

Parable of the Growing Seed

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[0 : 00] This summer we're considering the parables of Jesus in a little series and we've been specifically looking for the last few weeks at parables of the kingdom. So these are parables that Jesus gave where he specifically tells a short story about the kingdom of God and in that he uses similarly most often the kingdom of God is like this or a metaphor or out last week we saw that he uses allegory symbols, a thoroughgoing symbolism to describe the kingdom of God.

One of the things we've said every week, I've said every week is that we see in the New Testament and the Old Testament that God uses stories to teach us. God has always used stories. Most of the Bible is written in narrative and one of the reasons for that, Dorothy Sayers, an English fiction writer of the past century, one of the one of the best of writers of the past hundred years, Dorothy Sayers says that telling stories is an aspect of what it means to be made in God's image.

So we as human beings, we all love to tell stories. We love to hear stories. We love to read stories. Telling stories is part of what it means to be in the image of God because God tells stories, God writes stories and this is an old way of saying it, but John Calvin said something like the world is a stage, the world is a theater, all of history is a theater and God is working out the drama of his glory on the world stage.

All of history is his story. It's his great plan of redemption that's been unfolding. And so God has written story into the fabric of what this world is. Our lives have meaning because they are storied lives and God continues to give us stories to help us make sense of what's going on in the life of the world and he does that in the Bible. As Lewis, C.S. Lewis put it, how do we relate to God? We relate to God like Hamlet relates to Shakespeare.

Right? How does Hamlet relate to Shakespeare? When Hamlet asks where is Shakespeare? He doesn't look around the stage and say where is Shakespeare? Where is Bill Shakespeare? No, if Hamlet wants to find Shakespeare, the only possible way that Hamlet could ever find Shakespeare is if Shakespeare writes himself into the story.

[2 : 12] You know, the character has to, can't arise to the level of the author. God is the author of the story of history, the author of the drama of redemption and we know him because he wrote himself into the story.

He came down, the king came down and that's what the kingdom of God is all about. And so we've been thinking about that. God gave us stories and so these parables are short little stories about the big story of the kingdom.

The story of history actually that God is still writing and we're a part of. And so what we've done is we've looked at, we've been looking at the kingdom parables that are in Matthew 13.

In Matthew 13, there are seven kingdom parables, seven different parables that Jesus says the kingdom of God is like. He's trying to get us there to think about creation, sevenfold parable to remind us that these stories tell us about the sevenfold movement of new creation.

That he's doing something brand new and these little stories are telling us that. And so what we've done so far is we've looked at five of them and we've learned things like from the mustard seed.

[3 : 20] That the kingdom is the power of God to bring heaven down to earth, down to earth. And we've learned that Jesus is the king and the tree of life himself, the great world tree from Daniel chapter four.

The mustard seed told us that we learned that the kingdom is home. It's homecoming, that it's the place where all of us long to actually find our nest to put our nest in the kingdom of God.

And we learned from the parable of the leaven that God is going to transform this whole world and penetrate, permeate everything in existence with all of his glory. And we learned from the pearl and the treasure that there is a treasure at the center of the kingdom, the best part of the kingdom.

And that's that you can be in relationship with the living God, Jesus himself. And we learned from the treasures old and new in the scribe of the kingdom that there's a calling in the Christian life to be a scribe of the kingdom, to love Jesus and his word, and to connect the Old Testament and the New Testament, and to understand how those work together.

That's being a scribe of the kingdom. So that's the five parables we looked at this week. We have the sixth and it's the one parable that is not in Matthew 13. So there are seven kingdom parables in the gospels, all in Matthew 13, and then there's an eighth.

[4 : 31] And the eighth is in Mark chapter four. It doesn't appear anywhere else. And it's this parable about the seed that is growing. Very simple. Some of the same agricultural themes that we've been looking at.

