

## Principled Living (Part 3): Growing In Righteousness

Our Cooperative Effort With God

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Given 30-Apr-05; Sermon #717A

While I was in middle school (oh so long ago!), I was, like many of you, required to do a science fair project. I cannot remember what year it was. It may have been 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I enjoyed woodworking, and decided to do my science project on the scientific use of growth rings in trees.

Some of you (in my audience) who go back a while will remember Winston Davis. Dad and I talked to Winston and somewhere in the course of his work near Darlington, he felled a fairly old oak tree, and cut me off a 2 or 3 inch slice of its trunk, and brought it to church for me, and I was able to do my project.

To me, this project—this tree trunk slice I had—was a project within itself! The slice was about 18 inches or more across. It may have been 75 to 100 years old. I do not remember exactly anymore. This was over 25 years ago. I had a terrible time sanding that thing down. You know how hard oak is! And, he had cut it with a chain saw so it was quite rough. It needed a good layer sanded off just to make it smooth.

Once we got it smooth, and coated with shellac, it looked pretty nice. It was a nice piece of wood. (It looked like it could become one of those cypress clocks you might find in an interstate highway souvenir shop.) It was beautiful science project for a 12 year old!

I showed that a light and dark band recorded a years' growth. I used arrows to point out when significant historical events occurred during the life of this tree. (It went back to near the turn of the last century.) I also explained that by measuring the bands of a tree, climatologists can estimate local temperature and rainfall conditions for the near past, and give you a pretty accurate approximation of what the local climate was like.

So, I got an A on my project, which was nice, and an honorable mention. I wish I would have saved it, but it got dried out, and got a big crack in it, and so we have since tossed it.

Of course, humans do not have tree rings. (If you do, you should see your doctor!)

We do not record our growth like tree rings. But, just think about it for a minute. Suspend reality for a moment. What if instead of rings to show physical growth we had growth rings that showed our spiritual growth? What if we were able to take a slice and

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see the record of our spiritual growth since our conversion?

Would we have much to show at all? Would there be a few wide rings around the center during our early "first love" growth? But, would there be many narrow ones near the edge of recent years? Would there be a jumble of wide and narrow rings where sometimes we grew, and sometimes we did not, and then we would get back on the stick, and then, we might have sloughed off again.

Or perhaps, there have been identical rings, one after another, all evenly spaced; just nice steady growth throughout the years. Or maybe even better would be rings that got wider with each passing year. Spiritual growth is another major principle of godly, Christian living.

Once a person has rid himself of sin, as we have understood about the Days of Unleavened Bread (and this has been done primarily through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and secondarily our overcoming), a person must replace the sin with a life of righteousness, or the sin will return with a vengeance.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Our spiritual life abhors a vacuum also, and if we are not growing, then we are receding and going backwards; and sin will eventually replace the spiritual growth that we had in the past.

And so, we need to understand that our goal is righteous, holy, spiritual character, the same character that Jesus Christ has; and growth in righteousness will bring us to that point.

We are going to begin today in Exodus 12:18-20 which are a reiteration of verses 15 through 17. I want to catch how God summarizes what He has just said:

**Exodus 12:18-19** 'In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening [day's end], you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening [day's end]. 'For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land.

No leaven shall be found. Verse 18 said to eat unleavened bread. Verse 19 said no leavening shall be found, meaning do not eat anything leavened.

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**Exodus 12:20** 'You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.'

This reiteration of the command emphatically emphasizes these things about the Days of Unleavened Bread. It emphatically emphasizes the command regarding leavening. As we went through there we saw verse 18 was all about the positive aspects of eating unleavened bread. Verse 19 was all about the negative aspects of eating leavened products. And then, verse 20 hits them both, first the negative, and then the positive.

So you see, there is symmetry here: Positive negative; negative positive. God brackets the two negatives with the two positives. What we see here from just these three verses is that it is equally important *not to eat* leavened bread as it is *to eat* unleavened bread. We must do both of these things to fulfill God's command for this holy day season.

