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What Gospel Laborers Can Do, and What They Cannot

Mark 4:26-29

I. A Crushing Burden that No One Can Bear

Mark 4 gives a marvelous summary of aspects of the gospel advance

The fact that the twelve apostles will play a strategic role in spreading the gospel throughout Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth is not yet clear to them, but it will be after his death and resurrection. For now, he must tell them something vital about their role in advancing the Kingdom of God through the preaching of the gospel. He wants to alleviate them of a CRUSHING BURDEN that no one could bear.

A. The Crushing Burden

Jesus spoke of the scribes and Pharisees:

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

This speaks of a MASSIVE BURDEN... a weight so heavy that it would totally crush anyone who tried to carry it.

Well... what about this: suppose you believed that the eternal destiny of specific people was completely up to you? That you had to devise a way to win a certain set of lost people, that you had to pick the locks of their personalities and their minds and their emotions and their wills and cause the locked gates of their hearts to swing open; and that if you fail, they will spend eternity in the fires of hell. Eternity... wailing and gnashing

their teeth, crying in agony, and ultimately, because you failed to find a way to win them to life in Christ, they are lost, lost for all eternity.

THAT is a crushing burden that no human being can bear.

BUT imagine if the Lord pointed to some co-worker, or to a group of neighbors, or for a missionary, an unreached people group, or a section of a vast Asian city... and said the same thing: "Their eternity depends on you. If you don't find a way, they will be lost. You MUST win them, you MUST bring them into the kingdom... I have done my part, now you must do yours!"

If that doesn't crush your spirit, I don't know what would. But perhaps just as bad would be for some people to RISE to the challenge... to work and persuade and reason and plead and do whatever it takes, and IT WORKS... and they believe that they are JUST AS RESPONSIBLE for saving those souls as Jesus himself.

So, as with all fleshly self-focus: this one will result in either **despair** or **arrogance**.

To cut that off, Christ tells this EXTREMELY HUMBLING parable, putting us in our place:

Mark 4:26-29 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."

Simple summary: as evangelists, as spreaders of the Word of the Kingdom of God, we have a LIMITED ROLE... we scatter the seed on the ground. Then, we DO NOTHING ELSE. We cannot give life. Life comes apart from anything we can possibly do. Whether we are awake or asleep, the word of God does it all. ALL BY ITSELF, the soil produces grain. And we who have scattered the seed HAVE NO IDEA how that happens. It has

nothing to do with our power or our knowledge. It is God alone that gives life, God alone that gives spiritual growth. We get to scatter the seed and then go to bed. God does everything else... what really matters. God gives life. We cannot.

God's reason for all this is plain: that he alone gets the glory for the salvation of souls, and he alone takes responsibility for the condemnation of souls. God is everything... absolutely sovereign in salvation:

1 Corinthians 1:31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

We are HUMBLLED by this... but also greatly encouraged as well!

So, this morning, let us talk about what we gospel farmers CAN DO, and what we CANNOT DO. Then, to intensify both, let us consider what gospel farmers MUST DO, and what we MUST NOT DO.

II. What Gospel Farmers Can Do

A. The Gospel Farmer Here is NOT CHRIST

1. Jesus IS the sower of the seed in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, according to the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 13:37 "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man."

2. But here, this man KNOWS NOTHING and CAN DO NOTHING about the seed
3. So the gospel farmer is anyone who scatters the Word
4. So what can ordinary gospel farmers do??

B. First, they Can Scatter the Seed of the Word

Mark 4:26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground."

