

Introduction:

When I was young, I developed a character flaw with which I continue to struggle. I am afraid to fail. I am afraid to mess up, afraid to strike out, afraid to fall on my face. Because of that, I have rarely attempted things I wasn't absolutely certain I could succeed at. I bailed from an honors class in fourth grade because I was afraid the work would be too hard and I wouldn't pass. I decided not to try out for the high school football team because I feared I couldn't make the cut. I quit trying to learn Greek when I started out preaching because I was afraid I just would never get it. Every time, the problem was I was afraid to fail. I was afraid I would invest my time in something and it wouldn't work out. I know what you are thinking. "Edwin, that's silly, since you didn't try you never did learn Greek, you didn't make the football team, you didn't pass the honors class. You failed in every single one." I see that, but this character defect plays a mind game with me. Since I didn't even try, since I didn't work, I have a justifying excuse: "Oh yeah, if I had worked at it, I probably could have done it, but I didn't try that hard." I know that sounds absolutely insane, but that is exactly how my mind works.

My mind is working like that right now. Next Sunday is our big evangelism day. We've certainly done things like this before, but nothing exactly like this. I've prayed a lot about it. I've talked it up with you. I've talked it up with others. However, right now that fear of failure is starting to play in my mind. Are you like me? Is it beginning to play in yours? My mind has started to rehearse the reasons why this effort won't work. I hear the voices of those who have said, "It's just too hard to get people to invite folks these days." I hear the voices of those who have said, "It's just too hard to get people to accept an invitation these days." I think about how urbanized and transient a community we are. We have looser connections than a more rural community like Lanton. I think about how affluent our community is. Let's face it, wealthy people simply don't see a spiritual need as quickly. I could go on and on. This is about the point when my character defect kicks in and starts to say, "Edwin, quit trying so hard. It will be one thing for this to go nowhere if you didn't put any work in it. It would be completely different if you work really hard and it goes nowhere." My fear of failure is telling me to give up and quit working. However, God has been good to me this week. He had a good friend of mine remind me of **Mark 4:26-29**. As I read and reread that passage, I was reminded of three things that have rallied my courage. I want to share them with you because, if you're like me, you need to see these lessons too. If you're not like me, I hope you'll be encouraged anyway.

Discussion:

- I. We don't know how it works.
 - A. The farmer is an interesting man according to **Mark 4:27**. Day in and day out, he sows his seed, tends his ground, and eventually brings in the harvest. However, for the most part, he doesn't have any idea how the whole thing works. How exactly does that seed germinate and grow? I know botanists have made huge strides since the time of Jesus and we know a lot more about what happens than Jesus' audience did (though we don't know more than Jesus did). Yet, in reality who really knows what causes that little seed when it enters the ground to grow? The farmer goes out and scatters the seed but doesn't even know how it works.
 - B. Here is the kicker about that. If he doesn't know how it works, then in reality he doesn't actually know if it will work. Dropping that seed in the ground is a tremendous leap of faith for the farmer. But he does it anyway because he has seen in the past that even though he doesn't know how it works, the only way it will work is if he works.
 - C. This principle has helped me tremendously. It actually attacks one of my other character defects—pride. In my pride about evangelism and sowing the word of God, I am constantly looking for that one exact right way that will work. I'm looking for that in general. That is, I keep stirring about trying to find some method that will produce amazing results with a bunch of different people. I'm also looking for it in specific. That is, with each person with whom I am in contact, I often get paralyzed. I want to wait for the perfectly right moment or the perfectly right approach. I'm sure that I can at some point divine exactly how to sow the seed with someone to make sure they'll listen. The problem is, until I figure it out, I just keep silent. That is my pride. That is me thinking I know how it all works. Therefore, I end up making these lofty and grand statements about what will and won't work.

- D. I have no problem with us trying to find approaches and methods that seem to have more success. At the same time, I think we need a healthy humility that says we just don't know what makes the seed grow. Once that seed gets in the soil of someone's heart, we don't know what will cause it to grow. We hear door-knocking doesn't work. But I know of people who have baptized folks through door-knocking even recently. We hear getting folks mad doesn't work, but I know folks who came to Jesus because they were first made angry and wanted to prove the person who made them angry wrong. We hear gospel meetings don't save people anymore. When I was in Texas we had a gospel meeting in which we baptized 17 people in 4 days. Do I know many times when these things have not worked? Sure. Why did it work sometimes and not others? I don't know. But that is the key. If I don't know how it works, how can I make lofty statements about what will work and what won't ever work.
- E. If I don't know what will work, if I don't know what won't work, if I don't know how it all works, what is the final conclusion for me? I just need to get to work. Instead of offering excuses, instead of assuming things won't work, instead of waiting for something I'm positive will work, I just need to get to work. That's what the farmer does; that's what I should do.

