

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32

Halifax: 25 September 2005

Introduction

Here we are today, assembled together to worship the Lord.

- Even though it is the Lord's Day, there are not many in our congregation...
 - Nor are not many across our city who are worshipping today...
- And even among those that are gathered in name,
 - many of these do so out of tradition that is empty of living faith and if not that,
 - out of spurious enthusiasm that is not really rooted in Jesus Christ.

We find it to be just as our Lord said it would be in the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13.

- Already, we have studied the parable of the sower and the parable of the tares.
 - In the sower, Jesus explained that even though the gospel of the kingdom would be preached,
 - that there would be many who never receive the word at all...
 - others who would receive it with initial enthusiasm and then turn away because of persecution...
 - and still others that would be draw away by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches...
 - And in the parable of the wheat and the tares,
 - He told us that even among those who did profess,
 - there would always be many among them who were false sons...
 - devoid of true saving faith.

Most of the Jews expected that when the Messiah came, everyone would believe,

- but in these parables Jesus told them that it would not be so.
- And so we find it today.

But we must not be discouraged

- Today we have come to this parable about the mustard seed...
 - It follows these other two parables that talk about the rejection of the unexpected rejection of the Messiah...

- But it points out that even the beginnings of the kingdom will be very small,
- it will grow and grow into a huge kingdom!

This parable is given to you by the Holy Spirit to encourage you not to despair when the kingdom of God is small and despised!

- Not that we should be indifferent and unconcerned about the kingdom...
 - No, no! We are to pray and work to see the kingdom established...
 - but we must learn from this parable not to despair when it is small...
 - not to give up in our work because it seems to give small returns.
- In this parable we are reminded that our Lord delights in taking what is small and contemptible and making it into something grand and glorious!
 - There is much for us to learn here...
 - We are a small band of disciples in a city that has so few disciples!
 - We need the encouragement that is in this parable!

I. I want to start off this morning by looking at what the man does in this parable and what that represents.

A. There is something very striking about what the man in this parable does!

1. He takes one—only one—tiny mustard seed and sows it in the field.
 - a. Now I ask you, what gardener would do such a thing?
 - If a man expects to have a crop, he will sow many seeds...
 - who would take but one seed and sow it in the ground?
 - What if it is a bad seed that cannot produce?
 - b. Everything depends on that one seed.
 - If it grows, the man will have his harvest, but if it does not grow, he will have nothing.
 - There is no other plan to fall back on.
2. And I want you to think about what a marvellous thing a little seed like this is—
 - a. A seed itself—any seed—looks like nothing—
 - The only reason we have any confidence in planting seeds is because God has given us wisdom to know what happens when they are planted...
 - But if you had never seen a seed,
 - you think it a great miracle to see what happens when you plant it.
 - If you saw a man take his precious seed and stick it in the ground—

- You would think he was mad!
- b. Just think what an amazing thing it is that a farmer sows his seeds and after a few weeks, plants start to appear from those seeds...
- There are no trucks that come in with materials and no workers to speak of—only a seed in the soil...
 - And after a few months, he has a whole crop!
 - All that life and fruitfulness is contained in those tiny seeds...
 - That in itself is a marvellous thing!

TRANS> Jesus is showing us that the growth of His kingdom is as marvellous as the growth of a seed...

- Something tiny that looks like it has no life in it is planted and a tree emerges!
- A mustard plant was only about ten or fifteen feet tall at the most,
 - but the marvellous thing was that it grew out of a tiny little seed...
- In this parable, Jesus is focusing more on the smallness of the seed than He is on the bigness of the mustard tree...
 - If He had intended to focus on the great size of the tree, He would have spoken of an oak tree,
 - but because he wanted to emphasis the smallness of the beginnings of His kingdom, He chose the mustard seed.

