**Unstoppable Growth**

Mark 4:21-34

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David Platt, author of several books, including *Radical*, is now the president of the Southern Baptist’s International Foreign Mission Board. Beth and I heard him preach a sermon about a month ago that crushed me. I’ve watched it several times and think about it often. I found it unusually unsettling and quite convicting so thought I would paly a three-minute clip. If you want to watch the entire message, it’s posted on the sermon extras tab on our website.

Play [Sermon Clip by David Platt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpyg3OFbeRM) – “Martyrdom and Mission: Why Reformers Died In Their Day; How We Must Live In Ours.” (44:06-46:50)

*What will it take for the concept of unreached peoples to become totally intolerable to us in the church?*

*When did it become OK for us to be OK with unreached people dying without hearing about Christ and spending eternity in Hell?*

* 2 billion unreached
* 90% of unreached live in Gospel resistant areas
* 495,000 villages in India have no Christian presence

The 10/40 Window is the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia approximately between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitude. This area is home to some of the largest unreached people groups in the world, including those in Turkey.

Today (Sunday) has been declared as the Day for the Unreached. As part of the focus today in churches and mission organizations around the world, a “Manifesto for the Unreached” was put together. I want to read part of it.

* **Unengaged and Unreached People.** We refuse to stand idly by as people enter eternity without Christ when we can share the good news that transforms them through any means possible (Acts 5:40-42).
* **Declaration.** We will shout from every peak, pinnacle and rooftop that the only hope for this dying world is a relationship with Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).
* **Summary.** As long as God provides His abundant grace, we will not stop or be deterred from this calling. We work relentlessly for the day when a gaze around the expanse of heaven reveals thousands worshipping at Jesus’ feet because of the mission He gave us for this moment in eternity (Revelation 5:9-10).

I’d like to lead us in prayer.

* Repent and ask God to shake us out of our sleepy lethargy
* Pray that God would give us a heart for our neighbors and the nations
* Pray for God to soften hearts to the truth of the gospel
* Ask God to raise up believers to go and reach these groups
* Pray for multiplying churches to be launched

It’s easy to get discouraged when we look at the unfinished task and the hard hearts of so many people in our neighborhoods and in the nations. Our passage of Scripture today is designed to help us see that God is on the move…and it’s our joy to join Him. I was helped by some insight from the brand new *Gospel Transformation Bible’s* commentary on the parables we’ll be looking at today:

*“The growth of this new messianic rule appears outwardly unremarkable, at least initially. But the influence of the kingdom develops progressively to reflect the visible glory of God. Followers of Christ can easily grow discouraged by the fact that many of the powers and established structures in this world seem to overshadow the emerging kingdom of God. Jesus encourages all followers to trust that God’s purposes, which grow slowly, will be accomplished, despite all setbacks. The counterintuitive nature of God’s kingdom should not surprise us. After all, the gospel of grace is itself a message that confounds our expectations and tells us that things are not as they seem…”*

We’re going to tackle four parables that remind us of the unstoppable growth of the gospel so we can join God in what He’s doing to reach the unreached among the nations. Two weeks ago we plowed into the Parable of the Soils and learned that *when we go and sow, the kingdom of God will grow.*

The word parable means, *“to throw something beside something else”* and has the idea of placing two things together in order to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus employs four metaphors to explain the growth of the gospel.

* The *lamp* helps us see that we’re to *glow.*
* The *measure* urges us to *know.*
* The *plant* reminds us that it is normal to *grow.*
* And the *mustard seed* demonstrates that our faith will *show*.

The progression goes from *glowing* to *knowing* to *growing* and then *showing.*

**1. Glowing.** Look at Mark 4:21-23: ***“And he said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.’”*** The picture here is of an oil lamp that is designed to light up a room. In that culture these lamps were often put on a table or up on a nook in the wall in order to dispel the darkness. It would be totally absurd to take this lamp and put it under a basket or under a bed.

