

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

WHY YOU WANT TO BE ON JESUS' SIDE

Luke 13:18-21

By

Steven J. Cole

June 6, 1999

© Steven J. Cole, 1999

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

June 6, 1999
Luke Lesson 65

Why You Want To Be On Jesus' Side Luke 13:18-21

Most believers have struggled with discouragement. Even some godly pastors have gone through low times when they have wondered if they have spent their lives in vain. Charles Spurgeon, John Henry Jowett, and Andrew Bonar all went through dark valleys of discouragement. So did the Scottish preacher, Alexander Whyte. His biographer said, "Resolute as was Dr. Whyte's character, he had seasons of deep depression regarding the results of his work in the pulpit or among his people" (in Warren Wiersbe, *Walking With the Giants* [Baker], p. 263).

Let's face it, sometimes it seems as if the other side is winning. The world certainly is not getting better and better. There isn't a single Christian nation (or anything close) on the face of the earth. Evil people abound and seem to prosper. Godly people are a minority and even some of them fall into serious sins. If we look at what we ourselves have accomplished for the Lord, it seems so insignificant in the face of the huge task of establishing God's kingdom on this earth. It's easy for me as a pastor to think about how few have been transformed through my years of ministry and to grow discouraged.

The two parables in our text are here to encourage all who serve the Lord Jesus Christ with the simple truth that His side is going to win. The mustard seed will grow into a tree with the birds nested in its branches. The leaven will spread throughout the whole lump "The kingdom of the world [shall] become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

Luke links these parables to the preceding context with the word "therefore." Jesus was facing opposition and rejection from the Jewish religious leaders (13:14). You have to put yourself back into the times to understand what the disciples must have been feeling. They had left their businesses and way of life to stake everything on the fact that this young carpenter turned preacher was none other than God's Anointed One, the Messiah. He didn't look

like what everyone expected the Messiah to look like. He wasn't born to nobility. He didn't have connections with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. He had not been educated in their schools. He had no pedigree in the worldly sense of the term.

But His powerful teaching and the miracles He performed had convinced these men that He was the one. They expected Him to inaugurate His kingdom by overthrowing the Roman rule and establishing the throne of David again in Jerusalem. But things weren't going according to expectation. The religious leaders were not lining up on His side. In fact, they were growing increasingly hostile. Rather than trying to win them over, Jesus was boldly confronting them by calling them hypocrites, so that they were being humiliated (13:17).

The disciples might have looked at themselves, men who lacked the education and sophistication of the religious leaders, and at the way things seemed to be heading, and have grown discouraged. But these two parables show them and us that in spite of small and seemingly insignificant beginnings, the gospel will prevail. Even though there is conflict and the task seems overwhelming, God's purpose through Christ will triumph. Thus,

You want to be on Jesus' side because ultimately He will triumph over all.

Although there are some different lessons, both parables make the same point, that ultimately God's kingdom will triumph.

1. The parable of the mustard seed illustrates that ultimately, Jesus will triumph over all (13:18-19).

The parable is simple. The kingdom of God is like a man who sows a mustard seed in his garden and it grows until it is so large that the birds could nest in its branches. Probably Jesus was referring to a shrub that grows 8 to 12 feet high. The point is that a little seed could produce this unusually large shrub, so large that even the birds could find shelter there. There are two lessons:

- A. Jesus will triumph through the sowing of the seed of the gospel.

The man took the seed and threw it into his own garden. As in the parable of the sower, the seed represents the Word of God,

especially the central message of the Word, the gospel. (For my treatment of this parable I am greatly indebted to Spurgeon's insightful sermon, "The Mustard Seed: A Sermon for the Sabbath-School Teacher," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim], 35, #2,110.) The parable assumes that the man had a garden and that he desired to reap a crop. Sadly, many professing Christians go through life without any concept that the Lord has given them a corner of His field to sow and produce a crop for Him. He is the landowner to whom we all must give an account. Your garden consists of the people with whom you have contact, to influence them for the sake of the kingdom of God. You should desire to see God use you to produce a harvest for Him in your garden.