In Exodus 13 we will see a similar thing. The symmetry is a bit different however.

**Exodus 13:3-10** And Moses said to the people: "Remember this day in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. On this day you are going out, in the month Abib. And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall keep this service in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread [a positive], and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD [which we are doing right now]. Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days [another positive]. And no leavened bread shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven be seen among you in all your quarters [negative]. And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.' It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year."

Did you notice the symmetry here? I tried to emphasize it.

First, it was negative, then it was positive, then it was positive, and then it was negative. It is the reverse of chapter 12. But again, there is symmetry. They are parallel

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emphasizing once again that you have to do both to fulfill the command of the Days of Unleavened Bread season.

Now, notice verse 9 and what God says that these types are supposed to teach us. The specific phrase or clause that I want to pull out of this is, "that the Lord's law may be in your mouth."

What does it mean? This is very interesting.

First of all, if any of you have a study Bible, you may have a note that this is one of the verses that the Jews included in their phylacteries. They would put a band of leather around their left wrist, and attached was a box, and inside this little box was a scroll with verses written on it. This was one of those verses, taken from the Law of the Firstborn, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. I do not remember exactly how many there were, but there were several.

And they also had another leather band around their head, with an attached box on their forehead between their eyes, and they had more verses written therein also. This verse (I do not recall if it was on the wrist, or on the forehead, it does not matter) was included. The Jews did this of their own will. They looked at this verse completely literally when God wanted them to look at it symbolically.

Second of all, we have to understand the symbols of the hand and the forehead. We went through this a bit last week. The hand is the symbol of work, of action, of doing; whereas the forehead is a symbol of thinking, of reasoning.

So you can put them into general categories: the hand equates to practice, the forehead equates to belief. What you believe resides right behind your forehead, and what you practice you often do with your hand (the hand leads the action.). Those are the two symbols that we need to make sure that we understand. What God says in the first part of verse 9, then, is that all this about unleavened bread is an exercise—a use of the hand—and a reminder to use the old noggin (your head; forehead). They are annual notices and warnings that God's law should be in our mouth!

So, we go through the physical aspects of eating unleavened bread, and not eating leavened bread—that is what we do with our hands. And year by year it teaches us something.

But we also have the mental aspects of this holy season which we learn. We are reminded, it is a memorial of things that have happened in the past (particularly that

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Israel came out of Egypt) and we sandwich that in with our coming out of this world, and all the things that God did for us to redeem us, and to put us on the path to His Kingdom.

God covers the angles here so that we learn the lesson. And the lesson is that God's law should be in our mouth.

But, what are the Days of Unleavened Bread about? In its most basic sense it is about eating. It is a feast unto the Lord. What do you do when you feast? You eat! How do you eat? You put stuff into your mouth—we put food (or bread as it is in this holy day) into our mouths! God is very simple and basic in these things. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure this out.

God's command at this time of the year is that we abstain from leavened bread, and eat unleavened bread to remind us that we need to be ingesting His law, His instructions—the Torah—the whole kit-and-caboodle!

The Days of Unleavened Bread, if you want to put it very simply, are a yearly reminder of this dual principle not to eat leavened bread, and to eat unleavened bread. It is a yearly reminder that we are to put away sin, and to grow in righteousness.

Remember, *both* of them *must* be done. They are equal things that have to be done. We must rid ourselves of sin—as thoroughly as possible—and we must then put our energy into growing in righteousness, putting God's law into our mouth.

In Matthew 15 we will see that the same One who gave the command in Exodus 12 and 13, says the same thing in the New Testament as a man. There is a slightly different context, but the principle is the same. This is where the Pharisees complained that the disciples were eating with unwashed hands. But, Jesus takes this off into a tangent of something far more important:

**Matthew 15:10-11** When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man."

**Matthew 15:15-16** Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man.

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Jesus says here that what He is interested in is not what actually goes into the mouth as physical food, but what comes out of the heart. And what comes out of the heart reveals and exposes the person's character.

