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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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The Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-35

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for -- I just thank you for the little ones as well, and what an incredible blessing it is to see and what an incredible responsibility it is to have these little ones to fill up with your Spirit, fill up with your word, to instruct and to lead and we just thank you for them and for the folks and the parents that are there with them as well. We just again, we are like little children always when we come before you, we are again opening up your book and asking for your Holy Spirit's presence to fill us, to guide us, to teach us and to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, Jesus consistently blew the minds of his disciples. We've been following this bewildering path that he took them on when he started speaking in parables and we've seen that Jesus basically used parables both as blessings and as a form of judgment. To some these were truth illustrating stories designed to teach those that he was blessing. To others these were truth hiding riddles designed to judge those who refuse the truth.

Jesus laid down this principle behind his parables in Matthew 13 when his frantic disciples had taken him aside and asked him why he was speaking in a way that nobody could understand. *Matthew 13* says: *Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."* Well, Jesus is stating the principle in verse 12, he says, whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away. Simply put, the more we accept truth, the more truth we receive. The more we reject truth, the more blinded to truth we become. Jesus was using the parables to teach his disciples a truth that was very hard to accept. It was all about this brand new paradigm about this thing called "the church." Now his disciples understood God the way Israel had understood him for centuries. They understood him in the old covenant way, and they had a very difficult time relating to or even understanding what God's new covenant was all about. We have the opposite problem. And we are so used to the God of the New Testament that we often have a very difficult time understanding the God of the Old Testament. And I've had

Christians tell me that they think that the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament are really two different entities, two completely different gods. They don't even realize that that is a heresy, that's an ancient heresy known as Marcionism. Truth be known, most of us harbor thoughts about God that are caricatures rather than actual portraits. I mean most of us think of the Old Testament God as the mean God, the strike-you-dead-if-you-mess-up God. He's God the Father. And he looks just like that figure in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, I mean, he's huge, he's got this great big flowing white beard, he's full of power and he's full of might and he's full of fear. And on the other hand there's Jesus, the New Testament God, the friend of sinners, the compassionate one, the one who is completely and totally forgiving. He's the God that we feel comfortable with. But the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are one and the same God. I mean in John 14 Jesus is instructing his disciples about this. It says this in *John 14:8*, it says: *Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father." "He who has seen Me, has seen the Father." Hebrews 1 says: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. I mean the Son was in the Father in the Old Testament when the Father said he was a holy God and we*

were not. And the Father was in the Son in the New Testament when the Son said that he was God's sacrifice to make us holy when we were not. And together with the Holy Spirit, God the Father and God the Son are now unfolding in these parables what God has planned even from before the Garden of Eden. And the only way to really understand what God is doing here is to understand it in the context of war. You see, the parables are Jesus's battle plan for this new covenant that God is making with his people. And to just read the parables without an historical context is to kind of enter into a war room in midstream. You can't help but misconstrue and misunderstand what Jesus is saying and why. You see, everything Jesus did was planned with the Father and with the Spirit from before the beginning of time. I mean you think about the disciples, they've been with Jesus for three years. Well, Christ has been at this work for multiple eons. This is an eternal plan that's now just starting to unfold in time.

So the disciples are learning they were to be the new leaders of this new phase of war that had been planned since before the Garden of Eden, and the bible covers it all. If you want to understand this new battle plan, you first have to revisit the old battle plan in order to get the big perspective. And you look at scripture and it opens with a battle lost. It opens with a battle lost in the book of Genesis. And it closes with this great battle won in the

book of Revelation. And in between you got thousands and thousands of years of basically warfare, spiritual warfare. I mean it started when Adam and Eve turned traitorous in the Garden of Eden. And God judged them and in that judgment he gave what scholars call the protoevangelicum, I mean that's scholarly fancy talk for first, you know, proto, prototype, the very first of anything. Proto is first, evangelicum just means good news. So the very first protoevangelicum, the very first piece of good news occurred in the book of Genesis. And the good news proclaimed there was that God had pronounced judgment not just on Adam and Eve but on a third party who was at work in that garden, and that third party was Satan. I mean it was Satan who embodied himself in the serpent and tempted Adam and Eve to fail. And God said to that serpent in *Genesis 3: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* See, in the midst of this curse being pronounced, we have this stunning announcement of good news. But the good news is all about warfare. God says: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers."* Now "enmity" according to the dictionary is "a state or feeling of being actively opposed or hostile to someone or something." God is laying out the fact that

