

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Matt. 13:31-33

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Jesus continues with his parables. Matthew has two of them that brings out the thought of growth before he goes on to the interpretation of the parable of the weeds. These parables are important. Over against the mighty numbers of the worshipers of heathen gods and even of the Jews who acknowledged the true God, those who proclaimed the kingdom were a tiny minority. Jesus teaches them not to be hypnotized by size. These tiny beginnings would grow into something greater by far than any of the religions found in the disciples' contemporary world. Jesus begins by comparing the kingdom to a mustard seed. Then he goes on to talk about leaven. The leaven was but a small amount, but in time it changed the large quantity of flour. Like the statement of the mustard seed, this one brings out the contrast and the continuity between the small beginnings of the kingdom and its great consummation. The little group of disciples might be despised as preaching a kingdom too insignificant to be noticed, but as surely as a tiny piece of leaven had its effect on a large mass of dough, so surely would the kingdom have its effect throughout the world. The parable also makes the point that the power that effects the change comes from outside the dough; the mass of dough does not change itself.¹ The key truth that we are to take away and consider from these two short statements by Jesus is that the kingdom of God may seem small and insignificant, but it has an outsized impact. Why? Because the God of the very universe is at the center of it. In other words, **don't underestimate what God can do.**

1. Who is God?

- a. Jesus uses a common agricultural image to drive home a point, not just about the nature of God but, more centrally, the nature of his kingdom.
 - i. Most identify the seed in question as black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), although other varieties like white mustard are possible. This seed germinates within five days and grows quickly to a height of about ten feet, and has large leaves, especially at its base.
 1. Those who measure such things report that the mustard seed is one millimeter in diameter and is **so tiny it requires from 725 to 760 seeds to equal one gram (one twenty-eighth of an ounce).**

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 351–353.

2. While not technically the smallest of all seeds known today, it was the smallest of all those that Jews regularly planted in their gardens, which is all that the proverbial language is claiming.²
- ii. ***The point of the parable is that this very little seed grows into a sizeable plant, one larger than all the plants of the garden, and indeed in its mature state becomes a tree (it can grow to a height of 8 to 12 feet).***³
 1. ***Simply, Jesus is reminding us that we are not to underestimate what God can do or the scope of his kingdom.*** → But, we must ask, “Who is this God that defies our expectations and imaginations?”
- b. **Author of Creation – Gen. 1-2**
 - i. The purpose of Genesis - Gen. 1:1-31 ***The passage, indeed the Book, is about him first of all; to read it with any other primary interest (which is all too possible) is to misread it.***⁴
 - ii. ***Bārā*** - Its usage suggests the kind of creating that only God, and no one else, can do.
 1. The First Act: **The Hebrew verb for “created” is *bārā***. In its basic form (used here) this verb appears in the Bible with only one subject: God. Its usage suggests the kind of creating that only God, and no one else, can do. Old Testament and Semitic languages scholar Thomas E. McComiskey comments: “This distinctive use of the word is especially appropriate to the concept of creation by divine fiat.”
 2. **The Bible stands apart in declaring that space and time are not eternal but, rather, suddenly came into being by an act of God, a Being completely independent from— that is, transcendent to or outside of— space, time, matter, and energy.**
 - iii. v. 2 “The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the deep.”
 1. The Hebrew word translated as “hovering” is ***rāḥap***. It’s a rare word, used only one other time in the Bible by the same human author (Moses). In Deuteronomy 32: 11 passage, it refers to a female eagle stirring up her nest and “hovering” over her young. **This connection with the image of the eagle’s activity has led a number of Hebrew linguists to infer that the Spirit’s “hovering” over the waters, as stated in Genesis 1: 2, refers to God bringing about life in Earth’s ocean— even before light shone through.**
 - iv. v. 26 “Let us make man in our image.”
 1. We read also that the Son is the one “through whom” God “created the world” (Heb. 1:2). These passages give a consistent picture of the Son as the active agent carrying out the plans and directions of the Father. The Holy Spirit was also at work in creation. He is generally pictured as completing, filling, and giving life to God’s creation.⁵

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012), 392.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 351–353.

