

Missions Sunday
Sharing the Gospel with Confidence
Mark 4:26-29
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The passage that we come to tonight is an agricultural one, and when I was growing up, I had a little bit of interaction with the agricultural world, because my father loved gardening. Behind our two-acre yard in Mobile, Alabama, there was nothing but woods and swamp – but my dad had the wonderful idea to ask the man who owned the property if we could use a half-acre of that land for our garden. At first, that sounded pretty exciting, you know – I was an early teenager, and I thought, yeah, great – food! What could be better? And then I realized that I was supposed to be part of this project – in fact, as it turned out, I was the plow. The first year, my dad and I literally turned that half-acre of dirt shovel by shovel, then with hoes, foot by foot we broke up that compacted Alabama topsoil and cleaned the weeds and roots out of it and prepared the soil for planting. I was so thankful the next year when my dad bought a Roto-Tiller. It still took a long time, especially in the south Alabama 90-plus-degree heat with 90% humidity, but at least the tiller was doing most of the work. Once we prepared the soil – and that took a long time – then we made rows, and then, finally, my dad and I went out and he bought several small packets of seeds. I remember thinking, as a young teenager, wow, that was a whole lot of work for those tiny little seeds. We sowed the seeds, we covered them up, but I, and probably my father, only had vague ideas about how those seeds actually worked. We knew that they do work, so we sowed them in confidence of a harvest, but we really didn't understand what was happening beneath the soil.

In the same way, that's true in the spiritual world – we don't understand how the seed of the word of God works in human hearts, but just as in the physical world, we sow in faith and confidence. Just sow the word, leave the preparation of the soil, the growth of the seed, and the yield of the crop to God. You see, the path of the word of God in every human heart truly is mysterious – that's exactly the point Jesus makes in a brief but incredibly insightful parable in the fourth chapter of Mark's gospel, where I want us to look tonight. Turn with me to Mark 4, and I'll read this unique parable – verse 26.

And Jesus was saying, "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."

Now, first of all, you have to put this parable in the context of Jesus' life – this parable comes on one very busy day in the life of Jesus. On this day in Jesus' ministry, He had healed a demoniac; the Pharisees had accused Him of being in league with the devil; while He was teaching, His family, Mary and His brothers, showed up to take Him by force back to Nazareth because His brothers had thought He had lost His mind – on that same day, Jesus got into a boat on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, and from the boat, taught a huge crowd that had gathered. And on that occasion, Jesus took an entirely different approach – the thrust of His teaching ministry that day was in parables, starting with the parable of the soils, describing the different kinds of hearts into which the gospel falls. One of the parables that Jesus shared that day is recorded only in Mark's gospel – that highlights its importance for Mark, but also for Peter, who really was behind Mark's writing of this gospel, and ultimately it underscores its importance for the Holy Spirit; it's the parable of the growing seed that we just read together.

Let's look at it together – notice, first of all, how this brief parable begins, verse 26. "And He was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like.'" You see, the focus of this parable is the true nature of the kingdom of God – that phrase occurs some fourteen times in Mark's gospel, and it's used in the New Testament of two distinct realities. First, it's used in a general sense of the universal sovereign rule of God; it's His, this world is His kingdom, and He reigns over all. But it's used more specifically in the New Testament, particularly in the gospels, of the Messianic or mediatorial rule of God; that is, God's rule through the Messiah, His Son. Now, in the Old Testament, this Messianic, mediatorial rule is, at times, described as being primarily physical and political; the Messiah is going to reign over the earth and actually have a kingdom, a geopolitical kingdom on this planet – of course, that's describing the future millennial reign of Jesus Christ – but that's why the Jews expected Jesus, as the Messiah, if He was the Messiah, to initiate a political kingdom. But Jesus, instead, taught that the present aspect of His kingdom is not

political, but spiritual – in fact, we could say the present aspect of Jesus' kingdom is the hearts over which He rules, the people over whom Christ rules. But since the people of His time were confused about the nature of Messiah's mission, Jesus set out to correct their thinking with these kingdom parables. Now, the one we're looking at follows closely after the parable of the soils – this one focuses not on the soils, but on the seed. This parable explains something about the nature of the spiritual kingdom over which Christ rules right now.

