

# The Parable of the Mustard Seed

**Lesson Title:** *Unorthodox Origins and Growth*

**Matthew 13:31 / Mark 4:30 / Luke 13:18**

Be sure to underline, highlight, circle, or make personal notes as you go through the text. Write some observations below.

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## **The Kingdom Parables (The Kingdom of Heaven/God is like...)**

As we discussed in our first lesson on the Parable of the Sower, parables both **reveal** and conceal, and the condition of the heart of the hearer determines understanding. While this is the primary motivation of the parable, it is not the only one. Parables are also an invitation to **engage** – to reflect, to seek, and to hunger after truth. They are layered stories that grow with the listener. As spiritual maturity deepens, so too does the meaning within the metaphor. The parables sifted the crowds: separating those who merely wanted miracles from those who genuinely wanted *meaning*, who were willing to have their preconceived ideas toppled for the sake of truth.

Yet, while sifting, they also served as a window for the humble hearer to grasp the mysteries of the **kingdom** of God through the use of varied forms of **comparison**. These literary devices quietly, but soundly, declared the present kingdom's inauguration with Christ's arrival while also anticipating what is known as eschatological (dealing with end-times) anticipations of the kingdom's consummation.

In **Luke 17:20-21**, after being asked to answer the question "*When will the kingdom of God come?*" Jesus declared, "*...behold, the kingdom of God is among you.*" Due to prevailing opinions, expectations, and a myriad of political circumstances, even that answer both revealed and concealed. What was Jesus saying? He was the inauguration of the kingdom. The King had come, but it was not going to look like what they were expecting. Everything would seem to be upside **down**. Thus, when seeking to discuss the mysterious kingdom that countered political, national, and religious expectations, Jesus employed insightful parables.

In **Mark 4:30**, Jesus asks the question: “*With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?*” There are around **twelve** specific parables that respond to this question from Jesus.

- The Wheat and the Tares – Matthew 13:24
- The Mustard Seed – Matthew 13:31 / Mark 4:30 / Luke 13:18
- The Leaven – Matthew 13:33 / Luke 13:20
- The Hidden Treasure – Matthew 13:44
- The Pearl of Great Price – Matthew 13:45
- The Dragnet – Matthew 13:47
- The Unforgiving Servant – Matthew 18:23
- The Laborers in the Vineyard – Matthew 20:1
- The Wedding Feast – Matthew 22:2
- The Ten Virgins – Matthew 25:1
- The Talents – Matthew 25:14
- The Growing Seed – Mark 4:26

### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

- **Matthew 13:31-32 (KJV)** – 31 Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: 32 Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.
- **Mark 4:31-32 (KJV)** – 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: 32 But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.
- **Luke 13:18-19 (KJV)** – 18 Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? 19 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it.

### **Mustard Seed Observations**

- Matthew and Mark place this parable in the collection of parables on the kingdom. Luke places it after the healing of the woman bound by Satan for eighteen years.

- The likeness of the kingdom here is not specifically to a mustard seed alone, but a mustard seed that is **planted** intentionally.
- While not the **smallest** of all seeds known today, it was one of the smallest seeds planted in the gardens of those who heard the parable.
- The mustard seed is also used to teach a lesson about **faith** (Matt. 17:20)
- The mustard seed could often result in a bush-like tree that could reach heights of **8-12** feet.
- Birds roosting in the branches may allude to the cedar of Ezekiel 17:23 (cf. Daniel 4:12). If so, this could be an intentional **irony** on the part of Jesus, silently contrasting the cedar with the mustard tree while also pointing to the inclusion of Gentiles.

### Interpretation

- The kingdom of God may begin as seemingly insignificant—a barely visible seed—but, in the end, it produces something that far **exceeds** its beginning.
- While Jesus could have used the cedar, which results from a seed, still something small becoming mighty, the mustard seed is intentional in that, while it emphasizes small to great, it presents an **unorthodox** vision of the kingdom of God.
- The strange use of the mustard seed would invoke **surprise**.
- During Jesus' earthly ministry, many looked for a **mighty** tree whose branches covered the earth. Yet, they failed to see the seemingly insignificant seed that, over time, became a powerful force spreading across the earth.
- The entire ministry of Jesus and the inauguration of the church that followed, as recorded in the Book of Acts and the Epistles, defy **human** wisdom and might.
  - **1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (ESV) – 26** For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. **27** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; **28** God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, **29** so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.
  - **James 2:5 (ESV) – 5** Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

- We must remember that the great Kingdom of God began in a lowly **manger**, born to poor parents, and attended to at birth by only lowly shepherds.

**Read Isaiah 53:1-3**

**Reflection:** This week, read this parable and **Isaiah 53:1-3** together. What stands out to you? How do you think many religious people could fail to understand the kingdom today? Would we have rejected Christ today as He was rejected then?

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**Reflection:** How does consumerism (possessions, wealth, and success) possibly resist the kingdom of God today? Can we mistake success in the kingdom through a human lens, but not a spiritual or biblical one?

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**Reflection:** How does my church (Antioch Northwest) reflect the truths of this parable, and how do each of us use this parable as a vision for growth and action?

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