⁴ Kidner, D. (1967). *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 47). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁵ Grudem, W. A. (2004). *Systematic theology: an introduction to biblical doctrine* (pp. 266–267). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

c. **An uncomfortable conversation with Job. – Job 38-42**

i. The conversation begins: 38:2-3

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

² **“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?**

³ **Dress for action like a man;**

I will question you, and you make it known to me.

1. Job is in the middle of suffering and wrestling with the nature of God, his plans, purposes, and goodness.
2. **The questions are designed to give Job a clarified picture of God.**

⁴ **“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?**

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ **Who determined its measurements—surely you know!**

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ **On what were its bases sunk,**

or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷ **when the morning stars sang together**

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

- a. **Job is completely in the dark because he lacks counsel and knowledge.**

These God now supplies.⁶

ii. Job proclaims his corrected view of God. → Unrestrained admiration.

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

² **“I know that you can do all things,**

and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ **‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’**

**Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.**

⁴ **‘Hear, and I will speak;**

I will question you, and you make it known to me.’

⁵ **I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;**

⁶ **therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

1. Job is satisfied. His vision of God has been expanded beyond all previous bounds. He has a new appreciation of the scope and harmony of God’s world, of which he is but a small part. **But this discovery does not make him feel insignificant. Just by looking at ordinary things, he realizes that he cannot even begin to imagine what it must be like to be God.**
2. The world is beautiful and terrifying, and in it all God is everywhere, seen to be powerful and wise, and more mysterious when he is known than when he is but dimly discerned. The Lord has spoken to Job. That fact alone is marvellous beyond all wonder. Job has grown in wisdom. He is at once delighted and ashamed.

⁶ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 295.

3. His first spontaneous outburst, so different from the reserve of his reply to the first speech, is an expression of unrestrained admiration:⁷

d. **Preeminent over all creation. – Col. 1:15-20**

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

- i. The church in Colossae: They were doing well, but there were very real and dangerous pressures facing them.

1. Mystical Polytheism – The worship of other gods... living in fear of them.

- a. This included just adding Jesus as one more deity.

2. **Paul sees both of these issues as a compromise of who Jesus actually is.**

- a. This is why he opens with a powerful Christological look in chapter 1.

Who Jesus is matters to our daily life.

- ii. The supreme rank of Jesus:

1. **V.15** - “The firstborn over all creation” → This is not about when Jesus was “made”, it is instead a strong statement of Jesus’ preeminence and authority.

- a. **It conveys the idea of priority in both time & rank.**

- b. If Jesus has priority (supremacy) over all of creation (ie. All created things), then how effective is his work in my life?

2. **V.16 “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”**

- a. There is an idea of “totality” to Paul’s phrase “all things”.

- i. Paul doesn’t separate the material, spiritual, or political world.

1. “... even if they do not acknowledge the fact, owe their very existence to Christ.” N.T. Wright

- ii. **This means that even in those areas that we doubt God’s ability to restore, he can.**

e. **That is what the Bible says, but is God’s existence logical?** ⁸

- i. Anslem of Canterbury (11th Century thinker/ priest) / Alvin Plantinga → The ontological argument.

1. If God can exist in any possible world, it is likely that he exists in the known world.

- a. God is conceived of as a maximally great being.

- ii. Kalām Cosmological argument.

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.

2. The universe began to exist.

3. Therefore the universe has a cause of its existence.

⁷ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 313–314.

