

As a cultural phenomenon, Jesus gets painted with a broad brush. Some see Him as a heavenly vending machine where they put in anything they wish, pull a knob of faith, and out comes their request. Some see Jesus as a national liberationist while others see Him as having nothing at all to do with national policies. Some see Jesus as a teacher of love and peace and an unfortunate victim of more powerful forces at work in the world. Others see Jesus as their miracle worker. The same was true in Jesus' day. Most defined Jesus by their own agenda. The religious leaders saw Him as a threat to their ambition and way of life and so they plotted His death. Many just wanted Jesus to take care of some immediate need. In Mark 3:21, His family concluded that He had lost His mind and they made the trip to Capernaum to take custody of Him (an intervention). Mark is telling a young church what they might expect from spreading the word. They should not be surprised at the plethora of responses to Jesus that are based on false theories about who He is and why He has come. Jesus' first parable about the seeds drives this same theme home.

Once again, the crowds pressed in on Jesus. So, He begins to teach them parables from a boat on the water. He tells them the word of the gospel is like seed cast upon various kinds of soil. The soils represent the various responses to His words. Some responses are hardened; some are shallow; some are divided; some are responsive.

This morning I want to consider why Jesus compares the gospel to a seed. There are three reasons. **First**, like a seed, the gospel has power. **Second**, the gospel comes alive and grows the way a seed does. And **third**, the secret of the gospel is its weakness just as the secret of a seeds power is in its weakness.

He compares the gospel to a seed because a seed has power, because of the way a seed comes alive and grows, and third, because the weakness of a seed is the secret of its power.

### **Seeds Have Power**

First, Jesus compares the gospel to a seed because seeds have power. In an agricultural economy, everyone knew about the power of seeds. Earlier this spring, Joan Steinfeld took some tiny little tomato seeds and planted them into small containers, watered them, fertilized them, and exposed them to the sun. When they were about ten inches tall, Joan gave me two plants. Today, those plants are almost five feet tall and filled with clusters of ripening tomatoes. Joan vowed she would never grow tomatoes from seeds again. However, those little seeds are now showing up as tasty tomatoes in salads in homes as far as Oregon City. Seeds have power that is seemingly infinitely greater than the size of the seed. An acorn has the power to cover the earth with oak trees.

But Jesus is not talking about tomato seeds. We know from verse 14, that He is talking about the word of God or the word of the Gospel. In the Old Testament, the Lord called Israel His vineyard. She was the planting of the Lord. Psalm 1 tells us that the one who delights in the law of the Lord is like a tree planted by the waters. If you have received God's word, you're not some wild seed blowing in the wind. Your life is not at the mercy of random forces; instead you have been sown and planted by God.

Seed is a metaphor for the word of God that has the power to produce eternal life. James 1 says that God chose to give us new birth through the word of truth. So humbly accept the word planted in you, which is able to save you. 1 Pet. 23 says, You have been born again not by a perishable seed, but one that is imperishable, that is through the living and abiding word of God.

Just as a seed has the power to give life to a new plant, so the seed of the gospel has the power to give spiritual and eternal life. Plants and animals have life, but they are not alive to as much reality as humans. Plants experience sensation but animals experience more awareness than plants. But unlike humans, animals cannot distinguish between justice and injustice. That is why your dog continues to love you even after you have done him wrong. His moral categories don't run very deep. Look, a plant is exponentially more alive than a rock, why? Well, it sees more reality than a rock, and, an animal is more alive than a plant; it sees more of reality than a plant. A human is more alive to reality than an animal; it sees more of reality than other animals. What about spiritual life?

What does Jesus mean when He says that to receive the word is to receive new life? He means that when you receive the word of the gospel you begin to see more reality about the way things really are. Hamlet said it this way, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." When we receive the seed of the gospel, it brings in new realities that you just could never see before - like the holiness of God, the Father's love, repentance, the grace and mercy of God, and the forgiveness of sins. The seed of the gospel makes you alive to the Trinity, heaven and hell, and the future resurrection. All of these things, before the seed took root in our hearts, we either did not believe them or they were just abstractions to us. For me, they were just in some parallel universe. I was alive but not to these realities. When the seed of God was planted in my heart, these things became real and palpable. When you receive the seed of the gospel, it begins to melt you. Gospel things begin to taste sweet to you; they become your food and drink. Is the seed of the gospel power and reality for you? Or is it an abstraction or just a doctrine? Here is a test. Is the Father's love for you in Christ, His delight in you, and His promises to you more real than the criticism of others? How about your failures, illness, loss, your questions, the economic downturn, or the wickedness and evil you see in the world? Is the gospel a thing of real and prevailing beauty to us? Are we alive to its beauty? I'm not asking you if you can recite it. Is it wondrous and marvelous? The gospel is a seed and it has the power to fold you into the Father's love in such a way that He will never let you go. It makes you alive to the reality of God's promises that are irrevocable and eternal. The gospel has more power than we could ever imagine.

