



Speaker:  
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## Growing Together

◀ Series: The Gospel of Mark • 13 of 13

8/2/2020 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 4:21-34**

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Last time, we looked at that famous parable of the sower. Today, we're looking at verses 21 to 34.

This continues with the theme of the gospel seed and the kingdom of God. Straightaway, we see Jesus make a comparison between a literal light which illuminates a room and the gospel light which illuminates hearts. Do we take a lamp, he asks, and hide it somewhere so that its light can't shine? And how he applies this is to repeat a point he's already made. It's to remind us that this gospel light is hidden from some and manifested to others. It's secret to some but revealed to others. We said that it was by the sovereign will of God that gospel truth is spread widely yet thoroughly affects few. Far more people have heard the gospel message than have received it gladly.

Many commentators, having in their minds a picture of a saviour who loves all equally, find these truths uncomfortable. They cannot accept that God would deliberately withhold salvation from people. So they try to explain away what they see as harshness, an inequality that cannot possibly come from God. We know otherwise. Think about what Jesus says in John's gospel (Joh 10:27). He says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Who hears his voice? **His sheep**. Oh everyone hears the words of the gospel when it's preached, **but only the sheep hear the effectual call of God in it**. Remember what it says in Acts 13:48. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: *and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.*" The ones who believed had already been chosen for salvation by God in his eternal decree of election.

We see the same pattern of events today. Many people have heard, and continue to hear, the gospel. And even though preachers of the gospel are as clear as they can be, their message makes no sense to most. Yet amongst the masses God has his sheep. And through the words of faithful men, they hear the voice of Jesus say, *Come unto me and rest*. They have to know more. They might ask the preacher questions. They might go on the internet and do some research. Eventually they will find themselves sitting in a church building listening to the word of God being expounded. The fuller explanation of the gospel they first heard is fed to them week by week. And like the disciples of old who asked Jesus to tell them more about the parables, these repentance souls come to hear more about the marvellous gospel that we preach.

Today, we're mostly talking about what happens when God's elect people are drawn towards Christ. When verse 23 uses that familiar phrase, "If any man has ears to hear, let him hear", we can understand it in two ways. Firstly, it is a plain fact. It is a proclamation by Jesus Christ. In the same fashion as he proclaimed "Let there be light" and there was light he now says, *Those whom I have chosen to receive understanding **let them understand***, and they understand!

Secondly, the statement speaks to us who have been given understanding. You have this unbelievable privilege of being able to understand the things of God in a way that the world cannot. So you must use it. Isaiah 55:3 declares, "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." Work hard at listening to God through his faithful ministers. Put effort into listening to God as you read his word. Jesus emphasizes this in verse 24: "Take heed what you hear." In other words, **pay attention** to what you hear. "With what measure you mete", he says, "it shall be measured to you." This might not be clear to the modern reader, but it simply means you get out what you put in. Those who hear the gospel then afterwards make efforts to learn more will be rewarded. If, by the operations of the Holy Spirit of God, they pursue Jesus Christ until they find him and have him in their hearts, they'll receive more revelation and that in abundance.

We've looked at this operation of God not so long ago, in John's letters. God creates an inequality among people. Just as those who have heard something of the truth of God end up getting more, the ones who ignore the message end up having even that small revelation stripped from them. What this means in reality is described in Luke 19:24. "And he said unto them that stood by, 'Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds.'"

This will appear unfair to the average person. The world understands fairness. It's one of those ideas that is in them because they are the offspring of God. He allows men to act in ways that benefit society. Without these mercies, the world would descend into a giant Satanic frenzy. And he preserves the world in this way in order that his purposes are seen through to the end. And although the world's ideas about equality are flawed, they can be beneficial. In our society, we see to it that poorer people who are not working are given support. We have a health service everyone has access to. And the same equalizing practice was carried out by the apostles, taking offerings of money from better off Christians and distributing it to those with less. So fairness is usually the best policy.

But God has a purpose that will create a huge INequality. And it's not only in the way I described. It goes further. When Jesus returns to judge this world, he will take from sinners every comfort and enjoyment they've had in this life. They didn't have much on this earth, but God will take even that from them. They'll have no thoughts to comfort them and no companions to share their burdens with. And through eternity, there'll be the knowledge that there are others out there, God's children, who already had spiritual life and untold

blessings in their Christian lives, yet receive immeasurably more in their resurrection life. It starts as an equality gap and gets made wider.

