

“Christianity is dying. At least that’s what some major newspapers have been reporting lately. Research from a new Pew Center study seems to reinforce what almost all sociologists are observing these days— “the number of Americans who identify as Christians has reached an all-time low, and is falling.” The lead editor of the report told The New York Times that secularization—mainly in terms of those who identify as “nones” or with no specific religious affiliation—isn’t isolated to the progressive Northeast and Pacific Northwest, traditional “dead zones” for Christian activity, but “the change is taking place all over, including the Bible Belt.”

What does this mean? Well, it’s not good news for America. After all, when Andy was Sherriff of Mayberry at least we enjoyed some agreement on the definition of “traditional family values.” Marriage was easy to define, adultery was impossible to defend and your neighbor’s family looked a lot like our own. Churchgoing was part of being a good parent, a good neighbor, and a good American. Being an atheist meant social marginalization. Not now. Andy isn’t the Sherriff anymore.

What is bad news for Mayberry could be good news for the gospel. Russell Moore, in his blog “*Moore to the Point*” writes, “We don’t have Mayberry anymore, if we ever did. Good. Mayberry leads to hell just as surely as Gomorrah does. But Christianity didn’t come from Mayberry in the first place, but from a Roman Empire hostile to the core to the idea of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. We’ve been on the wrong side of history since Rome, and it was enough to turn the world upside down.” What do we have to offer a world spinning out of control? What do you do when a nation seems hell bent on casting off any restraining influence of the church and Christianity? The answer is found in Mark 4.

I hope we never forget that Jesus was preparing His followers in a hostile environment. Christians were squeezed between a godless totalitarian government that crucified people who criticized it and a religious system that still stoned people who did not comply with their rules. On any given day you could be stoned or strung up. So Jesus was very intentional in His training of the twelve.

So far in our study we have seen that following Jesus begins with the right response to the word of God. A Jesus follower, as opposed to a Jesus fan, submits to the authority of the Bible and values the words of Jesus over the rules of men. As we spread His word we will encounter various groups; the curious, the conflicted, the contrarian, the concerned and the called.

Today, in Mark 4, we are going to see that the calling of those first disciples is the same as our calling today – to broadcast the seed of the gospel so that the Kingdom of God grows. A follower of Jesus spreads the gospel so that the Kingdom expands. Let’s consider some important reminders for seed sowers (one major point and two lesser):

**The kingdom grows unpredictably...1-25.** You cannot predict how people will respond because you cannot know the condition of a person’s heart...until you sow the seed. The word of God reveals the condition of the heart. Let’s take a look at the four responses Jesus mentions:

a. Some people are hard-hearted...vv. 4, 15. Jesus equates this person’s heart to that hard-pan, sun-baked clay path that is almost impossible to penetrate. Seeds that falls on this soil don’t have a chance. Satan will see to it that any argument for the gospel will be quickly dismissed as just a passing thought.

b. Some people are shallow-hearted...vv. 5-6, 16-17. These are people who are receptive initially but they wilt under the scorching sun. The sun in this case comes in the form of tribulation and persecution.

c. Some people are half-hearted...vv. 7, 18-19. This is such a good reminder to us that three of the greatest obstacles to our own spiritual growth are worries, wealth and wants.

d. Some people are whole-hearted...vv. 8, 20.

This parable has confused those who try to interpret Jesus’ words as a diagnostic tool to discern who is and who is not saved. The first person is clearly unsaved, the fourth is clearly saved but what about the second and third guy? Are they saved or not? Well, here is the answer – that’s not what the parable is talking about. A parable has a simple point. It is not an allegory where the reader has to correlate every detail of the story to a spiritual reality. Jesus’ point is a simple one - there will be all kinds of responses to the gospel. Some hearts are like hard soil. They will be obvious. Others will appear at first to be responsive but time and circumstances will reveal that the word is having little or no effect in their lives. But don’t be discouraged when it seems like people don’t “get it.” The whole-hearted will embrace the message and a process will begin in their lives that will lead to a fruitful and productive ministry. So just keep throwin’ the seed.

There are two more observations about the kingdom in this chapter.