The main application is that Jesus came as the light of the world to dispel the darkness. Do you see the phrase, ***“brought in”***? In the original it reads this way: *“Is a lamp come into the house?”*  Christ was hidden from many at the beginning but is now made manifest in the world. That’s exactly what John 3:19 says: ***“…the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”***

The secondary application is that you and I are called to shine the light of the Lord to others. Philippians 2:15 tells us that we’ve been placed ***“in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”***

Unfortunately, some of us are not shining because we’re all up into sinning. Instead of exposing deeds of darkness, we’re enjoying the darkness. Verse 22 reminds us that ***“nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light.”*** Achan’s sin was eventually exposed in Judges 7:1-26. Numbers 32:23 notes: ***“be sure your sin will find you out.”*** 1 Corinthians 4:5 says that the Lord: ***“will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”***

What is concealed now will be revealed later. If we want to keep *glowing*, we must make sure we continue *knowing.* That leads us to the second parable.

**2. Knowing.** Verses 24-25 help us see that the more we listen, the more we’ll learn: ***“And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.’”*** This is the principle of reciprocity – we get out what we put in. Every time you receive God’s Word with eagerness and openness, God will give you more.

Did you see the story this week that Facebook has been filtering news on their *Trending Ticker*? It’s been revealed that the algorithms they set up and the human curators they’ve hired have been serving as gatekeepers so that conservative news stories don’t show up. This is a huge story because Facebook boasts over 1 billion account holders. Since 2/3s of American users get their news from Facebook, the stories they see are being filtered by a small group of people.

This is a good reminder for us to be careful about what comes in through our eyes and ears: ***“Pay attention to what you hear,”*** which literally means, *“Look at what you hear.”*  How do we look at what we hear?In the parallel account found in Luke 8:18 Jesus says, ***“Take care then how you hear.”***  We’re to take heed how we hear. We’re to be gatekeepers about what goes into our minds. Paul expands on this idea in 2 Corinthians 10:5 when we’re told to ***“take every thought captive to obey Christ.”***

Let’s flesh this out a bit more.

* **If we have a high capacity for knowing, God will pour knowledge into us.** If we bring a big bucket, God will fill it up, and then some: ***“…and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given.”*** Isaiah 55:7 says that God will not only pardon but ***“abundantly pardon.”*** Ephesians 3:20: ***“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think…”*** And Malachi 3:10 tells us that when we honor God with our giving – BTW, 10% (a tithe) is a good place to start. When we put Him first with our finances, He will ***“open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”***
* **If we have a distracted capacity for knowing, our knowledge will be diminished.** The end of verse 25 is ominous: ***“…and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”*** It’s both obvious and profound – if you want to know, you’ll know. If you don’t want to, you won’t. Or to say it another way: *people do what they want to do.* That reminds me of the Parable of the Talents where the guy who was given one talent buried it and then ended up with no talents.

A week ago Thursday about 60 men gathered for a Men’s Huddle time as a follow-up to the Iron Sharpens Iron Conference, where 108 men from EBC attended. I had the delight of speaking from 1 Corinthians 16:13-14: ***“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”*** We pondered 5 Mandates for Men from this passage (there are extra cards available at the Welcome Center if you’d like one).

1. Wake up
2. Stand up
3. Man up
4. Grow up
5. Love up

I referenced an article entitled, *“The Modern Man and His Fantasy World.”* If you want to read it, it’s posted on the Sermon Extras tab on our website. Here are some highlights: *“I have noticed a trait, particularly among men, where faith is impeded. I’m talking about a cultural fixation upon fantasy…men are giving themselves to something they can see but is not real. However, with Christianity we give ourselves to something that we cannot see but is actually real.”*

Here are the three fantasy worlds men are giving themselves to…

* Pornography
* Fantasy sports
* Video games

*“We find that men are reluctant and stagnant in their Christianity because they are thriving in a fantasy world. Is it any wonder why there is such a decline in biblical masculinity in the church? It is a shame that many men are far too busy conquering fake lands, looking at fake women, and winning fake championships to follow Christ’s path of self-denying, cross-bearing, service.”*

Let me say it more strongly than I did to the men that night. If you live in fantasy land, you won’t grow in your faith.