B. But to what is Jesus comparing this mustard seed?

1. This time, we are not expressly told as were in the first two parables.
 - Nor can we assume that the seed always represents that same thing in all of Jesus' parables...
 - In the parable of the sower, the seed was the gospel—the word of the kingdom.
 - But in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the thing that was sown was men—
 - We had Christ planting His elect in the kingdom...
 - And we had Satan planting false sons among them...
 - It was people rather than the word of the gospel.
 - So we must not just look at what the seed was before...
 - we must look at what makes the most sense in this parable.
2. It seems that in this case it is Christ Himself who is the mustard seed!

- a. We have a picture here of God the Father as the man who plants the seed and of God the Son incarnate as the seed that is planted.
 - God the Father,
 - wanting to bring forth a kingdom of righteousness in a ruined fallen world sends His very own Son to the earth to establish that kingdom.
 - There are not many seeds that are planted here and there as there were in the parable of the sower (as when the gospel is preached),
 - nor are there many plants as there were in the parable of the tares...
 - This time there is only this one little seed.
 - And if there is only one seed, this seed surely must be Jesus.
- b. There is nothing at all unusual about looking at Jesus as a seed planted by the Father...
 - 1) We find Him promised just after the fall in Genesis 3 as the “seed of the woman” that God will send to “crush the serpent’s head.”
 - Satan is the serpent who had led Adam and Eve into rebellion against God,
 - but the Lord assures them that the woman will bring forth a son that will destroy Satan and all his work...
 - In this one seed is all the hope of the world!
 - He will be a founder of a kingdom of righteousness in a world that has fallen into rebellion...
 - He will be the great deliverer from bondage to sin and death.

TRANS> Clearly, Jesus is the seed of the woman that God sends to destroy the works of the Devil...

- but this is not the last time we hear of Him as the seed.
- 2) Again, we learn of Jesus Christ as the seed after the tower of Babel...
 - a) You remember what happened at Babel!
 - Man in his pride rose up to establish himself without God!
 - It was a kingdom of rebellion!
 - It was man thinking he could bless himself without the one true and living God.
 - You know what happened,
 - The Lord looks down from heaven and He sees this rebellion...

- And He comes down in judgement and breaks up this great kingdom of rebellion...
 - He divides their language so that they can no longer unite in their rebellion against Him.
 - He humbles them.
 - He shakes this kingdom of man to its very foundations!
 - He shows that they can do nothing good without Him.
 - This is just what He has done all through history...
 - He shakes up what man has built independently of God.
 - I hope you have eyes to see how this is happening in North America today!
 - We have trusted in an increasingly idolatrous way of life instead of in God, and now God is starting to shake us up!
 - We see our society and our economy and our security all starting to crumble.
 - The Lord will shake what man idolatrously trusts in.
- b) But what good is done if the kingdom of man is shaken unless the kingdom of God is also established?
- And so it is that no sooner is Babel destroyed than God comes to one of the families that was separated at Babel and promises to bless that family...
 - He come to Abraham and tells him that He will give him a seed in whom all those now scattered families of the earth will be blessed!
 - In the ruins of civilisation, God is going to plant a seed among men that will restore the nations to Him!
 - A seed that will bring forth a kingdom in the earth that will be His people and who will have God as their God!
 - This promised seed will establish a kingdom of righteousness in a hopelessly rebellious world!

TRANS> There is much more I could say about this promised seed and how He is revealed in Moses, but I skip over that...

3) I will skip over that and bring you to the time of David when this seed is so clearly promised again...

- In Psalm 89:34-37, the LORD declares:

- Ps 89:34-37: My covenant I will not break, Nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever, And his throne as the sun before Me; It shall be established forever like the moon, Even *like* the faithful witness in the sky.
- David was a king who sought to establish God's kingdom, and by God's grace, he did much in that direction...
 - But he was not the promised seed who was able to establish God's people in righteousness forever.
- Clearly, the promised seed in these passages is Jesus Christ.
 - He is the seed that the Father planted in this world in order that the whole world might be blessed.
 - This promised seed is the Messiah that the Jews were taught to seek as each day passed...
 - And He was the seed that David looked to as the foundation of all His work for God's kingdom...
 - David knew that it was not, but His seed that would restore the people to God.

