

The Kingdom and Growth

2. Growing Secretly Mark 4:26-29 Luke 13:20-21

Last week we talked about Shredded Wheat and you may remember that I said to you that Shredded Wheat is what we are aiming to become. And we looked at the parable of the sower and the different conditions of the soil that determine how well a seed will grow. And if you were awake last week then you will remember that I said that the varying conditions of the soil are like the varying conditions of our hearts and the parable has to do with how respondent we are to God's word.

If you weren't paying attention last week then I won't be too offended, after all, the passage seems to indicate that when Jesus taught he anticipated that three quarters of his audience wouldn't really take notice of his teaching.

Anyway, if the seed lands in a respondent heart (good soil) then Jesus goes on to talk about the growth of that seed. You'll remember that in the parable of the sower, the good soil produced a crop of up to 100 times that which was sown.

You see, those of us who are trying to become shredded wheat, it doesn't stop there. We are called to help others to become shredded wheat as well.

And we may wonder, and perhaps the disciples wondered, how does this growth happen? I mean, if you're a logical person or a person who likes to organise everything five years in advance then you will want to know what to expect. And especially for those of us who have taught in the Sunday School or spoken at various meetings or even when we've shared our faith with friends at work. If we are enthusiastic about seeing people grow into mature Christians then the question we really want an answer to is 'what then?' – after we have sown the seed, then what do we do? – what activities do we plan, in what order do we teach things to get the maximum growth, how long does a seed take to grow?

Jesus gives another parable:

The Parable of the Growing Seed

26He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

(Mark 4:26-28)

Ah, did you catch that line, "the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain"? I don't know how you feel about that. Do the words "he does not know how" frustrate you or do the words "All by

itself” relieve you? The answer to ‘how does the seed grow’ seems to be ‘it just does’.

Paul sheds a little more light on this for us:

1Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? 4For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

5What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

(1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

Paul points out that the growth is not up to us, we are not the project planners, that’s God’s business, ours is to plant the seed or water it if that’s the job God has given you to do. But it is God who makes the seed grow. Paul points out that we are God’s co-workers. Isn’t that tremendous? God has allowed you to be part of his team, what’s even more incredible is that God has allowed me to be part of his team, WOW! – either God is very gracious or he is getting very desperate for co-workers. I like to think that he is gracious. But sometimes we forget that we are co-workers with God and sometimes we even forget that he is the team leader. It’s all a matter of focus, we need to remember that we work for him, not the other way around.

That doesn’t mean that God wants us to be idle, your boss at work doesn’t expect you to do nothing do they? Most job adverts you see today state “must be able to work on own initiative”. That means that they are expecting you to be able to think for yourself but it doesn’t mean that they want you to run the company. I’ve seen people who try to do that and the result is that they usually get booted out. Every employee knows that “using your own initiative” really means coming up with creative ways of doing what your boss wants you to do. And that’s our role too. God has given us initiative and so we should use it but we also need to remember that he is the boss. We are called to plant seed and to water and God will work on the growth.

And you thought that growing the kingdom was hard work didn’t you? Well there’s even better news to come. Have a look at Luke 13:20-21

20 Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

(Luke 13:20-21)

Again this would have been a very familiar illustration to Jesus' listeners and perhaps we don't get the point as easily today as they would have then. They would have known that bread without yeast wouldn't rise when it was baked but by just adding a small amount, the results would be dramatically different.

Notice two things about this. Firstly, it only takes a small amount. It's not a big grand gesture, it's a little thing that makes a big difference. You might not feel that you are a great evangelist, well you don't have to be. Sometimes, in fact most of the time, it's little conversations with people, it's the way you do things. Secondly, again we are talking about something that works from the inside. The yeast has to be mixed into the dough, it's no good left outside of the dough. I have no idea how yeast makes bread rise but I know that it does. We can apply the same principle to sharing our faith with others. I have no idea how God will use what I've said or done to help someone to grow spiritually, but I know that somehow he does it.

And so that should give us confidence to go out and scatter the seed. Because we don't have to be the great evangelist and we don't have to have all the answers sown up, we just have to scatter seed, water, and trust God to use it.

