

A Parable About the Kingdom of God

Mark 4:26-29

Mark 4:26-29 – *“And He said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”*

Background Notes

Here we have a short parable about the kingdom of God. As you know, many of the parables are contained in more than one Gospel, but this particular parable is found only in the Gospel of Mark.

In verse 26, in the phrase, “a man scatters seed on the ground” or “casts seed on the ground,” the idea is not that the man doesn’t know what he’s doing, and just kind of throwing seed around haphazardly. No - this was how farmers sowed their seed in those days. They scattered it on the ground, and then they plowed it in. We saw this in the parable of the sower.

Doctrinal Point

Spiritual maturity is a gradual process.

The ripening grain represents spiritual maturity. What does “spiritual maturity” mean in this parable? Was the Lord talking about the spiritual maturity of the Christian or the maturity of the Kingdom - because it’s a parable about the Kingdom of God? Well, not everyone is agreed, and there are two basic interpretations for this little parable.

The first interpretation is that the maturity in this parable is spiritual maturity of the Christian. Christians sow the seed, and people receive the Word of God and believe it, and they become Christians. And now they begin to grow, and they mature as Christians. And if that is the interpretation of the little parable, the point is that there is no shortcut to spiritual maturity. Spiritual growth is like the growth of a plant. Once the seed is received, it will continue to grow - but maturity won’t be instantaneous. Philippians 1:6 certainly assures us that growth will continue: *“Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* But spirituality is not instantaneous. In this interpretation, the harvest time is the Day of Christ—that is, the day that we meet the Lord.

The second interpretation is that the Kingdom itself is in view—the maturity of the Kingdom. The Lord Jesus is the “man” in verse 26, and He planted the good seed of His Word during His earthly ministry. Then He went back to Heaven. (In this interpretation, by the way, some people feel that the meaning of the man “sleeping and rising up” may picture the death and resurrection of Christ. Although I tend to lean towards this second interpretation, I believe that the idea that the death and resurrection of Christ is represented here is pushing the parable a bit too far!) In any case, in this interpretation, the Lord has gone back to heaven, and in the mean-time the Kingdom is maturing.

The power is in the Word itself, since the Lord Jesus is not as actively involved as He was in His earthly ministry. The power is in the living Word of God, as Romans 10:17 says: “*Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.*” And not only is the gospel spreading and bearing fruit, but the Kingdom itself is maturing.

After the Lord planted the seed and returned to heaven, there were the early days of the Church, followed by the post-apostolic days where the faith was continuing to grow and spread. Think of early Church history, when the Church was maturing, and the essential doctrines of the faith were being hammered out at the church councils. In councils in those early centuries AD, heresies were debated and debunked, and the doctrine of Christ was defined: that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, fully God and fully man. Farther on in Church history, the Kingdom took a giant step in the maturing process during the Reformation, with the recovery of the great truth of justification by faith. So you understand the idea of the Kingdom maturing, and that may be the interpretation.

And the harvest is coming! The time when the grain ripens may come soon. We don’t know when full maturity and the harvest will occur, or when God’s sovereign plans and program for the Kingdom will take place, but when it does, the harvest will certainly come.

I tend to agree with the second interpretation because the “man” who sows the seed is the very one who puts in the sickle at the harvest and reaps the mature grain. Notice verse 29: “*but when the grain ripens, immediately He [that is, the man who sowed back in verse 26] (He) puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come.*” Well, we believers don’t do that! Only the Lord puts in the sickle! Now it’s true, if you like the first interpretation, we certainly do reap the joy of seeing believers grow and become spiritually mature, as we sow the seed and see people become Christians and go on in discipleship. So we certainly do participate in the harvest in the sense that we reap the joy of seeing believers grow and mature spiritually.

But it seems to me there’s more involved in the harvest than just the joy we experience at seeing believers grow. The man putting in the sickle is the same man who scattered the seed, but he’s immediately putting in the sickle and gathering the ripened grain when He sees that the grain is ripe or mature. That seems to me to fit better with the idea of God’s program for the Kingdom and the return of the Lord Jesus.

It fits quite well, I believe, with the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. That is also a parable of the Kingdom. In Matthew 13, the wheat and the tares were to be gathered together at harvest time, and then the tares (the evil part) were taken out and burned, and then the good wheat, the ripened grain, was gathered into the barn (Matthew 13:30). This little parable fits very nicely with that parable of the Kingdom in Matthew 13. So it seems to me the best interpretation is that of the kingdom maturing—the Lord starts things off and returns to Heaven, but the maturing process continues - and there will be a harvest.

Now the doctrinal point, that spiritual maturity is a gradual process, is also true if you go with the first interpretation. Whichever interpretation you take, it is true that spiritual maturity is a gradual process. The Bible teaches that there is no shortcut to spiritual maturity in the individual Christian life. But I believe that the best interpretation is that, since it's a parable of the Kingdom, it's talking about the maturing process of the Kingdom of God, and the harvest is yet to come.

Practical Application

You can be sure that there will be a harvest!

This application is helpful, regardless of which interpretation you take on the parable. Whether it refers to the spiritual maturity of individual believers, or the spiritual maturity of the Kingdom itself, we can be sure that there will be a harvest.

In the first interpretation, we can be sure that if we scatter the seed there will be results. People will be saved, and disciples will be made. The power is in the Word itself. We don't save a person; God does it through His Word. Romans 10:17 again: *"Faith cometh by hearing, hearing by the Word of God."* We sow the seed, but God does the work. The Spirit of God working in the hearts and lives of believers will bring about spiritual maturity. Isaiah 55:11 would apply here: *"My word will not return unto me void."* There will be a harvest. I Corinthians 15:58 would apply here as well: *"Finally, my brethren, be steadfast, unmoving, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as you know your labor is not in vain in the Lord."* There definitely will be a harvest!

In the second interpretation, where the harvest is the final stage of God's program for the Kingdom, this application is valid here as well. Just as the farmer didn't understand how the plants grew, so we can't figure out the inner workings of God's maturing process - but we can be sure that God's program for the Kingdom is right on schedule. And there *will* be a harvest!

So let's not be discouraged, and let's not throw in the towel because of what we think are "small results" in our service for the Lord. We all are part of God's great program for the spiritual growth of the Kingdom, and we are to continue to do our "small" part. And we can be sure that the program of spiritual maturity is going on. Before the harvest comes, the Lord will use you and me in some small way to help in His work of bringing the grain, His Kingdom, to maturity. So, our studies together here in the Gospel of Mark are all part of God's program for His Kingdom, to bring the grain to the ripened condition - because the harvest is sure to come!