

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Parables – Stories with Intent

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Bible Text: Matthew 13:31,32; Mark 4:30-32
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Open your Bibles to Matthew 13, please. Matthew 13. We continue on in our study of the parables and we're going to be several weeks, I warned you, doing this study, in fact, probably right here in Matthew 13 for a good deal of them. We're learning about "Parables – Stories with Intent." That is our subtitle for the series, "Parables – Stories with Intent," and in Matthew 13, Jesus shares another parable in verse 31 and 32. Matthew 13:31, we read these words,

31 Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: 32 Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

Today, the parable of the mustard seed. The parable of the mustard seed. This is the first of the New Testament parables that we have studied together to which we're not given a divine interpretation for and, in truth, we really don't need a divine interpretation for this one and that may sound sarcastic, but I don't mean it that way. There is good reason why Christ didn't offer up an interpretation specifically for this and one of the reasons why, first and foremost is simply because there is no real hidden meaning behind the characters that are mentioned in this parable. It's tempting to try to make something mean something; to say that every character represents something. But to do so over-complicates the clear meaning or intention of Jesus Christ in giving this parable. But, secondly, this is an immensely simple and incredibly relatable parable especially to the people to whom he spoke it to. Again, this is an agrarian society. An agriculturally based society. They depended on what they could grow, what they could get out in the fields and work. That was their livelihood. An agrarian based society, they knew exactly what a mustard seed was and how small it was and how big that it could become. So to try and obscure the clear-cut meaning of the parable by allegorizing all of its specific characters is simply to do an injustice to the text.

So what then is Christ teaching us by this parable? This parable is given to us in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in Mark and Luke's account, Christ begins the parable by asking a couple of questions. Essentially he says, "What is the kingdom of heaven like?"

And to what shall I compare or liken the kingdom of heaven unto?" And then he answers his own question by saying the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that man planted in his field. Now listen, this was not – and I can't emphasize this to you enough – this was not the answer that his disciples were looking for. When he said, "What shall I liken the kingdom of heaven to?" and then he answers it by saying this teeny, tiny, little seed, that's not what they were wanting to hear. That's not at all what they were wanting to hear. So to rightly understand this parable, we've got to put ourselves in their place, in the place of those disciples and hear him speak these words.

So understand, they've been waiting for Messiah to come. They were anticipating that promised Christ, that Deliverer, that next Moses to come and deliver them from Gentile rule, yet Jesus shows up on the scene and he's meek and lowly. He did not meet their lofty expectations at all. He refused to lead in rebellion against the Roman Empire. He was just as quick to lose a crowd as he was to gain a crowd. He wasn't amassing an army, by any means trying to overthrow Roman rule. In fact, when you put it in context, he just told them the parable of the sower and you remember that parable that you're going to go out and you're going to sow the seed and some people are not going to hear it; others are going to sprout up quick and fade fast. There will be some that will hear but only the minority of the people are going to hear. And he also told them the story of the wheat and the tares that we studied last week. So he tells them the kingdom of heaven is going to be surrounded by the enemy, by tares, by those who are unbelievers, and the disciples when they hear this, they have to be wondering to themselves, how is it possible that this man is the Messiah, that long awaited Deliverer, and how can he claim to be a King with a kingdom when look around. That's essentially their mindset would be, "Look around, man. There are only a few of us gathered together. There's only a few of us here."

And probably, and I say this with most certainty, probably they would have preferred if Jesus would have answered and said when he said, "How shall I liken the kingdom of heaven or to what shall I compare it?" they would have much rather he said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a great cedar tree reaching up to the sky, branches that reach out and covers all of the earth." That's what they wanted to hear but Jesus didn't tell them what they wanted to hear, he told them what they needed to hear.

He told them, in fact, what was also not only what they needed but what was accurate. In the Old Testament great empires, Babylon, Assyria, these great empires were likened or compared unto huge, solid, strong trees that would reach out and cover all the earth and that's what they wanted. That's what they wanted him to say. Jesus, that Messiah, he's coming and his kingdom is going to be like those kingdoms, and it's going to be strong and mighty and it's going to reach out and cover all the earth. But instead, instead of him using some high and mighty language to describe his kingdom, instead he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed." While that was not what they wanted, it's what they needed to hear. In this parable, Christ teaches his disciples that in spite of appearance and opposition, his kingdom would become great and we need to be reminded, I need to be reminded, that we should not judge God's work by only what we can see because God is, indeed, growing his kingdom.

