

Matthew 13:31-32

I. Verse 31a – “He put another parable before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like...’”

Most Jews would have thought that they already knew what the kingdom of heaven was like, because it was already described and anticipated by the prophets of the Old Testament. *But* there were some things about the kingdom that had previously been somewhat hidden. It was all there in the Old Testament prophets, but the people weren’t yet able to really grasp or understand the actual *outworking* of the fulfillment. And so the purpose of this parable, and of all the other parables in this chapter, is to *reveal* to those who have been *given* ears to hear the *secrets* of the kingdom – the things that previously had never been fully understood. So as those who have been given ears to hear, we need to remember again our great privilege, so that we will be more joyful and diligent in our listening!

In the parable of the sower, the secret revealed is that the Messiah’s kingdom is a matter of the *heart*, and that as we proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom to others, that message may or may not take root and bear fruit in a person’s life – depending on the kind of soil in the heart of those who hear. This calls us to trust in God’s sovereign power to change and transform hearts, and to content ourselves with the simple task of earnestly and prayerfully scattering the seed.

In the parable of the weeds of the field, the secret revealed is that though the promised kingdom is already a present reality as Christ is now ruling over all of heaven and earth, nevertheless, the separation of the wicked from the righteous will not happen until the close of this age. For the present, the wicked and the righteous live side by side in the kingdom (within the sphere of Christ’s rule). This is a severe tension, but it will not always be this way. One day the wicked will be gathered out of the kingdom and thrown into the fiery furnace, and *then* the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. This calls for endurance, because even though we are the sons of the kingdom, oftentimes our lot will appear to be no different, if not even worse than the sons of the evil one.

But now Jesus puts another parable before His disciples, and before us, saying:

II. Verse 31b-32a – “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds...” [See picture on p. 7]

The ESV notes clarify for us that the mustard seed was “the smallest of all *agricultural* seeds in *Palestine*”. The NIV adds the word “your” (“it is the smallest of all *your* seeds”) in order to make it clear that Jesus is not making a strict scientific statement about the smallest seed in the entire world (which the mustard seed is not)! The people of Jesus’ own day would have known that! In another place Jesus says: “If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed...” (Mat. 17:20) Over time, and in the culture of Jesus’ day, the mustard seed had become proverbial for its smallness. And so now Jesus does something unthinkable and shocking. He actually compares the *kingdom of heaven* to this mustard seed – to the *smallest*, *tiniest*, and most *insignificant* of *all* seeds! And maybe the idea of seeming helplessness and vulnerability is here as well. Here is a picture of one single, lone mustard seed being not planted (as the NIV) but sown—or *cast*—not into a garden (as in Luke) but into a *field*! In light of the size of the mustard seed, the garden

could easily be called a field! The sense of insignificance and “tinyness” now becomes breathtakingly overwhelming! How can anything of any significance at all come from *such* tiny and insignificant beginnings – the tiniest and most insignificant beginnings *imaginable*?!? To our natural reason and sensibilities, it seems simply *impossible*.

So how was the kingdom of heaven like a mustard seed that a man sowed in a field? J.C. Ryle, puts it this way:

“It was a religion which seemed at first so feeble, and helpless, and powerless, that it could not live. Its first founder was One who was poor in this world, and ended His life by dying the death of a malefactor on the cross.—Its first adherents were a little company, whose number probably did not exceed a thousand when the Lord Jesus left the world.—Its first preachers were a few fishermen and publicans, who were, most of them, unlearned and ignorant men.—Its first starting point was a despised corner of the earth, called Judea, a petty tributary province of the vast empire of Rome.—Its first doctrine was eminently calculated to call forth the enmity of the natural heart. Christ crucified was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness.—Its first movements brought down on its friends persecution from all quarters. Pharisees and Sadducees, Jews and Gentiles, ignorant idolaters and self-conceited philosophers, all agreed in hating and opposing Christianity. It was a sect everywhere spoken against... If ever there was a religion which was a little grain of seed at its beginning, that religion was the Gospel.”

How can anything of any significance at all come from such overwhelmingly tiny and insignificant beginnings?!? To our natural reason and sensibilities, it seems truly *impossible*. Think of how the disciples must have felt! And yet contrary to our natural sensibilities, we all know what happens when a single, lone mustard seed is cast into a field.

III. Verse 32 – “It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Here is an astonishing miracle of transformation! The *largest* of *all* the garden plants comes forth from the *smallest* of *all* the garden seeds! From one tiny seed grows a bush (plant) that reaches on average 6-8 feet, and sometimes even 8-12 feet tall! [See picture on p. 7] And notice that now instead of the field, we have moved to the context of a garden (“garden plants”). Within the confines of a garden, the mustard plant would have a massive and imposing presence! Now, instead of the overwhelming insignificance of the seed in the field, we are met with the imposing presence of the plant in the garden!