1. The “Kingdom of God” is the spiritual realm in which the subjects enter by faith and dwell by faith gladly under the sovereign reign of Almighty God
2. Jesus introduced most of his parables with that statement... “This is what the Kingdom of God is like”... or “This is how the holy God does the business of his Kingdom”
3. “A man scatters seed on the ground”
 - a. The seed is the Word of God... especially the gospel of Christ
 - b. There is almost nothing said about the person who scatters the seed; he could be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl; he is unremarkable, there is nothing special about him at all
 - c. His role is simple: scatter the seed on the ground
 - d. There is no plowing mentioned, no preparation of the soil, no building of a protective wall, no watchtower or winepress built; all of those are mentioned in other parables, but not in this one
 - e. Simply put, he speaks the word of God to a human being
 - f. It could be a pastor preaching a whole sermon, or a neighbor speaking the gospel to a neighbor over tea, or a passenger on a plane speaking to the person sitting next to him, or a mother speaking the gospel to her own children
4. Gospel workers can do this as much as they like... and I will exhort you at the end of this sermon to do it as much as you possibly can
5. But Jesus makes very little of the process; there is nothing simpler than SCATTERING SEED ON THE GROUND
6. You go walking through your field; you reach your hand into the bag slung crosswise over your shoulder, you grab a handful of seed, and you fling it around you indiscriminately everywhere; then, as soon as your hand is empty, you reach into the same bag and get another handful of seed... and you do it again
7. You are walking in an orderly pattern; you are not standing in one place but moving intelligently in an orderly pattern to cover the

whole field you are intending to sow; and you keep doing this until the whole field has been sown with the seed

8. That's the first thing this parable says we gospel farmers can do

C. Last, Gospel Farmers Can Harvest the Crop

Mark 4:29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.

1. When the “grain is ripe,” this person is ready to be HARVESTED
2. What is that harvest? It is either the end of someone's life, after all their spiritual growth as a Christian—that is DEATH; or it is the final moment in which the person's saving faith is consummated in salvation; CONVERSION... they have CROSSED OVER FROM DEATH TO LIFE
3. BUT since the gospel farmer is NOT CHRIST, we ordinary human beings have no role in the FINAL HARVEST of a person in death; we're not the “GRIM REAPER”
4. So the harvest must mean the conversion of a sinner to a Christian
5. What role does the gospel farmer have here? What is the getting of the sickle and the harvesting of the ripe grain? It is the role an evangelist has in confirming the saving power of the gospel in someone's life
6. And the progress of the seedling is the secret work of the Spirit leading a person to Christ

Mark 4:28 first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

7. Key text on reaping: John 4; the Samaritan woman... left her water jar at the well and ran into the village; she said **“Come see a man who told me everything I ever did... could this be the Christ?”**
8. Jesus' disciples came from the village with food but with NO SAMARITAN PEOPLE... the woman got the whole village to come out to see Jesus
9. So, Jesus rebuked his disciples who invited him to eat food:

John 4:35-38 Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."

What is the REAPING??? It is to be present when the SOWED SEED has finished its work in the human soul:

John 4:41-42 Because of Jesus' words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

These Samaritans have now become confirmed believers in Jesus as the Christ... as the Savior of the World

Who did the reaping? JESUS DID... he brought them to a final, settled conviction of his identity as Savior of the World

This also is reaping... when you confirm that a person has heard the word about Christ and believed it... they have crossed over from death to life:

John 5:24 I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

The reaper confirms this by various words of assurance... "Based on your testimony, I can tell you that you are now a child of God; all your sins are forgiven!!"

To give the new convert the assurance of full forgiveness of sins and to confirm them in the Kingdom of God is to REAP, to BRING IN THE HARVEST.

10. Soon after that, reaping also involves water baptism:

Acts 2:40-41 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Alright... so the gospel farmers can scatter the seed of the Word; and they can reap... bring in the harvest.

What else can they do?

D. They Can Sleep and Get Up

Mark 4:27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

1. In other words, they can live their ordinary lives...
2. They can lie down and sleep, not panicked about the seed or the harvest
3. They can rest comfortably, not thinking the burden of the eternal harvest is up to them
4. They can awake, get up and make breakfast... then do other things tied to a normal daily life

III. What Gospel Farmers Cannot Do

A. They Cannot Give Life... and they Cannot Give Growth

Mark 4:27-28 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.

