

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Mark 4:30-34

As Christians it is easy to look around and grow frustrated with the current state of affairs both in the church and in the world. Every night the news is filled with examples of the worst kind of sin. More and more it seems as if people are opposed to the message of the gospel. In light of this opposition churches all over the place have compromised the message of the Gospel. Often the kingdoms of this world seem to be far more significant than the Kingdom of God. This leaves us asking the question "why?" If Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God then why do things seem to be so bad? Why does it seem like the Kingdom is so insignificant when compared to the kingdom of this world?

We find the answer to these questions in Mark 4:30-34. Follow along in your Bible as I read that passage:

30 Then He said, "To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?

31 It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth;

32 but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade."

33 And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it.

34 But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.

Jesus asks the question: **"To what shall we liken the kingdom of God?"** This is not the first time Jesus has spoken about the Kingdom of God. From the very beginning of His ministry Jesus preached the Kingdom. Remember Mark 1:14-15? **"Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'"**

Jesus came preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. He announced that it was imminent, **"the time is fulfilled."** He announced that it was a spiritual Kingdom. In John 18:36 Jesus says, **"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."** And He announced that we enter into His Kingdom through repentance and faith: he said, **"Repent, and believe in the gospel."**

The bible is clear that God controls all things and reigns over the universe. Psalm 103:19 puts it this way, **"The Lord has established His throne in heaven, And His kingdom rules over all."** From the beginning it was God's plan to use human beings to rule the earth on His behalf. We were created in the image of God, and we were to be His agents on this earth. However, when Adam sinned it became impossible for mankind to fulfill this role by ourselves. We became rebels against God rather than agents being used by God. This is why Jesus had to come. He had to fix what we

ruined with sin. He came and became the perfect mediator of God's reign, because He was God. He reestablished God's Kingdom. However, before He could physically reign over the earth He had to die as a sacrifice. He did this so that we could be a part of His Kingdom. Even now, as we wait for Him to return and rule on this earth, He is growing His Kingdom. He saving for Himself citizens of His Kingdom is from everywhere in the world, so that they can rule with Him.

It is encouraging for us to think of all that Jesus has done for us, and the way that He has established the Kingdom of God. However, there are still times when it just doesn't feel like the Kingdom is growing. In fact, many of the people who followed Him during His earthly ministry probably felt this same way. And certainly, Mark's Roman readers who were enduring the persecutions of the Emperor Nero would have felt this way. Jesus understood that this could be a problem, and He addresses it in Mark 4:30-34.

In this passage learn that we must not grow frustrated with what we perceive to be insignificant growth in the Kingdom of God. Here Jesus teaches us the important principle that by its nature the Kingdom of God starts "small" and grows to be "great." (vv. 30-32) Additionally, this passage contains an example of this very principle being lived out. (vv. 33-34)

In these verses we find Jesus teaching the people again. He begins this session with two rhetorical questions. Jesus asks them to highlight the theme of the Kingdom of God. He wants to get His listeners involved, and get them thinking about this subject. This is why He asks them what they would compare the Kingdom of God to. In other words, He wanted them to think about how they would describe the Kingdom of God. I think that is a pretty good question, and so I let me ask you to think for a second. How would you describe the Kingdom of God? What would you compare it to?

The disciples may have held some imaginative ideas about what the Kingdom of God was like. Perhaps they imagined it to be like a high mountain that soared above the world, displaying its glory, power and majesty. Maybe they imagined the Kingdom of God as a mighty river that carried its life to faraway lands. Perhaps their minds pictured the kingdom as a massive oak, standing tall and providing shade and shelter. We really don't know what they were thinking, but I am sure they were surprised when Jesus shared His illustration with them.

When Jesus began to speak, He didn't compare the Kingdom of God to a high mountain, a mighty river or even a majestic oak. Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed!

The particular seed that Jesus probably has in mind here comes from the black mustard plant which is commonly grown in this part of the world. These plants were, and still are, very useful. The seeds are used as a spice and, can also be turned into the condiment known as mustard. The seeds are also pressed to make mustard oil, and the edible leaves can be eaten as mustard greens. Jesus tells us that this seed is the "**smaller than all the seeds on earth.**" Literally, this little seed is smaller than a grain of fine sand.