Now, there are two possible interpretations of this parable – one of them says it describes the entire sweep of redemptive history, from Jesus' first coming to His second coming. In this case, it means that during Jesus' earthly ministry, He planted the seed, and when He returns at the end of the age, He will gather a harvest from the seeds that He planted when He brought the gospel to this planet. And that's possible, and of course it is true, but I don't think that's what Jesus means primarily here – why? Because of the context – the closest parable in proximity is the parable of the soils, which describes the seed landing and growing in individual hearts. And so, more likely, and for most interpreters, this parable describes the mysterious growth of the seed of the gospel in each individual heart – in this case, Jesus is playing off the parable of the soils, and here He explains how the seed ends up bearing the fruit of eternal life when it lands in the good soil, how the word works in those whose hearts God has prepared to receive it. So, this parable, then, is a description of the progress and growth of the word of God in an unregenerate heart, between the time the seed is sown in that heart, the gospel, and when it bears fruit in the life. So, that's the big picture.

So, let's look at it more carefully – Jesus begins this parable with describing the primary duty of the farmer in verse 26 – "And He was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil.'" Now, in the first century, what He's describing here was a regular part of life – in fact, likely, while He was on that boat, just on the corner there of the Sea of Galilee, He could point to the crowd out across the fields that are part of that part of Galilee, and they would have seen this reality having unfolded. In Galilee, the primary crop was wheat – over 50% of the average person's total caloric intake in the first century was grain, and largely wheat, in Galilee, followed by legumes, lentils, olive oil, fruit – that was the mainstay of the diet. So, the wheat harvest, then, was crucial. Now, to understand what's going on in this parable, there's one other

thing I want you to understand, and that is the climate in Israel – the climate in Israel is driven by two major geographic features that surround it on each side. May through September, Israel's weather is hot and dry, affected by the great desert to her east. The other half of the year, October through April, the climate is affected by the Mediterranean on her west, and so, it's wet and cooler. The early rains – you've read that in the scripture – the early rains come in October, and the latter rains fall in March and April. So, the best growing season, then, in Israel, is between October and April, the half of the year with cooler weather and rain, because the climate is controlled by the Mediterranean during that time of the year. So, farmers, then, prepared their fields for planting in the late fall – in October/November, they tilled the soil, they planted; then in May, sometimes continuing into June, they harvest the ripened wheat. It had to happen, by the way, the harvest had to happen in that time period because there was a narrow window between when the latter rains ended in April and the hot winds off the desert began to blow and blast the plants and dry them up. If you've ever lived in Southern California, the weather in Israel is very similar – the rains end and the hot winds begin to blow and everything withers and dies – and so, the harvest had to come at that time.

So, in October or November, Jesus says, notice what He says here in verse 26, "A man casts seed upon the soil." What does He mean by the seed? Well, just a few minutes before, Jesus had used this same metaphor of seed in the parable of the soils – when He explained it to His disciples, He does so back in chapter 4, verse 13. "He said to them," verse 14, "The sower sows the word" – so, He defines the seed as the word; Luke also, in Luke 8:11, has "the word of God," describing the parable of the soils. It's likely that with another parable with seed in such close proximity, Jesus intended us to understand the same thing here by the seed. So, Jesus' meaning is this – He's describing a situation very common in Israel, when a farmer went out to sow the seed, and specifically here, He's talking about someone spiritually sowing the word of God, specifically the word of the kingdom, or the gospel. So, that's the primary duty of the farmer – it's to sow the seed.

