

On the Way to the Cross - Part 9 - Kingdom Perspectives

Last Sunday we studied the Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes); where Jesus clearly defined a new constitution for the citizens of His kingdom. As we continue the journey with our Lord, we find Him talking much about what the kingdom is like (**Matthew 13:24-52; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1; 25:14; Mark 4:30; Luke 13:18; 13:20**). It is almost 2 years into Jesus' ministry and He has told us exactly what is expected of those who are to be subjects of His kingdom. Now, He wants' us to get a real perspective on what it is like.

In this regard, Jesus uses Parables, and most of them are explained by applying farming metaphors. The one I'd like us to concentrate on today is the Parable of the Mustard Seed. This parable is mentioned in **Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:30** and **Luke 13:18**. The Lord often used parables as "prophecies" concerning His kingdom until His return. Whenever He taught in this way He provided two views of the same subject: specifically, the outward aspect, conveyed to a multitude of people; and the inward aspect, as revealed to His disciples. Here He brings to light a specific characteristic of His kingdom compared to the outside world. Namely, that the historical development of the "church" (which is to represent His kingdom on earth) would be one of humble beginnings. But this parable contains more than this one important truth.

Hidden within these verses is a warning about any diversion from the church's ordained method of growing and of satanic attacks upon it. This parable is an analogy, and therefore, the symbolism of the Kingdom of God being likened to a mustard seed is not identical. Yet it explains a particular aspect of the "process" which the church goes through in preparing for the "fullness" of God's Kingdom. Let's read **Matthew 13:31-32**...

1. What does the mustard seed represent? Most commentators agree that the mustard seed stands for the birth of the early church from small beginnings. This parable focuses on this idea of *small beginnings*. The mustard seed is something small that does its part to expand in preparation for the Kingdom of God. Such seed represents an instrument by which 'spiritual growth' can be advanced, just as a plant grows and reproduces itself through a seed. As in the Parable of the Sower, the one who sows the mustard seed is Jesus Christ, and the field is the world. Jesus Himself had an insignificant entrance into the world by human standards, and it's the same with His church. It starts off small because God did not intend it to become a physically powerful organisation that would make a spectacle of itself.

As with the church, you must be comfortable with *small beginnings*. Like the mustard seed, God doesn't only see something tiny, He sees your potential to unfold into something great. *"Do not despise these small beginnings for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin"* (**Zechariah 4:10**). *"Though your beginning was small, yet your latter end would increase abundantly"* (**Job 8:7**).

2. What do the birds of the air represent? Birds are naturally attracted to the taste of the mustard seed. Matthew identifies the birds of the air as "the wicked one". Mark and Luke connect them with satan. According to **Revelation 18:12**, the end-time Babylon becomes *"a habitation of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird."* Jesus predicts the birds of the air would come to nest in the branches. These evil spirits, led by "the prince of the power of the air", will continually try to infiltrate the church. To the devil, the most appetising thing about you and me is the Word that's been sown in our hearts. He is naturally attracted to the taste of it!

3. What does the "tree" represent? The largest of mustard plants, even under ideal conditions, can grow only to a height of about 15 feet. **Luke 13:19** describes it as "a large tree," yet the natural mustard plant is not "a large tree" by any stretch of the imagination. All varieties of the mustard family, which are herbs, have thin, pulpy stems and branches. It is nothing like a tree. More like a bush! Let me pose this question? Did this mustard plant do something abnormal by growing beyond its design parameters? Did it become larger than what God designed it to be?

Maybe, (just maybe) as the church grew from a tiny seed into a small mustard bush, it was as God designed it. But over time, it mutated into a large tree, something never intended by God. And if so, what has become of the true church? Is it a consistent characteristic of God's true church to remain an affective local community, spiritually feeding those who are chosen to become citizens of the Kingdom of God? One thing's for sure, whatever view we may take of the church, and it's small beginnings, we know that God wants His church to usher in as many souls into His Kingdom as possible!

Now that we have dealt with the mustard seed in the context of this parable, let's look at its other usage in the New Testament. **Matthew 17:20** states, So Jesus said to them, *"Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."* So the Lord said, *"If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you"* (**Luke 17:6**). Jesus encourages us to have mustard seed faith! **Matthew 17** records the story of a man who came to Jesus seeking help for his son. **Mark 9:14-29** reveals more details of the same story.

Mark tells of a dispute between the disciples and the Jewish teachers. This father had already pleaded with the disciples, but were unable to help. Jesus has some harsh words for the unbelieving Jews, so He calls for the man to bring his son and questions the man about how long he has been possessed and what his symptoms are. The man's plea, *"If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us,"* is answered with, *"If you can believe? All things are possible for those who believe."* Then the response is, *"Lord, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief."* And Jesus heals the man.

Later, when the disciples got Jesus alone they asked why they couldn't cast the demon out of the man. Jesus tells them it was because they had so little faith. Then He makes the most astounding statement, He says, *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you"* (**Matthew 17:20**). A tiny bit of faith is enough to move mountains! I think there is a more beneficial way to interpret this statement. The original Greek does not talk about size at all, and that is reflected in the King James translation which says simply, *"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed."* Maybe it's talking about the size, but suppose it isn't! Suppose it is qualitative. Suppose it means having the kind of faith that a mustard seed has.

That feels very different to me. A mustard seed is one of the tiniest of seeds, but it grows quickly into a large plant. Suppose we had **faith** that could believe in the far-reaching effects of 'tiny little' efforts. What difference it could make! But that's not necessarily the kind of faith that a mustard seed has. It's own size has nothing to do with the outcome.

When we have the faith of a mustard seed, we recognise our true nature. We are fully confident that we are made in the image of God and therefore the powerful love of God can and will be channelled through us. That's what the disciples failed to grasp in the Matthew story. They thought that because they were only human they couldn't cast out a powerful demon. Yet that wasn't their true nature! They belonged to God and had the power of God at their disposal. Likewise, it doesn't matter if you are small, or poor, or uneducated, or weak. It doesn't matter if you're facing mega problems. Your power is God's power, and with God all things are possible. You may just be a tiny seed, but remember, you are a mustard seed! And that means big things are about to happen. Mountains are about to be moved!

Yes, there are mountains ahead of us as a congregation. The one looming largest is the financial mountain for the new building. We all know what that's like! A number of you probably face financial mountains in your personal lives as well as other mountains of all sorts. Some of you may have mountains of grief from losses of your lives, mountains of anxiety about your future, mountains of work that seems only to grow larger each day. Notice, if you are up close to a big problem, it fills the whole screen of your life so you can't see anything else! That's how it is with all mountains. And, we will likely have many in both our personal and professional lives.

However, Jesus invites us (in the shadow of our mountains), to remember the little mustard seed. To remember that it's always hard to see potential until you plant it in the soil of faith and water it with the love of God. Things you never even noticed suddenly become the most impressive plants in the garden. Because of your faith, things that first looked like mountains turn to foothills which in turn become flat, grassy meadows. What was once unattainable becomes something that's suddenly within your reach.

I invite you to think about ways that your faith might become more like the faith of a mustard seed. Do you expect too little? You are a child of God so dream big! You get what you expect. Does a problem seem insurmountable? Place it in God's hands. Are you so afraid of breaking (and becoming nothing) that your life has no opportunity to grow? In Christ, death is swallowed up in victory, and life begins when you stop trying to protect it as much. Why don't you trust the capable and powerful hands of God? You may be feeling small and weak and insignificant, but you have the potential of God Himself in you. **You have faith as a mustard seed!**