

MORE TEACHING IN PARABLES

Mark 4:26-34

In verses twenty-six to twenty-nine we have one of the most beautiful parables in the Gospels. It is the only parable recorded by Mark and by no other writer. It is deserving of special attention because it presents an aspect of truth about Christian service which is not found elsewhere. Sermons have been preached and books have been written on the kingdom of God, but our Lord gave a few simple analogies here which He knew people could understand. In describing the kingdom Christ used here a very common case of a man casting seed into the ground. Every hearer would understand that and know full well that that was about all a man could do toward the production of a harvest of grain. The farmer knows better than most others man's dependence upon God, because the farmer can only wait while the forces of nature do their work.

In the parable of the Sower which immediately precedes this parable the seed is the Word, the soil is the heart of man, the fruit is character, and the harvest is the end of the age. It teaches the great responsibility of those who hear the gospel message. The parable which is now before us for consideration tells of the responsibility of those who proclaim the gospel message. It illustrates the right attitude of mind for one who teaches or preaches the Word of God, and then leaves the results with the Lord. It should afford us much encouragement as it informs us that we are not responsible for the attitude of human hearts towards the seed. It also emphasizes that the seed which is sown has more vitality and power than what we can see or know.

Note the simple beginnings of spiritual life in the soul. Three factors must always be present if there is to be spiritual life — the faithful sowing, the living seed and the receptive soul. Be the seed ever so potent, and the sowing ever so faithful, there will not be any harvest unless the soul is receptive. The sowing may be difficult and painful. It may involve hardship and sacrifice but when the seed has been carefully sown one can then rest.

The growth of the seed is spontaneous. Man merely deposits the seed, the earth receives it, works on it, makes it germinate and causes it to bear fruit. The seed springs up and grows without the sower's aid. It has a secret energy of its own, a principle of life and growth within itself, so it obeys the law of its being and comes to maturity. What counts here is not the act of the sower, but the property of the seed. There comes a time when the sower's responsibility ends. Having faithfully sown, he must believe in the vital potency of the seed, and go about his daily duties.

In the experience of a farmer there are three periods — faithful sowing, patient waiting and joyful reaping. His task is to sow the seed faithfully; the production of the harvest is left with God. As to the forces in the earth, the rain and sunlight and summer air, the sower has no control, but he trusts that, after he has sown good seed, these influences will combine to produce the ripening grain. The earth possesses properties adapted to the seed, and the seed possesses a principle or germ of life which the earth can nurture, but no human power is needed to cause the seed to germinate.

So we sow the seed, which is God's kingdom truth, and the soil (the soul) is ready for the seed. The Holy Spirit works on the heart and uses the seed sown and makes it germinate and grow. Because this is the law and order of nature and also of grace in the kingdom of God, it is certainly worthwhile to preach and teach. The preacher and the teacher can only sow the seed, but they can do that. Unless they sow the seed they fail utterly.

There is a natural law of continuity in the spiritual life, as there is in other things. The life of God in the soul is perfectly simply and beautiful. There is first the tender

green blade, little children in grace. Then, there is the ear, the time of vigor and manifest growth and gain in strength. Finally there is the time of spiritual maturity, of ripened experience in God. Regeneration is instantaneous, but growth in grace is gradual. Salvation means, not merely delivering a man from sin, but building him up in all nobleness, and this is always the work of time. The "fruit of the Spirit" does not come to ripeness in us in a day. Time must elapse between sowing and harvest. Christians must not be satisfied with imperfect attainments, stunted growth and fruitless lives. But they should be suspicious of forcing processes, of instantaneous and magical developments. They should seek by normal methods, by the use of the ordinary means of grace, to develop within them the peaceable fruits of righteousness. Only God puts forth the sickle, and only He knows when the grain is ripe. The Christian worker is encouraged to await the gradual fulfillment of the plans and purposes of God. After long nights and days of patient expectation, the harvest will come, the fruits of ones labors will appear, and he who has gone forth with weeping, bearing precious seed, "shall doubtless come again with joy, bringing his sheaves with him."