1. Life itself is the greatest mystery in the world
2. The most skilled farmer has no idea how the apparently lifeless seed germinates... how the moist rich soil causes the seed to come to life and poke out its first green root
3. Even the most brilliant biologist can do little more than give fancy terminology and describe the results of thousands of hours of

observation and research about the sequence of events and what is going on at the molecular and chemical levels... but no one understands the MYSTERY OF LIFE

4. Furthermore, no one can create life; only God can do that!
5. So the farmer, once he has scattered the seed all over his field takes off the bag, hangs it up in his barn, washes up and eats dinner with his wife and kids
6. Then he goes to bed... and wakes up the next morning; he knows enough to leave the seeds alone, because there is NOTHING HE CAN DO to make them come alive, to germinate, to do all the amazing things that seeds do in the ground
7. Not only can he not make the seed come alive to begin with; he cannot make it GROW... not a single step of progress is his to achieve; when the first tender green shoots poke up through the soil, he can see them, but he can only kill them. If he tugs on them with his fingers, he will not be able to elongate the stalk

B. The Man CAN DO NOTHING and KNOWS NOTHING

Mark 4:27-28 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.

When Jesus says "whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows," he's saying the farmer's POWER and SKILL contribute NOTHING to the life and growth; there is not a single thing he can do to make the seed sprout and grow

And Jesus overtly says the man "DOES NOT KNOW HOW" the growth comes

C. The Soil Does Everything

Mark 4:28 All by itself the soil produces grain-- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

The Greek word translated “all by itself” is *automaté*, from which we get the word “automatic”

The same word is used of the prison gate in Acts 12:10 when Peter was miraculously delivered from prison:

Acts 12:10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it.

The use by Jesus here means the farmer contributes NOTHING to the life and growth of the seed; the soil seems to do it all by itself...

But we know the truth!! The seed and the soil are dependent on the secret powerful working of Almighty God.

Here is the HUMBLING PARALLEL message:

1 Corinthians 3:6-7 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

Paul says “I the planter of the seed am NOTHING! Apollos the waterer of the seed is NOTHING! God alone makes things grow... HE IS EVERYTHING

D. Connecting It to Gospel Work

1. Romans 1:16 says the gospel is the power of God for salvation of sinners, yes, BUT ONLY WHEN COMBINED WITH THE SECRET WORKING OF GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT in the hearts of the people
2. The gospel farmer (the preacher, the evangelist, the missionary, the mother with her growing child) speaks the words of the gospel, including scriptures, persuasions, arguments, ideas...
3. Then these ideas take root in the mind of the person only by the power of the Holy Spirit

Mark 4:28 first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

4. Conviction of sin starts to grow; fear of hell starts to grow; yearning for heaven starts to grow
5. Most importantly, the beauty of Christ starts to grow
6. The person starts to see Christ as attractive, his death as beautiful, his resurrection as amazing; he cannot shake the growing sense of Christ and of the beauty of the Christian life
7. He also cannot shake the terror of refusing, the fear of God and of damnation that is rising
8. There are secret inducements and persuasions that are coming in the mind... maybe even some sleepless nights

On the Road to Damascus, Jesus said to Paul:

Acts 26:14 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Goads are sharpened stakes put behind the ox or horse – to keep an angry beast from kicking back at his master

Goads in the gospel are persuasions, delights, fears that cause someone to move toward faith in Christ

It is a gradual process... in some it happens more quickly, in others it may take years

Mark 4:28-29 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."

E. Human Power Cannot Convert a Single Soul

John 1:12-13 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

People are made children of God NOT by natural processes, like in physical procreation; not by the will of the flesh nor of the will of man... but only by the POWER OF GOD!!

Also Nicodemus:

***John 3:6-8 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷
You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'
⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."***

The SPIRIT MOVES wherever he chooses; people scatter the seed of the word, but it is the Spirit alone that gives life. Two people could be sitting side by side, hearing the same message; one is converted, the other is not.

But there is nothing the evangelist can do to make it happen!!! He must simply deliver the word and leave the rest to the secret power of God.