So, He moves on from that, then, to describe the mysterious growth of the seed. The mysterious growth of the seed – verse 27; and this man, who sowed the seed, "goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows." In the Greek text, it's very unusual, it says this –

"and he would sleep and get up, night and day." "And he would sleep and get up, night and day" – the picture is this; he gets up day after day, as this routine continues with a large amount of time that passes – he goes to bed, he gets up, he goes to bed, he gets up, night after night, day after day, on and on and on, a large amount of time passes. Now, while that's happening, obviously, a good farmer never ignores his fields, so certainly, along the way, he pulled weeds, and he fertilized with animal dung, and he ensured that the irrigation ditches were allowing the crop to get enough water. But all that time, and this is Jesus' point, all that time, he just lived his life and slept and ate, and he had absolutely nothing to do with the seeds he planted – in fact, while day after day passes, notice verse 27, "the seed sprouts and grows."

But Jesus continues, then, as He's talking about this seed, by making three crucial observations about the mysterious growth of the seed. First of all, He says that we can't fully understand how it grows. Look at verse 27 – "he goes to bed at night, gets up by day, the seed sprouts and grows – how, he himself does not know." Now, that's true on a physical level, with real seeds – we know that God made seeds to work this way, right? All the way back in Genesis 1:11-12, "God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them,' and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them after their kind, and God saw that it was good" – so, this was God's design. So, we understand the basic idea of seeds, but read the most comprehensive scientific descriptions of how seeds grow, and you'll realize that, although now, more than the first century, we can explain the process, we still can't remove all of the mystery – with all of our technological advances, we still don't know how a seed grows. Certainly, the farmer in first-century Galilee didn't know – he just knew that between his sowing and between his reaping, something happened – that he knew, but he didn't know how. There were things he knew that he could do that would help or hinder the growth of the seed, but the process of growth in the seed was one of life's mysteries. William Hendriksen, the Presbyterian commentator, writes, "All the farmer could do is trust – to be sure, he can cover the seed, root up weeds, loosen the soil, add fertilizer, and perhaps even channel water to his plot; all these things are important. But he cannot cause the seed to sprout and grow – the rest, he must leave entirely to the seed, ultimately to the One who created the seed, who knows it thoroughly and activates it. The farmer must trust and pray, and he must wait patiently."

Now, of course, you understand that Jesus' point here is that this is not only true on the physical level; this is true on the spiritual level as well – who can fully explain or fully understand the work of the Spirit of God using the word of God, the gospel, in a human heart? We know that the word is the instrument the Lord uses, right? James 1:18, "In the exercise of God's will, He brought us forth," He gave us birth, "by the word of truth." 1 Peter 1:23, "you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable; that is, through the living and enduring word of God." So, we understand that anytime a person comes to faith, it's because the Holy Spirit has used the seed of the gospel in their hearts – but we can't trace that; we don't understand that. And it looks different in different cases, in different people's lives – we can't fully understand how it works.

Secondly, Jesus also wanted us to know about the seed that, not only can we not fully understand how it grows, we can't make it grow. Notice verse 28, "The soil produces crops by itself" – soil here is a figure of speech called a metonymy; Jesus is using soil to refer to the seed planted in the soil. So, the seed, He says, literally bears fruit on its own, or by itself – the Greek word translated "by itself" is *autotomatos*; it's the word from which we get our word automatic. It occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, and that's Acts 12:10, and Peter is getting broken out of jail. "When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them" – here it is – "by itself," automatically. You see, amazingly, when it comes to physical seed, God has written the right information into every seed so that it knows what to do and when to do it and how to accomplish its tasks. Jesus' point here is that, just like with physical seeds, we can't make the gospel, the seed of the gospel grow and produce fruit in the lives of the people around us – we can't do it! The growth of the seed in the good soil is independent of all human effort and action, just like a physical seed and a farmer – there's nothing I can do, there's nothing you can do, to make the spiritual seed of the gospel grow in another heart. Don't we sometimes wish we could for those we love?