II. But now I want you to consider that when this seed finally came, He was, from all human observation, little and despised.

A. When the people saw Him, they were inclined to say...

- "Not Him, He could not possibly be the one that brings salvation to the world!"
 - Perhaps the prophet Isaiah explains the peoples' reaction to Him as well as anybody in his prophesy about Jesus...
 - He says:
 - Isa 53:2-3: For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, *There is* no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, *our* faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
 - Let's look at three particulars of this prophecy.
1. First, Isaiah says that He will be "A root out of dry ground..."
 - This speaks of the fact that Jesus did not come from a prominent family...
 - He was born to a poor maiden who was married to a carpenter...
 - They laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the Inn.

- When they offered their sacrifice for Mary’s purification after He was born, they offered two pigeons—the sacrifice prescribed for the common people.
 - That was all they could afford.
- They made their home in Nazareth,
 - a lowly town in a lowly region that was considered the backwaters of Israel....
 - It was so lowly that the humble Nathanael asked,
 - “Can anything good come out of Nazareth,” when he first heard that Jesus had come from there.

TRANS> Truly, the One God sent was a root out of dry ground.

- He was a lowly seed of no special sort—just one among many as far as His birth.

2. Isaiah further states:

- He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, *There is* no beauty that we should desire Him.
- a. Jesus was not like King Saul who stood head and shoulders above all the people...
 - Though He is often represented like Saul in pictures,
 - the Bible tells us otherwise.
 - We are glad that the artists love Him and want to make Him beautiful and large,
 - but they are wrong—the Bible says that there was no outward beauty about Him at all...
 - He was nothing much to look upon.
- b. Nor was there any other particular beauty about Him...
 - He did not wear fine clothes,
 - He did not use fine speech according to the wisdom of His age...
 - He was not one of the pretty people in this world...
 - He was only a common seed.

3. And so Isaiah closes out His description of the peoples’ response to Him:

- “He was despised and rejected among men,” and that “we esteemed Him not.”
- a. He was not recognised as a great man.

- He was not found in king's palaces or in the homes of the high priest and the nobility...
 - His following was a company of uneducated fishermen and a former tax collector and one or two others.
 - Even his own brothers had very little regard for him.
- b. And in the end, rather than being set on a throne,
- He was arrested and crucified as a disturber of the people.
 - Truly, He was despised and rejected among men.

TRANS> And so you that Jesus was not only a seed among seeds (a man among men), but he was also a tiny seed among seeds—not a great man, but a man of no account.

- It was as if God took all of the divine glory of the Son of God and packed Him up in the shell of a mustard seed...
 - This is how the Son of God appeared in this world when He took to Himself our human nature...
 - Not only was His divine eternity and glory encased in a seed...
 - in ordinary human flesh...
 - it was encased in a little seed...
 - human flesh that was of no account among men.
- When God wanted to establish a kingdom of righteousness in this fallen world,
 - He did not send a purple robed king with a golden crown!
 - He sent a lowly man from Nazareth!
 - This was the tiny seed He appointed for the salvation of the world!

B. And this seed is the only seed that God sowed!

- He did not have another plan!
 - He did not sow a handful of seeds as is usually done, but he sowed only this one tiny mustard seed...
 - The salvation of all the earth depended entirely on Him!
1. That Jesus is the only way of salvation is everywhere taught in scripture!
- a. It is taught in Genesis 3 when the seed of the woman is promised that will crush the serpent's head—
- and in the promise to Abraham and David that follow...
 - there is not a promise of many seeds, but only of this one seed!

