

Parable of the Tiny Mustard Seed: Grain to Greatest

Text: Matthew 13:31-33

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We turn our attention to the parables taught by our Lord Jesus Christ, focusing particularly on those recorded in Matthew 13:31–33. These parables, simple in form yet deep in meaning, reveal the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. How precious are these teachings, particularly in a world that exalts another kingdom entirely – the kingdom of man. All around us, we see the kingdom of darkness swelling in influence, power, and appeal. We see its ideologies in schools, governments, and even in nominal churches. And we, the people of God, are tempted to think that if we want to see the church grow, if we want to see the kingdom of God thrive, we ought to learn from the world’s methods – methods of numbers, visibility, branding, politics, and power.

But Christ, in His parables, strips away those assumptions. He teaches us not merely what His kingdom will become but how it grows and what characterises its development. These parables are not just stories – they are *divine instruction*. He begins with the parable of the sower, in which He makes clear that the problem is never with the Word, never with the gospel, but with the hearts of men. Some hearts are stony, others thorny, others hardened altogether. Some people fall away because of tribulation, others because of the cares of this world. And there are tares among the wheat, even in the visible church, sown by the devil himself. Christ tells us plainly: do not be surprised when sin arises even from the bosom of the church. The lines of election and reprobation run through the covenant community itself. We are not to lose heart.

The Smallest Seed Sown

Christ continues in verse 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.” What a striking image. Jesus does not say the kingdom is like a grand oak, a tall cedar of Lebanon, or some visibly imposing institution. No, He says it is like a mustard seed – one of the smallest seeds known in that region, a seed so tiny it may slip between your fingers unnoticed. It appears negligible. It begins imperceptibly. And yet, He says, that grain grows into the greatest among herbs, so large that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches.

What is this mustard seed? It is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. As in the earlier parables, the seed refers to the Word of God – the gospel preached. And the sowing of the seed is the preaching of the gospel. Christ likens the kingdom not to political force, not to external power, not to massive visible expansion, but to the sowing of something that seems utterly weak in the world's eyes – the gospel. That preaching is the appointed means by which Christ speaks to His elect people. Through that Word, He draws His children out of darkness into His marvellous light.

And what does that preaching declare? It proclaims that all men are fallen in Adam and are justly under God's curse. That every man, woman, and child is guilty before a holy God and worthy of eternal punishment in hell. That God would be perfectly just if He left every one of us to perish. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." But in the preaching of the gospel, there is also the glorious proclamation of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. That the eternal Son of God was sent by the Father, motivated by sovereign love, to take on our flesh, live our life, bear our curse, and die our death. "That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This preaching is not a polite invitation. It is not a soft suggestion. It is a command: Repent and believe! For if you do not, there remains only "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in the place of outer darkness. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ! Cast your soul upon Him who alone can cleanse your sins and make you white as snow!

And yet, how often we are tempted to think the preaching is too simple, too narrow, too offensive. We look to the world's methods and say, "Maybe if we softened the message a little... maybe if the sermons weren't so sharp, maybe if we left out some of those 'hard doctrines'..." But Jesus says the opposite. The preaching must not be with "enticing words of man's wisdom." It must be plain. It must be reverent. And the man who preaches it must see himself as nothing – bearing the divine commission with holy fear. "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel."

This gospel, dear friends, is not common grace. It is particular grace. It is not an ineffectual wish that God has for all mankind, but the powerful Word that effectually calls His elect. It is the Word that brings the spiritually dead to life, bends the rebellious will, and causes the stubborn sinner to submit in joyful obedience to Christ. It is a Word that declares that marriage is unbreakable. It proclaims that God's covenant is not conditional, but unchangeably rooted in His electing love. That tiny seed – the foolishness of preaching – grows into something glorious.

The Sure Spiritual Growth

And then Christ gives a twin parable in verse 33: “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.” This is a familiar image. Any woman baking bread in those days would understand it. She takes a small piece of fermented dough and works it into a large batch of flour—three measures. Then she leaves it. And though she cannot see the leaven working, though nothing outwardly appears to change for some time, she trusts the process. And in due time, the whole is leavened.

Here, the leaven represents the gospel, just as in the former parable. Though leaven is often symbolic of sin or false doctrine in Scripture, here it cannot be. Christ would never say that the kingdom of heaven is like the spread of corruption. Rather, He is teaching us that the gospel, once it enters a person’s heart, works silently, invisibly, but powerfully. It touches not just part of the person, but their whole being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. The gospel is not sprinkled on the surface. It is *hidden*—kneaded deep into the whole of life.

And though you cannot see it with the naked eye, the transformation is real. Just as we do not see conviction of sin with our eyes, or the softening of the heart, or the tears of repentance at midnight, or the struggles in secret prayer. These are the inward, spiritual fruits of gospel preaching. And this sanctification is not a moment but a *process*—a life-long, Spirit-worked transformation.

We must not be discouraged because we do not see immediate results. The woman who baked the bread didn’t toss out the dough just because it didn’t rise in five minutes. She trusted the leaven. And we must trust the gospel. The same Spirit who regenerates will sanctify. “Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it” (I Thess. 5:24). “The very God of peace sanctify you *wholly*” (v. 23). God is at work in His people, even when no one else sees.

What are the signs of this quiet, spiritual growth? A mother who lays aside her career to raise covenant children in the fear of God. A young couple that prioritises worship, catechism, and the communion of saints above worldly success. A church member who falls into sin, but is grieved by it, and says like David, “I have sinned against thee.” This is fruit. This is growth. This is sanctification.

The Surprising and Sovereign End

But here is what surprises many: the growth of the kingdom is not visible in the way men expect. Contrary to the teaching of those who advocate a *postmillennial* vision – that the world will be progressively Christianised, that the nations will all bow in some visible and external way – the Word of Christ teaches us something different. The true church becomes *smaller* and more *hated*. The spirit of Antichrist *increases*. In Revelation 11, the faithful church is pictured as two witnesses – clothed in sackcloth – who are eventually slain and their bodies lie in the streets. The world rejoices at their silence. The visible church institution, from an earthly standpoint, appears destroyed.

And yet the church continues. God's kingdom does not fail. It is eternal. It remains through the gospel, through the Spirit, through the communion of saints. Even in persecution, there is refuge in the church of Jesus Christ. There, the vilest sinner finds hope, forgiveness, peace, and a new family in Christ. There, the gospel is not watered down, but flows sharp, pure, and healing.

When Christ returns, then shall we see the glory of the kingdom in all its fullness. Then the whole lump shall be leavened. Then the saints shall be glorified – body and soul made perfect. Then we shall wear robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Then every tongue shall speak of God's grace and wisdom. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, and perfected through the preaching of the Word and the sanctifying power of the Spirit.

All this – this eternal, glorious kingdom – comes by means of a tiny seed. The preaching of the gospel. That is how Christ builds His church.

So, beloved congregation, though you be small, though your numbers be few, know this: *Christ is at work*. Do not measure by the world's standards. Do not fear. That mustard seed grows. That leaven works. That gospel sanctifies. And the day is coming when all shall be complete, and we shall be made like Him.

Our Father, which art in heaven, Thou dost know even the frailties of our hearts, how we are prone to look at what's going on around us, and wish even for growth in numbers, for outward physical growth. We pray Thou would use Thy Word to convict us of our sin and to work in us. Help us to trust in the preaching of Thy word, in the sowing of that tiny mustard seed, knowing that Thou dost use that even to sanctify us and to perfect us and to prepare us for the eternal glory that awaits us in heaven. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.