

Growing in Trust: Reaping God's Blessings

Mark 4:26-29

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+4:26-29)

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Jesus is a friend of farmers and gardeners!

A good friend and devoted member of the Chilson Hills Church is one of the last full time farmers in Livingston County. Glenn and Dorothy Hanson are an inspiration to all of us. Several years ago during a summer that was not really a summer. Glenn, the farmer said that the summer was just right. In fact, one comment he made in the midst of our misty, moisty, Scottish August almost got him shot. As the boats were all docked and taking on rain water, he said, "This is the best summer for farmers that I have experienced in my lifetime."

If you talk with Glenn and Dorothy for very long you will hear of their love for all of Jesus' parables about agriculture. I am sure that the rest of us do not appreciate the farm imagery much more than we did this past summer's weather. When we are out of touch with the growing earth, we tend to take it for granted. This morning I want us to do our best to become sensitized to the power of God's kingdom to grow, to change, to produce, and to create something new out of something old.

Jesus loved God's rich earth!

Jesus did not have the problem of distancing from the earth that we experience today. Jesus walked through the fields. Jesus and his band of followers were intimately involved with the seasons, the earth, and the seed to harvest miracle. Perhaps if we move into a different arena with the same process, then we can understand the power of Jesus' words. Let us reflect upon our personhood, our psychology, our spirituality. Let's put the focus on each one of us.

I can assume that God is providing each and every one of you with life. That gift is obvious. You are breathing. You do not think about breathing. You just breathe. You move around. You do not think about putting one foot in front of the other, you just do it. You are alive. God's gift of life is yours.

I can assume that there are seasons in your life. Psychologists write in language that describes stages of development. Children develop through predictable stages. Several scholars have suggested that adults also move through stages of development. Theologians have hopped on this developmental band wagon and begun to talk of stages of faith development. I can assume that you are in one of the portions of developmental growth; young adulthood, middle adulthood, empty nesters, young retirees, or senior adults.

I can assume that somewhere in your life you chose to trust in Jesus Christ and associate with a group of like-minded people. You are here. Your physical presence implies this choice. Therefore, I can assume that God's great kingdom presence is at work somewhere in your life. Jesus taught that God's Divine Energy was released into the world. This Divine Energy is:

- a spark of fire,
- a grain of salt,
- a candle lit in a dark room,
- a cross that forgives sin,
- an empty tomb that overcomes death.

God's power is at work in your world! Are you experiencing it? Perhaps we can take an evaluative look at our lives this morning. Where are we on Jesus spiritual growth chart?

- Are you celebrating new life? Is your head just sticking up above the earth and enjoying the light of God's great love shining upon you?
- Are you in the time of your life when you are growing strong with God? You know the trials and troubles of life but are you growing in your trust in God?

- Are you a person of spiritual maturity? Are you at a point where God's love is first and foremost in your life? Are you ready to be harvested? Are you ready to celebrate with God for all eternity?

Where are you in God's great field of life? God's power is quietly providing all the nourishment that you need to grow with God. God's Divine Energy is available to flow in your life. God desires that you grow in your trust. God desires that you grow in your fruitfulness. God desires to bless you with abundant life. Where are you in your spiritual growth? Let's examine each step to help you in your evaluation.

Are you a fresh, green stalk just peaking out of the ground?

There are points on your life's journey when you must place your trust in God. You decide that your hope, your strength, your life will be in God. Sometimes this choice is a subtle one. Sometimes this decision is dramatic. But, somewhere along your journey you are called to decide to put your trust in Christ, or in someone or something else. Your choice determines the energy and power you have to live. Your choice determines the yes' and no's of your living. Your choice focuses your life.

There was a young man who went to Scotland to do some serious fishing. He rented a boat on Loch Ness. He got up early in the morning to get out on the lake. Just as the mists began to lift off the water, he felt the boat lift out of the water. A dramatic force catapulted him into the air. As he was tumbling toward the water he looked and saw the open mouth of the Loch Ness monster. With all he had in him he yelled out, "Lord God, save me!" Just like the old E.F. Hutton commercial, everything stopped. God answered. Son, you never believed in me before, why now? To which the young man replied. I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either.

There are times in our lives when we come upon the monsters, experience clarity, and find the Living Lord. Coming to know the Risen Christ personally is a moment of great joy. You celebrate. You experience that moment as a time of forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. When you die to yourself, when the seed pod that you were is planted in God's rich earth, and when you begin to grow in God's field, then you can celebrate God's great power transforming your life.

Perhaps some of you just experienced that great thrill of becoming a part of God's family for the first time. You know first hand the joy of popping out of the dark earth into the warmth of God's light and love. Perhaps some of you can remember the green seedling time of your life when God was present with you for the first time in transformative power. Right now, I ask you to remember the joyful love that flowed within you when you first found God's light shining upon you. Hold that joy in your heart as we move to that next stage of growth.

Are you growing strong and tall as one of God's cherished plants?

There is the season of faith development after we decide to live in relationship with Jesus Christ, but before our values and beliefs are transformed. This season is one of growth through all that life can throw at us. In Psalm 23 there are mentioned times of peace beside clear waters and times of difficulty walking through the valley of the shadow of death. As we grow through all the external challenges our inner spirit is being formed. Christ is quietly at work deep within us renewing our hearts and transforming our minds. With Christ's help we move from only:

- being concerned about ourselves, to being concerned for others;
- seeking to meet our own needs, to being willing to meet the needs of others;
- asking what I get, to seeking to find ways to give; and
- collecting things, to growing relationships that will last for all eternity.

