

## FAITH THAT WORKS – KINGDOM INVESTING

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July 15, 2018

Matthew 13: 1-12, 18-23

There are a few core teachings that I find I can't avoid, that I return to in my sermons again and again. One of them – the one I've hammered away at maybe more than any other – is the highlighted in that parable about the sower and the seeds. The parable reveals that we were created to be productive. The Lord wants us to be fruitful disciples. He invites us to be a part of the exciting, demanding and intensely-rewarding work of kingdom-building.

In the parable a sower distributes seed on different kinds of soil, and the condition of the soil determines whether or not the seed grows. The seed represents the Word of God. The soil represents different kinds of people. The seed that hits soil that's rocky, or sun-scorched, or thorn-infested all eventually dies. But the seed that lands on good soil – the gospel seed that's planted in the heart of a faithful disciple – takes root and grows. It produces a bumper crop that's 30, 60 or even 100 times greater than what is sown.

Let's think about those returns for a minute in terms that are more familiar. What would it mean in terms of our investment portfolios if we were to receive 30, 60 or 100 fold returns? I got out my calculator and ran some numbers.

I wanted to know specifically how long would it take to achieve those returns if we made the assumption we would receive the historic return on stock investments. According to Bill Gross, the founder of PIMCO, the actual, inflation-adjusted, 100 year rate of return for stocks has been about 6.7 % per year.

I used that number in my calculations. And what I discovered is that when the annual rate of return is 6.7%, it takes:

- 52 years to achieve a 30 fold return
- 63 years to achieve a 60 fold return
- and 71 years to achieve a 100 fold return.

This simple analysis underscores a mind-blowing spiritual truth. Jesus' promise of a 30, 60 or 100 fold return on the investment we make in God's kingdom is absolutely staggering.

Jesus explains most of the symbolism in the Parable of the Sower, but he leaves one crucial question unanswered. What does the bumper crop represent? In other words, what is the thing that's being multiplied 30, 60 or 100 times?

The answer is suggested to us, I think, elsewhere in Jesus' teachings. The first disciples that Jesus called remember were fishermen. Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee. He saw Peter and his brother

Andrew casting their net into the lake and he said to them, “Follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people” (Matthew 4:19).

The bumper crop that’s produced by the good soil is people – good-hearted, salt-of-the-earth people like Peter and Andrew – people who are sowing the seeds of the Gospel and harvesting disciples who will do the same.

Let’s think now about the people that didn’t produce anything. Their soil, remember, was rocky, sun-scorched and thorn-infested. Jesus offers a disturbing explanation. Rocky soil people are people who hear the message about God’s kingdom and don’t understand it. Sun-scorched soil people are people who receive the message gladly but soon fall away because of trouble or persecution. Thorn-infested soil people are people who are weighed down by anxiety, or who get caught up in the pursuit of wealth or fame.

Jesus’ diagnosis of our spiritual troubles points to deeper problems. Most people want to have a positive impact on the world. The idea of being productive for God is appealing to us. Yet as soon as we start to talk about the practicalities – as soon as we start to contemplate the concrete steps and specific strategies plans that might actually help us to be productive disciples of Jesus – everything changes. We recognize that our plans for our lives often don’t line up with God’s wider plan for his kingdom. It becomes clear that sacrifices are required. And suddenly we think of all kinds of reasons, some of them quite sophisticated, why God doesn’t want us or need us to engage in “good works.”

For example, some of us have theological concerns. We’ve heard church leaders say that, in God’s eyes, our good works are nothing but “dirty rags.” And we worry that our efforts to do good will compromise the purity of our faith by causing us to rely on our good works rather than Christ himself to save us. We say to ourselves: “I’m saved by God’s grace, not by any good that I do. In fact, when I do good works, I become prideful. I start to look at my good works as the path to my salvation. So the important thing is just to trust the Lord and leave the business of kingdom-building to him. I just need to put my faith in Jesus, and realize that he loves and accepts me just as I am.”

Millions and millions of church-going Christians around the world have adopted this pious-sounding attitude towards “good works.” The result is that millions and millions of people who profess faith in Jesus are doing little or nothing to establish his reign on earth. They’re just sitting on their hands, waiting to die and go to heaven, waiting for the Lord to come back and finally set things right.

It’s true that we’re saved by God’s grace and not by our accumulated good deeds. It’s important to remember and celebrate that truth every day. But we should also remember that for a disciple of Jesus, the motive for doing good isn’t that it will make us worthy of God’s grace. The motive is that we love God and we want to please him – we love other people and want to do what we can to help them thrive.