Notice with me, if you would from the text in verse 31, "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field." Now, I'm going to stop for just a moment right here and before we get into the nitty-gritty of the exposition of it, I want to point something out to you. Jesus says that he's teaching about what? His kingdom and he says, "How will I compare my kingdom?" Now, he's not teaching or talking at this moment about his local church. That's not what he's teaching about and we need to learn that. We need to get our minds around this. If Jesus wanted to, he could have used the word "ekklesia" but that's not the word that he uses. He's teaching not at this moment, he's not teaching about just his local church but he's teaching about all of the saved people inside of his kingdom.

Listen, this kingdom that Christ established is a spiritual kingdom. He is our King and when we are saved, we are translated into the kingdom of his dear Son. Every saved person is a member of the kingdom of God, kingdom of Christ, kingdom of heaven, both in heaven and on earth. We are part of his kingdom. So learn this when he's talking about the expansion of his kingdom, the growth of his kingdom. We'll look at this again next week, Lord willing, in the parable of the leaven, but when he's talking about the expansion of this, he's not talking specifically about his church. He established the church, this is true, he promised that church would go on, but that's not what he's teaching us. What he is telling us is that not only will he work through his church but he's going to work through his kingdom. Do you hear that? We need to learn that. We need to learn and we need to understand that not everybody who's in the kingdom is in the local church. In fact, I believe that the vast majority of the people that are saved are outside of the local church and in the kingdom. Now, if you'll learn that, it'll be a help to you.

So here's what I'm trying to say: it is my belief that if Christ wanted these people in his church, he'd put them in his church, and if they're outside of his church, it's not our job to try to stop them from doing the work of the kingdom. I know I'm not going to get a lot of amens preaching this in a Baptist church but I'm going to preach it anyway. It's not our job to stop everybody outside these four walls. If we try, do you know what we're trying? We're trying to stop the furtherance of the kingdom. Now, you can like that or not like it but it's just a fact. Jesus said, "I'm going to grow my kingdom. It's going to bloom. It's going to blossom." And I don't believe it is our responsibility in any way to hinder the work of those who are not in his church but are in his kingdom.

I believe I've got a little Bible to back it up because Jesus, the disciples went out. I've got to get to my parable but I want to teach you something. The disciples, Jesus sent them out two by two and when they came back, old sweet lovey-dovey John said, "There were some other people out there trying to do your work and we tried to stop them." Do you know what Jesus said? "Leave them alone. If they're not against us, then they're for us." Now, you can take that and take your sovereign Baptist pill and swallow it right down, okay? We're not the only ones and you'd better hear this and you'd better thank God that we're not the only ones doing God's work in his kingdom. So we need to learn. I'm not saying I'm all up in this pulpit, but I am going to say God's got a lot of people where he's got them for the reason he's got them there and I'm not going to try to stop them. Now, have you got that? Let's move on.

How does Christ illustrate his kingdom? In verse 31, 32, it's like a mustard seed, like a grain of a mustard seed. And you need to look in your bulletin and you need to see it because it's actually a little bit blown up in that picture in your bulletin, but you can see a single mustard seed, a grain, if you will, of a mustard seed. Now, by anybody's estimation, that's small. That's a teeny, tiny, little seed.

Now, let me just teach you as we go through here as well. This is the place where the critic wants to jump up and say, "Now, you see, this is why you can't trust the Bible because there are other seeds out there that are smaller than the mustard seed." And that's true but it is the smallest seed that is an herb that is planted in the garden anywhere in Palestine. He's not trying to tell them about the whole world, he's trying to tell them about something they understood. It's true that a tobacco plant seed is smaller than that, right? A tobacco seed plant is smaller than that but listen, in first century Palestine, they didn't know anything about any tobacco plants so we don't need to sit here and try to turn God's word inside out. Jesus knew what he was talking about. I think the man that created heaven and earth and everything thereon ought to be able to determine which is and is not the smallest seed, making reference to what he is speaking of.

