

# It's A Matter Of Faith

by Mark Jarvinen

## The Parable of the Growing Seed

*<sup>26</sup> He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

## The Parable of the Mustard Seed

*<sup>30</sup> Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."*

*<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. <sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. (Mark 4:26-34)*

## INTRODUCTION

As we have gathered for worship today in mid-June, we acknowledge that we are enjoying both the warmth and brightness of summer, and the refreshing and life giving rains that accompany the season. God is good, and with the naked eye we observe the signs of life that surround us. Yet, we must also acknowledge, particularly in light of today's text, that our loving Lord blesses us spiritually in ways that are not always visible to our physical sight. We are happy because of what we can see, but joyful in the fact that there is even more in store for us as believers in Christ. Therefore, I greet you with the words of **II Corinthians 4:8** –

***“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”***

And **Hebrews 11:1** –

**“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”**

## **TEXTUAL OBSERVATIONS**

Today’s text is made up of **two parables** (earthly stories with heavenly meanings) that are closely related in helping us understand what the kingdom of God is like. The Kingdom of God doesn’t refer to a specific place, i.e. heaven; but simply means **“the rule and reign of Jesus Christ.”** Therefore, today’s message speaks to us about what the rule and reign of Jesus Christ is like. In both parables there is the **sowing of seeds**. In the first parable, the seed is scattered **“on the ground,” (v. 26)**; and in the second parable, the mustard seed is planted **“in the ground,” (v. 31)**. Furthermore, **the growth of the seeds** in both parables has **implications for the end times** and the culmination of history with the return of Christ; the first parable noting the **sickle** sent to gather the harvest in **4:29**, and the second parable mentioning the **birds of the air** being able to perch or make nests in the shade of the large branches of the mustard bush, which stunningly has grown from the smallest of all seeds to the largest of all garden plants. Finally, both parables indicate **the respective seeds will, on their own, without any particular help from the farmer, produce the inherent results already within them**, despite the fact that **both seeds look so unpromising when they are first planted**. In both parables there is a sense of **hiddenness** or **mystery** about how the growth of the seeds takes place under the earth, coupled with a sense of **confidence** in the inevitability of the harvest that will eventually rather suddenly take place. In this message, we shall see that ...

## GOD'S KINGDOM WORK IS A MATTER OF FAITH ...

I. Faith That God's Word Is Working.

II. Faith That God's Church Is Growing.

---

### I. FAITH THAT GOD'S WORD IS WORKING.

It so happens that I married into a family of farmers. After Martha and I met, and I was first invited to her home to meet her parents and the extended family on the Rinden side, Martha coached me on how it would go. **“You’re not going to see that much of me,”** she said. **“You’ll go with the men in the living room and talk about the latest in farm implements and crop prices, and the fact that it’s either too dry or too wet, while I sit with the women in the kitchen and catch up on all the community news, who’s doing what, and the latest recipes.”** Amazingly, she was dead right. I learned from the get-go that a farmer’s life is tied to circumstances they can’t control, like weather and prices. It’s no wonder that Jesus uses the life of a farmer to illustrate faith.

In the first parable of our text, the farmer (any farmer) goes out and scatters his seeds on the ground and instead of worrying about things he can’t control, he trusts that nature will take its course and the seeds will grow, first the stalk, then the head, and then the full kernel in the head. The seeds mysteriously grow, whether he sleeps or gets up. He trusts in **the natural order of things**, because he knows it’s out of his hands to help the seed grow. Obviously, the farmers of that time did not have sophisticated methods of cultivation, but you get the point. The mature plant is in the seed and the nutrients it receives from the soil, proper moisture, and enough sunlight are

what combine to make it grow. The farmer doesn't have much to do with that. The seed will do its job and the harvest will eventually be there.

God's Word is saying that just as we need to surrender to the natural order in growing crops, in the kingdom of God, we surrender to the rule and reign of Christ as to how the kingdom of God will grow. The farmer goes into the harvest at the proper time, but the fact that the seeds grew to maturity was not his doing. We must acknowledge, "**Thine is the kingdom,**" and build upon that solid fact. **The kingdom of God is not the product of human effort.** God brings his plan to fruition in his own mysterious way and needs no help from us. We help in the harvest, but it is God who brings the increase. Our activity becomes constructive only when we allow God to take full charge.

At the **CLB convention** this past week, one missionary couple to Taiwan and one church planting couple to Colorado were commissioned by the church to "**Go and make disciples.**" In no sense did anyone believe that churches would be planted through their own efforts. **Martin Luther**, in his catechism says, "**'The kingdom of God comes of itself' and our prayer, 'Thy Kingdom come,' is that it may come also to us.**" You and I are called to have faith, faith that God is the ruler of his kingdom, faith that God is working through the power of the gospel even when we can't see the results.