Now, having said that, let me say that not all Christians would agree with what I just said – in fact, let me give you an example. In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren writes, "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her

heart. The most likely place to start is with that person's felt needs." In other words, I do understand the mystery of how the seed works, and I know how to pull the strings to make it grow – that directly contradicts 1 Corinthians 3:6, where Paul says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." There's one scripture that speaks precisely to this issue of the work of God, the mysterious, sovereign work of God in the heart, and that's John 3 – turn there with me just for a moment. Our Lord, of course, is interacting with Nicodemus, the most esteemed rabbi in the first century, *the* teacher of Israel; and he comes understanding that Jesus is unique; he is not like Him; and he comes by night, I think, to hide, to guard his reputation, but he really does come seeking. And Jesus says to him in verse 5, John 3:5, "Jesus said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.'" Now, born of water reminds us that in Jewish life, particularly in the Old Testament, water was always symbolic of purification – Jesus was telling Nicodemus that to enter His spiritual kingdom, he must first have a kind of rebirth that's characterized by complete purification from his sins. And then He says "born of the Spirit" – in John's writings, this consistently refers to that supernatural act of new birth accomplished by the Spirit of God. Jesus was teaching Nicodemus that to enter His spiritual kingdom, to receive salvation, he was entirely dependent on the Spirit of God in the same way that we were dependent on our parents for our first birth. We don't enter the kingdom because we decide to – it's up to the Spirit's decision. And, as you know, Jesus' comments here, "born of the water and the Spirit," really are His own commentary on that famous passage in Ezekiel 36 about regeneration.

Look at verse 8 – Jesus compares the new birth to the wind. "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus used these words to show Nicodemus that he was incapable of the heart change necessary to see or enter the kingdom of God. Sinclair Ferguson puts it this way, "As well to tell a lame man to walk, a blind man to see, or to tell a dead man to live, a man without spiritual life to have it, or to say, 'You must be born again.' There is a paradox in the gospel at this point, for we discover that the one thing needful is almost the only thing outside our power to perform." This sovereign act of God is an inscrutable act – verse 8 says, "You hear the sound of it," you see the effects, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it goes; it's inscrutable, it's mysterious, and it's sovereign. The wind blows where it wants

to blow, and there's nothing you can do about it – and you can see the effects, but you can't understand it all. We don't know exactly how God uses His word to affect the new birth – that's the point.

Now, go back to Mark 4 and our text, because not only is it true that we can't fully understand how the seed grows in the heart, not only is it true that we can't make it grow, but there's a third observation that Jesus makes here about the seed, and that is, we can't even always see it grow. We can't always see it grow – look at verse 28, "The soil produces crops by itself, first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head." Jesus' words here describe a slow, steady, and at times, even almost imperceptible process of growth. First, the blade; that is, the shoots of wheat that resemble grass – then the head; that is, the green, immature head of grain that appears – then the head matures. This whole process, from planting to harvest, takes six months or more; the plants grow slowly, at times imperceptibly. If you have a garden, you've seen this – there are times when it looks like, wow, that shot up in a hurry; and there are other times you go out and look and it's like nothing's happening. This takes time – the plants grow slowly, at times even imperceptibly – at times, you might wonder if there will ever be a harvest. Jesus' point is that it's the same with the seed of the gospel – we can't always see its growth; we can't always perceive growth, because it can happen slowly, almost unnoticeably, in a life and heart, over time.

That brings us, then, to the third point that Jesus makes here – we've seen the primary duty of the farmer is to sow the seed, we've seen the mysterious growth of the seed, but that brings us to the absolute certainty of the harvest in verse 29. "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." It takes a lot of time, but eventually, good seed that falls in good soil will produce a harvest; it's a long time, months, six months, seven months. You see, this is Jesus' promise, on a spiritual level, that whenever the word of God is sown in good soil, soil that God Himself has prepared, it will produce a harvest. Now, you can't know for a long time if that's going to happen, because think of all the things that can go wrong – I mean, it may be that those wheat plants have been sown among thorns, and as they sprout up, they get choked out like in the parable of the soils; the cares of this life choke it out, and it never comes to fruition and never bears fruit. Or it may be that the seeds have been sown on shallow soil – again, like the parable of the soils, where they sprout up and look like the real thing, but then the

