

**DAY 7 | MARK 4:30-34**

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

# **Mustard Seed**

## ***A Parable for Community***

*by Dilys Brooks*

We live in a global community. With the use of the Internet and cellular devices we are always a few minutes away from discovering breaking news and latest trends. We even have a new vocabulary for this age of 24-hour communication with our virtual communities and followers. “Tweeting,” “Google-ing,” “Face Time,” and “Viral Videos” have become a part of our daily conversation. In a fast-paced world where our needs are met in moments, it isn’t any wonder that we may lose sight of God’s intention for this planet we call home. Is it any wonder that although we appear to be always connected, we may actually be more alone than we realize? It is not unusual to see people gathered together for dinner or on an outing and almost everyone is on a mobile device connecting with someone virtually while ignoring those who are right in front of them. Gone are the days when you could be expected to know all the people who lived on your street, yet we can claim friendships with people who live all over the world who we may never meet face to face. This physical disconnect has affected all layers of society no matter where we live in the world. And it most definitely has affected our church community.



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*Community* is defined by the Merriman-Webster Online Dictionary as: “a group of people who live in the same area (such as a city, town, or neighborhood) or a

group of people who have the same interests, religion, race, etc. or a group of nations.”<sup>1</sup> Today many neglect gathering for worship, preferring to “watch on-line,” while others do not make permanent roots with a church because they like the flexibility of being with their friends. It has occurred to me as I have watched this phenomenon over the past several years that many of us fail to recognize that this way of living is not a reflection of what Scripture tells us about community.

A passage of Scripture that highlights our need to recalibrate and rethink our understanding of this community is found in Mark 4:30-32, NKJV:

Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”

The multitudes that followed the Messiah were unsure of what the “kingdom of God” was, and He often used stories and parables to explain what He meant. Their confusion was understandable because, as the people who were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were challenged by the occupation and oppression of the Romans and hoped for salvation from the promised Messiah. These masses had heard and responded to the preaching of John the Baptist. They were aware of the miracle at Jesus’ baptism. Every demon cast out, person healed, or miraculous feeding of thousands awakened within them the hope that perhaps this indeed was the Promised One. When Jesus declared that the kingdom of God was here, many hoped that this was indeed the warrior-king who would deliver them and reestablish Israel as kingdom. There was an expectation of what their community would become. What are your expectations of Jesus? Are they founded on what He has done in your life, or just what you wanted Him to do?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community>

# What is the kingdom of God?

Why haven't we been preaching or teaching about this before, especially since this was Jesus' message as traveled for three years through the dusty towns of Galilee? Jesus' first message after His Jordan baptism was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17–18 and Mark 1:15, NKJV). This declaration revealed that there was a new community, society, and way of life, which was being firmly established by Jesus. This new community would thrive with Jesus as its head, its chief, its leader, its king.

Jesus' method of teaching was not unusual. The rabbis, religious teachers, and contemporaries of His day often used stories and parables to explain theological ideas. Jesus' favorite type of story was often encapsulated in a parable. A parable is a simple story with familiar characters and activities that illustrate a principle. Not everyone who heard these stories could readily understand them. As a matter of fact, Jesus often told the parables to large audiences and many would leave unsure of the meaning. He would, however, tell His disciples privately what many of them meant. As we seek to understand the "kingdom of God," we must scrutinize this story more closely. Those who came to see and hear Jesus were never disappointed because He would often use the ordinary, common things from their Galilean experience to educate them about God. Can you picture them standing on the shores of the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, or the rolling, dusty hills listening to Jesus for hours? Have you ever been excited about going to class? Have you ever wanted to be the first in the classroom to get a good seat before the teacher came in? This is how many of those who were following after Jesus had to have felt. They were excited to hear what interesting thing He was going to point to today in order to get His point across.

The setting of the text places us with Jesus in the middle of a teaching session from the stern of a boat by the Sea of Galilee. We aren't sure how long the people have been gathered here or what time of the day it is. What we know is that the crowds have come to hear Jesus and He does not disappoint. Some of the stories

recorded in Mark 4 have an agrarian focus on “growing things”: the sower scattering seed (Mark 4:1-20) and the parable of the seed (Mark 1:26-29).