Notice that a seed's power is organic. It is not mechanical, commercial, or consumer driven. It's like a bulb growing into a Dahlia. It is life on life, God's life on ours. The gospel seed is an organic power and that may put a Christian or a Christian fellowship at an immediate disadvantage in a church culture that is commercial, consumer and competition driven. The seed of the gospel is about God's life growing in us. It makes you grow tougher but more sensitive at the same time. You will grow wiser, but you grow more humble. You will grow more confident, but you will become less focused on yourself. The seed sown has power. Paul said in Rom. 1:16, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." The seed of the gospel is the power of eternal life and salvation. Have you received it?

### **The Way A Seed Comes Alive and Grows**

Second, how does a seed come alive and grow? Well, it does so by going deep into the soil. Jesus soils may be grouped into those that were hardened, shallow, and divided. But, how deep the seed went into the soil is a common factor in each of His illustrations. Look, at the first picture (4) the seed is sown by the hard packed road. But, what happens? It does not penetrate the soil; the birds come and take it away. In the second picture (the rocky ground in verse 5), Jesus said that since the soil had no depth, it sprang up for a moment, however without depth it couldn't take root. Again, in His third soil (verse 7) the seed got choked out by the thorns; it couldn't get established deep into the rich soil. In each case the seed does not go deep into the soil. Moreover,

sowing seed is a gradual process. There is a lot of waiting involved in sowing seeds. It is now almost October and one of my tomato plants is just now producing ripe tomatoes. This metaphor was too slow, too passive, too pastoral to begin a revolution. This was probably why the Roman occupiers didn't perceive Jesus as a threat and why some others found Him irrelevant. Sowing is a gradual process. The seed of the gospel comes alive as you hear it, listen, reflect, ask questions, think it over, and think about the cost, the wonder, and the consequences. You let the roots of your soul go deep and wrap around the basic ideas: Jesus, Son of God, Lord, Savior, king, kingdom, forgiveness, repentance, and faith. This is why it is counter productive to get people emotionally hyped up with highly emotional and sensory means to get them to make a decision about Jesus. There is much to be considered.

The seed of the gospel releases its power as it settles in your heart, as it speaks to you of your great need for forgiveness, and God's mercy grace and Lordship. Jesus demands that everything in your life orbit around following Him as Lord. So, you must consider the cost because it will cost you everything. If you are interested in a quick fix you've come to the wrong Jesus. If you want to add Jesus to the other pantheon of gods in your heart with you at the center you are not accepting the gospel. Like a seed it works its way into your mind, heart, and soul. The ground of your heart must be tilled, receptive, soft, and ready to interact with the message of the seed. The first soil was way too hard for that kind of response. The second was way too impatient and shallow. At the first sign of trouble these will abandon the faith and go on to something else (17). And the third soil was way too divided about what their hearts really wanted. They had some initial interest in Jesus, but when the cares and treasures of the world offered their wares, what they really valued was revealed and it was not Jesus *as He is*.

A seed releases its power as its roots slowly and gradually wrap around and draw nourishment from the nutrients in the soil. The seed of the gospel releases its power as it settles in your heart, and speaks to you of your great need for forgiveness. It makes you alive to God's mercy, how worthy Jesus is to be the center of gravity of your life, and to the extravagant resources of God's love for you.

### **The Seed: Its Strength Is Its Weakness**

The third reason Jesus compares the gospel to a seed is that the secret of the seed's power is in its weakness. Even though an acorn has the power to give birth to millions of new acorns and millions of new trees, you can crush it simply by stepping on it. A seed is a paradox. Its power is almost infinite, yet you can crush it with so little effort.

The seed is perceived to be weak and irrelevant to most. The first ground in Jesus parable was too hard to receive the seed. Many are hardened by self-will and personal ambition. The seed of the gospel offers no power to those who are bent on self-will and personal ambition. To these the gospel is irrelevant and too weak for their blood. It doesn't speak to the way things really get done in the world. Things get done in the world through self-assertion and personal ambition. Jesus message was way too passive and naive. Satan comes and kicks it out of the way. The second soil was excited about it for a while. But, as soon as the gravy train was over their enthusiasm for it faded. To them, the seed was of no real power. It worked for a while. But, troubles came and because Jesus does not rescue His disciples from every trouble, they found something they thought would. The third group starts with some interest, however in time, other things (ambitions and possessions of life) offer more power and they abandon the seed of the gospel as well. For many, the gospel is simply too irrelevant and too weak for their ambitions. Jesus said things like, "He who loses his life for my sake will find it." And, "He who wants to be great must become the servant of all." Such images are way too passive and weak to be relevant to the way things really got done in the world.