⁸ A good resource for these arguments: *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, William Lane Craig

- iii. The simple truth is this, if you were walking in the woods and saw a cabin, you would not assume the wind and weather randomly caused the cabin's existence. No, instead, you would assume that there was a creator, designer, or builder that intentionally crafted the cabin into its form.
 - 1. **That is a far more likely and simple explanation for the cabin.**
 - 2. **It stands then that for you, me, and the universe that we are not the product of random natural actions. Instead, we are the creation of a good and capable creator.**
 - a. **If this is true, we must also recognize that the created is never above or has more authority than the creator.**
 - b. The problem that we face is that we perpetually forget this reality.

2. The problem of faith – Life in a broken world.

- a. **Faith is a forward-looking trust that is rooted in God's past provision.**
 - i. It encompasses the actions of belief, hope, and joy.
 - 1. **Belief** – The fundamental positive cognitive attitude that commonly takes a proposition as its object.⁹
 - 2. **Hope** – This is not a fleeting wish, it is the expectation of the believer that God will fulfill promises made in the past.¹⁰
 - 3. **Joy** – A sense of contented security that everything is going to be ok in the end.
 - b. The problem of faith is not that God is somehow untrustworthy or unknowable, the problem of faith is that we are broken. That brokenness extends to every facet of our experience and perspectives.
 - i. The reality is we live in a broken world and struggle to trust or find creditability in anything that is outside of our grasp or touch.
 - ii. **Faith is truly rooted in the concept that there is something bigger than ourselves and is worthy of our complete and total trust.**
 - 1. What are the factors that make it hard for us to have faith?
- c. **We are limited in vision. – 1 Cor. 13:12**
 - i. ¹² **For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.**
 - ii. Our knowledge of God in the here and now is imperfect and is in contrast with what it will be in the hereafter. Mirrors in the first century were of polished metal.
 - 1. Corinth was famous for its mirrors, but few Christians would have been able to afford a mirror of good quality.
 - iii. In the nature of the case the reflection would not be very clear. It is, of course, also the case that a mirror always distorts to some extent: it reverses left and right, what it shows is limited by the frame, and it is always indirect.¹¹

⁹ C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 17.

¹⁰ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 61.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 180–181.

- iv. While we live out our lives on this earth our sight of things eternal is, at best, indistinct.¹²

1. **All earthly knowledge is partial**, a truth Paul has already laid down (v. 9). Over against it, he sets the perfect knowledge when we shall know as we are known. The first *know* is *ginōskō*, but on the second occasion he employs the compound *epiginōskō* (used also when he says *I am known*). The use of the compound verb often signifies no more than that one's knowledge is directed towards (*epi*) a particular object. But it may mean a full and complete knowledge which seems to be the force of it here¹³

d. **We are disenfranchised by sin. – Rom 1:18-22**

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

- i. Even though they “**know God**” in some sense, they deny that knowledge by their conduct and behavior. They were expected to “glorify” (*doxazein*) God, i.e., praise and honor him for their existence and for the good things that they have experienced in life; cf. 15:6, 9 (“Praise God, all Gentiles”).
- ii. **They were also to “thank” (*eucharistein*) him for his bounty and his mercy toward them.** Thus Paul’s complaint is centered not so much on pagan ignorance as on the failure to manifest reverence and gratitude, which should have sprung from the knowledge they had of him.
- iii. **Instead, their reverence was paid to created things.**¹⁴
1. In this, while we can see that God exists in the and through the created world, we have become so disenfranchised by our sin that we attribute divinity to the things made by the creator.
- a. I.e., We are literally incapable of seeing anything beyond ourselves without God’s intervention. And so, we default to our desires.

e. **We default to our desires. – Judges 21:25**

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

- i. **This is one of the single most succinct statements on the destructive nature of pride in the Bible.**
1. Pride is nothing more than unabated glorification of self.
- ii. The book closes with the reflection of the editor that the absence of the strong hand of a king was largely responsible for the disorders of the land in this earlier age.

¹² Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 181.

¹³ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 181.

¹⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 282.