life for us on this planet will always involve enmity between two kingdoms. God says the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent's head and the serpent will strike his heel. That's warfare. God is speaking about thousands of years in the future and he's speaking about the cross, because the cross was the greatest battle the universe has ever seen and it was all fought for us. Satan did indeed strike Christ's heel and he did it with humiliation and torture and abandonment, but Christ struck back in a way that crushed Satan's head forever. And in some ways it was like a cosmic chess game. You know, when Jesus bowed his head at the cross and said, "It is finished," Satan really thought that he had won. He thought victory was his. He had pursued Jesus from infancy. Remember, he sought to kill him with the slaughter of the innocents by Herod. And when that didn't work, eventually he tried bribery. You know, we find Jesus in Luke 4 at the very beginning of his public ministry and he's fasting for forty days in the desert and then he's confronted by Satan himself and Satan is literally trying to buy him off by offering him all the kingdoms of the world if he would simply bow down to him. Well, Jesus refuses. He returns to his people and he begins to preach the gospel. Well, it's three years later and Satan is now confronting God at the cross, and at last he thinks he's accomplished his final mission and that now he's going to reign supremely. He has no idea that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit had used his

own treachery to display God's justice and mercy. I mean Satan thought that he was publicly humiliating his enemy God, when in fact he was being used by God to display the exact opposite, that is God's glory. In the cross, God's justice was on display for the entire universe, and God's own Son whom he loved was being publicly sacrificed to pay the just debt of sin not because some mean God of the Old Testament was punishing the compassionate God of the New Testament, but because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit had agreed before time had even begun that this was the only way to fully satisfy God's perfect mercy and justice.

And so the greatest sacrifice of all time was taking place, the holy, spotless Son of God was being mocked, scourged, stripped and crucified, and Satan was delighted. Satan never understood that the Father and the Son had agreed that this was the only way that we fallen humans could be restored by someone who was perfect dying in our place. And what was also on display was not the meanness of God the Father but his mercy toward us. We see God the Father holding back his holy rage at what we humans were doing to his only begotten Son. And he knew there was no other way for perfect justice and mercy to be accomplished. And God put it this way in *Colossians 2*, he said: *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal*

indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. You see, Satan had used our imperfection, our failure to live up to this written code as a means to condemn all of us. I mean "Satan" means "accuser." He knew the regulations that were against us and that we stood condemned for them and Jesus took the law "*which stood against us and condemned us*" and he figuratively and literally nailed it to his cross. His death in our place disarmed the powers and authorities that demanded our death. Instead they got his.

Now when Jesus is speaking his parables, you got to understand none of this has yet happened. In fact the disciples are still harboring the misconception that Jesus is going to start this new kingdom where power, might, splendor and glory are going to belong to him and of course also to the disciples who had co-labored with him in poverty and obscurity. That wasn't going to happen. And the only one who knew that was Jesus. I mean, the disciples had watched Jesus's fame grow slowly during those three years and they saw the crowds grow and they also saw the hostility of the religious leaders as it began to grow, but Jesus knew exactly where it was going. It was going to the cross. The disciples had no clue whatsoever. They still thought that Jesus was going to usher

in this earthly kingdom and that they were going to share in it, and the parables were these hard truths that shattered these notions and revealed God's battle plan for the future. This is what we've been studying for the last few weeks. We looked at the very first one and the first one just threw the notion out of this ideological purity that the disciples thought they had and what we saw in the parable of the soils was that the disciples and the kingdom would be an ideological mix of false believers, real believers and those who were in between. That was a complete shock to the disciples. And the next notion was practical. Jesus spoke of the parable of the wheat and the tares and it taught the disciples that they were to mingle in this world that they thought they were supposed to avoid. That was another shock.