**The kingdom grows automatically...vv. 26-29.** It is such a comforting thought that is easy to forget. We cannot create life. We can only create circumstances conducive to life. The word that jumps off the page at me is the word “by itself” in v. 28. It is the word “automate.” The process is automatic. A farmer cannot make a crop. He can only cultivate the soil, plant the seeds, pull the weeds, water the plants and leave the results to God. This is why I avoid referring to “raising children.” We are to train them. Kids will grow automatically. Just feed them, give them a place to sleep, keep them safe and they will grow. But training them requires some work.

**The kingdom grows disproportionately...30-34.** The smallest seed in the garden gives birth to the tallest shrub. The work of God is disproportionate to the efforts of men. That is why we should never be deceived by the American measure of success – bigger is always better. The more people in church the better the church. The more money we make the happier we will be. I think God’s people should develop more of a mustard seed mentality. After all, what were the chances that a small group of grief-stricken followers of a crucified carpenter would make one wit of difference in a world dominated by one of the greatest empires in human history? Have you read about what happened? It is easy to get preoccupied counting all the seeds in the apple and forgetting about how many apples there are in a seed. One simple seed can lead to an ongoing harvest.

That’s the lesson of Edward Kimball. Kimball, a Sunday School teacher in Boston in the nineteenth-century. He shared the gospel with a shoe clerk named Dwight Moody. D. L. Moody became an evangelist and pastor who had a major influence on a young preacher named Frederick B. Meyer. Meyer went preached on college campuses and while doing so, he converted J. Wilbur Chapman. Chapman became a pastor and evangelist and took a former professional baseball player named Billy Sunday under his wing. Billy Sunday did a series of evangelistic meetings in Charlotte, North Carolina. Those meetings were so fruitful that a group of Charlotte community leaders brought in another preacher named Mordecai Hamm to do revival services. In those meetings a young man named Billy Graham yielded his life to Christ. I don’t need to tell you much about Billy Graham except to say that one night Billy Graham preached by way of video in an auditorium in Los Angeles and there was a young man in that audience who heard the gospel for the first time and made his way forward to do whatever was necessary to follow Christ. My life was changed forever on that night.

And now I sow this seed with the confidence that it will not return void but it will produce fruit – thirty fold, sixty fold, a hundred fold.

So every time you see something that makes you homesick for Mayberry remember there is a place far better than Mayberry in your future and you are authorized to invite others to come and be part of it. So spread the word. **If you are a follower of Jesus then He has called you to sow the seed of the gospel.** Jesus did not come to earth to make a fallen world moral through social and governmental reform, but to make new creatures holy through the saving power of the gospel and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. We are called to be a kingdom of priests not the promoters of a political party. Our calling is not to promote a God-and-Country civil religion that prizes cultural conservatism more than theological faithfulness.

Spread the word, you never know where it might end up. It could end up in the ICU of Mass. General Hospital or even at the end of the earth. A couple of years ago Jonathan and Nikki Hollis were working in Antarctica. Nikki was doing supplies and Jonathan was a firefighter in the summer and doing search and rescue in the winter. There were times when he worked at the South Pole with 30 or 40 others. In the summer the population swelled to 130. Jonathan said he went through dark period during the long, dark days at the South Pole. He Googled non-denominational churches in Dallas and started listening to sermons coming from this room. Now the Hollis’s are part of our family.

So let’s keep broadcasting this great good news to the hard-hearted, shallow-hearted, half-hearted or whole-hearted. Do not put your lamp under a basket or under the bed. Let’s be a lighthouse for Christ right here in the middle of this city. Be generous with the truth and God will be generous with you. (v. 24). Spread this message like seed to the puzzled pessimist, the messed up materialist, the addicted and the afflicted and Jesus will build His church.

Again, Russell Moore says, “The future of Christianity is bright. I don’t know that from surveys and polls, but from a word Someone spoke one day back at Caesarea Philippi. (“I will build my church and the gates of hell won’t prevail against it”). The gates of hell haven’t gotten any stronger, and the Light that drives out the darkness is enough to counter every rival gospel, even those gospels that describe themselves as ‘none.’”