

## Mark 4:26-29

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[ 0 : 00 ] So in the evenings, Paul is doing a short series on encouragement, which we're taking a break from tonight.

! But I guess my aim really is to give you a little boost of encouragement, I hope, particularly with a view to evangelism from this passage.

In Mark 4. I don't know what you think when you think of the word evangelism, or how you feel. It is normally the word that brings sort of terror into our core, isn't it?

It is a great responsibility, it is a great privilege of the church, to think that God has set up the church as his mouthpiece to the world.

That he has commissioned his church to go to all the nations and to share his gospel message. And I think we know that well, don't we, as a church? We have a high view of evangelism.

[ 1 : 12 ] And with that, I think, comes a feeling of pressure. We can often think that it is all about us, as evangelists, as a church or as individuals, wherever we are.

And in that, I think we can become slightly control freakish about evangelism. I know that I want that feeling of being in control as I share the gospel.

I don't like to be out of control. The problem is, recognising, isn't it, that evangelism is actually more about God than it is about me.

It is more about God working than it is about me. I can think back over conversations, perhaps, that I've had with non-Christians.

And I normally go one of two ways, and I kick myself afterwards. I can go in a bit too hard and sort of bamboozle fake with biblical language in terms which just alienate them.

[ 2 : 23 ] And just push them further away. They don't understand. Or, perhaps more commonly, I've actually not had enough Bible in my speech and in my language and in my conversation.

I've not been biblical enough. And I've just given them platitudes or some of my own cherished thoughts.

And really, I'm scared of their reaction. And that feeling of wanting to be in control determines how I speak to people.

Slightly control freakish in evangelism. But I think that is why this passage is so refreshing in Mark chapter 4. Because despite our involvement in the kingdom of God growing through evangelism, God's kingdom grows independently from us.

Jesus gives the parable here of the picture of a farmer who knows the job of sowing seed. The analogy is sowing the word, isn't it?

[ 3 : 36 ] And yet he knows the limits of his job. Do you see that in verse 27? He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. Verse 28. The earth produces by itself. The growth is independent from him, the farmer.

He is quietly confident of a harvest, isn't he? At the end in verse 29, he puts in the sickle. But he has to give up that feeling of control. He has to rely on the seed itself.

And on the earth, and on the weather, and on things that he has no control over whatsoever. Just remember, this is farming without pesticides, without genetic modification, without modern machinery.

And so as a farmer, you have to relinquish control over the whole process, and get on your knees and pray for bread at the end of the season.

[ 4 : 45 ] You have to do that as an ancient farmer in Jesus' day. And this, Jesus is saying, is what the kingdom of God is like.

It grows, in a sense, independently from us. And so there is no need for control freakishness.

Now as we get into this more, I want us to see that actually, Jesus himself, in his own ministry, has modelled this to us.

He is the ultimate evangelist, isn't he? The ultimate seed sower. And yet we see, in his ministry, that he is not a control freak. But his confidence is in the power of the seed of the word.

He is convicted that, despite appearances, he's actually chosen the right method for the job, as the kingdom grows.

[ 5 : 45 ] So I want us to see three things in this parable that show Jesus' mindset. Jesus is not a control freak in evangelism, because he knows the kingdom will grow through the word.

The kingdom will grow through the word. Now if you look at this farmer here, in this parable, there's an intentionality here, isn't there?

He is doing something. He is intending on there being results. So he bothers to go outside, and he is sure that this strange process of putting these tiny little seeds in the ground has a point.

These tiny, tiny specks of genetic material are going to do something. He relies upon them.

And the kingdom, it grows only through the specks, the seeds, the word. Now back in chapter 2 of Mark, if you look at verse 38 there, chapter 2, the seed is that Jesus is with his disciples, and he's got a long queue of people waiting for healings.

[ 7 : 05 ] But in chapter 2, verse 38, listen to Jesus, let us go on to the next town that I may preach there also. For that is why I came out.

And this is the pattern, the priority for Jesus that comes up again and again in Mark's Gospel.

Chapter 1, verse 39, he went round Galilee preaching in their synagogues.

Chapter 2, verse 2, he was preaching the word to them. Chapter 2, verse 13, he was teaching them. Chapter 3, verse 1, he entered the synagogue, presumably there, to teach.

And as he sends his disciples out, in chapter 3, verse 14 and 15, he does say that they would preach and cast out demons with all authority.

You see, there is a priority out of all of the things that Jesus could be doing and he has been doing. His priority is the word for the kingdom to grow.

[ 8 : 13 ] And so you see how Jesus is not a control freak to start off with because he chooses the one method that looks most out of control.

It's interesting, as you get to Mark chapter 4, you see a division amongst two sets of people. There are what Mark calls the insiders and the outsiders.

We see a number of people listening to Jesus and hearing his word and they want to know more. They ask questions. They get close to Jesus.

They want to pursue him. But on the other hand, you see this group that Mark calls the outsiders and they hear Jesus' word and they don't take it any further and they give up and they walk away.

Jesus' word, it's kind of like the Marmite of words, isn't it? Some people love it and stick around.

