

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the seed growing in secret** in Mark 4:26-29. This is a parable concerning THE GROWTH OF GODS KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

A parable a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Please read Mark 4:26-29 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Mark 4:26-29 says, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain - first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

What are the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable?

(S) The growth of a plant is a mystery. In the realm of nature, *growth* is always a mystery! Whether it is the growth of plants or trees, or of animals or people, nobody can adequately explain why and how growth takes place! The farmer scatters the seed on his field, fully realising that he cannot cause those seeds to grow. He lacks all control over the processes of germination, sprouting, growth, fruit-forming and fruit-bearing. Many days and nights pass in which the farmer does nothing to the plants and yet, growth takes place! But he does not know how! All the farmer can do is trust that the seeds will grow and wait patiently till the harvest-time. To be sure, he can cover the seeds, pull up the weeds, loosen the soil, add fertiliser, and perhaps even give water to the plants. All these things are important, but they do not cause the growth!

(T) The seed of a plant is a potential miracle. All by itself, without any visible cause and apart from any human help, the seed in the soil germinates, sprouts, grows a tall stalk, forms an ear and finally develops the full grain in the ear. It is as if God has entrusted the secret or mystery of growth to a tiny seed, so that now, as it were, the seed knows exactly what it has to do, when to do it and how to do it. God has entrusted a great potential power or ability to the tiny seed.

(S) The growth stages. The transition from one stage of growth to the next is so gradual that it is imperceptible. The farmer cannot indicate the precise moment when the tall stalk develops into an ear, or rows of full kernels are produced in the ear. But under normal conditions, growth is inevitable. Nothing can stop the growth process.

(T) The harvest points to success and victory. Verse 29 literally says, "Whenever the fruit or crop permits, at once he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." The description of the harvest is dramatic: "At once", when the harvest-time comes, the farmer will harvest the crop without any delay!

(S) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The context of the parable may consist of "the setting" and "the explanation or the application" of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe the *circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the parable. In the parable of the seed growing in secret, the setting is contained in Mark 4:1-25 and 30-34, and the story in verses 26-29. Because no explanation or application is given, the parable must be interpreted from the story itself and its context.

(T) From Mark 4:33-34, it would appear that when Jesus spoke the parable of the sower in verse 3-9, the parable of the seed growing in secret in verse 26-29 and the parable of the mustard seed in verse 30-32, he was speaking to the crowds. It says, "With many similar parables, as these three parables, Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything."

(S) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable.

Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

(T) **First. The man or farmer.** Some Christians believe that the man or farmer in the parable of the seed growing in secret represents Jesus Christ, because in the parable of the weeds among the wheat “the sower” is Jesus Christ. But that would mean that Jesus Christ does not know how the seed germinates, grows and bears fruit. That would introduce a thought into the parable that is foreign to the main message. Thus, in this parable, the man or farmer is not an essential or relevant detail of the parable.

(S) **Second. The seed scattered on the ground.** This is not explained by Jesus, but must be related to God’s kingdom, that is, God’s sovereign reign in people. It may point to the Word of God which is sown in peoples’ hearts, as in Mark 4:14. It may even point to God’s sovereign work of salvation and all its effects: God is graciously and sovereignly working inward in the hearts of individuals and outward from one town to the next and from one nation to another, through his Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel, as John 8:16 and Matthew 24:14 teaches.

(T) **Third. The transitional stages of the plant.** The transition from one stage to another is imperceptible. The various stages of the growth of the plant, like sprout, stalk, head and full kernel in the head, are not explained or applied by Jesus. They reinforce the idea of the potential power of the seed to grow through all these stages towards maturity and the harvest. Thus, the transitional stages of the plant should not be given separate meanings. They do not represent specific identifiable stages of spiritual growth in individuals or stages in world evangelisation.

(S) **Fourth. The harvest.** As in the parable of the weeds among the wheat, “the harvest” reminds of the Final Judgement when Jesus Christ returns. However, Jesus does not explain or apply this detail. It only reinforces the idea that God’s sovereign and irresistible work through his Word in the hearts and lives of Christians cannot be frustrated. It will succeed and it will bear fruit!

(T) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson or message, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the main message of the story.

The parable of the seed growing in secret in Mark 4:26-29 teaches about *the growth of God’s kingdom*.

The main message of this parable is that “not man, but God alone and sovereignly is the Author of spiritual growth, that is, of the establishment and progress of his reign in the hearts and lives and spheres of people on earth.” It is because of God’s sovereign will that the spiritual seed, the message of the gospel or the word of God in the Bible, asserts its increasingly powerful influence upon the hearts of people and thus also on society in general. This fact is a great comfort and an encouragement to wait patiently for the harvest to arrive, because when it arrives, it will arrive in total victory! God’s plan concerning his kingdom must be carried out and is certainly going to be carried out! The coming of God’s kingdom is irresistible! Just as the seed grows according to its own inherent, God-given, laws, even if the farmer does not see them, so God’s work in God’s kingdom grows according to God’s will!

“Acknowledging God’s sovereignty” is a fundamental characteristic of God’s kingdom. The people of God’s kingdom acknowledge their complete dependence on God for salvation and for spiritual growth in all its aspects.

