

October 7, 2018

Parables
A Kingdom Parable
The Mustard Seed
Matthew 13:31-32

Opening words: There came a time in Jesus’s earthly ministry when he was no longer welcomed in the synagogues. The Master was forced to teach in the open air and to change his teaching method. For the first time, he used fictional stories to teach divine truth. We call those stories “parables”. Webster defines a *parable* as, a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. A parable is not an allegory or a fable. They are different. A parable stands on its own. Three of the four Gospels contain parables. The Gospel of Luke contains twenty-four parables. The Gospel of Matthew contains twenty-three parables. The Gospel of Mark contains eight parables. The Gospel of John has no parables.

In James Montgomery Boice’s book, *The Parables of Jesus*, he says all the parable of Jesus can be broken down into five categories. In this five-part sermon series, *Parables*, I have been looking at one parable from each category. To date, we have looked at a wisdom parable, a salvation parable, a Christian Life parable, and a judgement parable. I end this sermon series today by looking at a kingdom parable. To be more exact, I am going to look at the parable of the mustard seed. It is not the only kingdom parable. There are others. The parable of the sower, the parable of the of the weeds, the parable of the yeast, and the parable of the net are all kingdom parables. Each one comes from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 13:31-32. Let me call this message *The Mustard Seed*.

Matthew 13:31-32 ³¹ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.”

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) is remembered for his many years of mission work in China. One night, he was scheduled to speak at a church in Birmingham, England. After months of planning, the day finally came, but the weather was horrible. Some tried to discourage Taylor from speaking. Even the organizers of the event discouraged him. But, Taylor himself, insisted. Less than a dozen people showed up, but the meeting was marked with unusual spiritual power. Half of those present either became missionaries or their children entered the mission field, and the rest were faithful supporters of the China Inland Mission for years to come. Can I ask you a question? Was that meeting a success or was it a failure? Through the eyes of this world, it was a disaster; less than twelve people came. Yet, through the eyes of God it was a great success. Lives were

changed in the name of Jesus. Let me state the obvious. Bigger isn't always better. If you agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. Jesus is in Galilee, so you can expect to find a great crowd following him. That great crowd heard a series of parables about the Kingdom of God. The chapter begins with the parable of the sower. Next comes the parable of the weeds. Then comes our parable for the day, the parable of the mustard seed, followed by the parable of the yeast. There are seven parables in all in this chapter. Six of the seven begin with the phrase, *The Kingdom of God is like*. That is how our parable begins.

"The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed." You know this parable. It is known by all, because it is so short and easy to understand. The Kingdom of God is a like a mustard seed, which proverbially speaking was the smallest of all the seeds. (The truth be told, other seeds in that corner of the world are smaller. For example, the seed of a cypress tree is smaller.) However, don't be fooled by the size of the seed. It is deceiving. It starts out being small and insignificant, but it ends up being quite impressive. A full-grown mustard plant is more of a bush than a tree, and stands twelve feet tall. It is large enough for birds to take shelter. The point Jesus is trying to make is not hard to discover. The Kingdom of God will begin very small, but it will grow. In time, the Kingdom of God will become quite impressive. Jesus wasn't setting up the crowd for disappointment. The Kingdom of God did grow. Today, the faith that Jesus began, Christianity, is the largest religion in the world. Our world has a population of approximately seven billion people. Approximately one-third of our world's population is Christian. On the global scene Christianity is still growing. Did you know the Christian faith grows by 80,000 people per day? That didn't just happen in an instant. It took time. Consider this with me:

- In 100 AD the world population was 181 million. For every 360 people, there was one Christian.
- In 1000 AD, the world population was 270 million. For every 269 people, there was one Christian.
- In 1500 AD, the world population was 425 million people. For every 84 people, there was one Christian.
- In 1900 AD, the world population was 1.6 billion people. For every 40 people, there was one Christian.
- In 1950 AD, the world population was 2.5 billion people. For every 30 people, there was one Christian.

Jesus didn't lie to the crowd. He told them the truth. He told them the Kingdom of God would start out very small, but in time it would be very big. If you are thankful the Good News of Jesus Christ continues to be spread today, say, "**Amen!**" We like those big numbers, because in America we believe bigger is better. That line of thought has even filtered into the life of the church.