IV. What Gospel Farmers Must Do

A. Diligently Scatter the Seed

1. Though the parable is meant to humble us, to put us in our place, to give all praise and glory to God for all spiritual life and growth, yet we have a vital role to play
2. We MUST scatter the seed! We MUST preach the gospel to lost people
3. We MUST do this more than we have ever done it before
4. Some have one role, some another... but everyone is called on to scatter seed
 - a. I am called on the preach in this pattern; most people are not
 - b. But others can share at the workplace, or at family gatherings, or at the supermarkets, or at the doctor's office, or watching kids play Little League, or at coffee shops
5. Broadcast sowing

I have a broadcast sower for my lawn; it scatters grass seed in a spray pattern; seed everywhere! We need to think about how to

broadcast seed sow... not by media, but by frequency... getting to the point where it is an odd day in which you DON'T say anything about Christ to a lost person

6. We MUST do this... for this work is entrusted to us and to no one else... God *gave us the ministry of reconciliation*

2 Corinthians 5:20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Spurgeon:

“This seed should be sown often.... Sow again and again, for many are the foes of the wheat, and if you repeat not your sowing you may never see a harvest... No tribe of man, no peculiar constitution of the human mind, may be neglected by us, but everywhere we must preach the word, in season and out of season.

Wherever Captain Cook, the celebrated explorer, landed, in whatever part of the earth it might be, he took with him a little packet of English seeds, and he was often observed to scatter them in suitable places. He would leave the boat and wander up from the shore. He said nothing to anybody, but quietly scattered English seeds wherever he went, so that he belted the world with the flowers and herbs of his native land. Imitate him wherever you go; sow spiritual seed in every place that your foot shall tread upon. Some of you will before long be at the seaside, or amidst the mountains of Switzerland, or in some other regions of the earth, in the search of variety and beauty; carry the heavenly seeds with you, and be not satisfied unless in every place you let fall a grain or two that may bring forth fruit unto your God.

B. Rest Confidently in God for the Results

Expect a harvest! In the parable, the man sleeps peacefully. That is a holy sleep, for he is confident in a final harvest.

Spurgeon: “I fear that many Christians work without faith. If you have a garden or a field, and you sow seed in it, you would be very greatly surprised and grieved if it did not come up at all; but many Christian people seem quite content to work on, and they never reckon upon result so much as to look for it expectantly. This is a pitiful kind of working – pulling up empty buckets year after year. Surely I must either see a result for my labor and be glad, or else, failing to see it, I must be ready to break my heart. **We ought to expect results:** if we had expected more we should have seen more, but a lack of expectation has been a great cause of failure in God’s workers.”

V. What Gospel Farmers Must Never Do

A. Re-Engineer the Seed; that is, Change the Message

1. Some people, thinking it is OUR RESPONSIBILITY to make the harvest, are constantly analyzing the gospel results, as though we are gospel biologists
2. And if they don’t see the results they want, they take the seed back into the laboratory and re-engineer the seed
3. They take out the offensive elements... the wrath of God, the warning of hell, the bloody cross, the incarnation of the god-man... they tinker, they probe, they study and they CHANGE the gospel message, thinking they must have certain results
4. That is great wickedness... for a re-engineered, man-made gospel is no gospel at all

B. Changing the Approach

1. In addition to changing the message, some think the success of the harvest is up to human power and ingenuity; they stir up emotions by music or the lighting, or the production or the persuasion

2. They add bribes—like the prosperity gospel—which promises people power, pleasures, prosperity
3. They try this technique or that fad to win the affections of the lost
4. THIS WE MUST NEVER DO!!!

C. Sleeping the Sleep of the Lazy

1. There is in this parable a confident holy sleep that comes after a hard day's work in the gospel

Eccl. 5:12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much

2. But there is the sleep of the gospel sluggard in which we are asleep to the perishing all around us and make no effort to win them

Proverbs 10:5 He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.

THIS TOO WE MUST NEVER DO!

VI. A Final Appeal

A. This Whole Sermon Has Been an Appeal

B. But I Must Conclude by appealing to you who came in here lost... you have heard the gospel this morning; flee to Christ while you can!

C. And you Christians, ask God to search your hearts with these gospel appeals... do you need the Lord's conviction to move you to SCATTER SEED and HARVEST SOULS?

D. A Final Word to Christian parents

1. Do the work of evangelists in the lives of your children... but realize that you cannot make the seed grow in their hearts
2. There is a secret inner-working the Spirit does... trust it! Pray for it! "First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head"
3. Ask God to work a deep conviction of sin in your children, a deep sense of the beauty of Christ, a yearning for heaven, a fear of hell

4. This is the gradual progress toward conversion that only the Spirit can do