

The Mystery of Growth

Mark 4:21-29

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Despite our seemingly advanced society, there are lots of things in the world that we still don't understand. We don't really understand how our brains work. There is much we don't understand about the universe. It seems that we all struggle with understanding how the opposite sex thinks. And vast numbers of diseases are still a mystery to us. On a more personal level, we may not understand how our bodies work, how our cars work, how the internet works, or any number of other things. And yet, even though we don't understand exactly *how* these things work, we can make decisions about these things because we know they *do* work.

In our passage this morning, Jesus uses a similar analogy to teach us about the kingdom of God. God does many things, but we don't always know how He does them. The good news is that we don't have to know *how* He works, we just have to know *that* He works! Even though there is much we don't understand, we can live in the light of what we do understand. And the more closely we follow our Lord's teaching, the more our understanding will grow as well.

Light

Jesus starts by talking about light and understanding,

²¹ Then Jesus asked them, "Would anyone light a lamp and then put it under a basket or under a bed? Of course not! A lamp is placed on a stand, where its light will shine. ²² For everything that is hidden will eventually be brought into the open, and every secret will be brought to light. ²³ Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."

²⁴ Then he added, "Pay close attention to what you hear. The closer you listen, the more understanding you will be given—and you will receive even more. ²⁵ To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them." (Mark 4:21-25, NLT)

As we look at the different gospel accounts, we can see that while Mark lumps the phrases in this section together, other writers do not. Critics of the Bible might be tempted to argue that this shows the gospel accounts contradict each other, but that isn't the case. There is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this.

Rabbis in Jesus' day would often teach the same lessons multiple times to ensure their disciples remembered them. Since Jesus spoke to lots of different crowds, it would make sense that much of Jesus' teaching was repeated in different places and different times. So it's not surprising that the gospel writers don't necessarily record all His teachings in the same order.

We must also remember that the gospel writers weren't always trying to lay out a chronological record of Jesus' teachings. Instead, they may have been organizing them thematically in order to communicate certain points. As such, the fact that Mark records these teachings together likely means he was trying to communicate an important point.

Mark records this discussion about hiding your light under a basket immediately after the parable of the sower, where Jesus talked about how good soil will bear much fruit. It seems likely that Mark was trying to remind us that part of our job as Jesus' disciples is to share the light of Christ with the world. We shouldn't try to hide our light, but should make sure our lights shine clearly, because that is the only way other people will come to know Jesus.

But Jesus also tells the downside of this—light draws attention to things that can be hidden in the darkness. In other words, when we stand in the light of Christ's teaching, we begin to see things about ourselves that are not as they should be. We see just how sinful we are and how far we are from God's standard. We see that Jesus tells us to live in a way that is very different from the way of our world. And all of these truths are both difficult to accept and very unpopular in our world. This means that many people will try to hide from and even try to extinguish that light.

Practically speaking, this means that we, as Christians, should be bold in proclaiming our faith and pointing people to the truth of God's Word. But at the same time, we should remember that God's Word says things people don't want to hear. This means we are likely to be persecuted for proclaiming the truth. People will call us mean, insensitive, bigoted, arrogant, and many other things. We should work hard to ensure that we are not any of those things, but rather, that we speak the truth in love. Even though the gospel message is good news, it is not what many people want to hear.

And that leads to Jesus' teaching in verses 24-25, where Jesus says that the closer you listen, the more understanding you will gain, but that those who refuse to listen will lose even the understanding they already have. What is Jesus saying with this statement?

I think there are a couple aspects to this that we need to see. **First, Jesus is telling us that we can only grow by listening to His teaching.** When Jesus speaks of listening to His teaching, He does not merely mean that we should be able to repeat it. Rather, He is saying that we must work to understand it and put it into practice. Teachers understand that there is an order that lessons need to be learned in. You can't teach someone about Shakespeare until they've learned how to read. So a person who hasn't even learned their letters yet isn't ready to study Romeo and Juliet. The same is true in the life of faith. Often, we cannot move on to the next lesson God has for us until we have learned the lesson He is teaching us right now. We simply aren't ready. If we want to grow in our faith, we must do the hard work of wrestling with God's Word and how to put it into practice in our lives. That is the only way that we can grow.

The second aspect of what Jesus says is that **those who do not listen will lose even the understanding that they have.** This seems counterintuitive to us. Why would God

take away people's understanding? But if we really think about it, we see this truth in play everywhere we look in our world today. We see it with many of the facts we learned in school, but haven't used in years. If you don't use your knowledge, you lose it.