Do you remember the acronym GIGO that came out many years ago? It stands for “Garbage In, Garbage Out” and is a concept common to computer science and mathematics: the quality of output is determined by the quality of the input. If you put garbage in, garbage will come out. If men (and women) focus on fantasy, we will not *glow* for Christ and our ability to *know* Him will be short-circuited.

Let’s change this up a bit. GIGO can also mean, “God In, God Out.”

John Acuff perceptively quips: *“If you do the work, things happen. If you don’t, they won’t. I wish it were more complicated than that because then I'd have a better excuse to not do anything.”* Some time ago I heard a pastor say that *most American Christians are educated way beyond their level of obedience.* BTW, I posted this quote on Facebook on Friday and it generated a lot of discussion. I was going to tell you about it but the algorithms I set up wouldn’t allow me to.

We must obey what we know and then God will give us more. What measure are you using? Make sure it’s big enough and then let God add even more. If you want to know Him, you will because Galatians 6:7-8 promises: ***“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”***

*Glowing, knowing* and…

**3. Growing.** I met with a pastor friend this week and he told me that sometimes he wonders if preaching is really worth it. He had just shared some biblical truth with someone in his church and they had rejected it. I told him of the time I got up to preach in our previous church and started by saying something like this: *“Does preaching even matter? Some of you have heard hundreds of sermons but little seems to change in your life. I’ve heard thousands of sermons and personally preached hundreds of them and sometimes I get down about how little I’ve changed. Is this really worth it? Why don’t we see more growth?”*

In the parable of the growing plant, we’re reminded that there’s a mystery about how growth happens in verses 26-29: ***“And he said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.’”***

One of our tasks as Christ-followers is to sow the seed of the Word of God: ***“as if a man should scatter seed on the ground…”*** I love watching how God uses Duane Roesner as he comes into the office each week to make copies of tracts that he’s written. He then goes out into the community and hands them out.

The seed is sown but the sower can’t make the growth happen. He doesn’t dig up the seed to see if germination has taken place. He may water and remove weeds but he doesn’t touch the seed. We can sow but we can’t make the seed sprout. No matter if the farmer is sleeping or doing something else, the growth of the seed is in God’s hands: ***“He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows…”*** The farmer goes through his daily routines without exerting any extra energy into the plant to make it sprout.

According to the last phrase in verse 27, things grow but ***“he knows not how.”***  In Greek, the word order is quite lively: *“How, he does not know.”*  This is a good reminder to me that the gospel message can’t be manipulated or managed or marketed. The seed of the gospel grows and we don’t know how.

In verse 28 we see that something spontaneous happens when the seed is put into the soil: ***“The earth produces by itself…”*** The phrase *“all by itself”* in Greek is where we get the word “automatic.” It’s the idea of being self-acting or without visible cause.

We cannot make seed grow; we can’t even explain *how* it grows. This statement describes the organic growth that explodes underground leading to impressive growth above. Just like the seed germinates out of sight, so too, the seed of the gospel begins to grow before it will show.

Verse 29 shows us that sowing eventually leads to harvesting because *when the seed takes root, there will be fruit -* ***“But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”***

If you’re weary of sowing the seed and tired of all the weeds, then you might want to memorize Galatians 6:9: ***“And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.”*** Hudson Taylor, missionary to China, used to say that there are three qualifications for a missionary – *“patience, patience and patience.”*

Here’s how I summarize this parable: *Our part is to sow; God’s part is to make it grow. The growth may be slow but it will eventually grow.* 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: ***“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”***

I’ve shared these before but it’s good for us to be reminded of 8 fast facts about spiritual growth.

