

June 14, 2015 – Mark 4:26-34 (OT: Ezekiel 17:22-24 Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

God's Kingdom Grows "Automatically" Through God's Word

Every Sunday we pray in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come." The kingdom of God is very important. When Jesus started His earthy ministry, He preached: "*The kingdom of God is at hand*" (Mark 1:15). On May 17 we read that Jesus spent the forty days after His resurrection "*speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:3).

We also read that His disciples did not yet understand what Jesus meant by "*the kingdom of God*." They ask Him, "*Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6). They, like most Jews during that time, understood the kingdom of God as an earthly kingdom, and thought that it could be established by force. Others believed they could compel God to establish His kingdom among them if they followed all His laws perfectly.

So what do we mean when we pray "Thy kingdom come"? How does the kingdom of God come to us? Mark 4:26-34 tells us how God's kingdom comes.

Throughout His ministry Jesus spoke a number of parables that explained the kingdom of God and corrected the people's incorrect understanding of it. In our text we have two of these parables. We are told: "*with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples*" (vv. 33-34).

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus spoke in parables both to explain the kingdom of God and to hide this explanation. Those whose hearts are opened to Jesus seek to understand His parables, as the disciples often did when they came and asked Him to explain a parable He had just spoken. But those who have closed their hearts to Jesus fail to understand them and they do not seek to understand them. Jesus explained this in the verses before our text when He said, "*To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables, so that 'Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them'*" (Mark 4:11-12). Jesus used parables to hide the truth from unbelievers and to reveal the truth to believers.

Jesus also used parables to help us remember the truths that He reveals to us because they give us such memorable images. He paints pictures for us so that we can remember the heavenly truths the parables teach.

In Mark 4 we have three parables that deal with seeds. They all explain how the kingdom of God comes to us. In the beginning of the chapter Jesus tells the parable of the sower (Mark 4:3-8). While this is not part of our reading, it is a familiar parable to most of us: a man goes out to sow seed and some falls along the path, some on stony ground, some among thorns, and other on good ground where it grows and produces fruit.

The first parable we have in our reading focuses on the seed from that first parable that fell on the good ground. It illustrates how this seed (and the kingdom of God) grows. Jesus said, "*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head*" (v. 26-28).

When Jesus explained the parable of sower to His disciples, He explained that the seed is the word of God and that the different types of ground are those who hear God's word (Mark 4:14ff).

The same is true of this parable. The seed scattered by the man is the word of God. It grows in our hearts and produces fruit. This parable shows us that the kingdom of God grows through God's word "automatically", so to speak.

A farmer or gardener really has very little to do with the growth of the seeds that they plant. We can water and add fertilizer to help things grow, but we cannot make them grow. The seeds sprout and grow without our effort. As Jesus said, "*The earth yields crops by itself.*" Jesus tells us here that this is what the kingdom of God is like. We share God's word, but it grows by itself – by its own power. It grows by the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote about his work among the Corinthians: "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Just as we cannot make a seed grow, we also cannot make the growth happen more quickly. We may get frustrated by the slowness or lack of growth in ourselves or in others. But unless we are choking out and neglecting God's word, we cannot speed up its effects. Instead we can take comfort in knowing that God is working in us through His word and that He is working through the word that we sow with others. God said through the prophet Isaiah: "*As the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater; So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it*" (Isaiah 55:10-11). The purpose of God's word is to build His kingdom by bringing people the knowledge of the truth and bringing them to faith in the salvation we have through Jesus Christ.

Jesus concludes this parable by saying: "*when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come*" (v. 29). This harvest will be on the last day when Jesus returns in all His glory and majesty (see Joel 3:13, Revelation 14:15). Jesus "*will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven*" (Mark 13:27). We may wish that this day would come sooner rather than later. And it may seem like it is taking a long time for Jesus to return. But Jesus words here remind us that He will return at just the right time – "*when the grain ripens*". There will be no premature harvest. There will be no delay. Although it has been almost two thousand years since Jesus ascended into heaven, the harvest is not yet ready. Two thousand years seems like a long time to us, but it is not to God, to whom "*one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*" (2 Peter 3:8). When the grain is ready, the harvest will happen.

As we wait, we sow the seed of God's word. The word that we share is the gospel, the good news that Jesus came to give His life as our ransom. He came to die on the cross in our place to pay for our sins and redeem us from the eternal death and separation from God that our sins deserve. By nature we think that we have to do something to pay for our own sins and earn God's favor. The problem is, we can never do enough. But what we could not do, God did by sending His own Son to save us (Romans 8:3) by dying and rising again from the dead. He conquered death for us. And He will come again to raise us all from our graves (John 5:28-29) and welcome us into the eternal dwelling He has prepared for us with God in heaven.

This message is powerful. As Paul writes: "*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes*" (Romans 1:16). But when we look at God's word, it may not at times seem all that powerful. Can a book containing words from many different writers written across more than 1500 years, whose last writings are from almost two thousand years ago, really make such a big difference?

Jesus addresses this in the other parable we have in our text. He said, "*To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when*

it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; 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” (vv. 30-32). Like that mustard seed, God’s word may seem small and insignificant by comparison, but it produces great growth. We see this as we look at history; we see the great impact the Bible has had on the world. And we see the effect God’s word has had in our lives and in the lives of others.

We can get discouraged as we look at ourselves and how insignificant we seem. We may look at our small church and wonder how we can make much of a difference? But Jesus has shown us in these two parables that we do not cause the growth and that size doesn’t matter. It isn’t dependent on us. God’s kingdom grows through His powerful word – the word that we share. It is the power of God to bring people into His kingdom.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that *“God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence”* (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). The power rests with God, so a small beginning does not matter. We see this throughout the history of God’s people. The whole human race started with just Adam and Eve. At the time of the flood, only eight people were saved (2 Peter 2:5). God called Abraham and Sarah when they were advanced in years to leave their home and go to the promised land where He promised to make them a great nation, which He did. And Jesus started with just 12 disciples, and we are here today because of them. God does not need much to work with because of His almighty power.

So don’t be deceived by appearances or discouraged by seemingly slow growth. It is God’s kingdom that we proclaim and it is His word that causes the growth. May we be faithful and patient sowers of God’s word as we continue to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” Amen.

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