When people choose to ignore (or worse, suppress) what God has revealed to us, they are left groping in the dark for answers. As such, they try to find ways to make sense of the world that avoid having to submit to God.

Think about all the ways we see this in our society today. Modern science insists that everything can (and must) be explained by only natural processes. Evolution has become the central dogma of scientific inquiry, so every scientific conclusion is based on the assumption that everything can be explained by evolutionary theory. Anything that assumes God is involved is dismissed.

The same has happened with morality. Our society rejects the notion that God has laid down certain laws about how life is to be lived, because we don't want anyone to tell us what to do. Their solution is to declare that each person must determine truth for themselves. So now everything must be acceptable, even those things that are harmful to individuals and society as a whole. There is no standard of truth, so we must affirm every position, even if it is nonsensical. This is seen in the confusion we have over gender, sexuality, and all sorts of other moral issues in our society today. Any attempt to speak truth (or even insist on logic) is now considered hate speech.

This is what happens when people choose to ignore God's commands. If we embrace darkness instead of light, we will descend further and further into the darkness. Even what little understanding we have is taken from us.

We see this readily in our society, but we must take a careful look at ourselves and ask if it is happening to us. When we know that God tells us to live one way and we choose to live another, we will grow distant from God. When we coast in our faith rather than trying to grow and learn and understand, we will drift from the Lord.

Jesus' words in these verses remind us that we need to share the truth of God's Word with the world—but we must start by embracing it for ourselves. The only way for us to grow in faith and holiness is to take God's instructions to heart. And the only way for us to change the world around us is to point them to the light of Jesus Christ. Not everyone will embrace that truth—in fact, many will strongly oppose it—but Jesus is the only hope for us and for our world.

How Seeds Grow

Immediately after these statements about the importance of embracing the light and letting it shine, Mark includes another parable from Jesus.

²⁶ Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. ²⁸ The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are

formed, and finally the grain ripens. ²⁹ And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come.” (Mark 4:26-29, NLT)

Scholars have debated what this parable is really teaching. Different people see different lessons from this parable. I think that was Jesus’ intention. I believe He was illustrating several lessons at the same time.

First, it reminds us that God makes seeds of faith grow. We understand this concept in a farming community, because each year our farmers go into their fields and do everything they can to give their seeds the best chance of growing. They make sure the soil has optimal nutrients and water and they may break up the ground to prepare the soil for seeds. They carefully select the seeds they think will work best for a given location. They plant the seeds using machines that place them at precisely the optimal depth and spacing. And then...they wait. Even the best farmer can only give the seeds the best chance to grow—no farmer can make his seeds grow.

Jesus says that sharing the gospel is the same way. We can only plant seeds, we cannot make them grow. But, like the farmer, we should do what we can to prepare people to be receptive to the seeds of the gospel message (by showing them love, striving for consistency in our lives, and trying to explain it in ways they can understand), while remembering, we cannot make seeds grow.

This is a wonderfully freeing truth for us as we try to share the gospel. Sometimes we get frustrated because we feel like we aren’t smart enough or skilled enough to share the message, or that somehow we will mess up and it will drive people further away. People sometimes get discouraged when they share the gospel, but people reject it. They believe they have failed. But this story reminds us that isn’t the case at all.

Jesus’ parable reminds us that our success is measured by whether we are planting seeds, not by whether those seeds grow. You are not responsible for making people come to faith. Your job is to share the message with them. God is the One who ultimately determines which seeds will take root and which will not.

This also should embolden us, because there may be some people who we think would never trust in Jesus, but we don’t know how God might work in them. We can still reach out to them, because God can cause a seed to take root anywhere. Nothing is impossible when we remember that God is the One who is making the seeds grow. This should encourage us to plant as many seeds as possible and trust the yield to the Lord.

Second, it reminds us to be patient in waiting for growth. One of the difficult steps in the process of growing crops is waiting to see what will happen. After you plant seeds, weeks can go by before you know whether they are growing at all. And even once you start to see the leaves come through the ground, it may be months before you get to see whether they will actually survive. The same thing is true with the seeds of faith that we sow in others. Often, we may not see growth for a long time. But just like

with our crops, we need to remember that even though there may be no evidence of growth above the soil, lots can still be happening beneath the surface.