By the way—that had nothing to do with clean and unclean meats. That entire section was about eating with unwashed hands, and defilement.

**Luke 6:43-44** "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit [You could say, "that which comes from the heart."] For men do not gather figs from thorns, . . .

Because the thorn is not set to produce figs. In its "heart" are thorns, not figs—if you understand what I am talking about. Its "inner being" is designed to produce thorns. And so you cannot gather figs from it. They will not be there.

**Luke 6:44** . . . nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush.

Because brambles are designed to produce brambles. Very simple.

Now, the application to human beings:

**Luke 6:45** "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

Where does the heart get what comes out of it? What is the source of the things which come from the heart? Originally? From what it is fed.

In a sense, you really are what you eat. And so, what is put into the "mouth" and goes into the "heart," feeds it, nourishes it. What eventually comes out will be a reflection of what went in!

Jesus, the God of the Old Testament tells us that these Days of Unleavened Bread are about having the law of the Lord in our mouth, and we are supposed to understand that it goes into our hearts, and then it will produce whatever will be produced from what entered in.

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So in our daily lives, the question must be: Are we feeding our hearts corruption (a type of leavening)? Or are we feeding our hearts the pure Word of God (unleavened bread)? Paul calls it (in I Corinthians 5:8) "the unleavened bread of sincerity [purity] and truth." That is the question of the Days of Unleavened Bread. What are you feeding your heart? Is it corruption? Or is it purity?

And, of course, on beyond that is this: What do we produce with what we feed our hearts with?

As we have seen, God's law has two sides. Paul says in Romans 3:20, and 7:7, that the law defines sin. That is its negative aspect. But conversely, it also provides a guide for righteous living. That is its positive aspect. You can see that in such verses as Psalm 119:105, "The Law is a lamp unto my feet?" It provides a standard for us to measure ourselves against, and to emulate, and to try to reach.

So, the law can be understood negatively. For example, take the commandment "you shall not murder." God is telling you not to do such a thing. Or it can be stated positively as in "honor your father and your mother." That is something that you should do. You can pretty much do this with any commandment. You can lay it down negatively, as something that you should not do, or you can lay it out more positively.

So, in God's Word, there is always this dynamic of negative and positive. You destroy what is evil on the one hand, while practicing what is good on the other hand to produce righteousness. This is all through the Bible. One way or the other, it comes across either as negative or positive. But, it is the same law and instruction. It is just the direction from which it is given that differs.

Psalm 19 is another psalm of David. Notice how he stacks the deck here on the positive side. Notice how many ways that he exalts the law from a positive point of view:

**Psalm 19:7-10** The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Now, here is the negative aspect coming:

**Psalm 19:11-14** Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

David definitely emphasizes the positive. He goes through five verses just doing one positive thing about God's law after another, and all the wonderful things that we can learn from it, and do with it to help us to be better spiritual people.

Once our sins have been forgiven, David is urging us to channel our energies toward the positive, growth-oriented activities that God's Word provides; a life full of positive activities—wholesome, helpful, service-oriented works, words, and deeds—that leave little room for sin. This is what I mentioned last week about Acts 10:38—that Jesus went about doing good. He filled His life with good works, words, teachings, and other helps, and service including healing the sick and casting out demons.

So, His life was filled with good things. He was feeding His heart constantly with positive things, helpful things; He kept busy doing God's instructions and so His heart never had a chance to imbibe or ingest corruption. He held all that at arm's length because He was busy doing other things that God wanted Him to do.

In the same way, we have to practice these same activities so that they become etched into our hearts as a way of life. And there is no getting them there, no etching them on our hearts unless we actually do them. They just do not happen by osmosis. They have to be practiced and practice makes perfect.

