

Sow, Sleep and Reap

Mark 4:26-34 ²⁶ And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ "and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ "For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ "But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." ³⁰ Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? ³¹ "It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; ³² "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." ³³ And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. ³⁴ But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

If you had lived in Burma (Myanmar) in 1813, you might have come across a young American missionary named Adoniram Judson. He was not very impressive, and you would have found that his little work was struggling. Not a single Burmese soul had come to Christ in six years of ministry. Only in 1819 did he baptise his first convert. He saw his wife and child die shortly afterwards, burying them both in Burma. He completed a Bible translation into Burmese, after 37 years of ministry. Had you visited Judson in those first years and stayed with him for about 5 years, you might have concluded that God was not working there, that nothing was happening.

Thirty years after his death, Burma had 7000 converts and 63 churches; 100 years, later 200,000 converts.

God does His work quite unlike the way we build our businesses, political parties, or empires. God grows His work in surprising, even startling ways. People who do not understand the way God builds His work are prone to make tragic errors.

Jesus wanted to make sure that His disciples did not make those errors. He wanted his disciples to understand how God does His work in the world.

Jesus has been teaching on how the Word is received. He has been explaining why His message as Messiah has been rejected by most. He's been showing the problem is not with the sower, and it is not with the seed, but the problem is with the soil – the hearts that hear it. Some are indifferent. Some are impulsive. Some are infested. Only a few are ideal – hearts that God prepares, who receive the Word with readiness, reverence and meekness and go on to bear fruit.

With all that said, the disciples might be discouraged. Christians, who like their Lord Jesus, sow the word of God into the minds of others, might get discouraged at the idea of only 1 in 4 responding to the Word. Pastors, evangelists, Christians witnessing to friends or family, parents discipling children, Christians leading Bible studies with other Christians could respond wrongly. They could fall into two possible ditches. They could begin a kind of urgent, frantic neurotic ministry, where they try to control and engineer the results of their teaching, trying to guarantee success. Others may throw up their hands in despair, and just say, "It's no use. No one is serious. No one listens. Those that do – God does it to them – I have no part to play." Both of those responses would be wrong. Both of those responses are actually proud and self-pleasing. Jesus tells two more parables to prevent such reactions. These parables are really aimed at believers.

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This is a message for sowers. This is a message for every ministry-minded Christian. This is a message for every Christian who has ever tried to see another person come to Christ. Jesus wants

you to know what God's work in others is going to look like – what you should expect, what you should do and what you should not do. What is God's work like? What should we expect in terms of growth – speed, size, timing? How should we feel and respond to the work of God?

This is important because if your expectations are wrong for ministry, you will be disappointed, frustrated, and even unbelieving. You may become one of those spectator Christians who does nothing but criticise those who are competing, because you've become bitter and cynical about how God works. You might become the sort of person who thinks ministry is like a bombing raid rather than the cultivation of one spot on earth. You release the Word, and fly on and release and fly on. You will be tempted to use unbiblical methods to engineer success. You will fall into the traps of competitive ministry, envy, and jealousy. This passage can shape a whole philosophy of ministry. These two parables each have one main lesson in them, both of which deal with God's work of building His kingdom.

I. God's Work Grows By God's Grace

²⁶ And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ "and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ "For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ "But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The image is elegantly simple. A man sows seed on the ground. Having done that, what else does he do to the seed? Nothing. Instead, he simply waits, and carries on with life, sleeping at night, rising by day. But as the time passes, the seed sprouts, in a way he does not understand. He did not build the seed, engineer the seed, or rig it to do that. It just does it.

By itself, the earth causes the seed to grow – first into a blade, then a head, and then the full grain that can be harvested. Only now, after all that sleeping and rising, can he do something. What does he do? He puts in the sickle, and harvests.

But you'll notice that the emphasis in this parable is not so much on the soils, but on the whole process of sowing. Jesus is emphasizing what a sower can do and what a sower cannot do.

In this parable, what did the sower do? Look for the actions of the sower. He does three things here. He sows. He then sleeps and rises, which is more of a passive thing – he waits. Then at the end of the parable, he harvests. The sower sows, waits and harvests.