God has a funny way of bringing people to a place where they are ready to embrace the message of the gospel. Some people are very open and receptive, while others will take time for their hard hearts to soften. We must remember that just because people do not immediately respond in faith when we tell them about Jesus, it doesn't mean that they won't ever. We should strive to be faithful and consistent and patient in our message, because one day, God may cause a seed you planted many years before to take root. Don't be discouraged if you don't see the seeds you've planted growing right away—God may still be working beneath the surface.

Third, we are reminded that a time of harvesting is coming. Each year as we near the end of the summer, farmers all over the area are watching their fields to know when to start harvesting their crops. As I understand it, one of the big things they wait for is for all the growing to be done, and the crops to become mature and ready to be sold (which has a lot to do with humidity levels). When it's time to harvest, any seeds that might not have taken root have lost their opportunity. Once the harvest has come, the season is over.

Jesus reminds us that just like each growing season has a time of harvest that brings it to a close, there will come a time when the harvest will come for every human being on the face of the earth. When that time of harvest comes, that's the end—there will be no more waiting to see if seeds grow.

This truth should cause us to carefully examine our own lives. We need to ensure that we have genuinely embraced the gospel message for ourselves. We need to make sure that our lives are bearing fruit. It is not something we can continue to postpone until later, because eventually our time will be up. We don't know when Christ's harvest will be, so we should make the most of the time we have today.

This should also give us a sense of urgency with regards to telling others about Jesus. We don't know how much time anyone has left. We don't know when Jesus will return, but we also don't know if someone will be living tomorrow. We have all seen that there are no guarantees in life. As such, it ought to drive us to make sure that those closest to us have every opportunity to respond to the gospel, because we don't know how long any of us has left.

One way to think of it is like this—if a person you cared about were to die tomorrow, would you feel guilty that you hadn't shared with them the only way they could be saved? Would you feel like you had given them every opportunity you could to embrace Christ? We can't make seeds grow, but we must do what we can to plant them in the hearts of those we love.

Sadly, many of us have probably experienced the unexpected death of someone we care about. Often we find ourselves thinking about the last words we said to them or

saddened by the opportunities we didn't seize because we thought we would have more time. Don't let that happen to you. Tell those you love about the only way they can be saved—because the harvest is coming.

Conclusion

This passage contains a lot of different truths, each of which have a variety of applications to our own lives. I would challenge you to take some time and think deeply about what Jesus has said and how those lessons might be put into practice in the way you live today. Here are some thoughts to ponder.

First, are there ways you are hiding your light? As believers there are lots of things that can keep us from shining as brightly as we should in our world. Are you embarrassed by your faith? Have you become complacent and forgotten about shining the light of Christ before others? Are there behaviors that are overshadowing your faith and making it difficult for others to see Christ in you? Be honest with yourself about ways you can let the light of Christ shine more brightly in your life.

Second, are you working at growth? Jesus says that those who have ears to hear are the ones who will hear. This implies that some of the people who were there to hear Jesus speak didn't gain any understanding. We need to be careful that we don't do the same thing. We can do all the good Christian things, but if we aren't seeking to grow in them, then they are a waste. Are you engaged in fruitful Bible study? We can and should spend time reading God's Word, but if we aren't paying attention and trying to put into practice the things we read, then we will not grow in faith and understanding. Are you coming to worship expecting God to lead you in how to live? We can go through the motions of worship, but if we aren't prepared to hear from God, listen to Him, and do what He says then we're missing out. The more we bring to our time with the Lord, the more we will take from it. As we learn the lessons God gives us, He'll give us new things to learn. If you feel stuck in your faith, look for the lessons you have chosen to ignore.

Third, are you working hard at planting seeds? It's easy to get discouraged as we try to share our faith with others. It's tempting to throw up our hands in despair as we look at the state of our world. But remember that just because we don't see God working doesn't mean He isn't. Sometimes growth is happening beneath the surface. Like good farmers, if we believe that God will make seeds grow in His timing, we should be fruitfully engaged in reaching out to others and giving our seeds the best chance to grow. We should be emboldened to share our faith, knowing that all God asks us to do is plant the seeds—He will cause them to grow.

I hope you are challenged by Jesus' words this morning—because I believe that's what He intended to happen! Don't allow yourself to coast in your faith. Be actively engaged in growing in your faith and in cultivating the soil of those around you. Our Lord promises that if we do these things, one day we will see not only growth, but a harvest that would bring a smile to any farmer's face...and more importantly, to the Lord's.

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