Notice the New Covenant in Hebrews 8. I want you to see what Paul emphasizes here as he speaks about the New Covenant. Paul emphasizes that the New Covenant is different from the old in one particular way.

**Hebrews 8:7-9** For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them [the people—the ones who had come into the covenant], He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the

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house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LOORD.

This is going to be a covenant that is very much different from the old covenant.

**Hebrews 8:10-12** "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LOORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LOORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."

The thing that Paul emphasized in this particular section of Hebrews 8 about the difference between the New Covenant and the Old Covenant is that this time the laws will not be on tables of stone, but they will be etched and written on their minds and hearts. It is the same laws. He does not say that there is a change in the law. They are still "My laws." But now, they are going to be put directly into the person. In the Old Covenant the law never made it off the tables of stone. They were something that they grudgingly kept when they kept them.

They never really accepted those laws beyond the strict letter of the law. They never sought to apply them beyond what was written. And when some did try to apply them beyond, they messed them up because they usually overemphasized something at the expense of something else, like phylacteries. How stupid. I am sorry for all the Jewish people who might read this who have gone through this, but it is a silly practice. I understand their intent for wanting to put these laws close to them, but have you ever read something on the middle of your forehead? And if they are stuck into a little box what good are they? They might have been a nice little reminder, but it did not go any further than that. They were just little scrolls in a little box attached to some body part.

But, under the New Covenant God's Spirit softens our minds and hearts so that we internalize these laws. God goes in there by His Spirit, and opens up a way for us to get them in there, and make them ours. That is the difference.

Under the Old Covenant they were always God's laws. They were distant. They were

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behind a veil, and behind a bunch of priests that they could not get past because they blocked the way. They were tucked inside the Mercy Seat. They were not there for viewing by anybody. They were in the ark. They were hidden. They were distant.

But, under the New Covenant all of that is removed—the priesthood is removed, the veil is removed and split right down the middle, the ark is opened, the laws are pulled out of there and placed into our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit. And so, we have a chance to know them, and to use them until they become our laws, not just God's law. They become our character, and not just God's.

You know how President Bush has been talking about the ownership society where he wants people to own their own social security, and own their homes, and have their own personal stake in them? God had him by thousands of years on that idea! He wants us to own His laws, and make them ours! We cannot change them, but we can certainly live by them. By doing that they become part of our character etched in our hearts and minds.

This brings up something that my dad was just remarking about in his announcements before the roll call; the old saying is, "You don't really know a person until you walk a mile in his shoes."

This applies to this subject of growth in righteousness. Knowing the Lord is a lot like that, walking a mile in His shoes. We do not really come to know God until we begin to live His way of life.

Would you know what it is like to be a cobbler unless you actually got into his shop and started making shoes? Would you know the least thing about what to do? You know that there is a sole, and an upper, and there is a part for the heel, and then there are the considerations for the toes and the arch. Maybe you know a few things, but you do not have the slightest clue about how they all go together. And then there are the different sizes and widths. What about all the different tools? Do you know how to use them?

It is the same way with God. You do not get to know God until you start living His way of life, until you start working with His tools, until you start applying His laws. That is what growth in righteousness is all about—putting on Jesus Christ. You have to try on His shirt, His pants, and walk a mile in His shoes before you can start to know Him.

**Psalm 111:10** A good understanding have all those who do His commandments.

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You see, the commandments, the law that is supposed to be in our mouth during this time and the whole year, is a codification of His character. It is what He allows Himself to do, and it is what He will not allow Himself to do. He has passed it down to us in very simple principles and says, "OK. Try these out. Do them. Then you will come to know Me. You will understand how I live. You will begin to understand the way I react. You will begin to understand just how holy I am; and just what sacrifice is; and what you do to love; and what true humility and meekness are." You learn these by doing by putting them on, and growing in it.