Some people hate it and don't want to go anywhere near it. And yes, you see, rather than looking in control, choosing this priority of sowing the word makes Jesus' kingdom look out of control.

[ 9 : 27 ] And that is how seed sowing feels so often, isn't it? It just feels out of control in a sense. We cannot control people's response.

How are they going to react? How are they going to respond to me? Will they ever speak to me again if I say this? But Jesus knows despite the appearances, God's kingdom grows because the seed does its work independently from the sower.

Now that is quite a thing, isn't it? Jesus, the son of God, he must also rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of his word, isn't it?

Even he faces rejection. It looks as if even he and his word are out of control. But he is assured, he is assured that despite appearances, God's kingdom grows only through the word going out.

Now all of this sounds pretty obvious, doesn't it? Maybe to you. Evangelism must be about God's word. That might sound obvious.

[ 10 : 48 ] But I think the real challenge in this as we think about our own perhaps personal evangelism with folk is that conversations need to be biblically flavoured, don't they?

It is getting the meaning of the Bible into people's minds and hearts. It is getting Jesus' words into their ears.

And as I think about that, I know that as I speak with people I can just be far too cryptic at times. I can pretend that people will understand the gospel just from suggestions that I make.

That I expect them to join the dots where they just do not have the categories that I'm expecting them to have. And what is going on there?

In all honesty I'm just too embarrassed about the seeds, about the word. Too embarrassed about the seeds to plant it confidently.

[ 11 : 53 ] I look at the raw materials that God has given me and I just think, no way are they going to swallow this. I look at what God supplies and I think, no way.

It's just like what the disciples did, isn't it, with the feeding of the 5,000. They look at the supplies, they look at Jesus and they go, no way. But Jesus says, no, you feed them.

You feed them. J.I. Packer once said, you have liberty and authority when you allow the Bible to talk through you.

And our desire is to have biblically centred conversations with folk. And that is quite a radical thought, isn't it? Our religion is supposed to be private in our society.

We don't expect that, we don't look for that perhaps enough. And I'm not just talking about scattergunning people with Bible verses. Occasionally a Bible verse helps, doesn't it?

[ 13 : 02 ] But it is conversation which is gospel flavoured. And I want to say, we can actually get the Bible open with people, can't we?

that might not freak people out as much as you think. It's so easy to be embarrassed about the raw materials that God gives us.

I was hearing the other day about a Bible study that someone was laying on in a Christian union in a workplace. And this workplace was full of hard-nosed business people.

And this Bible study leader was getting a bit discouraged. we're going through the gospels, but is this really sinking in? Is it doing anything? Well, there was one particular executive, she was a woman who had a no nonsense air about her, she was quite intimidating, and she'd been coming along to this Bible study for quite a while, and she came and spoke to this leader and said, you know, I haven't been able to get Jesus out of my head.

I keep asking myself, what would Jesus do with the power that I have in my job? You know, I can spot a person a mile away who has complete authority, and Jesus possesses authority like no one else I've ever seen.

[ 14 : 25 ] And yet, he uses his power so beautifully to serve others. I found myself wanting to talk to him about important decisions I had to make in business.

But then I said to myself, wait a minute, you don't even know if you believe in Jesus yet. You see, she'd spent time, hadn't she, in the Gospels.

She'd been confronted with Jesus in God's word, and the seed was working there. God uses his word in ways that can't be measured, or explained, or controlled.

The seed works, as that Bible study leader, found out independently from the sower. And we are sure, along with Jesus, that the kingdom will grow only through the word, even though it feels weak and banal.

So don't forget the liberty and the authority that you have when you let the Bible speak through you, and don't be embarrassed about the raw materials that God has given us.

[ 15 : 37 ] Let go of that feeling of needing to be in control, because the seed grows independently from you, the sower. It grows by itself.

So the kingdom grows through the word. That's an important thing to get in our minds, but secondly, the kingdom will grow gradually through the word.

Verse 28, the earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

It grows gradually in stages. Just imagine the farmer, there he is, Monday, he goes out and he plants the seeds, doesn't he?

But he is not there on Tuesday, wondering where the grain is. He understands that it's gradual. He doesn't expect too much too soon.

[ 16 : 40 ] First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And again, isn't that reflected in the way that Jesus ministers with his disciples?

You can see it in Mark's Gospel. Just think of all of the times in the Gospels, where Jesus gives clear signs of who he is and how he is going to fulfil his mission to the disciples and they are clueless, aren't they?

They just don't get it. Because there are stages to the understanding of the disciples. Later on you can read in Mark 8, the midpoint of the Gospel, the episode of the gradual healing of a blind man.

It's a strange thing. There are two stages in his healing. And that is an active parable of the gradual understanding of the disciples.

And Jesus throughout Mark, he is so patient with them, isn't he? He perseveres with them. He teaches them and he shows them himself and he knows that the kingdom, it grows gradually.

[ 17 : 58 ] He is in it for the long haul with them. He is not expecting too much too soon from them. But with that there is a calmness in his approach.