So he says, "It is the smallest of the herbs." Read Mark and Luke's account, it's specifically the herb plants. It is the smallest of those herb seeds and let me take this a step further: more than it being true, more than it being accurate that that is the smallest of the herb plants or herb seeds, it was also a customary saying of the time. We use anecdotes all the time. Where I come from, we used to say I've know that person since I was knee high to a grasshopper. Do they say that in Georgia? That's a saying that we grew up with. We say someone is as light or something is as light as a feather, right? These are some common sayings. We say and it has been true in Georgia for too long, it is hotter than blue blazes, right? These are common sayings. These are things that we use, proverbs, anecdotes that we use all the time and so was this. When anyone made an example of something being small, it was common phraseology in Palestine of the day to say it is as small as a mustard seed. As a matter of fact, when the priest in the Old Testament, you know you had to bring a sacrifice without spot or blemish, it couldn't have anything on it, the priest would say, "Inspect it to make sure that it doesn't have a spot or blemish the size of a mustard seed." This is exactly, again, what Jesus meant when he said, "If you have faith as," what? "A grain of mustard seed."

So it was a common saying simply something that they understood that it means small, insignificant, teeny, tiny. And that's what a parable is, it is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning and he's casting alongside. That's what parable means. It's small, right? That mustard seed is small but it doesn't stay that way because it also says in verse 32, it "is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." It is small. It is a teeny, tiny, little seed but it doesn't stay that way.

It is really quite amazing when you compare a barley seed, wheat, any of these when you compare their seed to a mustard seed, they're bigger but the plant is much smaller, as

opposed to a mustard seed that's teeny, tiny, but the plant grows much larger. One particular species of it anyway has the potential to become very big. If you see again in your bulletins, you see a picture of what I'm told. If it's not so, I was lied to. But in your bulletin, you see a picture of a mustard seed plant or a mustard plant. Now, when you see that, you need to stop and think: all that, if this is true, if all that began with something so small, isn't that amazing?

It is commonly reported that the mustard seed plant, and that's what I call it, I've read it that way 100 times this week, the mustard plant can grow from 12 to 15 feet high. There are reports of men who would ride their horse underneath the branches of the mustard plant. Compared to wheat, barley, these other plants, these other things that would commonly grow, it is like a tree. Its branches do become big, big enough even that the birds of the air can come and build nests in it. We at home, we had a garden and we had tomato plants and, I mean, they took off. Some of them shot head high. You've seen some grow that tall but I've never seen birds build nests in any of them, and what Jesus is saying here is that these, though it begins as something small, insignificant, tiny, miniscule, it becomes something great, big, that even birds can go and build a nest there that provides shelter, safety, a place to be fed. That Jesus is a smart teacher.

Let me just stop right here, okay? In the parable of the sower, the birds or the fowls of the air were bad guys, right? They would come and take away the seed before it had time to be sown, but that was that parable, this is this parable. I told you and I taught you: you cannot cross interpret parables. If you do, you're going to wind up with a mess. Too many people, they want to say, "Well, the parable of the mustard seed means, you know, the mustard seed represents this, the branches represent this, the man who went and sowed represents this, and the fowls represent..." And when you get done, you don't even know what Jesus said, right? You've lost the simple relatable application of the parable itself.

All that Christ is teaching us here is simply that his kingdom is going to begin very very small but it's not going to stay that way. It's going to grow and it's going to reach out. And listen, that's what they needed to hear because when they looked around, who was left? I mean, really? In John 6, he preaches and the whole crowd leaves and Jesus turns around and there are 12 of them standing there. He went back home to Nazareth, stood up and read from Isaiah in the synagogue and he began to preach to them and do you know what they did? They tried to drive him off the cliff and kill him. And when his disciples who think, "Here he is. The long awaited Messiah. He's going to come and break the bonds of Gentile rule and crush the Roman Empire." Instead of that, there are just 12 of them and one of them is a devil. On the day of Pentecost, they gathered together 120. That's not very big, is it?

So what Christ is teaching so simply, so clearly is this: don't get discouraged. Don't get down. You look around and you measure success by what you see, you will be despondent, but I'm telling you, my kingdom is going to grow. Don't you walk away. Don't give up. My kingdom will grow.

And think now, if you based everything on numbers, Jesus originally would have been a big flop. You can line up the English books of the Library of Congress side-by-side and it will stretch for eight miles. I know that sounds strange, just stay with me. That's a lot of books but every one of them find their basis on 26 little letters, right? The greatest songs, the greatest symphonies, the greatest musical arrangements that have ever been put together can be found through simple chords and notes, a few simple chords and notes. And Christ is saying in like manner, we're going to start small but we're going to build, we're going to grow.