This is why Jesus said in His prayer to His father in John 17:3:

**John 17:3** "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

It goes up the ladder, you see. We not only have to understand Jesus Christ, but we have to understand His Father also. We do this by having that law in our mouth, and heart. This is what we are reminded about every year. Put away sin and use God's law to grow and become more like Him. It is only through an intimate familiarity with godly living that we gain insight into God Himself. You have got to believe it, and you have got to do it. And when you do it, your belief becomes stronger. Your faith grows. All those other fruits of the Spirit grow also. Everything just burgeons over time once we begin applying and growing, and working and doing.

In Ephesians 4, we have a very well known passage that many of you could recite with me:

**Ephesians 4:11-16** And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

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Now if you want a pretty simple one line summary of this passage it would be, "God provides ministers to help bring Christians to spiritual maturity, which is the very character of Jesus Christ."

There is a bit more to that, of course. For instance verse 16 basically says that as we all start growing we each supply something to the growth of the body. That is pretty simple.

The ministry is designed by God to provide the tools and the materials—the equipping—to the saints, as well as the instruction, and the motivation—the edifying. And for what purpose? Simply, it is so we can come to the unity of the faith—where we all believe the same thing—and the knowledge of the Son of God. As I have been explaining here, the knowledge of the Son of God has a lot to do with practice, growth gained by doing. So we have unity of belief, and we have the knowledge of the Son of God—what is gained by actually putting our belief into practice.

Paul and the God of the Old Testament are on the exact same page. They are working for the exact same thing. The goal is so that we can become perfect. The goal is so, as stated in verse 13, we can attain the fullness of the very character of Christ.

Those phrases, "to a perfect man," and "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" have boggled my mind since my earliest memories of this scripture.

Do you realize the heights that standard gives us to shoot for? Perfection on the one hand—the perfect man—the fullness of Jesus Christ. That is mind-boggling! As a minister I just reel to think that God has entrusted me with the job of doing this—well, at least equipping you and edifying you to the point that you could do this. Talk about falling short!

So, that is the goal—to grow spiritually to the point that we are just like Christ.

In this way, if you want to connect this with the first sermon in this series—growing in righteousness—it is very similar to imitating Christ. I mean, we are just all going into a circle here. These great principles overlap one another at just about every juncture. It is just amazing!

Putting verse 15 very succinctly here, we are to grow up and mature in all things, every area, into Him who is the Head—Christ. This is no small goal. He does not want us to leave any part out. He wants us to grow up in everything, in all areas to be just like His Son, Jesus Christ. Such a tall order!

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With plain statements like this, how can any reader of the Bible say that Christ has done it all for us? That is not what Paul was saying at all. He is saying, "Christ has given you a good head start. Now, let us grow until we come to be just like Him."

He did *not* do it all for us! God is not going to take us just as we are! Think of it this way: He wants more perfect children just like His perfect Firstborn Son. He wants all the children who come later to have the same qualifications as the One who came first! That is His goal!

He does not want a Perfect Son, and then a bunch of also-rans, or dunces, who can barely tie their own spiritual shoes. He wants ones just like the first One He produced!

He is not going to be satisfied with the foolish, the weak, and the base. That is where we are now, or at least, where we started from. When He gets finished with us, He wants to see the lowly become the wise, strong, noble, and glorious! He does not want us to stay in the state in which we began. He wants to see steady growth toward the perfection of Jesus Christ. And, from where many of us started, He expects prodigious growth; from a worm, as David referred to himself.

That is the prodigious growth that He expects from all of us.

Did you know that Jesus Christ called Himself a worm? It is in Psalm 22, the psalm of Christ's death. Jesus Himself did everything that we have to do. He went from worm to God. We must follow His footsteps.

We do not often go to this next parable in Mark 4. This comes right after the Parable of the Sower. And, it is linked with that parable too. Interestingly, Matthew did not put this in his version found in Matthew 13. He went directly from the Parable of the Sower to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. However, Mark inserts this one between them. It is also very interesting that this is the only parable that Mark has that none of the other writers have.