There has been a lot of confusion over this statement because there are smaller seeds on earth than the mustard seed. But really Jesus is not comparing the mustard seed to

all the seeds on the planet. He is comparing this seed to all the other seeds that would have been sown in the garden. It is important to note that the word translated here as “**earth**” is not referring to the entire planet, but rather to the ground or soil that the seed was being sown into. In fact, it is the same word used earlier in the verse to refer to the ground.

A mustard seed was proverbial for something small. In Matthew 17:20 Jesus said, “**If you had the faith of a grain of mustard seed...**” That was their proverbial expression for something very small.

But proportionately, there was nothing that they planted that started that small and became so large. In verse 32 we see that this seed is very small, “**but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.**” What a contrast! Even though the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds in the garden the mustard plant eventually grows to be the largest plant in the garden. This particular type of mustard plant, grown in Palestine, can grow to be anywhere between 10 and 15 feet tall. This is much larger than any of the other plants that the farmers would have been growing. It was even big enough for the birds to make nests in the branches.

This is how Jesus chose to describe the Kingdom of God. The question is what does it mean? What is the spiritual principle behind this parable? The answer is actually quite simple. Jesus uses this parable to explain the principle that the Kingdom of God starts “small” and grows to be “great.”

THE KINGDOM OF GOD WOULD HAVE A SMALL BEGINNING.

This means that we must not grow impatient, or discouraged as we wait for Jesus to come back and completely fulfill the Kingdom. This is difficult for us because we like for things done right away, and usually we want it done our way. However, the Kingdom of God doesn't always work this way.

Scripture tells us that there was nothing extraordinary about Jesus' appearance, and that there was nothing about him that would have suggested that he was destined to change the world (Isaiah 53:2). He was like an ordinary mustard seed. He grew up in an obscure Galilean town. He grew up with an insignificant family who lived ordinary first-century lives. When he began his ministry, he chose working class fisherman, overlooked religious zealots and even a tax collector to become his trusted disciples. And Jesus associated with the poor, the sick, social outcasts and the lowest and most despised people in Israel. By all outward appearances, Jesus showed no promise of changing human history.

But Jesus did change history. With his extraordinary teaching, came unprecedented miracles; and with his miracles came the revelation of who he was. Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. He was God in human flesh. He was the King of Kings wrapped in an ordinary package. And his death on the cross carried with it so much lasting significance that our historical calendar is now split because of what he has done.

Jesus died as a single mustard seed, but from him rose up a Kingdom that changed the whole world.

From his death came a new people. A people who are not marked by special physical features or noted because they come from a particular geographic boundary. His people are people with new hearts. They are souls who have been humbled and changed by the death of their Savior. They are seeds from the very first Seed. They are a transformed people, who have had the Gospel of God planted in their hearts on account of their Savior's death and resurrection.

We must resist the temptation to become frustrated and remember that even though our progress may seem insignificant it isn't. In fact, this parable teaches us that God's Kingdom will grow and it will be a blessing to the entire world.

THE KINGDOM'S GROWTH IS GREATER THAN ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

You see, in the Old Testament the image of birds nesting in branches was used as a picture for the inclusion of the nations, people all over the Earth, in God's redemptive plan. In Ezekiel 17 the Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy in a parable. The end of the chapter says, you have a messianic prophecy that says,

22 Thus says the Lord God: "I will take also one of the highest branches of the high cedar and set it out. I will crop off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and will plant it on a high and prominent mountain. 23 On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it; and it will bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a majestic cedar. Under it will dwell birds of every sort; in the shadow of its branches they will dwell. 24 And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it."

Ezekiel pictures the remnant of Israel and Judah and the Messiah's Kingdom that comes from that remnant as this twig that grows to a huge tree. The nations are pictured as birds coming to lodge in the tree of blessing. In other words, this is going to expand and not only Israel will be a part of this coming Kingdom, but the nations of the world will be a part of it as well. You have a very similar use of birds in Daniel 4 verses 10 and 21, Nebuchadnezzar views his kingdom and the birds that are in his tree represent peoples and nations under his rule.

With this parable Jesus picks up on that prophesy to show that even though the Kingdom of God seemed to have insignificant origins it would ultimately provide salvation for people of all nations in the entire world. Out of the most insignificant beginnings, invisible to human eyes, God creates his mighty Kingdom, which embraces all the peoples of the world.

