

God Causes the Growth

"The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows - how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." Mark 4:26-29

Since farming was commonly practiced in Israel, Jesus often used examples of planting and harvesting to teach His disciples about the kingdom of God. In this parable, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a seed that once deposited in the soil grows and produces a harvest apart from man's effort. Of course, the condition of the soil is also important and we will look at that shortly. The spiritual lesson of this parable is that God, not man, causes the growth in His kingdom. "So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6)." This is an important Biblical truth that many Christians do not understand. Although they know their salvation depended on God's mercy and not their own deeds, many Christians mistakenly think their spiritual growth now depends on their self-effort.

After we are saved, what should we do to grow as Christians? To answer this question, we need to look at another one of Jesus' parables. Jesus told a story of seed being sown on different kinds of ground (see Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:2-20; Luke 8:4-15). In this parable, the seed once again represents the kingdom of God and the soil represents the condition of our heart. Just as the condition of the soil determines how much fruit that the seed can produce, the condition of our heart determines how much spiritual fruit God can produce in us. Jesus said the seed was sown on four kinds of ground but only the last one yielded any fruit. "Other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown (Luke 8:8)." Jesus then said, "The seed in good soil, these are the ones who

have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15)." The lesson of this parable is that the gospel of the kingdom must be received in an honest and good heart to bear fruit. What is an "honest and good" heart? God said, "But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word (Isaiah 66:2)." With this in mind, the apostle Peter wrote, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand (1 Peter 5:6)." Based on these and many other Scriptures, we can conclude that, from God's point of view, a good and honest heart is a *humble* heart. The apostle James said, "In *humility* receive the word planted in you, which is able to save your souls (James 1:21)."

Just as we were saved when we received Christ with a humble heart full of faith, we must now live in Christ the same way. The apostle Paul taught, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught (Colossians 2:6-7)." Therefore, after we are born again, the next baby steps we take are very important. We know we were not able to save ourselves; however, after we are saved, we may wrongly conclude we can grow as Christians by trying our very best. This is a common trap that even the early Christians fell into. The apostle Paul admonished the Galatians for this wrong thinking, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh (*human effort*) (Galatians 3:3)?" All Christians through the centuries have faced this same dilemma. What is the work of God that we should do? When Jesus was asked this question, He replied, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent (John 6:29)." The work that God requires of us is always the work of faith - to believe in Jesus Christ and His completed work on the cross (1 Corinthians 2:2). This does not diminish the purpose and value of Bible study, prayer and acts of service. However, we will never spiritually grow and bear fruit unless we learn to abide (stay rooted by faith) in Christ and His death and resurrection (John 15:4).

The Bible says that when Christ died, we died with Him and our sinful nature was removed from us (Romans 6:6). God can deal with our sins but He cannot deal with our unbelief. If we do not believe Christ died for us, Christ's death cannot save us. In the same way, if we do not believe our sinful nature has died in Christ, Christ's life cannot bear fruit in us. Just as we could not save ourselves, we cannot spiritually grow apart from faith in the cross of Christ.

Jesus Christ said, "He who abides in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit (John 15:5)." When we were born again, God planted us in Christ (Romans 11:16-24). Our responsibility is to now stay rooted by faith in Christ and in what He accomplished for us by His death on the cross. We must strongly resist the urge to try harder outside of faith. It is impossible for us to grow in Christ no matter how hard we try. The Bible says "It does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy (Romans 9:16)." Just as faith was the key to our salvation and new birth, faith is also the key to our sanctification and spiritual growth. If we abide (stay rooted by faith) in the truth of Christ's death, God will cause Christ's life to be formed in us. "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:5)." In another parable, Jesus compared the kingdom of God to planting a mustard seed. When sown into good soil, the seed grew into a tree larger than everything else and took over the whole garden. If we know we have died in Christ and we no longer have a sinful nature, then let us fix our eyes on Jesus. He is not only the author of our faith; He is the perfecter of our faith and His life will grow within us until He takes over our whole life.

Jesus said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed... though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants." Mark 4:30-32