

## 2/16/20 The Church is... (Week 3) - A Field

*Neither the church leader who plants nor the one who waters is anything, because only God gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will be rewarded according to their individual labor. We are God's servants, working together; you are God's field... (1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 3.7-9a)*

1) Church is a Farmer's Field - Every congregation is a work in progress; St. Paul compares it to agricultural acreage that needs to be cultivated (3.5-9a; beginning in 9b, he'll use a similar analogy, calling church a building or construction project). Just as disciples are made, not born, to use John Ortberg's turn of phrase, the same could be said of churches. A key concept in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 3 is church seasons: every organization runs through predictable cycles, sometimes needing to be sparked from its doldrums, sometimes needing to rest and recover, sometimes needing to push forward into uncharted territory, etc. (see Ecclesiastes 3.1-8 for a reflection on all life being this rhythmic). The lesson here is simple enough – we are to pay attention to the current season and the work that needs to be done, while anticipating the different season and needs that lie ahead.

2) We are God's Field Hands: All of us, but congregational leaders especially, are workers in God's field. It's His land, not ours; He's owns it, we're just His employees. And, as pastor Andy Stanley puts it, each of us is both temporary and accountable; we are to identify our role in the current season, and then pursue it with zeal, all the while knowing that the church will need new and different influencers in the near future, so we ought to hold the reins loosely. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard would label this "situational leadership" and "situational awareness."

3) Only God Causes Growth: This may well be the most important reminder St. Paul gives us in this passage, in part because it's counterintuitive. Churches work hard and their leaders seek to play their particular part for their time, but in both cases without the delusion that they are responsible for causing growth. Church isn't a simple cause and effect (that is, if we labor wisely and long enough, we grow). Instead, our roles are merely preparatory, we are setting the optimal conditions for God to do what only He can – cause growth. We discuss together, we assess needs and strengths, we train, we learn, we empower creativity, we try new things, and so on, all the while knowing that we can't always predict where, how, and when God will ignite progress and development. In this way, church cultivation is akin to the dynamic at play in personal spiritual habits and routines: as pastor Daniel Matthias puts it, "The first thing to say is that growing in Christ is not something we can produce...Growing in grace isn't something we can calculate and produce. It's not ultimately in our court. There are actions we take, and must take — habits of mind and heart and life to cultivate — but in the end, we are powerless...We're typically not aware of growth as it is happening, but only later look back and say, "Wow, look what God did. He brought about so much growth, and I only now can see it."

*Jesus told them a parable, saying, "Listen! A farmer went out into his field to scatter seed...Let anyone who has ears hear what I have to say!" (Matthew 13.3b, 9)*

Jesus Himself uses the same image of a planted field for His Kingdom. And in this first parable in Matthew 13, He describes what conditions either work against or for a church's receptivity to God's activity among them (His "seed"). Specifically, there are three hazards about which churches need to be keenly aware:

1. Hardness (13.4) – Sometimes, according to Jesus, God's seed falls on packed earth, and it cannot take root. So our own hardness, or our inattention to the tilling and prep of the soil of our souls, is often a chief way that we miss divine opportunities.

2. Heat (13.5-6) – On other occasions, God's seed is given too little ground in which to grow, so the first stretch of hot days to come along kills it off. Jesus' point seems to be that if we only pay nominal attention to what God may want to do in our midst, then the first difficulty or hurdle we face will dissuade us from it. If a God is sprouting something new and good in your church, give it every chance to succeed, and don't let a bump in the road here or there stop your enthusiasm for it.

3. Thorns (13.7) – In some cases, God's seed wants to sprout and take hold, but our thorns – that is, our own preexisting, unaddressed problems – get in the way, and choke out what He wants to bring about. So while we can't cause the growth, we, and our issues, can certainly stymie it. Just like an adept gardener, we ought to be intent about clearing weeds so that which is more desirable can flourish.