The mustard plant *is* a plant and Jesus Himself implies this when He says that it is larger than all the garden plants. But then Jesus goes on to say that it becomes a *tree*, “so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches”! Again, the mustard *plant* is not technically a tree, and for that matter it really doesn’t even look all that much like a tree, but it does fulfill one of the *functions* of a tree when it provides a place for the birds to come and make nests in its branches. So even though Mark never mentions the word “tree”, he does record these words of Jesus: “it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants *and puts out large branches*, so that the

birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:30-32). [See picture on p. 7] So the mustard plant *is like* a tree because the birds can make nests in its branches. But Jesus isn’t content to say that the mustard plant is *like* a tree. He goes so far as to say that it “*becomes* a tree”! In light of this exaggerated emphasis on the mustard plant as a tree with branches that are large enough for birds to nest in, it seems clear to me that there must be some agenda, some point, some significance to what Jesus is saying! Now Luke’s original Gentile audience would not have seen any connection, but *surely* Matthew’s Jewish audience and Jesus’ original audience of Jews *would* have seen a clear connection with several passages from their Old Testament Scriptures. In Daniel chapter four, the rule and reign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is compared to a tree in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived.

- ✓ Daniel 4:10-12 – I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

The beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens represent all of the nations (“all flesh”) that found protection (“shade”), nourishment (“food”), and their very livelihood and wellbeing (“lived in its branches”) as they submitted to the rule and reign of Babylon. In Ezekiel chapter thirty-one, the kingdom rule and reign of the Assyrians is compared to a great tree with beautiful branches in which all the birds of the heavens made their nests.

- ✓ Ezekiel 31:3, 6 – Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds... All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations.

So the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field represent “all great *nations*” (and therefore all of the lesser nations as well). But the most important passage for our understanding of the parable of the mustard “tree” is found in Ezekiel chapter seventeen.

- ✓ Ezekiel 17:22-23 – Thus says the Lord GOD: “I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar [the cedar represents David’s royal family]... and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar [this cedar represents the Messiah’s kingdom rule and reign]. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort [all the nations of the earth] will nest.

Now some people will complain that the mustard “tree” is still a *tiny* little plant compared to the noble and lofty cedar planted on a high and lofty mountain. We can’t compare mustard plants and cedar trees! But on the other hand, we don’t plant cedars in gardens, and we don’t plant mustard seeds in the forest or at the peak of a high and lofty mountain! We can easily compare the size of the mustard plant in the context of the garden to the size of a cedar tree in the context of the forest. And the seeds of the cedar tree had never become proverbial for their smallness! So when Jesus calls the mustard plant a “*tree*” because of the fact that *birds can come and nest in its*

branches, we can't *help* but think of the cedar that was planted on a high and lofty mountain. Now we have the *smallest of all* seeds growing into the *largest of all* garden plants and *then* even evoking Old Testament images of the lofty cedar in the shade of whose branches birds of every sort will nest! The transformation is staggering! The contrast now becomes even more mind boggling than ever! And so the kingdom of heaven, which starts out as the smallest and most insignificant of all seeds, will gradually grow, and grow, and grow, until eventually it fills all the earth, and all the nations of the earth will come to find nourishment and refuge under the Messiah's rule.

- ✓ Isaiah 2:2-4 – It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

These verses are *ultimately* fulfilled only when the tree is full grown and all of the birds have come to make nests in its branches after the return of Christ, and yet these verses are in the *process of being* fulfilled even *now*! The fulfillment of these verses is gradually growing, and *growing*, and **growing**...! It is this “*secret*” of the **gradual** growth and fulfillment of the Messiah's kingdom that the parable of the Mustard seed reveals. In fulfillment of Isaiah chapter two, the word of the Lord (the Gospel) has gone forth from Jerusalem into all the world.

- ✓ Acts 1:8 – But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

From all the world, people are coming to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach them His ways and that they may walk in his paths.

- ✓ John 12:31-32 (cf. John 10:16; Isaiah 56:6-8) – Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (Jews and Gentiles, people from all nations).

And even today, we ourselves are among the birds that have nested in the branches of the mustard tree. *We* are among those who have come to Zion to find nourishment and refuge under the Messiah's rule – the rule of Jesus Christ our King. So J.C. Ryle writes (slightly paraphrased):

“In spite of persecution, opposition, and violence, Christianity gradually spread and increased. Year after year its adherents became more numerous. Year after year idolatry withered away before it. City after city, and country after country, received the new faith. Church after church was formed in almost every quarter of the earth then known. Preacher after preacher rose up, and missionary after missionary came forward to fill the place of those who died. Roman emperors and heathen philosophers, sometimes by force and sometimes by argument, tried in vain to check the progress of Christianity. They

might as well have tried to stop the tide from flowing, or the sun from rising. In a few hundred years, the religion of the despised Nazarene,—the religion which began in the upper chamber at Jerusalem,—had overrun the civilized world. It was professed by nearly all Europe, by a great part of Asia, and by the whole northern part of Africa. The prophetic words of the parable before us were [being] fulfilled. The grain of mustard seed [was growing into a great tree; and the birds of the air were coming to nest in its branches].”