- b. Jesus Himself expressly told His disciples that He was the only way to God when He was headed for the cross...
 - In John 14:6, He said to His disciples...
 - John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”
 - A couple of years ago, I heard of a woman who was being examined for ordination in the Presbyterian Church in Canada who told the presbytery that she believed there were many ways to God...
 - One of the few believing ministers in the room asked her how she would preach on John 14:6 where Jesus said,
 - “I am the way the truth and the life,”
 - And she responded that she would not preach from such a text.
 - But I declare to you today that that woman was an unbeliever!
 - There is only one way to God and when you know this way, you know that there can be no other.
 - There is not the Muslim way or the philosopher’s way or the Hindu way or the New Age way or the Mormon way or the Pope’s way—
 - these are not the way to God at all...
 - There is only this one seed that God has planted in world and you must come to Him if you would come to the Father.
 - Jesus Himself says so.
 - He is the only way.
- c. With great boldness, Peter declared this truth to the angry Jews who had arrested him for preaching about Jesus:
 - To them he said:
 - Acts 4:11-12: This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.
 - If any of you want to be saved, this is the only way that God has appointed!
 - The name of Jesus is the only name by which you may be saved...
 - This man who was born in this world two thousand years ago and was rejected by His own people...
 - He is the One that God has appointed for the salvation of the world.

- Let foolish doctors and professors of theology babble on about how those who do not know the name of Jesus may be accepted of God...
 - God has told us in His word that they will not be accepted.
 - We all deserve to perish in Hell forever and God has only one plan of salvation...
 - and that plan involves coming to Jesus and trusting in Him for salvation...
 - It doesn't matter what your reasons are for not coming to Him...
 - You may have many fine sounding excuses...
 - You may claim that you do not understand about him...
 - There are some who have never even heard of Him...
 - But it is still just as true that you cannot be saved apart from Him...
 - There is no other name given among men by which we must be saved.
2. God in His mercy did not have to set up a kingdom of righteousness in this fallen sinful world at all...
- a. He was under no obligation to us in any way whatsoever!
 - He could have left us all to perish in our sin and misery and could have justly consigned every one of us to Hell.
 - b. If He has chosen to establish His kingdom of salvation through faith in this one man,
 - It is for you to trust in this One that He has sent!
 - It is for you to marvel at His mercy!
 - Not to complain about His method and suggest your own alternatives!
 - c. God was not looking for your approval when He appointed this way,
 - He was looking for a way that would satisfy His justice and bring glory to His name...
 - And that way was by sending His Son in human flesh,
 - hiding His glory in the shell of a tiny seed of human flesh and planting Him this sinful world.

TRANS> But it all looks like such a hopeless endeavour!

- To call people to trust in a man who was despised and rejected by His own people for their eternal salvation!
- What can ever come of that?

III. In this parable Jesus tells us what will become of the mustard seed!

A. This one little seed will grow into a great tree that will bless all the nations of the earth!

1. At the time, who could have ever thought so!

a. It is remarkable that Jesus should say such a thing at this time in His ministry!

- We have recently seen how He was increasingly rejected as He went about among the people!
- In Matthew 11-12, we looked at six negative responses to Him.
 - He met with doubters....
 - He met with frivolous critics...
 - He met with those who were indifferent...
 - He met with rejecters...
 - He met with blasphemers...
 - He met with sceptics...

b. But instead of looking at all this rejection and the small number of loyal followers and saying,

- “What’s the use? Why should I go on?”
- Jesus looks at all this and He says,
 - “All the nations of the earth will be blessed by my work!”
 - He saw what no one else could see...
 - That God will take this little seed that is rejected and despised...
 - this seed that is so contemptible—
 - and will raise up a great tree!

c. He speaks of how this tree will be a lodging place for the birds!

- It will be so big that birds will be able to make their nests here!
 - You don’t see that in other seed crops—birds don’t make their nests on a stalk of corn or a blade of wheat!
- Jesus seems to be using the imagery of the birds the same way Ezekiel did when he spoke about the great kingdom of Assyria as a great tree:
 - Ezekiel said:

- Ezek 31:6: All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; Under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young; And in its shadow all great nations made their home.”
- The birds represent the nations that come to find refuge in this great kingdom.
- By faith in God’s promise,
 - Jesus sees His kingdom (the kingdom of righteousness God sent Him to establish) filling the earth and blessing the nations of world!
 - It would be the kingdom we sing about in Psalm 72...