The way to produce a crop is to sow the seed of the gospel. The man threw the seed into his garden. Until he did that, the seed did not sprout and start growing. You can go to the nursery, buy a package of seeds, take them home and set them on your shelf. The package tells you that these seeds will produce tomatoes within so many weeks. So you wait, but the time goes by and you don't see any tomatoes. You go back to the nursery and complain that the seeds didn't produce any crop. The nursery clerk asks, "When did you plant them?" "Plant them? You mean I have to plant them?" There is no such thing as a seed that will produce a crop without being planted. And the gospel will not have any effect until it comes in contact with sinners. If we want to reap a crop, we must sow the seed of the gospel into the hearts of sinners.

Spurgeon points out that the man sowed the plain seed. He didn't wrap it in gold leaf or dress it up in any other manner. He just put the bare seed into the bare soil. The point is, we don't have to embellish the simple gospel message. Our brilliant ideas and persuasive techniques are not the power of God to salvation. The *gospel* is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16), and so we must be clear about the gospel and present it clearly to others.

In order to welcome the good news of the gospel, people must be convinced of the bad news of their condition before the holy God. The bad news is that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Some of us may be better persons than others, but none of us can ever qualify for heaven by our own goodness. To try to enter God's holy presence through our own

righteousness would be like flying into the sun; we would be consumed instantly. Hundreds of times and in hundreds of ways we have violated God's holy laws so that we stand guilty before Him. God can't just forgive everyone or He would no longer be just. Sin must be punished and the penalty is eternal separation from God.

Against this backdrop of bad news, the good news is that God has not left us to face His judgment. He sent a Savior in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Being fully God and fully man, Jesus was the only one who could live the sinless life that God requires and offer Himself as the one whose death could satisfy God's just demand for sinners. And, the best part of the good news is that God doesn't offer the Savior to us in exchange for our vows or efforts to earn His salvation. He offers eternal life to us as a free, undeserved gift, received by faith alone. He promises that the one who believes in Jesus as his sin-bearer shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

That message, that we are sinners, that Christ died for sinners, and that we can receive Him as Savior and Lord through faith, is so simple that children and uneducated people can understand it and respond to it. We should be sowing that simple seed with our children, with family members, with friends and acquaintances at work or at school, and with strangers whenever we get the opportunity. If you teach Sunday School, make sure that each of your students understands the gospel clearly and urge each one to put his or her trust in Jesus as Savior. Jesus will triumph through the sowing of the seed of the gospel.

We need to make sure that we are sowing the seed itself. There are many in our day who camouflage it in a way that won't be offensive to people. The doctrine of self-esteem has flooded into the church, telling us that people don't like to hear that they are sinners, much less worms! So we change the wording of our hymns and we dress up the gospel in the upbeat clothes of personal success: "Jesus can help you be all you've ever wanted to be! He will help you achieve your dreams! Don't worry about repentance. Just try Jesus and you'll be happy!" But that's not the gospel and it won't save sinners.

Some believers are confusing the gospel with moralism: "We need to call America back to our religious roots. Let's post the Ten

Commandments and get prayer back into our schools. Let's elect decent people to office and pass laws that uphold our Judeo-Christian values." While those may be worthy goals and while some Christians should serve as godly politicians and public officials, Christian morals will not save our nation. The gospel is what will save our nation and will result in true moral reformation. Moral reformation without the gospel is like trying to put a tuxedo on a pig. It might make the pig look nice for a while, but it won't bring lasting change. Jesus will triumph through the sowing of the seed of the gospel. We need to keep our focus there.

- B. The sown seed of the gospel will powerfully accomplish its intended results.

The man sowed the seed and it grew and became a tree. At first, that little seed seemed so small and powerless. It was just a speck in the man's hand. What could it possibly accomplish? But it wasn't long until it produced a plant large enough for the birds to nest in. Inherent in that tiny seed was the life and power to produce a sturdy tree.