In Luke 17, I'll just give you this reference if you want to look at it. In Luke 17, frustrated with what they could not understand, the Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Now, tell us right now when is the kingdom coming? If you claim to be the Messiah, when then is the kingdom coming?" And Jesus replied to them by saying, "The kingdom of God doesn't come by observation." In other words, you don't see it with the naked eye. Luke 17:21, he says, "behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Some people get the idea because they would crucify Christ, that would kill his movement, but that's not what it did at all. In fact, the death of Jesus did not crush the growth of his kingdom but it magnified the growth of his kingdom.

Think about the supernatural way that the kingdom of Christ has grown. Instead of pomp and circumstance, Jesus was born in a manger. Rather than being surrounded by princes and dignitaries, Jesus was surrounded by farm animals. He lived the greatest part of his life in relative obscurity in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, and when he showed up on the scene, even one of his own disciples said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Think about how small, how insignificant it was. Most of his followers were uneducated fishermen. He came to his own and his own received him not.

How was this King received? Well, he was betrayed by one within his own circle. He was denied by one of, if not his closest follower. He was rejected by his own nation. He was condemned as a criminal. Rather than a coronation, they gave him a crucifixion. Rather than being crowned King, they put a crown of thorns on his head. And he was killed on a Roman cross and buried in a borrowed tomb. And many thought, that's it. That mustard seed is dead. It's gone and it'll never be seen no more.

But just like Jesus taught his disciples in John 12:24, Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Pointing not only to his resurrection but to the expansion and growth of his kingdom. Jesus' death wasn't the end of the growth or the future of his kingdom but it was the launching point from which it would expand. Just as surely as he came up out of the grave, so too has his kingdom. In the parable, the mustard seed is taken and put in the ground out of sight, just like Jesus was in the ground and out of sight, but he came out and so too has his kingdom come out and grown.

His kingdom has stretched all over this world. There are men and women who have forsaken everything to follow after Jesus of Nazareth. People from every kindred, every tongue, every tribe, every nation, have heard of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and their lives

have been changed forever. What began as a little small mustard seed in Palestine has bloomed and grown and spread all over this earth. They went forth from Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. What started out as a little band of brothers, I love what he says in Acts 17:26. I got that verse all wrong. Acts 17:6, trying to go from memory instead of looking. Acts 17:6, those critics of Christianity said, "These men have turned the world upside down." Did you hear that? That's what has happened. What began as nothing, small, insignificant, teeny, tiny, now has turned the world upside down.

Look around you. Don't get scared. Look around. What do we have in common? Different backgrounds, different likes, different histories. We're all part of the same kingdom. Those that are saved, we all serve the same King. We sit here in this room today as just a little bit of the offshoot of that mustard seed plant. Just a part of what Jesus planted in Palestine has bloomed all across America and now that kingdom is growing in places in this world.

It's easy. It is easy to get discouraged when you look around at America today, when you see the mess we're in. You think it's bad on us, think about those disciples, how they felt, right? They needed to hear, we need to hear that while it may seem like things are out of hand and the tares are going to take over, Jesus said, "My kingdom is going to grow. It's going to keep growing. It's going to keep expanding." Don't judge – listen to me, I might as well preach to the preacher – don't base everything, your success, the future of what you hope, don't base it on what the eye can see. Jesus said, "I'm going to grow my kingdom." In spite of the fact that we're outnumbered, the tares, in spite of the fact that some are not going to receive the word, the wayside ground, that which is on the wayside, some are not going to remain faithful, some are going to fall out, some are going to jump up quick and fall away fast, in spite of all of opposition, criticism and demonic efforts, Jesus said, "I'm going to grow my kingdom."

We need to be reminded of that from time to time and Jesus, knowing – listen – put it in context. He's going to be leaving them, right? He's going to be leaving them. He's going up into heaven and they need to know no matter how small you seem, you're a mustard plant, you're little bitty, you're teeny tiny, but I'm not through. And I really believe it is God working through the Holy Spirit that really began on Pentecost when he came down and empowered his church and thereby sending out and going into so that now the word of Christ has been preached all over this whole planet. A group of weak, doubt-filled believers stood on a mountaintop one day watching their King ascend up into heaven and no doubt they were despondent and discouraged. Never ever could they have imagined how far their ministry was going to reach.