Well, the next parable, the one that we're looking at this morning is really two stories, one of which we're going to look at today, but it, too, was a bombshell for the disciples. And in it Jesus lays out just how the kingdom of God is going to start, how it's going to grow and where it's going to end up. Understand what's going on here. Jesus is about to reveal secret plans for the kingdom that had been hidden for centuries, and he's going to do it through yet another parable. And just like the parables, it shatters every mistake and notion the disciples had about this king that they were following and his kingdom. This is what Jesus said

in Matthew 13. It says: *He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds comes and perch in its branches. Jesus spoke all of these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."*

Did you get that last phrase? Listen to what Jesus is saying. *"I will utter things hidden,"* secret. Nobody knew this before. *"I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."* See, the Son of God had been at work and at war since the creation of the world, but only now he's laying out these plans for his disciples. They are war plans and it's a war unlike any other kind of war and his tactics are incomprehensible to the human understanding. So Jesus is speaking all of these things in parables which is truth revealing stories if you have ears to hear and absolute nonsense if you don't.

So once again we have Jesus telling the crowd another garden story. This time it's about a mustard seed growing big enough for birds to perch in its branches. And Jesus once again, he gives no

explanation whatsoever about what this means. All the crowd gets is another story. This time it's about planting mustard seeds. Jesus says, the kingdom is like a mustard seed that a man planted in his field. Now again, you got to back up and understand these -- this is the third story and there's two other parables that preceded this. Jesus has just told them first about the good soils and the bad soils and the good and the bad seeds, and then he told them next that he was the sower of good seeds and that the field that he was sowing in was the world. Now he's going to start telling them about a different seed that he was sowing, a kingdom seed. And he says of the mustard seed in verse 32: "Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree." Now I have to pause here to respond to the gotcha crowd who say, well, if Jesus was God, he must have not known that there are smaller seeds than mustard seeds, or he was just playing into the culture's ignorance. And either way the Bible isn't trustworthy because the statement wasn't absolutely true. Well, again, context is everything, I mean, Jesus used the Greek word for "seeds" there and the Greek word was "sperm," and it was understood to mean seeds that were used in agriculture as opposed to every single seed in the world. I mean this is a farming community and Jesus is speaking to farmers in a way that they understood. He's essentially saying the smallest of all of your seeds. The point that Jesus is making is that the

kingdom is not going to start out like the disciples thought it would. It's not going to be powerful or mighty or glorious in the worldly sense. In fact it's going to be meek and lowly and humble. Literally the smallest of seeds. And it would grow just like any seed grows and that is by dying. In *John 12* Jesus says: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* And you know in this very thing Jesus was going to lead the charge. He did and he died. And in so doing he started this mustard seed that grew to be a tree, the largest of all garden plants, so large that birds could perch in its branches.

Well, now we look at trees in scripture, and we see that trees are used to represent kingdoms. I mean, Nebuchadnezzar was a tree in the book of Daniel. The Assyrian Empire was a tree in the book of Ezekiel. The kingdom of God is also a tree, but as trees go, it's pretty humble. I mean *Daniel 10* said that Nebuchadnezzar was a tree whose height *"reached up to heaven"* and that the sight of it was *"to the end of all of the earth"* and all of the birds of the air dwelt in its branches. *Ezekiel 31* says: The Assyrian Empire was a tree: *"Exalted above all the trees of the field,"* and again it points out that the birds of the air made their nests in its

branches. Well, the kingdom of God is a mustard tree. It's not even a tree, it's more like a woody shrub. But again Jesus says the birds of the air perch in its branches. I mean at its peak, a mustard plant is maybe twelve feet high. It's not even in the same league with the cedars and the redwoods and the sequoias, but it's not supposed to be. You see, Jesus was painting a picture of what the kingdom was going to be, and the last thing that Jesus wanted for this kingdom was earthly power. I mean the power source in Satan's kingdom is power itself, and you get that power by any means necessary. You know when Jesus said in John 8 that Satan was a liar and a murderer, he wasn't calling him names, he was stating facts. I mean that is who Satan is. And that's how his kingdom works. The power source in Jesus's kingdom is love. I mean *John 15* says: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."* And so we see these battle lines being drawn, and what God is basically telling us is that we are at war with Satan's kingdom. But God makes a critical distinction about how we are to fight this war. In *2 Corinthians 10* he says: *For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.* The very nature of the kingdom of God is that it is antithetical to the power the world loves and embraces. I mean, God told Paul that *"My strength is made perfect in weakness."* And Jesus said: *"Whoever exalts himself will be*

humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." He said in *Mark 10*: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all."