scorching sun comes out and they don't have enough root base and they wither and die – that's what happens when a person emotionally responds to the gospel, but persecution and trouble comes, and they abandon it, they walk away; not the real thing – that could happen. In addition, you can't know for a while if it's the growth of a real wheat plant or a tare, a dandel, that's a false, wheat-looking plant – and, for a good time of that growth cycle, you don't know that it's false; that can happen, too. The devil, Jesus said, sows pseudo-wheat, dandel or tares; those who look like the real thing – and, so, they start growing up with the real wheat, and you're excited, and then you realize they're not really wheat at all; that can happen. And even real wheat, in good soil, can often grow incredibly, frustratingly slow, even imperceptibly slow – so, it requires great patience to see a harvest come. But Jesus says, in verse 29, that good seed in good soil guarantees there will eventually be a harvest – the growth will be gradual, at times imperceptible, but it is inevitable. In Galilee, the wheat was planted in October/November and harvested in May and early June – that was a long time to wait for a harvest; it was a long, slow, tedious process. The same is true with the work of the word of God in the human heart – now, don't misunderstand; regeneration, the new birth, happens in a moment of time – but the work of the Spirit of God, using the word of God to bring fruit into the life, and to bring that person to the point of regeneration, and to produce that in them, happens over time. They're understanding the word of God, they're understanding of their sin, they're understanding of their need of Christ; all of that can take time – but seeds planted in good soil will produce a harvest of real wheat.

Now, that's a simple parable – but you can already begin to see, perhaps, the very clear applications to our lives as believers. And particularly, I've entitled this message "Sharing the Gospel Confidently" – can you see how it relates? Let me just walk through several powerful implications of this amazing parable that should encourage you. First of all, the power of God is in the seed. The power of God is in the seed – physically, that's true; the power of growth is literally in the seeds. There are some, scientists tell us, some 250,000 kinds of plants that produce seeds. Now, those of you who are more scientifically oriented may already know this, but for the rest of you, this may surprise you – each seed consists of three parts: there's an embryo, or partially developed plant, with an immature root and stem; there is in that seed a supply of stored food; and there is a protective seed coat. Seeds remain dormant until the conditions are favorable for growth – pretty amazing when you think about that; what looks like

a dumb little seed, that tiny little seed, God programmed all of this into it. On average, seeds can remain viable from a few weeks to fifty years, and in one case, they tell us, lotus seeds that were thousands of years old were able to be germinated under the right conditions. One scientist says this – "Botanists have learned that the principles of fiber optics are used in growing plants – as soon as the growth tip touches the sunlight;" so you, you know, you plant those seeds and you go out each day to see what's there and it's just topsoil, and then one day there's this little green shoot sticking out of the soil. "As soon as the growth tip touches the sunlight, it begins gathering this golden energy by sending it down living optical 'fibers' to the plant's growth center in the seed. There, with the soil's damp darkness all around it, the heart of the seed is nevertheless basking in sunlight, which powers the rapid cell divisions, as the ... plant keeps doubling in size. Scientists have learned that the system works so well that the plant's optical system actually transports a focused image of the light source to the seed below." The power's in the seed – that's true physically, but what Jesus wants us to understand here is, in the same way, God has endowed the spiritual seed with amazing power.

First of all, the seed of the gospel – James Edwards writes, "The seed contains within itself fruit-bearing potential; the seed, like the gospel, prospers of itself, and once sown, sets in motion a process that leads to harvest." R.T. France, "The man who is the beneficiary of the seed's growth contributes nothing towards it beyond the initial sowing of the seed and the eventual harvesting – in between, he has nothing to do but wait." Turn over to Romans 1 – this is what Paul says about the gospel here, Romans 1:16, this morning, the choir's anthem reminded us of this passage. Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it," the gospel, the seed of the gospel, "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Can I just encourage you? You don't have to make profound philosophical arguments to bring people to faith in Christ; you don't have to be brighter than they are and wittier than they are, and you don't have to think your way around them – just sow the seed. The power is in the seed; the Holy Spirit uses that seed, the simple gospel message. I've seen it again and again in my ministry – I'm neither a particularly intelligent or articulate speaker, but I do know that if I just sow the seed, if I just relay the simple gospel message, a message that sounds too good to be true, sounds simple, even simplistic, then the Holy Spirit can

