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The good seed

The Word is doing its work

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

Mark 4:26-29

Introduction

The parable of the growing seed is unique to the evangelist Mark. While Matthew describes in seven parables the progress of the kingdom of heavens until the consummation of the age, the end of the present dispensation (Matt. 13), Mark focuses on the spiritual and moral character of the Kingdom of God and the spread of the Good News in our day (Mark 4). The seed of the gospel is sown all over the world and it bears fruit according to the specific laws that God has given it. This happens according to the miraculous power He gives to the seed by His Word and Spirit.

While Matthew mentions no less than seven – or even eight – parables in his famous overview in chapter 13, Mark mentions three or four of them in chapter 4 of his gospel: The parable of the sower and the fourfold result of his work (vv. 1-20); the parable of the lamp and the lampstand (vv. 21-25); the self-growing seed and the rich fruit it produces (vv. 26-29); and the mustard seed that grows into a large tree in which the birds of heaven can nest (vv. 30-32). Nominal Christianity has become a great power on the earth, in which unclean spirits have been given

free play (Rev. 18:2). This is especially true for the time leading up to Christ's return.

The Parable of the Sower

The sower goes out to sow the Word in the field of this world, but only a limited portion of it falls on good ground, where it bears abundant fruit. But there appears to be a difference in fruitfulness: a thirty-, a sixty- and a hundredfold. The grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, and then bears much fruit. Thirty, sixty, or even one hundred new grains of wheat come forth from it.

You could say that this is God's method of multiplication: right through death and resurrection. This principle was applied to the Lord Himself, but it also applies to each one of us (cf. John 12:24-25). As we die to ourselves, we will also live to Him and bear fruit in God's new creation.

The seed that falls by the wayside is eaten by the birds. The latter has an unfavorable meaning according to Matthew 13. It points to the activity of the evil one, who robs the seed (Matt. 13:19; Mark 4:15). Compare the parable of the mustard seed, in which the birds of heaven also play their role.

Then there are the unfavorable influences, both from without and from within, that can prevent fruit-bearing. The first we see with the seed that falls on stony ground, causing it to rise only temporarily. It has no root and withers quickly due to unfavorable conditions, such as oppression and persecution. The seed that falls among thorns, however, is suffocated by all sorts of evil things that live in the human heart: worries, lusts, temptations (Mark 4:13-20).

The parable of the lampstand

So God's Word is the imperishable seed of the new life we have received in the Savior (Mark 4:21-25; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). The interlude about the lamp on the lampstand teaches us several lessons about our way of dealing with the Word of God. The Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It deserves a prominent place in our homes and also in the house of God. It should be prominently displayed for all to see on the lampstand or candlestick (v. 21; cf. Matt. 5:15).

For now the time had come that the mysteries of the Kingdom of God should be revealed, and everyone was to take heed. Through human activity (the basket), or laziness (the bed), the light is hindered from shining. It is also possible that this verse refers to the work of John the Baptist as a burning and shining lamp, for he was the messenger and forerunner of the Light of the world (John 5:35).

In addition to the function of spreading the light of the Word in a dark world, this passage is also about hearing and listening to the Word of God. Do we have ears to hear properly and understand the will of God? It is remarkable that the refrain of verse 23: "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear" is not only repeated in the gospels (cf. Matt. 11:15; 13:43; Luke 14:35), but also occurs seven times in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 (and again later as a serious warning in Rev. 13:9-10).

The good hearer is richly blessed: he gains even more treasures. But he who does not listen also loses what he had (vv. 24-25; cf. Matt. 25:29; Luke 19:26).

Final parables

We now highlight a few more aspects of the parable of the growing seed, which follows. Here we see how God is at work in the present dispensation of grace, in which the Lord Himself is no longer present down here. He has traveled to a distant land, to receive His kingship and then return (Luke 19:12). He has been exalted at God's right hand and He is now hidden in God; only at His return will He be revealed with all His own in heavenly glory (Col. 3:1-4).

The counterpart of God's work in this time is seen in the last parable of Mark 4, that of the mustard seed. Entrusted to the responsibility of men, the Kingdom takes on an unnatural form. It becomes a great power, a human structure in which evil and impure spirits can nest (Mark 4:30-32). We have pointed this out before.

But let's focus on the glorious principles God uses in the expansion of His kingdom. These are the principles that we also find elsewhere in Scripture: "You know that you have a Lord in heaven" (cf. Col. 4:1 and 3:22-24). Christ is the Lord of the harvest, and the harvest is great (Matt. 9:37-38). The Word does its work, although it seems that the Sower has no knowledge of it (vv. 26-27). It is alive and powerful, and bears fruit everywhere in the world (cf. Eccles. 11:4, 6; Isa. 55:10-11; Acts 12:24; 1 Cor. 3:5-9; Col. 1:5-6; 1 Thess. 2:13).

The seed "naturally" bears fruit in several stages, according to the characteristics God has placed in it: first the blade, then the head, and after that the full grain in the head (vv. 28). The blade perhaps points to the confession we have to make as Christians. The fruit – the full grain in the head – points to the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, in conformity to Christ Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22). We can also think of the fruit of preaching the gospel (Rom. 1:13-15).

But then the harvest time immediately arrives (v. 29). Christ is the perfect Servant. He begins His work and completes it as well. He comes as a thief in the night for this world (1 Thess. 5:2). He causes the sickle to be put into the ripe harvest and brings the wheat into His barn. But the tares, a picture of nominal confessors, are burned with unquenchable fire (cf. Matt. 13:30, 37-43; Rev. 14:14-16).