So it is with the gospel. In Jesus' day, the popular notion was that the kingdom would come in with great fanfare. It would have a dramatic beginning, so that all would marvel. But Jesus is teaching that the kingdom would begin almost invisibly, without much notice, just like this man planting this small seed. But, having been planted, it would powerfully grow until it accomplishes God's purpose in sowing it.

Have you ever considered the amazing power in a seed? Throw a small seed near the foundation of your house and it may eventually crack that foundation. We've all seen concrete sidewalks buckled because a tree seed had been sown nearby. The power in a seed is the power of life. Sequoia trees that stand 300 feet tall and are almost 30 feet in diameter are contained in a small seed that you can easily hold in the palm of your hand. Put that seed into the ground and the life in it will produce that mighty tree.

The seed of the gospel is powerful because God uses it to impart His very life to sinners, transforming them from the inside out. As I mentioned last week, the gospel, as opposed to dead religion, is the life of God in the souls of men. As such, it is powerful to

transform not only individuals, but whole cultures. I recommend that you read Don Richardson's books, *Peace Child* and *Lords of the Earth*, if you want some modern, exciting stories of how the gospel powerfully transforms murderers and cannibals into peaceful missionaries who have a concern for others.

In 1981, Chester Bitterman, who was serving with Wycliffe Bible Translators, was murdered by Colombian terrorists. In interviewing Bitterman's family, a television reporter was probing for any covert connection between the young Bible translator and the CIA. The reporter suddenly blurted out, "But why should they kill someone just for translating the Bible? I mean, isn't that a pretty harmless thing to do?" Harmless?!! Well, yes, in terms of the final result, it's harmless, peaceable, and full of many such good qualities! It may be harmless, but it's certainly not powerless! Wherever it has gone, the Bible has transformed whole cultures through the simple message of the gospel.

There was no glory to the man who sowed the seed. We don't know his name. He didn't do anything spectacular or heroic. The power was not in him or in the slick way he put the seed into the ground. He hadn't taken a course in how to get guaranteed results through proper planting techniques. He just threw out the seed and let it do its thing. Sure, he may have watered it and protected it from the elements and fertilized it. But he had nothing to do with making that seed grow. The seed grew because of the life within it and the man could only marvel at how that big tree came out of that little seed by the mysterious process of life.

It's the same way with the gospel. While we may benefit from learning how to present the gospel in a clear manner, we have nothing to do with the power of it. The power comes from God imparting His life to dead sinners. When God acts through the gospel, all we can do is marvel at His great power to transform lives. Those who sow the seed can't take any glory for themselves. God gets all the glory.

In spite of all the advances of modern science, no one can produce anything as simple as a living seed. Assemble the world's most brilliant scientists and give them a year and as much research money as they need. They can analyze seeds and figure out the DNA structure. But they can't construct a simple seed that will

grow into a living plant, because they can't design life. Only God can do that and the power of the seed is life.

And no one can come up with a message or a philosophy to rival the gospel, because the best of human wisdom falls far short of the life-giving power of God in the gospel. As Spurgeon points out, no nation has ever been transformed from barbarism to culture through the writings of Plato or Socrates. But the seed of the gospel is powerful to convert the chief of sinners to the most godly of saints. As Paul puts it (1 Cor. 1:21), "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

Think of the powerful results that can come from the single seed planted. Thousands of new seeds are produced, each one capable of producing thousands more life-giving seeds. And the birds found shelter in the tree that resulted from this single seed. Probably this is a reference to the Gentiles who find shelter in the gospel that was first given to the Jewish nation (Ezek. 17:23). All who nest there find the shelter of peace with God, freely provided. And the birds always sing. We have some birds outside our bedroom window that now begin singing at 4:30 in the morning, a bit early for my blood! The Bible shows that the preaching of the gospel in all the world will result in myriads from every nation gathering around God's throne, singing praises to Him because of His saving grace. God's means of accomplishing His glorious purpose is through His people sowing the seed of the gospel.