The other day, I was at home and Joel Osteen was on the television. I don't know how you feel about Joel Osteen, because I don't know how I feel about Joel Osteen. However, you must admit he has done something right. He is the pastor of the largest church in America, Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. They worship in the Compaq Center and welcome 43,500 on an average week. They have six services on an average weekend, four in English and two in Spanish. In a bigger is better society, Joel Osteen is a great success. I have nothing negative to say about Lakewood Church or any other megachurch, but God has never been impressed with the crowd. God is more impressed with the committed.

Can I make a confession? I am a product of this society. I, too, believe bigger is better. For most of my working career, I have been chasing the crowd. For decades, I have studied church growth principles. I know enough church growth principles to hold my own workshop. On Sunday afternoons, I add up our attendance. If it was a good attendance day, then I am in a good mood. If it was a low attendance day, then I am in a bad mood. When my colleagues ask me about our church, I give them a number. I have researched other churches' numbers. I, too, believe bigger is better. There is nothing wrong with numbers, until they became a preoccupation. Some time back I discovered something very sad. The numbers robbed me of any feeling of satisfaction in our progress. The numbers only promoted my failures. I began to evaluate my worth as a person based on the numbers. Last weekend, Joel Osteen preached to 43,500 people. Last weekend, I preached to 219. There really is no comparison. I won't say it was a crisis, but it was unpleasant. I really didn't know what to do. It was God, Himself, who liberated me from the numbers. It came from one of my own sermons. You know the scene, and you know the text.

It was the Sunday before the resurrection of Jesus. A great crowd had gathered in Jerusalem for the annual Passover observance. On the lips of everyone in the crowd was the name *Jesus*. His miracles had made him famous. Some believed he was the long-awaited Messiah. When Jesus arrived, everyone wanted to see him. Some were in the crowd cheering for Jesus because he was trending. Some were in the crowd cheering for Jesus because they wanted him to perform a miracle. Perhaps they needed a healing, or a loved one needed a healing. Some were in the crowd for political reasons. They were tired of foreign domination and hoped Jesus would use his power for political liberation. A minority in the crowd loved Jesus and just wanted to be near him. Through the eyes of the world, it couldn't get any better. Jesus was a success because he had drawn a great crowd. But, you know what happened. One by one the people walked away. On Thursday, the great crowd had been whittled down to twelve. By Friday, the crowd had been reduced to a select few. It didn't seem to matter to Jesus. He wasn't interested in the crowd anyway. Jesus was more interested in the committed than he was in the crowd. Jesus was more interested in eternal faithfulness, than he was in worldly success. Some things don't change. To Jesus, bigger isn't necessarily better. The only thing that really matters to Jesus is faithfulness. This is the

question you must answer: How faithful are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** The greatest thing you can do for God is simply be faithful.

One of the great preachers of the twentieth century was Fred Craddock (1928-2015). He taught homiletics at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. No one has influenced my preaching more than Fred Craddock. Recently, I read a story about a time Fred Craddock addressed a group of ministers at a conference. These are his own words:

To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others. . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom -- I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—"Here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all." But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. We listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting and cover the same issues again. We give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a smelly nursing home. Usually, giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.

It isn't just true of preachers. It is true for all of us. We long to do something great for God, but what we normally do are the little things and hope God uses them. We aren't just doing little things. We are planting mustard seeds. How many mustard seeds have you planted in your life? Have you ever seen any of those mustard seeds grow? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) is one of the great names in the history of the western church. He was the minister of the New Park Street Chapel of London for 38 years, where he saved countless souls and influenced a generation. His accomplishments in life are impressive, but his own conversion was quite simple. He accepted Christ as a teenage boy at a little Methodist chapel in the middle of a snowstorm. Very few were there that night. Even the preacher was absent. A layman led the service for the tiny crowd. He spoke on just one verse from Isaiah, "Look unto me and be saved, all ends of the earth." Those words resonated in Spurgeon. He accepted Christ, and the world will never be the same again. When I read that story, I couldn't help but to ask this question: I wonder if that sincere layman knew the impact he had on the world? I wonder what kind of impact we have had on the world? If that question makes you think, say, **Amen!"**