There was a man in the book of Acts in chapter 5, his name is Gamaliel, and after they had tried to stop the apostles from preaching, this man says to them, and I'm going to give you the summation of what he says, Acts 5:38 and 39. Essentially he says to them, "Listen, there's been a lot of people that have gained a following. They died and their following died. Listen," he says to them, "if this thing is of man, the same thing is going to happen. If Jesus dies, his following will die out." But then he said, "If it be of God, you best not interfere with it. You best not try to stop it." And that is exactly what has

happened with the growth of the kingdom. "If it be of God," this man said, "you cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God."

How clearly we should see the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit in growing Christ's kingdom. Think about all the opposition that is faced. Think about the millions that have been killed and persecuted but still his kingdom grows. Anybody here, I don't expect to see any hands, anybody here ever laid eyes on Jesus Christ with your natural eyes? Everybody ever heard him speak with your natural ears? We see him, we hear him from his word but as far as naturally, it just doesn't happen. He speaks to us now through his word and yet here we are gathered together on a Sunday morning, singing, hooping, hollering and spinning about a man that lived 2,000 years ago. That is the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit in growing the kingdom and there are little pockets of people all over this planet today who are doing just exactly what we're doing when it began with nothing but a little tiny mustard seed. That is how Christ said my kingdom is going to grow.

But let me give you this. Even though we've seen massive growth, Jesus is not through yet growing his kingdom because one of these days not only will his kingdom be a spiritual kingdom but it's going to be a material kingdom. He's coming back. The King is coming. He's coming back and he's going to set up a physical and literal reign here on earth, and at that time, the kingdom will not merely be spiritual but it was also now be material and physical because the King himself is going to be here. And in fact, Psalm 72:8 says, "He shall have dominion," how big, how wide, how high will this kingdom grow? "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. The kings shall bring presents. The kings shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him." That's how big that kingdom's going to grow.

We don't serve a defeated foe, we serve a conquering King and he's coming back. Perhaps it's hard to see but don't get discouraged. Don't judge by what the natural eye sees. I know that it seems like things are out of hand and we're facing real issues here in our nation, but we're not trying to restore the kingdom to America, we're trying to build God's kingdom and like those early disciples, I am, if it fits you, I'm too prone to look around real quick and say this is it. You don't know what God can do with just a little bit, with your little testimony. You don't know what God can do with it. With you handing out one track, you don't know what God can do with it. With you being that good Samaritan to your neighbor, you don't know what God...that's how he grows his kingdom. The furtherance of his Gospel person to person, we'll get into this next week, that's how he grows his kingdom. Don't get discouraged. Don't get down. Jesus is King and he's growing his kingdom.

Then I'll just close: there is shelter, there is provision, there is a place of rest inside the kingdom. Just like the birds of the air would come and build nests in that mustard plant when it was growing, you can come and build a nest in the house of God. There is a place of rest inside God's kingdom, a place to raise a family. Isn't that what a nest is? A place to

raise a family. A place to be fed. A place of safety and shelter. That's what life is inside the kingdom. Why would anybody want to be out of it?

This is my closing thought, really my closing thought: you are either in his kingdom working for him or you are outside of his kingdom working for the enemy. Now there is no in between. You're either with him or you're against him. Are you saved? Because if you're saved, you're part of the kingdom and you need to be growing. If you're here and you're not saved, you're not part of this kingdom. You're still in that kingdom of darkness. But by trusting in Jesus' atoning work at Calvary, death and resurrection, you can be in his kingdom and one of these days when that kingdom grows, we're going to be part of it.

Are you saved today? Have you been born again? Then I just simply say to you: there are a lot of little parables, a lot of little parables, and one of the little parables is you don't light a candle and put it under a bushel, do you? You don't light a candle and hide it. You put the candle on the candlestick and if you're here and saved, you need to let your light so shine before men, in other words, you confess Christ openly and you join his local body which is a candlestick and you let your light shine. You don't hide it. There's no such thing as closet Christians. If you're in the kingdom, you need to let the world know, "I am a follower and committed to the Lord Jesus Christ." You do it and it will be well with your soul.