Let's move on to the next two parts of this account.

Firstly, the kingdom of God is likened to a seed that is planted. As time passes, the seed emerges. It grows. And the end of its growth is fruit. At this point, it's ready to be harvested. This harvest is, of course, the end of the world. But I'd like us to focus on the growth that takes place before the harvest. You and I, like these individual stalks of wheat, grow during our Christian lives. That's normal. It's to be expected. More than that: it's *required* of us. And how do we achieve that growth? By the means God has provided.

We read in 1 Peter 2:2, "As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." The advice to one who has been converted by God is to look at the basics. They are to look at the gospel itself. They should find out more about Jesus. They ought to get an overview of the scriptures. They start with the basic stuff first.

But it must not stop there. It's always been a complaint of God's under-shepherds that some believers don't grow as they should. Their growth is stunted. That is, they do desire the sincere milk of the word, but they want to live on that milk for the rest of their lives! They don't move on. Who wouldn't think it odd for an adult to live on baby milk? Well it's just as undesirable for one who has been a Christian for a number of years to be happy to get by with their basic knowledge of God and the Bible. They may defend themselves. They may try to mask their laziness with noble sounding claims like, "I just have a simple faith" or "I just want to know about Jesus". Well we all want a childlike faith. We all want to know more about Jesus. But that doesn't mean that we remain in a state of being adult babies! We are to *grow*. Paul complains in this way in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able." How embarrassing. Paul wanted to take them further, but he had to keep reminding them of the basics.

- They were not diligent in their growth.
- They were not paying attention to what they heard.
- They were not living by that maxim of Jesus, when he said that the more you put in the more you get out.
- They weren't too interested in Jesus' principal that if they should meditate on his word he will greatly add to their blessing.
- It didn't concern them that their growth was stunted. They were lazy in using the means of grace that God had kindly provided for all his people.

Let me clarify something at this stage. Sanctification in the Bible is mostly used to describe how God sets us apart as vessels for his own glory. It's used only secondarily to describe changes in behaviour. When we're converted, we receive the perfect righteousness of Jesus

Christ himself. We have the Holy Spirit making his home in our hearts. We are truly new creations. And it's this new standing before God that is our acceptance with him. **We are accepted because we are in Christ.** United to him. Sharing his state of sinlessness.

But as we observed when looking at John's letters, our outward behaviour doesn't always reflect the presence of the perfect Spirit of Christ in us. The relics of our former selves tempt us to sin. But we're encouraged by God to see to it that our outward behaviour reflects our new nature more than our old, so that we more and more love what is good and hate what is wicked. This is Christian growth. But we should never think that by this growth we become more acceptable in God's sight. That's a risk. And this is why I avoid terms like "progressive sanctification" or refer to one person as "holier" than another. I'm simply exercising caution.

What then is this growth? Peter, who we have just heard rebuke believers for being careless says in his other letter (2 Peter 3:18), "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." You might like to think of these two aspects as growth in the *heart* and growth in the *head*. So growth is not proper unless it's made up of these two aspects. And they're firmly connected. Growth in one area leads to growth in the other.

Consider what happens when we attend to God's word. With the Holy Spirit lighting our way, we explore it. We make discoveries. We learn the doctrine of Christ. On an intellectual level, we learn facts and understand doctrines. But at the same time, our hearts are warmed towards Jesus. We love him more, and we become more attached to his flock. And this joyful attraction leads to us wanting to know more. And so we return to the scriptures. We carefully listen to the ministry of the word. We pray more heartily. We involve ourselves emotionally at the breaking of bread. And so it is that this cycle continues: growth in grace and growth in knowledge, each one feeding the other.

If we look back in our text, at verse 30, we now see **Jesus comparing the kingdom of God to the growth of a mustard seed.** Very small things were commonly likened to this very small seed. And you will know that Jesus employed aspects of the world he lived in when creating his parables. In that culture, the mustard seed was used to describe very small things. Had Jesus lived in our culture, he might have likened small things to an atom. But in the picture he wanted to paint here, the very small thing had to be a seed anyway. Because this was about growth. The mustard seed, like the seed in the previous example, grows into a mature plant. This tiny seed was known to be able to grow into a large shrub. The seed changes into a plant millions of times bigger than itself.

