



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Learning to Wait on the Lord

Mark 4.1–20, 26–32

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Introduction

It's an oft-repeated school activity. Children plant a seed in a milk carton which is then placed near a window where they water the soil and wait for the seed to grow. Wise teachers know to pick seeds that sprout quickly because every day the children head straight for the window to check on progress and ask, "Has it grown yet?" (see Moss 2004, 133).

Sometimes, children will do more than ask. Frustrated at not seeing evidence of growth, they dig into the container to see if the seed is still there. That causes a bigger problem, of course, and may keep them from learning that seeds operate on their own schedule and cannot be hurried by impatient harvesters.

It is interesting that Jesus used seeds, sowing, growth, and harvest so often to illustrate the nature of the reign of God. It is also interesting that his followers sometimes treat the process more like school children than seasoned farmers.

Parables

Because it is "a parable about other parables" (Moss 2004, 133), found in all the Synoptics and explained by Jesus, most of us are familiar with the first parable in our text, the parable of the sower (or soils; Mark 4.1–20; cf. Matt 13.1–23; Luke 8.4–15). Jesus speaks of a sower who scattered seed on four kinds of soil: a hard path, rocky ground, among thorns, and into good soil (Mark 4.3–8). The seed represents the word of God (v. 14) as it is presented to four kinds of hearts: those from whom Satan quickly snatches the word (v. 15); those who at first readily accept the word, but then abandon faith when trouble comes (vv. 16–17); those in whom cares, riches, and desires cause disregard for the word (vv. 18–19); and those who hear it and let it grow and bear fruit (v. 20).

The second illustration in our text, the parable of the patient farmer, is the only one that is unique to Mark (4.26–29). In this story, the seed sprouts and grows in a way that the farmer cannot understand (v. 27). But it does grow, not because of human action, but "by itself" (v. 28).

The text's third parable, about the mustard seed, is more an extended saying depicting an action than a story and, like the parable of the sower, appears in all the Synoptics (Mark 4.30–32; cf. Matt 13.31–32; Luke 13.18–19). Unlike the other two, it is not about the process of growth, but rather the surprising contrast between planting the smallest of seeds that grows into a plant 8–10 feet high with branches capable of holding birds (cf. Lane 1974, 171).¹

Correctives

Ralph Martin observes that one of the benefits of Jesus's parables is that they expose "false ideas about God's reign and wrong-headed notions about the way that the kingdom comes into human experience" (Martin 1981, 23). In light of his comment, when we can examine each of the parables in our text, we can identify some ideas we should guard against.

First, the parable of the sower should remind us that we cannot control how the seed is received. Three of the four soil types in Jesus's parable fail to produce a good harvest. This should not discourage us from sowing the seed. But it should serve to caution us that, although it is possible to persuade people to change their thinking from indifference, neglect, and materialism, ultimately, they have free will and can choose how to respond to the seed we sow. By extension, we should know that there are places and times when whole cultures will be more receptive than others (note present-day Africa in comparison to the West). The amount of "good soil" in any given place will vary.

Second, the parable of the patient farmer reminds us that we should guard against trying to rush the process of change and growth. Two phrases in the parable bring this idea to light. In verse 27, Jesus says that seed scattered on the ground sprouts and grows, but the man who planted it "knows not how." In verse 28, he says that "the earth produces by itself." He is assuming that good farmers know they must be patient, that the growth process cannot be rushed or manipulated. Remember that the subject of the parable is the growth of the reign of God (v. 26). Similarly, we must maintain faith that receptive hearts will respond favorably to the word we declare, practicing patience and refraining from manipulation of the result.

Third, the parable of the mustard seed can teach us to guard against skepticism regarding the growth of God's reign. The point of the contrast between the tiny mustard seed and the large plant that results is that it illustrates the reality that God works in ways that surprise and even surpass our efforts. Think about the ministry of Jesus. From among his disciples, he chose twelve to be with him (Mark 3.14). After his resurrection, a larger group of 120 assembled for prayer (Acts 1.15). By the end of the day on Pentecost, there were 3,000 who accepted Jesus as Lord and Christ (Acts 2.36, 41). Later, Paul reported that the gospel was being "proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Col 1.23).

From another angle, think about that group of twelve, a diverse group that included fishermen, a tax collector, a Zealot (rebel) and others who were considered neither important nor influential. How did the kingdom survive, thrive, and expand? By planting and cultivating the seed, yes; but in the final analysis, it was "God [who] gave the growth" (1 Cor 3.6). Who will argue that he cannot do the same now?

¹ Moss 2004, 130, comments, "This huge plant gets its start as a very small seed. It was the smallest of the seeds that Jews of Jesus' day would plant in their garden. It is not the smallest seed ever.... In rabbinic thought, the mustard seed was proverbial for smallness."

Faithfulness

First, it's important to remember that the parables in Mark 4 also show that the sovereignty of God does not eliminate human responsibility to sow the seed. Notice that the one who plants seed is prominent in both the parables of the sower and the patient farmer. God works in accordance with (and yes, beyond) their work. Sowing the seed is essential to the process.

Second, the parable of the sower reminds us that our task is to faithfully sow the seed, not to coerce the soil to accept it. The parable envisions soil where seed has not been planted, not transplanting plants that have already done some growing. And while we might argue that there is wisdom in concentrating first on soils that are obviously more receptive; the soil types in the parable remind us that what appears on the surface may not represent what lies beneath it. Our responsibility is to sow the seed (without discounting the importance of acts of service; cf. Acts 10:38) as Jesus did, understand that those we teach can choose to either accept or reject it, and trust God to work through us in those who are receptive.

Third, the patient farmer parable emphasizes that we are to be sowers, not growth producers. God operates in different ways and according to different timetables than ours. While we should be diligent in meeting our responsibility, we should resist the temptation to impatiently "help" him along with plans that may short-circuit the growth process. Remember, the principle is that we plant and water; God gives the growth (1 Cor 3.6–7).

Fourth, the mustard seed parable reminds us to continue trusting in faith. God has a history of bringing great things from what appears to be dead end situations. So, let's keep sowing.

Conclusion

Ralph Martin reminds us that the process of spiritual growth involves both faith and faithfulness: "We need some equipoise [balance] between God's sovereignty and control and our part in responding and working for the kingdom. 'Expect great things from God: attempt great things for God' is the phrase to capture the truth in both extremes" (Martin 1981, 25).

To follow the Lord is to learn to wait on the Lord. Following him also requires us to remember that he always rewards those who faithfully serve, regardless of circumstances or appearances.

Works Cited

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