We are in the parable portion of Mark and I don’t want to assume that everyone knows what a parable is. A parable is, literally, something “cast alongside” something else. Jesus’ parables were stories that were “cast alongside” a truth in order to illustrate that truth. His parables were teaching aids and can be thought of as extended analogies or inspired comparisons. A common description of a parable is that it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

For a time in His ministry, Jesus relied heavily on parables. He told many of them; in fact, according to Mark 4:34a, “He did not say anything to them without using a parable.” There are about 35 of Jesus’ parables recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.

Interpreting a parable can present some challenges for the student of the Bible. Sometimes, interpretation is easy because the Lord Himself gave the interpretation—the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares are both explained in Matthew 13. Here are some principles that help in interpreting the other parables:

1) Determine the scope of the spiritual truth being presented. Sometimes, a parable is preceded by some introductory words that provide a context. For example, often Jesus preceded a parable with the words “this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.” Also, before the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we read this: “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable” (Luke 18:9). This introduction delineates the subject matter being illustrated (self-righteousness and spiritual pride).

2) Distinguish between the “meat” of the story and what is just ornamentation. In other words, not every detail of a parable carries a deep spiritual meaning. Some details are simply there to help the story seem more realistic. For example, in Jesus’ own interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, He does not comment on the fact that there are four (and only four) different types of soil. That detail was meaningless to the overall point Jesus was making.

3) Compare Scripture with Scripture. This basic principle of hermeneutics is invaluable when studying parables. Jesus’ parables will never contradict the rest of the Word of God, which He came to express (John 12:49). The parables are meant to illustrate doctrine, and the teachings Jesus illuminated are found clearly taught elsewhere in the Bible.

After telling some of His parables, Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (Mark 4:9, 23). This was a call to listen to the parables, not just as one would listen to an ordinary story but as one who is seeking the truth of God. May God grant us all ears to truly “hear.”

Back to the parable for today. Let us listen for the truth that comes from Jesus’ parable. Anyone who is a farmer, of which I am not, so I have to do research, would tell you one of the interesting things about this parable is that the farmer plants the seed and then he doesn’t tend to it. It says the soil itself produces crop by itself and that is one of the focuses of this parable that we will come back to.

One commentary I read suggested that this is not normal farming. You don’t go to sow the seed and ignore it and go to bed and only return when it is time to use the sickle. You normally go back and take care of whatever you are growing. Tending the land, removing the weeds, etcetera.

Perhaps that is the purpose. Jesus is not trying to tell us how things normally are, he’s telling a story that will feel familiar to the people and highlight elements to push certain points to get to the lesson and one of the points seems to be the farmer is not involved in the growing of the crop.

Another point is that the growth is progressive as most growing of seeds into a crop goes. And both of these truths are talking about evangelism, especially seeing as it comes after the parable of the sower.

The farmer is the evangelist who throws out the seed which is the Word of God going out into peoples lives. And we may get into arguments or squabbles about what it looks like to evangelize. Does it look like the fire and brimstone preacher on the street corner? Does it look like sitting down and talking to people about Jesus? Does it look like handing out tracts so people can get the Gospel? Does it look like my actions and not just my words? There are so many ways in which people evangelize. While that is debatable, what is not debatable is the fact that Jesus uses several parables to instruct us to evangelize. We are called to lead people to him.

Here is a truth about evangelism, we often try to do what we think is going to get the best results, but what are results since we can’t measure someone’s heart? And so we measure it based on altar calls, or baptisms, and even just pleasant conversations that we have had with people and consider that successful evangelism. I would argue that successful evangelism is simply sharing the Gospel through our words and deeds where we are able to sow seeds of faith in peoples lives.

The point of evangelism is the Gospel of Christ going out to peoples lives. And when it comes to the church what I preach to our church council and what I preach to our Service and Witness Committee, is that our job is not to regulate evangelism, our job is to provide opportunities for folks to have a positive experience at church and to give people the opportunity to hear the Gospel and give their lives to the Lord. Because ultimately we are the farmers.

We are the farmers and it is our duty to scatter the seed wherever we walk. You may be thinking to yourself well, that’s great pastor, but I don’t know how to explain my faith, or I don’t know how to explain the Gospel, or I don’t know how to field peoples questions, or I just am not confident. And to that I say, meet me and we can talk one on one, or we can have an evangelism class where we talk about what is the Gospel and how we can share it because we cannot abandon one of the primary roles of the church and the each of us as individual members of the body of Christ.

Remember one of Jesus final commands was the great commission to baptize all nations in the name of the triune God and teach them his commands. We go out and sow the seed and we provide a place, the church building, where folks can learn to live out their faith, learn about their faith, and grow in their faith. And as our mission statement says, to reach inward, outward, and upward for the living God.

You don’t believe me go back to the parable. The farmer sows the seed and then goes to rest until its time for the harvest. The work is divided between the farmer planting and the soil growing.

Another thing about this growing being progressive is a reminder that no matter how good we think we did sharing the Gospel, things don’t just happen overnight. You may sow the seed and it take years to sprout, or you may sow seed and it grows immediately, well its possible that you were the one that was watering a seed already planted by someone else. So we do not measure success in evangelism by how many people turn to the Lord once we finish speaking to them or living it to them because more often then not faith does not blossom overnight. You may be one tiny piece in the story of their journey to faith. We plant the seed and let the soil do its work.

Next comes the harvest part of the parable. What is that about. Well in the parable of the tares we learn that the harvest comes at the end of the age. Let me share this quickly to drive home the point.

In the parable of the tares the synopsis is this. True and false believers the wheat and the tares grow up together and some sown by the Lord and some by the enemy and in Matthew 13 Jesus explains this by saying the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man and the field is the world and the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom and the tares are the sons of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. Everything has a corresponding element. And the harvest is the end of the age and the reapers are the angels.

If that’s the case with the parable of the tares, and its one Jesus totally explains, we can use it to understand this one. The harvest then is implied to be the end of the age. So that is good news for us because it has us looking at the total fruit of the Gospel in the world and not just one moment of evangelism. Because its about the final harvest and we are a part of something bigger than ourselves and any one moment.

I truly believe that there is nothing greater in this world than sharing the Gospel and our excitement about Jesus with someone. I mean if I can sit and talk with someone about how great pie is, or the cowboys, Michigan football, burgers and all the restaurants I love like Paiges Okra Grill and Hoof and Hound, and all the board games I play, I think its only right that I can talk about my Lord and Savior who died on the cross for me, and suffered the punishment for my sins. The one in whom I delight in and find my being in. The God who is with me all the time and brought me this far along the way. That amazing God is greater than all the things I mentioned and so if I can learn to talk about this finite things I should work to talk about the infinite love of God. Who came to earth to die for our sins, and rise from the grave so that we can have eternal life.