

ESF, Lord's Day Service Message
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Growing in Grace
Text: Mark 4:26-29

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

When we think about growing, we tend to focus on our own effort. But the foundation of growing is not of human effort, but God's grace. Either physically or spiritually we can't grow at all without God's grace. Then how does God's grace work for our growth and how can we receive the grace to grow?

God's grace works beyond man's understanding

A farmer does several things with a seed such as sowing it, watering it and fertilizing it. He sees it budding out of the soil and growing. But he can neither create life in the seed nor make the seed grow. The life of a seed is mysterious. Farmers cannot understand how the life of seed works and grows.

As the growth of life in a seed is mysterious so is man's physical and spiritual growth. We can't understand all the mysteries of God and how He makes changes in our hearts and makes us grow.

We may try but we will never understand everything in our growth, we will never get all the answers. We will only waste our energy and time searching for unanswerable questions. To receive God's grace we must acknowledge the limits of our understanding. It means that we have to

be humble before God who works in our growth with his infinite and unfathomable wisdom.

Job 11:7-9 says,

"Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?

They are higher than the heavens—what can you do?

They are deeper than the depths of the grave —what can you know?

Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.

It means that even if we don't understand the way God's grace works in a seed, we must keep sowing the seed. And God will make the seed powerfully grow.

A little girl loved the Lord and longed to help share the message of Christ with those in the mission field. So she contributed a penny to a missionary to help in the work of evangelizing the people of Burma. The missionary was so touched by the little girl's response that he decided to do the most he could with that little penny. After careful thought, he bought a gospel tract and personally gave it to a young chieftain. The chieftain would not admit that he could not read, yet he burned with a desire to know the contents of the leaflet. He traveled 250 miles to find someone who would read it to him. After hearing the gospel message, it was not long before this young chief made a profession of faith in Christ. Returning to his people, he told them what the Lord had done for him. Later he invited missionaries to come and share Jesus with the village. Many tribesmen accepted the good news and were converted. All this and probably more resulted from one dedicated penny given in Christ's name by a little girl who gave from her heart.

Don't wait until you understand everything of God's grace. Just do whatever you can do with the seed of the Gospel. And God's grace will

take care of everything else. You will eventually see wonderful growth in your life and other people's lives.

God's grace works beyond man's efforts

Although a farmer sows a seed, cultivates and fertilizes the soil, waters the soil, he can't do everything for the growth of the seed. He can't give life to the seed itself, or create soil, rain or sunlight. He can do nothing to cause life in the seed to spring up. He goes to sleep at night, gets up in the morning without doing anything to create the life of the seed and yet the seed brings forth fruit of itself according to its own time schedule. The essential needs for the growth of the seed can be met not by a farmer's effort but only by God's graceful power.

Thus when we receive the word of God in our hearts, we must depend upon God's grace for our spiritual growth rather than depending on our own efforts.

It does not mean that there is nothing we can do or we should do to grow. Just as farmers are doing their best to help their seeds grow, there are things we can do and we have to do to grow - meditating on the Word, praying constantly, participating in worship and fellowship regularly, reaching out to people, taking care of people with love etc.

It means that we should not try to control the content or direction of our own growth. It means that we should constantly trust in God's grace for our spiritual growth. It means that we should not be proud of ourselves when we see growth in our lives. It means that we should not depend upon any man's talent or wisdom but depend upon God's grace alone for our spiritual growth.

When the Corinthian believers depended upon famous leaders for their spiritual growth it brought conflicts among themselves, Paul reminded them of this truth in 1 Corinthians 3:5-7.

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

When you see any spiritual growth in your life, don't take credit for the growth to yourself or to people. Take credit to God for it. Although you do something for your growth, people may do something for your growth it is God's grace which has truly caused you to grow.

It also means that even if we are weak and fail from time to time, we must be confident of growth by God's grace. Growth in God's grace works so powerfully that it breaks through and overcomes all obstacles. "A tree can split a concrete pavement with the power of its growth. A weed can push its green head through an asphalt path. Nothing can stop growth. So it is with (*the growth in the*) kingdom of God. In spite of man's rebellion and disobedience, God's work goes on; and nothing in the end can stop the purpose of God" (William Barclay, the gospel of Mark, p. 108).

