

The Word Works—to Grow God's Kingdom

*(Mark 4:26-34) He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. {27} Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. {28} All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. {29} As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." {30} Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? {31} It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. {32} Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." {33} With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. {34} He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.*

Tell me, have you ever been frustrated by your own lack of faith? You feel like you're kind of in a rut. Your spiritual life isn't what you want it to be. You've kind of fallen back into some bad habits. And you're thinking, "Man, how do I get back on track? How do I bring some vitality to my spiritual life?" Or maybe it's not your own spiritual life that is bothering you. Maybe it's your spouse or your child that seems to be drifting away from God, and you're worried about that. Or maybe it's not your family that has you concerned. It's your church. That church down the road seems to be busting at the seams, but your church, well, there's still a lot of empty seats here. Why is that? What does it take to grow a church? What does it take to grow faith—whether it's in your heart or in the heart of someone else?

My friends, the answers to all those questions are found in the Word of God. This week, we continue our sermon series entitled:

The Word Works

In this case, it works:

to Grow God's Kingdom

Whether we're talking about God's Kingdom in our hearts, or in the hearts of others, it's the Word that does the work.

Now, to illustrate that point, here in Mark chapter 4, Jesus uses an extended simile, sometimes called a parable. Jesus begins, "*This is what the kingdom of God is like.*" Maybe we'd better stop right there. When Jesus says, "This is what the kingdom of God is like," what is he referring to? Is he saying, this is what heaven will be like? Or this is what the Garden of Eden was once like? Or this is what our world will be like when Jesus returns and rules for a thousand years?

No. Jesus once told his disciples, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*" (Luke 17:20-21). In other words, the kingdom of God is not so much a place as it is an activity. It's God's ruling activity in the hearts of believers. When you and I are led by God's grace to acknowledge that Jesus is our Savior and Lord, then God's kingdom has come to us. Jesus has set up his throne in our heart.

The question is, how does that happen? Exactly how does someone become a believer?

What is it that leads a person to believe? If I want my faith, or someone else's faith to grow, is there something I can do to make that happen? Well, Jesus answers that question with these words, "*This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.*"

Isn't that the truth? Do we have any gardeners here today? Have you planted any seeds this spring? What?!? Should you really be here right now? Shouldn't you be standing over those seeds, making sure they grow? No. That's not how it works. You and I can't make a seed sprout. We can make conditions favorable for a seed to sprout and grow. We can plant it in warm soil. We can water it. But we cannot make a seed grow. You and I cannot impart life to a seed. No, that life is found in the seed itself. The seed sprouts and grows all by itself, whether the gardener is standing over it watching it or he sacked out on his recliner. The power to grow is found in the seed, not in the sower.

So what is the parallel spiritual truth? What does the seed represent? Well, in the Parable of the Sower and the Seed, which is recorded earlier in Mark chapter 4, Jesus offers this explanation: "*The farmer sows the word*" (Mark 4:14). In both parables, the seed represents the Word of God.

So what's the point of comparison? In what way is God's Word like a seed? Both can be held in your hand? Both can be thrown on the ground? No, the point of comparison is simply this: Just as a seed has the power to grow and produce a harvest, without any human assistance, so the Word of God has the power to grow faith and produce fruits of faith without any human assistance. God's Word, in and of itself, has the power to bring life, growth, and fruits of faith into the hearts and lives of human beings. That's the truth that Jesus is illustrating with this parable.

The question is, do you believe that truth? Do you believe that the Word works? To be honest with you, I think there are a lot of ways that I act like I don't believe that the Word works. For example, when I feel frustrated with my spiritual life, when I feel like I'm in a rut. I have a bad attitude. I'm stressed out or worried. I feel distant from God, and it shows in my actions and attitude. I properly diagnose my problem: I'm not where I want to be in my spiritual life. But so often I fail to trust in God's cure. Scripture says, "*Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17). But do I believe that? Do I trust that the Word will work in my heart? Am I trusting that the Lord will produce the God-pleasing fruits that I'm looking for? Often times I don't.