I mean, understand, power is the very last thing that Jesus wants for his church. You say why is that? Just ask yourself, has the church ever been healthy when she has held power? I mean I can look at lots of events in church history that came about when she had power, things like the crusades, things like the inquisition, the Salem witch trials. We can look back in our own time. We look back at the heyday of the 80's when evangelicals ruled. I mean, those of us who are older remember the days of Jim and Tammy Faye, of Jimmy Swaggart and all the others, and the church was an absolute hot mess. Tim Keller argues that if you trace the path of the church in history, you're going to find that it always, always moves away from power. I mean, you look at the history of the church, you see it started in the east and then it moved to Greece and Rome and from there it moved to Spain and then to all of Europe. And in every place that the church moved, blessing followed. I mean wherever the mustard seed was planted, it grew so large that the birds of the air could perch in its branches. John MacArthur says this about those branches and those birds, he says this: "Christ is saying, then, that wherever Christianity flourishes, the people who climb in the branches prosper, even

though they don't know Christ. America is what it is today because of its Christian heritage. There are many birds in its bush. Not all of them are Christians, but they still receive the benefits. The dignity of life in America, the jurisprudence system, the law, the sense of right and wrong, education, free enterprise, the dignity of women, and the caring of children all rise out of Christian truth. Reform movements throughout history have had their roots in biblical truth. Wherever the kingdom's influence is felt, there is an environment of protection for those who aren't even in the kingdom."

You see it's because of that blessing that every place the church took root, that place became a place of power. I mean the church took root in Europe and Europe essentially became a world power eventually rejecting the very gospel that gave it that power. So what happens? Well, the result is the Holy Spirit just picks up and it moves to a place that has no power, a place called America. Well, the mustard seed took root in America and wouldn't you know it, blessing and power followed, and along with the power came the same rejection of the same gospel. And it can certainly be argued today that since we are rejecting the very same gospel that the Spirit is moving again from great power to no power. I mean there's no doubt if you look at it, the church has become completely eclipsed in Europe and I think there's very little doubt

that it's eclipsing now in America. And so what do we see? We see at present the Spirit is alive and moving and flourishing in Africa and China and places where the church has little or no power.

Marvin Olasky writing in *World Magazine* said he wouldn't be surprised if by 2050 China was the largest Christian nation in the world. But you have to understand, Jesus knew all of this and laid all of this out for his disciples through these parables 2,000 years ago. I mean if you look, you see how Jesus is tying all of this together. In the parables -- I mean, in these three parables he talked first about soils, then about good seed, now he's talking about a seed itself. And so we've learned from Jesus so far that only good soil produces fruit and that the sower sows good seed in good soil but that an enemy has come and over sown so that good seed and bad seed now commingle together. And now he's going to teach them something about the nature of this seed itself, this mustard seed that he says "*the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.*" Well, it's humbled, it's humbled 'cause it's the smallest of seed and it grows only by dying, sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally, but always by dying. And growth as a Christian necessitates dying, dying to the flesh, dying to the lure of this world, dying to the wiles of the enemy. And the mustard seed grows not into this towering cedar but into a scrubby ubiquitous tree that birds take shelter in.