The parable of the mustard seed shows that ultimately, Jesus will triumph over all. But we must briefly consider the parable of the leaven.

2. The parable of the leaven illustrates that ultimately, Jesus will triumph over all.

The lessons are somewhat overlapping and so do not require much comment. But the repetition may cement them in our minds.

A. The size of the task proportionate to the smallness of the force is not a hindrance to Jesus' ultimate triumph.

The woman's three measures of flour were equal to about 39 liters or 50 pounds of flour, a large amount. The point is that just a

small amount of leaven was all that was needed to permeate this large mass of dough.

Leaven or yeast is a single-celled fungus that promotes fermentation. When put into bread dough, it produces carbon dioxide bubbles that cause the dough to rise. Since leaven is often used in the Bible as a symbol for sin, some commentators understand this parable to be referring to the spread of false doctrine in the church. But this is to overturn the obvious contextual flow of thought. Sometimes in the Bible, leaven is not a symbol for evil (Lev. 7:13; 23:15-18), and it can be argued that Jesus is using a somewhat different meaning to grab His hearers attention and to give the parable a provocative twist.

So the meaning here is parallel to the meaning of the small mustard seed. The smallness of the pinch of leaven is not a problem even though the lump is large. The smallness of Jesus and His ragtag band of followers is no problem with regard to the worldwide spread of the gospel. The power does not depend on Jesus' followers, but on the power of God through the gospel.

B. The leaven must come in contact with the dough for the power to be unleashed.

We've already seen the same point with regard to the seed. Here there may be the nuance that once the contact is made, the power works from the inside out. That is how the gospel works as God transforms the hearts of sinners.

C. Once the contact has been made, the power is unstoppable.

You can't reverse the process. Once you introduce leaven into the dough, it does its thing. Once the gospel penetrates the hearts of those whom God has chosen to save, it is effectual to bring them to salvation and then to progressive sanctification. As Paul explains (Rom. 8:29-30), "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified." Our job is to bring the leaven of the gospel into contact with the mass of humanity. God's job is to save those whom He has purposed to

save. And He will save them because salvation does not depend on the will of man, but on the sovereign will and power of God.

Conclusion

These parables do not teach postmillennialism, that the gospel will spread until all the world is converted, at which point Jesus will return. Many other Scriptures refute this view (*e.g.*, 2 Thess. 2:1-8). But they do teach that the gospel will spread to all peoples and that God's sovereign purpose through Christ will be accomplished. He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Dr. Ralph Winter of the U.S. Center for World Mission has shown that in 1430 A.D., the total number of Bible-believing Christians proportionate to the total world population was only one percent. But by 1993, that number had progressively increased to ten percent. He says that the kingdom of Christ is currently expanding at a rate of over three times the rate of world population growth ("Mission Frontiers," May/June, 1994, p. 5).

If you're not already on Jesus' side, these two parables should alarm you because you are opposed to that which inevitably will prevail. You need to cross the line by trusting in Christ as your Savior and Lord. If you are on Jesus' side, these parables should encourage you to sow the seed of the gospel, because God will powerfully use it for the conversion of sinners and the fulfillment of His purpose of being glorified in all the earth. You want to be on Jesus' side because ultimately He will triumph over all.

Discussion Questions

1. Is *every* Christian obligated to share the gospel? What if he is uncomfortable talking to others about spiritual matters?
2. If conversion is God's doing, to what extent are we free to use persuasive techniques in witnessing? See 2 Cor. 5:11.
3. Some say, "If God has predestined all who will be saved, why do we need to witness?" Why is this fallacious?
4. Why should the doctrine of predestination actually be an encouragement to witness? See Acts 18:9-10; 2 Tim. 2:10).

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 1999, All Rights Reserved.