When we look at this short passage we might become distracted by its simplicity and miss the importance of the message. Jesus tells the attentive audience that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus states that this small seed grows to become greater than all the other herbs or bushes in the garden. In Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of this story Jesus refers to the mature mustard plant as a tree.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matthew 13:31–32, NKJV).

“Then He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches” (Luke 13:18–19, NKJV).

It is important to note that the mustard tree wasn’t ever the tallest tree that could grow in a garden, because olive trees usually towered over the other plants. So the point to the listeners is that the kingdom of God is not determined by the size of the seed. Those listening would be familiar with being left out of the ruling class as a result of being occupied by Rome. In choosing a mustard seed, Jesus was letting His hearers know that He was more concerned with how they finished than how they began. The mustard seed that was common to the area of Palestine was the black mustard and was cultivated in both gardens and the fields. The plants could grow to three meters (10 ft.) in height but had the smallest seed of plants that were cultivated at that time.<sup>2</sup> The mustard seed could be seen as a metaphor for potential. There was great growth potential in the seed, and there is great potential in the hearers as well. They needed to learn how to unlock this potential. How could they become a part of this kingdom?

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (738). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

# Farming instead of War

“It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31, NKJV). He simply says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus was counter-cultural. Jesus used a farming analogy to demonstrate God’s plan for humanity, which was antithetical to the expectation of a nation awaiting a warrior-king. He uses this story to create a paradigm shift in the minds of His listeners from fighting to farming; from war to worship; from Caesar to community; from grappling with the law to grace. One Bible commentator, R. P. Martin, states, “Yet everything about Jesus’ ministry controverted their understanding of who the Leader would be. Instead, Jesus tried to instill in their minds the prospect that the road to His future glory was bound to run by way of the cross, with its experience of rejection, suffering, and humiliation.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus stated, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6–7, NKJV). Seeds hold life within them, yet in order for the seed to produce life it must die. Jesus states in John 12:24, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24, NKJV). The size of the seed doesn’t dictate its growth or function. However, small seeds are quicker to ripen and can be dispersed sooner. This littlest of seeds grows to be a tree that is formidable in its size and the amount of shade and protection it supplies to all who seek shelter therein. God has made you, seed, to be a part of His everlasting kingdom. He has placed within you everything that is necessary, not just for your survival, but for the spreading of the gospel. Are you willing to die, die to your self, your desires, your plans, so that God can get the glory?

As I stated before, Jesus’ audience had a first hand experience with farming—more so than we do—which means He didn’t have to explain the conditions necessary for this seed to grow. While it is true that we could all “Google” this information about farming and growing things, if we lack the experience, we may not fully understand the lessons in Jesus’ analogy. The seed undergoes a process called “germination” in order to unlock the new life within. There are three central

<sup>3</sup> Martin, R. P. (2003). *Messiah*. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler, Ed.) (1115). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

conditions that allow the seed to germinate: (1) the embryo must be alive, called “seed viability.” (2) Any dormancy requirements that prevent germination must be overcome. (3) The proper environmental conditions must exist for germination.<sup>4</sup>

Once the conditions are met, the seed will germinate and new life, an immature plant called a seedling, begins to grow. The seedling will grow to adulthood and form a mature plant. Jesus jumps from seed to mature plant without describing the processes that bring the plant to maturity. He then states in verse 32, “but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”

In *Christ’s Object Lessons* we read, “The germ in the seed grows by the unfolding of the life-principle, which God has implanted. Its development depends upon no human power. So it is with the kingdom of Christ. It is a new creation. Its principles of development are the opposite of those that rule the kingdoms of this world” (77).

