

## From Seedtime To Harvest: What's Stunting My Spiritual Growth? - Readings

A sermon by Rev. Matthew Genzlinger

**Luke 11:1-10:** Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

**Genesis 1:9-13:** And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land be seen; and it was so. And the dry, God called Land, and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas; and God saw that it was good. And God said, Let the land cause the tender sprout to sprout forth, the herb seeding seed, and the fruit tree making fruit according to its kind, in which is its seed, upon the land; and it was so. And the land brought forth the tender sprout, the herb seeding seed after its kind, and the tree making fruit, whose seed was in itself, after its kind; and God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the third day.

**Arcana Coelestia 9207:** "And your sons shall be orphans. That this signifies that then at the same time truths will perish, is evident from the signification of 'orphans,' as being those who are in truth and not yet in good, and nevertheless long for good, here those who are in truth but do not long for good, thus those with whom truths are perishing; for it is said of the evil, whose sons shall become orphans.... Truths which are conjoined with good always have within them a longing to do what is good, and at the same time, to thereby conjoin themselves more closely with good; or, what is the same, those who are in truths always long to do what is good, and thus to conjoin good with their truths; and therefore those who believe themselves to be in truths and do not long to do what is good, are not in truths; that is, they are not in the faith of these truths, howsoever they may suppose themselves to be so."

**Arcana Coelestia 55:** "A grain of mustard seed' is the good a person has before he becomes spiritual. It is 'the smallest of all seeds' because he imagines that he himself is the source of the good he does. In reality what he does of himself is nothing but evil, yet because he is in a state of being regenerated there is some element of good, though it is 'the smallest of all'. Later on when faith is being joined to love it grows larger and becomes 'a plant'. Once it has finally been joined to love it develops into a tree, and at that point 'the birds of the air, which here are truths or intellectual concepts, 'nest in its branches', which are facts."

**Arcana Coelestia 29:** "Once the earth or individual has been made ready in such a way that he can receive from the Lord heavenly seeds and produce some measure of good and truth, the Lord first of all causes something tender to spring up, which is called 'a tender plant', then something more useful which reproduces itself and is called 'a seed-bearing plant', and finally something good which bears fruit and is called 'a tree bearing fruit' in which is its seed.... The person who is being regenerated at first imagines that any good he does comes from himself, and that any truth he utters comes from himself; but the fact of the matter is that all good and all truth come from the Lord. Consequently anyone who imagines that these originate in himself does not as yet have the life that belongs to true faith, though he is able to receive it later on."

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Seeds. There are many places in the Scriptures where the Lord compares the process of a person's spiritual development to the growing of a seed. Our faith, our love for the Lord and the spiritual life that stems from these, start off as small mustard seeds; but gradually grow over time. We may start off as tiny seeds, but the Lord is continually working to form us into beautiful, "Trees, planted by the rivers of waters, that bring forth their fruit in their season." (Psalm 1:3)

While the Lord is always encouraging us, seeing our great potential, there are inevitably going to be times when we don't feel like we are progressing spiritually. Our faith, our love for the Lord and our spiritual life which should be thriving, seem to be stagnant or even wilting away. Today we are going to focus on three things that the Lord tells us can stunt the seeds of faith from growing within us.

**1. The first is a lack of water.** Children usually grow up with some kind of spiritual foundation. Even if you were not raised in a very religious household, chances are you still grew up with the general idea that there is a God who created all things; that there is a life after death; and that, again in general, good people go to this place called heaven and bad people go to this place called hell. Many children also learn at least some of the more classic Bible stories.

As useful as this foundation of general ideas is, when we become adults the Lord encourages us to build on this foundation. He does not want us to continue with a vague sense that He exists or with a blind faith that He has somehow saved us. The Lord urges each one of us to persistently develop our understanding of who He is and what kind of relationship He wants to have with us. Of course, throughout the Scriptures, we see the Lord imploring us to be seekers and to continually thirst for a better understanding of what is good and true. In the book of Revelation, the Lord says, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who thirsts I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely." (Revelation 21:6) In the very first Psalm we read that happy is the person whose delight is in the law of Jehovah, "And in His law he meditates by day and night." (Psalm 1:2) And interesting, in a negative sense widows are sometimes used in the Scriptures to represent people whose affection, whose drive, whose passion to really learn from the Lord and His Word has withered away and died. They are widows in that they are no longer seeking, or knocking, or even desiring to drink the water of life that the Lord is offering.