In order to arouse the curiosity and to hold the interest of His disciples, Christ introduced this parable with two questions: "Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?" How startled the disciples must have been when Christ answered His own question and said, "It is like a grain of mustard seed." Every parable has one main lesson to teach, and the lesson here is derived from comparing the smallness of the seed when it is sown with the comparative greatness of the tree when it is grown. From a very small seed a towering plant grows. Nature, quietly and without ostentation, from a tiny beginning, produced a plant of wide usefulness.

Our Lord was fully conscious how insignificant His cause must have appeared to His enemies, and even to the multitudes who listened to His words. Until then He had only a small band of followers, and they were obscure men who were powerless themselves. The rulers hated him and were plotting His death. Could this movement, which Christ was heading, be the glorious Kingdom of which the prophets had spoken? Christ reminded His hearers that however contemptible His cause may have appeared unto them, or to others, it would yet attain proportions which would engage the attention of the whole world. The purpose of Christ in this parable was to contrast the insignificant beginnings of the Kingdom of God with its future growth. For purposes of comparison, he wisely selected a natural object which was proverbially small, but which could develop into a plant of astonishing size. The true kingdom does not come by way of great organization and much advertisement, so in the judgment of the world it is considered insignificant. That is where the world's judgment is in error. Whereas it estimates according to size, heaven estimates according to sort.

Humble beginnings often have exalted issues. Judging by ordinary standards, what could be more insignificant than the career of Christ Himself? Think of the lowly birth of Christ, His humble home, the carpenter's shop and the cruel cross. On the other hand, think of the Holy Scriptures, the gift of salvation, the throne of grace and the coming consummation! Think of the insignificant beginnings of Christianity, slowly at work in the vast Roman Empire; and then, think of that Empire, now non-existent, and of Christianity as being worldwide in its scope and influence! Think of the small beginnings of missionary effort in contrast with modern missions! Do not despise the day of small things. Think not only of "when it is sown," but also of "when it is grown." Little is much if God is in it.

With the approach of evening had come the thought of a little rest apart from the throngs. Christ suggested to the disciples that they go across the sea from the western to the eastern shore. Nothing could be more restful and refreshing to the tired Master than a quiet ride across blue Galilee. So He told His disciples to turn toward the opposite shore the bow of

the little boat which He had been using as a pulpit. Immediately they proceeded to carry out His wish. Having sent the people away, they started across the sea. Other little boats accompanied the Master's boat. There is something very beautiful in the fact that many of the people wanted so badly to be near Christ that they entered boats and pulled alongside His boat. Can you not visualize this silent fleet making its way across the lake, with only the occasional splash to disturb the peacefulness of the scene? Christ was so thoroughly exhausted that He went to the back of the boat, lay down and went to sleep.

Suddenly a hurricane arose and the waves were soon rolling over the sides of the boat so rapidly that it was filling with water. The disciples, who were very much at home on the sea, were panic-stricken, so they rushed to the back of the boat and aroused Christ with words that were mingled with distress, petulance and rebuke. They said in substance, "Master, we are perishing; don't you care?"

Should we not pause to recall how frequent such storms are in the life of Christians? To follow Christ does not always mean "smooth sailing" or cloudless skies.

In their appeal the disciples expressed the extremity of their fear, but it contained an implied rebuke. It was to the fact that Christ did not care; either He did not know or He was not concerned about their peril. We sometimes think in the same way. In the overwhelming storms we really believe that the loving Master is indifferent to our need. Their appeal also intimated a spirit of pressure. It seems that they assumed that the Master was neglecting His duty; that it was His obligation to protect them; that He was guilty of neglect, and that He ought to save them whether it was His desire or not. In like manner, we sometimes come to the Master for help, and seemingly assume that His relief and deliverance are matters of debt and not of grace. We should make our supplication to Him, but we should not complain or reprove. Situations in which we find ourselves may make us afraid, but they should never lead us to remonstrance with the Master. We should learn to be calm in the midst of the storms of life just because He is beside us in them. A storm with Christ is better than a calm without Him.

Christ awoke, commanded the waves to be still and instantly they obeyed him. "They feared a great fear" and they talked one to another, marveling at the One Whom even the winds and the sea obeyed.