

The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself

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In his children's book, *Frog and Toad Together*, Arnold Lobel depicts a toad planting a garden and becoming impatient for the seeds to grow. He is convinced he has to help the seeds along. First, he tells them to start growing. Then, he commands them to grow. Next, he goes out at night and reads them a story. He then sings them songs, reads poetry to them, and then plays them music on his fiddle. Finally, being very tired, he falls asleep. While he is asleep and doing nothing, the seeds sprout from the ground. Unfortunately, the toad doesn't learn the lesson and concludes that the seeds came up because of all his hard work. I wonder if Arnold Lobel had the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself in mind when he wrote that story?

This parable of Jesus appears only in Mark 4:26-29. It is an often overlooked parable that teaches an important lesson that many, especially many preachers (if not toads), would do well to learn. Mark 4:26-29:

And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

Although some have suggested that this is Mark's variation of the Parable of the Tares of the Field, there is no reason to assume this. This parable is quite different from the Parable of the Tares of the Field and teaches a unique lesson.

Symbols and Explanation

Jesus does not explain the meaning of this parable. Nevertheless, we can understand what the symbols stand for by their use in the Parable of the Sower as recorded in Mark 4 (see verses 3-8 and 4-20).

I. The Man Casting the Seed: A man casting seed is the same as a sower. In Mark 4:14, Jesus says, "The sower soweth the word." This identifies the sower as someone who spreads the Gospel. As I explained in "The Parable of the Sower" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>), the indication is that the Parable of the Sower primarily applies to Jesus' ministry. Although the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself contains lessons that anyone who spreads the Gospel can learn from, because Mark 4:29 says of the same man who casts the seed that "he putteth in the sickle," I believe we should understand the man in this parable as referring to Jesus. Of course, when someone preaches the Gospel, he does so under the authority of Jesus, as an extension of Jesus' ministry, and, therefore, it can be thought of as Jesus spreading the Word.

Man casting the seed=Jesus Christ

II. The Seed: Referring back to Mark 4:14, we see that Jesus identifies what the sower sows—the seed—as "the word." (In Matthew 13:38, referring to the Parable of the Tares of the Field, Jesus says, "The good seed are the children of the kingdom." But, because Mark excludes that parable, there is no reason to use Jesus' explanation for that parable here in Mark.)

Seed=Word of God preached in the world

With this information, we see that the man "casts" seed to the earth. The word "cast" is *balē*, meaning "throws." It suggests that the planting of this seed is not careful. It is thrown indiscriminately. Therefore, in this way, it matches the picture in the Parable of the Sower of the Seed. That is, the seed falls where it may. This is a picture of the Gospel being preached and published indiscriminately to all the earth. We then learn that the man sleeps and rises, night and day. I see no reason to take this as having any greater significance than showing the passage of time. During this time, the seed sprouts and grows; that is, the Word of God results in people becoming Christians.

We now read that the man does not know how this happens. This should not be seen as a deficiency in the man. Jesus' intention is not to say anything about the man here, but to express that a mystery is at work here. He is conveying a concept similar to what He said to Nicodemus: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). In other

words, we should see that the way in which the Gospel brings forth a harvest of saved people is a mystery. In Romans 1:16, Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." What we see in this parable is the power of God in the Word being preached. Just as it is a mystery how something so mundane looking as a seed can bring forth a plant that produces fruit, so it is a mystery how the Gospel results in Christians.

The first part of Mark 4:28 says, "For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself." "Of herself" is translated from the Greek word *automatē*. As you might imagine, this word can be translated "automatically." The Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself is a direct contradiction of preachers who think they have to plead, have altar calls, use music, or add any other gimmicks to the Word of God. This parable teaches that all the preacher has to do is cast the seed—preach the Gospel. The rest, at least from our point of view, will happen by itself.

III. Sequence of Growth: The second part of Mark 4:28 describes the sequence of growth: "First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." This is talking about growth, from the time of seeing the first green blades of grain plants sprouting from the ground to the time of harvest.

But when is this harvest that Jesus is talking about? It is true that in Matthew 13:39, Jesus says, "the harvest is the end of the world." But Mark does not include such a statement, and I believe this was inspired so as not to cause confusion. The parable that Jesus is explaining in Matthew 13:37-50 is illustrating something different. Remember, as I have already pointed out, in Matthew 13:38, Jesus says, "the good seed are the children of the kingdom." But in Mark 4, the seed is the Word. So, Mark 4:28 is not talking about the harvest at the end of the world when the children of the kingdom will be separated from the children of the wicked one. This harvest in Mark is talking about a different kind of harvest altogether.