So let's think about it together. This is a story about how the kingdom grows. So that's what we're going to think about. And there are three characters, the seed that grows, the farmer that sows. That sows the seed. And lastly, the harvest that is brought in. So let's think about each of those characters and what we learn here about the kingdom. First, the seed that grows.

All right. So in the beginning, verse 26 and 27, this farmer goes out and he scatter seed all over the ground. And the seed goes down into the soil. And we're told here that the farmer goes to his bed. He sleeps night and day. He rises again and he comes back out and he sees that the seed has sprouted. Some days later, the seed has become a plant.

[5 : 31] And many days later, the seed has become a tree. And there's a very important word in verse 28 that Anna read for us. And it's when he says in verse 28, the earth produces by itself.

So that's the Greek word *automatos*. And you know that word because it's the English word *automatic*. So *automatos* or *automaton* is the word we derive to say *automatic*.

So it says here that the farmer scatter seed, the seed goes down in the soil. And automatically, there's a sprout. And of course, when Jesus says it happens automatically, he's doing something a little bit different than we do with the word *automatic*.

Because when we say *automatic*, we very literally mean it does it on its own. But that's not how he means the word *automatos*, *automatic*. No, because that's part of the point of the parable.

He's trying to derive, help us to think about nature to see, of course, that it does not work automatically. The seed doesn't just sprout on its own. And he's drawing a distinction here between what the farmer does, but then the power, the invisible power that is there in the potential of the seed to grow into a sprout.

[6 : 44] And you know, one of the ways to think about this is Jesus is, in the first century, drawing us in to think a little bit about biology, seed biology. I don't know anything about that.

But I do know that in a seed, there's an embryo, there's gestation, there's a birth that takes place. You can think about it in the same way of when a baby comes into mother's womb.

There's so much mystery there. The biologist can tell us exactly what's taking place as a baby grows in a womb. I don't know what you call it, a seed biologist.

There's a word for that, and I can't remember it, a plant biologist. Can tell us what's going on in the life of the seed as it breaks forth and brings forth the sprout. But there's biology, and then there's philosophy, and they're different.

And philosophy comes and gets you to ask questions like, but why does this exist? And what is this little baby in mother's womb actually for?

[7 : 45] And where does personality come from? And what is a person? And does the seed have meaning? And do people have meaning? And is there value in this? And how come it keeps happening so consistently?

Why do the same rhythms of life, the laws of nature seem to keep ticking over, over and over and over again? And one of the things I think Jesus does here is that he draws us to remember that science is very helpful.

Biology is so good, but it's got real limits. And we can't transgress those limits. So science can tell us about the mechanics of the biology of seed life, or what's going on in a womb, and so many other things.

But it cannot tell you why it happens. It can't tell you how exactly, all the way to the bottom. It can't tell you what it means. It can't tell you what this is for. Science can tell you so much about the baby in the womb, but it can't tell that baby, this is what you should do with your life.

This is what gives that baby meaning. And the same thing actually happens at the level of plant life, of natural life at every single level. We ask questions like, why does the sun continue to rise?

[8 : 51] Why does the world continue to spin on its axis? Why should we expect the sun to rise tomorrow? And science takes you so far, but then eventually it has to stop.

It can't get all the way to the bottom. Here's one way to think about it. I can't remember if it rained yesterday, but I'm sure it did, right? You could ask a question like, why did it rain yesterday?

And the first answer is because water vapor condensed in the atmosphere and had to fall. And then you could ask, why did it rain yesterday? And you'd say, because the grass and the trees and the flowers need water to survive in the life cycle in our ecosystem.

And you could ask, why did it rain yesterday? And you dig a little deeper and you say, it's because God has ordered the world in such a way that water from the heavens is the fundamental source of life. And you could say, why did it rain yesterday?

And you could say, because God has declared that life is good and that life is better than death.

And you could ask, why did it rain yesterday? And you say, because life is good, because God is alive.