What could the sower not do? He could not make the seed sprout in the first place. He could not make the new shoots grow in the second place. And he could not cause them to ripen in the third place. Life, growth and ripening were beyond his power. He could not speed up the growth. He could not change the volume of the growth. He had absolutely no part to play when it came to whether the seed would germinate into life, and how abundant the life could be.

Jesus does not explain the parable, but given the previous parable, it rather explains itself. Once again, the seed is sown. The act of spreading God's truth is given out, it is preached. And once it lands on good ground, it will bring good results – a harvest that can be later enjoyed by others. When the Word of God finds a good heart, it will produce the good results of salvation and godliness and love for others.

But here the lesson is for every Christian who wants God to use him or her. The lesson is about your part and God's part in God's work. What is it that you can and must do? You must sow the Word.

Every Christian is able to sow the Word in some way to someone. Every Christian can share Scripture, explain Scripture, give Bible studies or books or booklets. This is the task of every believer – sow the Word.

Romans 10:13-14 ¹³ For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." ¹⁴ How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?

But once you have sown the Word, what can you not do? You can not make a person believe. You cannot create new life. You cannot cause someone else to be born again. Nor can you make another person grow. You cannot mature someone. You cannot make them love God more.

Whose responsibility is that? In the parable, Jesus says ²⁸ "For the earth yields crops by itself: In the Greek, the word is *automate*. By itself – without human interference. In the realm of the human heart, who brings life and growth and maturity? God does.

John 3:7-8 ⁷ "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

John 1:12-13 ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

God's work grows by God's grace. Paul understood this. He told the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.

What did the sower do while waiting for the earth to do its work? He rested. What should Christians do while God does His work? Rest. Trust. Sleep in God, trusting that if we have diligently sowed the Word, and watered it with tears of prayer and compassion, the rest is up to God.

Just like the sower who did not know how the earth did this, so we do not know how God brings conversion. We do not know how a heart is drawn to God and responds. We do not know how God turns resistance into receptivity, hostility into openness, hatred into love, hardness into repentance. But He does it and the way we glorify Him is by trusting fully that He will.

But after his trusting, the sower harvested, didn't he? He gets to gather the now fully-grown results of his sowing. So, as a Christian, you also get to harvest. You get to see results. Somebody you witnessed to professes Christ. A Christian you encouraged grows. A child you kept teaching trusts in Christ. A ministry you've kept labouring in matures and grows. Here you get to enjoy the fruits of something you didn't create. You sowed, God gave the increase, and then you enjoy the harvest.

Now as simple as this model is, if you look around you, you will find that many, if not most Christians don't believe it. They do not believe that God's method is for them to sow the Word, rest in His sovereign power and then harvest.

A lot of this began in the 19th century with a preacher by the name of Charles Finney. Charles Finney was educated as a lawyer, and after his conversion, became a Presbyterian minister. However, Finney came to reject some important doctrines. He rejected the idea that humans have

original sin. He also rejected the idea that God must sovereignly draw sinners to salvation. He believed that given the right circumstances, right atmosphere, right context, anyone could be brought to repentance and/or experience revival. Therefore, he set about to create circumstances that would, in his words, 'produce religious excitements'. Finney's standard for judging if something was appropriate to use in this regard was very simple: its effectiveness. Where did he get his ideas from? He suggested that ministers look to the world for its marketing techniques, its salesmen, its gimmicks, and use them in ministry.

Finney was wildly successful. Hundreds of thousands were 'converted', and his meetings were considered mass revivals. Historians doubt how permanent the conversions of Finney's revivals were; at any rate, they were nothing like the Awakenings of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Since Finney, the church has lived in his shadow.