Verse 12 is a quotation from Isaiah 6 where God called Isaiah to preach to Israel even though the vast majority was determined not to listen. After hundreds of years of faithful preaching by the prophets, the days of opportunities to repent came to an end. The nation was adamant and hardened in its rejection of the Lord. God seconded that motion and He used Assyria and Babylon to judge Israel. In the days of Jesus, Israel's heart was in a similar condition. And when a heart has determined to reject and steeled itself against the words of the Lord, in His timing, Gods words may have a concealing and confirming effect. Do Jesus' comments mean that He wants to hide the gospel from people so that they will not be forgiven? His next parable about not hiding a lamp suggests that He wants the gospel to shine over the face of the earth with a desire that all come to repentance and be saved. Yet, the verse says that there are those for whom the parables conceal the reality of the kingdom. These are those who are determined to reject it lest they turn and be forgiven. I have not been given enough light to see through this mystery satisfactorily. However, the parables speak of things so foreign to the ambitions of those who are determined to reject it that the saving power of the gospel remains concealed and hidden from their hearts precisely because they are perceived as irrelevant. The parables have a revealing effect on those who believe and they also have a concealing/judging effect with those determined to reject it. And, of course, in rejecting it, they reject the forgiveness it offers.

Again, the gospel is hidden in the parables because the images in the parables seems too irrelevant to those who reject it. They offer no immediate political revolution, no guarantee of worldly wealth, success, or even health. They offer no guarantee of political, social, national, or ethnic power. They offer no guarantees that others will like you and receive you. They offer no guarantee that your will will be done. For those who demand these things, the gospel is insignificant and irrelevant. Because the parables speak of belief and values so counter-intuitive to selfish ambition, the gospel message within the parables remains concealed. That is why much caution should be used when attempts are made to make the gospel relevant. Relevant to what (God or to a sinner's personal ambition)?

Even though the gospel is perceived by many as a weak thing, its weakness is its power. And that is so because seeds have a paradoxical strength. Seeds only release their power if they fall to the ground and die (see Jn.12). If Jesus had come as a hammer or a sword we would be lost. He could have achieved a short-term gain through a display of raw power, but not our salvation. Jesus came as the ultimate seed. He came to die for us and to reconcile us to God so that we might live before God's face accepted. When you see Him doing this for you, if you lay hold of the beauty of that and the love of that, it changes your life. The weakness of the Lord is the power of the word. Jesus came to take our place. He was cast out so that we might be brought near. He was made low so that we might be raised up. He was made poor so that we might become rich in the things of God. He taught us that love happens when you die to self and make the well being of another more important to you than your very own. And that is the paradox of the gospel. You gain your life by losing it. Jesus died for us. He was excluded so that we might be included. He lived the life we should have lived and He died the death we should have died. His weakness is what changes sinners into saints.

Now notice that the parable ends on a note of great triumph. For those who hear and accept there is a harvest of 30, 60, and 100 fold. This is a crop that no farmer can achieve. It is extravagant. The harvest will include those from every tongue, tribe, and nation. A seed is sown in weakness but when it comes to life again it comes with power.

Years ago, G. Campbell Morgan visited a cemetery in Italy. And he noticed a huge marble slab right in the center of the cemetery. It was massive and thick. Yet, somehow, almost 100 years earlier, a small acorn had fallen into the grave where the man was buried. Over the years that little acorn grew and grew until one day it broke through the surface and cracked that marble slab into two pieces. Eventually, that tree grew up and rolled the marble slab into two pieces. With some good soil, a little water, and just a hint of light, that seed

released the power to crack that massive marble slab in two. Listen, it does not matter what kind of marble slab is over your heart. It may be an addiction, fear, worry, or sin. It does not matter who you are, what you have become, or what has been done to you. If you receive the seed of the gospel, if you repent and put your faith in the Lord Jesus and take that message into your heart, it has the power to grow up and in God's timing, it breaks open that slab. What kind of soil characterizes the response of your heart? What are the roots of your soul wrapping around and from where do they draw nourishment? Hear the gospel. Listen to the gospel. Receive the seed, and discover the power of the seed of new life in Christ.