2. **Now** we can look and see how remarkably that has come about!

- a. We see how the gospel has spread from Jesus to those 11 disciples to the entire world!
 - Here we are in North America today praising the Lord...
 - And there across the Atlantic is England where there gospel once flourished...
 - and down to the South there is Africa where the gospel once flourished and is now starting to flourish again.
 - And over there in the Far East—there is China where millions are calling upon the Lord today in humble assemblies!
 - There was nothing when Jesus was here to indicate such a response—
 - nothing but the promise of God!
 - There was only Jesus, the mustard seed.
- b. When we look around in our own land and we see how the gospel is so largely rejected,
 - we must not allow that to detract from how marvellously it has spread in the earth and how it is still spreading in many nations today.
 - The mustard tree is huge and it is growing every day!
 - Truly the nations of the earth have come to Him and His dominion is to the ends of the earth!
 - Who could have ever thought this when they saw Jesus and His little band of followers in Galilee?
 - How much less when they saw Jesus on the cross!

TRANS> But Jesus knew that God loves to take what is little and despised and use it for His glory...

B. The Bible is full of accounts of this way of God's working—

- Jesus knew that all these accounts pointed to Him as the mustard seed that would bring life to the world.

- Lets look at some of them...

1. Jesus is our Isaac,

- promised to Abraham when his wife was as barren as the desert and past the age to bear children!
- God brought forth the child of promise to show that salvation was of Him and not of us!

2. Jesus is God's Son in Egypt...

- held helplessly with no resources to escape in cruel bondage to Pharaoh—
 - and yet God brings down the mighty empire and leads His people forth across the Red Sea!

3. Jesus is our Joshua...

- who takes a people not trained in war and not prepared for war and brings down a land of giants and cities fortified to the heavens!
 - The spies did not give an inaccurate report, but a faithless one!
 - Israel did not at all have the resources to take the land by human reasoning and calculation, but they had the promise of grace—
 - they were a mustard seed that God made into a tree.

4. Jesus is our Gideon...

- You will remember that Israel was in hopeless oppression under the Midianites when God called Gideon to deliver them!
 - And remember how God concluded that the army of Gideon was too big and how He reduced it from 22,000 to 300 to go against the million of Midian!
 - The Lord wanted to conquer the Midianites with a mustard seed for He said:
 - “The people who *are* with you *are* too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”
 - And so God reduced them to a mustard seed.

5. Jesus is our David...

- standing before Goliath to defeat him—

- a tiny seed before a giant!
 - a mere man before a Satan!
- Down comes the giant by the mighty power of God—not by the power of the flesh!
6. Jesus is our Jeremiah...
- preaching righteousness to a hostile nation that despises him!
 - Let them destroy Jeremiah, but the word of God continues to stand and bear fruit!
7. Jesus is our Daniel...
- shut up as a captive in Babylon with nothing but the promise of God...
 - a promise that looked right into the future of Messiah's coming after the rise and fall of four great empires...
 - and of the establishment of an empire that would never end!
8. Jesus is our Judas Maccabeus...
- standing with a small and despised band within a mostly apostate Israel against the mighty Greek empire...
 - and carrying the truth of God by divine power into the next generations to bear fruit!
9. Jesus is the eleven disciples in the upper room
- for they are His body, lowly, insignificant and despised...
 - Yet, there they stand by faith and proclaim His resurrection and ascension into heaven to their apostate nation...
 - And the eleven soon become ten thousands!
10. Jesus is our Athanasius...
- standing against the Arians who denied the deity of Christ...
 - It seemed that the whole world had joined the Arian party for a time...
 - The saying was "*Athanasius contra mundo*—Athanasius against the world!"
 - and Athanasius prevailed and the kingdom of God continued by divine grace!
11. Jesus is our Peter Waldo and our John Hus and our John Whyclif...
- Men largely despised by the world for believing the truth of the gospel...