A pastor tells a story about a young woman in his congregation who was going through a serious crisis in her life. The pastor assured her that God would help her through this time of trial, but instantly she retorted in anger, saying:

**"Look pastor, you know I've been a good church member my whole life, but now, the first time I really need God, He's nowhere to be found. I'm not sure God even exists. I'm going to have to get through this on my own."** (Sermon Central)

Many of us have felt this struggle or something similar. But isn't it also true that in the darkest hours of trial, as we cling to Him and his Word, God meets us in our pain and despair and becomes for us our source of life and strength? There's a hiddenness to this reality that Luther calls "**the theology of the cross**" in contrast to the view of some, that Christians who walk closely with the Lord should never have to suffer pain or despair, called "**the theology of glory.**" The theology of the cross is illustrated In Mark Tabb's book, Out of the Whirlwind, in which he writes:

**"He tells us to trust him enough to believe he knows what he is doing. When his actions don't make sense, trust him. When the windows of heaven seem to be open extra wide and life can't get any better, trust him. When the bottom falls out and life turns hard, trust him. Good times and bad, happy and sad, trust him. When I try to explain him away or reduce him to neat little formulas, I show a lack of faith not a wealth of it." (Sermon Central).**

Stop for a moment and consider what God's powerful Word has done in your life. Pastor **Vern Baardson** spoke at the recent CLB convention in Fergus Falls and shared how he went from a confirmation student who could hardly stand to read the Bible to a person who one day, out of the blue, found himself with an insatiable desire to read and study God's Word. He said,

**"It's nothing I did. The Holy Spirit created in me a hunger for his Word. I began to see that I was a sinner in desperate need for God's grace, and He met me there, revealing Himself to me as my Savior."**

This reminds me of **I Peter 1:23**, which says, ***"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God."*** God's Kingdom work is a matter of faith, faith that God's word is working. The Word of God is alive and well in our lives and we celebrate God's grace that this is so. Think on and trust the words of **Isaiah 55:10-11** –

***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word, that goes out of my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

**Secondly, God’s Kingdom is a matter of ...**

## **II. FAITH THAT GOD’S CHURCH IS GROWING.**

In the second parable, **v. 31** describes the mustard seed as ***“the smallest of all seeds on earth.”*** It would be natural to think that this smallest of seeds would yield a very small or unimportant plant. Yet, in **v. 32** we are told that the mustard seed grows into a bush of great size, 10 to 15 feet high, that produces shelter for the birds of the air.

This speaks to us about the fact that the church of Jesus Christ is growing, even when the numbers may not bear that out. CLB President, **Paul Larson**, writes that there has been an 11% drop in synod-wide membership and a 16% drop in synod-wide worship attendance over the past decade, bringing our numbers as a denomination down to where we were 20 years ago. This of course, has taken place during a period of seismic cultural change in America, felt by many church groups. If it were only about numbers, you might think that the CLB is ready to close their doors. Yet, in my almost 4 decades of pastoral ministry in the CLB, I’ve never been more optimistic about the future of the CLB and the opportunities to share the gospel that lie before us.

I’m not saying that numbers aren’t ever mentioned in Scripture. In the book of Acts, we learn that **3,000 people came to faith on the Day of**

**Pentecost** through Peter's sermon and the events of that day. That said, let's keep in mind that in **Jesus' Great Commission** to His disciples in **Matthew 28**, he said, ***"Go and make disciples,"*** i.e. devoted followers of Jesus, which suggests that God is concerned about establishing heart relationships with people that lead to transformed lives, and not merely a casual interest in spiritual things, or attendance at entertaining worship events. Are we tempted to tone down the preaching of the gospel of Christ, which is ***"the power of God unto salvation"*** in the name of inclusivity and non-offensiveness? Have we caught ourselves muttering, ***"If only our church was bigger and/or offered more programming, then people would come."*** Let's remember that the Christian Church started with **12 apostles** devoted to following Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit shared the gospel with others, until today, world-wide, we see a church with countless millions. **We complain that if our church had more money, we could do more**, yet we read that when the disciples lacked money to pay taxes, Jesus sent them to catch a fish and pay the taxes with the coins they would find in the fish's mouth. Perhaps we're leaning too heavily on our excuses and not heavily enough on the teaching of Scriptures such as **Matthew 6:33** which says –

***"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."***

Could it be that in our selfish, self-help, arrogant society we have picked up some bad habits? Could it be that deep down we believe that the success or failure of God's church depends on our own (or someone else's) efforts, or having the right kind of leadership? Remember how Paul addressed the Corinthian congregation that had broken into factions, following the leader most popular in their own eyes? Paul wrote in **I Corinthians 3:7** –

***“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”***

We may not always see outward growth in the Christian Church. We may even feel that our church or Christianity in general is losing ground. This is not the case. The Lord has promised that the gates of hell cannot overcome the Church. **We need to remember that God’s Church “is growing” whenever and wherever God’s Word is being heard and believed.** This kind of growth is not always observed numerically. Faith is created and nourished through hearing and believing the Word of God as we learn in **Romans 10:17 –**

***“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”***

We heard an interesting verse read in our Scripture reading earlier today, from **Ezekiel 17:24**, which I’d like to reiterate as I close:

***“All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.”***

Growth is God’s work and it happens in the way he chooses.

## **CONCLUSION**

God’s Kingdom work is a matter of faith, and not always what is visible to the naked eye. God’s Word is working just as certainly as the seed that is planted is growing invisibly and imperceptibly beneath the surface of the soil, until mysteriously and with certainty the small seed pushes its way through the ground as God gives the increase. God knows those who are His, meanwhile we are called to share the gospel, knowing it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe. **A-men.**