Today we have people who do not believe that the harvest is dependent on sowing, and trusting. They believe the harvest is dependent on what kind of band you have at church. They think that what kind of youth ministry you have is what makes the difference. They think that the presence or absence of a coffee shop in the foyer makes a difference. They are sure that the seed will grow if you get a celebrity sportsman or businessman to endorse the gospel. They think the seed will grow if we make movies out of the gospel, or make fun cartoons out of it for the children. They think the seed will grow if you provide lots of games for the youth and prizes and rewards. They are sure the seed grows if you promise people money, health and a great yuppie lifestyle. They think the seed will grow if you remove those nasty bits from the gospel about sin and hell and punishment. They think there will be growth if the church feels like a mall, or like a theatre, or like a motivational seminar.

All of this says, God is not sovereign over salvation. God is not sovereign over growth. See, we all want positive responses. We want to see fruit from our labour. We want to see things happen. But we cannot engineer conversion. We cannot manufacture spiritual life. If we think we can do what only God can do, we will become pragmatic in our ministry, using any and every method under the sun to supposedly draw people to Christ. In the process we make fools of ourselves, dishonour the high name of Christ, create false converts and false disciples and encourage superficial growth which will dry up at the first sign of persecution.

We must embrace the truth - that we live in a world where spiritual conversion and growth remains entirely in the hands of God, who uses us, but does not need us. If we adjust our understanding of growth to God's, we can rest – be both hardworking and resting. Sow, sleep, reap. Teach and trust.

Good spiritual work, lasting spiritual work is done by those who sow and sleep. Steady ministry brings the harvest in the end. William Carey spent over 40 years in Burma and India, and when he was asked to explain his astonishing accomplishments, he simply answered one word: "perseverance" He said to his wife, Eustace: 'If after my removal (his death) anyone should think it worthwhile to write my life, I will give you a criterion. If he gives me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much: I can plod'.

Perhaps we would not have as many ministry drop-outs; as many ministry burn-outs; as much church-hopping if people were willing to sow and sleep, and reap.

Perhaps the reason we have people who want to make ministry happen and grow the seed by their own hands is that they want to get the credit for God's work. They desire to earn results and merit admiration. They have a desire to glory in God's presence. But God's grace is the reason for life,

growth and maturity.

So perhaps you're a parent frustrated with the lack of response to the gospel in your child. Sow God's Word. Sleep on it. Trust that the Word will bring a harvest. Maybe you're ministering to others in this church and you feel like quitting because there doesn't seem to be a huge response. Teach. Trust. Maybe you have a friend, and you're thinking of gimmicks and tricks to get him to like the Gospel. Will you trust that God's Word is powerful enough without your tinkering, engineering or manufacturing results? Maybe you're a young person thinking about dating an unbeliever, thinking that you will be able to convert that person to Christ. No – it's God's work. Don't do anything foolish. If that person is for you, he or she will be trusting Christ before you commit to them. So just give the Word, and if it is meant to be, God will bring the life and the growth.

God's work grows by God's grace.

But what should we expect in terms of the size of the growth? That's what Jesus teaches in the next parable.

II. God's Work Grows From Insignificant to Impressive

³⁰ Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? ³¹ "It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; ³² "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."

So we agree that the growth must come from God. But what will the growth look like in the end? This gives the answer. The mustard seed is a very small seed. So small, it had become a kind of proverb – the smallest seed, the way we speak of an ant. An ant isn't the smallest of all insects that exist, but it becomes a kind of proverb for smallness. However, sow this little mustard seed, and the resulting tree can reach four meters high, large enough for birds to rest in it. The word translated *herbs* is the word for garden plants. From a tiny seed, you end up with this garden plant higher than a one storey house.

Jesus didn't interpret this for us, but it's again fairly simple. The seed is that which God uses to build His work – His Word and its preaching. It often starts out small. It seems insignificant. You do not expect much from it. Small beginnings. However, in God's time, it turns into something large and unexpectedly imposing. I don't want to try to spiritualise the birds and make some point about it – I think Jesus was simply pointing out that the small mustard seed has become big enough to host others.

When Jesus began His ministry, He did so from a palace in Jerusalem, accompanied by he a mustard seed – a carpenter's son, from the backwater town of Nazareth, preaching mainly in the northern province of Galilee. And who did He commit His Word to? Twelve ordinary men – fishermen, tax collectors, unimpressive, untrained men. A mustard seed of a start.