That's pretty staggering stuff. These few guys are being told that the nations of the world are going to be brought into this. And if you go to the book of Revelation, you're going to find that gathered around the throne of God in heaven are people from every tongue and tribe and nation and people, right? It's stunning and staggering.

It's also a warning. Remember back in the parable of the sower and the soils in verse 4, **"the birds of the air came and devoured"** the seed. And in verse 15 Jesus interprets the meaning of the birds saying, **"Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts."** So it could be that the birds may also represent

the enemy so that the warning is to beware because the kingdom of God will also become a haven for the very enemies of God. Now maybe that seems an extreme interpretation to you, but it's not when you look at Matthew 13 and the other parables of the mystery of the kingdom, particularly the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet. In those parables false believers are found in the kingdom until the end when the Lord separates them in His judgment at the end of the age.

Though in the shade of the great tree the birds are allowed to perch, the Kingdom still grows ever larger. They hide in the shade because they cannot tolerate the light of truth and they steal seeds in defiance of the one who planted the great tree. They build their nests by its dead branches and they eat the fruit it bears. But the birds cannot bring the great tree down. They cannot stop its growth, and in Kingdom terms this great tree will last forever. That should encourage us.

In addition to seeing this principle about Kingdom, Mark also records for us a specific example of that principle being worked out. In verses 33-34 it says, **“And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.”** In 4:11-12 we learned that Jesus taught in parables both to reveal the truth to those who would receive it, and to conceal the truth from those who reject it. Here Mark adds that Jesus spoke **“to them as they were able to hear it.”** Many people were confused by Jesus' message, and quite frankly weren't interested in the spiritual principles that He was teaching. Some, like the religious authorities, flat out rejected Jesus' teaching and sought to kill Him.

Things weren't looking all that great for the Kingdom of God. However, God was still at work growing His Kingdom. Mark tells us that even though the masses did not understand Jesus' message, there were those who continued to follow Jesus. In fact, Mark tells us the Jesus privately explained his teaching to these individuals.

Jesus invested in these individuals, and ultimately he used them to grow His Church and further the Kingdom of God. Many of these men went on to become the apostles who spread the Gospel after Jesus' ascension. In the beginning they were only a few men, but God used them to grow something great. The same thing is happening today. We, as Christians, are equally privileged to have the Holy Spirit explaining the teaching of Jesus to us. And even though things don't always seem to be going well, as long as we remain faithful to Christ we will be used to further the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion:

As we look at the world around us it would be very easy to become discouraged and give up. But when we are tempted to give up we must remember the principle taught in this passage. We must understand that even though the Kingdom of God seems insignificant sometimes ultimately God is growing it into something magnificent.

Even though it doesn't feel like it sometimes, God has grown His Kingdom and He will continue to do so. As Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

If you find yourself discouraged by all of the evil about you in the world - and there is plenty of it - pause for a few moments to consider the continuing impact of Christ's

kingdom in this world. Everywhere the work of the kingdom has spread, not only have there been new converts that follow Christ even to death, but there has also arisen thousands of schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages, job training institutes, hunger relief programs, literacy training, relief for the poor, prison ministries, and a host of other work that benefits society. There's nothing small about the influence and effects of Christ's kingdom in our world! Whatever small beginnings you observe of Christ's kingdom, be assured that Christ's Kingdom will prevail.

This parable is meant to encourage us. It is easy for us to get discouraged sometimes, because we feel like no matter how hard we try, we always seem to be crushed and crowded out by the evil world around us. If we feel that way, can you imagine how the disciples felt? However, the potential for the kingdom's amazing growth rests not in us, but in the Person who reigns as its King, Jesus Christ.

There are many believers all over the world today, and there are still many people coming to Christ. In some countries there are thousands of people coming to Christ every day. The Kingdom is growing because of the King.

What's the greatest privilege of a Christian? To know the truth, to know the King right? To know the Him, obey the Him, love the Him, to be those who are able to listen to His truth and believe. And how do you listen? Do you listen obediently and appreciatively, and dependently, and humbly and confidently? What amazing privilege has been granted to us, hasn't it?

Think of it this way. If you're a believer, you speak God's language. When He speaks, you perfectly understand it. It's a foreign language to everybody else.