Let me be specific. In our culture the signals of success are all focused upon the collection of money and property as if that will provide great success. Money is not bad or good. Money can be used to do great good, but not when it is hoarded. The Divine Energy of God is stymied by the "get and keep all you can" value system. The Divine power of Christ comes into our lives as we focus our lives in building up God's Kingdom. "Seek first the Kingdom of God," says Jesus, and success in everything else will come. As we grow in God's grace, seeking to live in relationship with Jesus Christ our focus will gradually turn towards Kingdom values. One of the chief values for us, in this time and place, is Christ-like generosity.

In conversation with a friend and member of Chilson Hills about this value, I asked if he could help me know how to communicate the importance of Christ-like generosity to spiritual growth. He is highly critical of fund raising techniques that churches often use. He said that as a young family man he used to resent guilt techniques about tithing. He didn't like the shame that came with the charts that challenged people to give. But, as his relationship to Christ grew, he just naturally grew into tithing and then beyond. Christ's love and the vision of Kingdom living filtered up into his inner spirit grew the value of generosity. Others have also experienced the same Divine power transforming their vision, their hearts, and their life focus.

William Magee (52) and Kathleen Magee (51) are founders of Operation Smile. One is a plastic surgeon and the other a social service worker. Operation Smile began in 1982; since then, it has performed surgery on 18,000 kids in 15 countries to correct—without charge—such disfigurements as cleft palates and burn scars, while training local doctors in the procedures.

Paul Beyer calls it “the Lord's work.” Beyer lives in Leola, Pennsylvania. Every week for 35 years he has driven a truck to New York City, a six hour round trip, to deliver food to the Bowery Mission, located in one of the seedier sections of Manhattan. His truck is loaded with produce, canned meats, and pastries which the Mennonite farmers and businesses near his town have donated. He says that people trust him with the food he takes and that the reward is to see all the happy faces when the food arrives.

God's power transforms individuals who then make a difference in God's Kingdom. As with the growing plant, this transformation is often quietly done within the inner spirit of a person. Sometimes the growing person does not even notice what is happening. They are growing in generosity, grace, and love without even being aware of the change. Their Christ-like value choices have become a way of life.

Look back to where you were in your spiritual life 5 years ago. Now look at where you are today. Celebrate God's quiet soul work within your life right now!

Are you ready to be harvested at any time?

The mature and vibrant citizen of God's Kingdom is a wonderful person to encounter. They are quiet and gentle followers of Christ. Economic status does not matter. What matters is the sharing of God's love in concrete and tangible ways. Being servants in God's Kingdom is more important than being popular in this culture. Generosity is a way of life. Let me urge you to think of some people you have been privileged to know who have, by God's grace, grown into a mature Kingdom Citizens.

I think of some of the people I know and have only heard about who are witnesses to a vibrant, joyful, meaningful, Christ-like life.

Let me share with you the story of Mrs. Epps who volunteers at the Norge Elementary School in Williamsburg, Virginia. There she works with students who have mental and physical disabilities. Her day begins long before she goes on duty at 7 a.m. She has to catch a bus to get to the school. When she gets there, she greets Drew who has difficulty walking. Another one of her favorites has Down Syndrome. He sits beside her, smiling. She turns on the tape recorder and plays, “Jingle Bell Rock” while her students sing and clap enthusiastically. It takes a lot of energy to volunteer all morning, five days a week, with these children. Oh, did I mention that Mrs. Epps is 99 years old? She exemplifies the vibrancy of a giving lifestyle. “I don't want to act dead while I'm still alive.” She says.

Speaking of a giving lifestyle, the Ann Arbor News reported on a Christian family who live in Delaware. Sam Arthur works as a chemist. He and his wife give nearly \$40,000, about half their pretax income, to God's work. They are living in a crowded neighborhood, driving old cars, and raising two teenagers on about \$35,000 a year. Each month, Judy Arthur sits down and writes about \$3,300 worth of charitable checks to help starving children and church ministries. Sam Arthur says, “Heaven is much nicer than any of the houses in Wilmington or Beverly Hills for that matter. God has always blessed me...I feel an obligation to share that with everyone else...In 30 or 40 years, it won't matter what kind of car I drove or house I buy. Then I'll be answerable for how I used the resources God gave me. God has always blessed me.”

God's divine energy is available to you when you open up your soul!

God is at work growing you to full maturity. Whether you continue growing to full harvest is your decision. God's Divine Energy will always be available to you. However, you can close it off, shut it out, crimp the pipe, or plug up the source. You can choose to be a stunted, half grown plant. Or, you can choose to grow to be a strong, vibrant person involved with Christ in building up God's Kingdom right here. A major value in growing into full maturity is trusting Christ with your financial resources. Biblically speaking the tithe, 10 percent of your income, is the standard. The reality of American Christianity is about 2 to 3 percent is the practice. Is there any wonder that God's power is not flowing very strong in America anymore?

- * There must be a shift in our song from "me" to "we." There must be a change in our focus from "my needs" to "their needs."
- * There are children who are suffering in this community from loneliness, from learning disabilities, from too much television and too little Christ-like love.
- * There are youth in this community who are satiated with things and empty of soul.
- * There are adults who have lost their way. They want to do something meaningful, but they can only live vicariously through "Reality TV."
- * There are senior adults who cannot afford food because their pharmacy bills are too high.
- * There are people dying alone, without knowing the eternal companionship with Jesus Christ. The mission field is no longer across the sea. The mission field is across the street, down the block, and around the corner.

God's power can flow. God's energy can transform. God's presence is real and available. The first value step in Kingdom growth, after you experience God's gift of saving grace, is to pull out the cork and decide to trust God with your checkbook. God knows and loves you better than you do for yourself. God is not going to ask you to give more than you can. But, God will challenge you to step up to giving more than you think you can. God wants to bless you. God wants to flow in your life in a big way. As God speaks to you, trust Him. As you trust God, the blessings will flow.