He is not a control freak. He is not trying to get them to pray a prayer after a five week course and expect them to know everything all at once. But he is confident that his word will do its work in its own time.

He is not a control freak farmer. And that is so encouraging isn't it, I think, for many of us who have got friends and neighbours who we've perhaps shared the gospel with in the past.

We are to be calm in evangelism and yet quietly confident of gradual growth. Perhaps those conversations that have happened years and years and years ago and you're beginning to think that they are a lost cause.

I just forget about them now. Perhaps you can remember that conversation that happened years ago. And we are not to lose hope, are we? Because the kingdom grows gradually.

[ 19 : 22 ] On the other hand, I do want to say that actually we need to be wary of times where there is exceedingly quick growth and it's exceedingly speedy.

We long for a revival, don't we, in London, in this country, that would be a wonderful thing. But at the same time, we are wary when there is exceedingly speedy growth.

We do not want folks to be like those people in the parable of the sower who spring up quickly but they do not have the roots and they wither under the pressure of living for Jesus in the world.

We should not expect too much too soon. I heard the story just the other day about a conversation someone had had with a young woman friend years and years and years ago.

she had lost touch with this girlfriend and she had apparently stopped going to church. She'd seemed completely lost to the gospel and Christian things.

[ 20 : 32 ] This was years ago. But then just recently she'd re-emerged and life had led her on a path to a new city, to a new job and a marriage in which the husband turned out to be a Christian.

And he took her along to church and over time she's returned to the Lord. And as these friends got chatting she said, you know, I really never forgot that conversation we had all those years ago.

See, that was the planting, wasn't it? And it took years and years and years for the blade and the ear and the full grain to appear.

Seed farming, it takes great patience. There's one lesson we know very well here, isn't it, in Ealing. and we can't expect it all at once.

And it's easy to think, isn't it, well, nothing's happened yet in that family, amongst that family in the estate. Nothing's happened yet with that family member that I know.

[ 21 : 44 ] Nothing's happened yet with that colleague. And so, because of that, Jesus is not working there. That is wrong. The kingdom grows, gradually.

This kind of thing, it does apply to us as well, I think, in the church, as believers. Each of us have different stages of faith and of knowledge, don't we?

And our approach to each other should be one of patience. As Jesus is patient with his disciples, we need to know what people need to know and when.

We need to be long-suffering and accommodating with people's gaps, I guess. John Owen said that we can be justified by faith without understanding justification by faith.

faith. We do not slam somebody because they don't completely understand a doctrine or something about Jesus.

[ 22 : 55 ] We need to know what people need to know and when they need to know it. So the kingdom grows through the word and it grows gradually through the word.

And lastly, the kingdom is heading for a great harvest. Verse 29, the grain is ripe at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

Finally, in the end, there will be a great harvest. The harvest has come. God's kingdom, it seems banal, it seems small now and there is nothing spectacular about it.

it's just some little seed, Jesus says. It seems commonplace. Even the king of the kingdom is rejected in the world today.

And yet the farmer is confident in its final power and in its end result. It's inevitable. So rather than embarrassment about the material God gives us, we should be optimistic actually.

[ 24 : 06 ] It seems so insignificant and its king seems so hidden. But the goal is inevitable of great harvest.

I wonder whether you think about that day. I think Jesus is referring here to the day when he will return and all of his people will be joined together with him on the last day.

On the day of harvest, I wonder will there be people there who you thought were lost, who'd heard the gospel, the seed had been planted, and perhaps you will look at them and you'll say, is that really you?

I saw you years ago and even then I didn't believe it, but God was working independently from me, wasn't he? And you're here.

there is no doubt about it for Jesus because the seed grows independently from us farmers and so we're not to be control freaks.

[ 25 : 10 ] This is the liberation and authority you have when the Bible talks through you. And this is real. This is everyday Christianity, isn't it?

It is worth remembering who we are speaking to as we share our lives with non-believers. Let me finish with a quote from C.S. Lewis.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. So remember that the dullest, most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.

Or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. There are no ordinary people.

You have never talked to a mere mortal. But it is to immortals that we joke with, work with, live with and speak to.

[ 26 : 20 ] And immortal horrors or everlasting splendors follow them. There are no ordinary people, no mere mortals, but each one has an immortal soul.

And so this is Christianity and speaking biblically, biblically flavoured speech to people is so crucial, isn't it? It does not have to mean quoting verses of people.

gospel, it is simply to explain the meaning of the gospel, to speak of Jesus without embarrassment. And that is scary, isn't it? That is scary.

But it's exciting. And gloriously, we are not in control of that. And that is humbling, but it's incredibly liberating.

Our lives are so messy, and we are not very good at it. But this passage encourages us to see that the seed will grow independently from us.

[ 27 : 27 ] And so I can let go of my control in my witnessing, in my evangelism, in my seed sown with folk that I meet. And I must get on my knees and pray for the harvest.

Spurgeon said, whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom because it grows independently from us. It grows through the word, it grows gradually, and there will be a harvest. Let's pray together.