So, it is entirely unique to the book of Mark. But, it parallels his overall theme of tireless service to God and man. Remember that the symbol of Mark is the oxen who pulls and pulls tirelessly until they sometimes fall over in their tracks. That is the idea that Mark is trying to get across about Jesus Christ Himself. Many of the things that he writes about fit into that mold. He is the one that talks about Jesus' emotions, and such.

Here is the only parable that is unique to Mark:

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**Mark 4:26-29** And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground [links to the sower], 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."

This is a parable about Christian growth. And, Jesus clues us in as to how it works.

If you remember my sermons that I gave regarding the parables of Matthew 13, I went over a lot of principles. I cannot go over them again today. (You can download them from our webpage.) But I want to reiterate the fact that we should not get tripped up by the phrase "Kingdom of God" because if we put these parables in the scenario of God's Kingdom when He comes in all His glory, bringing His government to this earth, then we are going to miss the point.

The Kingdom of God, here, means the reign of God, or the rule of God. For us as Christians, it starts at our conversion. That is when God begins to rule in our hearts.

So, we must understand that this parable is talking about the time from when we are first called and given the truth—accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior, are baptized, and have hands laid on us. This is where this parable begins to kick in.

Verse 26 picks up right where the Parable of the Sower leaves off. Remember in the Parable of the Sower, the last portion was that the good seed fell on good ground, and it sprang up and produced a crop of 30, some 60, and some 100 fold. This parable picks up right at that point where the seed falls on good ground.

It says "A man" as if it were a man should scatter seed upon the ground. If you go back to the beginning of chapter 4, and verse 3, it says, "Listen, behold a sower went out to sow," and in verse 14 Jesus does not define the sower. He just says, "a sower sows the word," because His emphasis is not on the sower, but on the seed.

Here in verse 26, we have a similar thing. The emphasis is not really on the sower again. It just says "he throws seed on the ground." This could be Christ Himself, but I do not think it is. I think that in this case, it is a minister who goes out and sows the seed—an apostle, an evangelist, a pastor, or teacher. It does not really matter who.

Verse 27 verifies this by the fact that it says, "he himself does not know how." Now, if it

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were Jesus Christ, He would certainly know how. He made it. Certainly He knows how the seed grows. And, in the same case spiritually God is sovereign. He knows how His Word works in people. But the sower, here, is a human being who does not know how it works. His job is merely to sow the seed. And also, as time goes on, to irrigate, to cultivate, to fertilize, and whatever else it takes to bring forth a crop. So, the sower here is a human being.

The phrase, "sleep by night, and rise by day," illustrates the normal work routine of a farmer. Many of you may have grown up on farms, or have some knowledge of them. This is the way that it is. They go to bed when it is dark, and they get their rest, and sometimes even before it is quite light, they are up in the fields or barns working again. They work all day, and they rarely stop except to eat, and then it gets dark again, and they start their rhythm all over again the next day. They sleep in the night, and they work in the day.

This is Jesus' way of simply telling us that things go on normally as they should on a farm.

He goes out and he does these things—waters, weeds, fertilizes—but the growth of the plant is beyond him. He does not know how the seed germinates. All he knows is that if he waters it, and gives it the right conditions, it is going to sprout. If he makes sure he keeps the bugs off, and makes sure that it has all that it needs, and God blesses him with plenty of sunshine, well then, there is going to be a crop. He does not know quite how, he just does what he can. He does not know the workings of plants. He is not a biologist who might have some inkling of how this all works. But, only God really knows how growth takes place. Whether barley, or wheat, fruit trees, or even a human being.

The farmer is ignorant of the intricate biological working of the plant, but he knows that if you put the seed into the ground, it gets water, and it gets cultivated, and it gets fertilized, and it gets enough sunshine, it is going to grow. So he does what he can to foster that growth which he does not quite understand.

