**The Servant And The Mustard Seed**  
**Mark 4:30-32**

**Introduction**

In the fourth chapter of Mark Jesus speaks to the people in parables. The themes include sowing (vv.1-20; 30-34); shining (vv.21-25); reaping (vv.26-29); and later trusting (vv.35-41). Jesus begins by relating parables (vv.1-34) but will reveal His power (vv.35-41).

The parables are sometimes difficult to understand and difficult to teach. We want things to mean one thing or the other. Our minds are not always open to multiple meanings and shades or nuances of meaning.

Remember the parable was meant to reveal to some and conceal from others the truth of Jesus’ words. The parable appears in Matthew (13:31-35) and Luke (13:18-19) and here in Mark.

In Matthew’s Gospel the parable of the Mustard Seed is preceded and succeeded by parables with the same theme or the same subject; the weeds among the wheat, the mustard seed, and the yeast. All three (weeds and wheat; the mustard seed; and the yeast) contain six common elements; (1) a similitude or comparison that includes the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God; the earthly sphere of profession both true and false; (2) “a man” Christ (3) “a field” the world; (4) “seed”; the word of God or its effect; (5) “growth” or expansion or spreading “church growth; and (6) the presence of evil; symbolized by weeds or birds of the air or yeast.

In a general sense the parable of the mustard seed pictures the kingdom of God beginning with very little influence; humble beginnings and then growing worldwide in scope and influence.

An outside observer watching a poor and obscure preacher from the Galilee with his little following would have given little hope that a lasting legacy could emerge.

In the chapter Jesus has introduced the laws of radiance (the candle must be allowed to shine; vv. 21-22); the laws of recompense (a man gets what he gives; vv.24-25); the laws of reward and retribution (a harvest is coming; vv.26-29); and now the laws of redemption (the Kingdom God will grow; vv.30-32).

Vance Havner wrote; “As long as the church wore scars they made headway. When they began to wear medals, the cause languished. It was a greater day for the church when Christians were fed to the lions than when they bought season tickets and sat in the grandstand.”

The Kingdom will grow. But does this parable warn of a shadow government of make-believers and apostates who find shelter in a tree where they don’t belong?

**The Growth And Greatness Of God’s Kingdom (v.30)**
Mark 4:30 Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it?”

Jesus asks a question and invites His hearer to enter into the parable. “To what shall we liken or compare the kingdom of God?” The NIV translates this; “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it?”

In both Matthew (13:31) and Luke (13:18) the question is repeated in a different form and in a different context. Some scholars suggest they are at odds or contradict; but the suggestion that Jesus may have repeated his teachings in different places with different contexts seems to escape the critic. It makes perfect sense that Jesus spoke at different times to different audiences the same material with slight differences.

What is the Kingdom of God? It is the place where God rules and reigns. It is the place where Jesus Christ is Lord. The Kingdom of God recognizes and submits to the power and authority of Jesus. The power and authority of Jesus to vanquish demons; heal the sick, control nature, forgive sins; conquer death; this is the place where Jesus imparts to His followers the authority to proclaim God’s truth; confound opposition, rebuke hypocrisy and clear the temple!

What is the Kingdom of God? Francois Fenelon (c.1651-1751) wrote; “To want all that God wants, always want it, for all occasions and without reservations, this is the kingdom of God which is all within”.

David Livingstone the famous missionary to Africa said, “I will place no value on anything I have or possess unless it is in relationship to the kingdom of God.”

We pray for it every time we say “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.” But is it something we merely pray for--or long for--or is it something we work for?

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The Seed Is Sown On The Earth (v.31)

Mark 4:31 It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth;

The Greek has “grain” (kokkos) of mustard (sinapi)

In what way is the Kingdom of God like the Mustard seed? In Jewish thinking a mustard seed was small; it became the very representation of miniscule.

Some have suggested that Jesus was wrong.
Technically the mustard seed is not the smallest seed on the earth. How could Jesus make such a major blunder if Jesus is in fact the Creator of the Universe and the author of life on the earth?

Jesus does not use the superlative but rather a comparative. It probably would be better to translate “smaller than all the seeds” as “one of the smaller seeds”.

Can we justify that translation? The adjective is micros; small, little; the Greek literally reads that mustard seed is “smaller than all the seeds that are upon the ground” (NASB).