[9 : 56] And from his living being, everything else arrives, living being. And you could keep going a little bit, but eventually you reach the bottom, right? And science takes you some of the way, natural study takes you some of the way, but eventually you realize that every single person in this world needs religion.

And without religion, you can't actually say why. You can't actually say how at the bottom level. You can't actually say, but what does it mean? Only religion can do that. Only religion can really plumb to the depths of what something is and what something actually means.

Thomas Nagel, one of the most important philosophers in the United States, he wrote a book some time ago called Mind and Cosmos. Thomas Nagel is not a Christian. No, in Mind and Cosmos, he declares that he is an atheist.

But let me just give you a little summary of the argument in his book. He says the idea that there is an ordered cosmos, an ordered cosmos without a mind, a consciousness, a living personality at the back of all that exists, he says it's difficult to maintain that.

And he says the proton, the quirk and the bit of stardust that first appeared at the beginning of history has been given a purpose that it seeks to fulfill.

[11 : 12] He says in every little proton there is a purpose, that proton is hungry to do what it was made to do. He points that out and he says the tiniest bit of existence has an engine in it, a purpose in it, a reason that drives it.

And it tells us that there is some mind that stands behind everything that exists. Now that's exactly what Jesus first does in this parable. He says that the farmer sows the seed and the farmer goes to bed and the farmer wakes up and there's a sprout and it does it automatically by itself.

And what is he trying to get you to do? He's trying to get you to say, oh boy, it doesn't. It doesn't.

That there is a power, an invisible power, the spirit of the living God who continues to give life and breath and hold the world together at every level from the womb to the little seed-bearing plant.

And this is all across the Bible in Ecclesiastes 11 verse 5. The writer co-hell it, the preacher, he says it like this. He says, as you do not know the way that the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes and holds everything.

Thomas Nagel said it. He said, you can't just say that everything's just running on its own. No, it's not. The spirit of the living God is holding everything together and we cannot see.

[12 : 36] We forget. We don't remember. We lose memory about the billions and billions and numbers I don't know how to say of ways that God continues to tick the world over.

And he tells us in Genesis after the flood that he is the one who gives the seasons. It's a covenant. He's made with the world. He is the power. The spirit of God is the power of nature now.

That is not the point of the parable. Jesus gives us that point then to tell us the point of the parable. And the point of the parable is this, the kingdom of God is like that.

In other words, the point of the parable Jesus is saying is this, when you look out at nature and you realize there is an invisible power, the spirit of the living God at work that's actually the engine that's driving real growth.

The kingdom of God is the same. That when it comes to ministry, when it comes to the work of the church, when it comes to people moving from darkness to light in their lives, finding the beauty of

the gospel and being transformed by it, he says look at nature and you can see exactly the way it works.

[13:47] And that's that the spirit who upholds creation, who gives power to the quarks, whatever a quark is, somebody can tell me after. The spirit of God is doing the same exact thing in the kingdom.

That it's the spirit of God, God who is the invisible power at work that's transforming people's lives and building the kingdom of God all around us. That nature teaches us what new creation is like. The spirit of God at work and creation is the same spirit at work and new creation and it's God who's building the kingdom. It's God who's building the church. It's God who is doing all the work. Let me say it like this and we'll move on. The spirit's work and creation, the rhythms of natural laws, the laws of nature, is an organic living lesson to us about the way the kingdom of God works. And that's that God is the builder. Now secondly, the farmer that sows. Who's the farmer here that's doing the seed sowing? Who's the farmer? Who's the person in this passage that's throwing the seeds out?

[14:48] And the answer is that it's any follower of Jesus doing the work of ministry. So today, if you are a Christian and a follower of Jesus, you are the farmer in this parable that sowing seeds.

And what is the seed here that's being sown? It's the seed of the kingdom. It's the message of the kingdom. It's the gospel of the kingdom. And the gospel of the kingdom, just to make sure that we're really clear on this, is this that you were made by God in your mother's womb for a living relationship with the real, absolute, and only God.