take that seed and use it to bring a sinner to Himself. That's what you need to have confidence in – the power is in the seed; the Holy Spirit uses the seed of the gospel. 1 Corinthians 1:18, "The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing;" the message about the cross – "but to us who are being saved," that message "is the power of God." Don't ever be ashamed of the simple gospel message – and I say simple; obviously, there's a lot of complexity to that message in one sense, when you really delve into its riches – but, at a basic level, it's a simple message that a child can understand. Don't be ashamed of that message; it is the power of God – the power is in the seed; it's in the seed of the gospel.

It's also, the power is in the seed of the word of God – 1 Thessalonians 2:13, "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God." And then he adds this – and, of course, he's talking about the gospel as part of this, but he's talking about the fullness of the word of God – and he says, "the word of God ... performs its work in you who believe." It's – the power is in the seed; that's why I preach the word of God. I don't have the capacity to change me or to change you – and neither do you; the power is in the seed. God has entrusted, by the work of His Spirit, to use this powerful seed to work in our hearts – so, just sow the seed.

Secondly, another implication is that God alone is sovereign in salvation – He causes the seed to grow. Again, William Hendriksen writes, "On this aspect of the truth, namely God's sovereignty, the present parable places the emphasis – that is the point of this parable. It teaches that God alone, not the farmer, thoroughly understands, and is in fact the author of physical growth – so also, God alone, not man, thoroughly understands and is the author of spiritual growth, the establishment and progress of the reign of God in hearts, lives and spheres." Again, 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." This is such a great encouragement and comfort – it's not our job, it's not your job to make sure the seed produces; you can't, just like the farmer can't. It's our job to sow the seed and to water – and God causes the growth.

Number three – Jesus still expects every Christian to sow the seed. Did you notice in this parable, there's only one reason that good soil, a heart God has prepared, doesn't produce a harvest – what's the reason? If the farmer doesn't sow the seed – it's the only thing; it's the only thing that will keep it from happening in the end. We believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation, but there is an essential part of salvation that you and I are responsible for, and that is to be the messenger, to sow the seed. Turn over to Romans 10 – Paul's describing here the two ways of salvation; there's the way of the works of the law that will never save you, and then there's the path of faith in Jesus Christ; and he says in verse 8, "what does this message say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and heart.'" Here's the message that we're preaching, he said – "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the scripture says, 'Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.'" "Whoever," verse 13, "will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." But look at verse 14 – "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" You know what he's saying? Somebody has to sow the seed. Christian, Jesus expects you and me to sow the seed – we're not responsible for the growth, we're not responsible for the harvest; He is. Only He can cause the growth – but we are responsible to sow the seed. Share the gospel message – you don't have to fully understand how it works, like the farmer – just sow the seed.

Number four – be patient with God to use the word you've sown. This is where we usually get discouraged, isn't it? The growth of the word of the kingdom in a person's heart may not be showy, it may not be dramatic, it may at times be almost imperceptible; you wonder if anything's really happening in there. But be patient with God, just like the farmer – the farmer doesn't sow the seed in November and go out on December 1 expecting a harvest; he's patient with God to cause that growth, and it happens, in some cases, over time. So, sow, water, and wait patiently, like the farmer, for God to do what He does. Let me just make it very personal – maybe you have a parent or maybe you have a child or a friend who isn't a Christian, and that deeply burdens your heart. You've prayed for them, you care for them, you love them, you want them to come to faith in Christ – what do you do? Well, you find a way, if you haven't already, to sow

the seed of the gospel – somehow, you share the gospel with them. You say, how do I do that? Well, you can be straightforward and set up a time to meet with them, have a lunch, and just talk to them directly, share the gospel with them. You can start by bringing them to church with you and let that initiate a series of conversations. You can, if they're not in our area, research a good church where they live that you can recommend to them to visit. Send them a Christian book that has influenced you and impacted you that has the gospel in it. Send a link to a sermon that's been instrumental in your own life. Somehow, sow the seed – then, don't give up if it seems like nothing is happening. Just keep praying, keep watering, keep waiting patiently for God to cause the seed to grow, just like the farmer – it comes down to trust. God produces the harvest.