The same is true of the work of God's Spirit in a Christian. We do what we can. We are the farmer here. We study. We pray. We meditate. We fast. We serve. We start applying what we know, but the complex exercises of what God puts us through day by day to teach us things, and cause us to grow, are really beyond us.

God puts His Word in our mouth. It goes into our heart and it begins to work. We do not know how. We do not know how the Word necessarily connects with the Spirit, and causes us to make certain decisions, or not to make certain decisions. We often do not

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know how this bit of knowledge, and that bit of knowledge come together to lead us to a decision. We do not know why God has us go down this street instead of that one, because maybe had we done so, we would have been in an accident; and so He causes us to go down another one instead.

We do not know all the ways that God protects us. We do not know all the ways that God blesses us. I think about this every morning when giving the prayer over our breakfast, about how many blessings we have. You start with a thank you for your life, and then your food, and then the instructions received, and on, and on—the rain, the sunshine, the solid earth under our feet, for the truck, for the family—you understand. God says that everything comes from Him. And we do not know the way that all these things interact and work to produce growth in us.

All we know, basically, is that God called us, planted the seed in us; and if we make a few good decisions in accepting it, and starting to work with it, we grow! It just works. God's way works.

And because it is God's way, He is the producer of life, it grows. Everything that God does grows. When the Kingdom comes, Jesus starts with 144,000, and a few saints that are not changed, necessarily, a small group in Jerusalem, and it grows to fill the whole earth. How does that work? That is just the way that God's Word works. God's Spirit works. It produces growth.

I am not saying that you have to do nothing, because if you do nothing, you are not going to grow. But, if you cooperate with Him, in even just the smallest way, growth begins to occur. It is inevitable. It is a cooperative effort!

I want you to see what Paul said in Philippians 2. I think that it is very interesting the way that Paul put it. I can sort of hear his voice, or maybe, at least, put some inflection upon this so that maybe you can understand how I see this now, having studied through this:

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

He says, "Work as hard as you can so that you attain salvation! But, you know that it is God who, uh, actually does all the work to bring you to the point where He wants you.

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But, work, work, work! Cooperate with God! Do what you can. It is going to take your whole life! Put yourself in it! But, God will do it for you: God will make up for what you lack. God is the One who is actually working and giving you the little hints to go this way, and pushing you that way, and narrowing you in over here, and helping you over there. It is God who is working! But, you have to cooperate with Him. And that cooperation is going to take all you have got. God will finish the work."

That is what He says in chapter 1, verse 6: "being confident of this very thing that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of the Lord."

So, just like the parable back there in Mark 4, we do not know all the intricate ways of how we grow, but God is going to make sure that if we cooperate with Him, and we do the things that we need to do to foster this growth, it will then happen.

By the way, I need to mention this, which is also in verse 28, that the earth yields crops by itself. That is how it appears. Throw some seed out there, and nature takes it its course, and up comes the crop. It does it automatically. And that is exactly the word here, from the Greek: *automatee*. It means, "all by itself; naturally."

That is how it appears, like it all happens naturally. And that is how it looks with our lives too. God does not place us in some lab somewhere, and cause us to grow. Our growth happens in our natural course, and progression of our lives. It looks like it just happens naturally. It looks like God is not doing anything, but He is. He is working all the time to bring us to salvation. That is His job. But, we do not see it. It occurs extra-sensorially.

Jesus describes growth, here, as:

**Mark 4:28** "For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

So, it is the tender shoot (and the stalk in the boot), and then the head blossoms, and then the final part with the full, ripe grain. He describes three stages of growth here, and we can put them into various words:

The novice: the newly converted person.

The journeyman: the person growing and learning his trade, but not mature yet.

The veteran: the person producing mature fruit.

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In this case, it is not just the number of years you have served, but it is how you have grown that produces the veteran.