Think about the humble beginnings of the New Testament church. It begins with a man, albeit a very special kind of man. He's born into a nondescript town. He's not born into money. In all outward appearances, he couldn't be more normal. His ministry was impressive. But it lasted only a few short years. Awareness of it was limited to a relatively small region of the world. Most of the population of the planet carried on as normal, unaware that God had come in the flesh and was walking the same earth as them.

So the beginnings were very small, like the mustard seed. And anyone who plants a seed must see it disappear from their sight. It goes in the ground. Even that which they had they no longer have. They have to commit it to the earth in the hope that it will bring forth fruit. And so it was with the saviour. His followers had to witness him taken from them, killed, and placed in the ground. But all this was necessary. Like the new life resulting from the death of the seed, our Lord was gloriously raised from the dead. He became alive again, and is alive today! And this was the start of a new movement of God whereby his salvation would extend to all the nations of the world.

You would do well to take note here that the Church of God is described for us in two different ways. We firstly considered how we are individual plants growing to maturity. But here, we are all viewed as one plant. Both of these perspectives are correct. We are individual Christians, but we are part of one body. We are both many *and* one. This is why Jesus's death is described as being for each one of us *and* for the church. Every believer is regarded as the Bride of Christ, and the church as a whole is also his bride. You, the individual believer, were in the forefront of Jesus Christ's mind as he suffered on the cross. But you were also viewed as part of an organic whole.

Think about what this tells us about growth. We've spoken about growth as individual believers. I pray for you all, individually, that you would grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I exhort you to be diligent in the things of God. It's my job to, as it were, *pester* you to rely on God more and to do more.

Yet we're also, like this mustard plant, to grow as one. Were to grow together. This is what the local church is for. The idea of working out your faith at home is alien to the Bible. When someone tells me they don't attend public worship but instead have a private faith, I read that as NO faith. That may sound a bit too harsh to you. But remember: the one who is growing in the way that we've described will love the brethren more and more. They will learn that Jesus is not only the saviour of the individual but of the body also. And they will see that it is expected that the believer will regularly meet with other believers for worship.

And so it is that we come together. The church listens together, studies together and prays together. And even though it is practically impossible for the global church to worship in the same place at the same time, all these individual gatherings are viewed by God in that way. He sees one, united church offering up praise to his heavenly throne and listening to him through his word. We grow as individuals and we grow together.

We talked earlier about the harvest of the crops. We can consider the harvest in two ways. The Bible uses it to refer to the conversion of God's elect. Jesus himself exhorts us to pray that God would raise up men to evangelize the world and thereby gather in these people. So do please pray that God will do this. That he would mercifully dispense to men the gifts to bear his testimony to the world.

The Bible also uses the idea of a harvest to picture the ingathering of souls that will take place when Jesus returns, which is how it's used in our earlier parable. In that great harvest, the returning saviour will have in view all those who have died and all those who are alive at that time. And whether alive or dead, all will be separated into two groups and treated accordingly. On the one hand, there is the true wheat. This is to be taken into God's own barn. Everything else is taken and burned. **This harvest, then, pictures the great day of the resurrection of mankind.**

There is a spiritual resurrection. This describes the shift that takes place when God converts a man or woman. He raises them from spiritual death to spiritual life. But there is also a *material* resurrection, when all those who have died as believers will be brought to life again. Both of these are referred to in the following verses from John's Gospel. In John 5:24-29 it says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man."

So it's clear that conversion is described as life from the dead. But it continues as follows: "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation."

The resurrection of the body. What a glorious day!

- All the apostles—alive again!
- All the well-known characters in church history—alive again!
- The millions of ordinary but faithful saints throughout the ages—alive again!
- Our saved friends and relatives who have departed this life—alive again!

We have so much to look forward to, brethren. Sure, the Bible is silent about the nature of the world to come. We can only fantasize about the experiences that await us in Paradise. We *do* know **we shall be happy**. We do know that **we shall never want it to end**. In the meantime, friends, consider what we have learnt today. We've learnt that you believers have been chosen by God to receive the multitude of his blessings. We've learnt that we should make use of our privilege. We've learnt that we're to grow as individual believers AND as a body.

So I shall again leave you with the encouragement to love the Lord Jesus Christ, love his people and love to do his will.

Amen.