Another excuse we give for our apathy has to do with God's sovereignty. In the light of God's awesome power, we discount the idea that we might have anything of value to offer to him. Our reasoning goes something like this: "The Lord reigns over all the earth. He's all-knowing and all-powerful. That means he has everything under his control. He can do anything he wants, anytime he wants. All he has to do is say the word and snap his fingers. So obviously he doesn't need my help."

God *is* sovereign over his creation. He's all-powerful, all-knowing and ever-present. But creation is broken. Because of sin, God's will is *not* done on earth as it is in heaven. Christ came to root out sin and establish God's reign over a re-created order. And one of the great mysteries revealed in the Bible and through God's actions in history is that God has decided to include us in that work. He invites us to be his partners in the business of kingdom-building. In plain English, he's relying on us to help him. He *needs* us to continue the work that Jesus began when he walked among us. And, with the help of his Spirit, we *can* and *will* make a difference.

The Apostle Paul understood all of this better than anyone. He had a comprehensive vision of God's sovereignty and power. Yet no one ever worked harder to continue the Lord's work and establish his kingdom on earth. He wrote to the Corinthians:

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain

- 1 Corinthians 15:58).

Paul offered a similar word to the Galatians:

...[L]et us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us good to all people...

- Galatians 6:9-10

Paul understood that God was calling the church to be Christ's hands and feet. He knew that God, in his inscrutable wisdom, had elected to use puny, flawed humans like us to rise to the stature of Christ, and to partner with Christ in establishing his eternal reign.

Yet another excuse we give for not engaging in kingdom work is that God hasn't spoken to us. He hasn't been clear about what he wants or expects of us. Or so we think. We say, "If God has a job for me to do, he'll let me know. He'll send his Spirit to talk to me or push me in the direction he wants me to go. Until that happens, I'm going to assume God doesn't need my help. I'm going to follow my dreams and enjoy myself."

It's true that God rarely communicates with us through miracles, or in visions or dreams. He almost never speaks in an audible voice. Yet God is constantly revealing his will and his intentions for our lives through other channels. He signals to us through the Bible, through our conscience, through mature friends, through books and movies and poetry. He guides and encourages us by shaping the

circumstances of our lives. And if we aren't picking up any of those signals, the fault lies with us and not with God.

Here's the takeaway for us this morning. *Our purpose in this life is to become like Christ so we can do the work of Christ. It's to be filled with Christ's life so we can share his abundant life with others.* Those core insights pervade Jesus' teachings. They're illuminated by so many of the parables and images that Jesus employs.

Think of his words to Peter and Andrew as they're casting their nets: "Come follow me and I will send you out to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). From the very start Jesus makes it clear that he's going to train his disciple to do what he does. Together they're going to call people out of the darkness and into the light.

Think of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells his followers they are the "light of the world." Actually, he is the light that illuminates our hearts, but he has appointed his followers to spread the light. As they continue his work, he assures them, others will see their good deeds and be drawn to the Father (Matthew 5:14-16).

As Jesus travels through the towns and villages of Israel, he has compassion on the people. He points out that they're harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. But he also makes it clear to his disciples that they're to share in his work of bringing them into his kingdom. He says to them, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37).

Later he invites those who are weary and burdened to find relief by joining in his work. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he said, "for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:28-29). Here again we see Jesus inviting us to become partners with him in ministry. He assures us that when we're yoked with him, our burdens will seem light. Because he's strong, he can carry the load. Because he's gentle, he knows when to stop and rest. And because he's wise, he knows the direction we need to go.

It takes a long time for the disciples to embrace their calling. They spend a lot of time just watching Jesus and listening to him. You get a good insight into the disciples' apathetic tendencies in the story of the Feeding of the 5000. Jesus has been speaking to an immense crowd and the dinner hour is approaching. "Send them away," the disciples tell Jesus. But Jesus asks if they can scrounge up any food. And all they can come up with is 5 loaves of bread and two fish.

As most of us remember it, the story ends when Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fish and everyone is fed with plenty to spare. But that's not exactly what happens. Jesus first has everyone sit down in groups so the disciples can bring food to them. Then, after Jesus blesses the loaves and the fish, the disciples distribute them. And *that's* when the miracle occurs. The multiplication happens as the disciples follow through on Jesus' instructions – instructions that, to any nonbeliever, would have seemed absolutely crazy.