Interestingly enough, one of the big problems that farmers have with growing mustard is its ubiquity. I mean simply put that means that once it starts growing, it starts popping up everywhere. Farmers have to take great pains to isolate their field if they're growing mustard because that tiny seed blows everywhere and it overwhelms adjacent fields. It becomes a nuisance that can't be stopped in many, many fields in this world. Fields in China, in India and Africa and Indonesia and Vietnam, in Columbia, Uganda, Sudan, the Philippines, anywhere the gospel goes, anywhere the Master plants it, it eventually flourishes. Now some fields treat the mustard seed as a nuisance, they just try to make life difficult for it. Other fields treat its presence as a matter of life and death, they go to extraordinary lengths to eliminate it, to eradicate it. And we learn about this and I've mentioned many times how I've learned about this a lot in the *Voice of the Martyrs* magazine. I mentioned the fact that once a month I get a very disturbing newsletter that I really don't want to read because it makes me feel guilty, I mean, guilty for how easy we have it, guilty for the blessings that we have, guilty for the courage for those who for the gospel's sake are being beaten, imprisoned and sometimes killed. The *Voice of the Martyrs* had a report about one of our brothers planted by the Master in China. This is what it said. It said:

"Since 1979 Brother Liu has been arrested so many times that he has lost count. He declares, 'the Lord told us it is a rough road, following his path. It is a road where one has to take up his cross in order to follow him.' Brother Liu was labeled a 'non-repentant prisoner.' He endured much hardship while he was in prison. During one beating, his ears were beaten with an electric baton. His injuries caused him great pain and suffering for six months. He says, 'I experienced too much of these things, but I have to confess the most precious thing I have ever learned is that the Lord suffered more than we did. My family has not fallen away in the midst of our suffering. Rather we become bolder following the Lord. Now my children are in the ministry and they inherit our wonderful examples following him to the end.' Brother Liu is a member of the prayer team of his house church and prays for the church and ministry. When asked what he would like to tell others about his testimony, he said, 'Drink the cup that Jesus drinks. For a student is not above his teacher. Our light troubles are temporary, beatings are temporary, pain is also temporary, but the eternity and joy is everlasting.'"

Well, Brother Liu is quoting *2 Corinthians 4* which says: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and*

momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. So Brother Liu is focused on the first part, I mean, that's to say his light and momentary troubles are achieving for him an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. But we don't suffer like Brother Liu suffers. We live in the most prosperous, safe, blessed country on earth. I mean here in America we have to focus on the last part of that verse, and there Paul says: *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

You know, this summer I'm going to reach the ripe old age of 70, which is amazing to me, but I can tell you that and I look back and I remember that when we were young, life seems like this endless road and all of it stretched out in front of us. I remember because it's all stretched out in front of us, we tended to focus on what is seen, what is temporary. But after a while of going through life, we begin to see more and more of it through the rear view mirror, that is through things that we've already done. And the last thing that I want is for that view in my rear view mirror to be empty. I want it to be full and rich of those things that are unseen, those things that are eternal. I mean I want the fruit that my persecuted brothers are going to have for eternity. I read

these reports of people who are beaten and tortured for Christ and I see them responding with love for those who have imprisoned and beaten them and I realize I'm not fit to tie these folks' shoelaces and many of them don't even have shoes. This is the good seed sown in good soil, humbled seed dying to produce fruit, fruit that brings honor and glory to Christ through suffering. That's how the mustard seed grows in many parts of the world. I mean, we've learned in the parable of the wheat and the tares that the field is the world and the master owns the fields, it's his world, it belongs to him. So when seeds are sown wherever his spirit desires, first in Jerusalem, then in Greece and Rome, then in Europe, then America, now Africa and China, then the rest of the world. And everywhere that humble mustard seed goes, humble mustard trees grow. And many birds take refuge in their branches. That picture that Jesus painted was yet another shock to the disciples. I mean it wasn't supposed to be that way, they thought. They thought they were supposed to separate themselves from the rest of humanity. They didn't realize that Jesus wasn't describing some new method, some new technique for gaining converts, he was describing a completely different kingdom with a servant's power unlike anything that had been seen before. And he set the example that's been laid out in *Philippians 2*, which says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to*

be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It should be pretty obvious that Jesus is not telling his disciples how to win friends and influence people. I mean, he's explained to them a whole new way of thinking with a brand new source of power. He's living out the paradigm that says, *"my strength is made perfect in weakness,"* and he's inviting them into the power of that weakness. It's a power that scripture is not shy about. *2 Timothy* says: *Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. 2 Peter* says: *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence. Romans 1* says: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek.* What Jesus is doing here with his disciples is he's revealing the greatest raw power the universe has ever known,