These are natural stages. Remember, the verse said that the earth yields of itself. So, these are natural stages in the growth of a Christian. Just like you cannot go from the new tender stalk just sprouting out of the earth to the full head of grain, so the Christian cannot go from the novice to veteran without going through that intermediate period of the journeyman.

So it takes time. James talks about the patience of a farmer in chapter 5, about how he has to wait for the early and the later rains before his crop can ripen for harvest. It is the same thing with us. These things take time. It is going to take a long patient period where things might not look like they are going to make it.

I mean, how fragile and vulnerable is a green shoot just coming up out of the ground? It needs to be nurtured, and protected, and helped along until it can reach the stage where it is able to at least be able to start to produce fruit.

All these things are part of the natural growth process. God is very big on process. He always starts small, and it grows to encompass as much as it can hold. And, through His blessing it avoids the more tragic ends that could come in the meanwhile. Remember He talked about that in the parable of the sower, of what could happen to the new shoots that get withered by the sun, or the seed which gets eaten by birds before it even has the chance to sprout. But, God likes processes, because they develop mature end products. It works the best that way.

Verse 29 is interesting. Once the Christian is consistently bearing fruit, just like a ripe grain stalk with a full head of grain, God's purpose is fulfilled. He is bearing fruit. And then he puts the sickle to it. Do you understand the illusion of this? Tomorrow (May 1, 2005) is the Wave Sheaf Offering—putting the sickle to the grain was a type of Jesus Christ being resurrected.

What we have here is God said that while we are physical human beings, He will take us through these three stages of sprout, stalk, and full ripe grain; and once we have done that, we are prepared for the resurrection of the dead!

Now, do not get too caught up on this immediately, here, because Mark uses this word a lot. It is like verily. In the book of Mark he uses the word "immediately" quite often. But, the original word's meaning is "when the time has come." It will happen in the twinkling of an eye. He is got that all planned out as we see in I Corinthians 15.

**John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

I think that we have gone through this illustration enough to understand the overall gist of it. But, notice verse 2. Notice how high the stakes are. If you do not bear fruit, you are cut off, and taken away, and cast into the fire. That is pretty scary.

But, if you do bear fruit, He prunes you so that you bear more fruit. When a landscaper trims something like this, pruned properly, it spurs much more new growth. And so, the plant—the tree or vine—can bear more and better fruit having been pruned.

That is what God does with us. He is the vine dresser. But, notice that they are both cut. One is cut away and burned, the other is cut for his own good to bear more fruit.

What I am saying here is that growth is a painful process. We should not expect for it to be easy. Nothing ever done well is done easily, or without some sacrifice.

Even so, we cannot take any credit for the fruit that we bear. Jesus says here that we could not have even started trying to do so unless we were attached to Him. He has supplied us with what we need.

Notice verse 7. This is very encouraging. Because He has told us how difficult this is, He gives us a promise here: "If you need anything to be able to grow, to produce fruit, ask Me!" Ask God the vine dresser, and He will give it to you. It will be supplied. That is His work! He wants a good crop.

And so if you say "God! I'm just not getting it! I need to understand—whatever it might be—will you help me?"

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Whatever you ask, if it going to help you bear good fruit, He says that it shall be done for you. Do not ever take that promise lightly.

This is the way, He says in verse 8, to give God glory. This is what pleases Him, and it magnifies Him before the world, and in the church, and to us; and that makes Him happy.

We will conclude in Philippians 3. I am not going to make much comment on this. I just want to read it. It is from a man who seems to have done this. As a matter of fact, in my New King James, this paragraph has the title, "All for Christ." He was a man that produced spiritual fruit by the truck load.

**Philippians 3:8-15** Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

And so, adding to our list of principles of living—imitating Christ, and conquering sin—we have now added, growing in righteousness, which is putting on the mind and character of our Lord Jesus Christ.