3. Fruitfulness Luke 6:43-45 Luke 13:6-9

That brings me onto fruitfulness because when we scatter seed or when we water or whatever we are involved in, we hope that it is going to produce fruit. We are hoping to see some kind of a result. Well, the first point is to mention again what we have just looked at. That is that we are co-workers with God. If we leave God out of things then we can expect to achieve nothing. This is about cooperating with God, it's about having a relationship. But I want to bring this back to us because in order to make a difference for Jesus in this world then we need to keep growing ourselves and we need to keep producing fruit.

When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

(John 15:8)

That's where we want to be isn't it, the people producing good fruit who bring glory to the Father.

Jesus compared two types of tree.

43"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. 44Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. 45The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

(Luke 6:43-45) – wise and foolish builders comes after this – judging others comes before

Now, I wanted to bring this passage in here because I want to clear a few things up. When we read this then it might make you think about some of the things that are going on in your life at the moment and it might make you think that you must be a bad tree. (Well obviously not you because you don't have these struggles, but the person next to you might be thinking they are a bad tree). You might just want to point out a few things to them that they might have missed in this passage.

Firstly notice that Jesus compares two distinctly different types of tree. The good tree producing good fruit and the bad tree producing bad fruit. You might just like to remind the person sitting next to you who thinks that they are a bad tree, of some of the good fruit that they are producing. Notice that the passage says that no bad tree bears good fruit. So if you're producing good fruit then you can't be a bad tree can you? But I know you're sitting there thinking 'yes, but you don't know the state of my spiritual life at the moment'. I've got one word for you about that – "Weeds". That's what that is, weeds. Weeds grow up around good plants and take away all the goodness and so the plant dries up. We talked about this last week so I don't want to labour it again, read last week's sermon on the website or ask Paul for the tape. We can all expect to have to deal with weeds, it's a rule of gardening. That's why Jesus said:

...every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

(John 15:2b)

Needing to be pruned doesn't mean that you are bad. Remember again last week I talked about the prompting of the Holy Spirit about the things that are wrong in our lives. This is an indication that you are a good branch and God simply wants to prune you so as you will be even more fruitful.

So what are these bad and good fruits that Jesus talks about? Well the apostle Paul talks about them to the Galatians.

16 So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. 17 The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the

opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. 18 But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

19 When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, 21 envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

22 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. 25 Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. 26 Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.

(Galatians 5:16-26)

Have a look at those two lists. Those things of the sinful nature (v19-21) and those of the Holy Spirit (v22-23). How much of each of those things can you see in your life? As Paul says here, these two forces are constantly fighting each other so it is likely that we can see bits of our sinful nature but which list describes you best? What things do you base your life on?

When Jesus compared the good and bad trees he said that the fruit comes from what is stored in the heart. Are we living according to our sinful nature or are we living according to the Holy Spirit? The change needs to come from the inside. If you are seeing too much of the fruit of the sinful nature and not enough of the Holy Spirit then sort it out quickly but you need to sort it out inside.

Jesus said:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

(John 15:4)

That's the key to everything. The better our relationship with God is, the better everything else will be. Sort that out and everything else will take care of itself. That's the point of everything I've been saying. Our relationship with God is fundamental.

When I was in my teens we had a huge sycamore tree outside our house, I think it was probably one of the largest in the street and it was much taller than the house. The roots were pretty big too, I know this because they started to break the walls of next door's extension which was on the back of the house so the roots must have stretched right under the houses. Anyway, the tree was quite old and every year it produced seeds which came down all over the garden like a squadron of little helicopters launching an attack. But my mom had suspected for a while that the tree was going rotten. I can't remember if it was still producing helicopters or not but one day in a storm, it fell down and narrowly missed our house but crashed through the roof of next door. It was obvious then that the tree had gone rotten in the middle. Quite literally, it was hollow in the middle where it had snapped. You see, the tree had stopped getting the nourishment that it needed and that meant that eventually when the storm came, it collapsed.

6Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 7So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

8" 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

(Luke 13:6-9)

You know, this happened with the sycamore tree outside our house. My mom had called the council about it before asking them to take it down because it swayed so much in the wind. Mom suspected that it was going rotten but the council wanted to leave it. Well eventually the rot went too far and the tree was beyond rescue. When it fell down, then the council came and cut the rest of the tree away and put it all in the chipper.

We need to keep a close eye on our relationship with God, are we getting the spiritual nourishment that we need to stay healthy? If we are then we can expect to grow good fruit and Jesus says this about us:

When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

(John 15:8)

That's where we want to be isn't it, the people producing good fruit who bring glory to the Father.