But from those 12 came 120 in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, which turned into 3000; which turned into churches throughout the region; which turned into churches throughout Roman empire; which turned into churches throughout the known world. Here we sit, twenty centuries later, on the very tip of Africa, a mixed multitude of Jew and Gentile, black and white, European, Asian, American and African, and we together share the Word. Has it grown into an impressive tree?

Who would have said so when those 11 discouraged men sat in a room on Easter Sunday before the Lord appeared to them?

Who would have said so when Paul preached and it seemed like foolishness to the Greeks and to the Jews? His preaching was so unimpressive, so ordinary. So much like a mustard seed. Yet, Paul's preaching turned a Christianity, that was mainly Jewish, onto the whole world.

God seems to take particular pleasure in starting things ridiculously small, obscure, struggling. Remember how he kept telling Gideon to get rid of men, until he had a pitiful army of 300? Why did He do that? To quote Paul - **1 Corinthians 2:5** ⁵ *that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

1 Corinthians 1:27-29 ²⁷ *But 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;* ²⁸ *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,* ²⁹ *that no flesh should glory in His presence.*

God allowed his Word to start as mustard seed in Israel. And do you know, He continues to replant it in places as a mustard seed. When God raises up new churches, they are often as mustard seeds - small, unimpressive, apparently struggling. Right now in the Philippines, there is a mustard seed that will be planted among the Aguytaynen people.

God starts it that way and it is up to Him how fast and how big it grows. That's his work, not ours. But we can stand in full hope that God's Word does bring growth.

We are a culture that is impressed with size. We tend to frown upon smallness and this attitude is in the church. Vance Havner : 'The church has moved from the catacombs to the Colosseum in its emphasis on size. We stage mass demonstrations and gigantic congregations. We put celebrities on the platform, and borrow from Caesar to enhance the banner of Christ. We have gone crazy over bigness, actually we need a thinning instead of a thickening. I learned long ago that growing corn or cotton must be thin, we reduce the quantity to improve the quality. Gideon had to thin his troops, and a similar procedure might help God's army today. Jesus thinned His crowd, as is recorded in the sixth chapter of John, and doubtless there were many another occasions. Today the persecuted minority has become the popular majority'.

Just this week, I saw an event advertised. Look at the write-ups. What is the drawcard in each case?

_____ founded _____ Church in _____ in 1980. He's the author of _____, with over **30 million** copies sold worldwide.
_____ is the senior pastor of _____ Christian Fellowship in _____, and _____ in _____ and founder of _____ Crusades, which have ministered to **4,405,000 people**.
_____ released the groundbreaking _____ album _____, which broke into the **Billboard Top 200** Albums, debuting at No. 17, while reaching **No. 3 on the Top 10** albums chart on iTunes.
_____ is the founding pastor of _____, which has grown to **13,000** people each weekend, meeting in **six locations** in _____.

Please don't get me wrong. I don't despise large numbers at all. I want to see as many sinners come to Christ as possible. Who are we to say that some of these large churches are not a fully grown mustard tree? If so, amen and amen. The disturbing thing is this – why are large numbers, big sales, impressive popularity the things people seek or value? Why are these touted as symbols of success

in the church?

The problem with that kind of attitude is that, not just in terms of church size, but in terms of all Christian ministry, bigness is better. If something is small, then it is struggling, and can't be of God. Small growth is not blessed. If our Bible study group has remained small -we must be doing something wrong. If our pastor does not have a TV ministry, then something is lacking.

John Brown wrote this to a young pastor:

"I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small in comparison with those of your brethren around you. But assure yourself on the word of an old man that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ at his judgment seat, you will think you have had enough."

Do not be ashamed of the Lord's work. Don't mistake small beginnings for powerlessness. Don't be impatient at the speed at which He brings that growth. Don't give in to the temptation to manufacture bigness and impressive numbers.

Sow, sleep and reap. Trust that there will be growth. Growth that might exceed your expectations. Growth that may continue past your lifetime.

God's work God's way. It's His grace that brings the growth. It's His growth that takes it from insignificant to impressive.