So this is a relatively simple reminder. But it's one that the Lord often focuses on. If we feel as if our faith, our love for the Lord and our spiritual life in general is wilting, it may be because we are not allowing the Lord to water us. It can be difficult in today's busy world where many things distract us from doing it, but in order to have that strong and growing faith we all want, we need to be asking ourselves, are we actively seeking the Lord's Divine truth.

**2. A second thing that can stunt the seeds of faith from growing within us is a lack of warmth.** It is a wonderful thing that the Lord provides us all with a real love of learning from His Word. Water is vital to the growth of any healthy tree. But the Lord also warns us about the danger of having water but not enough warmth.

One of the reasons the Lord chose to be born into this world was to remind us that everything He teaches has one goal: And that is to help us learn how to better love the Lord and our neighbor. Of course, in the gospel of Matthew the Lord told a Scribe that the two greatest commandments were to love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-40) The Writing for the New Church spend a lot of time encouraging us to recognize that in order to live the life that leads to heaven, our faith or our knowledge of what is good and true, must be conjoined to a life of useful service. The book Heaven and Hell explains in great detail that it is the marriage between wisdom and love, or truth and goodness, or faith and charity that makes heaven in a person. If the truth we know is not inspiring us to live a life of charity, then our spiritual life will suffer because of it.

I want to read for you a wonderful passage from the book Arcana Coelestia, where the Lord is explaining the spiritual meaning of “orphans” in the Scriptures. Sometimes orphans can represent people who know what is true AND are longing to live a good life. But in this case an orphan is used to represent someone whose spiritual life is suffering because they know what is true, but they are not using that truth to live a useful life of love and charity. We read: “And your sons shall be orphans. That this signifies that then at the same time truths will perish, is evident from the signification of ‘orphans,’ as being those who are in truth and not yet in good, and nevertheless long for good, but here those who are in truth but do not long for good, thus those with whom truths are perishing; for it is said of the evil, whose sons shall become orphans....Truths which are conjoined with good always have within them a longing to do what is good, and at the same time, to thereby conjoin themselves more closely with good; or, what is the same, those who are in truths always long to do what is good, and thus to conjoin good with their truths; and therefore those who believe themselves to be in truths and yet do not long to do what is good, are not in truths; that is, they are not in the faith of these truths, howsoever they may suppose themselves to be so.” (AC 9207) What a fascinating and important passage! Here the Lord is telling us that we can know as much truth as we want, we can have a relatively clear idea of who the Lord is and a faith in what He did for us; it can all on some level make sense in our minds; but if we are not at the same time longing to do what is good, if we are not simultaneously looking to live a life of love and charity, our apparent faith and understanding of what is good and true will eventually perish.

Another wonderful place that the Lord addresses this cause of our own spiritual stagnation is in the many Scriptural passages about salt. In the Old Testament many of the burnt offerings and sacrifices were required to be salted with salt. And in the New Testament the Lord often told His disciples that they should have salt in themselves and that, “Everyone should be salted with fire.” (Mark 9:49) Well in these passage “salt” represents a kind of truth in a person that is longing for what is good; or teachings that are being used to live a life of love and charity. This is a good thing! And yet, elsewhere you may remember that the Lord gives us a warning about salt. He says, “However, if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot by men.” (Matthew 5:13). Salt that has lost its savor represents truth or knowledge that is no longer longing to do what is good. Something similar is represent by Lot’s wife disobeying the Lord’s commandment to not look backwards upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Because she did this, she was turned into a pillar of salt.

So this is one that I personally find very relevant and useful to reflect on. Whenever I am feeling as if on some level my faith, or my love for the Lord, or my spiritual life in general is not thriving in the way that I might hope or that it is perhaps even wilting; I try to think about this teaching that faith and a genuine spiritual life will only grow within me if I am using the things I have learn from the Lord to focus on living a useful life. And honestly, as soon as I start thinking about this teaching, I usually pretty quickly come to the realization that my spiritual life has been wilting because I have been focusing far too much on myself, on my own needs, on my own anxieties, hang-ups, ego and reputation; and not nearly enough on simply looking for ways that I can better serve the Lord and those around me.

With this teaching in mind, it's interesting to come back to that image of a seed growing into a tree. A single seed can grow into a large tree, which is wonderful. But if that single tree is going to turn into a beautiful forest that will continue to grow and develop forever, that tree must bear fruit. It's in the fruit – which represents acts of love and charity – that new seeds are born and an entire garden can begin to flourish.