Number five – our sowing ensures the eventual harvest. It's true, not all seed falls on good soil – but much of it will, and when that happens, God is going to use the seed sown to bring about the results He intends, to bring about the harvest. You remember Isaiah 55:10-11? "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth. It will not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." So, our sowing ensures, eventually, the harvest God intended – it may not be the harvest you intended, but it's the harvest He intended; it will accomplish exactly what He intended to accomplish. Turn over to Acts 18 – there's so much encouragement in this passage from Paul's life. Acts 18 – look at verse 9; Paul is in Corinth, and verse 9, "The Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent'" – keep sharing the gospel. Verse 10, "'for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you.'" That's not a universal promise, by the way, obviously, but it was for Paul in that city; he was harmed in other places – but here, the Lord said, no one is going to harm you; and notice what He says in verse 10, I want you to do this, I want you to keep speaking, keep sharing the gospel, "'for I have many people in this city.'" And so, verse 11, "he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." You see, when we sow the seed, we wonder if there's going to be a harvest – but God doesn't. He says to Paul, Paul, sow the seed, because listen – "I have many people in this city." I have people I intend to use that message to draw to Myself and to make them My own. That's the confidence you can have when you share the gospel – it's not because you're going to

convince them, or you've got the power of persuasion or you've got all the right tricks and the right things to share – no; you sow the simple seed and let God do His work. Let Him use His word as He intends – it will bring the harvest He intends.

Number six – if you're here tonight and the seed of the gospel has been sown in your heart; that is, you've heard the truth that you're a sinner, that you deserve hell, that you deserve God's judgment. But the same God who is just is also gracious, and that God sent His own Son, His eternal Son, into the world as one of us – He was born of a virgin, He was both fully God and fully man, He lived here on this planet for thirty years, and the reason He lived here for thirty years was to live the life of perfection you were supposed to have lived. God commanded you, like He commanded me, to keep His word, and we haven't – but Jesus did, and that earned Him the right to be our substitute, to pay our sin debt. And so, on the cross, Jesus died, not for His sin, but for the sins of all who would believe in Him; He paid the debt in full so that God could be just and still forgive the sins of those who would believe in Jesus. And then He died, God raised Him from the dead, and He's now ascended to heaven at God's right hand, and one day He will come again for those who have believed in Him. That's the gospel – if you've heard that, then the seed has been sown in your heart. You say, what do I do – if only God can cause the growth, what do I do? The answer is what Jesus said in Mark 1 – "Repent and believe" that gospel message. You let God worry about what God does; you do what He told you, repent and believe the gospel, and if you'll do that, the promise we just saw in Romans 10 is true; "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord" like that "will be saved" – that's His promise to you. The harvest will start in your heart tonight of the seed that was planted, maybe long ago in your home, maybe more recently, maybe tonight, that harvest will begin if you'll respond in faith and repentance to God your Creator. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this amazing parable that provides so much hope, so much comfort. Lord, we often feel so woefully inadequate when it comes to sharing the gospel – and it's because, Lord, we know intuitively we don't have the power to effect change. And yet, somehow, Lord, we allow our feelings to persuade us that that's really the reality. Thank You for this parable – thank You for the reminder that, just like we can't make physical seeds grow, we can't make the spiritual seed grow either. But, Lord, reminds us of our duty, our responsibility, and that is to

sow the seed, to simply share the gospel message with the people in our lives, so that You can do what only You can do, and that's cause it to grow. Lord, we thank You again for this reminder – help us to remain humble before You, not to take on those things which are not ours to take on, but simply to be faithful, and to trust You, just like the farmer with the seed he sows.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.