

## God's Expanding Kingdom

Mark 4:26-35

Bryn MacPhail / Jan. 22, 2012

In our text of study this morning, Jesus teaches us about **the kingdom of God** using two parables.

Before we unpack these parables I think it will be important to make a distinction regarding the use of the phrase **the kingdom of God** within the New Testament.

The phrase is used by Jesus in at least two different senses.

Look ahead to Mark chapter 10, for instance, and you'll see Jesus talking about "**the kingdom of God**" as something we "**enter**".

In this sense, we begin to think of the "**kingdom of God**" as a *destination* for the faithful—which it is.

But there is another sense in which Jesus talks about "**the kingdom of God**".

The kingdom of God can also be a reference to *the active influence of God upon this present world*. (see also Luke 17:21)

And this is what we find here in chapter 4.

This distinction helps us to understand why Jesus would describe the “**kingdom of God**” as something that grows

The kingdom of God in heaven has no need for growth--it is perfect and complete in every way.

But the kingdom of God on earth, by contrast, is imperfect and incomplete—and so growth is very important.

To convey this, Jesus makes an analogy to farming.

The desire of every farmer is for their crops to be mature and numerous.

It is not much use to have an abundance of crops if the crops do not grow to maturity. And, it is not much consolation to have mature crops if there aren't enough of them to use or to sell.

I had a first hand experience of this as a five-year-old living in Niagara Falls.

In our yard we had some pear trees, and I got it into my head one day that one of the trees should be chopped down.

So I grabbed the weapon of choice for a 5-year-old boy--a croquet mallet--and I began to beat the trunk of the youngest pear tree in our yard. By the time my older brother apprehended me it was too late.

Every year that followed revealed the extent of the damage. Very few pears would grow on that tree, and of the pears that did grow, very few matured enough to be edible.

It is a God-ordained principle that living things grow; it is a natural thing for living organisms to grow if they are healthy.

For example, I don't need to command my daughter, Anya, to grow. So long as I provide her with even a modicum of nutrition, she will grow.

In spite of all the potato chips and soda I give to her, Anya appears to be growing normally. If Anya were to stop growing, this would indicate that something was terribly wrong.

By the same token, if a congregation experiences a lack of growth, or stunted growth, it is an indication that something is wrong.

I think this is a fair comparison given that the New Testament often refers to the church as being a body, specifically, as Christ's body.

We infer, therefore, that since the church is more like a body than a business, and because the church is better described as an organism than an organization, we should expect the church to grow.

If a congregation is not growing, there is something wrong.

A congregation that is not growing contradicts what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God.

Jesus teaches us in these parables that the kingdom of God is a present reality, and is intended to grow.

Beginning at verse 26, Jesus 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 would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop is ripe, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come**"(4:26-29).

In the second parable, Jesus says that "**the kingdom of God . . . 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, grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so the birds of the air can nest under its shade**"(4:30-32).

Again, we see that *the kingdom of God is twice compared to something that grows.*

And not only is it compared twice with something that grows, but it is compared with things where there is expectation for *significant* growth.

No farmer desires a small harvest, but a large one. And the mustard seed, though smaller than most seeds, often grows to be 10 feet tall.

The kingdom of God may have begun as a tiny seed in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago, but the kingdom has since grown, and will continue to grow as the Gospel spreads to the ends of the earth.

The second thing we should note from these parables is that *the growth process begins with someone casting seed upon the soil.*

A farmer would never expect anything from the soil unless he had first sowed seed.

In the same way, the church of Jesus Christ--the kingdom of God on earth--will grow and spread only where the gospel seed is being sown.

It is from the parable that opens Mark 4 that tells us that the seed represents the Word of God.

As a pastor, I am reminded that genuine growth does not come sowing human wisdom. Growth does not come from clever ideas, elaborate strategies, or from using cutting edge technology.

Sustainable growth—growth that endures—is the result of the Word of God being sowed in the hearts of men and women.

It is a great encouragement to me to know that the harvest does not depend upon my word, but His Word.

One of the things which makes this Book so special is that it contains a power to transform lives (Romans 1:16).

[tell the story of Fariborz's conversion]

The Word of God has the power to transform lives.

We can enter into this life-altering process in a couple of different ways.

The most direct, but perhaps the most intimidating way for some, is by directly sharing the gospel message with friends and family members.

You need not be a trained theologian for this. The Christian gospel is such that it can be easily summarized. John 3:16 would be one example of a gospel summary.

At the risk of sounding like I'm providing you with a loop-hole, another thing we can do is invite friends to attend a worship service or Bible study where we expect the gospel to be explained.

Maybe it is not a good idea to mix metaphors...but here I go anyways...

Think of the gospel as a meal, the church as a restaurant, and the leaders of the church as the restaurant staff.

When we invite our friends and family to visit our church on a Sunday morning, our aim should not be to show off an impressive restaurant building. Our aim should not be to introduce them to the chef or to the friendly wait staff.

When we invite our friends and family to visit our church on Sunday morning it should be because we desperately want them to enjoy a satisfying meal.

It may take more than one invitation. It may take many invitations by multiple people.

The apostle Paul explained the same by saying that he sowed and Apollos watered (1Cor. 3:6).

Seeking a harvest is not a one-time event. Seeking a harvest is a process, and potentially, a long one at that.

Where possible, the soil should be tilled and prepared within the context of a healthy personal relationship.

Then we then scatter the seed, water the seed, and then we do the hardest part of all--we wait.

We wait because, after the seed has left our hand, we cannot cause it to bring forth life.

As Jesus has said, "**the seed sprouts and grows, (but the sower) does not know how**"(4:27). As the apostle Paul has said, "**I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth**"(1Cor.3:6).

With regard to the kingdom of God on earth, we are charged with the responsibility of scattering seed.

We are commanded to spread the Gospel message. But nowhere in Scripture do we see human beings causing spiritual rebirth in others.

Spiritual rebirth is a work of God, and a work of God alone.

And yet, at the same time, there is a process leading up to that rebirth, and in that process, Christ calls for our participation.

The problem I see in many congregations today is that there are very few Christians who are willing to engage in this process.

Jesus has asked us to sow the seed.

And while we should not view ourselves as personally responsible for another person's salvation, we must not view ourselves as unnecessary to the process either.

Amazingly, God has ordained to save people through the process whereby one person shares the good news of Jesus Christ to another.

And God has promised, "**My Word which goes forth . . . shall not return empty without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it**"(Isa.55:11).

Because the kingdom of God is a present reality, because all authority has been given to Christ, and because we are His Body, *I expect to see a harvest.*

I expect the Gospel to succeed.

I expect to see the Christian Church grow, and not decline.

I expect to see a harvest, but I do not expect to find every seed springing up. I do not expect that when I preach the gospel that every person who hears it will receive it.

What I do expect, however, is that where the Gospel is preached to many, it will be received by some, according to the will of God.

God does not expect you to work miracles--leave that for Him.  
But God does expect each and every one of His children to  
work the farm. He expects us to scatter the seed.

God's kingdom on earth is growing, and this congregation will  
continue to grow if we are faithful to share His Word with  
others. Amen.