Or maybe I'm frustrated by the behavior of my kids. I want them to behave. And so I lay down the law. I take away privileges. I underline my expectations for them. But do I take the time to have a devotion with him? Do I spend some time together in the Word? Do I trust that the Word works to strengthen faith and produce the fruits I'm looking for? Too often, I don't. It's like I don't believe that the Word works.

In fact, are there times when the same thing happens on a larger scale? I want my church to grow. I want more people to become a part of the Mount Olive family. But am I willing to trust the only tools that God uses to make believers, and that's God's Word and Sacraments? Or do I sometimes think that if we only had a little nicer facility, or more comfortable pews, or a little bigger parking lot, then we would grow?

Now, don't misunderstand. It's not wrong to create comfortable spaces for people to hear the Word. But let's recognize where the focus is—spaces for people to hear the Word. Early Childhood classrooms where children can hear the Word. Why does the Word need to be the focus? Because buildings don't make believers. You and I can't make any one believe in Jesus.

We can't do anything to turn dead enemies of God into living, breathing, children of God, through faith in God's Son. No, only the Word of God can do that.

And as proof of that, I need only point to...you. Isn't that the truth? Who of you caused the Word to grow in your own heart? When you were first carried to a font for your washing with water and the Word, did you say, "I think I'll become a believer now? I'll cultivate the soil of my heart. I'll make it ready to accept God's love? No way! At the moment of your baptism, you and I did absolutely nothing. God did it all. God planted the seed of his Word. That Word sprouted, grew and bore fruits of faith in your life. When it comes to planting and growing faith in our hearts, when it comes to producing fruits in our lives and in the lives of those around us, when it comes to growing God's invisible church here and around the world, the bottom line is simply this. The Word works. Believe it!

And then act like you believe it. What do I mean by that? Think back to the farmer and his seed. If the farmer firmly believes that his seed is going to sprout and grow and ultimately bear abundant fruit, what does he do with that seed? Does he seal it in a jar and leave it sitting on his bookshelf? No, if he believes that the seed works, then he puts his faith into action by planting that seed. Isn't the same thing true for you and me, when it comes to the growth of God's Kingdom? If we truly believe that the Word works, then there's only one thing for us to do, and that's to plant that Word, sow the seed, preach the gospel as often and as widespread as possible.

And really, if we go back to the parable, here's where we need to draw a distinction between the sower and the seed. Each has a different role to play, a different job to do. The farmer can't make the seed grow. But neither can the seed sow itself. Isn't that also true in the spiritual realm? The gospel doesn't carry itself to distant lands. Sermons don't spontaneously write themselves (even though I sometimes wish that they would). You can't put a Bible under your child's pillow and expect the Word to work faith in that child's heart. No, rather, God has seen fit to use human messengers to distribute his life-saving Word out into people's hearts and lives.

How does Isaiah put it? *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those bring good news, who proclaim salvation. (Isaiah 52:7).* Or in the words of St Paul, *How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them. (Romans 10:14).*

Theologians sometimes refer to this as the ministerial cause of our salvation versus the instrumental cause of our salvation. The instrumental cause of our salvation refers to the fact that God uses tools or instruments to work saving faith in human hearts. Those tools are the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, that is, the Bible, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But those tools didn't just fall out of the sky. Instead God put those tools into the hands of believers like you and me, God's servants, yes, ministers of the gospel.

This is where we get the term the ministerial cause of our salvation. The ministerial cause of our salvation is a reference to the fact that God still uses weak, fallible human beings to bring to our hearts and to the hearts of others, the most powerful message in the world, namely, the good news of God's love for us in Christ. In a sense, we are all cracked clay pots, carrying an incredibly precious treasure, the treasure of God's word.

The only question that remains is: what are you going to do with that treasure? What are you going to do with those powerful seeds of God's Word that God has put in your hands? The answer: You are going to do what any good farmer would do. You're going to plant them. Maybe that means taking time out of your schedule to read your Bible. Subscribe to the Your Time of Grace videos. Check out a People's Bible Commentary from our library. Read a

Meditations with your family. Christian, plant the seed. Do what God has given you to do. And let the Word do what only it can do. For you see, that's how God grows his kingdom in your hearts and in our world, for your good and his glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.