**3. A third thing that can stunt the seeds of faith from growing within us is a lack of acknowledgment that everything good and true comes from the Lord and not from ourselves.** And this third idea kind of encompasses the first two. When we are children, and even as we progress through our adult life, spiritually we start off by assuming that we are somehow the source of good outcomes and true ideas. When we do something that is useful, when we achieve some level of success, or when we think of a brilliant solution to some problem, it's normal to feel some sense of pride and satisfaction in what we have accomplished. And this isn't all bad. The Lord wants us to feel good when we come to a new understanding of what is true and when we achieve something good.

However, the Lord also very clearly teaches us that if we want our faith and our spiritual life to continue to grow and develop, we must come to genuinely acknowledge from the heart that all things good and true really do come from the Lord alone, and that from ourselves we can do nothing. If our faith and our spiritual life in general seem to be wilting away, there is a good chance that on some level we are taking too much credit for the things that really belong to the Lord alone.

When it comes to truth, I think we see this danger in the tendency we all have, to become infatuated with our own ideas and brilliance. We like being right. We like the sense of self-importance we feel when someone compliments us for an idea we had, or for a sermon that we gave, or when we get lots of likes on Facebook for some superb inspiration we shared. Again there's nothing wrong with feeling a sense of delight when someone compliments you on your ideas or says that they really enjoyed a thought that you shared. But the Lord teaches us that if we want to continually grow in true wisdom, we need to always acknowledge that the Lord alone is wise, and that any apparent wisdom we have is only on loan to us from Him.

And the same thing is true with everything that is good. Every day the Lord encourages us to look for ways to serve Him and to practice a useful life of charity. And again, feeling good about ourselves and sense of joy when we do accomplish something useful is appropriate. And yet, that joy will only continue to grow to the extent that we recognize that we are not the ultimate source of this goodness. As soon as we begin to forget that we are simply vessels and begin to get infatuated with our own sense of goodness and pride, the Lord tells us that we will begin to stagnate and wilt spiritually.

One wonderful example of this is seen in the parable of the mustard seed that we read earlier. The heavenly doctrines teach us that in this parable, the mustard seed represents the goodness that does exist within us when we first begin our spiritual journey. This goodness is useful, and the Lord does work to cultivate it; but it is represented by a small mustard seed because although it is good on some level, we are still imagining that this goodness is coming from ourselves, and not from the Lord. Our goodness is like a small mustard seed, not yet growing and blossoming as it could, because we have not yet truly acknowledged from the heart, that nothing of this goodness ultimately comes from ourselves, but that it ALL comes from the Lord. Interestingly, the tender herb that the Lord created on the third day of creation represents something similar. It represents some level of goodness within us, or some kind of useful life that we are living, but that goodness is tender, and it's not yet truly spiritual because we're still taking too much credit for it.

This is another one that I personally find very useful to reflect on. Whenever I am feeling as if on some level my faith, or my love for the Lord, or my spiritual life in general is not thriving in the way that I might hope; I try to think about this teaching that a true faith and a true spiritual life can only thrive when I really get the fact that I am not the source of these good and true things. The Lord is! And as soon as I remember this, I can often literally feel on some level my spiritual life and faith beginning to grow again.

This week, reflect on this beautiful image that the Lord often uses of your faith and your spiritual life being like a seed that is gradually growing into a beautiful tree. While the Lord is always encouraging us, and seeing our great potential, there are inevitably going to be times when we don't feel like we are progressing spiritually. Our faith, our love for the Lord and the spiritual life that we should be living seem to be stagnant or even wilting away. During these times, it can be useful to take a step back and reflect on ways that we might be preventing this growth. What choices are we making that might be causing this stagnation? The Lord offers these three suggestions. 1. Is there a lack of water in my life? Am I making the effort to increase and enrich my mind with a better understanding of the Lord and His Word. 2. Is there a lack of warmth in my life? Is my faith suffering because I am focused too much on myself; and not enough on using the things I know to look towards serving the Lord and my neighbor. 3. Is there a lack of acknowledgment in my life. Am I struggling spiritually because on some level I am forgetting that everything good and true comes from the Lord and not from myself? If we work on these three things, then instead of stagnating and even wilting, our faith, our love and our spiritual life will continue to grow and thrive as the Lord continues to lead us forward. Reading from Psalm 1: "Happy is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners stands not, and in the seat of the scornful sits not. But in the law of Jehovah is his delight; and in His law he meditates by day and night. And he shall be as a tree planted by rivers of waters, that gives its fruit in its time, and its leaf does not fade; and all that he does shall prosper." (Psalm 1:1-3) Amen.