In John 4:35, Jesus says, "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." This was a harvest that was ready even at that time. Referring back to the mission that Jesus had sent his apostles on, He says, "For herein is the saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye have not labored: others have labored, and ye are entered into their labor" (John 4:37-38). In other words, the Old Testament

prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus have sown the Word that was now bearing ripe grain for the apostles to harvest. I believe it is significant that the word "sent" in John 4:38 and the word poorly translated as "he putteth in" in Mark 4:29 is the same Greek word. The word is *apostellō*. It is the verb form of *apostolos*, which is the Greek word for apostle. *Apostellō* means to send forth on a mission. *Apostolos* is one who is sent forth on a mission. In John 4:38, Jesus is telling His disciples that He had sent them on a mission to reap in the harvest. In Mark 4:29, Jesus is saying basically the same thing. When the time of the harvest is come, the One who sowed the Word—in this case, Jesus—sends forth on a mission "the sickle." Who, then, is the sickle? The sickle represents the apostles, the ones sent forth on a mission. They are to harvest the people who come to fruition because of the sown Word.

Harvest=people in whom the Word of God grows and are then gathered into the kingdom of God (this is happening in this age)
Sickle=those sent to harvest people into the kingdom of God

The Lesson of the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself

The lesson of this parable is really quite simple. Jesus—in His Word spoken during His earthly ministry, in the words of His apostles spoken during their lives, and in the written Word preserved for us in the Bible—is, throughout this age, casting His Word indiscriminately throughout the earth. This Word automatically results in many people who hear or read it coming to the state where they are ready to be harvested into the kingdom of God, and they are harvested by the servants Jesus sends on this mission. This harvest is simply the second part of the Great Commission: after the Word is preached, those who believe (those who are ready to be harvested) are baptized and taught. The parable was for the time of Jesus ministry, the time of the apostles, and continues to have application today.

Application of the Parable to Our Lives

What does this parable tell us today?

1) Because the seed representing the Word of God is cast or thrown indiscriminately into the earth, this parable tells us that the Gospel is to go to all indiscriminately. The Word of God is to be preached and published throughout the earth. Thus, we must not fall into the error of thinking that the Gospel is to be preached only to the elect. The spoken and written Word must reach as many as possible. Only God

knows whom He wants to save, and He will have those people respond positively to the Word.

2) This parable should teach us that "the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself" (Mark 4:28). That is, although we can be used of God to spread God's Word, God's Word it must be. The fruit is not brought forth by our own words. We must be careful when we are teaching God's Word that we are sticking close to it and not wandering into our own ideas. Also, I know of no place in the Bible that supports such practices as telling our own testimony to bring people to Christ. Our testimony is our own words, and, while it can be of interest to people and even help them see God's working in our lives, we should not think that it will bring forth fruit for the harvest. Only God's Word results in fruit ready for harvest. And, as I have already pointed out, in direct contradiction of preachers who think they have to plead, such unbiblical additions as altar calls, emotional music, or any other gimmicks added to the preaching of the Gospel to try to get people to make a decision are of no use in the harvest. They will never result in more people being saved than if they had not been used, and they present the very real danger of producing false conversions due to mere emotional responses.

In regards to the topic of spreading the Word, we should realize that we have methods for casting God's Word to the earth today that were not available in the first century A.D. In the first century, Paul wrote, "For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher [*kērussontos*—"herald"]?" (Romans 10:11-14). In the first century, we would have to have answered Paul by saying, "Yes, they cannot hear unless a herald be sent announcing the Good News." But now we must honestly admit that they can also "hear" through radio, television, the internet, and printed books and other publications. In fact, I suppose that nothing has led to more people learning the Word of God than the printing and dissemination of Bibles in the common languages of the people. Certainly, I am not saying that heralds cannot also still be sent. In fact, in some cases workers are needed to first teach the people to read, or even, sometimes, to first create a written language. Nevertheless, it is true that in many cases, the herald is now the Bible itself with the ones

sent forth now being the first century apostles as their words are recorded in the Bible.

3) But while the above is true regarding the casting of the Word to the earth, this parable teaches us that there must also be a sickle sent forth to harvest those who are ready. In John 4:1-2, we read, "When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,)." We see here that Jesus did not baptize. Later in this same chapter are the verses that we have already seen where Jesus tells his apostles that they were harvesting what others had sown. Paul also makes this distinction when, in 1 Corinthians 1:17, he explains that "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Paul's ministry was one of sowing, not harvesting. I am not saying that one can never be involved in both ministries, but I am saying that there is not a necessary connection. Today, the Word of God is spread by very many means. People can be exposed to the Word of God without ever coming into direct contact with a Christian. But harvesting is another matter. People need to go out to those who have been brought to the point of harvest by the Word of God, make contact with them, baptize them, welcome them into the kingdom of God, and, as the case may be, answer questions, teach, and generally comfort and establish them (see 1 Thessalonians 3:2) in their walk as members of the called out assembly of the kingdom of God (the *ekklēsia*).

The next parable we will examine in this series will be the Parable of the Mustard Seed.