Jesus is using a figure of speech sometimes called rhetorical hyperbole. Also Jesus is using a contrast that includes something very small becoming very large.

The mustard seed was the smallest seed used in the Middle East for consumption. Bible students believe it is a reference to the black mustard called brassica nigra. The plant has been known to grow to a height of fifteen feet and have a thick main stem; with branches sufficiently thick to bear the weight of a bird.

The leaves were used as a vegetable and the seed as a condiment. The seed was the smallest seed that Jews sowed in Palestine.

The seed is very small. It is barely visible to the naked eye. The idea of something so small generating something so large seemed unbelievable.

The seed is sown on the ground or in the soil or in the earth.

The earth is simply dirt; sterile, empty barren without the mustard seed of God.

Citadel Or Sanctuary (v.32)

Mark 4:32 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.”

In the language of the passage Jesus draws on Old Testament images (Psalm 104:12; Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6; Daniel 4:12,21).

“Greater than all the herbs” (garden plants). We use the word herb usually to mean that it has some culinary or medicinal value. Plant makes perfect sense. The Greek word lachanos--is derived from the verb lachaino (dig)--hence a plant that we dig or placed in a garden.

The expression “nest” (kataoudenoun) “to tent or camp down”
The Kingdom seems to be represented as an organic whole. The source of blessing, shelter and food.

The seed when it is sown; grows up! What a lesson for us! The seed of the gospel--ever so small is ever so powerful. The size of the seed does not discourage the farmer from sowing. The farmer knows the hidden potential locked away in the seed. The farmer understands the potential for growth and the power that fruit has for those who consume it. Please note that the power for growth and fruitfulness is in the seed and not in the person who plants the seed.

Do you feel small? Do you feel insignificant? No matter how small we are; or how insignificant our ministry--we sow the seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what the Psalmist wrote? “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:5-6).

In Hosea we read, “Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the LORD; till he come and rain righteousness upon you” (Hos. 10:12).

Does the tree represent the church or the government of the church or the branches of the church? Does the tree represent Jesus who is the head of the church and therefore ultimately in charge of its growth and spread? Does the tree represent the sphere of salvation?

Clearly the Church grows and provides shelter, benefits, and protection to all people, believer and unbeliever.

1 Corinthians 7:14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

Many Bible teachers point to the reason the birds find shelter in the Mustard Bush. The birds feast on the fruit of the tree. The very fact the tree or bush is present means many will come.

Shelter and food are necessary items for existence. But the Kingdom of God offers so much more.

The Church of Jesus Christ begins with a resurrected Savior who ascends into heaven. The small group gather in an upper room and experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
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The small band of followers will explode into a major religion that will encompass the Mediterranium; invade Europe and North Africa and eventually circle the globe.

The growth of the tree makes it an easy target for the birds.
The birds represent the presence of evil. Sorry bird lovers.

To be fair--not all Biblical interpreters suggest the birds are evil; some have suggested the birds represent mankind and the benefits that derive to humanity from the presence of the Church on the earth. The condemnation is not the size or influence of the Kingdom; but rather the presence of the birds (they nest); the church will not remain pure.

The parable of the Mustard Seed is both a prediction and a warning.
The mustard bush finds both believers and make-believers. Those who confess and follow Jesus and those who profess Jesus with their lips but their legs are far from Him.

The birds nest. The bush becomes grand central station for all kinds of false teachers.

Is the Church of Jesus Christ a Citadel of Faith Hope and Love or a Bird Sanctuary with all kinds of freaky fledglings, crazy cagelings; birds of prey rather than birds that pray!

The next time you hear someone say “Church is for the birds” you will know what they mean! Does the parable in some way picture the outward form of visible Christianity to a watching world?

What do you see?

An overgrown monstrosity filled with institutional apostasy? Or do you see a chaste virgin bride ready to receive her husband?

Conclusion

William Hendriksen summarizes the parables of Jesus this way;

“In the parable of the sower (vs.3-9, 13-20) the emphasis was on human responsibility; in that of the seed growing in Secret (vs. 26-29), on divine sovereignty. When these two co-operate—man working out his own salvation because God is working within him (Phil. 2:12,13)―abundant growth results, as shown in the parable of The Mustard Seed” (New Testament Commentary; Mark Baker; pp.171-172).
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Seed sown grows. But make no mistake about it; you must sow the seed. If there is no sowing there is no growing!

Redemption and reproduction go hand in hand.