And that every single one of us have rebelled against that and committed great injustices against the living God who made us. And then God decided, I'm going to write myself into the story.

And Jesus Christ, the king came down and he said that I want to know you. I want to be close to you. And he died for the sake of establishing our justice. He went to the cross for our injustices.

And he's coming again in his resurrection power to redeem everything, to bring peace, to restore.

And so the message of the kingdom is that today you can have forgiveness to the point where God forgets your sins.

[16:01] You can have true peace and you can have a hope that someday all wrongs will be made right. Now that's the message of the kingdom. That's the seed that the farmer sows. If you're a Christian today, there's a simple call here that all of us are called to sow that seed, the message of the kingdom.

And the second point of the passage is really, really clear, really obvious, I think. And it's that when we sow seed, when we do ministry, when we speak the word of the gospel, when we do good deeds as Christians, what this parable is trying to get us to say is, there's something I do here.

I open my mouth. I take courage and tell somebody else about the gospel, but boy, I know that I'm not actually doing any of the work. So in the same way that you, the farmer does not raise the crop up from the ground, he has no power to do that, in the same way, not a single one of us Christians has any power to actually transform people's lives.

We sow the seed, but only God can do it. Only God can give the growth. That's the message of the parable. It's probably so simply put, we could have probably just read this one verse and prayed.

No, we would never do that. Paul, how does Paul say it? Paul says, I planted Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

[17:24] And actually the verb there, God gave the growth, is a participle. It says God was causing it to grow all along. That's the message of the parable. We can plant, somebody else can come and till or water a little bit, but only God can grow the kingdom.

Now, let's get super practical as we come to the end in just a moment. Let me give you three very practical takeaways. What to do with this? First, this is calling us then every single follower of Jesus today to have a real kingdom mindset.

And a kingdom mindset based on this parable is to simply be willing to say, be able to say something like, I do not build the kingdom. So it's very common, even in our tradition, sometimes for us to say, for people to say, we are out building the kingdom of God.

For churches sometimes to get caught up in that language, to say we are all about building the kingdom of God. This parable shows us we do not do that. We don't build the kingdom of God.

We don't grow the kingdom of God. Not at all. Only God builds the kingdom. Only the spirit of the living God can build the kingdom. Only God grows the kingdom. What do we do? The language of

the Bible is we witness to the kingdom.

[18 : 36] We sow the seeds of the kingdom. We attest to the kingdom. We serve as ambassadors of the king trying to point other people to the only one that can actually change them, the king himself.

That's the kingdom mindset this parable calls us to. The second thing to take away here is this parable calls each of us, follower of Jesus, to trade in ministry pride.

We could call it ministry pride for ministry humility. And boy, this is first for pastors, I think. First for leaders in the church to hear. And then for every follower of Jesus, what this parable teaches us. And that's this ministry success. What is ministry success? What does it look like for us to have a successful church for things to go really well here? Lots of answers to that.

But one of the things this parable says to us is first you have to say, you cannot measure that. God is doing things that you will never see. God is raising up the crops in a way I do not understand.

[19 : 42] And God is doing things with the seed that is sown in ways that I do not understand. And so we're called to sow the seed and in some ways to not try to figure out exactly what it means to be successful.

Because God's doing it. God's the one that's giving the growth. We don't, that means that I think we're being invited here as a church, as St. Columbus, not to measure everything in the three B's of ministry success that you learn in seminary.

What are the three B's? How many bodies are in the room? How many buildings do you own and how's your budget? The three B's. Ministry success.

Bodies, buildings and budgets. Right? And this parable says that that's not the measure of ministry success, not primarily. That God is doing things in an invisible way in people's hearts that we may never understand.

And you're going to have the tiniest church in the world and God can be doing unbelievable things under the surface that you can't see. We got to trade in our ministry pride, our megachurch mentalities, right?