(S) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. The truth in all the parables also has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct and clear teaching of the Bible.

In Isaiah 55:10-11 is written, “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: *it will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*” God’s words in the Bible will accomplish what God desires and will achieve the purpose for which he has sent

it! Likewise, God will fulfil his purpose for each of his children and he will never abandon the works of his hands (Psalm 138:8)! All God's purposes will become reality and no one can stop him from carrying out his purposes (Isaiah 14:24,27)!

(T) I want to compare the parable of the seed growing in secret with the parable of the sower. The parable of the sower emphasises *the human responsibility* with respect to the seed, the word of God. The seed cannot sprout, grow, and bear fruit unless it falls into good soil. It means that the gospel or the message of the New Testament will only bear fruit when the heart of man responds favourably to it. Man always has a responsibility to respond favourably to the word of God. In Acts 16:30-31, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." The preacher or teacher of God's word must not only explain the word of God, but must always challenge the hearers *to respond favourably to the word of God!*

The parable of the seed growing in secret, however, emphasises *the divine sovereignty* with respect to the seed, the word of God. Not man, but God alone thoroughly understands physical growth, because he is the Author of physical growth. Likewise not man, but God alone thoroughly understands spiritual growth, because he is also the Author of spiritual growth. God alone causes the establishment and progress of the reign of God in the hearts, lives and spheres of people. It is because of his sovereign will that the spiritual seed, the word of God, asserts its increasingly powerful influence upon the hearts of people and consequently on society in general.

(S) I want to compare the parables of sower and the seed growing in secret with the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed. The parables of the sower and the seed growing in secret emphasise what *we* should do and what *God* does with the word of God. The parables of the yeast and the mustard seed, however, emphasise *the abundant result of spiritual growth*, when man co-operates with God in his kingdom. Philippians 2:12-13 says, "Therefore, ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Thus,

*when man works out his salvation, as the parable of the sower emphasises,
because God is working within him, as the parable of the seed growing in secret emphasises,
then abundant growth is the result, as the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed emphasise!*

The parable of the yeast emphasises this *inward growth*, which the reign of God causes in the hearts, lives and spheres of people. The parable of the mustard seed emphasises this *outward visible growth*, which the reign of God causes in the hearts, lives and spheres of people.

(T) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

The main message of the parable of the seed growing in secret is that that "not man, but God alone and sovereignly is the Author of spiritual growth, that is, of the establishment and progress of the reign of God in the hearts and lives and spheres of people on earth."

This parable is a warning against so much human enthusiasm, human idealism and human impatience with regard to God's work. People ask, "Why does God not establish the fullness of his kingdom sooner in this dark and broken world?" The result is often discouragement, pessimism, doubt, and the loss of diligence and perseverance. This parable wants to turn our pessimism into optimism and trustful idealism: Wherever we sow, there will one day be a harvest! Even if there is much we do not understand, God's plan and programme cannot and will not fail!

This fact does not rule out the fact that Christians should work together with God (1 Corinthians 3:6-9). But the parable of the seed growing in secret emphasises God's sovereign work in the hearts and lives of people. That is why God says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

(S) Spiritual growth is a mystery. Mark 4:26-27 speaks of the mystery or secret of growth. Nobody can fully explain the secret of either physical or spiritual growth. *We can observe* growth and fruit-bearing, but we *cannot cause* any person to grow and to bear fruit! As a matter of fact, John 15:5 says that of himself a person can do nothing. According to John 3:3-8, it is only by means of the power imparted by God that a person is able to turn to God in true faith. He cannot be converted unless he is first of all regenerated. It is only because of God's will that the spiritual seed, the words of the Bible, asserts its increasingly powerful influence upon the hearts of people and thus upon every sphere of human society in the world. All the farmer can do is cover the seed, pull up weeds, loosen the soil, add fertiliser and channel water to his plot. All these things are important, but he cannot cause the seed to sprout, grow or bear fruit! He must leave this work entirely to God and trust God to work! (1 Corinthians 3:5-9).

(T) The word of God has great potential power. Mark 4:28 speaks of the potential power of the seed, that is, the word of God. Apart from human help, God's word knows what to do, when to do it and how to do it (Isa 55:10-11)! God's word works irresistibly and sovereignly in the hearts of people (Jer 23:28-29). God's word travels from one

person to another and from one nation to another (Acts 19:10,20). God's word increasingly causes its power and influence to be felt in every sphere of life (1 Pet 1:22-2:3). That is why Christians make every effort to preach God's word and see to it that God's word is recognised and, if possible, obeyed in every sphere of life, like the family, the church, the government, education, agriculture, industry, commerce, and mass communication.

(S) The harvest at the Second Coming will be the final victory. Mark 4:29 speaks of the final victory at the harvest-time at the end of the age. The victory of God's kingdom is sure. The harvest is all the time approaching. At the moment decided in God's plan, the kingdom of God will be revealed in all its splendour. Revelation 11:15 says, "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever'." God's plan and programme concerning his kingdom must be carried out and is certainly going to be carried out!

(T) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed. As preparation, please read Luke 13:18-20.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".