1. Turbulence and apostasy defines the period of the judges.¹⁵
- iii. This verse defines an era when God would show up in profoundly massive ways, yet the people would continually go back to serving their own self-interests. → And it was unrelentingly destructive.
 1. They assumed the creation was wiser than the creator.
 2. **It doesn't have to be this way.**
 - a. **Jesus tells us that the power of the kingdom may seem small and insignificant, but it has an outsized impact.**

3. The promise of faith – Life in the Kingdom of God

- a. Too often, we look at the values of the kingdom and the life of Jesus as:
 - i. **Impractical...** Doesn't really solve the problems we face.
 - ii. **High and lofty...** Not realistic.
 - iii. **Ethereal...** Good for really religious people.
 - iv. **Naïve...** It is immature or unintellectual.
- b. Yet, if we are willing to take one step of trust at a time, we will come to find what Jesus says to be true.
 - i. Yes, the kingdom is like a mustard seed or a bit of leaven. → It initially seems insignificant. But, as we walk in it, we find that it defies our expectations in the best possible ways.
- c. **The Kingdom defies our expectations.**
 - i. One of our expectations is that of **self-resiliency and savior-ship**.
 1. The gospel says you cannot save yourself. (Eph. 2:8-9)
 2. The leaven - **The parable also makes the point that the power that effects the change comes from outside the dough; the mass of dough does not change itself.**¹⁶
 - ii. A second expectation is that of **victimhood – It is not my fault**.
 1. The gospel says you are not as innocent as you think. (Rom. 1:22)
 2. There is a cultural narrative that says if I am a victim, I am without fault or accountability. → This is only partially true, and when we see it as fully true, we will consistent harm ourselves through lack of growth and persistent immaturity.
 - iii. When we find ourselves living the kingdom, we find ourselves with an expectant mentality that God can do more than we could ever expect or imagine (Eph. 3:20)
 1. **²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.**
 2. The "power at work within us" → This is the power of God!
- d. **The Kingdom defies our boundaries.**
 - i. We often put boundaries or limits on what can logically be accomplished or done.
 1. Again, let us go back to Job's conversation with God. (Job 42:1-6)

¹⁵ Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 204.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 351–353.

- a. **But this discovery does not make him feel insignificant. Just by looking at ordinary things, he realizes that he cannot even begin to imagine what it must be like to be God.**
- 2. **Our boundaries are determined by our perspectives.**
 - a. I.e., How we see God, will determine what we think he is capable of.
 - i. Cosmic tyrant – Only capable of punishment and vengeance.
 - 1. Cruel and unrelenting.
 - ii. Disconnected creator – Powerful but indifferent to his creation.
 - 1. Can't and won't be fully known.
 - iii. All loving and affirming – Kind but ultimately impotent.
 - 1. The sweet uncle or aunt that keeps telling you it is going to be ok, but can't really help you.
 - iv. Full of grace and truth – Able to redeem and reconstruct our broken lives and identities.
 - 1. Is able to be known and is able to love us despite our brokenness.
 - b. The key question, how do I see or relate to God?
- e. **The Kingdom defies our limitations.**
 - i. The more that the kingdom and God comes into a right perspective, the more aware we become of our own limitations.
 - 1. This is actually a beautiful gift of grace. → Why?
 - a. Because in the face of our limitations, we find that God is ever more capable.
 - 2. ***I cannot, by direct moral effort, give myself new motives. After the first few steps in the Christian life we realize that everything which really needs to be done in our souls can be done only by God.***¹⁷
 - ii. Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed and some leaven, it looks small, insignificant, and insufficient to our sinful nature. However, because God is at the center, it is capable of an outsized impact in my life and the lives of those around me.
 - 1. We are not to underestimate what God can do. → When we do, we rob ourselves of the joy of faith. That is, seeing God do only what he could do.
 - 2. What is the thing that you are holding onto that you think God cannot do anything about or with? → How are you seeing God in relationship to that thing?
 - 3. **The goal of the spiritual life is not accomplishment or arrival but that of growth through abiding relationship.**

¹⁷ C.S Lewis, Mere Christianity: p.165