

**The Good News of God's Kingdom
The Parable of the Mustard Seed
"Great Things Start Small"**

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32)

The reference appears to a garden variety of the black mustard plant commonly grown in Palestine. It is well known for its hot-flavored seeds.

Critics of the Scripture have charged Jesus with error in His statement that the mustard seed "is smaller than all other seeds". But here Jesus uses phenomenal language. The seeds of the mustard tree are not technically the smallest seeds in the botanical world, but in Jesus' culture they were the smallest among plants familiar to the people of Palestine and the mustard seed in particular was used as in describing something small.

As a plant, it ordinarily reach about 4 feet but can with proper maintenance reaches ten, sometimes fifteen feet in height. In the fall of the year, its branches have become rigid, and the plant often serves as a shelter for birds of many kinds.

And so Jesus' illustration is true to the facts in the cultural context in which he was speaking. But what is the message that Jesus is teaching?

The Meaning for People in Jesus' Day

Clearly the message seems to be contained in the contrast between the smallness of the seed and the largeness of the tree that it produces after its complete development.

Jesus on another occasion used it to describe how even a small faith can move mountains (Mt. 17:20).

*And He *said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. (Matthew 17:20)*

The Jewish Mishna also uses the mustard seed as a measure of smallness (Niddah 5.2)

So the mustard seed illustrates in nature a plant that starts exceedingly small, but grows far beyond the expectations one might have for a seed its size.

The parable thus illustrates the nature of the kingdom's growth and contains an important message for those who would enter the kingdom.

The two previous parables before this one might have been somewhat discouraging in their messages:

The parable of the sower indicated that not all would have what it takes to even enter the kingdom. Many would not enter and others who at first seemed to want to be a part of the kingdom would not remain committed.

Moreover, the parable of the tares indicated that Jesus' kingdom would not immediately bring to an end the forces of evil in this world. The kingdom citizens would have to co-exist with those who followed the rule of Satan, thus portending an extended time of conflict and difficulty for the people of God.

Yet in spite of these truths the disciples must understand that the "unpromising beginning of the kingdom was but a precursor to explosive growth" (Chumbley).

The historical reality conforms to Jesus' prediction.

By the time of Jesus' death, most of the masses had lost faith in Jesus as the Christ of their hopes. "Many turned and walked with him no more" (Jn. 6). After Jesus' death, there were twelve apostles and a little over a hundred loyal followers in Jerusalem, hardly the stuff of which great kingdoms is made.

Imagine a great king arising among a dozen men and saying, "You and I together are going to conquer the world!" Yet that is exactly what happened. Look at how the kingdom started.

"The Son of Man grew up in a despised province; he did not appear in public until his thirtieth year; then taught for two or three years in neighboring villages, and occasionally at Jerusalem; made a few converts, chiefly among the poor and unlearned; and then falling into the hands of his enemies, died the shameful death of the cross; such, and so slight, was the commencement of the universal kingdom of God." (R. C. Trench, Notes On The Parables Of Our Lord)

Yet beginning at Jerusalem the twelve and those affiliated with them, armed with nothing more than a message of God's love and power, grew into thousands and those thousands spread throughout Judea and Samaria preaching the word. Those thousands became tens of thousands as churches were established over the Roman world in the first century. And through the ages millions upon millions have heard the call of the gospel and entered the kingdom. It has come even to us and to the millions like us around the world.

The mustard seed has become and continues to grow into the great tree that shelters the yearning lost souls of this world.

The parable of the mustard seed provided the encouragement the disciples needed as they faced the intimidating task of establishing the kingdom of God in a world of impressive and powerful human kingdoms.

As the world becomes progressively evil, there is a tendency to capitulate. What's the use? Nobody wants to hear the gospel. We lose hope. We quit inviting. We become resigned to apparent "failure". Jesus' message gives us the encouragement not to quit when our efforts seem to fail. "Great things start small."

It is important that we not stop doing the seemingly "little things" that spread the word.

It may seem like a little thing to watch your example around the unbeliever, to say a word of truth in a discussion, to speak a word of cheer and encouragement in a time of need, to pass along a recommendation to a co-worker or neighbor, to take the brief moment to greet a visitor, to send a card, to give that extra bit of enthusiasm in worship. Yet great things start small!

We should never lose sight of the tremendous potential that the word of God has in this world. Jesus parable not only shows us that little things are important; he shows us that little things produce great things. Or to use our theme, great things start small.

The power of the kingdom resides not in the strength of men and their efforts, but in the power of the word of the kingdom and its King, our Lord Jesus Christ. Don't ever doubt His ability to change people! The message that turned the hearts of thousands at Pentecost, turned the hostile heart of Saul into an ardent teacher of the gospel and brought moral respectability to the immoral Corinthians can do the same things today.

In the parable of the mustard seed, we see that the large plant produced provided shelter or protection for the birds.

Perhaps Jesus in the parable of the mustard seed wants us also to see that the kingdom of God provides great benefits for those who enter it. The kingdom of God provides what people need most in this life.

for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)

And it makes possible entrance into the "eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11).

Conclusion: But for this to happen, God's people must believe the parable of the mustard seed! Do we have the faith to believe that great things can happen? Do we have the vision to see how it can happen? Do we have the commitment to put the kingdom of God first in our lives so it can happen?

If you are not a Christian, let Jesus promise be fulfilled through you.