- Men despised by the church of their day for proclaiming the gospel...
- Men faithfully proclaiming the gospel to their contemporaries...
- Men savagely attacked and even destroyed by their adversaries...
 - but not destroyed because by grace the gospel lives on and prevails!

12. We could go on to speak of Ridley and Luther and Calvin and Knox and many many others—

- We can come into our day and speak of Machan and Murray and Adams and Wilson and Horton and many many others who are despised by the professing church and the world...
- They are the mustard seed—
 - who continue in the truth even though they are rejected for it...
 - and from which the tree of God's kingdom comes forth!

13. You see, the mustard seed is the faithful remnant of the body of Jesus Christ wherever it is in this world!

- It is you in Jesus Christ when you hold onto the gospel against the sneers of friends...
- It is you when you reject the church that teaches that Jesus is not the only way to God and are despised for it...
- It is you when you trust in God in a society that is not trusting in God.
 - when you are rejected by family and friends because of the truth.

TRANS> God delights to bring forth His kingdom from a mustard seed!

C. Why does God operate this way?

1. He operates this way so that no flesh should glory in His presence!
 - a. There have been times when people thought the kingdom of God would come through the machinery of war...
 - They organised their crusades and they went to war, but they failed...
 - b. There have been times when people thought the kingdom of God would come by political means—whether by Constantine or by a modern political rally or march...
 - but they always fail...
 - c. There are many today who think the kingdom of God will come by marketing techniques...

- They say, "If we can just find out what all the felt needs of the people in our community are, then we can show them how Jesus can meet all those felt needs and they will come to Him..."
 - The Catholic Church tried that in Middle Ages, and they gathered many disciples, but they brought those disciples to ruin...
 - Many evangelicals are trying it today, and they are gathering many disciples, but they will bring them to ruin also...
 - already you can see how many who come by way of the marketing gospel no longer understand the gospel.
2. My friends it is not the things that the world glories in that will bring in God's kingdom!
- a. It is the lowly and despised Jesus, just as He is revealed in the gospel!
 - Not armed with a machine gun,
 - not wearing the crown of a political kingdom,
 - not dressed up in popular clothing to appeal to the masses...
 - It is Jesus, crucified in the place of guilty sinners and risen again...
 - It is Jesus as He is revealed in God's word...
 - It is Jesus, the mustard seed!
 - b. God wants you to know that it is not by might nor by power that His kingdom comes, but by His Spirit.
 - He wants you to continue in His word without apology in the face of opposition...
 - even when it looks like that will destroy the kingdom!
 - even when it makes the five thousand go away because they don't like the message of the gospel!
 - He wants you to continue in faith, believing that He will build His kingdom.
 - c. I plead with you...
 - Learn to despise all efforts at self-salvation!
 - all efforts at altering the gospel to make people like it!
 - all efforts at trying to become like the giants of this world to gain the victory...
 - Brethren, it is the mustard seed that God uses!

- It is the mustard seed that grows into the glorious kingdom of God that endures forever and ever!
- Do not despise the day of small things!
- Do not despair if you are despised for Christ's sake!
- Do not lose heart!
 - This is how God is pleased to work!
 - It has always been His way and it always will!
- I don't care if the seed is small and despised by this world...
 - If God is in it, that is all that matters...
 - If it is His way, I am going to make it my way and I am going to glory in it!
 - God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion...

Understand what you have in the little tiny mustard seed!

- In Jesus of Nazareth, a lowly and despised man in this world...
 - It is right here that you have the most wonderful thing below the skies!
 - In this little seed is the hope of the nations!
 - In this little seed is the root of eternal life!
 - In this little seed the eternal God is encased—
 - All the fullness of the God-head is found in Him!
 - All the excellence of infinite grace, divine wisdom, eternal power are all found in this little seed!
- Let the world despise Him, but know that God has given Him to us for eternal life.
 - I plead with you, do not despise Him just because the world does!
 - He is the One God sent from heaven to give us eternal life.
 - The word to you is very simple...
 - “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”