II. God does the hard work.

- A. **Mark 4:28** says something interesting. "The earth produces by itself..." Strictly speaking is that true? No. Jesus' point is that is how it seems to the farmer who doesn't know how it works. The true fact is the earth does that work because God is doing His work. Think about this. The farmer is actually doing the easy part of the job. All he has to do is drop in the seed and tend the ground. God is the one who gets the seed to germinate and grow. The farmer could bend the might of all his will in the direction of that seed, but he would never make the seed grow. However, he drops it in the ground, tends to the land, and God makes it grow.
- B. I know I don't have to remind you of **I Corinthians 3:5-7**. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Who did the hard work here? I recognize that the planting and watering can often seem like hard work to us. After all, the farmer who plows, plants, and tends is working hard. But what is the really hard part of that? Plowing, planting, and tending may take a great deal of manual labor, but they are not the hard part of the work. The hard part is getting the seed to grow. God hasn't asked us to do that. He does that.
- C. Isn't that great? Someone else does the really hard part of this work. We don't have to save people. We don't have to make the seed germinate in their heart. Our job is simply to plant and water the seed. God will tend to the seed once it is in the soil.
- D. This also brings up that character defect of pride. Sadly, in a moment of rigorous honesty, I want us to have a couple hundred guests so we can say, "Wow, look at all we did. We're awesome." The fact is, however, we can't do the really hard work that needs to be done. That's why all of this work is really about having faith in the working of God. Consider **Matthew 19:24-26**. Jesus said it was hard for rich people to enter the kingdom. The disciples simply couldn't understand this. If rich people had a hard time entering, then who could possibly enter? Jesus' response was, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Think about that for a minute. It is impossible for us to do any amount of work and save even one single person. We just can't do it. We can work and work and work and work but not one single person will make it into Christ's kingdom. However, we are not working alone. God is working with us and all things are possible with Him. **Ephesians 3:20** brings it home for us. Our God can do far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think. When it comes to this evangelistic effort, what is the biggest thing you can think of? God can do more than that.
- E. We need to keep working because we are not working alone. In fact, God is doing the hardest part. He can do more than we can imagine.

III. God works when we work.

- A. Having said the above, however, I can't help but notice that God did His work through the earth and seed only when the farmer actually sowed the seed. God can make seeds grow however He wants. God doesn't actually need farmers to provide food for us. However, that is the way God has chosen to work. If we want to eat, someone has to plant the seed. Then God does His

work on the seed. Do you see how it works in the agricultural world? God won't just work on His own. God works when we work.

- B. The same is true in evangelism. God does the really hard work. He does what we cannot possibly do. He could do it any way He wanted to. However, He has chosen to work through us. God can do far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think according to **Ephesians 3:20**, but notice it is by His power working in us. He will only work far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think when we work.
- C. Think of all the Bible stories you've ever learned. What did they stress? They stressed that God works when we work. God delivered Noah when Noah built the ark (**Genesis 6-8**). God delivered Israel from Egypt when Moses finally went to Pharaoh (**Exodus**). Goliath had taunted Israel for 40 days (**I Samuel 17:16**) and God didn't kill him. But when David stepped on to the battlefield with his sling, God slew Goliath (**I Samuel 17:46**). God delivered Israel from Haman when Esther went into the king (**Esther 5-7**). Do you see the point? God works when we work!
- D. Two weeks ago, we issued the 21-day prayer challenge. I have to admit I haven't made three times a day, every day. However, I have been praying for this one work more than I've ever prayed for anything we've done (which is a sad commentary on my prayer life). My most fervent prayer has not been that God will give us hundreds of visitors. My most fervent prayer has not been that God will let us baptize dozens of people. My most fervent prayer has not been that I will be able to speak eloquently and move people. My most fervent prayer has been that God will teach me and teach us, the Franklin church, that He works when we work.
- E. Here is the key for me though. God's work may not be what I have in mind. God's work through this effort may not be that we have numerous guests and baptize dozens. It may be that His work is within us as we meet and grow in the challenge to pray. It may be that His work is within us as we increase in the courage to sow the seed. It may be that His work is simply to give folks opportunity so that they are without excuse in the judgment. So here is what gives me courage to keep working despite my fear of failure. I am now convinced that as long as we are working, God is working. We cannot possibly fail. It may not look like what we want. But God is working. We have succeeded when we have done the work. God will sanctify our work and it will not come back to Him void.

Conclusion:

The reality is I have a bunch of character defects. God continues to work on them as I continue to work with Him, relying on His working. My natural tendency because of those defects is to clam up, be paralyzed, quit working. I'm afraid to fail. However, God is conquering that fear as He teaches me that when we work, He works. I hope if you have that fear, you can overcome as well by the grace of God. We have another week to work and succeed in God with this particular evangelistic effort. If we work, so will God. Let's get to work.