[20 : 48] For ministry humility and say we sow, but God's going to do what He wants to do. Third, let me read you a quote from J.C. Ryle. I like what he says about it.

Let us note this truth for it is deeply instructive. It is humbling no doubt to every minister and to teachers of others. The highest ability, the best preaching, the hardest work cannot command ministry success.

God alone can. God alone gives the growth. Third, last, and we'll move to the final thing. That also means at the same time, juxtaposition.

This parable calls us to trade in our small ambitions for huge kingdom ambitions, for kingdom expectations. In other words, if we can come today and say, you know, I know that it doesn't depend on me.

I know you can say I know it doesn't depend on me. I'm called to sow, but I don't transform the world. I can't transform the city. Then that means we can actually have huge ambitions.

[21 : 55] Huge ministry ambitions because we can say God is so powerful, God can do it. It's not up to me. I'm so thankful that I don't have to do it. God's doing it. And so that gives me the humility to have huge ambition for what might happen here in our city.

I would imagine that as the disciples heard this parable, they would have probably been tempted to say, they would have probably been tempted to look at the Roman Empire and say, you know, Jesus keeps talking about the kingdom and he keeps saying things like the kingdom is like a seed. But I look at the Roman Empire and I see the kingdom is like Caesar's palace. You know, it's pretty nice. It's huge. It's big. It's powerful. And Jesus is saying, look at this little, this kingdom.

This kingdom is a seed. And they had to have been tempted to say, I sort of wish the kingdom of God was being compared more to the palace in Rome than the little, but he see that goes into the ground.

I want to see big things. I want to see great things. I want to see the world transformed. And boy, today in our world, there are 2.4 billion Christians and billions beyond that that have already passed away.

[23 : 07] And where is the Roman Empire? It's long gone. And that means we can trade in ministry pride for ministry ambition. God is doing great things.

God loves to do great things. He still is. Thirdly, finally, the harvest that we seek. At the very end of the passage, we're told in verse 29, when the grain is ripe, the farmer puts the sickle to the wheat because it's time.

So at the very end, we learn that there is a harvest and there's a harvest that the farmer, the follower of Jesus actually does bring in because of God's work. And what is that? That's new. That's people coming to faith in Christ. That's baptisms. That's new church members. That's people being transformed day by day to take on the image of the sun in themselves.

That's virtue. That's sanctification. So much harvest that can be so much fruit that can come. And I just want to conclude with a few things to do as you seek the harvest as a follower of Jesus as a farmer, as a sower of the seed.

[24 : 15] The first is this, take a moment today to evaluate, to do a little self-evaluation, to do a little bit of diagnostic work in your heart and say, am I sowing the seed?

Because one of the things we learn here is there's a real invitation to say every follower of Jesus is called to be a farmer of the kingdom, to sow the seeds of the kingdom. Do you sow seed? Are you ministering to other people in this world through the word of the gospel, the word of the kingdom and deeds in the kingdom?

That's the first. The second thing to do there is to say, where are you going to get the power to sustain a lifelong farming ministry? And the answer is that you've got to look at the seed himself. And in John chapter 12, Jesus Christ compares himself to a seed, to a seed that's thrown into the ground. And he says that the seed has to go into the ground and it has to die in order for real fruit, real life to come up from it.

And there, of course, he was talking about his cross. He was talking about his death. And he was saying, if you really want to be a planter in the kingdom, you can only have power to do that if you never graduate from staring every day at the seed himself.

[25 : 28] The one, the king, the author who wrote himself into the story, the one who came and was sown in weakness, sown in death, but raised in strength.

He says, there's the power. There's the hope. There's the victory. There's the strength that you can have to actually be a consistent, lifelong ministry farmer, a sower of seed.

Never take your eyes off the cross. The seed, sown in weakness, raised in strength. You go down in humility in order to have power to do ministry. It's the cruciform life.

