

## THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Matthew 13:31, 32

### I. INTRODUCTION

A. Quite a few people these days are becoming aware that something is wrong in their churches. I often hear people say, “My church only talks on social issues,” or “My church is more interested in organizations and booming programs than the teaching of the Bible.” There is a reason for what is happening and I believe that this reason is given in the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

B. By way of review, we should remember that our Lord gave this series of parables in Matthew 13 to describe some truths about the development of the kingdom program while the King and His physical kingdom are absent from the earth. These mysteries about the kingdom span the period between the first and second advents of Christ, so most of the characteristics of the kingdom can be seen in our time.

### II. LAWS OF INTERPRETATION

A. There are four parables in Matthew 13 where our Lord gives no interpretation, so it is very difficult to get the true meaning. Undoubtedly there will be some speculation on these parables, for no one knows for sure exactly what they mean. For sure, we dare not build any major doctrine on a parable that has no stated interpretation.

B. However, a very simple law of interpretation is to go to the immediate context for meaning before going outside the context. The first two parables (the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and Tares) can be used as a guide to the interpretation of these parables where there is no explanation of the meaning. From the symbols that Christ employed in the first two parables, we can understand the symbols in these four other parables without any stated interpretation.

C. A misuse of these simple laws of interpretation has caused some to make a serious blunder in theology. For sure, we should never build any major doctrine on a parable that is not interpreted for us. For instance, many have taken the Parable of the Mustard Seed to prove a postmillennial position of eschatology or future things. This view is that there will be a thousand years of Christianizing the world before the Lord returns in His second advent. The idea is that the whole world will become more and more Christian and then Christ will come in His second advent. They have taken the mustard seed to mean the kingdom and that it will grow until the whole world is taken over by the kingdom. These people are committed to “bringing in the kingdom,” and this view can be held by evangelicals as well as liberals. Postmillennialists have misjudged the whole movement of history because by a mistaken use of the symbols Christ employs they have misunderstood what our Lord is saying.

### III. THE PARABLE 13:31, 32

A. It is fairly easy to interpret the first two symbols. The “sower” is obviously the Lord Jesus Himself (13:37), for He is the sower in the first two parables. The “field” again is the world (13:38), so this parable has something to do with the world in general and is not dealing primarily with the true church.

B. With this in mind, let us try to identify the other three symbols: (1) the mustard seed is the kingdom message; (2) the tree is the monstrosity of professing Christendom; and (3) the birds refer to Satanic activity.

#### IV. THE INTERPRETATION

A. What Jesus planted in the world was a mustard seed. This mustard seed is the message of the kingdom. Christ sowed a radical and revolutionary message into human society. The mustard seed is used as a symbol for two reasons: (1) to teach the biting impact of the gospel in this world, and (2) to teach the extent this message would cover the world.

B. The mustard seed is a peculiar kind of seed. Mustard has the quality of pungency. It is biting, disturbing, irritating and has a pungent odor. Mustard is fiery and stirs up the sensations of people. ILLUSTRATION: Mustard Pack. NOTE: Our Lord is using mustard seed as a symbol which indicates that the message of the kingdom of God will arouse, irritate and disturb men when it is preached. When the gospel is declared in power, individuals, churches and communities are aroused, excited and stirred, either positively or negatively. The preached Word should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was younger, my mother was from the old school and had some home-indian remedies for sickness. One was a mustard pack that was put on when there was a severe chest cold. Mustard was mixed with water and placed on a rag. It had a very pungent odor and would burn, sting and bite so as to make one feel uncomfortable. It probably never cured anything, but it felt so awful that you thought it was curing.

C. The main thought of this parable concerns another quality of the mustard seed. Our Lord says that a mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds. If you have ever seen a mustard seed, you would know that is not the smallest of all seeds, but it is very small in size. Some have thought Christ was ignorant of agriculture and have questioned the inspiration of scripture over this point. This statement actually comes from a Jewish proverb which used the mustard seed as a symbol of smallness or insignificance. Jews would say, "Small as a mustard seed." We often say, "As small as a flea" but we know that the flea is not the smallest of insects. NOTE: Christ is stressing here the apparent insignificance of the gospel of Christ. It is very simple. It does not look like much; it does not sound like much. The message "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved," does not sound very impressive to most people. It is so simple that you can teach it to children and to idiots and morons. Yet the gospel is so complex that the greatest of minds cannot grasp all that is in it. The world as a whole is not excited about the gospel and not very impressed with it. The world scorns the gospel, and does not regard it as a tremendous, earth shaking philosophy. We do not find chairs of philosophy in the universities dedicated to the simple gospel. In fact, the world despises the gospel. But let someone be touched by the supernatural grace of God and believe the gospel of truth and something revolutionary happens. Let someone in simple faith trust Christ and invite Him into their life and this person experiences new birth and a radical change occurs in one's life. The gospel is foolish to the world but power to true Christians (I Cor. 1:23, 24). NOTE: Notice also that the spreading of the gospel from a small seed develops into a great tree. This indicates that there will be a phenomenal growth of the kingdom message before the kingdom is established. The gospel will have a wide extent

of proclamation in the world, but will not necessarily be believed (Matthew 24:14).