* **It’s normal to not see immediate results from evangelism.** You may simply be the first in a long line of seed sowers.
* **It’s normal for a Christian to grow.** If you’re not growing, something is wrong.
* **Germination is spontaneous but growth is not instantaneous.** Growth takes time.
* **Growth is not always easy to measure.**
* **Be gracious with those who still need to grow.**
* **Be intentional about your own growth.**
* **Help others grow but remember God brings growth.**
* **Sow the seed in your children and wait for it to sprout.**

*Glowing* leads to *knowing*, which leads to *growing* and finally to *showing.*

**4. Showing.** In the final parable we see that the smallest seed grows into the tallest shrub. Look at verses 30-32: ***“And he said, ‘With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.’”***

In order to compare how the kingdom of God works, Jesus focuses on something that is very small. It’s interesting that Jesus didn’t say the kingdom comes like a gigantic mountain or a rushing river but like a seed that is so small that its hard to even see. Those listening were expecting the kingdom to come with a cataclysmic bang where judgment would be immediate and the Messiah would set up his resplendent reign in Jerusalem.

I’m told that it takes about 750 mustard seeds to make up a single gram and there are about 21,000 seeds in an ounce.

Let’s think about how Jesus entered this world. He was born in the little town of Bethlehem and reared in the backwaters of Galilee in a nasty town called Nazareth. Jesus’ parentage was questioned and his followers were a rag-tag team of misfits. He was rejected by his own people and despised by others. He was crucified as a common criminal and then his body was put in a borrowed tomb.

But look at what happens next! ***“Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants…”*** The smallest turns into the tallest! The mustard bush becomes a shrub-like plant that looks like a tree, some growing as high as 15 feet!

When the seed was planted it looked like nothing much was happening. There were a few followers of Jesus. Acts 1:15 says that there were about 120 devoted believers. But on the Day of Pentecost, over 3,000 were saved at one time. A short time later, another 5,000 came to Christ at one time. Not too many days later, the church in Jerusalem was said to number 50,000!

And the growth of the gospel continues today! Listen to how Revelation 7:9-10 describes a time in the future: ***“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”***

This is a good reminder for us to not look down on the little, the least and the lost. Zechariah 4:10 tells us to ***“not despise the day of small things.”*** God loves to take what appears to be insignificant and do amazing things.

Notice that the mustard shrub ***“puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”*** Commentators differ on what this means but I believe it’s a reference to how the gospel goes to all nations and when it does it provides comfort wherever it has germinated.

When people are saved in a society, compassion and morality spring up. Hospitals and schools and orphanages take root. Cannibalism is destroyed, polygamy is pulverized and child sacrifice is ended.

Let’s summarize. Make sure you’re *glowing*. Don’t stop *knowing*. Keep *growing*. And make sure you’re *showing*.

Here then are some practical ways to live out these parables.

**Action Steps**

* **Utilize summer Sunday nights for sowing the gospel seed with your neighbors.** We have two more Sunday night services in May and then we won’t meet during the summer so you can be free to hang out with your neighbors. One of the organizers of the “Day for the Unreached,” made this statement recently: *“As many believers in North America have lost concern about their neighbors who don’t know Christ, it’s becoming even harder to be concerned about people around the world who they will never meet.”*
* **Join the Tuesday night prayer group here in the library.**
* **Attend the Walk for Freedom event**. As a way to learn more about our “next door nations,” I encourage you to get involved in the World Refugee Day on Saturday, June 18 at the Singing Bird Nature Center at Blackhawk State Park.
* **Join a 30-day prayer effort by praying for an unreached people group at dayfortheunreached.org.** If you sign up, you’ll receive an email prayer request every day.
* **Download the Joshua Project App on your tablet or smartphone (JP Unreached).** This will help you learn more about a different unreached people group every day and give you specific things to pray for.
* **Utilize our Go Team Video Screen to learn more about our missionaries.**
* **Continue giving during services or online.** Around 11% of what you give each week goes to support missionaries, some of whom are targeting unreached peoples in the 10/40 window. We’re also in discussion with some new church planters so we can get behind these efforts. Edgewood has helped to launch many churches over the years. We support them for a limited period of time and then we find more church planters and repeat the process.
* **Be filled with the Holy Spirit.** This Sunday is know as Pentecost Sunday, the day we remember how the Holy Spirit empowers and equips believers to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

*What will it take for the concept of unreached peoples to become totally intolerable to us?* We must make sure we’re *sowing* and *glowing* and *knowing* and *growing* and *showing*. We are called to not just survive but to thrive.

Closing Song: **“Thrive”**