery, yet the seed will have produced life within a short time.

Sowing the Gospel seed is the same way. When it is sown into prepared ground...a 'receptive heart,' it begins to grow and in a way in which to both survive and thrive. Sometimes it happens quickly...in minutes or hours. At other times, it may take months or even years, but it still remains that there is an inexplicable life within that seed. Recently, against all expectations, seed scientists from the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place, the Royal Botanical Gardens in West Sussex England, have germinated 200-year-old seeds discovered in The National Archives – and they are now growing into vigorous young plants!

If the ground is receptive...if the birds of evil do not come and immediately pluck the seed away...if the roots can find soft ground, and the thorns of worldliness do not choke it out, that seed will begin to germinate within that heart. When it does, life will issue forth. Spiritually, this is the process we call sanctification. It is a puzzling mystery, how something so overtly simple, received into a human heart, can ultimately bring about such a profound change. Yet, all those who have experienced it know the power of the Gospel when it touches the good soil of the heart!

In Christ's second parable, he presents a completely different kind of picture, but one which that is just as real and just as important to understand. But to actually grasp what Jesus is saying herein we must gather some of the realities about the elements of the story. Firstly, the mustard seed, in reality when planted, grows to be a yellow-flowered bush about 3 1/2 feet tall. A healthy mustard seed does not grow into "*greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the*

birds of the air may nest under its shade.” The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan wrote “A grain of mustard seed never develops into a great tree, unless it becomes abnormal.” But according to this parable, this seed grows up to be a mutated monstrosity, much larger than it was ever supposed to be. It actually becomes a tree that is large enough for the “birds of the air” to nest in its branches. Remembering that we are to interpret the rest of the parables using the explanation of the parable of the soils as well as all of scripture totally, we know that the birds in scripture represented the evil one, satan and his messengers.

The fact is, this parable and others tell us that the Kingdom of God would become much larger than it should be, and the evil one would have his followers setting up shop in the branches. “*And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*” (Matthew 11:12) Never forget that the church's greatest threat has never been and is not today from the outside, but from the inside. Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30 “*I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.*” These are the ‘birds’ that have already been presented last week as the culprits that “snatch away the seed” before it finds root, and now we see those birds roosting in an aberrant tree called the “kingdom of God.”

The Bible speaks of one “unpardonable sin”...one that puts us out in the cold and we are essentially a ‘dead man walking.’ That unpardonable sin...the one that will not be forgiven... is the sin of a hard heart. The soil that will not receive. The individual that will not hear...will not listen, and has closed his heart to the Spirit of God and the voices around him or her that God has used throughout history to speak His will. These individuals often go to church.

So we must never think it a strange thing at all when these things happen in the church. The kingdom of God today has become a mutated monstrosity, having grown much larger than it ever was supposed to. Churches and ministries are filled with not only the unsaved, but with the unholy messengers of satan as well. Christ will speak more about this later in scripture. But those who have gardened know that when one plants seed, occasionally a ‘bad seed’ gets mixed in with the good. A ‘wrong seed’ in mis-packaged and gets planted along with the rest and until it reaches maturity one does not know what he has. Such is not a ‘gospel seed’ but a weed!

I certainly have seen this in my years of ministry. Oh, I have seen an individual sprout and something doesn’t look right almost from the beginning. I have seen traits and practices that are contrary to healthy individuals within the kingdom and have moved to keep those folks out of dangerous rolls in the church. Hard-heartedness and rampant pride. Secret lives and personal agendas. Eventually...*every time*, that plant will get big enough to find that it is not a healthy fruit producing plant but is in fact a cocklebur! Sometimes it takes a long while but eventually all is known. That is fitting with the theme behind all of these recent parables. The theme of rejecting God’s voice. Whether it be the parable of the soils, or the lamp that was covered, or the eyes that won’t see and the ears that won’t hear, these stories speak of that unpardonable sin of rejecting God’s voice.

In Daniel 4, we also find a story about this aberrant tree. In that account Daniel speaks of a vision, and this vision was seen of the great *'tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great'*, (verse 10 of chapter 4) *'The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth: The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it'*. Then verse 22 of the same chapter: *'It is thou, O king', Daniel said to the emperor, 'that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth'*. Daniel then interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream and told him: *'You are the tree, God has given you your kingdom, and it has spread across the whole world,'* and that kingdom was the kingdom of Babylon.

In Ezekiel 31, we find the same figure used by God, this time the Cedar tree representing the Assyrian empire. Ezekiel 31:3: *'Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs',* verse 6, *'All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs, and under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, and under his shadow dwelt all great nations'.*

So the picture of the aberrant tree is one that is not relegated to this Mark passage alone. Each was a story of a growth of a powerful world power where the birds of evil lived in its branches. ***Bird's of evil.*** Certainly the picture cuts across the ages as birds are the enemy of any farmer. They will do what they do naturally and destroy the crop for their own gain.

Ephesians 2 verse 2 tells us that Satan is the Prince of the power of the air; Ephesians 6:12 tells us there are principalities and powers, rulers in heavenly places who are dictating to rulers in earthly places, and influencing our whole society. Even when we go to the end of the story, we see these figures still existing. Babylon the Great in Revelation 18 is understood to speak of a last days religious movement that will incorporate established Christendom. These birds in verse 2 are seen in cages in a system which they participated in building: *'He cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird'.* It would seem that birds, in all of these passages, depict the way of false teachers and false professors, those that are so often mentioned by the apostles Paul, Peter and John as well as the other apostles.

In 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul wrote of 'ministers of light' who were really angels of darkness, messengers of Satan who had already invaded the church. They were false apostles, false prophets etc. So even in apostolic days, just after the little seed had been sown and was only starting to sprout, the professing churches then was already departing from the truth and being corrupted from within. Paul said in 2 Timothy 1:15, *"All who are in Asia have departed from me, they have forsaken me!"* This is the great apostle that wrote 13 letters in the New Testament, and they didn't want anything to do with him! He knew the pain of having those he loved turn on him.

The great preacher Vance Havner once said *'The church has moved from the catacombs to the Colosseum in its emphasis on size. We stage mass demonstrations and gigantic congregations. We put celebrities on the platform, and borrow from Caesar to enhance the banner of Christ. We have gone crazy over bigness, actually we need a thinning instead of a thickening. I learned long ago that growing corn or cotton must be thin, we reduce the quantity to improve the quality. Gideon had to thin his troops, and a similar procedure might help God's army today. Jesus thinned His crowd, as is recorded in the sixth chapter of John, and doubtless there was many another occasion. Today the persecuted minority has become the popular majority'.*

How do we know then the reality of ourselves as well as those that we call our brothers and sisters? The real thing will "keep its eyes upon the son." There is an anonymous quote that says *"The beginning of greatness is to be little."* Why can we not learn that great principle of Christianity that says the 'way to be great is to be less, and the perfection of greatness is to be nothing.' But it is pride that brings us down... the great Christian evangelical sin. It was the sin that made the devil the devil, therefore being the parent sin, he tempted Adam and Eve, and overcame them, and pride entered into their hearts and into the human gene'. Are we following the son or ourselves?

As William MacDonald puts it, the sad result is that every one of us has enough pride to sink a fleet. Here's the message in all of this, and a principle for the Christians. Christ was humble in His birth, humble in His life, in His death - and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. F. B. Meyer once said that "D.L. Moody is a man who never seems to have heard of himself. No wonder God used him so wonderfully". A Keswick speaker put it like this on one occasion: *'There's nothing God cannot do if we keep our hands off the glory'.*

(NOTE: some material herein acquired from notes on Mark by Pastor David Legge, Belfast , N. Ireland)