***I Cor. 1:23, 24: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.***

***Matthew 24:14: And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.***

D. But now look at the tree that grows out of it. Our Lord said, “But when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs (shrubs), and becometh a tree.” Mustard by nature is not a tree but a plant that grows in fields. Mustard does not grow into a huge tree. Then why did Christ say it does? Because He was speaking proverbially. Our Lord obviously intended to teach that this growth of the mustard seed was unnatural and not normal. Instead of the small, lowly, humble plant, there was a huge, abnormal, unnatural growth into a tree. NOTE: What is the natural growth of the gospel of the kingdom when it genuinely lodges in one’s heart? It produces lowliness of heart, humility, meekness, gentleness, and a readiness to submit to God and men. The gospel rips up pride, egotism and self-centeredness, so that a person gets a submissive sort of an attitude. What then would be an unnatural growth of the seed? It would be loftiness, pride, ambition, domination of others, arrogance and a concern for self. Often a tree is used symbolically in the Bible for authority and dominion. NOTE: Christianity, which began with the pungent, simple message of Christ and His kingdom in the first century, has through almost twenty centuries of existence developed into a huge, ungainly, abnormal tree, concerned with power and pride and domination. NOTE: Through compromise, ignorance, a lust for power and bigness, the so-called professing church has turned into an ugly monstrosity. The professing church in the world may give intellectual and lip assent to the gospel but it has become a monster that no one can control. Protestants and Catholics alike are guilty of developing a power structure. We have built out great church buildings and substituted organizational hierarchy and highly organized churches for the Word of God. Power, bigness and organizations take the place of real, living and dynamic Christianity. Religion becomes the rule rather than regeneration. NOTE: Even in evangelical circles we have become concerned with our prestige, our status in the community, our image and have sought the patronage and admiration of the world. Evangelicals are guilty of advertising their church rather than Christ. We appeal to men to come to church. We have a preacher who is a good speaker; we have lots of social functions; we have a booming youth group; we have a great choir; we have an outstanding nursery and so on, but there is no real talk about Jesus Christ. The early Christians did not go around talking about church but about Christ and God’s purposes.

E. Notice also that the tree has many branches. Perhaps this is a prediction of the divisions and denominations of Christendom. According to the Bible, in each town or city that the Apostles organized churches, the churches were always independent of one another governmentally, but were united together in the love and fellowship of the Spirit. They were bound together by mutual interests but never organizationally. Churches began to gather together organizationally to avoid

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F. Finally, we are told that the birds come and lodge in the trees. We assume this

has reference to making nests. The Lord has already told us in another parable that the birds are symbolic of Satan (13: 4, 19). NOTE: There will be much Satanic activity that will nest itself in the huge superstructure of the professing church. Evil men and evil ideas will find lodging in the professing church and their ideas will be accepted by many. NOTE: This great professing church is symbolized for us in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 18:2). The implication is that as we go on down towards the end time, the second advent, that this professing church will increase in number. In 1973, heresy and doctrines of demons are common place within the professing church. Even though there are still many believers who are putting forth the pungent gospel and the message of Christ is being spread over this world as never before because of greatly improved communications, the professing church is an ever growing monstrosity that will one day almost wipe out the true church on earth. ILLUSTRATION: Stedman.

***Rev. 18:2: And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.***

ILLUSTRATION: You notice that it is only since the tree is fully grown and has branched out that this has taken place. It is as we near the end of the age this has occurred. How visibly this has been demonstrated in our day when from the pulpits and the spokesmen of the church has come a flood of stupid, crazy, mixed-up ideas – evil concepts which have blasted and blighted and ruined the hearts and minds of people, just as our Lord said. It was only a comparatively short time ago that the great denominations of our day, though they represented unnatural and abnormal development, still were basically true to the faith and stood solidly on the authority of the Bible and proclaimed the true Gospel. But along came German rationalization and higher critical theories and socialistic philosophies. The Bible was overthrown and another gospel was substituted and supernatural faith was denied, and the birds of prey moved right into the pulpits in many places. One by one men of true faith were driven out. And it is still happening today. No wonder when the youth of today look at part of the church which is like that, they say, “It is strictly for the birds!”

## V. CONCLUSION

A. Are you a real Christian? Perhaps you are a professing Christian and a good church goer, but are you genuinely Christian? Do you have Christ or church? Have you experienced religion or regeneration? The devil has duped many in the so-called professing, visible church to think they are saved when they really are not. Each year the professing church gains in strength and the true church weakens, but do not cast your lot with the majority of the visible church. The majority is seldom right in spiritual matters.

B. Have you seen yourself a sinner, separated from God, lost and headed for eternal judgment? If you have never seen yourself as you really are before a holy God, then you are not saved. Have you seen Christ as the perfect substitute for your sins, your curse, your hell and have you received Him into your life as your personal Lord and Savior? If you have not, you are not saved. How can you be saved? “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.”