So, yes, Jesus *does* perform the miracle. But he does so in a way that pulls in the disciples. It's when the disciples obey Jesus' outrageous instructions and thereby show their faith that God's power is released.

And the takeaway for the disciples, once again, is that the Lord wants to make them abundantly productive.

The Parable of the Sower is linked in Matthew with several other parables. "What's the kingdom of God like?" Jesus asks. It's like a tiny mustard seed that a man planted in his garden, and that grew into a huge tree.

It's like yeast that a woman mixed into sixty pounds of flour. It spread through the dough and caused every loaf that was baked to rise.

These simple images reveal vital truths about God's kingdom. They tell us show that God uses small things to get big results. They tell us that God's kingdom is a place of growth and abundance.

Jesus tells a parable that focuses on our responsibilities with regard to our money and the other resources we control. In the parable a rich man goes on a journey and entrusts each of his servants with his riches. Success comes to the servants that take personal responsibility for the money, and invest the money on behalf of their master. They multiply his wealth many times over, and are rewarded for their efforts. But the servant that buries the money in the ground is cast into the outer darkness.

All of these stories and parables reveal a vital truth: God's kingdom is a place of bounty and blessing. It's a world where all good things expand and multiply, and nothing is ever wasted. And the Lord wants us to share in the work of bringing that kingdom to earth. He needs us to share in that work. He created us for that very purpose.

Let's think now about the practical application of these truths. What does it mean for us to be good soil people? What do we need to do, here and now, to receive the Gospel seed and produce a bumper crop?

First we need to realize that everything we have and everything we are is God's.

So often our conversations about stewardship focus on the amount we should be giving, and whether we're giving enough. The Lord didn't spend much time focusing on those issues. Instead, he urged his followers to be all in for him. He wanted them to find their peace, their freedom, their fulfillment and their joy in living for God and serving on his team.

So instead of worrying about whether you're giving enough and doing enough, take a step back and ask: "What would my life look like if I just surrendered everything to God?" I'm not talking about giving all your money to the church. I'm talking about completely rethinking your relationship with the Lord. I'm

talking about organizing every aspect of your life, including your finances, so that you can maximize your impact a kingdom-builder.

Of course it's hard to surrender everything to God. It's hard to re-order your priorities so they line up with God's priorities. But we have a counselor and friend who is standing by to help us. As we take baby steps towards that new life, God's Spirit moves in to change our hearts, and to bless and multiply our work.

Second, we need to realize that God entrusts us with money, influence and other resources so we will use them in kingdom-building.

Lots of people inside and outside the church believe money is dirty and evil, and that it contaminates anyone who touches it. But that isn't what the New Testament teaches us. Money can be incredibly seductive. Those who fall in love with it are destined for destruction. But we should all hope that God's people would be blessed with abundant financial resources. We should all pray that God would raise up a generation of rich Christians who are completely surrendered to him, who love the things that he loves, and who will generously fund the work of kingdom-building.

Third, we need to uproot the defeatist attitude that has overtaken so many people in Christ's church.

I'm so tired of listening to Christians complain about the church's lack of relevance. If Jesus followers think God's word no longer has power in our world, it's because they've forgotten about the power of mustard seeds and the yeast. They've forgotten that God uses small things – sometimes even hidden things – to get big results.

We need to realize that God's harvest is ripe and ready, and that a bumper crop awaits those who will step out in faith.

On the night of his betrayal – the night before his crucifixion – Jesus speaks to his followers at length. He is preparing them to continue his work. Much of what he tells them they've heard before. He says, "Don't be afraid... if you obey my teachings my Father and I will come and make our home with you... the Father is going to send you the Holy Spirit."

Then Jesus comes to what I believe is his core message. He revisits ideas that are familiar to his followers, but the imagery he employs is new to them. He speaks of vineyards and grapes, of branches that are fruitful and branches that produce nothing.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

- John 15: 5-6, 8

Jesus is imploring his disciples, as he prepares for his departure, to stay connected to him. If they will do that, Jesus says, his life will flow to them, and he'll do his work through them. He'll cause them to produce harvest after harvest of sweet, delicious fruit.

So then, here's the takeaway this morning: If we're truly committed to the things of God, and to the advancement of his kingdom, we have every reason to expect a great harvest. Because God's kingdom is a place of astonishing growth and abundance.