

# Kingdom Parables

## The Parable of the Mustard Seed

### IV. The Parable of the Mustard Seed - Matthew 13:31-32, Mark 4:30-32, Luke 13:18-19

#### A. The Central Point of the Parable

The Kingdom of God, from its small and insignificant beginning, will grow very large and provide shelter for many.

#### B. Significant Elements of the Parable

##### 1. The Mustard Seed

The mustard seed has been confirmed as the smallest crop seed known other than tobacco, which is not grown as a food crop.

In Palestine, the mustard seed becomes a large bush. However, at specific times of the year, the branches become rigid enough for birds to build nests. Also, it has been recorded that mustard grows large enough for a man and a horse to ride under the branches.

##### 2. The Birds

As mentioned in point #1 above, a mustard bush can become big enough and rigid enough for birds to build nests in it.

#### C. Insignificant Elements of the Parable

Two of the background elements of the parable that can be given interpretive meaning are the man, and the field. What we mean by this, is that these elements can be identified as part of the background imagery of the parable, or as essential elements necessary to the interpretation.

Since we will always be looking at the parables in their most simple form, we will categorize these two elements as background. That is NOT to say, however, that they can be interpreted as essential elements. If they are, the following interpretation of these elements apply:

- The Man

Obviously the man would be God who planted his kingdom in the world. This would fit in with the symbology of the previous parable, that of the Tares. Also, God would be the only meaning of this element that would make sense.

- The Field

The field would be the world in which the kingdom grows. This corresponds to the identification of the field as being the world in the previous parable.

1. The Field

Many interpreters identify the field as the world in the same manner as the Parable of the Tares does. However, the field really plays no significant part in this parable, or in the interpretation of it. As a result, it is probably best to interpret the field as part of the background imagery of the parable and not as an interpretive element.

2. The Man

Although we can identify the man as God, it really lends no help in understanding this parable. The main point of this parable is the growth of the kingdom. Hence, the mustard seed is the central element and the other elements all revolve around it.

D. Interpretation of the Parable

1. The Mustard Seed

From the statement in Matthew 13:31a, the mustard seed is meant to represent the Kingdom of God. To make any other identification is to read information into the passage.

As a further help in identifying this element, we note in Matthew 13:32 that the mustard seed grew into a tree. In the Old Testament, we often find nations and kingdoms as being represented by trees. For example:

Babylon in Daniel 4.  
Assyria in Ezekiel 31:3-6.

With this in mind, it is easy to identify the mustard seed as the Kingdom of God.

It is at this point that a diversity of interpretations make themselves known. These interpretations all revolve around the meaning we give "Kingdom of God." When all the various interpretations are analyzed, there are basically two interpretations that make themselves evident:

- a. The Kingdom of God refers to the collective group of men that identify God as their king. As a result, the Kingdom of God refers to both the good and the bad, the wheat and the tares.
- b. The Kingdom of God refers to only those who are true members of the Kingdom. The only time this rule is broken, is when it is specifically stated in the parable or text.

The reason the above is important, is that the meaning we give to the term "Kingdom of God" will affect the way we interpret this parable.

If we interpret the term "Kingdom of God" according to the first view, we will come to the conclusion that the rapid growth of the mustard seed refers to the rapid growth of the true and false believers. This identifies the growth as something that is abnormal and undesired.

However, if we take the second view, we will come to the conclusion that the growth of the Kingdom of God refers to the spread of the gospel resulting in true believers.

Although many scholars identify with the former interpretation, the latter seems to be the best for several reasons:

- Identifying the Kingdom of God in its broadest sense in the parables causes many problems. For example, if the Kingdom of God is a pearl of great price, and we interpret the Kingdom as being part evil, then that parable makes no sense at all.
- Unless specifically stated, the Kingdom of God always refers to the true kingdom, not the kingdom composed of the true and the false.
- This interpretation results in the best understanding of this parable, that being the rapid growth and breadth of the kingdom.
- This interpretation aids in the understanding of the Parable of the Leaven which follows.
- This interpretation makes the best sense in the preceding parable, that of the Tares. Note that in that parable, the tares are a foreign element, that is, they are not part of the kingdom itself. The true seed is the kingdom, the tares just become mixed in.

The significance of the use of a mustard seed is the fact that the mustard seed was used to speak of the smallness of things. For example, in Matthew 17:20 and Luke 17:6, Jesus refers to the disciple's faith as "a grain of mustard seed." This was a common saying in Jesus' day to refer to small, insignificant things.

All of the above merely shows that the mustard seed refers to the smallness of the start of the kingdom. In fact, at the beginning of the kingdom there was only Christ and the eleven true disciples. However, from that small and insignificant beginning, the kingdom has grown and will someday encompass the whole earth. See the following references on this:

    Psalms 72:8-11  
    Isaiah 54:2-3  
    Revelation 11:15

## 2. The Birds

The interpretation of the birds also rests on what meaning we give to the term "Kingdom of God."

If we interpret the kingdom in it's broadest sense, we would probably give an evil meaning to the birds. In fact, many interpret the birds as being demons. They get this from the use of birds representing demons in the Parable of the Sower.

However, if we interpret the kingdom in its strictest sense, the birds can represent evil or can be neutral. Since they are not specifically stated as

being evil, a neutral interpretation would be preferred. (To give an evil meaning to the birds would be reading into the text a fact that is not specifically stated).

With this in mind, we are led to the conclusion that the birds are beneficiaries of the mustard bush in the fact that the bush offers sanctuary and protection. In the same way, the true Kingdom of God offers sanctuary and protection to those who are not a part of it. For example, when righteousness rules a nation, many unbelievers are recipients of blessings God bestows on the righteous. Another good example of this is Joseph in Genesis 39:1-4. In that passage we find that Potiphar prospered by the mere fact of Joseph's presence in his house.

E. Application of the Parable

1. The Kingdom of God will start out small, but will grow until it fills the whole earth. Jesus started out with eleven true disciples, but has millions today.
2. As the Kingdom of God grows, many unbelievers will share in some of the blessings God bestows on the righteous. A good example of this is the Millennial Kingdom in which many unbelievers will share in the blessings of that time even though they are not part of the true kingdom.