Conclusion

When the disciples first heard this parable and understood its meaning, what do you think it required from them? First of all, and above all else, *faith* – faith to *see* the tree with birds nesting in its branches when right now all they could see was a tiny little mustard seed. Faith to see men and women from all the nations of the earth coming to find nourishment and refuge under the Messiah’s rule when right now there were only a few Jews from one tiny little province in all the vastness of the Roman Empire. Would we have had this kind of faith – to see in the mustard seed the full grown tree?

But second of all, the “secret” of this parable called for *patience*. “It starts out the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and become a tree.” “*When it has grown.*” The tree doesn’t grow overnight. It takes *time*. The growth is *gradual*. The disciples were tempted to be impatient. They were called to believe *not* in a sudden and immediate moment of transformation, but in a long and *gradual* process of growth. And so they must learn to wait patiently for the day when the tree is finally full grown, and all the nations of the whole earth have come to find nourishment and protection under the shade of its branches. Would we have had this kind of patience – to wait for this tiny mustard seed to sprout and grow to full maturity?

Finally, the secret of this parable calls for *diligence* and for *courage*. The disciples would be tempted to despair and give up when they saw the kingdom of heaven as nothing more than a mustard seed. But the growth of that mustard seed is *sure*, and the full grown tree is *certain* no matter how gradual the process may be, or how long it may seem to take. Hendriksen sums it up this way: “To those who first heard it, this parable was saying, ‘Have patience, exercise faith, keep on praying, and keep on working. God’s program cannot fail.’”

But now what about us? Look how far the kingdom has *already* come! It is no longer a mustard seed – as it was when Jesus first spoke this parable. *Already*, multitudes of men and women from all different nations of the world have come to find nourishment and refuge under the saving rule of Jesus. *How much more*, then, should we continue to *believe*, and *wait*, and *work*, and *pray* because God’s program cannot fail? But if we don’t have this perspective, then what value will we see in Wednesday evening prayer meetings? What value will we see in prayer at all? What significance will we see in our little churches and in our small attempts at Christian service and outreach? We are impatient. We easily give up, because we lack the faith to look at the mustard seed and see there the full grown tree with birds nesting in its branches. We wonder what thing of any true significance could ever come about through our small efforts. But this parable reminds us of the words of the prophet Zechariah: “Whoever has despised the day of small things

shall rejoice” (4:10). Or as our more modern saying goes: Great oaks from little acorns grow. So “let us learn from this parable never to despair of any work for Christ, because its first beginnings are feeble and small... to the eye of man, the work may appear too great, and the instrument employed quite unequal to it. Let us never give way to such thoughts. Let us remember the parable before us and take courage.” (Ryle) Though the kingdom started as the smallest of all seeds, and though it grows only gradually over time—never seeming to grow fast enough to our human wisdom—yet God’s program cannot fail. So by faith, let’s just be *faithful*—both as individuals *and* as a Church—to do what God has called us to do, to say what God has called us to say, to be who God has called us to be, and to go where God has called us to go. One day we will find that the tree is full-grown, and that all the nations of the earth have come to find nourishment and refuge under the Messiah’s rule.

Teaching our Children

- Q. In Jesus’ day, what was special about the mustard seed?
- A. The mustard seed was the very *smallest* seed out of all the garden seeds.
- Q. Jesus talked about something that was just like a mustard seed. What was it?
- A. Jesus said that the *kingdom of heaven* was like a grain of mustard seed (little, tiny, apparently unimportant and insignificant)!
- Q. How was the kingdom of heaven like a grain of mustard seed?
- A. See quote from Ryle under II. C.; Reflect on how the disciples (and *we*) might naturally feel when something starts out so tiny and small.
- Q. What does the smallest of all the garden seeds turn into?
- A. The smallest of all the garden seeds turns into the *largest* of *all* the garden plants!
- Q. Jesus said that the mustard seed even becomes a what?
- A. A tree.
- Q. How can Jesus say that the mustard seed becomes a tree?
- A. ~ Because it puts out branches large enough for the birds to come and build their nests in them.
~ Read Ezekiel 17:22-23 under III. D.
- Q. How is the kingdom of heaven like the mustard seed when it grows into the largest of all the garden plants and provides a place for the birds to nest in its branches?
- A. ~ Read and discuss III. F. and the Scriptures under III. F. from Isaiah, Acts, and John.
~ See quote from Ryle under III. F. 3.
- Q. What does this parable’s teaching about the kingdom require from us? How must we live in light of the teaching of this parable?
- A. See Conclusion (see especially the quote under Conclusion B. 2.)

