

When I was growing up, my dad always had a vegetable garden. It was a hobby of his, but one born of necessity: Six growing kids meant six hungry mouths to feed. The garden was a way of keeping the grocery bill down.

But six kids also meant Dad had six gardening assistants to help with the work. So I remember, come springtime, helping dad plant. Dad would till up the ground. Then we'd all head to the hardware store and buy little paper envelopes with seeds in them. Then back to the garden, where dad would tell us what seeds went in which row...how deep to plant them and how many inches apart for each one.

I also remember as a kid being a little skeptical as we planted. The plants on the cover of those seed envelopes were beautiful, but the seeds inside? They were dried up and shriveled. Some were so small you could barely see them. Stick that into the ground...is anything gonna come from that? But sure enough, in a few days, blades of green poking above the surface. A few weeks, and the plants actually started looking like the picture on the seed envelopes. A couple months, and we were helping dad pick tomatoes and pull up carrots.

“This is what the kingdom of God is like,” Jesus says to us today. The kingdom of God – do you know what that is? It's not a place. It's an activity. It's God's work to save – God's work in human hearts through the gospel, the message about Jesus. In two stories, Jesus likens that gospel-work in human hearts to a gardener planting seed, and says, “Here's how God grows his kingdom.”

And here's why we need to hear it: We're part of the field God is growing...and don't we all need to grow? Don't we all have to admit that our Christian living isn't up to par? Weakness of faith we need strengthened? And the truth is that often we're skeptical and misguided about the growth that God gives. So listen as Jesus assures us, “God Gives Growth” in a way that 1) defies our understanding, and that 2) exceeds our expectations.

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

1. Beyond our understanding

What do you think of the farmer in Jesus' first parable? He scatters his seed along the ground, like farmers did back then. Then he goes about the rest of his business. He sleeps. He gets up. And without any more effort on his part, the seed goes to work. **Sprouts. Grows. He**

doesn't know how – he's no expert on the science of germination. He just knows it works. And soon, all by itself, this seed has grown from a sprout to a plant to a head full of grain.

Does it seem a bit too simple to you? If you've gardened, you know there's more work involved than just planting and harvesting. There's weeding, watering, fertilizing. But that's not Jesus' point here. Jesus' point is this: For all the work the farmer does, there's one work he can't do: He can't make the seed grow. He doesn't have the power to do that. He doesn't even know how it happens – even today, scientists don't know all the mysteries of why a dormant seed sprouts. Growing is the seed's work. And it does work, **all by itself**, because God's placed that power in the seed.

Do you see what Jesus is saying? If this is God's saving work in our hearts through the gospel, the sowing of the seed is the gospel being proclaimed. And just like God has placed power in a seed, God has placed power in the gospel. The message that even though you are far worse than you could even know, God loves you more than you could ever imagine...that even though you sin at more times and in more ways than you even recognize, God came into this world as a man and died to pay for every last one... that even though you deserved nothing from God but his punishment, he loved you anyways, so much that he punished Jesus in your place so he could forgive you...that you are God's child and heaven is your home...all of God's loving promises that are "yes" to you in Christ...God has placed life-giving, life-changing, death-defying power in this gospel. The power to sprout faith, grow faith, produce fruits of faith, give heaven at the harvest. It is a mystery, isn't it? How simple words can do such wonderful things when planted in hearts. Yet though it's beyond our ability to comprehend, it works. God gives growth through the gospel.

That's God's job, not ours. Gospel's power, **all by itself**. And I think we need to remember that. Otherwise a pastor can start to think that growing God's kingdom depends on his eloquence, style, or wordsmithing. Or you might start to think something similar – get people to believe if you can just make the argument convincing enough. But growing faith isn't in my power. Convincing is not our work. That's God's work, the gospel's power. Our work is just to sow the gospel – and to be letting it fall on our own hearts, too.

But the fact we think we can somehow add to its power betrays a deeper problem, doesn't it? We don't always trust the gospel works. Farmer in the parable did, didn't he? Planted, and then went about his business, confident in seed's ability to grow. Kid me planting in springtime wasn't so sure. Maybe we're more like that.

Seeds seem small, dry, dead, unimpressive...is this really gonna do anything? And outwardly, the message about Jesus can seem the same. Words spoken, or dry ink on a page. Don't seem like much. Seem dead. Is this really gonna work? This is gonna change my life in wonderful ways? We might not feel any different after we hear it, and wonder the same...did this really work? We often don't see the growth, the change in ourselves or others, we were hoping for...is the gospel working?

And those doubts lead us to a dangerous place – not sowing. In our hearts, or others. If it doesn't do much, why does it matter much? And seeds left in the packet don't give growth; neither does the gospel gathering dust on a shelf.

But here's the thing: The fact that kid-me had some doubts whether those seeds would sprout or not – it didn't take away their power. It didn't change the fact that a few weeks later I was walking down rows of plants. The fact that we sometimes doubt God's power in the gospel

doesn't take it away, either. The gospel is God's power, and planted on your heart, you grow. Whether you feel it or not. Whether you notice it or not. Whether your sleeping or getting up, God is growing you. Power beyond our comprehension, but it's real – so trust it.

Maybe your weakness is worry, about family or finances or health. But Jesus points you to how well he takes care of the birds and the lilies – and assures you you mean much more to him than they do. Let God plant that gospel in your heart, and trust he's growing you. Maybe you struggle to forgive someone who's wronged you. Hear God say it again – Christ removed your sins as far as the east is from the west. Let God plant that gospel in your heart and trust he's growing you. Maybe you struggle with loneliness. Let God plant the good news that he will never leave you or forsake you in your heart, and trust he's growing you.

II. Exceeds our expectations

And to encourage you to do just that, Jesus shares with you another parable. God's able to grow his kingdom in ways that exceed our expectations. **Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."**

I thought I had a mustard seed to show you today; turns out I only had ground mustard seed in my cupboard. But even if I had one to show you, you wouldn't be able to see it. They're tiny – the tiniest of all the seeds people in Jesus' day would plant in their gardens. But mustard seeds in Israel can grow into trees that are 15, even 20, feet tall. Who would have thought that such a tiny seed had the potential to grow into something so large?

Do you see the point when it comes to God's kingdom? Take Jesus himself. You see a baby boy, born in a barn – who would have thought anything would come from that? By the end of his life, even his closest followers have abandoned him – who would think anything would come of him? Who, watching him nailed to the cross and put to death like a criminal, would think anything could come from it? And yet you know what came from it: Nothing short of forgiveness of sins for the whole world, your eternal salvation.

Or take the growth of the kingdom after Jesus rose and ascended into heaven. Jesus leaves his message in the hands of disciples with spotty faith-records. They're supposed to bring it to the world, starting with the very people who put Jesus' to death. Who would look at that and think that anything could come from it? And yet look what the gospel accomplished! Through it, Jesus established a kingdom that extends to the ends of the earth, a kingdom that will never end.

Or take what the tiny seed has done for you. Simple words with water in your baptism – who would think anything could come from it? Yet look what it accomplished! From death to life, from hell to heaven, God's enemy to his dearly loved child.

But God's not done with you. Until he gathers you and the rest of the harvest home to heaven, it's still growing season. The gospel is a seed with unlimited growing power that exceeds even our expectations. What amazing growth does God still have in mind *for* you, as he sows the seed in your heart? What amazing growth does he have in mind *through* you, as he uses you to sow it in the people you know and love? Paul put it this way: "God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within

us.” That’s the power of the gospel. Trust it. Sow it. And then sit back and watch God do his wonderful work. Watch God grow. Amen.