and like anything else in the kingdom, this power is standing the world on its head. The disciples hear Jesus telling them that big is little and that first is last and that humble gets exalted and weak is strong and to live is to die. I don't blame the disciples for being freaked out, for thinking this Jesus has lost it. But they were wrong and God was not. You got to understand, Jesus has been at this work for thousands of years before he even called the disciples, and now it's thousands of years since that day and the battle is still raging. God's plan has not yet changed from the instruction he gave his disciples. He's still planting good seed in good soil, the smallest of all agricultural seeds that grows everywhere into a humble tree by dying, as all seeds must.

So what does this mean to us? Well, I want you all to know that this morning you're actually sitting in a mustard tree, and it's still growing, and birds are starting to nest in its branches. But there's still a great deal more room for growth, for stronger branches to support more birds. And we are what makes the mustard seed grow and we live like a good seed lives, by dying to the world, to self, and to the devil and living for Christ. And so we ask, okay, how do you do that? Well, for one, we practically support our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for their faith. *Voice of the Martyrs* is a great place to start. But secondly, we seek to grow the mustard seed that we are part of on

25 Sullivan Avenue. And again we ask, okay, how do we do that? Well, let me tell you what makes this mustard seed grow, what always has, it's one word and that word is prayer. You see, this is a church that has been grounded and founded by prayer. And whether it was Bertha or Jean or Helen or Eleanor or Sylvia, many of you don't know who those women are but it was all women, and when we first started, we had no idea what we were doing at all, and yet these women were steadfast in praying for us in praying for every member of the church, they are the reason that we're here. They are the ones who got us here. God has taken the six men who are in leadership here and spoken through scripture to us to say you're not the most gifted speakers, planners or administrators but if you seek My will in prayer, I will guide you, I will instruct you, I will warn you, I will empower you to grow like a mustard seed, and birds will roost in your branches. We've been around for 28 years for that reason alone.

I mean, do you remember what Brother Liu did that made him such a threat to the authorities? Do you recall what his job was? I just read it. The article said Brother Liu was a member of a prayer team of his house church and prays for the church and its ministry. Could it be that the Chinese enemies of the church see more value and danger in prayer than we do? I mean I thank God for those who come out for corporate prayer, I mean, they truly do get it. But

they are very, very few in number. Oftentimes there's four of us, maybe five of us. And believe me, I'm open to any new creative way to engage the enemy through prayer, I don't care if it's home groups, whatever it is, all I care about is that people in this church are praying because we are nowhere near being a church of prayer. And I've said it before and I'll say it again, until we get a handle on the critical necessity of and power expressed through prayer, we will go nowhere.

How did the kingdom of God start? Well, it started with the planting of a mustard seed. And that mustard seed was planted with the death and resurrection of the sower. And it grows like all seeds grow, by dying. And it will end up just as the master said it would in *Matthew 24: And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* We want to be part of that process. We want that mustard seed to grow in Port Jervis. And when we look back at our rear view mirrors, we want to see: *"the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."* We want the birds to come and nest in our branches not because of our talents, our gifts or our cleverness but because of his grace and his power and we do that first and foremost through prayer. So let's pray.

Father, I thank you for who you are and I confess to you that we oftentimes neglect prayer. I think our greatest regrets when we get to heaven is to see exactly what prayer did and to realize the opportunities we had to engage in it that we never took. I am absolutely convinced, Lord, that it's not programs or people or giftedness or abilities or talents, it is broken, sinful people turning to you in prayer that is the source of all power, that is the means for mustard seeds to grow. And so again, Lord, my prayer is that you would move in the hearts of each and every person in this church about the very notion of prayer and how they individually in their own prayer times in their own ways can creatively come up with ways to make this church a praying church where everybody sees and recognizes that that is the source of our power. Lord, speak to us individually and collectively, give us a heart for prayer, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.