Let’s reflect once more on what was heard by the Galileans who were listening to the planting analogy. We must also try to pick up on the clues that are hidden within the telling. The Galilean audience knew the value and worth of the mustard seed. It was worth being cultivated. Jesus’ statement affirms that they are indeed God’s chosen ones. Yet their task was to replicate the love of God to the world. Jesus, God with us, was now reframing their concept of “kingdom.” Today young people are also being invited to live counter-culturally and to reject the pseudo community and pseudo friendships created in cyberspace that seem to be calling with every chirp, ding, and whistle of our digital devices. Jesus is calling you to something better. You are being called by Christ to become the community that is patterned after God’s ideal for us. The implications for both hearers of this message—then and now—are that we are invited to shift our thinking and grow. In order for the plant to grow from seedling to maturity, the gardener waters, feeds, weeds, and prunes the plants to maintain the optimum growing environment. Seeds produce plants and plants produce yet more seeds. From this one seed we know that there will be more mustard plants. Simple enough. Yet with the Messiah, nothing is ever simple.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seed>

## Kingdom instead of nationalism

While it is true the parables were theological stories with contemporary illustrations, Jesus' stories often left His listeners confounded and confused. Mark 4:33 states, "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear *it*. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples" (Mark 4:33–34, NKJV). Because of our method of wanting to award everyone and not exclude anyone, this seems unfair. Yet Jesus seemed very comfortable with the mystery that surrounded His teaching.

One pertinent piece of information left to reflect on is the definition of a "kingdom." A kingdom is a politically organized community or major territorial unit having a form of government headed by a king or queen.<sup>5</sup> Remember that those who listened to Jesus' story are hoping above all hope that this "kingdom" that Jesus is referring to will overthrow the Romans and reestablish Israel to its former glory, similar to the reign of Solomon, as well as usher in the period of safety, peace, and a world that worshipped Yahweh. Let's be candid. The argument could be made that Israel was more nationalistic; that is, they felt strong loyalty to and were proud of their country. Israel may have believed that it was better and more important than other country. A kingdom must have a ruler; people swear their fealty to this monarch who in turn promises to take care of his subjects. Jesus offers them an opportunity to trust and depend on the Sovereign God instead of their heritage. We too, as young people and adults, must be mindful that we don't hold on to our personal views at the expense of growing into the kingdom of God. We cannot be more concerned with holding on to the trappings of Adventism at the expense of growing God's kingdom.

Kingdoms were usually ruled with military might and with advisers who provided wisdom to the king about how to govern his subjects. Jesus is once again counter-cultural and creates a kingdom where the King dies for His subjects in order for them to live. He fights on our behalf not for an earthly realm, but instead for a realm modeled after God's heavenly kingdom where all the subjects swear fealty because of their love and appreciation of the King. When we each accept Jesus

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5 Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

and submit to His authority as King, our faith grows and becomes a place for others to come and find rest in Jesus.

## Implications for Us Today

Are we reflecting this kingdom of God on the earth? Have the central spiritual conditions been met in order for you to grow as this mustard seed? In order for this to happen (1) Jesus has to be alive in you, thus making your faith sustainable. (2) You can't allow anything or anyone in your life to force this seed of faith to be dormant, thus stunting or preventing growth. (3) You must remove anything in your environment that blocks the Holy Spirit from sparking the growth of Jesus fully in your hearts.

Just as a mustard seed can't grow in soil if the right conditions are not met, this spiritual mustard seed can't grow and reproduce or provide shelter. I'm so thankful that Jesus is available to help us get the environment and conditions optimized so that we can grow and mature. If they are unmet, why not ask God to show you today what you must throw out, cut off, weed or pull out of your lives to ensure that the kingdom of God begins to grow where you are? For those who can affirm that the spiritual conditions are met, you aren't off the hook! Just as the plant is cared for by the gardener to ensure it reaches maturity, we too—you too—must submit to the hand of the gardener. Jesus is the gardener. We must submit as He maintains the optimum environment through life's circumstances for us to grow. He will prune, weed, feed, and nurture us. Unfortunately, we can't dictate the conditions and orchestrate the timing. Are you submitting your plans to Jesus daily? Do you accept when He allows others to get the "things you want" before you do? Are you able to be thankful no matter what challenges you experience?

The world is in desperate need of authentic, life-giving community. As followers of Christ we get to share the good news that God desires to provide this to every person on this planet. Our challenge and invitation today is to be the mustard seed that grows into a mustard plant, so that the people who we interact with in our families, churches, schools, and communities will come and find rest and shelter. ●