It's the following the master. It's the way of Christ. Third, afford, embrace, there's a call in this parable then to embrace the mundanity of ministry.

There's something mundane here in this parable about ministry and about the kingdom. There's an invitation, I think, to be steady, faithful, patient, sower of seeds.

[26 : 28] James Edwards, one of the, I think, the best commentator on Mark's Gospel. This is what he says about it. The kingdom of God should be likened to something grand and glorious, we think.

We come and we say, why is he not comparing the kingdom to something so much bigger and more grand? To shimmering mountain peaks, to crimson sunsets, the opulence of potentates, the lusty glory of the gladiator.

Why not that metaphor? But Jesus instead chooses seeds. And here's the paradox of the Gospel. Indeed, the scandal of the incarnation itself, that it's disguised in common places.

The God whom Jesus introduces will not be kept at a celestial arms length. Jesus does not tell us how high and lofty God is in his metaphors, but instead how very near and local and present he is in all of his metaphors.

The routines of simply planting and harvesting faithfully are mundane clues to the nature and the plan of building the kingdom. There's a normalcy about it that we would have never expected.

[27 : 36] What does it look like to grow? What does it look like to bring fruit? It just looks like opening the Bible. It's mundane in a way, but it's powerful. Something so ordinary as reading is the place where you can come to meet the living God.

It doesn't look like the Vatican. It looks like the farmer sowing seeds. It's steady, it's patient, it's faithful, it's simple. That that's how fruit comes about.

Prayer, Scripture, worship, telling somebody else about Jesus inviting somebody. It's mundane, but it's the way, it's the ordinary means of grace.

It's the message of the kingdom. Lastly, that means that kingdom ministry, and we'll close with this, is not a zero-sum game. It's not what God is telling us here.

It's never for us to say, well, God does it so I don't do it, or I have to do it because God has left me to do it. And actually, there's no zero-sum game here in the way that God has worked it.

[28 : 36] God is the primary cause of all kingdom power. And then he says, and you are the secondary cause. And it's 100% the case that the only way the church will grow, the only way the kingdom will grow, the only way your friend will come to faith in Christ is if God does it.

And at the same time, he says, now go and talk to them. It's not a zero-sum game. It's 100%, 100%. And so what you can do is you can come today and say, I am not the source, I am not the engine, I am not the power of my own growth, I'm not the power of anybody's growth.

I can't bring my kids into the kingdom, I can't transform my city, I can't transform my neighborhood, I can't bring the royal mile to bow the knee to King Jesus, I can't affect anybody's life at the fringe, not ultimately, and at the very same time say, God has called me to be a kingdom farmer.

And so we can put it like this, God does all the work and I can sow the seeds of my own spiritual growth. God does all the work and I can sow the seeds of my children's spiritual health.

God does all the work and I can till the soil and plant the seeds of my church's corporate health by pursuing my individual spiritual health. God does all the work and I can share the message of the kingdom with my family member and my colleague and my neighbor and take courage.

[30 : 01] God does all the work and I can explain why I think God and Jesus Christ makes better sense of reality than a materialistic world viewed us. God does all the work and I can sow the seeds.

And that means God is building the ultimate garden for us. And he invites every single one of us today, every single follower of Jesus to go out today, this week, and be reminded that you are a gardener of that kingdom.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for the kingdom parables and we pray now that you would give us the balance, the balance of saying and knowing that it is you who are the power behind everything in creation and redemption and simultaneously the balance of saying, of knowing that you've called us.

So Lord, we give away our laxity attitude towards ministry and towards the kingdom of God. We don't want it and yet we struggle with it.

And so I do ask today that maybe Lord, by the Holy Spirit, by the power at work in us that we cannot understand, you would do the very important work of tilling our hearts and taking away our lack of desire to serve you through sowing seeds.

[31 : 18] Take it away Lord and give us new desires, fresh desires, real longings to do in this life what matters most. And so we pray for that heart in Jesus' name. Amen.