Whether you feel strong or weak, always depend upon the power in God's grace. Even if you have failed many times, don't give up sowing the seed of the Gospel in your heart and other people's hearts. Keep focusing on the mercy in God's grace. Keep depending on the power of God's grace.

God's grace works beyond man's time table

There are several different steps in the growth of every seed's life: "*the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head*"(verse 28).

If a farmer expects fruit at the time the seed is just a bud, he would get disappointed or even give up on farming altogether. But if the farmer knows how to wait for the different stages of growth until the seed ripens, he would not get disappointed and wait patiently for the harvest.

Wait patiently

Growing spiritually is the same. There are many different stages of a person's spiritual growth. When we receive the seed of the gospel in our hearts or plant the seed of the gospel in other people's hearts we should not expect results according to our own expectation. We should be patient until the seed of the gospel in a heart grows according to God's time table.

While we expect positive improvement in our lives according to our own time schedule, we may easily get impatient. We are living in an age when everything follows speed. Today people are not used to waiting patiently. So we are impatient in waiting too long for something. Why wait when everything is available immediately? That is many people's philosophy of life today. What is the problem with such an attitude? People miss the opportunity to grow which only comes through patient waiting. People are becoming shallow and weak in their character.

There was a tomato producer who found a way to "improve" his business. He would pick the tomatoes while they were still green and place them under a light (I think it was an ultraviolet light). The light caused the tomatoes to become red. He could then sell the tomatoes more quickly. The only problem, of course, was that the tomatoes didn't taste good because they weren't ripe.

But if we follow God's time table we can be content even if we don't see anything good according to our expectations. God operates in eternity. Even if we feel and think that nothing good happened to our lives for many years, in God's timing it may be a moment. Psalm 90:4 says, "*For*

a thousand years in your (God's) sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."

Although we feel that it is too long for us to wait, God never stops working to accomplish the wonderful promises given to us.

We need to hold on to this truth of gradual growth in life. When we patiently wait for the proper procedures of growth, we will enjoy the wonders of a life of real growing and the best fruit in due time. So, instead of hurrying up and pushing things to happen as we expect, we should patiently wait on God's time table. Be patient when growth seems to be slow. Wait for God.

Live with hope for the harvest

When a farmer sows a seed in the soil, and toils for the growth of the seed, he does that with hope. It is to get the harvest from the seed. He knows that the earth will not lie to him. He has hope that if he works diligently and waits patiently the harvest will surely come. Because of the hope, after doing everything he can do, he will not give up. Then at the time of harvest, he will forget all the hard labor he has put in. At that time he will rejoice at the harvest.

When we sow the seed of life in Jesus' gospel, the harvest time will surely come. God honors every labor in regard to spiritual life. The sufferings and labor and waiting while we work the seed of Jesus gospel will never go in vain. God will surely let us enjoy the wonders of real life growth and the best fruit in due time. Galatians 6:7-9 says, "*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*"

An elderly preacher was rebuked by one of his deacons one Sunday morning before the service. "Pastor," said the man, "something must be wrong with your preaching and your work. There's been only one person added to the church in the last year, and he's just a boy." The minister listened, his eyes moistening and his thin hand trembling. "I feel it all," he replied, "but God knows I've tried to do my duty." On that day the minister's heart was heavy as he stood before his flock. As he finished the message, he felt a strong inclination to resign. After everyone else had left, that one boy came to him and asked, "Do you think if I worked hard for an education, I could become a preacher-- perhaps a missionary?" Again tears welled up in the minister's eyes. "Ah, this heals the ache I feel," he said. "Robert, I see the Divine hand now. May God bless you, my boy. Yes, I think you will become a preacher." Many years later an aged missionary returned to London from Africa. His name was spoken with reverence. Nobles invited him to their homes. He had added many souls to the church of Jesus Christ, reaching even some of Africa's most savage chiefs. His name was Robert Moffat, the same Robert who years before had spoken to the pastor that Sunday morning in the old Scottish church.

Don't get disappointed when you do not see visible blessings immediately while you work for the Lord. Continue sowing the seed of the gospel with hope. Continue taking care of souls with hope in God's unfailing grace.